

Goodwin Harold Leland

**The Scarlet Lake Mystery:  
A Rick Brant Science-  
Adventure Story**



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Brant Science-Adventure Story**

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# Harold Leland Goodwin

## The Scarlet Lake Mystery: A Rick Brant Science-Adventure Story

### CHAPTER I

#### Spindrift

Rick Brant released the sling pouch with his left hand and let it drop smoothly to the end of its double string. The sling swung through a complicated arc, out to its full length, down again behind his back, then, with rapidly increasing speed, over his right shoulder. With a final whip he swung the pouch forward and released the free end of the string at precisely the right moment.

The rock left the pouch at astonishing speed, whistling as it traveled out to sea. Over fifty yards from shore it slapped into the water only a few feet from a bottle that bobbed there as a target.

Don Scott, nicknamed Scotty, nodded his approval. "Okay, David. Another hour of practice and you can go hunting Goliath."

Rick grinned. "I'm getting the hang of it," he admitted. "Let's see you heave another one out there."

The boys had collected a pile of assorted water-polished stones from the beach near Pirate's Field, and brought them to the front of the big Brant house facing the Atlantic Ocean.

Scotty selected one of the larger ones, then checked his sling. The sling was simplicity itself. Two pieces of strong cord were connected to each side of the pouch, made of heavy canvas about four inches long and three wide. One string ended in a loop, which Scotty slipped over his right forefinger. The other string ended in a large knot, which Scotty held between his forefinger and thumb.

Scotty placed the stone in the pouch and gripped it in his left hand, holding the stone in place with thumb and forefinger. He took throwing position, left hand holding the pouch slightly lower than shoulder height while his right held the strings in the center of his body just above his belt buckle.

He released the pouch and put his solid weight into the throw.

Rick's lips pursed in a silent whistle. The stone sang shrilly as it flew up, up, up and far out. Then the trajectory dropped off rapidly and it fell into the sea.

"Bless Bess!" Rick exclaimed. "Three hundred yards if it was an inch!"

Even Scotty looked a little surprised. "I'm going to quit while I'm ahead," he announced.

Barbara Brant, a slim, pretty, blond girl a year Rick's junior, hailed them from the porch, then ran down and joined them. "Hi! What are you two doing?"

"Scotty just won the rock-throwing championship of the East Coast," Rick told her.

Barby looked surprised. "He did? I thought you were waiting for Dr. Gordon?"

"We are, but we decided to try out Scotty's new sling while we were waiting."

The boys, and in fact the entire scientific staff of Spindrift Island, had been in a state of excitement for the past few days because of a telegram received from Dr. John Gordon. Dr. Gordon had been on leave for some time, working on a special project at a rocket experimental station in the West. A few days before, Dr. Hartson Brant, Rick's father and head of the Spindrift Scientific Foundation, a world-famous research organization, had received word from Gordon that Rick and Scotty were needed for a special assignment. Gordon had not given any details in his wire.

This morning Dr. Gordon had phoned that he had been delayed, but would arrive by Navy plane around noontime. Long before noon, Rick and Scotty had moved Rick's four-passenger Sky Wagon off the grassy runway that ran along the seaward side of the island, then settled down to the rock-throwing session.

Barby said, "I'm pretty good with a slingshot. Let me try."

Scotty handed her the sling. She looked at it dubiously. "What's this? It isn't a slingshot."

"It's a sling," Rick explained. "Not a slingshot. You know – like David and Goliath."

Barby looked her disbelief. "You mean David killed Goliath with two pieces of string and a piece of canvas?"

"He probably used leather thongs and a leather pouch," Scotty said, "but the idea is the same."

"Show her," Rick suggested.

Scotty picked up another of the larger stones and let fly. It dropped short of the earlier throw, but the effect was enough to make Barby's blue eyes open wide.

"Where did you get it?" she asked excitedly.

"Made it. Steve Ames showed me how, and how to throw."

The Spindrift Scientific Foundation, located on Spindrift Island off the New Jersey coast, had been called upon several times to assist the United States Government. In many of the cases, the scientific staff worked under the direction of a topnotch intelligence agent by the name of Steven Ames. Rick and Scotty had taken an active part, in spite of the fact that they were only in their teens.

Working for JANIG, the intelligence group that Steve Ames represented, had taught both boys a great deal about intelligence procedures. This training was a major reason why John Gordon had called on them for assistance.

"Isn't it a funny weapon for Steve Ames to use?" Barby asked. "I mean, after all, spies are supposed to use guns or knives, aren't they?"

Rick grinned. "Sure. They carry knives between their teeth, and they have at least two guns each. Walking arsenals, that is what they are. It takes a strong man to be a spy, on account of all the heavy metal he has to lug around."

Barby ignored him. "Scotty, how come Steve knows about slings?"

"It's a hobby. He and a few others are trying to keep the art of using slings alive," Scotty explained. "It's been nearly forgotten."

"I see." Barby glared at Rick. "If you can't give me a civil answer when I ask a question, I won't ask you any more!"

Rick pointed out, "You'll have to stop for now, anyway, because Scotty and I have to leave on this special job of John Gordon's. Besides, the only reason you're mad is because you can't go."

Barby always felt cheated when Rick and Scotty left the island on some exciting expedition or job. She had vowed to be a boy in her next reincarnation.

Scotty stepped in as peacemaker. "Barby won't mind," he said. "After all, Jan Miller will be here in a few days."

After completion of *The Electronic Mind Reader* case Hartson Brant had persuaded Dr. Walter Miller, an expert who had worked with the Spindrift staff, to join the Foundation permanently. That meant Barby would have Miller's daughter, Jan, as a companion, and Barby was delighted beyond words. The boys were pleased, too. Not only was Jan nice to have around, but her presence – they hoped – would mean less trouble from Barby when they were going off somewhere.

The Millers would move into one of the new cottages behind the orchard, next to Parnell Winston, the staff cyberneticist. Howard Shannon, expert in the natural sciences, and his family would be their other neighbors.

At the moment, however, Shannon and Tony Briotti, the staff archaeologist, were away on an expedition in the Sulu Sea. Rick and Scotty had been keenly disappointed at being left behind. But Dr. Gordon's offer of a new job had cheered them up considerably.

"Shouldn't Dr. Gordon be arriving?" Barby asked.

Scotty looked at his watch. "He should. But he didn't give any definite time."

Barby poked at a sling stone with one slipper. "Where are you supposed to go?"

"Somewhere in Nevada, Dad says," Rick replied.

"I thought Dr. Gordon was at White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico."

"So did I," Scotty remarked. "The telegram was the first I knew about his working in Nevada."

Barby held up her hand. "Listen!"

A plane was in sight! Rick identified it as a prop-driven Navy utility job. No doubt of it, Gordon was arriving!

They watched eagerly as the plane lost altitude, flaps and wheels lowered for the landing. The pilot brought it in over the big radar antenna on the laboratory roof, then dropped onto the runway for a three-point landing opposite the orchard.

The three ran around the wing, bracing themselves against the prop blast. Rick took the suitcase that was handed to him by Dr. Gordon, who leaped lightly to the ground after his luggage.

The scientist, a short, wiry man with gray hair cropped crew-cut fashion, waved to the pilot, then motioned the young people back as the pilot turned with a blast of his prop and taxied to take-off position in front of the lab.

Because of the racket, no one tried to talk until the plane was nearly out of earshot. Then Barby spoke for all of them as they walked to the house. "We thought you'd never get here!"

Dr. Gordon smiled his pleasure at being home again. He shook hands with the boys. "You've no idea how nice and green this island looks after the Nevada desert. And you've no idea how hungry I am! Is it too late for lunch?"

Mrs. Brant answered him from the porch. "You have just two minutes to wash up and come to the table, John!"

Hartson Brant appeared behind her. He shook hands with Dr. Gordon as the three young people escorted him to the porch. "Welcome home, John."

"Thanks, Hartson. It's good to be back. Where are the others? Zircon, Weiss, and Winston? I know Tony and Howard are off on an expedition, but I thought the others were home."

"They are. Parnell Winston is probably having lunch at his cottage. Hobart and Julius are in New York, examining some new equipment for the lab. They'll be back tonight."

Rick was dying to ask questions, but he knew this was not the right time. At lunch, perhaps, they might be given some details.

John Gordon looked at him and grinned. "Here's Rick Brant," he declared, "politely holding his tongue when he's about to pop like a firecracker with questions. Your self-control does you credit, Rick. Want one bit of data to chew on while you're waiting?"

Rick gulped, then returned the grin. "Yes, sir!"

John Gordon lowered his voice to a confidential pitch. "We have an enemy," he stated. "What kind of enemy may be seen clearly in the name by which he goes." He paused.

"What name?" Rick asked impatiently.

*"Homo Terrestrials."*

John Gordon turned and hurried upstairs to his room to wash up for lunch.

Rick stared after him. What in the name of a simple-minded spacefish did that mean?

*Homo Terrestrials.*

Man of Earth.

Earthman!

## CHAPTER II

### Assignment: Rocket Base

Rick turned the phrase over and over in his head, trying to make sense out of it. Earthman? Who wasn't an earthman? The whole human race was composed of them. Of course ordinary people didn't refer to themselves as *homo terrestrialis*, but that's what they were just the same.

Scotty was just as puzzled. "Do you make anything out of it?" he inquired.

Rick shook his head mutely.

As Barby made a beeline for the library, Scotty called after her, "Where are you going? It's lunchtime."

She answered without pausing. "I'm going to consult the dictionary before Dr. Gordon comes down."

"Maybe she has something there," Rick said. "Let's go."

But the dictionary gave no clues. *Homo* was simply "man," and *terrestrial* was simply "of earth."

"Terrestrial is in here, but not terrestrials," Barby complained.

"Same thing," Rick said. "Adding 'is' just makes it a Latin form. No, there's nothing strange about the term, except it's strange that anyone should use it."

"We'll find out," Scotty reminded him. "John Gordon was just teasing us. Let's go eat. Maybe he'll break down at lunch."

Rick realized the sense of what Scotty said, but he couldn't stop worrying the problem as his dog, Dismal, might worry a bone. Then, when they all sat down to lunch, his father effectively blocked discussion of it, and their new assignment, by talking with Dr. Gordon about mutual friends out West.

Finally Mrs. Brant came to her son's rescue. "Now, Hartson, and you too, John. You've teased Rick and Scotty enough."

Mr. Brant chuckled. "I wondered how long he was going to put up with our reminiscences before blowing a fuse or something."

Rick grinned sheepishly. He should have guessed that the two scientists were deliberately keeping the conversation off the main subject just as a joke.

John Gordon took a generous helping of salad. "All right. I'll talk, but you'll have to excuse me if I mumble a little. I intend to go right on eating. I've been looking forward to this for months!"

"We'll excuse you," Barby said quickly. "Only please start!"

Gordon smiled at her. "Can you keep secrets?"

"I always have," Barby retorted.

"All right. Then you can listen. But what I say must not be repeated."

The scientist paused long enough to drain his glass of milk and refill it from the pitcher.

"Well, to begin with, we moved from New Mexico to Nevada only a short while ago, in order to separate our work from military research. We created a new test base in Nevada, not too far from the Atomic Energy Commission's Nevada Test Site, although we have no connection with it."

"Then you're not on a military project?" Scotty asked.

"Yes and no. The work is sponsored jointly by the Department of Defense and some other agencies, including the National Science Foundation. However, we are not working on military projects, in the sense that our rockets are not weapons. They're for research purposes. Of course some of the things we're doing will be valuable for military application later, and so our test base is closed to the public and most of our work has a high classification. Usually the work is secret, but sometimes it's top secret. Is that clear?"

Scotty and the Brants agreed that it was.

"Very well. Since we operate under security, every person who works on the base is fully investigated and cleared for top secret. This is an important point. You know how thorough these investigations are. Once a security check for top secret is completed, there is literally nothing of importance that isn't known about a person. But in spite of the most careful security work, there is someone on our base about whom we do not know everything.

"It's absolutely baffling," Gordon continued. "Our first project was a simple one, with a tested rocket system. Actually, we used a modified Aerobee, a rocket of proven dependability. Nothing should have gone wrong. But when we fired, the rocket exploded at the top of the launcher. We investigated thoroughly, of course, and found someone had cleverly sabotaged the shoot."

"The what?" Barby asked.

"The shoot. When we launch a rocket we simply call it a shoot."

"Oh. Now I understand."

"Ask any questions you want. Well, we discovered that someone had rigged a steel bar at the top of the launching tower. It was spring-loaded and triggered to move right across the path of the rocket when we fired."

"What does spring-loaded mean?" Mrs. Brant asked.

"The bar was activated by a spring. The spring was under tension. The steel bar lay along one of the pieces of the frame, and was held by a latch. When the trigger withdrew the latch, the spring pushed the bar across the path of the rocket. That's what spring-loaded means in this case."

"Couldn't anyone have found the steel bar?" Scotty wanted to know.

"Yes, if anyone had looked for it. But once the launching tower was erected, there was no reason for anyone to go to the top for an inspection."

Scotty nodded his understanding.

"To go on, as soon as we found the bar and the spring mechanism we knew we'd been sabotaged. But that wasn't all. Etched on the bar was a rather good picture of a knight in armor, in the process of driving his sword through a rocket. Underneath was the inscription: *Homo Terrestrialis*."

"I don't get it," Rick complained.

Gordon grinned. "Neither did we. And we still don't get it. But you can be sure we started a few balls rolling. First, Security checked every man's file again. They missed no one. Even the security officers and guards were rechecked. Then they started a program to find out who on the base had any talent as an artist. Nothing was found. The security chief sent photos of the etched picture and the whole bar mechanism to every security agency in the government, including the FBI, Central Intelligence, and the military. He drew a blank. No one had ever heard of anyone calling himself the Earthman, and the technique wasn't familiar."

The scientist paused long enough to eat a little more, then resumed.

"Meanwhile, we were getting a Viking rocket ready to launch. We checked it from nose to fins. We didn't miss a thing. Then we posted a guard around it, and a guard to watch the guard. We took no chances at all. The project engineer even slept near the rocket where he could keep an eye on it."

"Did anyone climb the tower?" Barby asked.

"There was no tower. A Viking rests on its fins. Anyway, it took off. It climbed ten miles, then went on an erratic course. We couldn't control it. Fortunately it crashed on the Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range, which is a closed military area nearby, so no one was hurt. At first we thought it was just one of those typical accidents that happen during rocket research. Even the best-performing rockets sometimes go haywire. But when we got into the wreckage, we found the steering vanes had been tampered with, in a way that inspection couldn't have disclosed."

"Was there a picture?" Scotty asked.

"Not in or on the rocket. But when we got back to the base after inspecting it, everyone was excited. Someone had sketched a knight in armor with crayon right on the concrete of the launching pad."

Rick said thoughtfully, "Then you can eliminate those who went to inspect the crashed Viking."

"Unfortunately, no. We have no way of telling when the picture was drawn. No one was seen near the launching pad between the time the rocket was fired and the discovery of the sketch on our return from the gunnery range."

"Do you think this sabotage is the work of an enemy agent?" Hartson Brant inquired.

John Gordon shrugged. "Perhaps. Yet we don't really think so. In the first place, an enemy agent would probably not leave a calling card. And second, we're reasonably sure no agent could have gotten past the security check."

There was silence while Scotty and the Brants thought over what Gordon had said. The scientist busied himself with the excellent food, and finally accepted a cup of coffee.

Rick voiced aloud the angles that puzzled him the most. "If not an enemy agent, then why the sabotage at all? Who would have anything to gain but an enemy?"

"If we had the answers, we could find the saboteur," Gordon pointed out. "If we knew why he calls himself 'The Earthman' we might also have a lead. But as it is, we're stumped. It could be anyone on the base, including me."

"Is it you?" Barby asked in a stage whisper.

Gordon looked around, as though to make sure there were no eavesdroppers. "I don't think so," he whispered, "but I'll have to admit I haven't looked since yesterday."

"What do you want the boys to do?" Mrs. Brant asked.

The scientist became serious again. "It's a desperate hope," he admitted, "but there is always a possibility they might turn up something if we plant them as undercover agents. Rick and Scotty not only have good sense, but they're lucky. Maybe they'll be lucky enough to stumble over or sniff out a lead."

"How do we do this?" Rick wanted to know. He was definitely interested in the job. Just the idea of witnessing a big rocket shoot was exciting enough, even without the added attraction of a saboteur to be uncovered.

"You get jobs," Gordon stated. "But you'll have to get them on your own merits, because if I intervened in your behalf that would be a tip-off. Only I and the Chief of Security will know about you."

"Can you trust the Chief of Security?" Barby asked.

Gordon smiled. "A fair question. All I can say is, trust must start somewhere. If Tom Preston is the Earthman, I'll turn in my spaceman's suit and proton disintegrator and resign from the human race."

Rick grinned. "All right. We'll trust the Chief of Security on your say-so. What's the next step?"

"Well, you're not old enough to have much of a work history, so we'll have to exaggerate your ages and the time you've worked. It will be safe enough, so far as being found out is concerned," Gordon said. "Security makes all reference checks, including employment, and Tom Preston will handle your cases personally."

Dismal rubbed against Gordon's leg. The scientist slipped him a scrap of cheese from the salad, then looked guiltily at Mrs. Brant.

"John Gordon! How many times have I told you not to feed Dismal at the table?" she exclaimed in mock anger.

Gordon looked sheepish and hung his head. "I'm sorry. Anyway, boys, I'll advance you funds. You fly to Las Vegas as soon as possible and apply to Lomac for jobs."

"To who? I mean, to whom?"

"Lomac, Rick. The base is run by a contractor, an engineering firm by the name of Logan and Macklin, Lomac for short. They hire all but a handful of scientific personnel, like project directors and their chief assistants, who come from a variety of places, including government agencies, universities under contract to the government, and so on."

"Do we apply in Las Vegas?" Scotty asked.

"Yes. Lomac's recruiting office is there. I'll give you the address. However, the base is some distance away, so you'll need transportation. I suggest a jeep. You can pick one up secondhand after you arrive. I'll give you sufficient funds. Also, prepare to hang around Las Vegas for a while. It will take at least a week to process your papers."

"Are we supposed to know you once we get there?" Rick queried.

"Only casually, because of the Spindrift connection. You know who I am, but you don't know me well because you've never worked on a project of mine. I'll find occasion to talk with you privately as needed."

"Another question," Rick said. "Have there been any more sabotage attempts besides the two you mentioned?"

"No. Those first projects went off in fast order, but the next shoot isn't scheduled for about two weeks."

Scotty asked, "What's the name of this base? You haven't told us."

Gordon looked grim. "I hope the name isn't prophetic," he said. "The base was named for the dry lake where the rocket pads are located: Scarlet Lake."

## CHAPTER III

### Las Vegas, Nevada

Rick and Scotty picked up their luggage at the baggage counter, then paused to survey their surroundings. McCarran Field, the airport for Las Vegas, Nevada, was modern and attractive. But there was no mistaking that this was desert country. Beyond the airport they saw the barren mountains of the Charleston Range, and behind the motels clustered around the airport, they saw flat desert, thinly populated with mesquite and creosote brush.

"Welcome to the wild West," Rick said with a grin.

"Not a cowboy in sight," Scotty commented. "Plenty of dudes, though." He gestured at a group dressed in loud sports clothes. "What now?"

"Let's take a taxi into town, register at the hotel, and then go to Lomac."

"Okay." Scotty hailed a cab from the front of the taxi line. They loaded their baggage and climbed in.

"El Cortez," Rick directed. John Gordon had suggested that hotel, since it was close to Lomac's office in downtown Las Vegas, and the food was good and not expensive.

The taxi rolled through the gateway of McCarran Field and turned toward town. In a few moments they began to pass the fabulous resort hotels on the famous "Strip."

"Wow!" Scotty exclaimed. "Some bunch of fancy shanties!"

The taxi left The Strip, traversed the long lines of motels on Fifth Street, and emerged on Fremont a block from the Cortez. A few minutes later they had checked in and were unpacking their bags in a comfortable room in the Cortez Annex.

Scotty picked up the telephone directory and leafed through it until he found Logan and Macklin. "We have to go to Sixth Street and First Avenue. Any idea where that is?"

"Just a couple of blocks from here." While riding in the taxi, Rick had watched street signs and quickly figured out the simple street plan of the town. "Let's go."

The Lomac offices were on the second floor of a building less than five minutes walk from the hotel. The boys received application forms from a bored clerk and sat down at a table to fill them out according to previous plan. In his application Rick emphasized his experience with electronic equipment and in wiring circuits. Scotty stressed his mechanical experience with standard machine-shop equipment, and with motor repair. This had been John Gordon's suggestion, since it would result in their being placed in different departments at the rocket base, thus enabling them to cover more ground.

The clerk checked their forms, then nodded. "Okay. We can use both of you, if you pass the security check. Ever been cleared?"

"We're both cleared for top secret," Rick told him.

"What agency?"

"JANIG."

The clerk glanced up but made no comment. Rick guessed that JANIG clearances were not common. He was a little surprised that the clerk knew the agency; not many people did, because JANIG's activities were never publicized.

"It will take anywhere from a few days to two weeks to get your clearances verified and your files transferred. We can't do anything for you until then. When we want you, we'll call you. That's all."

Rick hesitated at the door. "Where are the used-car dealers located?"

"Fifth Street and Main Street."

Rick thanked him and the boys walked out into the brilliant sunlight. "Feel up to getting the jeep?" Rick asked. The boys had taken off from New York shortly after midnight and had ridden

all night on a plane that, as Scotty had said, "landed in every cow pasture west of Chicago." They had not slept much.

"Let's get the jeep," Scotty replied. "We can catch up on our sleep after lunch."

However, getting the jeep was not as simple as they had expected. Not until they reached the fifth used-car dealer did they find one for sale.

Scotty put the jeep through its paces, then drove it back to the car lot. He looked at it thoughtfully and shrugged. "I wouldn't call it a pile of junk, but that's only because I'm polite."

The salesman, a lean Westerner, looked pained. "What do you want for the price? A Jaguar?"

"No," Scotty said. "Just something that runs."

"This runs."

"Not exactly. It limps. Put a new timer in, replace the front-wheel bearings, grind the valves, and we'll take it."

Rick smothered a grin. Scotty's wink had told him the jeep would do. His pal was trying to get the price down.

The salesman sighed. "How are you going to pay for it?"

"Cash. Either repair it, or knock off the cost of repairs, and it's a deal."

"You named it. We'll knock off the repair costs."

In another hour the jeep was theirs and the boys had obtained a vehicle registration and Nevada driver's licenses. As they drove to the hotel, Rick asked, "Is it really in good shape?"

"Not bad. It does need some work, but we can do it in a few hours ourselves."

"Now that we have wheels, let's get cleaned up, have a nap, and then see the town," Rick suggested.

"I'm with you," Scotty agreed.

It was lunchtime when they returned to the hotel. They settled for ham and eggs in the Cortez Coffee Shop, then stopped on the way through the casino to watch the gambling. Even at noontime the dice table was jammed with customers, and the blackjack tables were nearly full. The roulette table was not getting much play, however, and they watched for a few spins of the wheel.

"At least you get an even break on this one," Scotty said. "The odds are thirty-five to one, and there are only thirty-six numbers."

Rick grinned. "How'd you like to have your life hanging on odds of thirty-five to one?"

Scotty chuckled. "Anyway, you don't have to play numbers. You can play black or red, or odd or even. That gives you fifty-fifty odds."

Rick shook his head. "You forgot something. The wheel has zero and double zero, and they're green, and neither odd nor even. That makes the odds less than fifty-fifty. You can't win, Scotty."

"Kill-joy. How about the one-arm bandits?" He pointed to several rows of slot machines.

"No help there, either. It depends on how they're set, but usually out of every four coins you put in, one drops out of play completely. The only one who ever sees it again is the man who owns the machine. So, if you keep feeding money in, eventually the machine will take it all. Sometimes the machines are set to take one coin out of every three, or even one out of every two."

"But people do win, gambling," Scotty objected.

"Sure they do. That's why people gamble – and hope. But the great majority lose." Rick waved at the luxurious casino. "If most people didn't lose, these casinos couldn't operate."

"Maybe I'd be the lucky one," Scotty said.

A deputy sheriff had been listening to the conversation with amusement. He tapped Scotty on the shoulder. "I said that once, son. I was going to be the luckiest ringdangdoo that ever hit Vegas. And what happened? I've been working in this hotel as a guard for two years, trying to make a stake big enough to go back home and start where I left off when the bug bit me."

"Tough," Rick murmured.

"The town is full of people like me. Besides, you lads can't gamble, anyway. The legal age is twenty-one. Come back in a few years if you feel rich and foolish, and try bucking the tiger. You'll see what I mean."

"We'll take your word for it," Scotty assured him. "Come on, Rick. Let's hit the hay. I can use a nap."

If Las Vegas was spectacular by day, it was a neon nightmare after dark. The boys dined well, and more than sufficiently, at El Rancho Vegas, then got in the jeep for a ride around town.

Scotty loosened his belt with a groan. "For once," he admitted, "I overdid it. Did you ever see so much chow?"

"Not outside of a supermarket," Rick agreed. He let his own belt out a notch or two.

The boys drove to Fremont Street, past the incredible gambling halls with their elaborate signs and miles of neon tubing.

Scotty remarked, "I guess you and that deputy sheriff were right. It takes an awful lot of lost money to keep all these places going."

Tiring of the neon wilderness they turned north on Main Street and headed out toward Nellis Air Force Base. For a brief stretch the neon glow faded, then resumed again as they reached North Las Vegas.

Suddenly Scotty pointed. "Hey! We're on another planet."

Rick stared. Towering into the sky was a huge, illuminated figure clad in a spacesuit. The transparent helmet glowed red, then blue, green, yellow, and finally red again. In one colossal hand was a supermodern pistol. Colored flame spurted from the muzzle.

Rick laughed as he noticed another figure in front of the establishment. "Look! He's got a pup."

Acting as a doorman was another figure, human size, clad in a similar getup.

Across the building which served as a base for the giant spaceman was a glowing sign:

#### THE SPACEMAN CASINO

"What say we drop in?" Scotty suggested.

"Sure," Rick replied, falling into the role of a science-fiction spaceman. "We might pick up the latest gossip on that uranium strike on Venus, or the discovery of live prodspenders on Mars."

Scotty swung into the parking lot. "Tell me, Space Commander, what are prodspenders?"

"A subspecies of sponprodders. Your ignorance surprises me, Cadet Scott."

"I haven't been to the inner planets for a week," Scotty apologized. "I lose touch."

They walked across the driveway, noting that the customary shrubs and plants were replaced here by artificial ones, made in a form that represented someone's idea of what plants from other worlds must look like. The effect was actually pretty good. The place had been built with imagination.

The spacesuit-clad doorman nodded, and they saw that he was perspiring freely inside the transparent helmet.

"Who ever heard of a non-airconditioned spacesuit?" Rick murmured. "Bet he couldn't survive the Venus-Mercury run in that rig."

Inside were the inevitable slot machines, in banks of fifty or more. Rick decided the objective must be one slot machine for each person in town. Behind the slot machines were the dice layouts, roulette tables, and blackjack tables.

Beyond the casino proper, however, was a pleasant lounge that included a snack bar and tables for dining. The boys wandered over to the snack bar and sat down on stools, looking around with appreciation. The walls were decorated with murals – photographic reproductions of a famous artist's conception of other planets.

"This is nice," Rick said appreciatively.

"Best place I've seen since Callisto Connie's joint on Jupiter," Scotty agreed whimsically.

A waiter, not much older than they were, wandered down the counter. He was dressed in a loose tunic that glittered.

"Howdy, fellas," he greeted them.

Rick and Scotty "howdy'd" back.

The counter clerk eyed them with interest. "Haven't seen you in here before."

"First time," Rick admitted. "Nice place."

"We like it. You from Scarlet Lake?"

The boys stiffened. "What gave you that idea?" Scotty asked quickly.

The waiter admired his fingernails. "Easy. You're not local folks and you don't look like tourists. So, you came here to work. Maybe the atomic test site, maybe Nellis, maybe Scarlet Lake. I said Scarlet Lake because a lot of people from there come in to eat when they're in town. Some of 'em here right now."

"Where?" Rick asked.

"At the tables over against the wall. What are you going to have?"

Neither boy wanted any more food at the moment, and said so. They agreed on coffee.

"Here or at a table?"

"Table," Rick said. "Might as well move in with the people from Scarlet Lake, starting now."

He led the way across the room and picked out a table next to two men in loud sports shirts. One man was big, nearly the size of Dr. Zircon of the Spindrift staff. He had red hair and a curly red beard. His eyes were dark and penetrating under bushy red eyebrows. He looked the boys over with slow deliberation, as though memorizing what they looked like.

The second man was big, too, although he didn't approach the redhead in size. He was slightly over six feet, Rick guessed. He was dark-complexioned and clean-shaven. His eyes, a light blue, were a surprising contrast to his dark hair and heavily tanned skin.

The redhead leaned over as the boys sat down. "I haven't seen you kids before. You from Scarlet Lake?"

"We hope to be," Rick replied civilly. "We've applied for jobs at Lomac, but now we have to wait for a security check."

The redhead turned to his friend. "Catching 'em kind of young these days, hey, Pancho?"

Pancho showed white teeth in a smile. "Looks like it."

"We can do a day's work," Scotty said shortly.

"Never doubted it for a minute." The redhead thrust out a massive paw. "I'm Mac McCline. Big Mac, they call me. This here is Pancho Kelly."

The boys shook hands and gave their names.

"Any idea what you're getting into at Scarlet Lake?" Big Mac asked.

"Not much," Rick said truthfully.

Big Mac guffawed. "Well, I'll tell you. Heat, dirt, sidewinders, and crazy rockets. And if they don't get you, one thing will."

"What's that?" Scotty asked.

"The Earthman."

## CHAPTER IV

### Scarlet Lake

Rick and Scotty never found out what Big Mac meant by his crack about the Earthman. He evaded their questions, apparently feeling that he had said too much. Otherwise he was cordial enough. As the days of waiting to hear from Lomac passed by, the boys made the Spaceman Casino their headquarters, hoping to pick up information from the Scarlet Lake people who hung out there.

Men came and went, but Mac and Pancho were there every night. Once, Rick commented on their nightly presence at the casino and said jokingly that work on the base seemed to allow plenty of free time.

"We don't go back to the base every night," Big Mac said. "Pancho and I do our job when there's work to be done. Other times we do what we want. If anyone at the base needs us, they know where to come."

Rick thought that over. It seemed reasonable. He asked, "Is it okay to ask what you do?"

"Sure it's okay. We're radar operators. We track the rockets on a radar set from a field station." Big Mac pulled a red-checkered handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose violently. "Good operators are scarce. That's why no one bothers us, so long as we're on the job when we're needed."

Scotty leaned over and picked up something that had dropped to the floor when Mac pulled out his handkerchief. "You dropped this, Mr. McCline."

Rick identified it easily. It was a tiny transistor, an integral part of modern electronic apparatus.

Mac took it in his big fingers. "Thanks. I must have stuck it in my pocket absent-mindedly while we were repairing the equipment."

"Where do you go when you're on a field radar job?" Rick asked. "Just tell me to mind my own business, if I get into anything classified."

"There's no classification on what we do," Pancho Kelly said. "Only the results. We go to Careless Mesa. Everyone knows that."

The boys let the conversation lag and ordered dinner. They didn't want to seem too inquisitive. Constant questions would only make Mac and Pancho suspicious.

Later, as they rode through the star-studded night in their jeep, Scotty suddenly asked, "What do you think of Big Mac and Pancho?"

Rick shrugged. He knew what had prompted Scotty's question. He had the same feeling himself. "They're friendly enough, but I think it's an act. What I mean, is ..."

"That they haven't any real interest in being friendly, they're just cordial for the sake of appearances," Scotty concluded.

"On the nose, pal. I get the feeling they could switch from casual conversation to mayhem without batting an eye."

Scotty thought it over for a moment. "Mac's the driving force of the pair, but I'd say they're equally tough. I'd guess Pancho is a combination of Irish and Mexican, both from his looks and his name."

"Is Pancho a name? Or a nickname?"

"Nickname. Usually short for Francisco."

Rick thought back over the past few days, and their meetings with Big Mac and Pancho. "Funny thing, Scotty. The casino is usually pretty busy, and mostly with men from Scarlet Lake. But instead of getting acquainted with many of them we always seem to sit near those two."

Scotty gave him a sideways glance. "What about it?"

"I think we do it instinctively," Rick went on. "Every time we walk in, they're deep in conversation. There's a kind of atmosphere about them, as though the talk is always very secret. None of the other men seem like that. They're more – well, open. No secrets. Know what I mean?"

Scotty nodded. "Now that you point it out, I do."

"So I think we sort of gravitate toward them automatically. On a hunch that we haven't even recognized, so to speak."

"Because there's more to be learned from them than from the others?"

"That's it!" Rick was glad he had finally put his feelings into words. "We'll keep an eye on those two," he said emphatically.

On the sixth day of their stay in Las Vegas, Lomac called. The boys hurried to the office and were told they could report to the base personnel office at once. They were given a map showing the location of the base. Scarlet Lake, they learned, was about two hours' drive northwest of Las Vegas.

They packed hurriedly, checked out, and loaded the jeep. After a brief stop for gas, they headed out Route 95. Within a few minutes they had left Las Vegas behind and were in open desert country.

The jeep was not capable of fast travel, and nearly an hour passed before they saw signs of civilization. It was the air force base at Indian Springs. They stopped for a coke, and topped off the gas tank. Rick bought a canteen and a desert water bag at the general store, and filled both.

A few miles beyond Indian Springs they saw the entrance road to the Atomic Energy Commission's Nevada Test Site, and the Sixth Army's Camp Desert Rock. After that, there was no sign of civilization for miles.

A few miles before the town of Lathrop Wells, Scotty spotted their turnoff. The sign was small and inconspicuous. It simply read: "*Scarlet Lake*," and an arrow was painted underneath the name.

The paving ended after a mile or two and became a very good dirt road. The jeep was climbing steadily now, and in a short time Scotty shifted to second gear.

"We must be nearly out of Nevada and into California," Scotty commented.

"Almost," Rick agreed. "According to the map, the base is right next to Death Valley." Suddenly he leaned forward as the jeep rounded a turn. Far below and still many miles away was the pinkish gleam of a dry lake bed. Scarlet Lake!

"I see where they got the name," Scotty said.

Rick grinned. "Scarlet Lake makes sense but some of the other names around here don't. Did you notice the town marked 'Steamboat' on the map? And not enough water to float a bar of soap."

"See anything of the base?"

"Not yet."

Five miles later they began to see signs that Scarlet Lake was occupied. Black strips indicated aircraft runways. Then, tiny concrete squares came into view. But not until they were in the valley, only a mile from the base, could they see buildings.

The buildings turned out to be a few single-story administrative shacks clustered around a check-in point. A uniformed guard waved them into a parking lot and told them to report to Security for badges.

They walked into the building marked "*Security Office, Badge Division*" and found a counter with another guard behind it. He took their names and asked for identification, then directed them to stand with chins resting on a tray. He slipped plastic letters into slots and formed their names, then took pictures with a fixed camera.

"Sit down and wait," he said. "We'll have these for you in five minutes."

Rick looked his surprise. "Can you process the pictures that fast?"

"Don't have to. This is a Polaroid camera."

Rick joined Scotty on a wooden bench. "I expected a barbed-wire fence. But there's no fence at all."

"The whole desert is a fence, I guess," Scotty surmised. "The only access roads are probably guarded, and the only other ways to get into the base would be by foot or horseback. No one could make it on foot, and anyone on horseback would attract instant attention."

Scotty probably was right, Rick thought. Still, it wasn't at all what he expected.

In a few moments the guard was back. He handed them laminated plastic badges with their names and pictures. At the bottom of Rick's were the numbers one, two, and three. Scotty's badge had only the numbers two and three.

"What do these mean?" Rick asked.

"Those are the areas where you're allowed to go. Area One is the blockhouse. Area Two is the main base and firing pads. Area Three is the machine shop and maintenance depot. You can go anywhere. Scott can go anywhere but inside the blockhouse. Sign these, please." He handed them forms in which they agreed to be bound by all security regulations, under penalty of the Espionage Act. They signed, and returned the forms.

"Go through the gate," the guard directed, "and report to the reception desk in Building Five. That's personnel. They'll take it from there."

They returned to the jeep and drove to the gate. The guard inspected their badges, compared the pictures with their faces, then waved them on.

"Taking no chances," Rick remarked. "There's Building Five."

The personnel office gave them another map, showing installations and buildings on the base itself, and assigned them to bunks nine and ten in Barracks Seven. Rick was told to report at eight in the morning to Dr. Gould in Building Twelve, while Scotty was told to report to Mr. Rhodes in Maintenance Building Twenty-three. They received a leaflet marked: "*Read This.*"

They followed the map for another three miles, leaving the gate buildings out of sight behind a ridge of rock. Their map showed that the main cluster of buildings was three miles from the gate and nine miles from the blockhouse and the firing pads on the dry lake bed. Again, Rick began to appreciate Western distances.

The boys found their barracks without difficulty, and moved into a room containing four bunks. It wasn't elaborate, but it was adequate for a camp of this kind. It was clear that the other bunks were occupied, but at the moment their bunkmates were apparently out.

Rick stowed his gear in the locker with his bed number on it, then sat down to read the leaflet. It was a directory of camp facilities, plus a written lecture on security. He was allowed to say what kind of work he did, and that was about all.

"Let's look the place over," he suggested.

They located the mess halls, the base movie house, post exchange, and post office. There was also a laundry and a snack bar. Set off by itself was a recreation hall, equipped with TV sets, comfortable chairs, card tables, and pool tables.

Rick followed the map to the laboratory buildings, and was surprised to find that they were enormous sheds, like hangars. Most of the doors were wide open, and he caught glimpses of shapes that could only have been rocket sections. His pulse quickened. There was an atmosphere of excitement, of big jobs being performed. At least his quick imagination told him there was.

Then, in one shed he saw the broken remains of a rocket. From its size he concluded that it must be the Viking that had crashed. The sight brought sharp realization of the real job he and Scotty were here to do.

Rick checked his map. "Our barracks has space for eighty bunks. And, according to this, there are twenty-eight barracks."

"Interesting facts about Scarlet Lake," Scotty declaimed. "What about it?"

"That's over two thousand men."

"A lot of men," Scotty agreed. "What are you getting at?"

"Needles in haystacks. Out of more than two thousand we're supposed to pick one – the Earthman!"

## CHAPTER V

### Project Pegasus

Dr. Gerald Gould, known to the staff as "Gee-Gee," looked more like a high school football coach than a scientist. His blond hair was cropped short, and his face was boyish except for a beautifully waxed military-style mustache. His speech was a remarkable combination of slang and rocket jargon.

He asked, "Do you know vector analysis?"

Rick shook his head. "No, sir."

"Hmmm. Well, boy-oh, we'll plant you with the electronic cooks in the spaghetti department. It says in your job application that you've had plenty of experience in circuit wiring. Roger?"

"Yes, sir." Rick understood that he was to join the technicians in the wiring department. His eyes kept wandering into the huge shed that housed the project on which he was to work. He identified rocket sections, and pretty big ones at that. The rocket was not assembled, but apparently it would tower several stories into the air when assembly was complete. One thing puzzled, him, however. One section obviously had wings. They couldn't be anything else, even though they were tiny and thin as knives. He hadn't heard anything about rockets with wings.

Dr. Gould saw that he was staring with interest at the activity in the shed and grinned sympathetically. "Ever see a big rocket before?"

"Only in pictures," Rick replied.

"Well, you'll see plenty of them before we're through here."

Rick hesitated. "Sir, is it okay to ask what this is all about?"

"Sure it's okay. We have three projects underway at present. In the shed on the left is Orion, which is a two-stage rocket for deep penetration into the exosphere. It's about ready to shoot. In the shed on the right is Cetus, a sounding rocket for ionospheric measurements."

Dr. Gould paused. "If you don't get me, speak up and I'll scoop you the answers. Roger so far?"

Rick nodded. "I'm with you." He understood from the scientist's explanation that Orion was to travel far into the exosphere, actually beyond the atmosphere, while Cetus was a smaller, single-stage rocket for research in the ionosphere, the ionized layer of atmosphere just beyond the stratosphere. The projects, he realized, were named for constellations.

"In this shed we have Pegasus."

"Pegasus was a winged horse," Rick commented, "And aren't those airfoils on that rocket section near the back of the shed? Is that the connection?"

Dr. Gould chuckled. "Sharp-oh! Those are indeed airfoils. Wings for Pegasus. Now make with the reason, if you can."

Rick pondered. He knew rockets achieved stability through fins, or steerable motors, and that wings were no help. Furthermore, there wasn't enough air for wings to be of use beyond the atmosphere where the big rockets traveled. He could see no reason for wings, and said so.

"You're not looking far enough ahead," Dr. Gould said severely. "Put on your spaceman's helmet. Connect up and think. You're on Space Platform Number One and you want to come home to Terra. What are the wings for?"

Light dawned. Rick's chin dropped on his chest and stayed there. Finally he gasped, "You mean the wings are to turn the upper section into a glider in order to land it again?"

Dr. Gould put a hand on his shoulder and nodded gravely. "Ole Gee-Gee is pleased with you. You have demonstrated something between the ears besides strawberry Jello. You have just described the objective of Project Pegasus. We intend to shoot the beast into space and bring the top stage home again by drone control."

The scientist grew serious. "It's not an easy thing, young Brant. No one has yet succeeded in getting a big rocket down in one piece. If we can do it, we'll be one step through the biggest barrier to manned space flight.

"You will work on wiring in the drone control section. Just remember that every touch of your soldering iron is critical. Take no chances at all; everything must be perfect. Do your job and do it well, and someday you'll be able to say that you made the big horse's wings work when it really counted. Now come on, and I'll introduce you to Dick Earle and you can get started."

Dick Earle turned out to be a bigger and darker copy of Gee-Gee. He had the same crew cut and mustache, but his hair was jet black.

Rick also met Dr. Carleton Bond, a tall, slender man of advanced years who was a consultant on drone controls, and Frank Miller, a studious, rather curt young man who was an electronics design engineer.

He began to make some order out of the organization. Gee-Gee Gould was electronics chief for all three projects. Dick Earle was electronics chief for Pegasus, under Gould, and there were also electronics chiefs for Orion and Cetus. Similarly, the projects had air-frame departments, propulsion departments, instrumentation departments, and administrative departments.

Each project also had a technical director, who was a sort of co-ordinator, trouble shooter, and general expert. The technical directors reported to Dr. John Gordon, on loan from Spindrift, who had the title of Senior Project Engineer.

Later, Rick explained it to Scotty. "Each project has its own staff, but there's a top staff that is responsible for all projects. I'm making a little sense out of it, but people keep showing up that I can't fit into the organization."

"They're probably support people," Scotty explained. "Seems the base is divided into two groups; the scientific gang and the support gang. I'm in support, in the vehicle maintenance section. Lomac runs the whole support group. Besides transportation, there's the tracking and monitoring gang – that's what Big Mac and Pancho are in – the machine-shop gang, and all the housekeeping facilities like the fire department, the security force, housing and feeding, and so on."

The boys' roommates turned out to be a security officer named Hank Leeming and one of the janitors, an elderly man of Mexican descent named Maximilian Rodriguez.

On the second day of work Rick met another interesting character, although a nonhuman one, and got an additional duty imposed on him.

He was at work installing a tiny servomotor in the drone control unit when something landed on his head and gripped his hair firmly. Instinctively he started to swing at it, but Dr. Bond's voice stopped him in time.

"Easy, Rick! He won't hurt you."

Rick reached up carefully and his hands met fur. He lifted the little creature down and stared at it, his lips slowly parting in a grin. It was a tiny monkey no larger than a squirrel, with soft brown fur and tufted ears. The little animal pulled free, jumped onto Rick's shoulder and kissed him ecstatically, making happy chirrupy noises.

"What on earth is a monkey doing here?"

Dr. Bond smiled. "Prince Machiavelli is more than a monkey," he replied. "Actually, he is a true marmoset of the genus *Callithrix*. He is also a genuine spacemonk."

"A what?"

The elderly scientist smiled. "Spacemonk. The simian equivalent of spaceman. The Prince has been into space twice now. Fortunately, the nose section was parachuted down intact both times, so he survived. Other spacemonks have been less fortunate. He will be our surrogate for Project Pegasus."

Rick stared at the little creature with increased interest. The marmoset was to substitute, then, for human occupants of the big rocket. His life would depend on their ability to get the winged nose

section down in one piece. He stroked the tiny spacemonk gently, and got a contented series of chirps in response.

Dick Earle walked in and smiled as the monkey snuggled down happily in Rick's cupped hands. "Looks as if you've made a friend, Rick. Good. In addition to your other duties you can take over as the monk's keeper. He won't be any trouble. Sometimes I think he has better manners than some of the staff." Earle turned and walked out again.

Rick stared after him. "What was that last crack about?"

Dr. Bond smiled. "Dick has his problems. I won't gossip, but you'll soon see what I mean."

The elderly consultant's prediction came true in short order. The next day, Rick ran headlong into an unwarranted and particularly nasty dressing down at the hands of Frank Miller. Rick, annoyed with himself for having done a rather poor job of connecting up the servomotor, was busily ripping it out when Miller came over to see what he was doing. Without waiting for an explanation, the design engineer launched into a tirade. Rick's face slowly reddened and his temper grew frayed. It was so completely unjust that he was on the verge of swinging at the engineer when Dick Earle walked in.

Earle asked crisply, "What's this all about?"

Miller turned on him. "You're supposed to be in charge here, but you let sloppy work like this go on! What good does it do for me to design circuits if – "

Earle cut him off. "Shut up, Frank. Rick, what's your story?"

Rick clenched his hands. "I installed this servo, and didn't do a clean job of it. It was pretty sloppy. So I pulled it out to do it over again. I won't settle for anything less than perfect work. But he came along and jumped on me without letting me explain what I was doing."

Earle nodded. "All right. Go ahead with your work. Frank, you are not this boy's supervisor. Let him alone."

Miller glared at the electronics chief, then turned on his heel and stalked out of the shop. Earle watched him go, his pleasant face sober. "I'm sorry, Rick. Frank is like that, and I don't know why. I suspect he has troubles of some sort and takes it out on us. Try to overlook it, because he's an extremely competent engineer. We'd have great trouble replacing him."

Rick nodded. "Yes, sir."

The work progressed smoothly. Rick finished the part he was working on and was assigned another. He met other members of the project, including Phil Sherman and Charlie Kassick who, like himself, were technicians at work on wiring and assembly. He met Cliff Damon, chief of the instrumentation section, who showed him the intricate devices used to track the big rockets and to record just about everything that went on inside them.

It was pleasant and exciting, and only the incident with Frank Miller marred the contentment Rick felt at being a part of Pegasus. Then, near the end of his first week on the job, Miller dropped in and watched Rick at work for a moment. The boy tensed, but said nothing beyond a civil good morning.

Miller cleared his throat. "Brant, I want to apologize."

Rick looked up in surprise.

"I'm known as a crank, and I guess I deserve the reputation. But just because I feel rotten doesn't mean I have to take it out on you. I'm sorry."

Rick looked at the engineer thoughtfully. Miller was apparently sincere. "That's all right," he said. "Why do you feel rotten, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Ulcers. The doctor says the only way to cure them is to get out of this business, and go into something with less stress and strain. But I can't. I've been a rocketeer ever since I graduated from college, and I can't leave. So if I snap at you, please forget it."

Rick nodded. "I'll play it that way if you say so."

"Thanks." Miller turned and walked out.

The design engineer was polite enough after that, and Rick discounted the few times when he appeared too curt. So, with pleasant working conditions all around, the work fell into an exciting routine. The days passed and the drone control began to shape up as a complete unit. Meanwhile, other sections of the big rocket were readied, and the first two stages, now completely assembled, were loaded on their special trucks and taken to the firing area.

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