

Space Marshall vs King Jorx

by Shelby Vick

Despite numerous advances – faster-than-light travel, which had spread humans around the universe for several hundred years, the discovery of many other advanced races, the injection of nanobots in human fetuses before birth to ensure against sickness and facilitate rapid healing of injuries – the human race in the twenty-sixth century had not improved itself enough to wipe out crime. As a result, there was need for a Space Marshall to patrol the galaxy

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A large and bulky cargo ship floated in the velvet blackness of space. Millions of stars pinpricked the darkness. Beside the huge ship was a tiny scoutship, a triangle with a glistening ball centered in it. The contrast in size was like a mouse beside an elephant and, not unlike interactions between those two creatures, the mouse was preparing to scare the elephant.

From the scoutship came a voice: "This is Space Marshal Slade Marsten!" Thanks to the magic of electroharmonics, the setting on the com caused Marsten's voice to reverberate thruout the hull of the huge cargo ship. "Open your airlock and prepare to be boarded, or we'll destroy you!"

"No, you won't," an answering voice replied from the scoutship's speakers. "We're holding hostages!"

Marsten switched off the microphone and turned to his redheaded companion Jill Parkenson and the large robot, both standing beside him. "I was afraid of that," he said. "I'll have to bluff."

Alarmed, the girl said, "You can't endanger those people, Slade!" While he felt that, in a way it was a weakness, Marsten liked Jill's softheartedness.

The space marshal nodded. "I don't intend to endanger them, Jill. I don't want them to die. But the pirates don't want to die, either. Trust me."

Turning the mike back on, he said, "Afraid I didn't hear your response. Reception's bad. You have fifteen seconds to open your airlock."

"I said, we have hostages!"

"Ten seconds," Marsten announced calmly.

"We'll kill them if you don't--"

"Five seconds."

"You cold-blooded bastard--"

"In two seconds, I fire." Marsten held his breath.

"The airlock is opening, Slade. It worked," the robot said. It was a human voice, controlled by a human brain in the robot's chest. That was the brain of Professor Ilyan Parkenson, Jill's grandfather.

The robot had been designed by the professor and Slade Marsten ten years earlier to hold the body and mind of the hundred-year-old mathematical genius. He was referred to as Probot, a name Marsten came up with, combining 'professor' and 'robot'. This was an example of Marsten's strange sense of humor. The robot's true identity was known only to Marsten, Slade, Jill and Crash Jones, head of Earth Security.

And one other, an entity Marsten dubbed BRITO--Beltlike Remote Instantaneous Transmission Organism. The name also was the closest approximation, in human tongue, to the name the entity gave itself. It was a fair description of it, since the entity was usually around Marsten's waist. BRITO was a traveler from another dimension who had arrived five years earlier, and found itself unable to return. Two years ago, it had separated into two entities, the second of which was on Crash Jones' waist.

As the airlock opened, the space marshal quickly donned a golden spacesuit with his emblem of authority--a large blue star--on its chest. He strode quickly to the scoutship's airlock.

"They'll be waiting for you," the robot cautioned.

"I know," Marsten said, from his helmetcom. "However, this is the only way I can take the ship from them and save the hostages."

He entered the airlock and floated, powered by his suit's gravdrive, thru the emptiness of space toward the cargo vessel. Then his nose started to itch.

"Not again!" he said with irritation. Several times before it had happened when he was locked in his spacesuit. There was a sedative he could take, but it would affect the speed of his responses, and that was something he couldn't afford. He twitched his nose, breathed deeply, but the itch was still there. All he could do was try to take his mind off it. He focused his thoughts on success, concentrated on trying to anticipate problems.

In minutes he was at the other ship's airlock door and the itch was gone. "I'm coming in," he broadcast. "Stand ready to surrender." He knew they would stand ready, all right--but it was more likely they would stand ready to kill him. It was his duty to keep them from doing that.

After the outer airlock door closed, the inner lock opened before him. As it did so, Marsten's right hand pulled a pistol while, with his left hand, he took a small disk from his spacesuit belt and tossed it thru the opening. There was a brief flash and the marshal followed it through the door.

The two men who'd been standing by the opening to ambush him now had their hands up before their eyes; their sight had not been protected by a polarized shield like the one on Marsten's visor. A few quick blows and they collapsed. Deadly force having not been needed, Marsten used the gravnet setting. He fired his pistol and an invisible net covered them, pinning them to the floor.

With his gravdrive holding him a few inches off the floor, Marsten headed down a passageway toward the ship's control room. He stopped at the open door and saw two men, one slender, one stocky, working feverishly at a panel.

"It don't work!" the slender one said. "Nothing works!"

"My pistol works," Slade said, calmly. The two spun about and faced him. There was alarm and anger on their faces. Then--

"My pistol works, too," a voice from behind him said. "Drop your weapon!" The fear on the men's faces turned to smiles.

"Not now, it doesn't" Slade said, turning to see a man dressed in black. The man's look of satisfaction turned to frustration as he tried to fire.

Slade pressed the net button and the man dropped. Then the marshal spun around in time to fire again as the other two tried to rush him. They also dropped. Slade Marsten turned back to the struggling man on the floor who was still trying to activate his pistol. "Nothing electric or electronic works, my friend," he informed the man. "Before I entered, I released an energy neutralizer. I'm protected against its effects. You aren't." He knelt beside the man, who snarled up at the marshal. Slade said, "Tell me where you're holding the hostages."

"Like hell!" the man said.

"Consider this," Slade said. "For each hostage you're holding that you don't tell me about now, you have another five years added to your sentence! Tell me where they are, and you'll only serve fifteen years for piracy!"

"Five years . . . each hostage?" he asked.

"Five years each," Slade said, nodding. "Where are they?"

After a moment's contemplation, the man answered in resignation, "First door on the right." He then stopped struggling.

"It doesn't pay to resist," Slade said, getting to his feet.

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Back on the scoutship, the space marshal exited his golden suit. "What did you do, Slade?" Jill asked.

"I reasoned with them," he said with a smile. "The captain of the ship had an empty storeroom. I locked the pirates in there. I directed the captain to turn them in at Lexus, the next planet on their route. They'll be taken care of." As he said it, the voice of Crash Jones from Earth filled the cabin. As head of earth's security division, Jones was Marsten's only boss.

"Slade! King Jorx is coming here. We've already sent all our defense ships to quell a rebellion on Orion, and we only have atomic rockets to use against him. They'll barely tickle that giant battleship of his! And get this: He bragged that he's the only one who can control his planetbuster, so we can never use it against him!"

"He had it fixed that way so none of his crew could use it to overthrow him seems more accurate," Slade said.

"I'm sure you're right," Crash agreed.

Touching BRITO, Slade said, "We're on our way, Crash. Feed all the information you have into the computer."

BRITO extended a filament to connect with the scoutship's computer.

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Stars rippled by as Slade Marsten and Jill Parkenson sat watching through the scoutship's lounge window. The lounge was above the left wing of the ship; the control room was at the front and the airlock passage rested over the right wing. Pearlescent walls reflected the stars. Jill's head rested against Slade's shoulder. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked softly.

"It's the time distortion," Slade explained.

Jill sat up and punched his arm. "Curse you, Slade Marsten!" she said. There was only mock anger in her voice; she spoke with a gentle smile on her full, red lips. "I'm trying to be romantic." Jill's long hair framed a heart-shaped face. She wore a white, short-sleeved shirt with a V neck open enough to reveal generous cleavage. Blue shorts covered her full hips.

Slade patted her smooth leg. "Forgive me," he said. "In my capacity as space marshal, King Jorx is uppermost on my mind right now."

"Remember how we first met?" Jill asked softly, trying to sooth Slade and start him thinking of romance.

"How could I forget?" he asked. "You were a knockout in that skimpy cheerleader's uniform."

"And you were very impressive as the football team's captain." They had been in college, Slade a senior, Jill a sophomore.

"Men!" she said. "All you think of is sex!"

"It's a woman's greatest weapon," Slade said, smiling. "But that isn't why I started after you. I found out that, as Professor Parkenson's granddaughter, you had inherited brains. Looks are good to attract me, but I want more than that for a continuing relationship."

They were using ultimate speed to return to Earth, their direly threatened home world.

Probot walked into the lounge. "We are within 60 minutes, five seconds, of reaching our solar system. You asked to be notified when we reached the hour."

"Thanks," Marsten said, and his hand went to his 'belt'.

"Marsten calling Earth Security," he said. As quick as thought, the message went from BRITO to his counterpart on Earth.

"Hello, Slade." It was the voice of Crash Jones.

"How close is Jorx?"

"He'll be within his weapon's range in not much more than forty-five minutes," Jones said.

"Damn!" Marsten exclaimed. "Faster than I'd anticipated! He had this planned too well."

"Planned?" Jill asked. Then she added, bitterly, "I should have realized."

"Of course," Marsten said. "Did you think the threat on Orion was unrelated?"

"I'd thought there was no connection," Jill said. "Now I see it all. It was a plan to get our defense systems away from Earth."

"All staged by Jorx," Marsten agreed. "Chances are, the threat to Orion has evaporated." A grim look hardened his square face. "Has he contacted Earth, Crash?"

"He's told us we don't have an hour to live," Jones said. "What will we do, Slade? That weapon will totally vaporize our planet."

"I know," Marsten said, "I know!" He paused, and his wide brow furrowed. "There's only one thing to do. In thirty minutes, call him and tell him I'll meet him at Pluto."

"He'll kill you, Slade," Jones said, his voice flat.

"He'll want to," Marsten said. "That's what I'm counting on. Just do it."

"I see. As usual, you don't have time to tell me what you have in mind--but since I assume you do plan to commit suicide, I'll do as you suggest. Luck!"

"Slade, you can't!" Jill objected, grabbing his arm. "He'll be in his fully armed battleship. Our scoutship doesn't have any weapons!"

"That's why he'll come," Slade Marsten said. "That's why he'll put off blasting Earth. That's what he's planning on."

"But he'll kill you, then get Earth!"

"I want him to think that," the space marshal said. He patted the holster on his shoulder harness. "This ship is unarmed. I'm not."

Jill's eyes widened. "You mean to go up against a heavily armed battleship with a pistol?" she asked incredulously. "I know it isn't just any pistol," she added. "It's the one granddad invented. But still, what good is it against a planetbuster?"

"I intend to disable that planetbuster," Marsten said, smiling. "The most powerful weapon is no good if it can't be used. Don't worry. Remember, Jorx failed twice before."

Jill shook her head. "You're absolutely hopeless, Slade Marsten--I'm more likely to die worrying about you than from a planetbuster!" She put a hand on his arm. "I know you have something up your sleeve, and you've pulled rabbits out of hats more times than I can count, but. . . ." She bit her lip and her voice trailed off.

The space marshal's face softened. "It'll be all right, Jill," he said. "I promise." He turned to the robot. "We have some planning to do," he said. "Follow me." They went to the control room.

"I can't give you a better weapon, not in the time we have," the professor's voice said.

"I know," Marsten said. Then he smiled at Probot. "If Jorx knew who you were, he'd be more interested in getting you than me--but he'd want you alive."

The robot nodded. "He'd want my research on time travel. It's good we were able to transfer my brain before I died. I'm close to making time travel a reality. For Jorx, it would be the greatest weapon there ever was!"

"Yes. He would use time travel to go into the past and kill the people whose descendants kept him from power. He would rule the universe! Exactly why he should never get it. But now," Marsten went "back to the present--what I need is something we can rig up quickly. Jorx will be looking for a trick I've got to do something he won't anticipate."

"At least," the robot said, "we will try. What can I do?"

In half an hour, the scoutship orbited Pluto, waiting. "Everything's ready, Slade," Probot announced.

"Good," the space marshal said. "How far is Jorx' ship?"

"It will arrive in six minutes, eighteen seconds."

"Raise him for me."

In seconds, a hologram of Jorx' green, reptilian face was looking at Marsten. "Are you ready to face space filth?" he said.

"Interesting," the space marshal said. "I was about to ask you the same question."

Jorx' silver eyes gleamed red. "You're done for, human! You don't have a chance! Your ship has no weapons! It is faster than my battleship, but I know you won't run, since I would then destroy your world!"

"I don't run, anyway," Marsten replied. "But don't be so optimistic. Remember, there've been other times you thought you'd killed me."

"I didn't have a planetbuster to use, then," Jorx gloated. "In less than one minute, we will be in range. Say your prayers, Marsten!"

"Oh, come on, Jorx--that won't satisfy your bloodlust, and you know it!" Slade declared. "The only way you want me to die is in front of you! You want to see my bleeding body at your feet, or you won't be happy!"

Jorx paused. "You know me too well, Marsten. But you paint a glorious picture. Yes, seeing you at my feet is precisely what I want."

Slade Marsten relaxed. That's what I was hoping for, you devil! he thought gleefully. Now, if everything else works out. . . . Aloud, he said, "But that presents a problem, Jorx. You'll have to let me on your ship. You know that can be very dangerous."

"You are tricky, Marsten," the alien hissed. "But I hold the key: Your planet's survival! You will enter my ship unarmed or I return and destroy your precious Earth! Agreed?"

"Agreed. Your weapons detector will reassure you, Jorx. Stop your ship, then open your airlock when I get there." So far, luckily, his nose hadn't itched. He hoped that just thinking about it didn't stop the irritation.

Jorx nodded. "I'll be waiting, Marsten." The grin that spread across his features was positively reptilian even as his face disappeared from the screen.

In minutes, the giant battleship was also orbiting Pluto, within view of the small scoutship. A beam of light from the dark hulk of Jorx' ship pinpointed Marsten's scoutship, just in time to reveal a golden figure departing, moving quickly down the light.

"I'm coming, Jorx," Marsten said. His nose still remained itchless.

The blue star seemed to brighten as the gold suit neared the inviting airlock. "Open up. I'm coming in, Jorx," Marsten said.

"My detectors tell me you are unarmed. Enter."

It tells you my gold suit is unarmed, Marsten thought, pleased.

In ten seconds, the outer door closed and then the inner one opened. The spacesuit exploded in brilliant light. Marsten, who was in a dead black suit and had entered just behind his decoy, rushed through and used his gravnet setting twice on the two groups of aliens who had been lying in wait.

"Your energy neutralizer is useless, Marsten," Jorx' voice said through his helmet. "I know your tricks. My instruments are protected and my people have shields to protect them from the glare."

That's why I didn't use the neutralizer, Marsten thought. And the flare was much, much brighter. His suit's gravdrive was sending him down the passageway toward, Marsten hoped, Jorx' control room. He moved along until, ahead, he saw an open door.

Open.

Won't you come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly? Marsten thought. It was an obvious trap, but he was going to have to walk into it. He saw no other way.

Deciding speed was the best approach, he set his gravdrive on high, shot toward the door--and slammed into a gravnet of Jorx', which covered the doorway. The net was attached to the sides of the door, so Marsten stuck to it instead of being pinned to the floor.

"There was no response from my guards at the airlock, so I knew you'd escaped them," Jorx hissed, grinning. He resembled a seven-foot-tall raptor, minus the tail, and was seated at a desk near the wall opposite the trapped space marshal. "Your trick didn't work, Slade Marsten!" he added, leaning forward.

And I'm stuck in the spider's web, Marsten thought. Then something struck a powerful blow to the side of his space helmet and he sank into darkness.

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When the space marshal's senses flooded back, he was seated in a chair across from Jorx, his hands behind him, with something that felt like a metal tube enclosing wrists and hands.

"Welcome, Space Marshal," Jorx said, his pleasure obvious in his voice. "It gives me great satisfaction to have outwitted you."

"I'm not dying, bleeding, at your feet," Marsten said. "Obviously something's not working out the way you wanted it."

Jorx' narrow shoulders shrugged. "A mere momentary delay," he said. "I wanted you to witness the destruction of your ship and your friends. You humans have a most helpful habit of being emotionally attached to others." He indicated a viewscreen to his right. Silhouetted against Pluto was the space marshal's scoutship.

"I see it's still there," Marsten said. "Why the delay?" He felt something sliding along his arms. "I was counting on that," he thought.

"My instruments only detect two beings in your ship," Jorx said. "Your girl friend and the robot. According to my information, there are four on your team. Where is the fourth?"

There were two members Jorx' crew, one on each side of Marsten, but they were relaxed, guns holstered. That was good, because the space marshal felt the metal tubes separating. BRITO had done its work--but Marsten had one more thing for the entity to do. Quickly he shook off the metal bonds from his feet while his right hand went to his waist.

"Right here, Jorx!" he exclaimed, throwing BRITO straight at the alien's face. As he threw, he lurched into the startled guard to his right, knocking it down. Slade grabbed the guard's pistol, turned onto his back and fired at the other, who already had its pistol aimed--but too late. Marsten hadn't changed his setting on the pistol, so he saw the guard disintegrate.

The next second, the space marshal was on his feet. He kicked the surviving guard in the head, palmed the door shut, then turned to look at Jorx.

He almost felt sorry for the monster. BRITO had wrapped itself around the top of Jorx' head, draped over the alien's brain. The silver eyes were wide open, as was his mouth. He was making a weird ululating sound as BRITO sent tendrils into the reptilian brain.

"Don't kill him, BRITO," Marsten said. "Just suggest that he orders all his crew to disarm and stand down. He should also disable the planetbuster, and forget how to use it. After we leave, he's to return to his home. Return peacefully!" he emphasized.

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When they returned to the scoutship and Slade recounted his adventure, Jill was furious. "You let him go?" she asked, incredulously. "He was going to destroy Earth! He wanted to kill you!"

"His planet's not a member of the Federation. He did no real damage, and there could be all kinds of loopholes in space law he could wiggle through."

"He's right, Jill," the Probot said. "Interstellar law is an art, not a science. Someone can pick a lock off a protected tree and be sentenced to five years. Another might embezzle millions from his company."

and receive little more than a slap on the wrist. If Slade took Jorx in, the alien might sue for false arrest and win."

Slade hugged Jill. "He's going home. Hopefully, he'll be so humiliated that we can expect no trouble from him for years to come."

"Well," Jill said, "everyone's safe. Happy ending."

And that, at least for the moment, was true.

HOME

Despite numerous advances – faster-than-light travel, which had spread humans around the universe for several hundred years, the discovery of many other advanced races, the injection of nanobots in human fetuses before birth to ensure against sickness and facilitate rapid healing of injuries – the human race in the twenty-sixth century had not improved itself enough to wipe out crime. As a result, there was need for a Space Marshall to patrol the galaxy.

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"Five years each," Slade said, nodding. "Where are they?"

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"How could I forget?" he asked. "You were a knockout in that skimpy cheerleader's uniform."

"And you were very impressive as the football team's captain." They had been in college, Slade senior, Jill a sophomore.

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"Planned?" Jill asked. Then she added, bitterly, "I should have realized."

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"All staged by Jorx," Marsten agreed. "Chances are, the threat to Orion has evaporated." A grim look hardened his square face. "Has he contacted Earth, Crash?"

"He's told us we don't have an hour to live," Jones said. "What will we do, Slade? That weapon will totally vaporize our planet."

"I know," Marsten said, "I know!" He paused, and his wide brow furrowed. "There's only one thing to do. In thirty minutes, call him and tell him I'll meet him at Pluto."

"He'll kill you, Slade," Jones said, his voice flat.

"He'll want to," Marsten said. "That's what I'm counting on. Just do it."

"I see. As usual, you don't have time to tell me what you have in mind--but since I assume you plan to commit suicide, I'll do as you suggest. Luck!"

"Slade, you can't!" Jill objected, grabbing his arm. "He'll be in his fully armed battleship. Our scoutship doesn't have any weapons!"

"That's why he'll come," Slade Marsten said. "That's why he'll put off blasting Earth. That's what he's planning on."

"But he'll kill you, then get Earth!"

"I want him to think that," the space marshal said. He patted the holster on his shoulder harness. "This ship is unarmed. I'm not."

Jill's eyes widened. "You mean to go up against a heavily armed battleship with a pistol?" she asked incredulously. "I know it isn't just any pistol," she added. "It's the one granddad invented. But still, what good is it against a planetbuster?"

"I intend to disable that planetbuster," Marsten said, smiling. "The most powerful weapon is no good if it can't be used. Don't worry. Remember, Jorx failed twice before."

Jill shook her head. "You're absolutely hopeless, Slade Marsten--I'm more likely to die worrying about you than from a planetbuster!" She put a hand on his arm. "I know you have something up your sleeve, and you've pulled rabbits out of hats more times than I can count, but. . . ." She bit her lip and her voice trailed off.

The space marshal's face softened. "It'll be all right, Jill," he said. "I promise." He turned to the robot. "We have some planning to do," he said. "Follow me." They went to the control room.

"I can't give you a better weapon, not in the time we have," the professor's voice said.

"I know," Marsten said. Then he smiled at Probot. "If Jorx knew who you were, he'd be more interested in getting you than me--but he'd want you alive."

The robot nodded. "He'd want my research on time travel. It's good we were able to transfer my brain before I died. I'm close to making time travel a reality. For Jorx, it would be the greatest weapon there ever was!"

"Yes. He would use time travel to go into the past and kill the people whose descendants kept him from power. He would rule the universe! Exactly why he should never get it. But now," Marsten went on, "back to the present--what I need is something we can rig up quickly. Jorx will be looking for a trick I've got to do something he won't anticipate."

"At least," the robot said, "we will try. What can I do?"

In half an hour, the scoutship orbited Pluto, waiting. "Everything's ready, Slade," Probot announced.

"Good," the space marshal said. "How far is Jorx' ship?"

"It will arrive in six minutes, eighteen seconds."

"Raise him for me."

In seconds, a hologram of Jorx' green, reptilian face was looking at Marsten. "Are you ready to face space filth?" he said.

"Interesting," the space marshal said. "I was about to ask you the same question."

Jorx' silver eyes gleamed red. "You're done for, human! You don't have a chance! Your ship has no weapons! It is faster than my battleship, but I know you won't run, since I would then destroy your world!"

"I don't run, anyway," Marsten replied. "But don't be so optimistic. Remember, there've been other times you thought you'd killed me."

"I didn't have a planetbuster to use, then," Jorx gloated. "In less than one minute, we will be in range. Say your prayers, Marsten!"

"Oh, come on, Jorx--that won't satisfy your bloodlust, and you know it!" Slade declared. "The only way you want me to die is in front of you! You want to see my bleeding body at your feet, or you want to be happy!"

Jorx paused. "You know me too well, Marsten. But you paint a glorious picture. Yes, seeing you at my feet is precisely what I want."

Slade Marsten relaxed. That's what I was hoping for, you devil! he thought gleefully. Now, if everything else works out. . . . Aloud, he said, "But that presents a problem, Jorx. You'll have to let me on your ship. You know that can be very dangerous."

"You are tricky, Marsten," the alien hissed. "But I hold the key: Your planet's survival! You will either leave my ship unarmed or I return and destroy your precious Earth! Agreed?"

"Agreed. Your weapons detector will reassure you, Jorx. Stop your ship, then open your airlock when I get there." So far, luckily, his nose hadn't itched. He hoped that just thinking about it didn't soothe the irritation.

Jorx nodded. "I'll be waiting, Marsten." The grin that spread across his features was positively reptilian even as his face disappeared from the screen.

In minutes, the giant battleship was also orbiting Pluto, within view of the small scoutship. A beam of light from the dark hulk of Jorx' ship pinpointed Marsten's scoutship, just in time to reveal a golden figure departing, moving quickly down the light.

"I'm coming, Jorx," Marsten said. His nose still remained itchless.

The blue star seemed to brighten as the gold suit neared the inviting airlock. "Open up. I'm coming in, Jorx," Marsten said.

"My detectors tell me you are unarmed. Enter."

It tells you my gold suit is unarmed, Marsten thought, pleased.

In ten seconds, the outer door closed and then the inner one opened. The spacesuit exploded in brilliant light. Marsten, who was in a dead black suit and had entered just behind his decoy, rushed through and used his gravnet setting twice on the two groups of aliens who had been lying in wait.

"Your energy neutralizer is useless, Marsten," Jorx' voice said through his helmet. "I know your tricks. My instruments are protected and my people have shields to protect them from the glare."

That's why I didn't use the neutralizer, Marsten thought. And the flare was much, much brighter. The suit's gravdrive was sending him down the passageway toward, Marsten hoped, Jorx' control room. He moved along until, ahead, he saw an open door.

Open.

Won't you come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly? Marsten thought. It was an obvious trap, but he was going to have to walk into it. He saw no other way.

Deciding speed was the best approach, he set his gravdrive on high, shot toward the door--and slammed into a gravnet of Jorx', which covered the doorway. The net was attached to the sides of the door, so Marsten stuck to it instead of being pinned to the floor.

"There was no response from my guards at the airlock, so I knew you'd escaped them," Jorx' hissed, grinning. He resembled a seven-foot-tall raptor, minus the tail, and was seated at a desk near the wall opposite the trapped space marshal. "Your trick didn't work, Slade Marsten!" he added, leaning forward.

And I'm stuck in the spider's web, Marsten thought. Then something struck a powerful blow to the side of his space helmet and he sank into darkness.

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When the space marshal's senses flooded back, he was seated in a chair across from Jorx', his hands behind him, with something that felt like a metal tube enclosing wrists and hands.

"Welcome, Space Marshal," Jorx' said, his pleasure obvious in his voice. "It gives me great satisfaction to have outwitted you."

"I'm not dying, bleeding, at your feet," Marsten said. "Obviously something's not working out the way you wanted it."

Jorx' narrow shoulders shrugged. "A mere momentary delay," he said. "I wanted you to witness the destruction of your ship and your friends. You humans have a most helpful habit of being emotionally attached to others." He indicated a viewscreen to his right. Silhouetted against Pluto was the space marshal's scoutship.

"I see it's still there," Marsten said. "Why the delay?" He felt something sliding along his arms. Clearly, I was counting on that, he thought.

"My instruments only detect two beings in your ship," Jorx' said. "Your girl friend and the robot. According to my information, there are four on your team. Where is the fourth?"

There were two members of Jorx' crew, one on each side of Marsten, but they were relaxed, guns holstered. That was good, because the space marshal felt the metal tubes separating. BRITO had done its work--but Marsten had one more thing for the entity to do. Quickly he shook off the metal bonds from his feet while his right hand went to his waist.

"Right here, Jorx'!" he exclaimed, throwing BRITO straight at the alien's face. As he threw, he lurched into the startled guard to his right, knocking it down. Slade grabbed the guard's pistol, turned onto his back and fired at the other, who already had its pistol aimed--but too late. Marsten hadn't changed his setting on the pistol, so he saw the guard disintegrate.

The next second, the space marshal was on his feet. He kicked the surviving guard in the head, slammed the door shut, then turned to look at Jorx'.

He almost felt sorry for the monster. BRITO had wrapped itself around the top of Jorx' head, directing

over the alien's brain. The silver eyes were wide open, as was his mouth. He was making a weird ululating sound as BRITO sent tendrils into the reptilian brain.

"Don't kill him, BRITO," Marsten said. "Just suggest that he orders all his crew to disarm and stand down. He should also disable the planetbuster, and forget how to use it. After we leave, he's to return to his home. Return peacefully!" he emphasized.

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When they returned to the scoutship and Slade recounted his adventure, Jill was furious. "You let him go?" she asked, incredulously. "He was going to destroy Earth! He wanted to kill you!"

"His planet's not a member of the Federation. He did no real damage, and there could be all kinds of loopholes in space law he could wiggle through."

"He's right, Jill," the Probot said. "Interstellar law is an art, not a science. Someone can pick a lock off a protected tree and be sentenced to five years. Another might embezzle millions from his company and receive little more than a slap on the wrist. If Slade took Jorx in, the alien might sue for false arrest and win."

Slade hugged Jill. "He's going home. Hopefully, he'll be so humiliated that we can expect no trouble from him for years to come."

"Well," Jill said, "everyone's safe. Happy ending."

And that, at least for the moment, was true.