

THE JET JOCKEYS

By R. W. STOCKHEKER

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There was something in the way that little Venusian fire dancer looked at me when I passed her on my way down the ramp to the rocket racks to get Suvia Jalmin's shiny Space Midget that started me thinking.

This jet burn I picked up the time I pinwheeled into the force fence on the big Zeta socket track on Mars hadn't exactly left me looking like a glamor flash from the telecolor screens. Only up until now I had never let that worry me because the way I figure it you don't race rockets with your face anyhow.

The way I figure it, it's nerve not profile that slams the big sizzle sticks around the magnet bends.

Still, when I caught the look in that little space dame's eyes—as though I'm some kind of slime mutant fresh out of a spore bog—I got to wondering. I remembered a dozen other girls I had met suddenly in a dozen other dark corners.

I remembered why from one end of the Great Galaxy Circuit to the other I'm billed as "Death" Benton, and it's not because of the chances I take. And I remembered, finally, that in the last two years I've been making about as much headway with Suvia Jalmin as a hay-burning burro on a star lane.

All the rest of the way down to the racks I thought it over, and it always came out the same. I could see that what I needed was a quick trip down to that new Venusian super-clinic in the

Interplanetary Settlement for a complete remodeling job. By the time I got back up to the starting platform with the Space Midget I had a plan for getting that remodeling job done, all worked out, neat and pretty, in my skull.

Suvia was waiting in front of the grandstand when I rolled her rocket off the pneumatic lift. The kid does a stunt act in between races that is considered tops in the Galaxy circuit. The Samson arcs, focusing on her, hit her curly, spun-honey hair, setting up a glow that put a gleaming nimbus around her crash helmet.

Suvia is one quarter Martian, a combination that makes her twice as gorgeous as anything else in curves on either Mars or Earth. Up in the stands the crowd was giving the usual big hand of appreciation at her appearance. Even the track robots were maybe doing a bit of applauding, too.

In her translucent sennilite suit with the airplast gliding wings folded at her sides, Suvia made a picture most men would joyfully have missed a parade of comets to see.

A hundred times I've told myself it's sheer blasphemy for such a luscious bit of femininity to be risking her neck like this, day after day. Yet tough stunting is in the kid's blood. Ever since her grandfather rode the first space ship to Mars there has been a Jalmin somewhere, risking life and limb just for the devil of it.

When she picked up the sound of her rocket on the platform, she turned what was left of her audience smile my way. For a moment I almost forgot the crash scars. Only not quite.

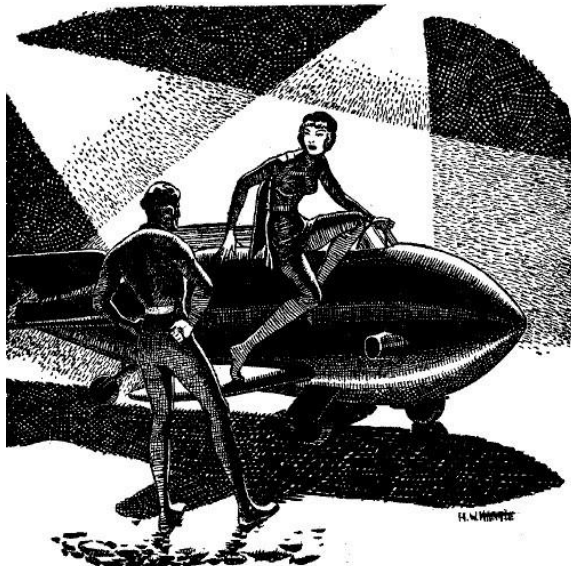
"Right on the dot, Pete," she said. "Nice crowd up there, isn't it?"

I boosted her up into the cockpit, making the usual little show of adjusting this and that to help build up suspense.

"Yes, it's a nice crowd," I said. "And every mother's one of them would be thrilled to pieces if something nice and fatal happened to you, so be careful. You going to watch the finals?"

Suvia had her hand on the cowl plate lever, ready to close the top plate, but she hesitated, bearing down on me with both eyes.

"I always watch the finals," she cried. "You know that, Pete Benton. Why? Are you up to some crazy scheme again?"



"Are you up to some crazy scheme again, Pete Benton?" asked Suvia.

For a moment I had half a notion to tell her about the fire dancer and my plan for letting a plastic doc go to work on the scar tissue on my face. But I braked on the idea fast.

"Scheme, baby?" I said innocently. "All I was getting at is there's going to be some high-grade blasting out there in a little while. I've got an idea Skid is just about right to take the big race today."

I'm talking about my partner, Skid Burman, of course. We've been knocking around the circuits together ever since he won the finals two years ago here at Astrola with a rocket we built in the old Benton tunglite plant out of shoestrings and baling wire.

At the mention of Skid's name, however, I could see the kid's jaw line harden, freezing out all the dimple. Her husky little voice picked up an edge.

"I wasn't going to mention it, Pete," she said, "but now that you've brought the subject up, that isn't exactly the way the boys in the bull ring seem to have it doped out."

Well, that's the way it is. A rider takes a couple of fourths or worse and right away he's all figured out as through, washed up and ready for the cargo routes.

"Skid's all right," I told her. "Is that any reason to think, just because he's blasted a few slow races recently, that he's

running out of nerve, like a jelly-armed Qxeas from Outer Space?"

"Could be, Pete. Slamming into the force fence isn't any picnic for anybody. You shouldn't have to be told that. And plenty of top riders have gone soft after taking the kind of smash-up Skid took last year on the Alpha Centauri track. It—it—look, Pete, why don't you play it smart for once and get out of this racket while you can. Rocket racing is nothing but death and danger anyway. Make this your last race."

"My last race!" I yelled. "And the Big Blast only a few months off, too. You don't know what you're saying, baby. Why Skid and I are practically a cinch to take it."

Her eyes flared like a solar corona. "The Big Blast!" She bit the words out like a curse. "That's all every rocket man from here to Jupiter lives and breathes for—a chance to shoot space in a racing tube so light it ought not to be allowed outside the ionosphere. You—you make me sick, Pete Benton."

She slammed her cowl plate shut, almost catching my fingers, and signaled for the boom to swing her up into one of the starting tubes.

I waited just long enough to hear her boosters start to purr; then I beat it for the rocket pits. Watching the kid come sailing down on those big, glistening wings through a pattern of beamed high-voltage flashes is more than I can take. One miscalculation in that heart-slamming maneuver with death and you couldn't find the pieces with an electronic microscope. I beat it and I beat it fast.

Down in the pits I found a tight spun circle of rocket riders, mechs, and rack attendants gathered around a sleek, fluorescent blue rocket.

The presence of that circle caused me to uncork a hustle that jolted every merylite pin in my stiff leg. Nothing but trouble, I knew, would bring a gang like that together just before a big race, and I had a good idea of just what kind of trouble was stirring.

Elbowing in between a pair of pot-bellied Martian mechs, I worked toward the center of the circle. Just as I expected, two guys in fabraglas jumpers were facing each other like a pair of gamecocks.

About their faces there was a sharp bitterness that gave me a pretty good indication of just how tense the situation was, because ordinarily both Skid Burman and Steve Ranklin are two of the easiest going riders on the circuit.

The circle tightened behind me. For weeks this blow-off had been building up to explosive proportions. Even the video papers had got hold of it. It made good flash, the kind of stuff the public laps up. You know how it goes: "What two rocket riders are fighting over what blond telecutie from the Coast Studios?" It was drama and romance and violence all mixed up with the death defying blasts of the big tubes.

I shoved my way in between the two. "Take it easy, Skid," I pleaded. "This is no time to pick a scrap. If you guys got anything to settle, wait until after the race."

Steve's blond head jerked around. "You keep out of this, Pete," he said harshly. "The time to settle this is right now, before something like that Meton track thing happens again."

Well, I thought, that does it. The Meton crack-up wasn't something you could discuss calmly, coolly, and without getting blood all over the place.

Skid's voice thinned out to a razor edge. "Don't say that, Steve," he said. "You know that Meton crash was an accident. When I take a magnet bend I don't make room for any driver—not even Pete."

"And I say that 'accident' was a deliberate attempt to slam me into the force fence. The only accident part about it was that you landed there yourself."

I braced for trouble. Only it never came. Jet Markham, First Zone Officer for the Astrola track, picked that moment to push his way through the crowd. He took one look at the two squaring off there in the ring, and cocked a finger as solid as a mooring mast.

"Break it up, boys," he snapped. "Any scrapping here now, and neither one of you will ever race in this park again."

That calm, heavy voice was like an ultrasonic fire extinguisher. I could see the red seep out of Steve's face. He hesitated, his long, bony hands curling and uncurling at his sides. Then, with an abrupt gesture of acquiescence he turned and crossed over to his big Space Ace, and climbed slowly in.

I grabbed Skid's arm, tugging him in the opposite direction.

"Come on, Skid," I said. "We got a race to ride."

He gave me a crooked grin. "I know, Pete. Dames certainly play the devil with racing, don't they?"

That reminded me of the little fire dancer and why I had been hunting Skid.

"Look, Skid," I said. "We're pretty low on cash right now, aren't we?"

"That's right, Pete. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't even be eating."

"Then even if you take a first today, if one of us suddenly needed a large hunk of cash, there wouldn't be anything left over that isn't already earmarked for the Big Blast, would there?"

He gave me a sharp glance. "Make it plainer, Pete," he said.

I told him about my brain-wave and what brought it on.

"What I mean," I went on, "is that if I decided to have this face of mine fixed up, we'd have to find a new source of income to pay for it, wouldn't we?"

The idea seemed to stagger him. "Get your face fixed up!" he yelled. "Are you crazy, Pete? Why those scars are worth good hard cash to you. They're all that keeps you racing the big cylinders today. You know that, Pete."

I guess I did. You see, I ride for the Galaxy circuit under a queer set-up. What I mean is that the circuit pays me a straight salary just to put a little more color into a race.

Instead of setting out to win, I'm hired to ride the magnet bends, making hair-brained skids and turns, the kind of trick stuff that looks good to the stands, but kills real speed. And the only reason I get by with most of the stuff I pull is because I've built up a reputation on this tough mug of mine.

I'm considered to be the sort of guy who would rather wreck his rocket than give an inch to another rider.

"I know, Skid," I said. "But I don't figure to go on racing rockets forever. Someday I'm bound to meet up with a nice girl, and—well, what is she going to think of this face of mine?"

Skid's finger traced a pattern along the sleek side of his rocket.

"Look, Pete," he said. "In the first place, there's nothing really wrong with your face. Believe me, those scars give you the kind of tough charm most women go for. And in the second place, it wouldn't do you any good to have your face fixed, Pete, because you're just the sort of guy who would get it banged up all over again, if just from falling over the nearest baby carriage."

Maybe I would have gone for that kind of talk if it hadn't been for that little plate-eyed space kid. But now I had my mind made up.

"I'm serious about this, Skid," I insisted. "I'm going to have this pan fixed up, if it's the last thing I ever do. And it looks like the only way I can get the cash is to go out there and place in the Double Century this afternoon."

Skid's teeth made a little clicking sound.

"Now I know you are crazy, Pete," he said. "I'll admit you're one of the greatest trick riders who ever put a rocket around a tube. But the moment you set out to race, you go completely haywire. You know that too."

I did know it. It's a funny thing. Just riding around the tube to put on a show, the way I'm paid to do, I'm like a robot. Up in my head there's a little timing device that tells me just how fast, down to the last split second, a rocket can take a magnet bend.

I can work out to the last fraction of an ounce the carom I can afford to take off the force fence or another rocket without wrecking. But the moment I go out to win, the tube guards start hanging out the crash warning again.

Still, there was the look in that little space dancer's eyes.

"This time it's going to be different, Skid," I said. "That last crash at Xovia was a lesson to me."

Skid gave up. He knew, as well as I, that the only thing I learned from the Xovia smash-up was that the nurses on Venus are tough kids to work into a clinch. But he didn't try to argue any longer. All he did was give me a shove toward my heavy, scarlet-finned cylinder.

"If that's the way it is, Pete," he said, "I'm for you to the limit."

Up in the stands I caught the usual half-hysterical burst of applause that always signals the finish of Suvia's act. With a sigh of relief I eased myself down into the cockpit of my rocket. A moment later the metallic, robot-toned voice of the tube

starter crackled from the loudspeaker, announcing the line-up for the Double Century.

At the finish of this announcement, the boom swung down to lift the first of the big racing rockets into the starting racks. Its appearance brought an instant responsive roar from the stands. That sound beat down into the pits with all the solidness of a slab from Sirius.

A quarter million voices, hiked to scream-pitch by excitement, is impressive beyond description, and Astrola, with its vast network of vacuum tube trains, often draws crowds of that size.

Four years ago, when Maza Boruu first introduced this brand new sport of rocket racing on Mars, nobody would have dreamed he was turning loose a sensation that would sweep the planetary system like a Jupiterian fire storm. But a year after the first rocket took the magnet bends at Zonuu, you couldn't have counted the tracks on a family of centipedes.

On Earth, especially, the response was tremendous. With the perfection of the Celetron robot, and its introduction into industry, time was beginning to become an item of increasingly boring magnitude to the majority of the populace. The result was that this new and exceedingly dangerous sport was pounced on by the people of Earth with all the gusto of a hungry carnivore on a juicy side of caveman.

Even so, jaded nerves or not, there's nothing else this side of the fourth dimension that for sheer thrill can touch rocket racing. The spectacle of twenty big torpedoes thundering along before the ground-quivering blast impact of their jets,

unleashing power better suited to the vastness of space than to a race track, is soul shaking. That riotous kaleidoscope of shifting, glow-colored cylinders would move a Cela pulp man.

Even after years of racing, the mere anticipation of the coming ride was enough to start my pulse to pounding. In an effort to counteract this stirring excitement, I tried to concentrate on the track.

Since the last time Skid and I had jammed around the big elliptic here at Astrola, the place had undergone a thorough remodelling. The old stands had been dismantled and replaced with new ones fabricated of jadette, that dark green bubble plastic recently developed in the Fabraglas Laboratories. The design of these stands followed closely the weird atomic style of the architecture of Mars.

The infield of the track, except for the video screen that brought the fifty-mile track within constant view of the stands and the huge Zoduu nuclear pile out in the center, was laid out in geometrically patterned beds of Vassong's vibrating orchid mutations.

Now, disturbed by the crowd noise, these orchids kept up a constant quivering, forming swiftly changing color combinations. A heavy perfume, as titillating as wine, rose from these blooms.

The track itself was the usual elliptical super-panta magnet, with arches of tennilite spaced around it at quarter-mile intervals. These tennilite arches, when under full charge from the Zoduu nuclear pile, builds up the tubular force fence which

guards the stands, and the force field which holds the terrific speed of the rockets under control.

This set-up of magnet and arches was the same combination as that first used by Boruu on Mars.

The voice of the announcer, calling Sirius 50 into position, jerked my attention back from the field equipment. Sirius 50 belongs to little Agu Ziggy, one of the original Martian riders from that first race at Zonuu, and I knew I was starting in the tube next to Ziggy.

With Sirius 50 on the move, I stooped down to get my polarized Beta-X visor out of its compartment. My helmet, when I straightened out, missed Suvia's blond head by inches. She had reached over the cockpit rim and was pulling back one of my hinged earphone flaps.

"Pete," she yelped in my ear, "what happened down in the rocket pits between Skid and Steve?"

The bad side of my face was covered by the crash helmet, so I felt pretty good.

"Nothing important, baby," I told her. "I doubt if it disturbs the Andromeda Nebula a bit."

She gave me a look you could have fried an atom with, and climbed up a step higher.

"Those little fire dancers Mil Gaines brought over from the Paris races are down in the dressing rooms, squeaking like a caveful of bats about a fight, Pete."

"Pay them no attention, baby," I told her. "Those dizzy little space dames are always squeaking like a caveful of bats. I remember getting drunk in a joint up on Venus where—"

She reached down and rattled my earphone jack, nearly blasting my eardrums loose.

"This is serious, Pete," she wailed. "Answer me."

"I am answering you," I said. "I'm telling you there wasn't any fight. Jet Markham cooled them off."

"But how worked up did Steve get? Would he try to do anything desperate in the race—like trying to wreck Skid's rocket?"

"Hold it, kid," I said. "Just what did those little spacies say?"

Before she could answer, one of the little Celetron robots came clicking up and tried to push the sliding cockpit cover shut under Suvia's nose. She brushed it off with a sweep of her arm, causing it to whirl plaintively. That's one thing about women, even Suvia, they've no respect for machinery. Those robots are precision instruments, too.

"It was that little dancer Azi Maruu runs around with," she said then, "who was doing most of the talking. I gathered Maruu has been needling Steve all week until he's reached a stage where he'll just about go out there and try to wreck Skid's rocket if it kills them both. The little dancer was spilling all this dope because she wanted the troupe to bet everything on Maruu to cop the 'Double.'"

That made sense in pieces big enough to start a meteor. Shades of little galaxies, I thought bitterly, the one day I decide to go out and drive a race, a thing like this has to happen.

"Guys have tried to wreck Skid before, baby," I said, trying to keep the trouble out of my voice. "I wouldn't give it another thought. Now you'd better let Percy here get those boom magnets fixed before he blows a tube."

My big, scarlet-finned Comet slid into the starting tube with hardly a jolt. From the corner of my eye I could see the familiar golden bulk of Sirius 50, its outlines somewhat blurred by the semi-transparent walls of the starting tube. On the other side, in the pole position, a gleaming white Tri Planet-built Star Car was being swung into place. The driver of the Star Car was a new-comer to the circuit—a nice looking blond-headed kid who brought his rocket up from Antarctica for this race.

The white Star Car was the last rocket to go into the tubes and it filled out the top tier. There are four of these tiers with five tubes to the tier here at Astrola, as at most of the newer tracks. The favorites usually draw the lower tier, where the pull of the force field is tougher and the going slower. This makes for closer and more exciting races since the rockets scramble for the better positions on the upper levels.

Outside my rocket I noticed the guide-line color bands on the force fence deepen suddenly, almost obscuring the stands. Although these bands were invisible to the crowd, they stood out sharply in my specially ground lenses, tracing the dome-shaped path of the force fence. This force fence, despite its apparent fragility, can stop a churning rocket on a pinpoint.

And it has stopped plenty of them, too. Not even radar controlled cushioning jets and the strong repellent force the fence exerted can keep a rocket from going into it.

When the color bands steadied to racing ready, I felt for the accelerator paddles, jabbing them all the way home. With the paddles completely depressed, the forward propulsion jets were all set to fire simultaneously when the starter threw the radio-controlled master switch in the judges' stand.

On the instrument board in front of me the keys that operated trimming jets and repulsion magnets shone with a dull green incandescence.

The ten-second warning signal let go with a sharp buzz in my earphones. I braced myself, pulling my neck down as far as it would go. And then suddenly my stomach was trying to push its way through the back of my spine and into the contacts of my anti-black-out belt. In one awful surge my big sizzle buggy kicked itself out of the starting tube.

That first magnet bend on the big elliptic is always the worst. Anything can happen when twenty bunched up rockets go into that curve still fighting the blasting surge of their starting momentum.

Automatically I set my repulsion magnets and increased the starboard trimming jets to ride the fence around. It's the only safe way to take that first tight corner. With the magnets of one rocket playing against the next and the last ship cushioned against the fence, you're in a groove as neat and cozy as a baby in a crib.

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