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Purple Priestess of the Mad Moon

Could Earthmen stand
against the forgotten
science of the Red Planet?



Purple Priestess
of the Mad Moon

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by Leigh Brackett

Some Short Stories

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Martian Quest

He disembarked at Thern, heart of the Rikatva Area, a pale, stooped shadow of a man, young from his face, but old and hopeless from his eyes. With him nearly five hundred other passengers on the ancient spacetub climbed down into the dry red earth that was their last hope of economic freedom. Rikatva and Tchava, the Martian Reclaimed Areas. The Tri-Council—great minds of three worlds—had poured money into them in an effort to give the unwanted overflow of a crowded civilization a chance to get off the public charity rolls. Water, brought in tanker ships from wetter worlds; Venusian humus, acid phosphate, nitrate nitrogen, to make the alkaline desert fruitful; after that, crude shacks and cruder implements, scrimped together with what was left from the funds wrung so hardly from resentful taxpayers. It was common talk throughout the Solar System that the Areas were a failure. Only the destitute still had hope.

The young man breathed the thin air and shivered. When special guards herded the mob across the landing field to the supply houses, he followed with the quiet obedience of a well-broken beast.

He presented his papers at last to the Assistant Commissioner, a lean, saturnine Martian from over Tchava way.

"Martin Drake," read the Commissioner. "Single. Occupation, secretary." He scrawled his name as though sick of seeing it and grunted, "Secretary! And not a farmer in the lot of 'em, I'll wager! All right, Martin Drake; you're out on the edge of the settlement, with the other single men. Makes less fuss when we lose 'em."

And while Martin Drake was pondering that remark, the long line pushed him on, down to tables where guards rummaged in the scanty

luggage of the newcomers. Drake submitted his for inspection. "Any firearms?" demanded the guard, and patted him expertly. Drake shook his head.

The man next ahead of him in line had an automatic taken from him, and commented, "Still remembering last year's outbreak, eh? Made you work for your keep, then, didn't they?"

"I wouldn't be too smart," the guard retorted. "If the guys that have to foot the bill for this outlay keep on howling, and you yellow-bellies don't make a better showing on the credit side, we'll still have army pay, and you'll be right back on the streets!"

The line shoved Drake on and on. Eventually he found himself in the one street of Thern, clutching his allotment of tools, seeds, and clothing, and the halter of a vaard; an ugly, hairless Martian edition of the horse, with harness-galls and a waiting malice in its little yellow eyes. And there was something about them, unscreened now by sheds and hangars, that made the lost, old look deepen on Drake's face.

Huddled and squalid under the huge loom of the water tanks, the cheerlessness of them was horrible; here and there rose the shattered marble spires of the ancient city, mute prophets of futility.

Drake sighed and drew out his land card.

* * *

The words meant nothing to him. He looked about for a source of information, and was abruptly conscious of a clamor arising down the street. People began to pour out of the bars and happy joints in a drab, morbidly curious crowd, and the red dust of the unpaved way rose in a choking cloud. Only one man stayed behind, a tall Venusian,

his boots spread wide apart, his cloud-colored eyes narrowed as he watched the crowd mill and turn back upon itself. A sun-browned man of slow, massive strength, with something of the Earth's hard honesty in the set of his big-boned head and curling yellow beard. Drake became painfully aware of his white skin and undeveloped body. But he had to find his home. He gripped his land card and tapped the tall stranger hesitantly on the shoulder.

The cloud-colored gaze flicked half contemptuously over the Earthman's stooped thinness. "Well?"

Drake showed his card. "Can you tell me--?" The tall man cut him short with an unenthusiastic grunt. "Your land is next to mine. I'm going home now. Come if you like." He gestured to a two-wheeled cart with a vaard between the shafts. "Get in, and tie your beast behind." Drake bent over the cart tail, fumbling clumsily with the halter end. The vaard jerked its head perversely, and the knot would not make. He heard the Venusian's derisive grunt, and went scarlet. Then slim brown hands reached over his, and a clear voice spoke in his ear.

"May I help?"

Drake looked up. A girl stood beside him, a slender, smiling angel in patched overalls, crowned with a tangle of black curls that danced in the breeze. She was glowing and strong and confident, and Drake stood in awe before her. She took the rein from his hand, tying it deftly while he stared and could not take his eyes away.

He was still staring when she looked up to ask his name. Drake stammered it out, drinking her in as though she were something he had never dreamed existed, and wanted never to forget. He saw her flush, and never thought of rudeness. Dimly he knew that the crowd was swirling back toward them, but her voice came clearly.

"I'm Terra Brooke. My father has the farm next to Tels'." Terra. Earth. No other name would have fitted her. Just looking at her roused a strange new joy in Drake, something that sang for no reason except that he was looking at her.

The shock of Tels' great hand on his shoulder was like a physical pain. "Have you never seen a woman?" demanded the Venusian shortly, spinning him round. Drake gasped out "No!" just as the edge of the crowd curled round them. Terra's brown face paled, and she turned her head away.

"Let's go, Tels," she pleaded, climbing into the cart. "I don't want to see." Tels didn't hear her. Harsh-faced, he tightened his grip on Drake's shoulder, thrust him bodily through the crush, to where men carried a blanket-covered thing on a stretcher.

"Look there, Earthpuppy! That's what's driving us from the land. That's what you city-bred weaklings can't fight. But Khom doesn't care. He gives no quarter to weaklings. Go on. Look!"

He ripped the blanket savagely from the huddle on the stretcher. Drake retched and held down a writhing stomach. The man beneath was dead. Naked to the waist, the manner of his dying was horribly plain. Something had struck him in the side, crushed his ribs and snapped his spine and laid his entrails bare. Something had done that with one blow.

"Khom?" faltered Drake. Martian for Destroyer. "But what... what is it?" Tels' strange burst of savagery had burned out with the sight of death. He muttered, "The great desert lizard," and turned to his cart. Drake stumbled after him, white and shaken.

The road they followed out of Thern ran between dusty fields, set to

beans and alfalfa and yellow Martian grapes. Here and there the land was stripped bare of green things, as though a plague of giant locusts had descended. Irrigation ditches, a stink of fertilizer, furrows cut square across the wind, weathered shacks without a shrub or a shade tree, and ahead, the open desert. Drake looked out across the flat emptiness of it, and heard for the first time the low laughter of its drifting earth under the hand of a wind that never stopped.

"Ugly, isn't it?" said Terra Brooke's low voice. "But it's all we have."

"It's better than nothing at all," said Drake with a queer, cold bitterness.

"Anything is better than that!"

Tels studied him in his slow way. "Your clothes are good," he said finally,

"and your thinness is not from starvation. I think you don't know what 'nothing at all' can mean."

Drake flushed. "I didn't mean--" He broke off, staring. "Look at that vineyard!"

The others looked, startled; then they turned questioningly to Drake.

"What about the vineyard?" growled Tels, and Terra added, more kindly, "It's only one that Khom has stripped."

"Yes," said Drake excitedly, "but look at the vines! They're eaten right down to the ground."

Tels stared at him. "Of course. So is the desert scrub he eats. So is everything he touches. What of it?"

"But how strange for a lizard to eat wood!"

"Perhaps," said Tels. "But he eats it, Earthman, and everything else beside."

"I suppose," added Terra gently, "it's because there's so little food in the desert; only the scrub and the cactus. Khom needs a lot of food, and I guess he's learned to use all there is. He even gets his water from the cactus, you know."

Drake nodded; for the first time his face was animated. "Odd, isn't it?"

Adaptability--"

"All that interests me," Tels interrupted, "is dinner. And even that I hate. Beans! When my melon ripens, I'll have something sour to cut the rotten dust from my throat!"

* * *

Drake had dinner at Tels' shack that night. Terra wanted it. She explained that she often cooked Tels' supper when he was late in town. Khom the Destroyer had stripped their vineyards not long before, and her father was not well, so any company Terra had, she had at Tels' place. Tels came for Drake, to show him the way, and before they left Drake's shack, the Venusian faced him.

"For Terra's sake you are welcome," he said, his eyes embarrassingly steady on the Earthman's thin face. "But look you, stranger." The curling blond beard was thrust rockily forward. "I will marry Terra when my farm is settled. And she is no street wench, to be stared at. You come for dinner, that is all!" Drake's face flushed angry scarlet, but Tels' broad back was turned. They went in silence

to the neighboring farm.

Terra was an expert cook. The strong desert hen was like pheasant, the baked red cactus and mixed beans from the fields fit for a potentate, for all Tels'

grumbling. Drake's dinner went down in a dream; a dream filled with a black-haired angel rattling dishes on an ancient stove. The overalls had been replaced by a simple print dress, and the sweet slim lines of her made Drake's throat ache. He was a confusion of unfamiliar feelings. He flushed and choked and stammered, and wished himself a hundred miles away, and yet nothing would have made him go. Terra talked to him a good deal, about the Areas; Tchava, she said, was no better off than Rikatva, and the whispers of a sudden stoppage of funds grew steadily louder. The lizards were worse than any Biblical scourge, killing without mercy when disturbed at their feeding. Khom was the greatest enemy; dust storms and dryness and grudging fertility could be whipped in time, but Khom was the harvester of the crops.

Terra smiled suddenly at Drake. "Never been on your own before, have you?"

"No," Drake admitted humbly. "My uncle raised me." Tels snorted. "You picked a fine place to come to," he growled. "Dust and wind and barrenness." He rose abruptly, thudding his fist with savage gentleness against the wall. "On Venus," he said softly, "there is dark earth that doesn't blow, and rain. Rain!"

Terra laid a sympathetic hand on his shoulder. "It is a hard place, Martin. And since the trouble last year, they won't let us have guns." Drake remembered the man in the supply shed. "What happened?"

"Some of the settlers here got tired of fighting. There are barbarian

tribes in the desert; they live by plunder. North of us are the radium mines. The settlers sent the barbarians against Rikatva to keep the soldiers busy, and went and attacked the radium mines. There was fighting, and a lot of men died before it was over. So all guns are forbidden here."

"But the lizards! Haven't you any protection?" Tels shrugged. "Guns are not much use against Khom. Only his eye and his throat are vulnerable, and since he feeds only at night, it's hard to hit them. We all keep flares; the light sometimes drives him off. So far he has let me alone."

Changing the subject abruptly, he said, "Here, you, Earthman; see what I have raised."

There was a box full of black earth in the warmest corner by the stove. Drake saw that the conditions were as much like Venus' sultry dampness as anyone could make on Mars. He studied the pallid melon vine with its two long fruits, and said:

"Wouldn't it have been better to grow it in a culture?" Tels glared. "A culture!" he snorted, and held out his hands. "Not while I have these to dig in the earth!"

Terra's eyes were suddenly shining. "First the lizards, now growth-cultures. Are you a scientist?"

Drake's thin face showed sudden lines. "No," he said dully. "No, I'm not a scientist. I'm a--secretary."

Terra studied him. "Show me your hands, Martin Drake." Puzzled, he held them out. Then, abruptly realizing, he snatched them back, thrust them deep in his pockets. Terra smiled and shook her head slowly.

"Stains, and acid burns. You're no secretary; you're a chemist." Drake was shaking, and his eyes were hollow. "I thought I was, once," he muttered. "Now I'm just a farmer, out on the edge of things where Khom can get me without making a fuss!"

"Why did you lie?" demanded Tels.

Terra, tense with some strange urgency, rushed on uncaring.

"Martin, I think a scientist could save the Reclaimed Areas! We can't do it ourselves, and the Tri-Council can't afford to send experts out here to work, perhaps for months and months. But you're one of us, Martin. You could try!"

"Try--what?"

"To destroy Khom! Guns and poison won't do it, but science could find some way, I know it!" She caught the Earthman's bony shoulders impulsively. "Will you do it?"

And while Drake stared at her, trembling, while Tels' harsh laughter rocked the room, there came from outside a horrible hoarse screaming; a rasping shriek of fear that set the hair prickling down their necks. Tels swore a furious oath and sprang for the door, catching a flare from a shelf as he ran. Terra's brown face paled, and she said one word: "Khom!"

* * *

The frosty air bit into Drake as he followed them outside. Both moons were up, throwing crazy shifting patterns on the fields. Tels was leaping for the vineyard, shouting terrible things in his own tongue. Drake made out several blots of darkness, eight or ten, that had independent movement. They were among the grapes, and the neat

rows of vines were broken now like crumbling battlements.

Tels threw the flare. A lurid glare burst over the vineyard, and Drake saw Khom, disturbed at his feeding.

Wicked triangular heads shot up from the ruined vines, horny reptilian heads framed in ruffs like Triceratops. Bodies two feet longer than a tall man raised high in ominous preparation on strong clawed legs, and tails--

Drake shivered, remembering the dead man on the stretcher, torn in two with one blow. Khom had a tail as long as his body and his head together; a mighty, supple flail armed with rows of deadly spikes.

Tels was still running toward the invaders, mad with the rage that takes a man when he sees the work of his hands destroyed. The vaard in the stable screamed on monotonously, terrified by the rank scent of the lizards. Tels stopped suddenly, began throwing clods of earth, shaking with a bitter, dreadful wrath.

Terra yelled a frantic warning. Eight of the lizards turned abruptly from the glaring light of the flare, running swiftly, high on their legs like monstrous crocodiles. But one, larger than the rest, stayed behind to do battle. A clod burst squarely between its eyes. Opening wide a gaping mouth set with strange rodential teeth, Khom charged.

Tels turned to run, twisting frantically aside from the sweep of the wicked tail. But Khom was swift. The spiked bludgeon swung, struck viciously. Tels, a hoarse scream of agony stifled in his throat, was tumbled limply aside into his broken vines.

Drake had a momentary glimpse of a back armor-plated like a battle cruiser, and huge jaws agape with silent laughter. Then Khom had shot by them, out into the dark, whispering desert.

Tels was still breathing. Straining, panting, Drake and Terra carried him back to the shack. The girl was white, dry-eyed. Unhesitatingly she stripped the blood-sodden shirt from the Venusian; drew a long, shuddering breath.

"Right arm and shoulder broken," she whispered; "and I think some ribs. Poor Tels, to be so foolish!" Her fingers bit into Drake's soft muscles. "Get the doctor, Martin. The hospital is the big white house in Thern. Ride Tels'

vaard. And hurry!"

Drake hurried. But the one thought in his mind was: "She loves Tels. Terra loves Tels."

Later that night he sat with Terra beside the Venusian's cot. The doctor had set the broken bones, molded a great clumsy cast around Tels' upper body.

"He'll live," he said, and left.

Terra placed her hand on Drake's. "You see now why you must try to destroy the lizards?"

Drake spread his hands. "Why not men with flame guns, or atomic bombs?"

"It would take years, and there's no money."

"Poison, then."

Terra shook her head. "Khom eats no flesh, drinks no water. We can't

poison our crops. No, Martin"--her eyes caught his, held them--"only science has a chance. It's up to you!"

There was a sudden sound from the cot; a feeble ghost of Tels' booming laughter. The Venusian had wakened.

"You ask too much, Terra," he whispered. "You ask a little weakling to lift the land on his shoulders."

Drake rose, flushing. Terra said quietly:

"What are you afraid of, Martin Drake?"

Again the husky laughter. "He's afraid of death, girl! He's afraid of work and pain and hunger, but most of all he's afraid of death. I saw his face when he looked at the dead man in Thern!"

Drake stood like a stooped, taut thing of marble, head averted, while Terra shook her dark curls and answered.

"No, Tels. You're wrong. It's life Martin Drake's afraid of!" Drake swung suddenly to face them, his thin hands clenched until the bones gleamed white.

"You can judge me, you people!" he burst out at them. "You weren't born owing your life, food, clothing and the schooling you had, to someone else. My uncle took me; I had nothing when my parents died. I've never had anything. Since I was old enough to talk, I've been paying my uncle back what I owed him.

"He had me taught chemistry, not because I liked it, but because he thought I'd be the most use to him in the laboratories. George Breckner, of Interworld Enterprises, who hated his sister because she defied him to marry my father. My father, you see, was a failure, a

visionary scientist who died a pauper. Uncle George had little hope for me, but he made me work! I took orders and cleaned test tubes and mixed solutions, but I never worked as an independent chemist. I wasn't worth it. I was my father's son, and dependent on my uncle for my bed and my dinner.

"It's easy for you to be strong and independent! You weren't taught from babyhood that you were utterly worthless and incompetent, existing on charity. There did come a day when I had my doubts. I thought I had stumbled on something in the laboratory. I thought I could prove to my uncle that I was worthy of consideration as an individual. I thought... I thought I could prove it to myself."

His voice faltered. He pressed his palms to his throbbing temples, and his words were almost inaudible when he went on.

"I made my experiment; secretly, because I wanted it to be a surprise, something no one could ignore. Well, I succeeded!

"I destroyed five thousand dollars worth of equipment in the resulting explosion. How I escaped death, I don't know; I wish I hadn't. But I had made a stupid, foolish mistake; if it hadn't been after hours, I might have killed every man in the laboratory. I knew then that my uncle was right. I... I ran away--"

Terra put her hands gently on his trembling shoulders. "You can help us here, Martin. I believe in you."

Martin Drake met her eyes. "You don't understand, Terra," he said simply. "I can't help anyone. I haven't it in me."

He turned and went out, walking slowly across the ravaged fields where the stumps of the grapevines were gnawed clear to the earth, and behind him there was silence in the cabin.

Next morning every house in the Reclaimed Areas found a printed proclamation at its door.

Due to the high cost involved and the untenability of the land, it has become impossible for the Tri-Council to continue to finance the Reclaimed Areas in their present state.

Wishing to give the Areas every possible chance, the Tri-Council has arranged a public hearing on the fourth of November, two Martian weeks from today. If, at this time, reasonable proof can be shown that the Areas may be placed on a sounder basis, the Tri-Council will take the matter under advisement. However, all residents are requested to hold themselves in readiness for immediate abandonment of Rikatva and Tchava.

Drake was sitting on his bunk, the crumpled paper at his feet, when Terra Brooke came in. She came without knocking; standing there, her black curls disheveled, her eyes strained and tired in her white face, she seemed dazed and queerly uncertain.

Drake stared at her blindly. "There's nothing left now," he said tonelessly.

"I've got to go back to my uncle. There's no place else where they'd take me. He... he said I'd come back."

Terra's hands made an aimless gesture. Her lips moved, but whatever words were back of them died in her throat.

"Why did you come?" asked Drake.

"I... I don't know. Perhaps I thought--" She broke suddenly, covering

her face with her hands. Drake could see the tears shining between her fingers.

"--I thought you might still save us, Martin Drake," she said, very low. "But you couldn't. Maybe Tels was right. Maybe you are a weakling!" Her eyes were suddenly shining fiercely into his. "What about Tels? He has to go back too, to a stinking swamp that swallowed his land on Venus. What about the hundreds of people who hoped to live here; the thousands more who might have found new life here? They have to go back, to the charity rolls. What about my father and me, Martin Drake?"

Somehow Drake found himself on his feet and repeated, "Why did you come?"

"Because--" The fierce tenseness went suddenly out of Terra's body. Her head dropped; Drake strained for her whispered, "I don't know--" There was nothing sane, nothing ordered. In the last day and night he had lived a hundred years. He had lost all identity with himself, all sense of the ordered pattern of things. He tilted Terra's tear-streaked face up and looked into her eyes. It wasn't a conscious act; some strange, hungry yearning, something beyond anything he had ever in his narrow existence known before, took his body and moved it.

He took Terra Brooke in his arms and kissed her.

For a long moment she lay quivering against him. Abruptly, like a wild thing, she wrenched away and struck him, hard, across the face. Then she was gone, running like a deer across the naked fields.

Drake stood still, his fingers against his bruised cheek. "I don't know," he whispered. "I don't know! But what difference can it make? I've failed anyway!"

Two Martian weeks. That's ten Earth days. Ten days!"

* * *

Eight of those precious days went by in a hopeless search for some point of attack. There seemed no way to begin; Khom didn't offer himself to be studied, there were no research laboratories, no fellow scientists to help. Then, on the eighth night, Khom made a raid across Drake's land into the inner circle of farms, and the furious, hate-filled settlers drove him back with flares, pursuing him right to the edge of the desert. Drake, caught in the forefront of that tide of battle, had barely time to turn his vaard loose to escape by itself, and then run for the comparative safety of Tels' shack. From there, he saw three men die under Khom's tail, and saw his own shack go up in flames from a random flare.

Poking morbidly through the ashes in the morning, choking over a vile stench that rose and went streaming out to the desert on the steady wind, he found something. Holding his breath, he knelt and pawed the ashes away with his hands.

Charred, head and tail partially burned away, but body still intact, a young Khom lay in the ruins. Only eight feet long, but old enough to have musk glands that sent up a stench, along with the charred flesh, that could have been smelled in Tchava.

Drake gasped for air, but he didn't leave. Here was a chance to study the enemy first hand. The armor plate had preserved the important parts of the carcass. He had no instruments, no facilities, but it was just possible--

He shook his head. This was the ninth day. Still--

He dragged the brute clear of the ashes, borrowed a tarpaulin and a

sharp knife from Tels, and began his bloody task.

It was a sickening job, cutting and slicing and handling things that were never meant to be seen. The tarpaulin kept the sun off, and Drake stayed on the windward side, but all day that musky reek went trailing out into the desert, seeped clingingly into his clothing.

And, at last, he sat back on his heels and whistled. "So that's how he gets away with his wood! An extra stomach, supplied with an enzyme culture--just like a termite. Protozoans, of course, to digest the cellulose for him. One-celled animals, living in an alkaline culture; got to be alkaline, because everything that grows here has an alkaline reaction in the digestive system.

"So Khom is just a big, four-legged termite!" To confirm his surmise, he borrowed litmus paper, used in soil testing, and the enzyme culture showed an alkaline reaction. For a moment Drake was enthusiastic. Then his shoulders sagged. Interesting, but it didn't help him any. It didn't show him any way to destroy the beasts. And tomorrow was the Council hearing.

He didn't even bury the carcass. In a few days there'd be nobody left to smell it.

There was smoke over Tels' cabin; Terra was getting supper. Drake crossed the fields, hating to see the two, to parade his failure, but unable to stay alone. After all, he had no place to go.

Somewhere, down the outer line of farms, a vaard voiced a querulous scream. As Drake entered the cabin he fancied he saw a stirring out in the desert, a flickering of low, swift shadows, but the double moonlight was tricky and a freshening breeze was shifting the whispering sand. Terra turned from the stove; just for a second there was hope in her eyes. It flickered out, and Tels, propped up on his

cot, wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"You stink," he said. "Go and wash off that damned lizard." Drake hadn't realized. Stammering an apology, he added, "My clothes were burned. I haven't--"

"Take mine," said Tels. "But wash!" Drake shivered under the cold shower in the crude bath, climbed gratefully into Tels' clothes. For lack of anything else to do with them, he left his own reeking garments on the floor.

It was a gloomy meal, the more so because it seemed all the vaards in Rikatva were having the nervous terrors, and the incessant shrieking rasped nerves already ragged. Several times Drake and Terra looked out, but there was no sign of lizards. In the shifting moonlight the desert was always full of shadows.

"Get the melons," said Tels abruptly. "We might as well eat them as leave them here to rot."

Terra brought them. Drake's throat ached at the sight of her; the spring, the joy, the life was gone from her. She was a little like him now, patient and defeated.

"Did you find anything?" she asked.

Drake spoke to them mechanically about Khom's digestive apparatus, accepting his share of the pale Venusian fruit. Tels found no joy in the prized melon now; his face was stony as he bit into his portion.

"Little animals living in his stomach?" he grunted around a mouthful, and shook his head. "It does not help us."

Drake sighed and took a bite. Instantly he choked and gasped over a corrosive sourness. The melon was acid, not pleasantly, like alkaline citrus fruits, but with a biting, astringent acerbity comparable only to some mess in a test tube. He gagged and retched, snatching for water.

Tels' blond beard crinkled to a roar of laughter. "Earth puppy! If you ever come to Venus, you'd better get some little animals to live in your stomach and drink your acids for you!"

Drake was suddenly transfixed, staring at the melon with a sort of awe. "My God!" he whispered. "That's it!"

* * *

Startled questions, sudden blazing inspiration, were drowned utterly in the high, wild shriek from Tels' stable. Other vaards picked it up, until the shack was ringed with screaming beasts. And this time the running shadows in the desert were close in the fields, and solid.

They congregated, dozens of them, in a milling swirl around a charred and butchered corpse that sent its musky stench out on the wind. Tels, lips tight with pain, joined them at the window. "Never have I seen them like that. Look, they break a little; some are coming this way. But there is nothing in my fields!"

Drake's face was white in the lamplight. "There's something in your bath. My clothes, with the smell of Khom on them. The corpse has brought them in; now they're coming here, after me!"

Terra's hands were clenched; the cords stood out on her wrists. "Martin," she said, "what did you mean just now, about the melon?" Drake's eyes were on those milling shapes. "Khom depends on wood-cellulose for his food. The protozoans that digest it for him live

in an alkaline culture. This melon is acid. Introducing it into the culture would kill the protozoans--and Khom would starve to death!"

Tels snorted. "You talk nonsense! Khom will not be fed by hand, those melons will not grow here naturally, and besides, there is but one plant."

"Hydroponics, Tels! Growth cultures. A ring of specially constructed tanks, fencing the Areas; nutrients, auxin, vitamins, intensifying chemicals. They can ship more vines from Venus; Khom can eat them as fast as they grow. Inside of six months, there won't be a lizard left in the desert!"

"You've got to get away, Martin." Terra caught his shoulders. "You've got to get that knowledge to the Council tomorrow. Khom will be all around us in a moment. You've got to get away!"

Drake stared at her unseeingly. "Get me pencil and paper, quickly." Tels turned slowly, an unbelieving rage hardening his face. "You would go? You would leave Terra here?"

Drake was silent. The girl put paper on the table; he wrote, rapidly. Tels saw what he wrote.

"Will fear make you forget even your idea?" he said softly, and struck suddenly with his good arm.

Drake went down. Tels, white with pain and anger, cried: "Run, Martin Drake!"

"We'll hold off the lizards. Run, damn you!"

Drake staggered up, gripping the paper. "We've all got to get out of here. Those brutes have the scent of my clothes now; in a few

minutes they'll break in."

"He's right, Tels," sighed Terra. Drake caught her look and winced. She'd had hope before; now she knew he was a coward.

"The stable," he said, "is the only chance. They may not find us for a while. Bring the flares, Terra."

She took the webbing sack of them, offered her other arm for Tels to lean on. Drake opened the door, and stopped.

* * *

Khom was everywhere. Great armor-plated shadows slid wide-jawed in nervous circles about the shack, drawing ever closer. The vaard in the stable screamed as Drake had never heard one scream before, and every beast in Rikatva was answering. There was a pregnant tension in the air; Death had come in from the desert.

Drake hurled a flare. Khom drew back, and the short path to the stable was momentarily clear. "Come on!" he yelled, and broke into a run, helping to bear Tels' half-helpless weight.

Glaring light and lashing tails, and armored heads that grinned hate at them. Then they were in the odorous dark of the stable, with the vaard thrashing and shrieking. Drake caught its head-rein; something in the touch of his hand quieted it.

He held out the paper to Terra. "Take this to Them. Get it into responsible hands. Then, if you can, bring help. Now go, before Khom closes in!" She didn't understand. She stared at him, clutching the paper with the fate of the Reclaimed Areas written on it. "But Martin! You... Tels--" Hardly knowing where the words came from, driven by something deep within him, Drake plunged on. "I don't

matter; Tels doesn't matter. Nothing matters but getting that paper where it has to go. The Council meets tomorrow morning! You ride better than I, you're lighter. The vaard will have a better chance to get away. Be you're... you're--"

He stopped abruptly, loosing the halter. "Go now, Terra. Hurry!" She was close to him in the dark; suddenly there were soft, warm lips on his, firm and vital. Then she was on the nervous beast, shoving the door wide.

"Throw a flare, Martin! Keep throwing them, until I come back!" Tels grinned. He hadn't seen that kiss. "Terra is a real woman! Where are the flares? I have one hand left!"

Drake saw her go, in the white glare, low on the vaard's neck, flying in a wide circle for Thern. Then he looked at the prowling, silent things in the naked fields.

"Afraid?" growled Tels.

Martin shook his head. "I... I don't know. Look, Tels! There they go!" Khom had made up his mind at last. There was a crash and a splinter as Tels' shack door went in; the flimsy walls rocked, cracking at the joints as the great bodies went hurtling in. They were mad, now. In a moment they would scent the humans in the stable.

"I'll kill a few!" snarled Tels, and lobbed two flares in quick succession at his shack. Wood grows dry on Mars. In five minutes it was aflame.

"My God!" groaned Drake. "That's done it. Here they come!" Balked of their objective, the lizards turned to the stable. In a grim, silent horde they came through the blowing dust, the flames red behind them. The two men hurled the precious flares, trying to keep a ring of light around the stable, and Khom prowled in nervous jerks, beyond

the blaze, stopped, but only momentarily.

Without warning, Tels crumpled to the floor. His face was gray, sweat on his forehead. "I can't--" he gasped, and fell back against the wall, half fainting. Drake knew fear, then; the full impact of it, cold and brutal. Tels' strength was taken from him. He stood alone, Martin Drake against the Destroyer. And with that icy realization came another knowledge. He had a job to do, and it didn't matter whether he was afraid or not.

It occurred to him, fleetingly, that maybe this was the secret of living. Picking up the half-empty sack, Drake flung the door open; he could aim better from the outside. Two of the beasts had got through already. A well-placed flare drove them back, but he didn't dare let it happen again. Much closer, and he'd set fire to the barn. Just keep the circle closed as long as the flares last. Why? Because Tels is in there, and maybe--Well, a man lives as long as he can.

He had the last flare in his hand when he stopped. "Tels!" he shouted. "Tels, look! Flares all along the fields there. Terra's brought the settlers. We're saved, Tels!"

He ran inside, seeing as he did so, that Khom was breaking his battle formation as the flares sizzled up from the rear, heading out into the desert again. Tels still leaned weakly against the wall, but he held up his hand. Drake took it, prepared to help them up.

"No!" said Tels. "I'll faint if I stand up. Shake it, Earthpuppy. Shake it!"

The Treasure of Ptakuth

Terry Shane stood in his deserted camp and swore. To his left the red Martian desert stretched in waterless desolation to the horizon. To his right, perhaps fifty yards away, rose a range of barren hills, low and worn by the press of ages. And at his feet was all the equipment the deserting bearers had left him; a canteen that might, with careful nursing, take him across the desert to the oasis of Morn, whence he had just come.

"By the holy saints!" swore Terence Shane, in a fury as black as his hair;

"I'll not be frightened from Ptakuth by any crawling scut that hides his face in the dark!"

The note in his hand mocked him. It had been pinned on his tent flap, and it said: "Your bearers have finally been persuaded to go home. Since you have proved obstinate, I can only say I hope you'll change your mind before you run into trouble. Having heard Terence Shane's boast that he never knows fear, I'm afraid you won't. But in all fairness, I warn you again: stay away from Ptakuth!"

It was signed Thaldrek of Ved. Shane knew of him. Everyone in the System knew of the Martian adventurer who sold valuable secrets to the highest bidder, and was never caught. Shane crumpled the paper in his great muscular hand and flung it away. Picking up the canteen, he swung off toward the hills which hid the lost city of Ptakuth from the world.

He found the place he was looking for: a gap where the mouth of a dry river joined the dry sea. Somewhere up the course of that dry river lay the cliff city of Ptakuth, cursed and lost for centuries that made

Shane's head reel with the thinking of them. There were legends of Ptakuth on Mars as there were legends of Atlantis on Earth, and the gray-bearded men of the Martian Archeological Foundation had paid adventurer Terry Shane a goodly sum to find it for them.

The rock walls and the sand floor hurled the Martian sunlight on Shane until he was soaked with sweat and parched with thirst. He endured the thirst. There might be no water for miles, if at all.

"And if there is water," he reflected, "there'll surely be barbarians. Shunni, in this part of Mars, and tough lads in a fight. Well, I've been paid to find Ptakuth, and I've come too far to turn back now!" In his heart he knew that wasn't the reason. The real reason was that someone wanted what he wanted, and dared him to come and get it. He was climbing a narrow trail alongside the river bed when he heard the sound. It came from across the gorge, beating down from the rocky walls in broken, maddening echoes; a low, sonorous note like a bell clanging. Shane shook his dark head in pain. The sound set his eardrums to banging in and out, bemused his brain, enraged him, because he sensed a definite purpose behind it. There was nothing in these naked hills to make such a sound, except a man-made agency.

Furious, trembling with the pain of his ears, he put his hands over them and went on. Abruptly the sound stopped. His head vibrated dizzily for a moment. Then there was blessed silence. Frowning, Shane climbed on.

There was a faint noise high on the cliff top above him, and a pebble bounced on the path at his feet. Someone was up there, climbing cat-footed over the rocks, spying on him. Shunni barbarians, or the man who had left that taunting note on his tent flap? Shane's gray eyes were keen, his hand ready on the butt of his proton gun. But there was nothing but empty silence. The musical note came again, lower

in pitch so that it took his very heartbeats and shook them. The vibrations hammered at him from the cliffs, from the rocks on the bottom of the gorge, from the trail at his feet, booming and thudding and setting every atom of his body and brain aquiver with them. Shane had heard of a similar thing; how certain Venusian tribes used musical notes to torture their victims, letting constant vibration send them mad after days of agony.

The very rock quivered under his feet; the cliff beside him, when he touched it, sent the low-pitched pulsing shooting through him. His jaws rang against one another like a tuning fork, and his brain was a darkened, shuddering anguish.

It stopped, and he was weak with the silence. Flexing his great shoulders, he bellowed defiance across the empty gorge, but there was no answer. And he wondered, if the sound came again, if he could fight ahead against it.

"Faith," he said suddenly, "that's it! A warning, to make me go back." His jaw set to an ugly line, and he went on, speeding his pace in the blinding heat.

Still he was conscious of watchers above him; faint clicks of metal on stone, a pebble dislodged from the crumbling rock. "Shunni," he decided, "because the notes came from across the gorge, and it's no barbarian making those." Sound again, this time a high-pitched screaming that was just within hearing range. Shane cried out before he knew it. The sound was like a knife in his head, a thousand times worse than the low note. It sang itself into the very bones of his skull, piercing and shrilling, maddening him with the pain of it. Nothing would shut it out. Shane raged at his weakness; pain, privation, danger, he had stood without flinching. But this he couldn't fight; it got hold of his brain and sent him wild as a frantic horse. He knew it was

the last warning. He knew he wouldn't have obeyed it if he could. But he was frantic, insane, driven by the piercing shriek in his head. He ran with all his strength, up the trail and through a sort of unroofed tunnel. And then, abruptly, he stopped. The agonizing shriek snapped off short. And Shane's hand dropped to his gun butt.

He had come out into what had once been a semicircular plateau, cupped in the wind-worn hills. Standing negligently at ease on the reddish earth were some two hundred Shunni warriors; great swarthy men in gaudy kilts and leather harness, bearing spears almost twice as long as Shane was high. Shane's head turned quickly at a noise behind him. Then his hand dropped the half-drawn gun casually back in its holster. Tall warriors filled the tunnel back of him; he shrugged and followed their pointing spears out onto the plain.

Then, for the second time, he stopped.

"Faith," he murmured, "it's sun-stroke I have, and this a vision come to comfort me!"

The girl had come from behind the front rank of Shunni. She had sun-brown hair and hazel eyes and a queenly way about her, and the blue skirt and copper corselet she wore only made her gorgeousness a little more patently gorgeous. Shane set his thumbs in his belt and smiled, watching the glitter and swish of her as she came to stand in front of him.

In a minute he'd try the Martian dialects he knew. But now: "Girl, you're as pretty as Shaughnessy's little brown pig!"

"Thanks," said the girl, in perfect English. "You're not bad-looking yourself. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

She laughed as Shane's tongue tried to come out of the paralysis of

surprise; the clear, merry sound brought a shamed flush to the man's cheeks.

"You make a man's tongue speak out of turn, girl. I'm Terence Shane, heading an expedition for the Martian Archeological Foundation." The girl frowned. "Expedition?"

Shane nodded. "My bearers left me back on the desert. I'm hunting for Ptakuth; it's a lost city somewhere in these hills."

The girl's face darkened. "The city," she said slowly, "with the treasure."

"Treasure?" Shane shook his head. "Perhaps they mentioned one, along with the curse and the destruction, but it means little." He grinned, looking down at her. "Who are you?"

The girl met his eyes for a long minute. Then, "Zenda Challoner," she said, as though it meant a lot.

The name struck an echo way back in the hazy corridors of Shane's memory, but whatever it might have meant was sidetracked in a sudden clamor in back of him. Shane swung to follow the girl's gaze, and his bronzed face hardened. A group of warriors had come through the tunnel, and they had a captive; a slight, fair man, dressed like Shane in spun-glass tunic and shorts. The Irishman, looking at the newcomer's high-boned, hawk-clean face, murmured:

"Thaldrek of Ved, by the devil himself."

Zenda Challoner smiled, and Shane found it difficult to believe that an angel's face could produce such a hard, mirthless expression. It was like a bared and sharpened spear point.

"Where did you get this one?" she demanded. The leader grinned.

"On the other side of the river, xanara, beside a spaceship. Will there be sport tonight?"

There was a nasty thought behind that last, Shane felt. Zenda shook her head, saying brusquely: "Are you an archaeologist, too?" The stranger had an easy smile. "No, xanara. I am--" His eyes, long, cloud-colored Venusian eyes in a Martian face, caught Shane's with suppressed laughter in them. "I'm Thaldrek of Ved, a dealer in--well, rare merchandise. My flier cracked up in the hills. Do I trespass?"

"You do," said Zenda Challoner curtly, and turned away with a gesture to the waiting Shunni.

In another minute Shane and Thaldrek, disarmed, were marching across the plateau and into a narrow defile, closely guarded by strapping barbarians. The Martian grinned crookedly. "Looks as though we're in a mess, Terence Shane."

Shane glared at him. Then, "I've been in tighter spots than this," he said, and his eyes went to Zenda Challoner.

Thaldrek grunted. "Some day," he said feelingly, "you'll meet something that'll throw the fear of God into you. And I hope I'm there to see it!"

The red Martian sunset was deepening when they reached the valley where the Shunni lived; a place of low cliffs honeycombed with caves, with little tilled fields along the course of a thin trickle of water. Shane noted the guards at the one entrance, and had to admit that leaving was going to be harder than getting in.

The two captives were permitted to wash and eat. Then, when full

dark had fallen and there was a flare of torches and cooking fires in the chill air, they were taken to Zenda Challoner's cave.

A big cave, floored and cushioned with skins, with an incongruous metal lock box on a high shelf. Thaldrek of Ved saw it, and Shane noted the quick flame that burned and then was hidden in the Venusian's long, cloud-colored eyes. Zenda Challoner watched them, lithe and lovely, from a couch of skins, their two guns under her hand, and her face was hard and troubled all at once.

"I don't know what to do with you," she said abruptly. "If I let you go, you'll come back with more men, and it will mean war. I don't wish to keep you prisoners here. And I don't want to kill you."

"Why, now," smiled Shane easily, "couldn't we just go on to Ptakuth as we planned, and nobody bother anybody?"

Thaldrek laughed. "Yes, xanara. Why not?"

Zenda Challoner frowned angrily. "Are you accomplices?" Shane growled, and Thaldrek said quietly, "We know each other by reputation rather than acquaintance!"

"Then what is it? You're hiding something!"

"So are you." Shane moved closer to her. "Who are you? And why are you keeping us from Ptakuth?"

The brown-haired girl gave him a long, level look. "My father," she said quietly, "was a god."

For the second time Shane's tongue was enmeshed in startlement. "A god!" Zenda nodded. "He was Harold Challoner, The-One-Who-Never-Sleeps. He came here from Outside, many years ago, and

settled among the Shunni. They knew he was a god, because he never slept. He mated with a woman of the tribe, and when it came time for his body to go elsewhere, his soul entered my body, and I, his daughter, became goddess-queen in his place. He left a certain trust with me, a guardianship."

"Of Ptakuth " murmured Thaldrek. "Of course." Again that nebulous tugging at Shane's memory. Somewhere before he had heard the name of Harold Challoner.

He said gently, "You're too pretty for a goddess, and too little for a queen. You sleep, don't you?"

"Of course. I have said my mother was a Shunni woman. Therefore I am only half god."

"But what of Ptakuth?" Thaldrek's face was keen as a questing wolf's. The girl seemed perplexed for a moment; that look of troubled indecision came again to her face. "It is forbidden," she said at length, "even to me." And she made an imperious gesture to a warrior standing guard. As Thaldrek and Shane were led out, she said, "I will decide in the morning what to do with you."

Shane shrugged. With a colleen like that to deal with, no great harm could befall Terence Shane. But Thaldrek's keen face was set, his eyes unseeing with intense concentration.

Back in their cave, alone except for half a dozen Shunni on guard around a fire on the ledge outside, Shane turned on the Martian.

"All right, Thaldrek, it's time now for speaking. What are you after?" Thaldrek had come out of his thoughtful daze. There was a look about him as though he had made his decision, and the world lay at his feet. Again Shane noted the mingled strains in him: cloudy eyes of

Venus, wiry litherness of Mars, and the fair hair some Earthman had given him, on a planet where the eternal sunlight makes most men dark. Shane could have broken Thaldrek's slim, supple body in his two hands, but he could not down a grudging respect.

"I am," smiled Thaldrek of Ved, "doing exactly what you're doing--looking for Ptakuth."

Shane grunted. "I'm getting paid for it, though. You'll not be taking up archaeology this late in life, will you?"

"Have you heard mention of a treasure?"

"So that's it!" Shane let go a roar of laughter. "Yes, and I've heard of a curse and a destruction, too. All legendary bosh, Thaldrek!"

"The-One-Who-Never-Sleeps isn't legendary bosh, Shane; his daughter sits there, ruling these barbarians, believing she's a goddess, and guarding the door to Ptakuth. There must be a reason."

"Challoner. Harold Challoner. Got it! He headed an expedition in search of Ptakuth about twenty years ago. Did it with his own money, tried to keep it a secret. Disappeared, along with his three companions. He lived his life out here, of course. Wonder why he didn't come back when he failed?"

"He didn't fail," said Thaldrek slowly. "Remember, he was The-One-Who-Never-Sleeps."

Shane stood over the Martian, and there was no humor in his face. "What is the treasure of Ptakuth, that you're so anxious to get it? And what's all this talk of Challoner never sleeping?"

Thaldrek smiled at Shane, his hands folded on his belt. There was something dangerous in his smile.

"The gods didn't give me the body of a bull," he said, "so I've been forced to develop brains. The first law of a full brain is a close tongue." He glanced at the skin-curtained entrance. Then, quietly, he asked, "How would you like to escape?"

Shane glared at him. "I could probably kill those six guards, but it's very angry the rest of the Shunni would be! Surely you know our escape lies through Zenda."

"Dealing with women, eh?" The Martian's veiled eyes held a malicious amusement. "I've heard your boast, Terence Shane. Are you afraid?" His laugh stopped the Irishman's angry roar, but his hands were still at his belt.

"Why, now," snarled Terry Shane, "is it an angel you'll bring from heaven to carry us off, or himself from down below?"

Thaldrek snapped the zipper of his tunic down to the belt. Strapped tight against his muscular body was a web belt bearing two little square boxes, hidden by the blouse of the loose garment.

"An electro-vibrator," said Thaldrek. "Operates on tiny storage batteries, sending vibrations of ultra-sonic perception over a beam with a six-foot range. Really a miniature of the tonal apparatus I used on you back in the gorge. Small, but powerful. Watch."

He stood by the skin curtain, within four feet of the guards outside, manipulating the dials. As Shane listened, the talk and laughter died away. There was a clatter as someone's spear dropped. Then silence. Thaldrek grinned. "Brains, Shane. Thought is electrical in principle; telepathy depends on electrical vibrations from one mind

impinging on another. The ultra-sonic vibrations blank the conscious mind so that I can exercise complete control of anyone under its influence, provided I make the vibrations of my own mind strong enough through concentration. I told the guards to go to sleep."

"You win," grunted Shane. "But the holy saints keep me from tearing you apart before it's time!"

Phobos shot up out of the west as they stepped out onto the ledge among the sleeping guards, casting an ink-black shadow under the western wall of the valley. It was late, and the cooking fires had smoldered to ashes. What folk were still awake were in their caves, for the night was cold. Prowling silently as cats down the well-worn trail in the moon-cast dark, Shane and Thaldrek made for Zenda's cave.

"How long will the guards sleep?" whispered Shane.

"About four hours," answered Thaldrek.

There were three guards on Zenda's ledge; the sonic-vibrator put them to sleep without trouble. Zenda slept alone, lying like a child, with her honey-brown hair tumbled over her shoulders. Thaldrek made sure, with the little box at his waist, that she slept soundly.

They retrieved the weapons Zenda had taken from them, and Shane turned to go. Thaldrek stopped him with a whispered, "Wait!"

"We have what we came for," Shane snapped. Thaldrek shook his head impatiently. "You're taller. Reach me that lock box from the shelf."

Shane hesitated. "You want to find Ptakuth, don't you?" demanded Thaldrek. Shane shrugged and lifted down the heavy box, muscles

coiling, along the one naked arm he deigned to use.

The lock was tight. Thaldrek turned to Zenda, lifting back the curtain of her hair with strangely gentle fingers. There was a twisted thong about her neck. The Martian loosed it, grasping the key that hung from it. The opened box yielded a metal-leaf notebook, written close with acid-etched lines. Thaldrek opened it, taut with suppressed eagerness. "Harold Challoner's diary," he murmured. "The secret of Ptakuth!"

Shane's patience had reached the snapping point. Distrust of Thaldrek, perplexity over his reason for aiding his, Shane's, escape when he might have gone alone, dislike of the uninvited trespassing in Zenda Challoner's boudoir, combined to set an ugly temper rising in him.

Thaldrek's low voice stopped his half-defined impulse toward violence. Almost as though he were thinking aloud, the Martian stared at the notebook and spoke.

"He found the city, and the treasure. His three friends died there, realizing too late. When he understood his own condition he destroyed the entrance to the cliff city of Ptakuth and came here. Of course! Zenda has the only key."

"Zenda?" Shane was very close to him, his face hard. Thaldrek met Shane's gaze. "The girl goes with us, Shane. She's the only one who can find Ptakuth for us. There's a hidden way that Challoner left, not quite daring to hide the treasure completely from the world. You only want the city; you're welcome to it. But I want the treasure!" There was eager laughter under his words. "Ptakuth was cursed and destroyed because of that treasure, Shane. Challoner became a god because of it--and killed himself ten years ago. But there's a place for that treasure in the world, Shane, and I want it!"

Shane sensed danger very close. His gun was half out of its holster, but Thaldrek's hand was quicker on the dial. The tall man's eyes glazed, his face went slack, and he slid the gun back.

Thaldrek smiled and shook his head. "I don't know why I bother with you, Terence Shane, except that I had a hunch it would be like this. My sources of information are better than yours. The Shunni are going to be annoyed when they find their goddess gone--and being torn to pieces is such a messy death." Tucking the notebook in his belt-pouch, Thaldrek turned to his prisoners.

"Walk ahead of me, to the valley entrance. Zenda, you will handle anyone who gets in our way. I'll fix the guards."

A quarter of an hour later they were far beyond the valley, leaving half a dozen Shunni sleeping peacefully at their posts. Thaldrek spoke briefly but earnestly with Zenda, listening intently to her mechanical answers. When another half-hour of brisk walking across the barren, tumbled rocks was past, Thaldrek halted his strange little cavalcade.

A narrow cleft was driven into a low cliff nearby. Shane, obeying like an automaton, walked into it and lay down, falling instantly into a deep sleep.

"For three hours," ordered Thaldrek. "That's about the best I can do for you. The Shunni will be coming along here eventually; that should give them time to get past you. They won't see you, you have your gun, and you can suit yourself from there on." He grinned. "You should be duly grateful, but I suppose you'll only swear."

Thaldrek sealed the end of the cleft with a boulder, thinking over his plan.

"It's cut rather fine, but I don't see why it won't work. The Shunni will be between me and Shane. I should be through and away before they get to Ptakuth, but in case they trap me there--they won't come in after me because the place is taboo--I've got Zenda to get me out. And I'll give the bomb plenty of time." He turned to Zenda, still quiescent under the spell of the sonic hypnotism, and there was something sad and wistful in his long gray eyes as he looked at her.

"Take me to the secret entrance of Ptakuth, Zenda," he said quietly, and sighed.

Shane woke abruptly to the fading scuff of many sandaled feet and a muffled clank of weapons. Springing up, dazed and angry with half-remembered things, he climbed the concealing boulder in time to see the last of a band of Shunni warriors vanish into a tangle of naked tors. Phobos was low in the east, Deimos rising slowly over it to cast a jumble of conflicting shadows. A word came to Terry Shane's lips, and the word was "Zenda!" Thaldrek had taken her, to find the hidden way to Ptakuth and the treasure. What would he do, or had he done, to her afterward?

He could guess where the Shunni were going. Thaldrek and the girl must have left a trail that these hillmen could follow in the dark, and they wanted their goddess back.

Half wonderingly, Shane found his gun safe in his holster. Like a black bull he took the trail of the Shunni.

He had no notion of time. But suddenly, as he topped what had been in distant ages a wooded peak overlooking the river, he saw his goal. To his left the river widened to a great inland harbor; there were crumbling stone quays still jutting into dry red sand, but the cliffs behind them had fallen in ruin. Man-made ruin.

"Challoner destroyed the entrance," grunted Shane. "And that must be the one he left!"

Five hundred Shunni warriors squatted in a grim semicircle about a crack in a cliff some fifty yards to his right. Thaldrek and the girl were still in there, then. Shane nodded. Then a sudden icy question flashed in his brain.

"What's taking him so long?"

There was just one way to get into that crack—from the top. The guarding Shunni would kill him in sheer rage if they caught him. Driven by haste that had something strange and disquieting in it, Shane skirted the cliff, climbed its wind-pitted surface at a safe distance, wormed his way silently back, and lowered himself into the narrow crack.

A man of lesser strength would have fallen. Shane, knees and elbows scraped raw, fingers bleeding, drenched with sweat, came safely to the bottom and turned down the low tunnel that opened into the heart of the cliff, drawing an atomic torch from his belt pouch.

The white beam showed him mighty buildings hewn out of the living rock, rearing up to hold the stony sky; great shadowy doorways and the marks of countless sandals in the stone floor underfoot. On all sides, branching away in every direction, were high-arched corridors broad as city streets, spanned at many levels by metal bridges. Shane stopped, uncertain. From somewhere, thinned by distance and the winding of the maze-like galleries, came a voice, calling.

"Thaldrek!" grated Shane and started off, guided by that voice that called and called. The rocky walls picked up his footsteps, threw them from side to side, hurled them back at him from metal doorways.

New footsteps echoed abruptly, coming nearer. Around a carved corner came Thaldrek, his hawk face strained with a deadly urgency, and he was calling,

"Zenda! Zenda Challoner!"

Torches made crazy patterns on the carved walls as Shane caught the running Martian by the shoulders, shook him savagely.

"Where is Zenda?"

"Lost," said Thaldrek, in a flat, quiet voice. "Lost in the dark in these corridors. And unless I find her and get us out of here within twenty minutes, we'll both die. You, too, Shane, since you somehow blundered in here."

"I didn't blunder," said Shane grimly. "And why will you die in twenty minutes?"

"I set the bomb forty minutes ago, to destroy the cyclotron. When I went back for Zenda, she was gone. It was my fault; in my excitement I forgot to give her a time command, and as soon as the sonic beam was off her, she regained consciousness. She ran away, of course, and I've been hunting her ever since." There was much that Shane didn't understand, but there was just one thing now that mattered.

"Can I get to the bomb in time to disconnect it?" he asked, and Thaldrek's eyes widened slowly at the tone of his voice.

"You think I'm afraid to go back, don't you?" Thaldrek laughed suddenly. "And I am. Not of dying--but of living!"

His eyes fastened on Shane's. "Yes, you can get there. Perhaps you can disconnect it in three minutes, though I don't see how. But if you

stay more than three minutes under the ray, you'll get what Challoner got. Immortality!

"I've already stayed the limit, making calculations and setting the bomb. And I don't want immortality at the price Ptakuth paid!" Shane shook his head. "I don't understand. But I'll disconnect that bomb if- Wait!" His hand caught the neck of Thaldrek's tunic in a strangling grip.

"What are you trying to pull? If the bomb goes off, it'll only destroy the cyclotron."

"Look." Thaldrek kicked the nearby wall, looked at Shane as a trickle of dust cascaded to the floor. "Mars is old. The water is gone from these rocks, the iron rusted out. The shock of that atomic bomb in the heart of the city will bring Ptakuth down in fragments."

Shane let him go. "Where is the bomb?"

Thaldrek turned. "This way. And hurry!"

Ringling, shadowy corridors reeled behind them. And abruptly Thaldrek snapped off his torch. "The treasure of Ptakuth, Shane." Light filtered into the darkness, growing as they approached its source. A massive archway opened, and beyond it was a square, spreading away in majestic simplicity to a raised platform. On the platform, under banked generators and transformer tubes, hemmed in by screens of unfamiliar metal, towered a great machine; a vacuum tube standing between poles of an electro-magnet that must have generated twenty million volts. There was a sort of shimmering all through the square, as though there were colored light just beyond seeing range.

"It draws power from the heart of Mars itself," murmured Thaldrek. "A

power that has never weakened." He stiffened suddenly. "Zenda!" Walking slowly through the shimmer, her bronzed slimness undulant, her arms raised as though in adoration, Zenda Challoner came from around the circular platform. Shane gasped. He had not remembered she was so beautiful. She was transfigured, filled with a joyous vitality as a glass is filled with wine.

"Zenda!" shouted Thaldrek, and there was tragedy in his voice. The girl paid no attention. Thaldrek caught Shane's arm in a grip that made him wince. "Get her, Shane! Get her, before it's too late! Unless it is already--" Shane didn't understand, but he caught the deadly terror in Thaldrek's voice. Terror not for himself, but for Zenda. Shane started forward, into the square. There was a mild electric shock, a surging in his blood as though all the life processes were being speeded up. He could understand Zenda's worship of the strange force.

"The bomb!" he said, stopping suddenly. "What about the bomb, Thaldrek?" The Martian groaned. "Get Zenda! Never mind--oh, my God! There won't be time afterward. Five minutes left. And you'll have used at least half of your three minutes of safety!"

Terry Shane swore. "What is this talk of three minutes'?"

"The limit of safety under the ray. At three minutes the radiations make a definite impression on the body. At five you have immortality. At six, death!

"Get Zenda before you're both lost!"

Shane turned and ran toward the girl. The ray was like strong sunshine on him; he felt vitalized and invincible, afraid of nothing. Thaldrek was a quivering coward--

Harold Challoner stayed too long under the ray. He killed himself. He was The-One-Who-Never-Sleeps.

Something strange and cold caught Shane by the throat. Blood beat in his ears, his heart thundered, his knees bent under him. Ptakuth was cursed and lost, Challoner died by his own hand, and he, Terry Shane, was soaking in the same ray that caused it all.

He stopped, and a strange, incredulous look came over his face. "Faith," he whispered. "Faith, and I'm afraid!"

Thaldrek's voice spurred him. "Hurry, Shane, hurry!" The Irishman shook his head to clear it. Zenda Challoner wavered in the misty radiance, utterly uncaring. Shane felt a surge of pity rise in him; pity, and something else. He grinned crookedly as he broke into a desperate run.

"And," he muttered, "I'm thinking I'm in love also!" The girl was warm and light in his arms. He shielded her with his body, not knowing that the rays went through him unchecked. And, while he ran with all the strength that was in him, he kissed the soft hollow of her throat where it lay under his lips.

"Three minutes left," said Thaldrek tightly as he caught the girl from Shane.

"And only a minute and a half left for you, if you go back."

"Can a man be in love and afraid at the same time?" wondered Shane, and turned back into the shimmering square.

Across the sandal-hollowed stones, running like a deer with the new power that was in him from the ray. Up the steps of the circular dais, searching, searching. Then he saw it, a little globe like a big marble,

with a timing device set clockwise atop it in a strong metal case. Shane had seen bombs like that before. Once they were set there was no stopping them, unless one had time and the proper tiny tools. And again fear gripped Terry Shane as he thought of the seconds ticking away, felt the ray beating its wonderful, horrible strength into him, thought of those artificially unstabilized atoms ready to blow Ptakuth and everyone in it to powder. Fear, and a humble realization that there were bigger things in the world than Terence Shane.

There was just one thing he could try. Kneeling, he caught the timing device between thumb and forefinger, set the thumb and forefinger of his other hand over those. And he pressed.

Veins swelled in his forehead, his face drew into a tight mask of agonized effort. The thing was so tiny, his strength baffled by its very smallness. He lost track of time, of everything except that stubborn bit of metal between his fingers. Perhaps he was already a "god" like Challoner. Perhaps the bomb would go off in his hand. Perhaps there was no use of anything, because Zenda was already cursed with the curse of Ptakuth.

Blood spurted from his fingertips as the flesh split under the pressure. One more effort, and he must stop.

Like a sweating colossus he poured every last ounce of his strength into his crushing fingers. And the metal gave, bent inward, split away with a tiny jangle of ruptured instruments.

Shane sagged, his cramped hands cushioning the fall of the bomb. He would have lain there and slept, but that a voice kept shouting his name. "Thirty seconds, Shane. Run!"

Blindly he rose and ran across the wide and empty square, hardly knowing it when he was safe in the corridor, not knowing it at all when

ultra-sonic waves blanked what was left of his conscious mind, set him walking toward the entrance where the Shunni sat.

He came to with his head pillowed in Zenda's lap. They were atop the hill from which he had first seen Ptakuth, and where the cliffs had risen beside the dead sea, there was now only a vast rubble-choked hollow. Ptakuth was gone, the treasure with it.

Shane struggled up, questions coming to his lips. A change came suddenly over Zenda; her eyes glazed, and when she spoke it was not with her voice.

"This is post-hypnotic command, Shane," she said. "Don't worry, Zenda is quite safe. Her body displays none of the symptoms of immortality; she had probably been there only a minute or so.

"I went back, after Zenda got us through and sent her warriors away, and set another bomb near the entrance. The secret of the cyclotron is too big and dangerous, I realize now, to loose upon the world, no matter how much money it might bring me. That's my business, as you know; selling secrets to the highest bidder. I set the first bomb, of course, to avoid any competition. The second was to destroy all my notes as well as the 'treasure' itself.

"This much I can say, Shane; tell it to the men of the Martian Foundation, and let them make what good they can of it. The cyclotron fired hydrogen bullets against a screen of yttrium. Using rubidium filters, the scientists of Ptakuth generated a ray with a wonderful property; the property of making the human bloodstream radio-active with a gamma-principle. This gamma element in the blood gave a power of regeneration to the body cells, but most of all, being in itself a germ-destroying element, it made the human body immune to all disease. You can see how this would extend the life span.

"The tragedy was that the ray destroyed whatever mysterious center of the brain it is that controls sleep. Imagine, Shane; a lifetime of several centuries, with never a moment's relaxation in sleep, never a quiet time of darkness and rest. Every second of every day lived to the uttermost. Ptakuth went mad! Like Challoner, it destroyed itself. and the rest of the world said it was cursed. Ptakuth was shunned.

"Yet there may still be good in the secret. Let modern scientists build what they can from the scraps of knowledge you have; they may find a safer way.

"We may meet again somewhere. If we do, remember that I know your secret. You were afraid twice on the same night!

"Good-by, and good luck to you and Zenda. May your daughters be as lovely, your sons as brave!"

Abruptly, as though it had never been, the post-hypnosis was gone. Zenda smiled, half shyly. Shane stretched out his arms, cradled her face between hands bandaged with strips of her blue skirt. "Thaldrek told me what you did," whispered Zenda. "At least I know."

Miles away on the other side of the dry river, a small spaceship roared up and drew a streak of vanishing flame against the paling sky. Shane looked after it with an odd little grin. Then he bent toward Zenda.

He stopped, chuckling. "Faith, girl," he murmured, "I'm afraid again!" But not for long.

The Demons of Darkside

It was early, so the ancient television was only observed by a scant audience. Sila, the town buried on the edge of Venus' eastern swamp belt, didn't wake till dark.

Barry Garth, almost alone in the scrap metal barroom, put his head in his arms and listened with a weary hatred. He'd heard so many telecasts during the past months. Thousands, it seemed, and all on the same subject.

"A third appeal for clemency was today denied Alice Webster by the Interplanetary Court," rasped the blurred image of the telecast announcer.

"This means that the twenty-three-year-old heiress, convicted of murdering her uncle, Gavin Webster, the Mercurian Metals tycoon, will die as scheduled three weeks from today. Her fiancé-accomplice, Barry Garth, has not yet been apprehended by the police, from whom he escaped soon after the trial."

"Dirty rat!" hiccupped a space sailor at the bar. "Leaving a dame to take the rap by herself!"

"Flash! Ladies and gentlemen!" The telecaster's voice fairly crackled. "Word has just come from Mercury. The private yacht of Wilsey Stevens, third vice-president of Mercurian Metals and chief witness for the prosecution at the murder trial of Alice Webster, crashed on Darkside two hours ago. Our Mercurian informer states that the yacht, the *Hermes*, struck a magnetic storm before she broke her drag, and was sucked down into the shadow.

"Wilsey Stevens himself was piloting the craft. Since experience has

proven salvage work impossible, and since no one has ever survived either a crash or an expedition on the dark face of Mercury, it must be concluded that Stevens and his entire crew of six men are lost. Names of those aboard—" Barry Garth didn't hear them. He was staring blankly at the telescreen, his big raw-boned frame taut. So Wilsey Stevens was dead, after all. All his lying, all his signing away of two lives, had availed him nothing. Darkside had caught him, and he was dead.

That meant Alice was dead, too. There was no hope now of saving her. He might as well go back and die with her.

Wilsey Stevens dead! But was he? Who knew what happened on Darkside? No one had ever come back to tell. Perhaps, if the crash hadn't killed him, he might live—at least for awhile. Was there a chance, one meager but all-important chance?

Barry Garth strode out of the barroom then, and there was something strangely ruthless in his dark, handsome face and the set of his wide shoulders. The slow Venusian dusk cloaked the single shoddy street. The fever-mists crawled up out of the swamp, and some faraway scaly beast sent up a hissing scream. Blue mud reeked and squelched under Garth's boots. Ahead, a space of desolation with the rocket-blown pits filled with water, was the port of Sila, the town's only excuse for existing.

* * *

Garth paused near a cluster of rusty shanties, searching with narrowed blue eyes. Finding what he sought, a cracked and slimy board bearing the legend

"Scotia Salvage Co.," he started forward and stopped again, wondering if he were not a little mad.

The odds were greatly against him that he could find Stevens alive, or live to come back himself if he did. Darkside was one of the impenetrable mysteries of the System. No one knew what existed under the blanket of everlasting shadow and freakish magnetic currents--except that men who went there never came back!

Garth shrugged. Perhaps he was going mad. To be a crack racing flier with a future and the grandest girl in nine planets, to be, out of a clear sky, accused and convicted of murder, to face an unjust death with that girl was enough to make anyone crazy.

Wilsey Stevens either killed or knew who killed Gavin Webster. His testimony at the trial, convicting Alice and Garth, had proven that. He had woven an unbreakable chain of evidence around them. But they knew they were innocent. Garth's one hope had been to force Stevens to confess. His one meager clue as to discovering Stevens' possible motive for the murder had brought him to Sila, only to end like this.

A new thought occurred to Garth. Even if Stevens were dead, the Hermes might yield some clue that would be sufficient to stop Alice's execution and give them another chance.

He knew what he was going to do to the man in the Scotia Salvage Company office. He didn't care. Not all the population of this rotten sinkhole put together added up to Alice Webster. He would cheerfully have shot them all down, if it meant one single chance for her.

As for himself, he was no diamond-studded hero. He wanted to live. He had a right to live!

Barry Garth put his right hand in his pocket and pushed open the door of the Scotia Salvage Company.

A pungent reek of white Venusian whisky struck his nostrils. The cramped, untidy office was growing dark, but he could see the man who rose from behind the rickety table. He looked into a dark face sunk between tremendous shoulders, with savage gray eyes half-veiled by hair, black, shaggy as that of a bear. Heavy stubble shadowed a square, grim jaw. The man's worn spacemen's kit, wrinkled against a powerful body, was stained and dirty. The tunic was torn open over a black-haired chest.

"There's no job here," growled the man. "And I'm closed for the night." His voice was deep and harsh, with a slight burr.

Garth shook his head.

"I don't want a job," he said.

"Then what do ye want?"

"Your ship," said Garth.

The gun blurred out of his pocket, snapped softly. A needle laden with a quick-acting anesthetic caught the man at the base of his hairy throat. Before his startled curse could voice itself, the big Earthman fell. Barry Garth eased his fall. There was something about that bitter, deep-lined face that seemed familiar, even important, but he couldn't bring the half-memory clear. He knew he'd never seen the man. He shrugged and sat down to wait.

The black, starless night shut down, and it began to rain. Staggering under the big man's weight, Garth ventured out into the deserted landing field. There was no one here but himself and the Scot.

* * *

He found the hangar, opened it with the Scot's keys. There was a squat, ancient salvage tug inside, one of those disreputable pirates of the space lanes, who preyed on misfortune and made ill luck worse. Garth knew these tramp salvage men. They'd give aid, preferably to private ships, and then strip the owner to his underclothes to pay for the service. He had, in his younger days, lost his first ship to just such vultures. The name Bruce was painted on the scarred hull. Garth dumped the Scot through the open port and set about checking the ship. Because of the darkness he was forced to risk a small light.

Some instinct made him look up suddenly. A face was framed in the opening of the door he had thought was closed. It was a thin, unhealthy Martian face, with lank hair and a mouth purpled from chewing finchi. Then it was gone. Garth jumped for the door and caught a dim glimpse of a tall, awkward form running. But there was no chance for a shot.

He turned back to the Bruce. He might, of course, have been watched all the time. By whom? Police spies, perhaps. A sharp-eyed space rat who had recognized him and wanted the reward. Or just a curious loafer. There had been something purposeful about that peering face. Garth's bony jaw locked grimly. Strapping the Scot in his bunk, he slid back the hangar top and sent the Bruce hurtling up on roaring jets, outbound for Mercury.... He was far beyond the cloud blanket, out in space, when he saw the little streak of flame on his visi-plate. Another ship, up from Sila, was following him.

Crouched in the pilot's bay, which was little more than a sweltering air-space between banks of machinery and control panels, Barry Garth threw every last atom of speed into the Bruce and cursed its slowness. If that was a police ship following--

But it wasn't. The ship reached its maximum velocity, approximately

that of the Bruce, and hung there. It was close enough so that Garth could make out its shape in the brilliant glare of the Sun. It was a squat, shabby salvage tug like the Bruce. Barry Garth frowned.

There was something funny about that. There was nothing ahead but Mercury, and there was no salvage job on Mercury except the Hermes. Besides, it took a damned strong motive to get any man near Darkside.

Uneasy curiosity sent his hand for the television switch. But he drew it back. He didn't dare contact that ship. If the Martian back in Sila had anything to do with it, they knew he had stolen the Scot's ship. If not, he didn't dare tip them off. They could radio the Venusian police to pick him up before he hit the shadow.

Garth forced himself to calm, and set about checking his course. Then he jerked bolt upright, sweat bursting in a sudden flood from every pore. The Scot had screamed--screamed in black, abysmal terror!

Barry Garth stood in the dim glow of the panel light, facing into the darkness toward the stern. The bunkroom was back there, beyond the air-tight door. Garth cradled the needle gun, waiting.

The bulkhead door clanged open wildly against the wall. A towering shape burst through it, staggered, and plunged for the light switch. The cold white glare of full power blazed blindingly.

The Scot stood flattened against the curving hull-wall, every muscle rigid. His face was a ghostly gray and his eyes were mad.

Garth forced his voice to be quiet.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Breath sobbed into the big man's lungs.

"The demons," he whispered. The burr was deep and thick in his voice. "They come i' the dark. I can hear them."

"You've had a nightmare," Garth said. "Take a drink and go back to bed." A measure of sanity returned to the Scot's wild gray eyes. His heavy muscles knotted in his effort to still them.

"The light," he said. "It drives them awa'. They cannot stand the light." Garth relaxed, remembering that the Scot had been drinking.

"All right, I'll leave the lights on," he agreed. "Go and sleep it off." The Scot's harsh laugh startled him.

"I'll nae sleep them off while I live, lad." He ran huge scarred hands through his shaggy hair, and looked up again, completely under control. "Now then. What are ye doing, and why?"

"We're going on a salvage job," said Garth evenly. "To Mercury. There's a man there I want to see."

"To Mercury?" Fear leaped bright in the big man's eyes, but he held it down.

"Go on."

Garth told his story.

"Stevens is my last and only hope," he finished. "He must have had a motive, a reason for what he did to us. I've tried every other way to find it, and failed. Now I'm trying this. I'll die if I fail, but I'd have to die

anyway. I had to have a ship, a salvage ship, and I knew I couldn't get anyone to go where I'm going voluntarily. I'll get you out of it if I can get out myself. But I'd rather kill every rat in Sila than let this chance go."

"Aye, ye're right," the Scot said. "And why not? Life's nae a merry gambol. Where on Mercury is it ye're going?"

"Darkside."

The Scot's grim mouth opened, but no sound came forth. His eyes widened like ice-gray flames. Garth saw a tremor shoot through him, as though he'd taken a death-blow over the heart. Then he laughed.

The roar of that wild, harsh laughter shook Garth strangely, and sent his blood running boiling hot and then cold. He braced himself and raised his gun.

"Darkside!" the big man whispered. "He's taking me to Darkside. Me, Sandy MacDougal!" He swung to face forward, toward the silver blaze of Mercury.

"This is yer doin'! Ye thought ye had me once, ye black demons of hell, but I cheated ye! Ye got Sarasoff, but nae me. Ye've hounded and followed me, and noo ye want me back. But I'll nae come! D'ye hear me? I'll nae come!" He flung himself forward with startling speed for such a big man. But Garth was ready. His finger closed convulsively on the trigger. MacDougal's hands had only time to close around his throat before they went lax. Barry Garth dragged the Scot back to his bunk and strapped him in, this time where he couldn't get at the buckles. Then he stood staring down into that lined, bitter face, and he felt himself tremble.

"Sandy MacDougal," he whispered. "I remember now. He was a crack pilot on the Mercury run for Interplanetary Mails nearly fifteen

years ago. And he was reported to be lost on Darkside!"

So someone had come back from the shadow. Someone had cheated whatever deadly forces lived in that sunless cone of eternal night. Garth smiled grimly. What one man had done, another could do.

Then he looked at MacDougal again, and his smile died....

* * *

Twenty-four hours went by, and then another five. Barry Garth, keeping himself awake on caffeine tablets from the supply locker, crouched in the narrow bay, stripped to the waist. The metal shields were over the ports, but the blaze of the huge, malignant Sun sent in heat that the hard-worked refrigerator units couldn't down. The thermometer crawled up and up, and the control levers were almost too hot to touch.

Three times in that period of hours, Garth had thrust another needle into Sandy MacDougal, keeping him in drugged quiet. Far more often than that he had cursed the necessity of bringing another man, cursed the luck that had given him MacDougal, of all men.

"Perhaps," he muttered, "it's my punishment for risking another man's life." Then he thought of Alice Webster waiting in her cell--waiting for a death she didn't deserve. Garth glared red-eyed at the shuttered ports.

"I'll get him back if I can," he said aloud. "But I had to do it! I had to!" It was the heat, he decided, that made his nerves go tight. The heat and that damned ship behind him that hung on and wouldn't go away. He swore viciously at the image in his visi-plate. It blurred before his eyes, and he felt the cabin spinning. Another caffeine tablet helped

keep him awake. How much farther was it? He'd wait another hour. MacDougal would come to by then. Still the heat climbed. Several times Garth found himself on the verge of collapse. His rangy body was tough, but the ordeal of the past months had taken something out of him, and he hadn't eaten regularly since his escape. He kept his aching, burning eyes on the chronometer, and when it reached a certain mark, he gripped the emergency fuel-dump lever. The plastic burned his palm, but he pulled it back, watching the gauge drop. He had calculated nicely, and he prayed that his calculations were right. If they weren't, it was just too bad.

When he staggered back to the bunkroom, the Scot was awake. Garth bent over him.

"Listen," he said. "There's just enough fuel in the tanks to get us to Mercury. You can't go back to Venus, no matter what. Now get in there and stand your watch."

MacDougal looked at him.

"Ye love that lassie, don't ye?" he asked surprisingly. Garth nodded. "I'll sleep now. And there's nothing you can do about it, MacDougal, so don't try."

The Scot rose stiffly, stood looking down.

"Ye've the kind of guts I like, lad. Sorry I can't help ye." Garth's bony face went ugly.

"It takes two pilots to get a ship through the disturbance field. That's one reason why I had to bring you. And you're going to pull your weight!" MacDougal shrugged.

"Without fuel, I'll have to, for awhile."

Garth hefted the pistol significantly.

"I'll see that you do," he said meaningly. He smiled as MacDougal turned and went down the corridor. And then he groaned as a thought struck him. He had forgotten that ship following them!

He plunged forward, and felt the vibration of the rockets die out of the hull, then start again as the forward jets cut in, decelerating. Raging, Garth burst into the control room and raised the needle gun.

Then the televisor buzzed. MacDougal, almost smiling as he looked into the visi-plate that had given him his chance, flipped the switch.

* * *

Garth saw the duplicate of the Bruce's cramped sweatbox of a cabin blur onto the old screen. A man filled the foreground--a burly man with iron-gray hair and a fighting jaw and level dark eyes. His half-naked body gleamed with sweat, but even so, there was a compact neatness about him.

"What the hell's going on there?" the man said. MacDougal laughed.

"Brent, for the first time in my life I'm glad to see yer ugly face!" Relief amounting almost to hysteria rang in his voice. "My young friend here dumped my fuel, so ye can gi' me a tow back to Venus." Amazement and suspicion vied in Brent's dark, hard face.

"Akai!" he called. And another face materialized beside his. It was the unhealthy Martian face that Garth had seen back in Sila. "Is that the man you saw?"

The Martian licked his purple lips and nodded. Brent scowled.

"What are you trying to put over on me?" he demanded. "You were headed straight for Darkside, and you know it!"

"Aye, but we've changed our plans," MacDougal said.

"Then you've given up?" A fierce smile creased Brent's cheeks. "It's just as well. I'd have wrecked you before I'd have let you have what Wilsey Stevens owes me. Though how you got onto it is beyond me." Garth bent forward, suddenly taut.

"What do you know about Stevens?" he shouted. Brent's black eyes glared at him.

"You know damn well!" he said. "I'm going for what you were, before you lost your nerve. It's funny, too. I'd have thought a man with guts enough to tackle Black Sandy there and steal his precious Bruce would have had the guts to do anything."

Garth was abruptly conscious of MacDougal's face. It was lined with a growing terror now.

"The tow, Brent?" he said. "Ye'll do it?"

"No! I'm going after the Hermes! Radio Venus for help. They'll take the Bruce away from you, but that won't matter much. We independents are nearly dead, anyhow--and a good thing." Garth caught the surprising bitterness in his voice.

"We're nothing but a bunch of filthy pirates, anyway."

"Brent!" Garth shouted. "What's in the Hermes? What do you know about Wilsey Stevens?"

Brent frowned.

"I don't know what you're driving at, and I haven't time to find out. So long!"

The screen went dead. MacDougal shot a shaking hand to the dial, and in the same instant, Garth lunged. The heavy needle gun in his hand rose and smashed down. Tubes and fragile metal shattered. Garth stood back, breathing hard, and cut the forward jets. The flame of Brent's ship passed their dot on the visi-plate.

"Get going," Garth said. "It's Mercury, or slow death for us." MacDougal looked at him like an animal beaten numb with hopeless fear. Garth shivered, but he stifled the stab of remorse he felt.

"There aren't any demons," he snarled. "You're crazy with drugs and whisky."

"Why d'ye think I drink?" MacDougal whispered. "So I can stay as sane as I am." He turned to the controls, set the stern tubes blasting again. Garth went back and locked himself into the bunk-room. But it was a long time before he slept....

* * *

Time passed in a blur of rising heat, of dials and gauges that danced before aching eyes, of metal that burned at the slightest touch, of clattering machinery and warm, stale water that did not quench thirst. At first, after his escape, the fear of failure had risen in Garth in racking waves. The knowledge of Alice Webster, waiting in her cell for him to free her, drove him on incessantly.

The answer to his problem lay on Mercury. He had only to overcome certain obstacles to find it. And success or failure--when it was over, it was over. Alice would die in a few days. There'd be no time to try again. Garth was rather glad. He knew he couldn't stand another try,

another struggle. All that was left to him now was the memory of Alice Webster's face when he kissed her in the court-room, before they were drawn apart. MacDougal stood his watches in a dangerous, tight-lipped quiet, drinking steadily from a supply in the locker but never getting drunk. The little flame of Brent's ship stayed always ahead of them, but unable to break away. The Bruce and Brent's ship entered the disturbance area almost together, and Garth prepared himself. Now was the time that MacDougal would probably make his last bid for freedom. There was no radio communication to Mercury, due to the nearness of the Sun and the crazy electro-magnetic currents generated by the wild flight of the planet's metallic body across the force-field of the Sun.

But MacDougal would try to semaphore the relay ship that hung above the Twilight Belt, or he could try to regain control of his ship and set her down on one of the mining company fields.

His face looking more like a death's head than ever, Garth came into the control room. It was empty. He'd taken one foolish step forward before he realized that the bulkhead door wasn't flat against the wall in its hooks. He caught the blurred movement out of the tail of his eye as he dived forward and heard the crash of the spanner flung by MacDougal on the metal floor. It was close enough to jar his teeth. Then he was bunched together and springing up, and the heavy pistol that never left him was flying for MacDougal's head. The Bruce lurched as the Scot swayed back, stunned and bleeding. The machinery bellowed and clanged as timers and compensators went off balance. Garth caught up the needle gun.

"Get over to those controls," he said almost gently. "Or I'll put enough of these needles in you so you'll never wake up."

Blood was running from MacDougal's temple, matting his shaggy black hair.

"I'll get you out of it, MacDougal," whispered Garth. "I swear I will!" MacDougal took the controls, uncertainly at first as the wild currents gripped the Bruce, then with strength flowing back into his hands. Garth, watching the struggling machinery, operated manual controls where the electric systems were too deranged, looked curiously at MacDougal.

What had happened, down there on Darkside, to change him so horribly?

The flame of Brent's ship curved across the visi-plate, still ahead. And then, abruptly, there was darkness edging across the field toward the little flame and the little dot that were their two ships—a darkness utter and impenetrable.

The dot was so tiny against the immensity of glare and shadow that Garth didn't see it until it was almost on them. MacDougal saw it, too, and took his hands away from the controls, staring at the oncoming edge of darkness.

* * *

At that velocity, it wouldn't be fatal. But it would be enough to crack their outer hull, force them to head for the Twilight Belt and repairs. Brent was in earnest, then. He knew something about Wilsey Stevens, something he didn't want to tell, something big enough to take him to Darkside. Garth blasted his port steering jets, knocking MacDougal aside to get at the levers. There was a dull, vicious thud somewhere astern. The Bruce yawed and shuddered, and there was a tiny hiss of air finding emptiness. Violet flames were born abruptly here and there along the metal. Electricity penetrated the broken skin in greater strength. The rockets broke in ragged discord as the timers went out. And it began to grow hotter. The refrigerators had

quit, short-circuited.

"Vac suits!" yelled Garth, and sent the Bruce hurtling toward the shadow. There was no time to get to the Twilight Belt now, even if he'd wanted to. At these temperatures, a man would roast alive in a matter of minutes. MacDougal got the suits. He seemed completely beaten, beyond even terror.

"What will ye do?" the Scot asked.

"You're the salvage man," Garth said.

Brent's ship had already touched the shadow, plunged into it. Garth could follow the crimson streak of her rockets.

"Ye'll have to land and study the damage," MacDougal said finally.

"Then we'll land." Garth pulled the final zipper on his vac suit, switched on the refrigerating unit and gasped with relief.

And then the shadow suddenly touched them!

The temperature shot downward, freezing where it had seared. Electric fire danced and flared through the ship. Garth felt the Bruce leap under his hands as wild, mad currents surged against her.

MacDougal laughed suddenly.

"Ye've killed us for nothing, lad," he said evilly. "My Brucie's done, and even if she weren't, Brent's ahead. The law of salvage says the wrecked ship belongs to the first one there!" His harsh, wild laughter rang against the helmet phones, and then was silent. And through the silence Garth heard someone whispering, very softly, but he couldn't quite hear the words. MacDougal's eyes met Garth's.

"The demons, lad," he whispered. "The demons of Darkside!" They struck with a skidding crash that jarred them brutally, but the Bruce was tough and it didn't kill them. Garth, crushed under MacDougal's weight, felt it lift suddenly, heard a broken cry and the shriek of a bent metal port being hurled open. And then he was alone.

Garth had never been so alone, even in prison, or out in space with his racing ship. The cold glare of his torch, thrown out the open port, showed him only an endless maze of crystal spires, glimmering eerily in the light. There was a naked loneliness about those tumbled crystal peaks, held forever in the unchanging vacuum and the unimaginable dark.

Garth felt the desolation seeping into him, flowing like water through his bones. The darkness pressed down, a solid thing beyond the narrow shaft of his torch. It was smothering, overpowering. The black of utter blindness, untouched by sunlight since the Universe began.

* * *

He swore loudly, defiantly. The Hermes was somewhere down here. MacDougal was out there, and Brent, and Akal, the Martian. And Wilsey Stevens!

Barry Garth left the ship. The crystals walled around him, flung back his light in broken glints of green and gold, blue and crimson.

"MacDougal!" he shouted over and over, bellowing into his helmet phone. He heard wild, faint laughter. And then the Universe was drowned out in a rush of voices.

Whispers, loud and clear, were at his elbow, and stretching to the very borders of infinity. Whispers not borne by his helmet phone. Whispers that came through the airless dark and into his brain.

There was something indescribably horrible about them. They reached deep inside him and dredged up buried ugliness--hate, fear, lust and a brutal desire for vengeance he hadn't known he possessed. Did he really hear words, or was it just that his mind formed them from habit, out of the things that stalked inside his skull?

"MacDougal!" he cried, and ran--ran engulfed in a mocking sea of whispers that kept pace with him, filling him like an empty vessel with shapes of naked horror.

Climbing a jagged ridge, he saw the shattered hulk of a wreck. He knew it, even in the dim reflection of his powerful light, by the peculiar design of the rocket tubes. It was the Hermes!

"Stevens!" he shouted, and instantly the whispers surged stronger and louder in rhythms of hatred and murderous rage. Then terror blotted them out. Perhaps MacDougal was right about the demons. Only the bull strength of the Scot could have brought him through this alive. What had happened to the Sarasoff he'd mentioned, down here in these crystal valleys?

Desperately he got a grip on himself, shouting to drown out the whispers. Then he heard another voice, crying:

"What is it? In God's name--"

Garth stumbled forward, and quite suddenly, the whispers stopped. Sounds rocketed through his headphones. MacDougal, crying his lament. Brent, swearing viciously. And a thin, high scream from Akal. A pit yawned suddenly beneath him, filled with shards of light broken from the blue-white torch beam. There were men down there, five of them! Lost from some ancient wreck. They were rigid and unchanging in the spatial cold. Garth looked at their dead faces and

swayed with a long, icy shudder. He couldn't find MacDougal, and his voice grew fainter as the Scot wandered farther away in the crystal maze. The Hermes loomed quite close now. Garth moved through showers of flame, over faceted ridges and between rearing cliffs, ever toward that silent ship.

He realized that he was waiting with a terrible fascination for the whispers to come again.

"Aka!" Brent's voice shouted suddenly. "Where are you?" There was no answer. Garth's torch picked out a stocky figure in a vac suit standing beside the broken hulk of Stevens' yacht. There were other shapes there, strewn on shattered crystals, but they didn't move. Brent had a gun in his hand, one of the deadly proton guns forbidden to civilians. Quickly Garth came up to him, and stopped.

"This ship is mine," Brent said to him. "Keep off."

"I don't want the ship," Garth said. "I want Stevens." Brent gestured.

"There he is, damn him. MacDougal's demons got him." He laughed, but it had a cracked, uncertain quality.

Garth knelt hurriedly. He could see Stevens' strong face clearly. But it wasn't impassive now. It was twisted into a mask of deadly terror. Stevens was dead.

* * *

Garth rose slowly, his sunken blue eyes fixed on the Hermes. His last hope of saving Alice lay there, barred by the stubborn figure of Brent.

"Listen," he said harshly. "I don't want that ship, or anything in it, except information. I'm going in, Brent."

Brent's gun hand lifted.

"You'd better not," he warned. And suddenly his voice broke out, loud and hard and bitter. "Do you think I'm going to let any man near this ship? Do you think I want to die here? Stevens owes me this. He made me what I am. But I wasn't cut out for a smuggler, nor a damned tramp salvage pirate! Stevens wouldn't let me go. But he's got his--and I want mine!" Questions broke from Garth, savage, urgent, but were lost in whispers. Again the world was filled with them, goading, driving, lashing him with brutal sensations. They swirled chaotically through him, bringing a jumble of alien voices, Brent's, MacDougal's, Akal's, all shrieking fear and death and hatred. No wonder MacDougal was crazy. Garth would be, too, if he lived. He'd even be too crazy to marry Alice. What were the whispers? They weren't demons. Then what were they?

And then things happened. A dark shape plummeted from a crystal peak, hurled itself at Brent. Garth glimpsed a white face gashed with purple. He heard Akal's thought rhythms, heavy with greed and hate, but most of all, greed. Brent hadn't seen him in time. Akal had him down in a flash. He was kneeling on his gun hand, battering his tough glassite helmet against the crystals on the ground. Garth leaped forward, gripping the heavy torch. Brent knew something. He couldn't die yet. The torch crashed down on Akal's helmet and knocked loose the life-giving oxygen valve. The Martian squealed, gasped, and fell away.

The whispers had sent Akal mad with the magnification of his greed for whatever was in the Hermes. Garth grabbed up the gun and plunged on into the wreck.

The cabins were a shambles. Fire from a short-circuit in the control relays had consumed every inflammable substance, every paper.

There was nothing!

Garth stood lax in the shattered cabin. There was nothing to do now but wait for death. His last hope was gone. He had taken MacDougal to his death for nothing. Alice Webster was doomed.

But Brent knew something. He had to shake off this weariness and make him tell what was so important in the Hermes. The demon whisperings surged and swelled now. Garth dropped the gun and began to laugh. He'd solved the secret of Darkside, anyway. He couldn't stop laughing. Brent knew something, but he wouldn't tell. And it didn't matter now. They were all going to die, here in the dark and the whispers.

Louder and louder came those voices. Brent was in the cabin, yelling defiantly. It was something about Yttrium, and Wilsey Stevens. Yttrium was rare and valuable, he babbled. Found in the mines of Mercurian Metals, it was stolen and smuggled through Sila to secret agents who bought it for armaments. It was smuggled by Brent and Wilsey Stevens. Stevens flew the stuff from the Twilight Belt on his own yacht. He killed Gavin Webster because he found out, and hung the murder on Alice Webster and Barry Garth. Brent didn't know about the murder, but Garth could fill in the gaps. He gripped Brent by the arm.

"Let's get away!" he shouted. "Hook onto your cargo of Yttrium and let's go."

* * *

Brent laughed crazily.

"Ship's smashed," he muttered. "I'm going to stay here with it." The whispers, surging and swelling, came again. Over and over, a

hideous monody. Suddenly Brent rushed at him. But he couldn't avoid the attack. The whispers drugged him. He fell under Brent's rush and lay laughing. Laughing, because he couldn't help it, because he had the evidence to save Alice Webster, and he couldn't use it.

Alice. The whispers said her name. He saw her, heard her, touched her. The picture of her steadied him. He stopped laughing and began to fight. Struggling, they rolled through the broken port and onto the crystal ground. And though Garth's torch was lost, there was light, faint webs of rainbow light tossed from facet to facet.

MacDougal rushed up to them then. A giant with mad gray eyes, he stood above the two, a heavy shard of crystal in his hands, muttering with the whispers.

"The demons sent Sarasoff to kill me," he mumbled. "I killed him first. Kill!

Kill before they do!"

The shard struck down. Desperately Garth flung Brent aside, took the blow glancingly on his shoulder, and struggled up. Even with Alice strong in his mind, he wanted to kill. He remembered a short-handled pick in his belt. While MacDougal was regaining his balance, poisoning the shard for another blow, Garth took the pick and brought it down solidly on the Scot's helmet. It stunned him, but didn't knock him out. Then an amazing change came over MacDougal.

"Their censor-band has relaxed," he said dazedly. "Conscious and subconscious are merged in my brain now. We can communicate with them for a short while. Listen!"

Garth started violently. Brent was shocked back a little to sanity. The whispers were faint. The crystals flickered eerily about the Scot, who

was lying on the ground.

"We realize that we've made a mistake," a strange voice said. "But it's lonely here. You unfamiliar organisms were new, interesting. We thought we might be friends. But we bitterly regret it. We understand now." Garth stared wildly. Had he gone mad already? The crystals flamed, weaving dim veils of gold and scarlet, and purple and green.

"Your minds are strange to us," the voice went on. "They give off wavelengths of which we know nothing. We do not know about hate, fear and love. We can but guess at them, and sensory impulses are unknown to us. In some manner we do not understand, we have caused unfavorable reactions in the organisms that have come into our sphere of life. Their mind-waves are confused, and then lost.

"We don't understand, now, why the censor-band, which seems to keep the vibrations of a part of your minds separate from the other part, has slackened in McDougal's brain. But for the first time we can communicate with you." Why was there light in the crystals? Why had the cold torchbeam broken to a full spectrum?

"Yes, we're alive," the voice went on. "You call us crystals. We're carbon, as you are, but static. We came into being with this planet and we'll go out of being with it. We neither die nor change. But we can't build up vibration of the proper frequency to enter your conscious minds. That's what you term them, isn't it?

"In some ways we have, instead, amplified the vibrations of your subconscious minds, which seem to be a storehouse for impulses not permitted in your conscious minds. We didn't realize for a long time that your fleshly brains had two centers of thought."

* * *

These, then, were the demons!

"But how do you do it?" Garth managed to ask.

"We build up thought impulses by simple oscillation of our facets," the voice explained. "During this exchange of vibrations, energy is liberated in the form of light. When all of us oscillate to the same frequency, we have quite a powerful output. Solar radiations destroy our thoughts by introducing counter-vibrations. That's why we're powerful only in the screening shadow of this planet.

"We meant no harm. We wanted contact, not destruction. It's very lonely here in the eternal dark, the eternal silence, the eternal thought. We might have helped you. Instead, we have--is killed the thought--killed you. We're glad that this contact has been possible, for we wanted to explain and to tell you that we'll never try it again. As soon as we sense the presence of one of your organisms, we shall cease oscillating until it's gone. You need never--is fear the sensation?--fear us.

"We're sorry. We meant no harm. But we're lonely. Pure thought is wonderful. There's no limit to it. But we're so near the limit, though we hadn't believed it existed. And we're lonely. Lonely. Lonely."

The fires died out of the crystals like fireflies drowned in the mist. Darkness, black and unbroken and cold, followed. And there was silence, utter and complete. The whispering had stopped for all time. MacDougal stirred and opened his eyes. They were wide and dazed, but the madness was gone from them.

"I heard," he whispered. "Somehow, I heard. Thank God!" Garth turned away. He had no right to watch another man's soul being released from hell.

Far away he could make out the dim glow of the Twilight Belt. They could make it now, without madness dogging them. He could semaphore the relay ship and get a stay of Alice's execution. Brent's testimony would change things. Alice would be free, and he, too!

Brent could come back to claim his Yttrium. MacDougal was free of his demons. And Darkside was no longer a death-trap, except for the magnetic currents, which man's engineering genius could soon overcome.

The dark, lonely plain spread around him. He could feel it, though he was blind with the darkness. For just an instant, he could feel the black eternities of flight through frigid space, the silence, the desolation, the terror of a Universe coming to its end.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the voice-crystal. "So very sorry" Then, quite loudly, he yelled to the others: "Come on. Our air won't last forever. Let's go!"

The Stellar Legion

Silence was on the barracks like a lid clamped over tight-coiled springs. Men in rumpled uniforms--outlanders of the Stellar Legion, space-rats, the scrapings of the Solar System--sweated in the sullen heat of the Venusian swamplands before the rains. Sweated and listened.

The metal door clanged open to admit Lehn, the young Venusian Commandant, and every man jerked tautly to his feet. Ian Maclan, the white-haired, space-burned Earthman, alone and hungrily poised for action; Thekla, the swart Martian low-canaler, grinning like a weasel beside Bhak, the hulking strangler from Titan. Every quick nervous glance was riveted on Lehn. The young officer stood silent in the open door, tugging at his fair mustache; to Maclan, watching, he was a trim, clean incongruity in this brutal wilderness of savagery and iron men. Behind him, the eternal mists writhed in a thin curtain over the swamp, stretching for miles beyond the soggy earthworks; through it came the sound every ear had listened to for days, a low, monotonous piping that seemed to ring from the ends of the earth. The Nahali, the six-foot, scarlet-eyed swamp-dwellers, whose touch was weapon enough, praying to their gods for rain. When it came, the hot, torrential downpour of southern Venus, the Nahali would burst in a scaly tide over the fort.

Only a moat of charged water and four electro-cannons stood between the Legion and the horde. If those things failed, it meant two hundred lives burned out, the circle of protective forts broken, the fertile uplands plundered and laid waste. Maclan looked at Lehn's clean, university-bred young face, and wondered cynically if he was strong enough to do his job.

Lehn spoke, so abruptly that the men started. "I'm calling for volunteers. A reconnaissance in Nahali territory; you know well enough what that means. Three men. Well?"

Ian Maclan stepped forward, followed instantly by the Martian Thekla. Bhak the Titan hesitated, his queerly bright, blank eyes darting from Thekla to Lehn, and back to Maclan. Then he stepped up, his hairy face twisted in a sly grin. Lehn eyed them, his mouth hard with distaste under his fair mustache. Then he nodded, and said; "Report in an hour, light equipment." Turning to go, he added almost as an afterthought, "Report to my quarters, Maclan. Immediately." Maclan's bony Celtic face tightened and his blue eyes narrowed with wary distrust. But he followed Lehn, his gaunt, powerful body as ramrod-straight as the Venusian's own, and no eye that watched him go held any friendship. Thekla laughed silently, like a cat with his pointed white teeth. "Two of a kind," he whispered. "I hope they choke each other!" Bhak grunted, flexing his mighty six-fingered hands.

In his quarters, Lehn, his pink face flushed, strode up and down while Maclan waited dourly. It was plain enough what was coming; Maclan felt the old bitter defensive anger rising in him.

"Look," he told himself inwardly. "Books. Good cigars. A girl's picture on the table. You had all that once, you damn fool. Why couldn't you. . ." Lehn stopped abruptly in front of him, grey eyes steady. "I'm new here, Maclan," he said. "But we've been Legion men for five generations, and I know the law; no man is to be questioned about his past. I'm going to break the law. Why are you here, Maclan?"

Maclan's white head was gaunt and stubborn as Tantallon Rock, and he kept silent.

"I'm trying to help," Lehn went on. "You've been an officer; every man in the barracks knows that. If you're here for any reason but failure in

duty, you can be an officer again. I'll relieve you of special duty; you can start working for the examinations. No need to waste you in the ranks. Well?" Maclan's eyes were hidden, but his voice was harsh. "What's behind this, Lehn?"

"What the hell is it to you?"

The Venusian's level gaze wavered; for a moment the boy looked through the man, and Maclan felt a quick stab in his heart. Then all that was gone, and Lehn said curtly,

"If you find the barracks congenial, stay there, by all means. Dismissed!" Maclan glared at him half-blindly for a moment, his fine long hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. Then he 'bout faced with vicious smartness and went out.

Nearly an hour later he stood with the Martian Thekla on the earthworks, waiting. The monotonous pipes prayed on in the swamp; Maclan, looking up at the heavy sky, prayed just as hard that it would not rain. Not just yet. Because if it rained before the patrol left, the patrol would not leave; the Nahali would be on the march with the very first drop.

"And my chance would be gone," he whispered to himself. Thekla's bright black eyes studied him, as they always did; an insolent, mocking scrutiny that angered the Scot.

"Well," he said dryly. "The perfect soldier, the gallant volunteer. For love of Venus, Thekla, or love of the Legion?"

"Perhaps," said Thekla softly, "for the same reason you did, Earthman. And perhaps not." His face, the swart, hard face of a low-canal outlaw, was turned abruptly toward the mist-wrapped swamp. "Love of Venus!" he snarled. "Who could love this lousy sweatbox?"

Not even Lehn, if he had the brains of a flea!"

"Mars is better, eh?" Maclan had a sudden inspiration. "Cool dry air, and little dark women, and the wine-shops on the Jekkara Low-canal. You'd like to be back there, wouldn't you?"

To himself, he thought in savage pleasure, "I'll pay you out, you little scum. You've tortured me with what I've lost, until I'd have killed you if it hadn't been against my plan. All right, see if you can take it!" The slow dusk was falling; Thekla's dark face was a blur but Maclan knew he had got home. "The fountains in the palace gardens, Thekla; the sun bursting up over red deserts; the singing girls and the thil in Madame Kan's. Remember the thil, Thekla? Ice cold and greenish, bubbling in blue glasses?" He knew why Thekla snarled and sprang at him, and it wasn't Thekla he threw down on the soft earth so much as a tall youngster with a fair mustache, who had goaded with good intent. Funny, thought Maclan, that well-intentioned goads hurt worse than the other kind.

A vast paw closed on his shoulder, hauling him back. Another, he saw, yanked Thekla upright. And Bhak the Titan's hairy travesty of a face peered down at them.

"Listen," he grunted, in his oddly articulated Esperanto. "I know what's up. I got ears, and village houses got thin walls. I heard the Nahali girl talking. I don't know which one of you has the treasure, but I want it. If I don't get it. . ."

His fingers slid higher on Maclan's shoulder, gripped his throat. Six fingers, like iron clamps. Maclan heard Thekla choking and cursing; he managed to gasp:

"You're in the wrong place, Bhak. We're men. I thought you only strangled women."

The grip slackened a trifle. "Men too," said Bhak slowly. "That's why I had to run away from Titan. That's why I've had to run away from everywhere. Men or women--anyone who laughs at me."

Maclan looked at the blank-eyed, revolting face, and wondered that anyone could laugh at it. Pity it, shut it harmlessly away, but not laugh. Bhak's fingers fell away abruptly. "They laugh at me," he repeated miserably,

"and run away. I know I'm ugly. But I want friends and a wife, like anyone else. Especially a wife. But they laugh at me, the women do, when I ask them. And. . ." He was shaking suddenly with rage and his face was a beast's face, blind and brutal. "And I kill them. I kill the damned little vixens that laugh at me!"

He stared stupidly at his great hands. "Then I have to run away. Always running away, alone." The bright, empty eyes met Maclan's with deadly purpose.

"That's why I want the money. If I have money, they'll like me. Women always like men who have money. If I kill one of you, I'll have to run away again. But if I have someone to go with me, I won't mind." Thekla showed his pointed teeth. "Try strangling a Nahali girl, Bhak. Then we'll be rid of you."

Bhak grunted. "I'm not a fool. I know what the Nahali do to you. But I want that money the girl told about, and I'll get it. I'd get it now, only Lehn will come."

He stood over them, grinning. Maclan drew back, between pity and disgust. "The Legion is certainly the System's garbage dump," he muttered in Martian, loud enough for Thekla to hear, and smiled at the low-canaler's stifled taunt. Stifled, because Lehn was coming up, his

heavy water-boots thudding on the soggy ground.

Without a word the three fell in behind the officer, whose face had taken on an unfamiliar stony grimness. Maclan wondered whether it was anger at him, or fear of what they might get in the swamp. Then he shrugged; the young cub would have to follow his own trail wherever it led. And Maclan took a stern comfort from this thought. His own feet were irrevocably directed; there was no doubt, no turning back. He'd never have again to go through what Lehn was going through. All he had to do was wait.

The plank bridge groaned under them, almost touching the water in the moat. Most ingenious, that moat. The Nahali could swim it in their sleep, normally, but when the conductor rods along the bottom were turned on, they literally burned out their circuits from an overload. The swamp-rats packed a bigger potential than any Earthly electric eel.

Ian Maclan, looking at the lights of the squalid village that lay below the fort, reflected that the Nahali had at least one definitely human trait. The banging of a three-tiered Venusian piano echoed on the heavy air, along with shouts and laughter that indicated a free flow of "swamp juice." This link in the chain of stations surrounding the swamplands was fully garrisoned only during the rains, and the less warlike Nahali were busy harvesting what they could from the soldiers and the rabble that came after them. Queer creatures, the swamp-rats, with their ruby eyes and iridescent scales. Nature, in adapting them to their wet, humid environment, had left them somewhere between warm-blooded mammals and cold-blooded reptiles, anthropoid in shape, man-sized, capricious. The most remarkable thing about them was their breathing apparatus, each epithelial cell forming a tiny electrolysis plant to extract oxygen from water. Since they lived equally on land and in water, and since the swamp air was almost a mist, it suited them admirably. That was why they had to wait

for the rains to go raiding in the fertile uplands; and that was why hundreds of Interworld Legionnaires had to swelter on the strip of soggy ground between swamp and plateau to stop them. Maclan was last in line. Just as his foot left the planks, four heads jerked up as one, facing to the darkening sky.

"Ram!"

Big drops, splattering slowly down, making a sibilant whisper across the swamp. The pipes broke off, leaving the ears a little deafened with the lack of them after so long. And Maclan, looking at Lehn, swore furiously in his heart.

The three men paused, expecting an order to turn back, but Lehn waved them on.

"But it's raining," protested Bhak. "We'll get caught in the attack." The officer's strangely hard face was turned toward them. "No," he said, with an odd finality, "they won't attack. Not yet." They went on, toward the swamp that was worse in silence than it had been with the praying pipes. And Maclan, looking ahead at the oddly assorted men plowing grimly through the mud, caught a sudden glimpse of something dark and hidden, something beyond the simple threat of death that hung always over a reconnoitering patrol.

The swamp folded them in. It is never truly dark on Venus, owing to the thick, diffusing atmosphere. There was enough light to show branching, muddy trails, great still pools choked with weeds, the spreading liha-trees with their huge pollen pods, everything dripping with the slow rain. Maclan could hear the thudding of that rain for miles around on the silent air; the sullen forerunner of the deluge. Fort and village were lost in sodden twilight. Lehn's boots squelched onward through the mud of a trail that rose gradually to a ridge of higher ground. When he reached the top, Lehn turned abruptly, his

electro-gun seeming to materialize in his hand, and Maclan was startled by the bleak look of his pink young face.

"Stop right there," said Lehn quietly. "Keep your hands up. And don't speak until I'm finished."

He waited a second, with the rain drumming on his waterproof coverall, dripping from the ends of his fair mustache. The others were obedient, Bhak a great grinning hulk between the two slighter men. Lehn went on calmly.

"Someone has sold us out to the Nahali. That's how I know they won't attack until they get the help they're waiting for. I had to find out, if possible, what preparations they have made for destroying our electrical supply, which is our only vulnerable point. But I had a double purpose in calling this party. Can you guess what it is?"

Maclan could. Lehn continued:

"The traitor had his price; escape from the Legion, from Venus, through the swamp to Lhiva, where he can ship out on a tramp. His one problem was to get away from the fort without being seen, since all leaves have been temporarily cancelled."

Lehn's mist-grey eyes were icy. "I gave him that chance." Bhak laughed, an empty, jarring roar. "See? That's what the Nahali girl said. She said, 'He can get what he needs, now. He'll get away before the rains, probably with a patrol; then our people can attack.' I know what he needed. Money! And I want it."

"Shut up!" Lehn's electro-gun gestured peremptorily. "I want the truth of this. Which one of you is the traitor?"

Thekla's pointed white teeth gleamed. "Maclan loves the Legion, sir.

He couldn't be guilty."

Lehn's gaze crossed Maclan's briefly, and again the Scot had a fleeting glimpse of something softer beneath the new hardness. It was something that took him back across time to a day when he had been a green subaltern in the Terran Guards, and a hard-bitten, battle-tempered senior officer had filled the horizon for him.

It was the something that had made Lehn offer him a chance, when his trap was set and sprung. It was the something that was going to make Lehn harder on him now than on either Bhak or Thekla. It was hero-worship. Maclan groaned inwardly. "Look here," he said. "We're in Nahali country. There may be trouble at any moment. Do you think this is the time for detective work? You may have caught the wrong men anyway. Better do your job of reconnoitering, and worry about the identity of the traitor back in the fort."

"You're not an officer now, Maclan!" snapped Lehn. "Speak up, and I want the truth. You, Thekla!"

Thekla's black eyes were bitter. "I'd as well be here as anywhere, since I can't be on Mars. How could I go back, with a hanging charge against me?"

"Maclan?" Lehn's grey gaze was leveled stiffly past his head. And Maclan was quivering suddenly with rage; rage against the life that had brought him where he was, against Lehn, who was the symbol of all he had thrown away.

"Think what you like," he whispered, "and be damned!"

Bhak's movement came so swiftly that it caught everyone unprepared. Handling the Martian like a child's bean-bag, he picked him up and hurled him against Lehn. The electro-gun spat a harmless

bolt into empty air as the two fell struggling in the mud. Maclan sprang forward, but Bhak's great fingers closed on his neck. With his free hand, the Titan dragged Thekla upright; he held them both helpless while he kicked the sprawling Lehn in the temple. In the split second before unconsciousness took him, Lehn's eyes met Maclan's, and they were terrible eyes. Maclan groaned, "You young fool!" Then Lehn was down, and Bhak's fingers were throttling him.

"Which one?" snarled the Titan. "Give me the money, and I'll let you go. I'm going to have the money, if I have to kill you. Then the girls won't laugh at me. Tell me. Which one?"

Maclan's blue eyes widened suddenly. With all his strength he fought to croak out one word: "Nahali!"

Bhak dropped them with a grunt. Swinging his great hands, forgetting his gun completely, he stood at bay. There was a rush of bodies in the rain-blurred dusk, a flash of scarlet eyes and triangular mouths laughing in queer, noseless faces. Then there were scaly, manlike things hurled like battering-rams against the Legionnaires.

Maclan's gun spat blue flame; two Nahali fell, electrocuted, but there were too many of them. His helmet was torn off, so that his drenched white hair blinded him; rubber-shod fists and feet lashed against reptilian flesh. Somewhere just out of sight, Thekla was cursing breathlessly in low-canal argot. And Lehn, still dazed, was crawling gamely to his feet; his helmet had protected him from the full force of Bhak's kick.

The hulking Titan loomed in the midst of a swarm of redeyed swamp-rats. And Maclan saw abruptly that he had taken off his clumsy gloves when he had made ready to strangle his mates. The great six-fingered hands stretched hungrily toward a Nahali throat.

"Bhak!" yelled Maclan. "Don't... !" The Titan's heavy laughter drowned him out; the vast paws closed in a joyous grip. On the instant, Bhak's great body bent and jerked convulsively; he slumped down, the heart burned out of him by the electricity circuited through his hands.

Lehn's gun spoke. There was a reek of ozone, and a Nahali screamed like a stricken reptile. The Venusian cried out in sudden pain, and was silent; Maclan, struggling upright, saw him buried under a pile of scaly bodies. Then a clammy paw touched his own face. He moaned as a numbing shock struck through him, and lapsed into semi-consciousness.

He had vague memories of being alternately carried and towed through warm lakes and across solid ground. He knew dimly that he was dumped roughly under a liha-tree in a clearing where there were thatched huts, and that he was alone.

After what seemed a very long time he sat up, and his surroundings were clear. Even more clear was Thekla's thin dark face peering amusedly down at him. The Martian bared his pointed white teeth, and said, "Hello, traitor." Maclan would have risen and struck him, only that he was weak and dizzy. And then he saw that Thekla had a gun.

His own holster was empty. Maclan got slowly to his feet, raking the white hair out of his eyes, and he said, "You dirty little rat!" Thekla laughed, as a fox might laugh at a baffled hound. "Go ahead and curse me, Maclan. You high-and-mighty renegade! You were right; I'd rather swing on Mars than live another month in this damned sweat-box! And I can laugh at you, Ian Maclan! I'm going back to the deserts and the wine-shops on the Jekkara Low-canal. The Nahali girl didn't mean money; she meant plastic surgery, to give me another face. I'm free. And you're going to die, right here in the filthy mud!"

A slow, grim smile touched Maclan's face, but he said nothing.

"Oh, I understand," said Thekla mockingly. "You fallen swells and your honor!

But you won't die honorably, any more than you've lived that way." Maclan's eyes were contemptuous and untroubled.

The pointed teeth gleamed. "You don't understand, Maclan. Lehn isn't going to die. He's going back to face the music, after his post is wiped out. I don't know what they'll do to him, but it won't be nice. And remember, Maclan, he thinks you sold him out. He thinks you cost him his post, his men, his career: his honor, you scut! Think that over when the swamp-rats go to work on you—they like a little fun now and then—and remember I'm laughing!" Maclan was silent for a long time, hands clenched at his sides, his craggy face carved in dark stone under his dripping white hair. Then he whispered,

"Why?"

Thekla's eyes met his in sudden intense hate. "Because I want to see your damned proud, supercilious noses rubbed in the dirt!" Maclan nodded. His face was strange, as though a curtain had been drawn over it. "Where's Lehn?"

Thekla pointed to the nearest hut. "But it won't do you any good. The rats gave him an overdose, accidentally, of course, and he's out for a long time."

Macian went unsteadily toward the hut through rain. Over his shoulder he heard Thekla's voice: "Don't try anything funny, Maclan. I can shoot you down before you're anywhere near an escape, even if you could find your way back without me. The Nahali are gathering now, all over the swamp; within half an hour they'll march on the fort, and then on to

the plateaus. They'll send my escort before they go, but you and Lehn will have to wait until they come back. You can think of me while you're waiting to die, Maclan; me, going to Lhiva and freedom!"

Maclan didn't answer. The rhythm of the rain changed from a slow drumming to a rapid, vicious hiss; he could see it, almost smoking in the broad leaves of the liha-trees. The drops cut his body like whips, and he realized for the first time that he was stripped to trousers and shirt. Without his protective rubber coverall, Thekla could electrocute him far quicker even than a Nahali, with his service pistol.

The hut, which had been very close, was suddenly far off, so far he could hardly see it. The muddy ground swooped and swayed underfoot. Maclan jerked himself savagely erect. Fever. Any fool who prowled the swamp without proper covering was a sure victim. He looked back at Thekla, safe in helmet and coverall, grinning like a weasel under the shelter of a pod-hung tree-branch. The hut came back into proper perspective. Aching, trembling suddenly with icy cold, he stooped and entered. Lehn lay there, dry but stripped like Maclan, his young face slack in unconsciousness. Maclan raised a hand, let it fall limply back. Lehn was still paralyzed from the shock. It might be hours, even days before he came out of it. Perhaps never, if he wasn't cared for properly. Maclan must have gone a little mad then, from the fever and the shock to his own brain, and Thekla. He took Lehn's shirt in both hands and shook him, as though to beat sense back into his brain, and shouted at him in hoarse savagery.

"All I wanted was to die! That's what I came to the Legion for, to die like a soldier because I couldn't live like an officer. But it had to be honorably, Lehn! Otherwise. . ."

He broke off in a fit of shivering, and his blue eyes glared under his white, tumbled hair. "You robbed me of that, damn you! You and Thekla. You trapped me. You wouldn't even let me die decently. I was

an officer, Lehn, like you. Do you hear me, young fool? I had to choose between two courses, and I chose the wrong one. I lost my whole command. Twenty-five hundred men, dead.

"They might have let me off at the court-martial. It was an honest mistake. But I didn't wait. I resigned. All I wanted was to die like a good soldier. That's why I volunteered. And you tricked me, Lehn! You and Thekla." He let the limp body fall and crouched there, holding his throbbing head in his hands. He knew he was crying, and couldn't stop. His skin burned, and he was cold to the marrow of his bones.

Suddenly he looked at Lehn out of bright, fever-mad eyes. "Very well," he whispered. "I won't die. You can't kill me, you and Thekla, and you go on believing I betrayed you. I'll take you back, you two, and fight it out. I'll keep the Nahali from taking the fort, so you can't say I sold it out. I'll make you believe me!"

From somewhere, far off, he heard Thekla laugh.

Maclan huddled there for some time, his brain whirling. Through the rain-beat and the fever-mist in his head and the alternate burning and freezing that racked his body, certain truths shot at him like stones from a sling. Thekla had a gun that shot a stream of electricity. A gun designed for Nahali, whose nervous systems were built to carry a certain load and no more, like any set of wires. The low frequency discharge was strong enough to kill a normal man only under ideal conditions; and these conditions were uniquely ideal. Wet clothes, wet skin, wet ground, even the air saturated. Then there were metal and rubber. Metal in his belt, in Lehn's belt; metal mesh, because the damp air rotted everything else. Rubber on his feet, on Lehn's feet. Rubber was insulation. Metal was a conductor. Maclan realized with part of his mind that he must be mad to do what he planned to do. But he went to work just the same.

Ten minutes later he left the hut and crossed the soaking clearing in the downpour. Thekla had left the liha-tree for a hut directly opposite Lehn's; he rose warily in the doorway, gun ready. His sly black eyes took in Maclan's wild blue gaze, the fever spots burning on his lean cheekbones, and he smiled.

"Get on back to the hut," he said. "Be a pity if you die before the Nahali have a chance to try electro-therapy."

Maclan didn't pause. His right arm was hidden behind his back. Thekla's jaw tightened. "Get back or I'll kill you!"

Maclan's boots sucked in the mud. The beating rain streamed from his white hair, over his craggy face and gaunt shoulders. And he didn't hesitate. Thekla's pointed teeth gleamed in a sudden snarl. His thumb snapped the trigger; a bolt of blue flame hissed toward the striding Scot. Maclan's right hand shot out in the instant the gun spoke. One of Lehn's rubber boots cased his arm almost to the shoulder, and around the ankle of it a length of metal was made fast; two mesh belts linked together. The spitting blue fire was gathered to the metal circle, shot down the coupled lengths, and died in the ground.

The pistol sputtered out as a coil fused. Thekla cursed and flung it at Maclan's head. The Scot dodged it, and broke into a run, dropping Lehn's boot that his hands might be free to grapple.

Thekla fought like a low-canal rat, but Maclan was bigger and beyond himself with the first madness of fever. He beat the little Martian down and bound him with his own belt, and then went looking for his clothes and gun. He found them, with Lehn's, in the hut next door. His belt pouch yielded quinine; he gulped a large dose and felt better. After he had dressed, he went and wrestled Lehn into his coverall and helmet and dragged him out beside Thekla, who was groaning back

to consciousness in the mud. Looking up, Maclan saw three Nahali men watching him warily out of scarlet eyes as they slunk toward him.

Thekla's escort. And it was a near thing. Twice clammy paws seared his face before he sent them writhing down into the mud, jerking as the overload beat through their nervous systems. Triangular mouths gaped in noseless faces, hand-like paws tore convulsively at scaly breastplates, and Maclan, as he watched them die, said calmly: "There will be hundreds of them storming the fort. My gun won't be enough. But somehow I've got to stop them." No answer now. He shrugged and kicked Thekla erect. "Back to the fort, scut," he ordered, and laughed. The linked belts were fastened now around Thekla's neck, the other end hooked to the muzzle of Maclan's gun, so that the slightest rough pull would discharge it. "What if I stumble?" Thekla snarled, and Maclan answered, "You'd better not!"

Lehn was big and heavy, but somehow Maclan got him across his shoulders. And they started off.

The fringe of the swamp was in sight when Maclan's brain became momentarily lucid. Another dose of quinine drove the mists back, so that the fort, some fifty yards away, assumed its proper focus. Maclan dropped Lehn on his back in the mud and stood looking, his hand ready on his gun.

The village swarmed with swamp-rats in the slow, watery dawn. They were ranged in a solid mass along the edges of the moat, and the fort's guns were silent. Maclan wondered why, until he saw that the dam that furnished power for the turbine had been broken down.

Thekla laughed silently. "My idea, Maclan. The Nahali would never have thought of it themselves. They can't drown, you know. I showed them how to sneak into the reservoir, right under the fort's guns, and stay under water, loosening the stones around the spillway. The

pressure did the rest. Now there's no power for the big guns, nor the conductor rods in the moat." He turned feral black eyes on Maclan. "You've made a fool of yourself. You can't stop those swamp-rats from tearing the fort apart. You can't stop me from getting away, after they're through. You can't stop Lehn from thinking what he does. You haven't changed anything by these damned heroics!"

"Heroics!" said Maclan hoarsely, and laughed. "Maybe." With sudden viciousness he threw the end of the linked belts over a low liha-branch, so that Thekla had to stand on tiptoe to keep from strangling. Then, staring blindly at the beleaguered fort, he tried to beat sense out of his throbbing head. "There was something," he whispered. "Something I was saying back in the swamp. Something my mind was trying to tell me, only I was delirious. What was it, Thekla?" The Martian was silent, the bloody grin set on his dark face. Maclan took him by the shoulders and shook him. "What was it?" Thekla choked and struggled as the metal halter tightened. "Nothing, you fool!

Nothing but Nahali and liha-trees."

"Liha-trees!" Maclan's fever-bright eyes went to the great green pollen-pods hung among the broad leaves. He shivered, partly with chill, partly with exultation. And he began like a madman to strip Lehn and Thekla of their rubber coveralls.

Lehn's, because it was larger, he tented over two low branches. Thekla's he spread on the ground beneath. Then he tore down pod after pod from the liha-tree, breaking open the shells under the shelter of the improvised tent, pouring out the green powder on the groundcloth.

When he had a two-foot pile, he stood back and fired a bolt of electricity into the heart of it.

Thick, oily black smoke poured up, slowly at first, then faster and faster as the fire took hold. A sluggish breeze was blowing out of the swamp, drawn by the cooler uplands beyond the fort; it took the smoke and sent it rolling toward the packed and struggling mass on the earthworks. Out on the battlefield, Nahali stiffened suddenly, fell tearing convulsively at their bodies. The beating rain washed the soot down onto them harder and harder, streaked it away, left a dull film over the reptilian skins, the scaly breastplates. More and more of them fell as the smoke rolled thicker, fed by the blackened madman under the liha-tree, until only Legionnaires were left standing in its path, staring dumbly at the stricken swamp-rats. The squirming bodies stilled in death. Hundreds more, out on the edges of the smoke, seeing their comrades die, fled back into the swamp. The earthworks were cleared. Ian Maclan gave one wild shout that carried clear to the fort. Then he collapsed, crouched shivering beside the unconscious Lehn, babbling incoherently.

Thekla, strained on tiptoe under the tree-branch, had stopped smiling. The fever-mists rolled away at last. Maclan woke to see Lehn's pink young face, rather less pink than usual, bending over him.

Lehn's hand came out awkwardly. "I'm sorry, Maclan. Thekla told me; I made him. I should have known." His grey eyes were ashamed. Maclan smiled and gripped his hand with what strength the fever had left him.

"My own fault, boy. Forget it."

Lehn sat down on the bed. "What did you do to the swamp-rats?" he demanded eagerly. "They all have a coating as though they'd been dipped in paraffin!" Maclan chuckled. "In a way, they were. You know how they breathe; each skin cell forming a miniature electrolysis plant to extract oxygen from water. Well, it extracts hydrogen too, naturally, and the hydrogen is continually being given off, just as we give off

carbon dioxide.

"Black smoke means soot, soot means carbon. Carbon plus hydrogen forms various waxy hydrocarbons. Wax is impervious to both water and air. So when the oily soot from the smoke united with the hydrogen exuded from the Nahali's bodies, it sealed away the life-giving water from the skin-cells. They literally smothered to death, like an Earthly ant doused with powder." Lehn nodded. He was quiet for a long time, his eyes on the sickbay's well-scrubbed floor. At length, he said:

"My offer still goes, Maclan. Officer's examinations. One mistake, an honest one, shouldn't rob you of your life. You don't even know that it would have made any difference if your decision had been the other way. Perhaps there was no way out."

Maclan's white head nodded on the pillow.

"Perhaps I will, Lehn. Something Thekla said set me thinking. He said he'd rather die on Mars than live another month in exile. I'm an exile too, Lehn, in a different way. Yes, I think I'll try it. And if I fail again--" he shrugged and smiled--"there are always Nahali." It seemed for a minute after that as though he had gone to sleep. Then he murmured, so low that Lehn had to bend down to hear him:

"Thekla will hang after the court-martial. Can you see that they take him back to Mars, first?"

Water Pirate

It was early in 2418 that the Solar System realized that there was a Water Pirate. The great tanker ships, carrying water to the rich dry-world mines and colonies, began to vanish from the space-lanes, with their convoys. The Trans-Galactic Convoy Fleet, which for two

hundred years had kept the space-ways safe, was suddenly helpless. Ships and men vanished without a trace or an explanation, and there was no clue to be found.

For four solid weeks not a drop of water got through. The storage tanks dropped lower and lower; a panic fear of thirst swept the dry worlds. The Interplanetary Trade Marts shook in the wind of that fear, and the economic system trembled with it.

Old Johan Gray, Chief of Special Duty of the Convoy Fleet, played his last card. His son Jaffa went through the worst hell-spots of the System, searching for something that might show them some way to fight.

And on a moon-washed Martian night, Jaffa Gray stood in the shadow of the Valkis slave-market and cursed, bitterly and softly; a stocky, strong-boned man, his square face hard with the failure that he had at last to admit. For the first time in the two days he had been in Valkis, he took off his peaked spaceman's cap, wanting the desert wind on his head and not giving a damn who saw his trademark--the broad streak where his hair had come in white over a scar. He raked his fingers through it, swearing out the last of his vocabulary; and a voice said out of the darkness: "Jaffa Gray!" He whirled, his heat-gun blurring into his hand. A boy stepped into the moonlight. His arrow-straight body was clad like Jaffa's in dark spaceman's leather, but where Jaffa's dark hair was cropped short, the boy's rose in a shining crown, bound with the thin metal chains that marked him already a warrior in Kesh, a barbarian state in the Martian drylands. Jaffa's face hardened. He had seen that gleaming pile of hair almost everywhere in Valkis. "All right, Keshi, you've caught up with me. Talk, and talk fast!"

The boy came closer, fearless of the gun, and his words were a breathless whisper. "I can take you to the Water Pirate!"

Jaffa stood like a graven image. He had risked his neck on an invisible trail. The last possible covert had drawn blank. He had been going home defeated; and now Fate dropped the whole thing neatly in his lap! His lips curled in a silent laugh. His left hand shot out to clamp the Keshi's tunic in a throttling grip; his right jammed the gun-muzzle in the boy's ribs. "Now," he said easily, "what's your game?"

The Keshi didn't flinch. "You are Jaffa Gray, I was sure when I saw your hair. You are hunting the Water Pirate. I can take you to him. There is no game." Jaffa's eyes blazed. "If you were telling the truth...." The boy grinned in his face, a fighting grin. "Feel my chin, Jaffa Gray, if you want proof!"

Puzzled, the Earthman slid the fist of his gun-hand along the up-thrust jaw. His breath hissed in sharply. Intently he retraced the jaw-line, ran downward along the smooth curve of the throat. Then he let go of the tunic abruptly, as though it had burned him.

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" he whispered. "A woman!"

"Now do you believe?" mocked the low voice. "Would I have risked Valkis to tell you a lie? What would those wolves do to me, if they found out? I need you, Jaffa Gray, and you need me!"

The white lock gleamed as Jaffa's blunt fingers rumbled it. Then he nodded shortly and shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"I'll take a chance," he grunted. "Let's go. We can talk aboard my ship." The Kallman two-seater was ready to fly. Behind the bolted space-port they were safe from spying, and the warrior-girl of Kesh told her story in rapid sentences.

"My name is Lhara. My brother Lhar was pilot on one of the tanker

ships that disappeared. The Water Pirate holds him prisoner, along with the men from the other ships, but one man escaped. My brother sent me a message by him; told me to find you, because you were the one man in the System who could bring the Water Pirate in.

"The pilot, who escaped in one of the Pirate's own ships, was to have helped us. But something went wrong; we crashed, and he was killed. You've got to fix the ship."

"Why not just use my own?" asked Jaffa.

"How close do you think you'd get to the Pirate's hideout?" returned Lhara impatiently. "Besides, it has much better weapons than any of our ships." Jaffa's ears pricked. "Who exactly is the Water Pirate?"

"I don't know. None of the men has ever seen him." Jaffa nodded. "Where did you crash?"

"Near the Teka range, about three hundred miles from here."

"Just a minute," demanded Jaffa suspiciously. "How'd you get across the desert to Valkis?"

The girl's grey eyes were contemptuous. "I am a Keshi." She touched the chains in her tawny hair. "I have earned these honestly. It was not hard to steal a thak from a village across the first range. I rode to Valkis." Jaffa shook his head. "You win. But warrior or no warrior, if you're lying to me I'll wring your pretty neck. What's your position?" He was admiring the pretty neck as he slid the strato-wings out of the hull and set the air-rotors going.

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" Jaffa shoved back his cap and whistled.

"Where did this crate come from?"

He was standing in the open port of a wrecked space ship, lying at a slight angle in the red sand of the Teka desert. It was the weirdest ship he had ever seen, and he had seen plenty. A flattened oval, rather than the familiar cylinder of the System, the alloy of its metal and the use of various gadgets projecting from the hull were both a mystery. Inside, the control cabin was furnished with queer low couches and upholstered all over with a peculiar silky stuff that flowed in quavering patterns of green and blue and brown. A small ship, carrying four at the outside on a long voyage. To Jaffa's right as he stood was the control panel, and beyond it, the buckled bow-plates that had sustained the brunt of the crash. Ahead was a wall pierced with thick quartzite visiports. To his left was a bulkhead; the heavy door into the rear cabins was closed. And at his feet....

At his feet was the maddest thing of the whole crazy ship. Covering most of the floor space was an oval pit some six feet deep, tiled in a pattern of outlandish marine growths. It was bone dry; whatever moisture had been there had long ago gone out into the dry Martian air. But it was undoubtedly a pool of some sort, and Jaffa wondered profanely what lunatic would cart a swimming pool through space.

He whirled as bolts shot to behind him. Whirled; and dropped in a jointless heap on the narrow floor. Lhara looked grimly down at him, the paralysis-gun that Jaffa had not taken from her steady in her hand. Mutely, Jaffa raged. He had not disarmed her, for there was no way beyond actual imprisonment to keep her from the Kallman's gun-rack; and Jaffa had been reluctant to risk alienating her help. Also, he had had no real reason to believe she lied. Now he could have kicked himself.

From a locker she produced manacles and chained him securely, wrist and ankle, taking his gun. "I'm sorry, Jaffa Gray," she said

steadily, as she stood at last over him. "That was an unworthy trick. But I have told you no lie. My brother is a prisoner, I need your help, and I can take you to the Water Pirate!"

Then she was gone, out into the desert.

Jaffa glared bitterly after her. The paralyzing charge had not been strong, and the life came back into him quickly. He struggled against his chains, knowing it was useless. Then he lay still, too bitter against himself and Lhara even to curse.

After a bit there came a thundering shock that rocked the desert under the ship. Sand pelted against the ports, and the sagging bow-plates shook in the surge of ruptured air. Jaffa swore. Only one thing could have made that explosion; Lhara had bombed his Kallman. His only hope of escape now lay in this queer ship that he must make fly.

The girl came back, carrying a bundle of Jaffa's things, her hair shaken in a tawny veil across her shoulders and full of sand. Subconsciously Jaffa saluted the courage it had taken to heave a sub-atomic bomb into the ship and then lie in the sand with that explosion roaring over her.

Lhara freed his hands, lengthened the chain between his ankles so that he could walk after a fashion, the paralysis-gun ready to topple him if he made a false move.

"Go look at the damage, Jaffa. You'll find everything you need here. And I advise you to hurry."

He went, grappling the problem of why, if Lhara had been telling the truth as she said, she was acting this way. She must have gone to a good deal of trouble to track him to Valkis, for he was not in the habit of leaving guide-posts behind him; and she hadn't done it simply

because she needed a man to repair the ship, or even to fly it. Almost anyone else would have answered that purpose as well as he. There was something more behind it, something damned queer.

He tried to solve the mystery by the simple method of asking questions. But Lhara, along with the chains in her hair, had learned a warriors trick of keeping her jaw shut.

He learned nothing.

The damage to the ship was not great. The bow-plates had been broken so that the cabin was not space-worthy, but the instrument panel had not suffered much. The pilot had died of a broken neck, according to the girl. Jaffa studied the controls. Unfamiliar in pattern, they yet bore a resemblance to those he knew, and the ship ran on the same vibratory atom-smashing principle. He nodded in grim admiration as he saw what had made the disappearances of the tanker ships and their convoys possible. A powerful vibratory field was created by means of exterior electrodes, neutralizing the vibrations in the atom-smashing units of the System ships, rendering the engines useless. The vibrations also blanketed the radios, preventing communication. After that, the huge electro-magnets simply clamped on and towed the helpless ships like fish on a line.

A queer, wonderful ship. But he knew he could fly it; and given the proper materials, he could fix the damage in two days.

"Of course," he added, when he made his surly report to the girl, "if the mechanism of the ship has been sprung or damaged...."

"It hasn't," she assured him, and he wondered how she knew. That night the two of them bunked in the control cabin. Jaffa never thought of being alone with a woman. They brought up their girls to be men in Kesh. Lhara simply chained her prisoner securely, lay down and went

to sleep. The door in the bulkhead remained closed. Jaffa tried more questions, but finally gave up and went to sleep too.

Sometime much later he came awake, not starting up, but simply ceasing to be asleep. Both moons were up, shooting crazy shadows across the narrow floor and the dry pool. Lhara's couch was empty.

Jaffa realized suddenly what had waked him. There was a sense almost of fog in his nostrils, a warm moisture faintly tinged with an unfamiliar smell. The dry, cold air sucked it up before he could analyze it. But it had been there; and Lhara was gone.

He sat up. His ankle-chain passed around a stanchion, but from where he was he could see that the bolts of the space-lock were shot from the inside, and the hatch into the engine-rooms below was locked.

His eyes fastened on the bulkhead door. Lhara was there, behind it; there was no place else for her to be. Something else was there, too, something that made warm moisture in a climate drier than the Earthly Sahara. What?

Jaffa lay awake, waiting, trying till his head ached to answer his own question. He lay so that he could see the door and still seem to be asleep; when at last the heavy door swung cautiously open, he held his breathing to an even rhythm, though he strained every sense to see what was beyond. Nothing. Just darkness, against which Lhara's unbound hair shone like a silver cape in the moonlight. But there came again that gush of moist warmth that had wakened him, and the strange odor was a thought stronger. Then the door swung to again, and the thirsty air swallowed all trace.

Lhara stood over him a moment, listening to his breathing. Then she went back to her couch; and in spite of his rage against her, Jaffa

dreamed of her, and pleasantly.

Two days of hard work saw the bow-plates once more tight. That evening Jaffa faced the Keshi girl.

"All right," he grunted. "Your crate will fly. Now what?"

"Now you try it." Lhara shot the space-bolts home. "Take her up. If she's all right, go on. If not, come back and finish the repairs."

"Had you thought we might not be able to get back?" asked Jaffa dryly. Lhara's jaw set. "Those are the orders, Jaffa Gray."

"Yours--or someone else's?"

"That doesn't concern you." The ever-present paralysis-gun motioned him to the pilot's seat. Jaffa shrugged and obeyed.

He switched on the air-pumps and the purifying system, watching the gauges intently. The needles held steady for a moment, then wavered back to the danger point.

"What is it?" asked Lhara sharply. "Cut in your rockets!" Jaffa pointed to the gauges: The girl's eyes hardened abruptly with suspicion.

"The pumps were all right when we tested for tightness an hour ago."

"You can see them now," retorted Jaffa indifferently. "If you go up with them this way, you'll not live two hours."

She wavered a moment, for the first time uncertain. She suspected a trap, but she knew nothing of machinery. In the end, she gave in; there was nothing else to do.

"All right. You'll have to go below and fix them, and you well know there's only room for one down there. But hear me, Earthman!" Her grey gaze was steel-hard, her jaw stern. "You can't escape from there. And if you make a single false move, I'll drop you in your tracks!"

Jaffa shrugged and slid his manacled feet down the hatch. A single narrow runway ran between the great bulk-headed power units, back to the fuel feed and the vibration chamber, where the special heavy atoms were smashed to power the rocket tubes. He found the air unit without any trouble, stood staring speculatively at the gleaming mass of machinery. There was nothing wrong with it; he himself had caused the reaction on the gauges. But there was an idea at the back of his mind, an unformed thing made of closed doors and cryptic actions and warm moisture in cold, dry air. With the queer inventiveness of a man on the brink of a mysterious fate, something had occurred to him; a fantastic thing, that might, just possibly come in handy. Any way, it was all he could do, and anything was better than nothing. He set to work with quick, sure hands. For nearly an hour he was at it, answering Lhara's shouted questions with surly plausibilities. When at last he climbed the ladder back to the control chamber, there was something in the air-unit that had not been there before.

He took the strange ship up, testing her in every way and finding her sound. Lhara gave him his course; he stared at it, raking the white streak in his hair with blunt fingers.

"The Asteroid Belt, eh? Trust the Water Pirate to do something no crook has done since the Fleet got its long-range detectors thirty years ago! I'll be interested to see how he does it!"

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!"

Jaffa said it, very slow and soft. Impossibility was manifest before his

eyes. Mars was back of them, across the curve of space. All around them the Asteroids hurtled on their far-flung way. Ahead, where Jaffa, under Lhara's pistol-enforced order, was steering, was a tiny world-pebble a mile or so in diameter. It seemed a long way to come to commit suicide, but Jaffa held the ship steady, straight for the barren surface.

Then the impossible happened. Emptiness yawned behind a backslid portion of the asteroid itself; Jaffa, goggling, took the ship in. The strange space-door closed behind them.

"We must wait until the air is replenished," said Lhara, as though she were reciting a lesson, and Jaffa waited, staring.

A vast space had been hollowed in the rock of the asteroid, probably with powerful disintegrators, and fitted out for a hangar. Ranged neatly in ranks were the convoy ships that had vanished with the tankers; of the clumsy tankers themselves, there was no sign. There was no other ship like the one he flew, and Jaffa smiled. That fitted his embryonic theory. The floor was sheeted in metal, and he guessed at magnetic gravity plates. A green light flashed against the wall. The Keshi girl got up and shot the space-bolts back. "Come," she said, and Jaffa, shuffling in his ankle-chains, followed obediently.

Lhara guided him, muttering directions under her breath as though she had memorized them. There was a barrack room where men of the Convoy Fleet sat in strange, quiescent alertness, like robots of flesh and blood. Lhara's eyes went in anxious pain to a tall Keshi in the uniform of the tanker company; but there was no recognition in his face, and she did not pause. Then there was a little terminal room where a car waited on a curved trough. Lhara motioned her prisoner in. Then she pressed a button, and the car shot down a green-lit tube straight for the heart of the asteroid.

With a dizzying, vertiginous suddenness, the car shot out of the metal tube into one of glass. Space opened around them--space filled with water, swarming with queer sea-creatures, suffused by a curious pale radiance. Jaffa realized, with a suffocating sensation, that the water filled the whole hollowed-out center of the asteroid.

Lhara's face was set and pale; he could not read her expression. But her knuckles were white on the grip of the ray-gun, and her breast rose to deep-drawn fighter's breathing.

There were glassite buildings ahead in the water's blur. The tube went straight into one, closing transparent walls around them. They went down a ramp and into a small room, furnished as the spaceship had been, and at Jaffa's feet there was a sunken pool, broad each way as two tall men. Jaffa followed the Keshi girl through swinging doors into a room that stretched vastly under curving crystal walls. Intricate mechanisms, control panels, coils and vacuum tubes and gigantic things of cryptic identity filled every foot of available space; there were ray lamps and heating apparatus and rack upon rack of cultures in gleaming tubes.

And there was water, in a deep sunken pool tiled green and brown in a pattern of water-weeds.

Lhara led her captive to the brink of the pool and stopped. They stood waiting, and there was a silence like a holding of breath in the laboratory.

The water in the pool stirred suddenly, lapping against the tiles. Far down, cloaked in the rippling refractions, a solid something moved, sending a stream of crystal bubbles up along the surge of the disturbed water. Something that was swift and sure and graceful; something that gleamed with a golden sheen as the light struck it; something that was panther-lithe and supple, and had areas of

shimmering iridescence at its extremities. Jaffa's blunt fingers raked his white-streaked hair and did not feel it. The head broke water.

A strange, unearthly face. Fine golden fur-covered features that were strong and clear and as streamlined as a space-cruiser. Eye and nostril were fitted with protective membranes, and there were no outward ears; but Jaffa, looking into fire-shot dark eyes, knew that this was a man, with no taint of the hybrid in his blood.

In one light surge the stranger gained the tiles beside the pool. The close golden fur that covered him shed the water in glistening streams down a smooth-muscle body, as human in shape as Jaffa's own, save that at wrist and ankle there were fanlike membranes. There was a strange, triumphant fire burning in the swimmer as he stood looking at Jaffa; and the Earthman realized abruptly that Lhara was trembling.

"You have done well, girl," murmured the golden Being, and Lhara's voice burst out of a tight throat.

"Give me my brother and let me go!"

The water-man might not have heard her. His dark gaze was fastened on Jaffa.

"The gods are with me!" he said softly. "I shall succeed." Jaffa's face was hard as carved stone. "I seem to be the sacrifice," he observed. "Is it permitted that I know for what?" The golden swimmer swung about, reaching for a switch, "I'll show you, Earthman!" The light went out, leaving a suffocating blackness. After a moment a pale square of light gleamed; the strange voice, that had a liquid music in it, called them closer. "Look here, into this ultra-visor. It will explain better than any words."

Jaffa looked, hearing the taut breathing of the Keshi girl beside him. Something, a spinning blur, took shape in the screen, resolved itself into a planet, revolving about a triple sun. The focus drew in, blotting out the suns; the curve of the globe flattened, became a concave bowl of water, stretching to the limits of the screen. Here and there tiny islands raised swampy heads, barely above the face of the warm, teeming sea; in the shallows around them were domes of gleaming glassite, housing cities. Closer still; into the streets of the under-water cities, where there were great buildings fallen to ruin and disuse, all save the temples. No children played, and the homes were desolate. Only the temples had life--and the taverns. There were as many taverns as there were temples, and here the sunken pools were filled with stuff that was not water; those who wallowed in them were mere sodden, licentious hulks.

The cities faded to show writhing undersea forests, growing on oozy mud. Amongst the towering fronds of weeds and the amorphous bulks of giant sponges swam monstrous shadows, things with gills and dorsal fins that were yet not fish. They were to the beings in the cities as the apes are to man, and their faces were bestial beyond anything Jaffa had ever seen. They swam around the glassite domes, nuzzling the transparent surfaces, glaring hungrily at the men within; and here and there a shining dome was cracked before the strength of their numbers. The sea-things rode the spurting water through the rifts, and the men who had time to drown were the lucky ones.

Lhara gasped, and Jaffa sensed her averted head. Then, as the screen flickered out and the light came up again, the voice of the golden swimmer spoke, low and somber.

"I, Rha, was the last child to be born on Vhila."

They stood waiting, the man and the woman. The alien one faced them, his muscles drawn taut.

"Vhila is a dying world. Once, as you saw, she was great. But we are an old people, and we have seen our doom approaching for centuries. The sea-dwellers out-breed us a thousand to one. One by one our cities fall, and my people have fallen too, under the load. You saw them; some wait for death in the temples, some in the kulha-tanks. But learning and work and hope are dead on Vhila.

"Can you understand that, Earthman? A world of living dead! No future, no life, just a dumb acceptance and an endless waiting. I revolted. I lived alone in the empty colleges, the laboratories, the museums; I learned all the ancient knowledge of my race. And I turned my eyes to your solar system, where I dreamed of a new life for what remains of my people. When I was ready, I took a spaceship from the museum, stocked it with the tools I would need, but no weapons, for we are a peaceful race."

"I landed first on Venus. You can guess why, Earth-man; we are amphibious, taking water through the skin. We cannot live in a dry world. But instead of the peaceful welcome I had expected, I was attacked and driven off. The people feared me. They would have killed me if they could. I knew then that my people could not come in peace. We are alien."

"I found this asteroid, and changed it to suit me. Then I studied your system more thoroughly, by means of the ultra-visor, that I might find means to conquer it. I have no wish to kill, only to force recognition of my wishes and to gain the power to carry them out. I found that your civilization rests basically on the water trade that permits your far-flung colonies to live. Fitting, was it not? I could prey on this water trade, bring you to the brink of destruction, and then make my demands. Under the circumstances, there could be no refusal."

Again the fire-shot eyes rested on Jaffa. "The gods have been kind."

So far I have succeeded."

Jaffa raised his head. "Where do I fit in?"

Rha smiled. "I need a hostage, to insure that my demands are believed, understood, and carried out promptly. You are the son of Johan Gray. The Chief of Special, I have learned, is really the most powerful man in the System, for he sits at the secret head of all the activities of the planets. To him, through you, I shall make my demands."

Jaffa nodded, his eyes hooded behind dropped lids. "And if he refuses?" Rha sighed and spread his hands.

For the first time Lhara spoke. Both men started. Her voice was sharp and fearless as a sword, and the paralysis-gun was steady in her hand.

"I've been a fool, Rha! I knew none of this; only that if I brought you this man, you would cure my brother and let him go. I thought you were only a clever bandit, and I was willing to barter with you for my brother's life. If I had known, I would have killed Lhar with my own hands before I would have obeyed you!"

She flung quick words over her shoulder at Jaffa. "I am sorry, Earthman, for what I did. Stand by me now!"

Rha did not flinch. "You cannot escape. The doors are closed, and my pilots, who are my slaves since I injected them with a special hormone, guard the hangar. Only I can take you out of here."

Wills met and locked. Then Lhara bowed before the truth. Rha took the gun from her unresisting hand.

"Now," he said. "We will go out again in my spaceship, away from here so that my position cannot be traced by the radio carrier-waves, and contact Johan Gray. You will not be stubborn, Jaffa, I am sure."

Jaffa's eyes were still hidden, and there was a ghost of a smile on his lips. He asked: "Why did you come back here at all? You were aboard the ship back on Mars."

"You guessed it, did you?" Rha nodded as he led the way out of the laboratory.

"The Martian air is so dry I couldn't leave my cabin, and I was afraid if you knew, you'd try something. An unfortunate thing, that smash-up, especially the pilot's death. But I had to have you, Jaffa, and I had to have Lhara to get you.

"I came back here for two reasons. The water, air, and food were nearly exhausted; but particularly I wanted you to see my stronghold and my laboratory, so that you would know I made no idle boasts. Vhila has scientific secrets your people won't guess at for several centuries yet."

They made a silent trio on the trip back to the hangar. Rha picked up three armed pilots from the barrack-room. He smiled at Lhara as he motioned her into his ship, saying: "I feel safer with you where I can watch you." Then the ship roared out through the space-door. The bulkhead door was closed, and the pool in the control cabin was newly filled.

At a safe distance Rha brought the ship to a standstill. And as the throb of the motors died, Jaffa came to his feet. His chains clashed as he hurled himself in a desperate dive for the control panel. Before anyone could stop him, he had landed all his weight on a knife-switch set beside the controls, smashed it down to the end of its slot.

Down in the bowels of the ship there was a grating clash. The water in the pool began to bubble and hiss, and a whitish gas rolled sluggishly over the brink to spread across the floor. In the time it took Jaffa to regain his feet, it had covered the floor-plates and was lapping the ankles of the thunderstruck people who watched it.

"That gas," said Jaffa steadily, "is highly explosive. I should advise the men not to fire their heat-guns."

Rha snapped his orders. "Take him--but don't fire!" The three pilots moved forward like plastic robots. Jaffa faced them; without shifting his eyes he called to Lhara, "Keep your head above the mist!" Rha stood quietly, waiting, but his eyes were on a switch above the one Jaffa had thrown, and he said "Hurry!" very quietly.

The white gas billowed sluggishly at their wrists.

The rest, afterwards, was a blur to Jaffa's memory. One man missed his footing on the narrow floor and vanished into the pool. The other two came on, holding their heat-guns clubbed. The Earthman caught a glimpse of Lhara, stalking like a panther behind Rha. Then he had grappled the two pilots and gone lurching down into the sea of mist.

The swirling opacity blinded him; he held his breath while he struggled, praying that his chest wouldn't burst until he had what he wanted. The pilots fought doggedly to hold him while they regained their feet. But Jaffa had the desperation of a man clutching his last chance; and he knew that above the rising flood of gas, Rha was reaching for the switch that would mean defeat. His hand closed on a flailing heat-gun. His head was ringing, his lungs burned with the agony of suffocation. Dimly he knew that one man had fallen limply to the floor, unconscious. He wrenched desperately at the gun, knowing he couldn't last much longer. The distorted face close to his loosed a

burst of breath that set the white gas swirling. Then the empty lungs sucked in; the hand went limp.

With the last of his strength Jaffa surged upward. The gas had risen; how high? Above his head, perhaps. Perhaps it had choked all air from the cabin, pouring up faster than the air-conditioners could work. Perhaps Rha and Lhara were lying under it, dying of anoxia. And suddenly, through his pain and desperation, Jaffa knew something. The hard-held air in his lungs broke from him in a cry.

"Lhara!"

Like a swimmer, his head broke the surface. The gas lapped his chin, but there was air still. He gulped it in. Rha's head was rigid above the rising tide, and behind it, Lhara's, her hair fallen in a bright cloak that gleamed through the mist.

Jaffa raised his gun and fired.

In a crackling fury of sparks the flying controls fused to a blackened ruin. Jaffa lurched forward, dragged at the switch above the one he had pressed before. The handle scorched his palm, so near had the destructive blast come to it. A gurgling rush came from the pool, and the gas sucked downward in a sullen whirlpool. Jaffa leaned weakly against the bulkhead, and knew that he was laughing at the two thunderstruck faces.

"Dry ice!" he gasped. "I diverted carbon dioxide from the air purifiers and improvised a compression unit with one of the pressure tanks. Then I connected the compression-tank release with a cut-in on the feed-pipe for this pool, the only one that can be emptied from the control panel. When I pulled that switch I dumped about ten pounds of dry ice into the water. That gas was the released carbon dioxide, perfectly harmless, except that it can suffocate." Lhara released the

arm she had been holding in a vise-grip behind Rha's back; the grip that had kept him from getting to that all-important switch and wrecking Jaffa's plans. Together they got the men up above the last of the gas that hovered above the empty pool. When they were breathing properly again, Jaffa turned to Rha.

"You realize your position. Very soon after I radio, Fleet ships will come to take us in tow. In the ordinary course of events, you will be destroyed as a danger to the welfare of the Solar System.

"But I don't think you are a menace, Rha. I think you're a very courageous man, and a great scientist; and on those grounds, I'll make a bargain with you. My father, as you said, has influence. I think, after I explain, that I can persuade him to arrange a colony for you, provided you give your word to live in peace. And that's what you really want, isn't it, Rha?"

"I ask only a useful life for my people." For a long, long moment Rha looked into the Earthman's eyes. Then he bowed his head, and his voice was deep as he answered:

"I accept your offer, Jaffa Gray."

Jaffa sighed relieved and turned to the radio. Lhara sat on a couch beside it.

"You'll go back to Kesh now?" he asked abruptly.

"As soon as my brother is free." She faced him frankly. "I'm sorry for what I did, Jaffa. But since it's turned out this way...."

"I think," said Jaffa, "if I were to come to Kesh, and you were to try very hard, I might forgive you."

Interplanetary Reporter

The news broke just after Chris Barton left the Stellar Queen at Vhia, the trade city for Venus. He stood on the steps of the spaceport. Looking out over the white city under its pearly dome, he breathed the cooled, scented air. As he listened, his thin mouth was set in a bitter smile of complete cynicism. Silence had settled over Vhia, a silence of pent breath and tautened nerves, of ears strained to catch every word from the great newscasters in every green square. People were converging in soft-footed multitudes on the three-dimensional, full-color television screens. The marts that supplied all Venus with the treasures of the Solar System had stopped in mid-career, to listen.

"I could have told them," Chris Barton thought. "I saw it coming, out in the asteroids. I can smell it the way a vulture smells death." Still the men on the vision screens talked on, curiously low and hurried. The people of Vhia stood frozen in a kind of incredulous daze, through which realization began to seep like pain through a new wound.

"Jupiter has declared war on Venus! Instructions will be given to the civilian population as soon as possible. Military classes will report at once..."

"For what?" muttered Chris Barton. "These people are like sheep. They can't fight. Most of them aren't even Venusians. Poor fools, they'd better just run, because Vhia is the first place the Jovians will lay eggs on. Hang it, I've got to stay and watch!"

* * *

He went down the steps. Among the stunned, unmoving mob, he walked like a lean old he-wolf among domestic cattle.

Something about him seemed to penetrate the stricken daze that held them. Perhaps it was his careless, piratical dress, or the hard-bitten arrogance of his walk. It might have been that the outland suns which had burned his skin to dark leather had also burned out all the soft places and left only the steel. Whatever it was, he attracted their eyes, and they drew back from him. He heard his name, tossed between white lips.

"Chris Barton, war correspondent for Interplanetary Press, the Sexton Syndicate. Wherever he goes, it means trouble." Chris Barton smiled--bird of ill-omen, vulture of pain. Beyond the dome of pearly glass, on the other side of Venus, lay the swamp where he had left his boyish illusions, covering the Leng campaigns. Out beyond the steamy canopy of clouds was Mars, where he had stood by a tele-transmitter until it was blown up under him, covering the Martian World War of 2504. There was Earth, where he had dodged bullets and poisoned darts to inform the people of the Solar System how the Dark Invasion was going. And there was the Asteroid Belt, where he had just televised a vicious, small-scale war. Forty-three years of life, and he was alone. The men who had started with him were dead, but his fatalistic contempt of death had pulled him through. There was not a man in the news world who didn't resent or dislike him. There had never been a woman.

Chris Barton stopped. An I. P. man pictured above his head was rehashing the situation--the Venusian defenses, the population of the Jovian moons, the boundaries of the Jovian Mandate in the Asteroid Belt, where the trouble had started. The same words, with different names, that he himself had said so many times.

Standing on the feathery Venusian grass, under the dome of a city listening to its death sentence, Barton felt the weight of those forty-three years increase to a hundred. The sordidness of them made him

sick.

Battle, news, death, and more news, endlessly. For what? Though he was a legend in newspaperdom, for all the thrills he had given the boobs, he was a pariah.

Fear-whitened faces. Voices tight with hysteria. Newscasters droning out death and suffering. They tripped a spring somewhere in Barton's mind, brought to light the worm that had been gnawing at his subconscious. He was tired, old and alone. And there was another war on, which only Chris Barton could give to the people.

His hard, light-blue eyes narrowed. He went on again, across the breathless city, with a sort of grim ruthlessness. He knew quite suddenly what he was going to say. Sanger could take his war and go to blazes with it. The fine white building that housed the Venusian headquarters of the Sexton Syndicate was in chaos. Reporters, rewrite men, telecasters, copy boys, technicians--wherever possible, the Syndicate employs native men--were swarming out into the streets, to find loved ones, to report for duty. Down below, where the great silent presses turned out the indispensable papers in the universal language of the trade cities, it was the same. Only the robot teletypists remained.

Barton shouldered through the mob, heading for the office of John Sanger, I. P. head for Venus. Halfway across the anteroom, he stopped. For a moment he didn't know why. Then his mind, fixed on one urgent goal, registered dimly. It was a woman who had swung from a window at his entrance. She was tall and wide-shouldered and lithe, dressed in a spaceman's dark coverall. Barton saw green, slanting Martian eyes set startlingly in a tanned, heart-shaped face, and hair that was the soft white-gold of Venus.

Confusedly he knew that she was familiar, yet he knew he had never

seen her before. His eyes met hers, held them. For one electric instant he was lost, disoriented, charged with a queer fascination. Then the bitter urge in his heart drove him on without speaking, and the thread was broken. The closing of Sanger's door behind him shut her out of his mind.

"Sanger," said Chris Barton grimly, "I quit."

* * *

John Sanger froze, half risen in welcome. A well built, well kept man, his dark hair had gone gray at the temples, and his clean-cut face was scored deep with weariness. He sank back into his chair.

"Why, Barton? What's the reason?"

Barton's lips twisted. "Getting old, I guess. Cracking at the seams. Anyway, I'm through."

"With reporting?"

"With the whole rotten game!"

John Sanger was silent, looking into Barton's bitter, stubborn face. Then he shook his head in bewilderment.

"You can't quit. I don't know what's the matter with you, but you're a newspaper man. You have your duty, as well as a job. There's a war on. The people have a right..."

"Blast the people!" snarled Chris Barton. "A bunch of fat fools, getting a thrill out of other people's suffering and hating you when the thrill comes home to them. No need to preach, Sanger. I learned all about the sanctity of the press with my ABCs--and forgot about it with my

second war. I'm sorry if it leaves you in a hole, but I'm finished."

"Be sensible, Barton!" said Sanger irritably. "You've been in this too long. It's all you know. You wouldn't fit anywhere else."

"You let me worry about that."

Sanger suddenly looked what he was, a tired man. He passed a hand across his eyes.

"I was counting on you. I've got a newspaper to run, and I'm going to have to do it almost single-handed. There's no one else...." He broke off and shook himself erect. "Why not? There were reporters before you were born!" He flipped a connection open, and Barton knew his voice was booming out along the empty corridors.

"Bobby Lancer! Report to Sanger's office, at once!" Barton shrugged and turned away. As he did so, a picture on a paper spread on Sanger's desk caught his eye. Picking it up unceremoniously, he stood staring at it.

Slanting green eyes looked back at him out of a heart-shaped face. Pale-gold Venusian hair fell to wide, coverall-clad shoulders. The three-dimensional, natural-color photograph brought her almost to life. The caption read: Kei Volhan, socialite adventuress of Vhia, who, it is rumored, is prepared for a takeoff despite the Venusian Space Committee's injunction. She will try to shatter the existing record for a three-point, non-stop flight--Venus, Earth, Mars, and back.

That was where he had seen her. In the brief lulls between wars and their rumors, he had read casually of her wild exploits along the spaceways. He had put her down as a feather-brained brat, product of the soft, over-stimulated trade cities, and forgotten her. Now he

knew he couldn't forget her again.

"What's she doing out there?" he asked abruptly. Sanger shrugged. "Came to raise a fuss about that story. The war changes all that, anyway. She'll probably take it out on young Lance. They're engaged to be married."

Still the enigmatic phantom pulled at Barton. He knew dimly that it wanted him to stay, because of Kei Volhan.

"I still quit!" he grunted, flinging the paper down.

* * *

Yanking his piratical old hat down over his eyes, he started out. He was through, finished, fed up. He hated himself and the world. He was going to get drunk, or die, or both. What difference did a green-eyed girl make?

The door opened before he reached it. She was there, and a tall young man was with her, his arm about her waist. Chris Barton stopped.

"Come in, Lance," Sanger said. "You too, Miss Volhan, if you wish." Those disturbing green eyes met Barton's again, held them, sent an almost electric current through his blood. Something in the girl rose to the emotions in him that everyone else turned away from. It was strange how strongly he felt that, because he didn't know women, didn't like them. He wrenched his gaze away, let it waver back.

It was then that the first Jovian bomb struck!

The instant his ears registered the first reverberations, Barton realized that the Jovians must have had a fleet waiting, invisible

somehow from the charted space-lanes. Briefly he wondered how. With the growing tension in the Asteroids, each world had kept a doubly sharp watch, and there had not been even the rumor of a fleet. But it must have been there. With the declaration of war it had swooped, catching the peaceable Venusians unprepared. There was a splintering crash as the dome was ruptured, a vast ripping sound as the tough glassite starred and cracked away from the hole. The office windows rattled with the change of pressure, as the wet, heavy outer air rushed into the cooler, thinner Vhian atmosphere. Then the shell burst. Chris Barton fell in a shower of plaster.

From the sound, Barton knew that the shell had struck on the far side of the city. Three more of them came in quick succession. The power of the sub-atomic explosive was strong enough to rock the heavy I. P. building like a cardboard toy. He nodded a brief acknowledgment of Jovian marksmanship. The invaders were out beyond the atmosphere, sending the heavy eggs down with a self-contained direction unit.

"Sanger!" he called out. "Have you got a cellar?" The I. P. head pulled himself up from behind the desk, bleeding from a nasty gash over the eye.

"You know quite well there are cellars," he grunted. Glaring upward, he added:

"This is the lowest, dirty-dog trick anyone's pulled in a century!"

"I'd still like to know where they hid their fleet." Barton scrambled up, coughing, and gave his hand to Kei Volhan. She didn't need his help, but she held his hand and looked at him while she rose. He knew that she was no more afraid than he was. Sanger joined them, wiping blood from his face.

"Hurry up. The skunks'll shell Hades out of us before the Venusian fleet wakes up. Hey, Bobby, are you hurt?"

* * *

Barton had forgotten Bobby Lance. He was half-crouched against the wall, his gray eyes dazed and staring in a bloodless face. For an instant Barton thought he was hurt, and was vaguely sorry. Lance looked like a promising youngster, well built, with a keen, intelligent face. But he wasn't hurt. He got up jerkily, bending his head to hide his face, running shaky hands through his dusty yellow hair.

"Come on, Kei," he muttered, and started for the door. Barton knew, then. Lance was scared. Barton shrugged cynically as they hurried down the corridor. Lance was young. Eventually you either got the fear hammered out of you, or you let it get you. Either way, it didn't matter, for the System didn't give a hang. All it wanted was thrills at a distance. They didn't dare use the lifts. Bombs began to fall again, cracking the steps under them as they ran down. Already the temperature was rising as the hot Venusian air steamed in. Barton thought of all the soft Vhians who had never been beyond the dome. They looked upon the hardy outsiders as barbarians, while they built their own polyglot civilization in a manufactured comfort. It was the same on all the planets. The trade cities are alien, a law and a race unto themselves. Vhia, at last, was going to get a taste of the real Venus.

"Nuts!" cried Sanger abruptly. "The summer rains are on Outside. With the dome broken, Vhia will be flooded out!"

"Perhaps," said Bobby Lance too loudly, "the cellars aren't such a good idea, after all."

"Perhaps," suggested Kei Volhan, "you ought to join the refugees."

"They'll be evacuating women and children."

Chris Barton's thin brows went up at the savage contempt in her voice. She didn't sound much in love with Lance. Lance looked at her. There was something in his gray eyes that penetrated even Barton's armor.

"That's not fair, Kei. You know I won't leave. There's the newspaper. There'll be a battle up there. Somebody's got to take the ship up and televise it."

"Why?" demanded Barton. His harsh voice brought Kei's green eyes around, and he felt that stimulating leap along his veins.

"Why?" said Lance simply. "The news has to be broadcast. The people have a right to know what's going on."

Chris Barton laughed, a sardonic bark. Kei's fingers fastened on his wrist. He felt the tingling strength of them answered in himself. Her brown, heart-shaped face was level with his own.

"You'll take the ship up, Chris Barton," she said. For some reason, he didn't tell her he was through with reporting. His hard, dark face went quizzical.

"Who'd fly me?" he demanded, knowing the answer. "I couldn't do it all alone."

"I will" said Kei Volhan.

"Kei!"

Incredulous hurt bleated almost comically in Lance's cry. But he wasn't comical. Barton had seen it before--a kid under fire for the first time, having a hard enough time without his girl going back on him.

But those were the breaks. You had to take them, beat them down and go on, or quit. It was up to Lance.

Barton's gaze held Kei's. His world had exploded in his face. Why not have a last fling? Besides, those green eyes promised something. He didn't know what, but he wanted to find out.

"Okay, sister," he said. "I might as well die that way as any other." Three steps below them, still running down, Sanger laughed.

* * *

The I. P. newscasting ship was in a hangar at the Dehra Spaceport, a private field beyond the dome. Normally it was an easy half-mile jaunt in a car.

"Take it up if you can get it, Barton," Sanger said. "I've got to stay here." They stood in a side entrance at street level, staring out. Barton's harsh face was grim. The pearly dome was cracked and shattered. Through the breaks, the outer air poured in like fog, smelling of jungle and swamp and lush-grassed uplands. There were growing pools of water where the hot rain splashed through. Barton could see smoke and broken buildings to the south, where the heaviest bombing had been. Rain was falling in torrents through a vast hole in the dome.

Refugees jammed the streets, pushing toward the outlets and safety. Men who handled the System's trade with Venus. Women whose lives had been smooth, easy and unruffled. People who had worked in peace and plenty, and ignored the storm signals too long. Barton had coldly seen it a hundred times before, yet this time it made him feel as he had felt in the square--old, tired and alone in a system that was doubly ugly, with this cowardly brutality of the Jovians. He sighed. Then he saw Kei's tumbled pale-gold hair, the brown arrogance of

her heart-shaped face, and felt life stealing through him again.

"Come on," he said, "if you're not afraid." She laughed at him like a Martian cat. She must have forgotten Bobby Lance, for she started when he spoke.

"I'm coming, too!"

Barton stared at him. Years of judging kings, dictators and presidents, warlords and treaty-makers, had given him a clinical insight into people. His cold, impersonal judgment managed to be uncannily accurate. When he had first seen Bobby Lance in the doorway with Kei, he had seen only a good-looking young masculine body. After the bombing, he had seen a youngster scared half out of his wits by his first taste of war.

Now he saw a man, disheveled and pale as death, his muscles jerking involuntarily as though with a high-tension current. Sick with fear, he was even sicker with rage against Kei Volhan, for turning her back on him because he was afraid. He raged against Barton as any man would hate the object of his fiancée's sudden favor.

Barton smiled. It was the first time any man had had occasion to feel that way about him. It was a stimulating experience, made him feel as though he were not really dead. He felt that Kei was being hard on Lance, and yet he could understand it. It was his own cynical ruthlessness, the impersonal harshness of a nature that asked no quarter and could see no reason for giving it. Kei had no fear, and she was savagely disappointed in Lance.

"I'm going, too," repeated the young man stubbornly, and his jaw was set and ugly.

"Why?" demanded Kei. "You--"

Her words were drowned in a thundering fury of sound. Great jagged pieces of the dome showered down, meeting an up flung geyser of plastic and concrete where two whole blocks vanished in oily smoke. It was close. Debris fell in the streets around the I. P. building. People screamed and fell, broken like dolls, and the whole mass of refugees surged forward in a frantic wave, mad with fear.

* * *

Lance was whiter than the cracked white terrace he lay on. He didn't seem to realize the time-lag between her question and his answer.

"It's my job. All this is happening. The people have a right to know the truth. The ship needs three—one to fly, one to broadcast, one to handle the equipment. There's no one else, even if it weren't my job." Rising cautiously from the rocking terrace, Chris Barton stopped long enough to meet Lance's gaze.

"I didn't know they still made people like you," he grunted, shaking his head.

"Idealism's a bad thing. Quicker you get over it, the better. Not so tough, then. The boobs can't hurt you."

The barrage had started again, and this time it was too close for comfort. Barton saw water running in ominous little rivers down the streets. Vhia, without gutters or storm drains, was in for a wetting.

"You can't stay, Sanger," he said abruptly. "Even if the bombs didn't smash this place to glory, you'd drown in the cellars." John Sanger sighed. "You're right. I'd hoped.... Oh, well, I can probably get over to Lhash. Our nearest branch is there, and I can carry on all right from it, thanks to you." Unexpectedly he gripped Barton's hand. "I knew you'd realize you couldn't quit. Good luck, Chris, and thanks." He plunged

out into the rushing human sea before Barton could open his mouth.

"Well?" snapped Bobby Lance. "Are we going?" Barton was still staring after Sanger.

"What?" he muttered absently. Then, jerking himself back, he rasped: "Come on!"

He led the way off the terrace. It was nightmarish, that struggle toward Dehra Spaceport. The three kept close together, Barton's shoulder touching Kei's. Water ran deeper and deeper in the streets as more of the dome fell in. Bombs were razing Vhia behind them.

The wild stampede slackened somewhat, slowed by the rain. Barton knew that it was thinning out. Most of those untouched by the first bombings had got out. He prayed they hadn't taken the I. P. ship for transport. Then, remembering that it only held two besides the pilot, he decided they probably wouldn't. They came to the smashed pressure-lock in the base of the riven dome, and were carried through with the outgoing press of people. Over in the main hangars and out on the field, people were fighting for space on any kind of ship going anywhere, away from Vhia. Barton's eyes went anxiously to the little private combination hangar and launching rack. He saw with relief that it was still locked.

"This way!" he called, and battled across the stream. Kei squared her shoulders like a man, staying at his side. Lance was taking out some of his inner turmoil with his fists. They won clear at last and broke into a run. The mob, intent upon escape, never noticed them. In five minutes, Kei Volhan had the retractable plastic roof slid back, the motors roaring to life. The trim little Fitts-Sothern quivered on the launching rack. Then it shot up through the rain, past the miles-thick layers of steaming clouds, out into the star-shot black of space.

In those brief moments of acceleration, Barton's lungs felt crushed, his eyeballs bursting. The seat straps were cutting his flesh. He cursed himself, wondering why a green-eyed girl had been able to make him do something he had sworn never to do again. He was used to having his brain clear, like a cold, accurate machine. Since he had stood in the square in Vhia, feeling the Old Man of the Sea that was his life fasten on his shoulders, his mind had been confused. Kei hadn't helped any. It gave him an angry feeling of helplessness, as though he no longer controlled his actions.

The pressure slacked abruptly, and he could see again. The Fitts-Sothern was a sweet little ship. Sanger had evidently wanted the most modern newscasting ship in his territory.

Electronic cameras of the newest type were mounted in nose and keel. The transmitter was compact and powerful, operating on an ultra-short wave controlled beam. Tight and strong enough to pierce the heavy Venusian atmosphere, it would be comparatively unaffected by ionization in the upper layers. Automatic full-color, three-dimensional cameras were mounted with the electronics, along with sound-recording apparatus to make a permanent record of what the reporter sent out to the world.

An extra, independent camera was in the pilot's bay, to be used at the reporter's discretion. All had infra-red and ultra-violet filters to take care of various conditions of light, as well as long-range lenses and telescopic sights.

Barton unstrapped himself, for they were in free space now. He went up beside Kei, noting that Lance, still pale and grimly silent, was already at the instrument panel. Looking out, he frowned.

"Where are the blighters?" he grunted.

Space was black and empty, except for the stars and the great cloudy ball of Venus. There was no fleet, no sign of anything at all. But the meteoric mass-detectors on the board showed the close presence of a small metallic body.

"What the--" shouted Chris Barton.

He was flung back violently, striking against the transmitter panel. Lance was already crumpled brutally against the stern bulkhead. Barton felt the wild, reverberant shuddering of the ship's metal sides.

"Space torpedo!" groaned Lance.

Strapped in her seat, Kei fought the ship to an even keel, shot away in a screaming tangent. Barton got to his feet shakily, hugging his bruised ribs and swearing. That had been much too close, and it had come from nowhere.

"Something funny," Kei said evenly. "Why can't we see the ship?"

"I don't know."

The pilot's bay gave full vision, and there was absolutely no ship. On an impulse, Barton switched on the infra-red projector, a lamp which shot a powerful beam of "black light" that helped in taking pictures in world-shadow areas or heavy atmosphere. It was a nasty feeling, waiting for another torpedo to fly out of nothing. This time it might not be a miss. The little visi-plate of the infra-beam showed a small, dim shape, off to sunward of them, lying still in space. It showed another, a tiny shape, streaking....

"Kei!" Barton almost screamed. "Ahead, fast!"

The Fitts-Sothorn shrieked in agony at the sudden acceleration, but they made it. They were bathed in the red flare of the torpedo that had been fired by a timing device.

Bobby Lance spoke from the transmitter panel. It had taken him a long time to get there. He sat straight in his chair, gripping the arms, and his young face was bone-white under his tumbled yellow hair.

"Can't they see our badge?" he asked flatly. All news ships carried a broad band of white paint, to mark them plainly as non-combatant neutrals. If the reporter were cautious, he could televise his battle from a distance in reasonable safety. Barton knew from experience that an incautious correspondent took the same risks as anyone else.

"Yes," he answered. "Sure they can see it." Whoever they were, they had a reason for ignoring it. Finding them again with the infra-beam, he flipped on the cameras and motioned to Lance. The young man's fingers quivered on the dials and verniers, but in a moment Barton's screen came clear. The man at the I. P. station at Lhash was speaking.

"You've got a System-wide hookup. Go ahead, but watch out for the Venusian fleet. It's on its way up. After what the Jovians did to Vhia, I hope we knock the devil out of 'em!"

"Okay."

Barton flipped the connection over, cuddled the mike in his palm. Then, with his eyes still glued to that enigmatic little blot of darkness in the lens, his mind began to race perversely.

"No more torpedoes," he thought. "Ship's no bigger than ours. No

room for more. Why don't I hate this? I hated it back in Vhia. Was Sanger right? It was Kei that made me come, but why did Kei make any difference? And I don't understand young Lance. Could I have understood him once? Did I ever feel that way?"

Then his mind was hard and clear again. There was news, a story in that strange black ship.

"Mr. and Mrs. Solar System!" he began. His voice went on, almost of itself, pouring out those short, electric sentences that had kept people glued to their televisors for twenty years, whenever something exciting was going on. Pale but unshaken, Kei sent the ship arcing toward the black one in obedience to his gesture. Infra-red beams and filters were raking it, pinning it indelibly to sensitive film. Abruptly its rocket tubes burst into flame.

"They know we've seen them," said Barton. "They've been quiet up to now, hoping to destroy us without betraying their position. They didn't count on the infra-red beam. Now.... Hold on. They're not Jovians! Their rocket gases--"

A bolt of vivid violet shot away from the black ship. Kei lurched the ship violently aside, but there was no escaping. The purple light was drawn to them. Before Barton could finish his sentence, it struck with a blinding flare of electric blue. In airless space, there was no sound, but the light lasted so long that Barton had an eerie feeling of fire. Fire in space?

"Lance, try to contact Lhash!"

The young man's face was ghastly. Barton hadn't believed fear could produce that gray, deathly pallor. Lance's fingers fumbled uncertainly. Barton heard Kei's bitter little snort of disgust.

"It's dead," Lance whispered. "Antenna fused."

* * *

Barton grunted. No more broadcasting, so the boobs would have to do without their thrill.

"What did you mean, Chris?" Kei spoke over her shoulder, watching the rocket flare of the black ship intently.

"Jovian ships use a fuel mixture that produces a red exhaust flare. If you'll notice, this is yellow. What fuel makes a yellow exhaust?"

"The Martian liquid-hydrogen mixture! You don't mean...."

"I mean that's a Martian ship," Barton said, evenly. "The Jovians didn't bomb Vhia."

"Martians! "The enormity of the thing gradually took shape. Kei was half Martian, but she was Venusian-born. "They've been fighting us over water prices. They claim we victimize them, because they're dependent on us for water. So that's it--revenge!"

Barton shook his head. "There's more to it than that. You are pretty hard on them, you know. They need water badly, especially with these new reclaimed areas. The Jovian mandate in the Asteroid Belt contains three of the wettest little worlds in the System. If she could get hold of those, Mars would be practically independent."

"They'll be coming for us as soon as they break their orbital drag," said Kei quietly. "What should I do?"

Venus loomed, a vast cloudy disc, beside them. Barton shrugged.

"Run like fury. We can't fight 'em."

Bobby Lance spoke behind them. They both started at the vehemence of his labored whisper.

"You can't run. We still have a camera and the infra-beam. The cameras outside are ruined, and so are the films. That bolt of electricity--they planned on a camera ship. But we've got to take pictures of them that will prove the Jovians had nothing to do with Vhia!"

"If we did," said Barton slowly, "it would change the whole aspect of the war. Jupiter wants territory. That's where the fight started. Mars wants water, and Jupiter has it. So Mars deliberately infuriates Venus against Jupiter by committing such an outrage that even peace-loving Venus will never quit until Jupiter is licked.

"Now Mars can either abrogate her trade treaty with Jupiter in return for the Jovian mandate, which Venus will hand over after the war is won. Or, if Jupiter looks like winning, she can give active aid to Venus in return for the Jovian asteroids and water rights here. Either way, it's a filthy business. Vhia didn't have a chance. And Venus is out to smash Jupiter for good because of it."

"That's it. We've got to put the blame where it belongs. Perhaps we can save millions of people from dying." Lance dragged himself erect. "You've got to do it, Barton. Will you?"

Barton's hard, light eyes pinned him, trying to see through him.

"We'd be crazy to try. They're armed, we're not. What about Kei?" The boy looked stubbornly past him at nothing.

"Kei got herself into this. And we have a duty to the world." So Lance could be ruthless on his own account. Barton's thin, harsh face

creased in a puzzled frown. What was it about Lance and Kei that set all his values askew?

"They're gaining speed," said Kei. "We haven't all day." Barton cursed the new confusion of his brain, hesitated.

* * *

Suddenly Bobby Lance was gripping his shoulders with fingers that hurt, shouting at him in a hoarse, strangled voice.

"Curse you, Barton, haven't you got a heart? Why are you a newspaperman, if the truth doesn't mean anything to you?"

"It may mean your death."

"I don't care. We've got to try..."

He fell abruptly, huddled at Barton's feet.

"They'll have enough velocity for fighting in a minute now," Kei said. "We won't be able to run much longer. What'll I do, Chris?" She hadn't noticed Lance's fall.

"Hang on a second longer." He was staring down at Lance. Could the kid be right? "Nuts!" he snarled, kneeling. "What does he know? Passing out that way from fright."

He lay on his face. Barton caught his shoulder, pulled him over. Then Barton caught his breath with a sudden hiss, and ran his hand along Lance's side.

"Kei, we're both heels," he said, rising slowly.

"Why?"

The ship lurched upward in a shuddering arc. Something yellow and vicious licked past the starboard ports--just a practice stab with a heat beam, but it showed that the Martians were getting deadly serious.

"Lance is a star-spangled hero," rasped Barton wryly. "He was scared stiff, but he came, anyway. He's stuck to his job, egged me on to be a noble little boy. And all this time, half his ribs were stove in. The first torpedo did it."

Kei dared not leave the controls, but she looked over her shoulder. Barton saw her heart-shaped face, suddenly pale in spite of the tan, the fire softened and misty in her green eyes. Chris Barton nodded.

"You'll make him a good wife, Kei. He needs your strength and you need his idealism. You're too much like me. That's why we're so drawn to one another. But it wouldn't work, even if you didn't love Lance. We'd bring out the worst in each other. Well," he added irritably, "what are you waiting for? The Martians'll blow us out of the sky if you don't wake up. I've got some pictures to take before that happens."

They had a chance, Barton knew--a long one, but a chance. The atomic heat ray was mounted in the nose of the Martian ship, and a good pilot could keep clear for awhile. The Jovian fleet wasn't due from its base on Ceres for an hour or so, and the man at Lhash had said the Venusian fleet was coming up. With luck, he could get his pictures and make a run for it.

He could guess the first plan of the Martian raiders. They had meant to lie still, protected by their black paint, until the two fleets met in battle. After that, the flare of their rockets would not have been noticed. The I. P. ship had blundered too close. They had tried to

finish it with torpedoes. Failing that, they had cut off communications and were out to prevent any word from getting back, even by word of mouth. But they had to work fast, because of the Venusian fleet.

* * *

Barton grinned. "Go get 'em, Kei--for Bobby!" The rockets roared into full power as he knelt again beside Bobby Lance. Not daring to lift him into a seat, because of the broken ribs, Barton wedged him under the transmitter panel.

Acceleration squeezed Barton like a giant press. He fought his way into the seat behind the remaining camera, mounted inside the pilot's bay. The infra-red beam still probed the sky, but they could follow the black ship now by its exhaust flare.

The Martian was equally good as pilot and bomber. Pulling his ship over in a skidding turn, he raked the Fitts-Sothorn so closely with his heat beam, the hull glowed cherry-red along one side. Barton saw Kei's face settle into a hard grin. Her strong hands were firm on the controls, her green eyes a bright emerald. Barton nodded and turned all his attention to his camera. If anyone could bring them out alive it was Kei.

Infra-red beam, filters on the camera, black light pinning a black ship to three-dimensional, all-revealing color film. Barton got some striking shots as the two ships wheeled and arced across space under the vast bluish disc of Venus. Time and again the heat beam touched them, so close to destroying them that the hull went almost incandescent. But the Fitts-Sothorn had a tough skin, built to resist the heat of atmospheric friction. The beam never found a real chance to eat through.

"Glory!" whispered Barton. "How the boobs will love this!" Kei cried

out, a shrill whoop of sheer excitement. The Martian had risked breaking the back of his ship to turn her in her own length. Now he was on their tail, with their already overheated rocket tubes square in his sights. One tube blown or fused, and he could finish them off at his leisure. Barton tensed his lean body against the sudden pressure. Kei was calling the final ounce of power, the last shred of endurance from the camera ship. Metal groaned and rang. The shuddering roar of the rockets was brain-numbing in the sealed air of the cabin. Back and up they went, in a shrieking arc that took them right over the black ship, so close that Barton felt he could have touched it. He saw something shining through the black paint, like water marks on silk.

The twin circles of Mars, emblem of her two moons....

"Kei," he yelled. "There's our proof! Anybody might use Martian fuel, but not a Martian ship. I've got to get that shot. It'll be the biggest scoop in three centuries. Can you do it again?"

"Watch me!"

The Martian could not have been expecting that mad attack. Kei looped over, through the thinning flare of his rockets, shot under his belly and up in a tight curve, right across his nose. Barton went white, but his eyes never left the camera finder. Every rivet, every seam, every strut in the ship seemed ready to burst apart. And there came the heat beam--

* * *

But the Martian's hand was a second slow on the trigger. The beam caught one rocket tube as they shot past. Kei shut off the fuel stream before the metal was fused, and their momentum carried them over before the remaining rockets could force them off. Barton got his picture, clear and unmistakable. Now they were finished, though. The

Fitts-Sothern was too crippled for any quick maneuvering. Barton gripped Kei's shoulder, and she smiled at him. Neither spoke.

The Martian swung around slowly, as though savoring his triumph. He could take his time now. Then he suddenly wavered.

"The Venusian fleet," Barton said coolly. "One more try, Kei." Kei blasted her remaining rockets just as the heat beam licked out, then shut off her fuel. The tubes fused as the Martian ray caught them, but the unchecked velocity carried them wide. Then the black ship had no more time. Venusian ships were pouring out of the cloudy disc beside them, their sunward sides flashing. The black ship raced away. It was over. They were safe. After awhile Barton's hand found Kei's.

"For the honor of the Fourth Estate," he muttered. "I'm all confused. It isn't easy for a man to change his ideas all at once. You and Bobby have shown me things I'd forgotten existed. Maybe those things make all the rest worthwhile--loving someone, believing in something. I think I've been alone too much. I think I've seen too much of the ugly things, with nothing to take the taste out of my mouth. I think I need friends, and perhaps..." Kei turned her lovely face to him, and her green eyes were smiling. Barton kissed her, was surprised at what it did to him.

"Oh, yes," said Chris Barton. "I'm going to have to learn to live all over again!"

The Dragon-Queen Of Venus

Tex stirred uneasily where he lay on the parapet, staring into the heavy, Venusian fog. The greasy moisture ran down the fort wall, lay rank on his lips. With a sigh for the hot, dry air of Texas, and a curse for the adventure-thirst that made him leave it, he shifted his short, steel-hard body and wrinkled his sandy-red brows in the never-ending effort to see. A stifled cough turned his head. He whispered, "Hi, Breska." The Martian grinned and lay down beside him. His skin was wind-burned like Tex's, his black eyes nested in wrinkles caused by squinting against sun and blowing dust.

For a second they were silent, feeling the desert like a bond between them. Then Breska, mastering his cough, grunted:

"They're an hour late now. What's the matter with 'em?" Tex was worried, too. The regular dawn attack of the swamp-dwellers was long overdue.

"Reckon they're thinking up some new tricks," he said. "I sure wish our relief would get here. I could use a vacation."

Breska's teeth showed a cynical flash of white.

"If they don't come soon, it won't matter. At that, starving is pleasanter than beetle-bombs, or green snakes. Hey, Tex. Here comes the Skipper." Captain John Smith--Smith was a common name in the Volunteer Legion--crawled along the catwalk. There were new lines of strain on the officer's gaunt face, and Tex's uneasiness grew.

He knew that supplies were running low. Repairs were urgently needed. Wasn't the relief goin' to come at all?

But Captain Smith's pleasant English voice was as calm as though he were discussing cricket-scores in a comfortable London club.

"Any sign of the beggars, Tex?"

"No, sir. But I got a feeling...."

"H'm. Yes. We all have. Well, keep a sharp...." A scream cut him short. It came from below in the square compound. Tex shivered, craning down through the rusty netting covering the well. He'd heard screams like that before.

A man ran across the greasy stones, tearing at something on his wrist. Other men ran to help him, the ragged remnant of the force that had marched into new Fort Washington three months before, the first garrison. The tiny green snake on the man's wrist grew incredibly. By the time the first men reached it, it had whipped a coil around its victim's neck. Faster than the eye could follow, it shifted its fangs from wrist to throat. The man seemed suddenly to go mad. He drew his knife and slashed at his comrades, screaming, keeping them at bay.

Then, abruptly, he collapsed. The green snake, now nearly ten feet long, whipped free and darted toward a drainage tunnel. Shouting, men surrounded it, drawing rapid-fire pistols, but Captain Smith called out:

"Don't waste your ammunition, men!"

Startled faces looked up. And in that second of respite, the snake coiled and butted its flat-nosed bead against the grating.

In a shower of rust-flakes it fell outward, and the snake was gone like a streak of green fire.

Tex heard Breska cursing in a low undertone. A sudden silence had fallen on the compound. Men fingered the broken grating, white-faced as they realized what it meant. There would be no metal for repairs until the relief column came.

It was hard enough to bring bare necessities over the wild terrain. And air travel was impracticable due to the miles-thick clouds and magnetic vagaries. There would be no metal, no ammunition.

Tex swore. "Reckon I'll never get used to those varmints, Captain. The rattlers back home was just kid's toys."

"Simple enough, really." Captain Smith spoke absently, his gray eyes following the sag of the rusty netting below.

"The green snakes, like the planarians, decrease evenly in size with starvation. They also have a vastly accelerated metabolism. When they get food, which happens to be blood, they simply shoot out to their normal size. An injected venom causes their victims to fight off help until the snake has fed."

Breska snarled. "Cute trick the swamp men thought up, starving those things and then slipping them in on us through the drain pipes. They're so tiny you miss one, every once in a while."

"And then you get that." Tex nodded toward the corpse. "I wonder who the war-chief is. I'd sure like to get a look at him."

"Yes," said Captain Smith. "So would I." He turned to go, crawling below the parapet. You never knew what might come out of the fog at you, if you showed a target. The body was carried out to the incinerator as there was no ceremony about burials in this heat. A blob of white caught Tex's eye as a face strained upward, watching the officer through the rusty netting.

Tex grunted. "There's your countryman, Breska. I'd say he isn't so sold on the idea of making Venus safe for colonists."

"Oh, lay off him, Tex." Breska was strangled briefly by a fit of coughing.

"He's just a kid, he's homesick, and he's got the wheezes, like me. This lowland air isn't good for us. But just wait till we knock sense into these white devils and settle the high plateaus."

If he finished, Tex didn't hear him. The red-haired Westerner was staring stiffly upward, clawing for his gun.

* * *

He hadn't heard or seen a thing. And now the fog was full of thundering wings and shrill screams of triumph. Below the walls, where the ground-mist hung in stagnant whorls, a host of half-seen bodies crowded out of the wilderness into which no civilized man had ever gone.

The rapid-fire pistol bucked and snarled in Tex's hand. Captain Smith, lying on his belly, called orders in his crisp, unhurried voice. C Battery on the northeast corner cut in with a chattering roar, spraying explosive bullets upward, followed by the other three whose duty it was to keep the air clear. Tex's heart thumped. Powder-smoke bit his nostrils. Breska began to whistle through his teeth, a song that Tex had taught him, called, "The Lone Prairee." The ground-strafting crews got their guns unlimbered, and mud began to splash up from below. But it wasn't enough. The gun emplacements were only half manned, the remainder of the depopulated garrison having been off-duty down in the compound.

The Venusians were swarming up the incline on which the fort stood,

attacking from the front and fanning out along the sides when they reached firm ground. The morasses to the east and west were absolutely impassable even to the swamp-men, which was what made Fort Washington a strategic and envied stronghold.

Tex watched the attackers with mingled admiration and hatred. They had guts; the kind the Red Indians must have had, back in the old days in America. They had cruelty, too, and a fiendish genius for thinking up tricks. If the relief column didn't come soon, there might be one trick too many, and the way would be left open for a breakthrough. The thin, hard-held line of frontier posts could be flanked, cut off, and annihilated. Tex shuddered to think what that would mean for the colonists, already coming hopefully into the fertile plateaus.

A sluggish breeze rolled the mist south into the swamps, and Tex got his first clear look at the enemy. His heart jolted sharply.

This was no mere raid. This was an attack.

Hordes of tall warriors swarmed toward the walls, pale-skinned giants from the Sunless Land with snow-white hair coiled in warclubs at the base of the skull. They wore girdles of reptile skin, and carried bags slung over their brawny shoulders. In their hands they carried clubs and crude bows. Beside them, roaring and hissing, came their war-dogs; semi-erect reptiles with prehensile paws, their powerful tails armed with artificial spikes of bone.

Scaling ladders banged against the walls. Men and beasts began to climb, covered by companions on the ground who hurled grenades of baked mud from their bags.

"Beetle-bombs!" yelled Tex. "Watch yourselves!" He thrust one ladder outward, and fired point-blank into a dead-white face. A flying

clay ball burst beside the man who fired the nearest ground gun, and in a split second every inch of bare flesh was covered by a sheath of huge scarlet beetles.

Tex's freckled face hardened. The man's screams knifed upward through the thunder of wings. Tex put a bullet carefully through his head and tumbled the body over the parapet. Some of the beetles were shaken off, and he glimpsed bone, already bare and gleaming.

Missiles rained down from above; beetle-bombs, green snakes made worm-size by starvation. The men were swarming up from the compound now, but the few seconds of delay almost proved fatal.

The aerial attackers were plain in the thinning mist--lightly-built men mounted on huge things that were half bird, half lizard.

The rusty netting jerked, catching the heavy bodies of man and lizard shot down by the guns. Tex held his breath. That net was all that protected them from a concerted dive attack that would give the natives a foot-hold inside the walls.

A gun in A Battery choked into silence. Rust, somewhere in the mechanism. No amount of grease could keep it out.

Breska swore sulphurously and stamped a small green thing flat. Red beetles crawled along the stones--thank God the things didn't fly. Men fought and died with the snakes. Another gun suddenly cut out.

Tex fired steadily at fierce white heads thrust above the parapet. The man next him stumbled against the infested stones. The voracious scarlet flood surged over him, and in forty seconds his uniform sagged on naked bones. Breska's shout warned Tex aside as a lizard fell on the catwalk. Its rider pitched into the stream of beetles and began to die. Wings beat close overhead, and Tex crouched,

aiming upward.

His freckled face relaxed in a stare of utter unbelief.

* * *

She was beautiful. Pearl-white thighs circling the gray-green barrel of her mount, silver hair streaming from under a snake-skin diadem set with the horns of a swamp-rhino, a slim body clad in girdle and breast-plates of iridescent scales.

Her face was beautiful, too, like a mask cut from pearl. But her eyes were like pale-green flames, and the silver brows above them were drawn into a straight bar of anger.

Tex had never seen such cold, fierce hate in any living creature, even a rattler coiled to strike.

His gun was aimed, yet somehow he couldn't pull the trigger. When he had collected his wits, she was gone, swooping like a stunting flyer through the fire of the guns. She bore no weapons, only what looked like an ancient hunting-horn.

Tex swore, very softly. He knew what that horned diadem meant. This was the war chief!

The men had reached the parapet just in time. Tex blasted the head from a miniature Tyrannosaurus, dodged the backlash of the spiked tail, and threw down another ladder. Guns snarled steadily, and corpses were piling up at the foot of the wall.

Tex saw the woman urge her flying mount over the pit of the compound, saw her searching out the plan of the place--the living quarters, the water tanks, the kitchen, the radio room.

Impelled by some inner warning that made him forget all reluctance to war against a woman, Tex fired.

The bullet clipped a tress of her silver hair. Eyes like pale green flames burned into his for a split second, and her lips drew back from reptilian teeth, white, small, and pointed.

Then she whipped her mount into a swift spiral climb and was gone, flashing through streamers of mist and powder-smoke.

A second later Tex heard the mellow notes of her horn, and the attackers turned and vanished into the swamp.

As quickly as that, it was over. Yet Tex, panting and wiping the sticky sweat from his forehead, wasn't happy.

He wished she hadn't smiled.

Men with blow-torches scoured the fort clean of beetles and green snakes. One party sprayed oil on the heaps of bodies below and fired them. The netting was cleared, their own dead burned.

Tex, who was a corporal, got his men together, and his heart sank as he counted them. Thirty-two left to guard a fort that should be garrisoned by seventy.

Another attack like that, and there might be none. Yet Tex had an uneasy feeling that the attack had more behind it than the mere attempt to carry the fort by storm. He thought of the woman whose brain had evoked all these hideous schemes--the beetle-bombs, the green snakes. She hadn't risked her neck for nothing, flying in the teeth of four batteries.

He had salvaged the lock of silver hair his bullet had clipped. Now it

seemed almost to stir with malign life in his pocket.

Captain John Smith came out of the radio room. The officer's gaunt face was oddly still, his gray eyes like chips of stone.

"At ease," he said. His pleasant English voice had that same quality of dead stillness.

"Word has just come from Regional Headquarters. The swamp men have attacked in force east of us, and have heavily besieged Fort Nelson. Our relief column had been sent to relieve them.

"More men are being readied, but it will take at least two weeks for any help to reach us."

* * *

Tex heard the hard-caught breaths as the news took the men like a jolt in the belly. And he saw the eyes sliding furtively aside to the dense black smoke pouring up from the incinerator, to the water tanks, and to the broken grating.

Somebody whimpered. Tex heard Breska snarl, "Shut up!" The whimperer was Kuna, the young Martian who had stared white-faced at the captain a short while before.

Captain Smith went on.

"Our situation is serious. However, we can hold out another fortnight. Supplies will have to be rationed still further, and we must conserve ammunition and man-power as much as possible. But we must all remember this.

"Help is coming. Headquarters are doing all they can."

"With the money they have," said Breska sourly, in Tex's ear. "Damn the taxpayers!"

". . . and we've only to hold out a few days longer. After all, we volunteered for this job. Venus is a virgin planet. It's savage, uncivilized, knowing no law but brute force. But it can be built into a great new world.

"If we do our jobs well, some day these swamps will be drained, the jungles cleared, the natives civilized. The people of Earth and Mars will find new hope and freedom here. It's up to us."

The captain's grim, gaunt face relaxed, and his eyes twinkled.

"Pity we're none of us using our right names," he said. "Because I think we're going to get them in the history books!"

The men laughed. The tension was broken. "Dismissed," said Captain Smith, and strolled off to his quarters. Tex turned to Breska.

The Martian, his leathery dark face set, was gripping the arms of his young countryman, the only other Martian in the fort.

"Listen," hissed Breska, his teeth showing white like a dog's fangs. "Get hold of yourself! If you don't, you'll get into trouble." Kuna trembled, his wide black eyes watching the smoke from the bodies roll up into the fog. His skin lacked the leathery burn of Breska's. Tex guessed that he came from one of the Canal cities, where things were softer.

"I don't want to die," said Kuna softly. "I don't want to die in this rotten fog."

"Take it easy, kid." Tex rubbed the sandy-red stubble on his chin and

grinned.

"The Skipper'll get us through okay. He's aces."

"Maybe." Kuna's eyes wandered round to Tex. "But why should I take the chance?"

He was shaken suddenly by a fit of coughing. When he spoke again, his voice had risen and grown tight as a violin string.

"Why should I stay here and cough my guts out for something that will never be anyway?"

"Because," said Breska grimly, "on Mars there are men and women breaking their backs and their hearts to get enough bread out of the deserts. You're a city man, Kuna. Have you ever seen the famines that sweep the drylands? Have you ever seen men with their ribs cutting through the skin? Women and children with faces like skulls?"

"That's why I'm here, coughing my guts out in this stinking fog. Because people need land to grow food on, and water to grow it with." Kuna's dark eyes rolled, and Tex frowned. He'd seen that same starry look in the eyes of cattle on the verge of a stampede.

"What's the bellyache?" he said sharply. "You volunteered, didn't you?"

"I didn't know what it meant," Kuna whispered, and coughed. "I'll die if I stay here. I don't want to die!"

"What," Breska said gently, "are you going to do about it?" Kuna smiled. "She was beautiful, wasn't she, Tex?" The Texan started. "I reckon she was, kid. What of it?"

"You have a lock of her hair. I saw you pick it from the net. The net'll

go out soon, like the grating did. Then there won't be anything to keep the snakes and beetles off of us. She'll sit up there and watch us die, and laugh.

"But I won't die, I tell you! I won't!"

He shuddered in Breska's hands, and began to laugh. The laugh rose to a thin, high scream like the wailing of a panther. Breska hit him accurately on the point of the jaw.

"Cafard," he grunted, as some of the men came running. "He'll come round all right."

He dragged Kuna to the dormitory, and came back doubled up with coughing from the exertion. Tex saw the pain in his dark face.

"Say," he murmured, "you'd better ask for leave when the relief gets here."

"If it gets here," gasped the Martian. "That attack at Fort Nelson was just a feint to draw off our reinforcements."

Tex nodded. "Even if the varmints broke through there, they'd be stopped by French River and the broken hills beyond it."

A map of Fort Washington's position formed itself in his mind; the stone blockhouse commanding a narrow tongue of land between strips of impassable swamp, barring the way into the valley. The valley led back into the uplands, splitting so that one arm ran parallel to the swamps for many miles. To fierce and active men like the swamp-dwellers, it would be no trick to swarm down that valley, take Fort Albert and Fort George by surprise in a rear attack, and leave a gap in the frontier defenses that could never be closed in time.

And then hordes of white-haired warriors would swarm out, led by that beautiful fury on the winged lizard, rouse the more lethargic pastoral tribes against the colonists, and sweep outland Peoples from the face of Venus.

"They could do it, too," Tex muttered. "They outnumber us a thousand to one."

"And," added Breska viciously, "the lousy taxpayers won't even give us decent equipment to fight with."

Tex grinned. "Armies are always stepchildren. I guess the sheep just never did like the goats, anyhow." He shrugged. "Better keep an eye on Kuna. He might try something."

"What could he do? If he deserts, they'll catch him trying to skip out, if the savages don't get him first. He won't try it."

But in the morning Kuna was gone, and the lock of silver hair in Tex's pocket was gone with him.

* * *

Five hot, steaming days dragged by. The water sank lower and lower in the tank. Flakes of rust dropped from every metal surface at the slightest touch. Tex squatted on a slimy block of stone in the compound, trying to forget hunger and thirst in the task of sewing a patch on his pants. Fog gathered in droplets on the reddish hairs of his naked legs, covered his face with a greasy patina.

Breska crouched beside him, coughing in deep, slow spasms. Out under the sagging net, men were listlessly washing underwear in a tub of boiled swamp water. The stuff held some chemical that caused a stubborn sickness no matter what you did to it.

Tex looked at it thirstily. "Boy!" he muttered. "What I wouldn't give for just one glass of ice water!"

"Shut up," growled Breska. "At least, I've quit being hungry" He coughed, his dark face twisted in pain. Tex sighed, trying to ignore the hunger that chewed his own belly like a prisoned wolf. Nine more days to go. Food and water cut to the barest minimum. Gun parts rusting through all the grease they could put on. The strands of the net were perilously thin. Even the needle in his hand was rusted so that it tore the cloth.

Of the thirty-one men left after Kuna deserted, they had lost seven; four by green snakes slipped in through broken drain gratings, three by beetle-bombs tossed over the parapet. There had been no further attacks. In the dark, fog-wrapped nights swamp men smeared with black mud crept silently under the walls, delivered their messages of death, and vanished. In spite of the heat, Tex shivered. How much longer would this silent war go on? The swamp-men had to clear the fort before the relief column came. Where was Kuna, and why had he stolen that lock of hair? And what scheme was the savage beauty who led these devils hatching out?

Water slopped in the tub. Somebody cursed because the underwear never dried in this lousy climate. The heat of the hidden sun seeped down in stifling waves. And suddenly a guard on the parapet yelled.

"Something coming out of the swamp! Man the guns!" Tex hauled his pants on and ran with the others. Coming up beside the lookout, he drew his pistol and waited.

Something was crawling up the tongue of dry land toward the fort. At first he thought it was one of the scaly war-dogs. Then he caught a gleam of scarlet collar-facings, and shouted.

"Hold your fire, men! It's Kuna!"

The grey, stooped thing came closer, going on hands and knees, its dark head hanging. Tex heard Breska's harsh breathing beside him. Abruptly the Martian turned and ran down the steps.

"Don't go out there, Breska!" Tex yelled. "It may be a trap." But the Martian went on, tugging at the rusty lugs that held the postern gate. It came open, and he went out.

Tex sent men down to guard it, fully expecting white figures to burst from the fog and attempt to force the gate.

Breska reached the crawling figure, hauled it erect and over one shoulder, and started back at a stumbling run. Still there was no attack. Tex frowned, assailed by some deep unease. If Kuna had gone into the swamps, he should never have returned alive. There was a trap here somewhere, a concealed but deadly trick.

Silence. The rank mist lay in lazy coils. Not a leaf rustled in the swamp edges.

Tex swore and ran down the steps. Breska fell through the gate and sagged down, coughing blood, and it was Tex who caught Kuna. The boy lay like a grey skeleton in his arms, the bones of his face almost cutting the skin. His mouth was open. His tongue was black and swollen, like that of a man dying of thirst.

Kuna's sunken, fever-yellowed eyes opened. They found the tub, in which soiled clothing still floated.

With a surge of strength that took Tex completely by surprise, the boy broke from him and ran to the water, plunging his face in and gulping like an animal.

Tex pulled him away. Kuna sagged down, sobbing. There was something wrong about his face, but Tex couldn't think what.

"Won't let me drink," he whispered. "Still won't let me drink. Got to have water." He clawed at Tex. "Water!"

Tex sent someone after it, trying to think what was strange about Kuna, scowling. There were springs of sweet water in the swamps, and even the natives couldn't drink the other. Was it simply the desire to torture that had made them deny the deserter water?

Tex caught the boy's collar. "How did you get away?" But Kuna struggled to his knees. "Breska," he gasped. "Breska!" The older man looked at him, wiping blood from his lips. Kuna said something in Martian, retched, choked on his own blood, and fell over. Tex knew he was dead.

"What did he say, Breska?"

The Martian's teeth showed briefly white.

"He said he wished he'd had my guts." His expression changed abruptly. He caught Tex's shoulder.

"Look, Tex! Look at the water!"

* * *

Where there had been nearly a full tub, there was now only a little moisture left in the bottom. While Tex watched, that too disappeared, leaving the wood dry.

Tex picked up an undershirt. It was as dry as any he'd ever hung in the prairie air, back in Texas. He touched his face. The skin was like

sun-cured leather. His hair had not a drop of fog on it.

Yet the mist hung as heavy as ever.

Captain Smith came out of the radio room, looking up at the net and the guns. Tex heard him mutter, quite unconsciously.

"It's the rust that'll beat us. It's the rust that'll lose us Venus in the end."

Tex said, "Captain...."

Smith looked at him, startled. But he never had time to ask what the matter was. The lookout yelled. Wings rushed overhead. Guns chattered from the parapet. The attack was on.

Tex ran automatically for the catwalk. Passing Kuna's crumpled body, he realized something he should have seen at first.

"Kuna's body was dry when he came into the fort. All dry, even his clothes." And then, "Why did the swamp-men wait until he was safely inside and the door closed to attack?"

With a quarter of their guns disabled and two-thirds of their garrison gone, they still held superiority due to their position and powerful weapons. There was no concerted attempt to force the walls. Groups of white-haired warriors made sallies, hurled beetle-bombs and weighed bags of green snakes, and retired into the mist. They lost men, but not many. In the air, it was different. The weird, half-feathered mounts wheeled and swooped, literally diving into the gunbursts, the riders hurling missiles with deadly accuracy. And they were dying, men and lizards, by the dozen. Tex, feeling curiously dazed, fired automatically. Bodies thrashed into the net. Rust flakes showered like rain. Looking at the thin strands, Tex wondered how long it would hold.

Abruptly he caught sight of what, subconsciously, he'd been looking for. She was there, darting high over the melee, her silver hair flying, her body an iridescent pearl in the mist.

Captain Smith spoke softly.

"You see what she's up to, Tex? Those flyers are volunteers. Their orders are to kill as many of our men as possible before they die themselves, but they must fall inside the walls! On the net, Tex. To weaken, break it if possible." Tex nodded. "And when it goes...."

"We go. We haven't enough men to beat them if they should get inside the walls."

Smith brushed his small military mustache, his only sign of nervousness. Tex saw him start, saw him touch the bristles wonderingly, then finger his skin, his tunic, his hair.

"Dry," he said, and looked at the fog. "My Lord, dry!"

"Yes," returned Tex grimly. "Kuna brought it back. He couldn't get wet even when he tried to drink. Something that eats water. Even if the net holds, we'll die of thirst before we're relieved."

He turned in sudden fury on the distant figure of the woman and emptied his gun futilely at her swift-moving body.

"Save your ammunition," cautioned Smith, and cried out, sharply. Tex saw it, the tiny green thing that had fastened on his wrist. He pulled his knife and lunged forward, but already the snake had grown incredibly. Smith tore at it vainly.

Tex got in one slash, felt his knife slip futilely on rubbery flesh of enormous contractile power. Then the venom began to work. A mad

look twisted the officer's face. His gun rose and began to spit bullets. Grimly, Tex shot the gun out of Smith's hand, and struck down with the gun-barrel. Smith fell. But already the snake had thrown a coil round his neck and shifted its grip to the jugular.

Tex sawed at the rubbery flesh. Beaten as though with a heavy whip, he stood at last with the body still writhing in his hand.

Captain Smith was dead, with the snake's jaws buried in his throat. Dimly Tex heard the mellow notes of the war-chief's horn. The sky cleared of the remnants of the suicide squad. The ground attackers vanished into the swamps. And then the woman whirled her mount sharply and sped straight for the fort.

Puffs of smoke burst around her but she was not hit. Low over the parapet she came, so that Tex saw the pupils of her pale-green eyes, the vital flow of muscles beneath pearly skin.

He fired, but his gun was empty.

She flung one hand high in derisive salute, and was gone. And Breska spoke softly behind Tex.

"You're in command now. And there are just the fourteen of us left."

* * *

Tex stood staring down at the dead and dying caught in the rusty net. He felt suddenly tired; so tired that just standing and looking seemed too much drain on his wasted strength.

He didn't want to fight any more. He wanted to drink, to sleep, and forget. There was only one possible end. His mouth and throat were dry with this strange new dryness, his thirst intensified a hundredfold.

The swamp men had only to wait. In another week they could take the fort without losing a man. Even with the reduced numbers of the defenders, this fiendish thing would make their remaining water supply inadequate. And then another thought struck him. Suppose it stayed there, so that even if by some miracle the garrison held out, it made holding the fort impossible no matter how many men, or how much water, there was?

The men were looking at him. Tex let the dead snake drop to the catwalk and vanish under a pall of scarlet beetles.

"Clean up this mess," said Tex automatically. Breska's black eyes were brilliant and very hard. Why didn't the men move?

"Go on," Tex snapped. "I'm ranking officer here now." The men turned to their task with a queer reluctance. One of them, a big scar-faced hulk with a mop of hair redder far than Tex's, stood long after the others had gone, watching him out of narrowed green eyes. Tex went slowly down into the compound. There were no breaks in the net, but another few days of rust would finish them.

What was the use of fighting on? If they left, now, they might get out alive. Headquarters could send more men, retake Fort Washington. But Headquarters didn't have many men. And the woman with the eyes like pale-green flames wouldn't waste any time.

Some falling body had crushed a beetle-bomb caught in the net. The scarlet things were falling like drops of blood on Kuna's body. Tex smiled crookedly. In a few seconds there'd be nothing left of the flesh Kuna had cherished so dearly.

And then Tex rubbed freckled hands over his tired blue eyes, wondering if he were at last delirious.

The beetles weren't eating Kuna.

They swirled around him restlessly, scenting meat, but they didn't touch him. His face showed parchment dry under the whorls of fog. And suddenly Tex understood.

"It's because he's dry. They won't touch anything dry." Recklessly, he put his own hand down in the scarlet stream. It divided and flowed around it, disdaining the parched flesh.

Tex laughed, a brassy laugh with an edge of hysteria in it. Now that they were going to die anyway, they didn't have to worry about beetle-bombs. Feet, a lot of them, clumped up to where he knelt. The red-haired giant with the green eyes stood over him, the men in a sullen, hard-faced knot behind him.

The red-haired man, whose name was Bull, had a gun in his hand. He said gruffly,

"We're leavin', Tex."

Tex got up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. We figure it's no use stayin'. Comin' with us?" Why not? It was his only chance for life. He had no stake in the colonies. He'd joined the Legion for adventure.

Then he looked at Kuna, and at Breska, thinking of all the people of two worlds who needed ground to grow food on, and water to grow it with. Something, perhaps the ancestor who had died in the Alamo, made him shake his sandy head.

"I reckon not," he said. "And I reckon you ain't, either." He was quick on the draw, but Bull had his gun already out. The bullet thundered

against Tex's skull. The world exploded into fiery darkness, through which he heard Breska say,

"Sure, Bull. Why should I stay here to die for nothing?" Tex tried to cry out, but the blackness drowned him. He came to lying on the catwalk. His head was bandaged. Frowning, he opened his eyes, blinking against the pain.

Breska hunched over the nearest gun, whistling softly through his teeth. "The Lone Prairee." Tex stared incredulously.

"I—I thought you'd gone with the others."

Breska grinned. "I just wasn't as dumb as you. I hung behind till they were all outside, and then I barred the door. I'd seen you weren't dead, and--well, this cough's got me anyway, and I hate forced marches. They give me blisters." They grinned at each other. Tex said,

"We're a couple of damn fools, but I reckon we're stuck with it. Okay. Let's see how long we can fool 'em." He got up, gingerly. "The Skipper had some books in his quarters. Maybe one of 'em would tell what this dry stuff is." Breska coughed and nodded. "I'll keep watch." Tex's throat burned, but he was afraid to drink. If the water evaporated in his mouth as it had in Kuna's....

He had to try. Not knowing was worse than knowing. A second later he stood with an empty cup in his hand, fighting down panic.

Half the water had vanished before he got the cup to his mouth. The rest never touched his tongue. Yet there was nothing to see, nothing to feel. Nothing but dryness.

He turned and ran for Captain Smith's quarters.

Hertford's Jungles of Venus, the most comprehensive work on a subject still almost unknown, lay between Kelland's Field Tactics and Alice in Wonderland. Tex took it down, leafing through it as he climbed to the parapet.

"Here it is," he said suddenly. "Dry Spots. These are fairly common phenomena in certain parts of the swamplands. Seemingly Nature's method for preserving the free oxygen balance in the atmosphere, colonies of ultra-microscopic animalcules spring up, spreading apparently from spores carried by animals which blunder into the dry areas.

"These animalcules attach themselves to hosts, inanimate or otherwise, and absorb all water vapor or still water nearby, utilizing the hydrogen in some way not yet determined, and liberating free oxygen. They become dormant during the rainy season, apparently unable to cope with running water. They expand only within definite limits, and the life of each colony runs about three weeks, after which it vanishes.' "

"The rains start in about a week," said Breska. "Our relief can't get here under nine days. They can pick us off with snakes and beetle-bombs, or let us go crazy with thirst, let the first shower clear out the ani--the whatyoucallits, and move in. Then they can slaughter our boys when they come up, and have the whole of Venus clear."

Tex told him about Kuna and the beetles. "The snakes probably won't touch us, either." He pounded a freckled fist on the stones. "If we could find some way to drink, and if the guns and the net didn't rust, we might hold them off long enough."

"If ," grunted Breska. "If we were in heaven, we wouldn't have to worry."

The days that followed blurred into a daze of thirst and ceaseless watching. For easier defense, there was only one way down from the parapet through the net. They took the least rusted of the guns and filled the small gap. They could hold out there until they collapsed, or the net gave. They wasted several quarts of water in vain attempts to drink. Then they gave it up. The final irony of it made Tex laugh.

"Here we are, being noble till it hurts, and it won't matter a damn. The Skipper was right. It's the rust that'll lose us Venus in the end—that, and these Dry Spots."

Food made thirst greater. They stopped eating. They became mere skeletons, moving feebly in sweat-box heat. Breska stopped coughing.

"It's breathing dry air," he said, in a croaking whisper. "It's so funny I could laugh."

A scarlet beetle crawled over Tex's face where he lay beside the Martian on the catwalk. He brushed it off, dragging weak fingers across his forehead. His skin was dry, but not as dry as he remembered it after windy days on the prairie.

"Funny it hasn't taken more oil out of my skin." He struggled suddenly to a sitting position. "Oil! It might work. Oh, God, let it work! It must!" Breska stared at him out of sunken eyes as he half fell down the steps. Then a sound overhead brought the Martian's gaze upward.

"A scout, Tex! They'll attack!"

Tex didn't bear him. His whole being was centered on one thing—the thing that would mean the difference between life and death.

Dimly, as he staggered into the room where the oil was kept, Tex heard a growing thunder of wings. He groaned. If Breska could only hold out for a moment.

It took all his strength to turn the spigot of the oil drum. It was empty. All the stuff had been used to burn bodies. Almost crying, Tex crawled to the next one, and the next. It was the fourth drum that yielded black, viscous fluid. Forcing stiff lips apart, Tex drank.

If there'd been anything in him, he'd have vomited. The vile stuff coated lips, tongue, throat. Outside, Breska's gun cut in sharply. Tex dragged himself to the water tank.

"Running water," he thought. Tilting his head up under the spigot, he turned the tap. Water splashed out. Some of it hit his skin and vanished. But the rest ran down his oil-filmed throat. He felt it, warm and brackish and wonderful, in his stomach.

He laughed, and let go a cracked rebel yell. Then he turned and lurched back outside, toward the steps.

The net sagged to the weight of white-haired warriors and roaring lizards. Breska's gun choked and stammered into silence. Tex groaned in utter agony. It was too late. The rust had beaten them.

His freckled, oil-smeared face tightened grimly. Drawing his gun, he charged the steps.

"Where the hell did you go?" snarled Breska. "The ammo belt jammed." He grabbed for the other gun set in the narrow gap.

Then it wasn't rust! And Tex realized something else. There were no rust flakes falling from the net.

Something had stopped the rusting. Before, his physical anguish had been too great for him to see that the net strands grew no thinner, the gun-barrels no rustier.

Scraps of the explanation shot through Tex's mind. Breska's cough stopping because the air was dried before it reached his lungs. Dry stone. Dry clothing.

Dry metal! The water-eating organisms kept the surface dry. There could be no rust.

"We've licked 'em, Breska! By God, we've licked 'em!" He shouldered the Martian out of the way, gripped the triggers of the gun. Shouting over the din, he told Breska how to drink, sent him lurching down the steps. He could hold the gap alone for a few minutes.

Looking up, Tex found her, swooping low over the fight, her silver hair flying in the wind. Tex shouted at her.

"You did it! You outsmarted yourself, lady. You showed us the way!" Scientists could find out how to harness the Dry Spots to keep off the rust, and still let the soldiers drink.

And some day the swamps would be drained, and men and women would find new wealth, new life, new horizons here on Venus.

Breska came back, grinning, and fought the jam out of the gun. White bodies began to pile up, mixed with the saurian carcasses of their war-dogs. And presently the notes of the war-chief's horn drifted down, and the attackers faded back into the swamps.

And suddenly, wheeling her mount away from the others, the warrior woman swooped low over the parapet. Tex held his fire. For a moment he thought she was going to dash her lizard into them. Then,

at the last second, she pulled him up in a thundering climb.

Her face was a cut-pearl mask of fury, but her pale-green eyes held doubt, the beginning of an awed fear. Then she was gone, bent low over her mount, her silver hair hiding her face.

Breska watched her go. "For Mars," he said softly. Then, pounding Tex on the chest until he winced.

Two voices, cracked, harsh, and unmusical, drifted after the retreating form of the white-haired war-chief.

"Oh, bury us not on the lone prairie-e-e...."

Lord Of The Earthquake

Chapter I

The Cosmic Hole

IT WAS stiflingly hot in the submarine's tiny cabin. The steady pound of the screws was a throbbing ache. Coh Langham, his scarred hawk face set in lines of restless boredom, stared out the port at the featureless muck that rolled endlessly away under the searchlight,

"Krim," he said abruptly, "you're crazy"

Simon Krim, hunched like a shaggy black bull over the tiny control panel, spoke without taking his eyes from the sea-floor. "What's the matter, Langham? Has the thrill petered out?"

"Thrill!" Langham's strong brown body, stripped to dungarees, hitched angrily lower in the seat. Yes, he had expected a thrill. He had hated seeing Krim again; it took him back to a time he wanted to forget. But Krim had asked him, and he, at a loose end and restless as always, had accepted. Hunting a sunken continent with a submarine was something he hadn't done before. It looked exciting.

The excitement had resolved itself into three weeks of hellish monotony, heat, and inactivity, and utter boredom.

Simon Krim grunted. "That's all you think about, isn't it? Thrills. Your father was a hard-working archeologist, my best friend. And you spend your life crashing planes and climbing mountains, having adventures.

There was an edge to his voice; his hairy body gleamed with sweat,

and there were tight lines around his mouth.

Coh Langham's blue eyes went hard under the scarlet cloth that held back his damp fair hair. "My life's my own, Krim. My father certainly never got much out of his!"

He locked his hands suddenly behind his head. The motion, in the dim greenish light that seeped through the ports, made a ripple of color up his arms and across his muscular chest. Kukulkan, the Feathered Serpent, writhed in blue-and-crimson splendor upward from each hand, to meet crest to crest on his breast.

"I still say you're crazy, Krim," Langham said. "You spend your life mucking, like my father did, in God-forsaken holes, tracking down the Murian legend--that damned Murian legend, that I had rammed down my throat daily until I was twenty-three! Now you put every cent you own into this submarine, and go poking along the bottom of the Pacific trying to find proof that Mu really existed. What does it get you?"

Simon Krim turned to look at him, stubby fingers raking at his tangled black hair. "I don't know," he said slowly. "I don't think I ever stopped to figure it out--except that I'm happy; and I wouldn't be happy doing anything else."

Coh Langham laughed. It was an ugly little laugh, and it turned Krim's stubbled face into a thundercloud.

"That's the trouble with you, Langham," he blurted. "You don't I. How what happiness is. You're too damned selfish. You say your fat father never got anything out of life. Well, he died happy, and several people regretted his death--which is more than they'd do if you I broke your fool neck!"

Krim's words waked something in Coh Langham; a loneliness, a dissatisfaction, a sense of lack. Then, as always, a blind anger surged up and drowned the fleeting vision. He came erect, his hands resting lightly on his belt—a heavy belt with a massive silver buckle, curiously scarred and dented.

"I saw my father die," he said with dangerous softness. "Fever, in a swamp in Yucatan. All his precious archeology never brought him anything. I le died poor, a young man. He was cheated, Krim! Well, you can plod and plug and dig in kitchen middens, and 'die happy'. And you can shut up!"

Still Krim stared at him, forehead wrinkled in groping thought. "It looks to me," he said slowly, "as though you're running away from something. I don't know. But I wish to God I had the brain you're wasting!"

Again that truth nagged at Coh Langham's soul. He beat it back, and his hands tightened on his belt. Krim's face enraged him. What right did the plodding fool have to question him? Then, over Krim's shoulder, rising out of the murky water, he saw something that sent a great wild emotion surging through him, a feeling unbidden and strange.

"Simon!" he cried. "A pyramid!"

Krim stared. His stubbled jaw worked, but no words came. Then he sent the submarine shooting toward the majestic, water-worn pile that reared from the muck, split here by a great fissure running down from low, flat hills.

Langham, stirred in spite of himself, watched out the port. Suddenly he gripped the fixtures, so that the twin serpents writhed convulsively. "Turn!" he shouted. "Turn!"

Krim stared, uncomprehending. Langham threw himself bodily at the controls. Then he was drowned, blinded, deafened, in roaring darkness that was like no darkness he had ever known.

He felt the submarine shudder, a strange, silent quiver as though its very atoms were shifting; felt his own body twisted by great impalpable forces, heard himself cry out in wild terror. Then there was only darkness and a horrible rushing as though the little ship was hurtling to the outer ends of space.

Chapter II

TO ANCIENT MU!

COH LANGHAM woke to coppery light streaming through canted ports. Climbing across the tilted deck, he looked out onto low hills alternately tilled and forested, sloping to a green plain. The roofs of what seemed to be his buildings were visible across the first ridge, and just within the range of Langham's vision to the right was a bulking outline that made him stare with a queer sense of vertigo:

A pyramid, flat topped and terraced, worn by centuries but still clear and sharp of outline, the carvings plain--a lot plainer, Coh Langham thought, than when he had seen it a few minutes ago, at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean.

Whirling, he shook Simon Krim to his feet, silently because all he might have said was too wild for utterance. Then he wrenched the hatch open and climbed out, his keen, scarred face alert.

For the first time, he regretted that they carried no weapons on the submarine, and his hands hovered near the massive buckle on his belt.

Nothing stirred. There was stifling heat and a faint hint of sulphur on the air, and an ugly yellow tinge to the murky sun. Here and there were cracks in the plain's turf and falls of loose rock that Coh Langham knew meant recent earthquakes. The low hills and the plain looked familiar; here was where the fissure had run, and there was the pyramid.

The pyramid, now untouched by twelve thousand years of ocean burial. A thought spoke in Langham's mind--a thought so fantastic, so incredible that he shook it angrily away.

Krim was staring about with blank amazement. He saw the pyramid. A look almost of reverent worship came over him, and he whispered: "Older than the Temple of Sacred Mysteries at Uxmal! But...my God, Coh, what happened?"

Langham's scarlet headcloth shook. "I saw something queer about the water near the pyramid; a sort of hole that seemed to be sucking the water in. I tried to turn...."

"And we got caught." Krim scratched his unkempt head in something like panic. "Where in hell are we?"

"I don't know" said Langham, admitting to himself that he was almost afraid to think. "We'll find somebody and ask."

The submarine was jammed fast in the narrow channel of a stream that flowed deep and swift away from the low side of the canting deck. Langham looked over the other side, and clutched dizzily at Krim.

He was looking down into illimitable emptiness--a hole, like the hole that had been beside the sunken pyramid, with a rim that wasn't a normal, solid rim, but one that wavered and shifted. Up to ground

level there was nothing. Then, exactly parallel with the earth, there was water, flowing in a steady stream, salt water, bearing an occasional deep-sea creature that promptly exploded with the release of pressure.

Coh Langham rubbed his scarred chin, and his first mad thought came back with battering-ram force. Turning, he leaped the short distance to the stream's bank, and started toward the buildings that showed over the first little hill.

And then he stopped, because there was a shadow across the sun, and he saw that the roofs were burning.

Simon Krim, lumbering up beside him like a shaggy black bull, cocked his head. "Sounds like a fight. I'll bet no accident started that fire!"

Kukulcan writhed as Coh Langham shrugged his shoulders. "We've got to find out where we are, and that's the only place I see. Anyway, the fight's none of ours. They'll let us alone." He strode off through the hot, dingy sunshine. Krim swore under his breath and followed.

THE picture was clear when they topped the hill. Low rambling buildings built of stone were being gutted by the fire, buildings much finer than a common farm. Loot was piled in jumbled heaps on the trampled grass, and a mob of yelling men had four people cornered under the sod roof of a cow-byre.

Four people; a man like an oak tree, grey and stalwart, two fair-haired striplings whom Langham guessed to be twins, and a thin, dark young man whose free hand pressed a bleeding wound. They fought desperately, but the end was clear. And Coh Langham's gorge rose as he saw how the leader of the mob, a paunchy, great-shouldered man covered all over his swarthy body with ornaments,

held his men off so that the sport should be prolonged.

One of the fair-haired lads fell with an axe-blade through his brain. The other cried out "Helva!", and Langham knew that it was no boy, but a woman.

Coh Langham had little use for women, but he couldn't help admiring that splendid girl. She was something new to him. Excitement poured along his veins; in a second his belt was off, wrapped around his tattooed right hand, the great buckle swinging free, and he was striding down the slope.

Krim caught him. "You damned fool, you'll only get us killed!" Langham shook him off. "Start running, if you think you can beat them. They've seen us already."

There was nothing for it but to fight. They stood back to back, seeing in the mad-dog faces of the running men the hopelessness of peaceful advances, even if they could make themselves understood.

Over the attackers' heads, Langham saw that the three still standing under the sod roof were taken and being bound. Then men were rushing at him with drawn swords and heavy scythes, and he knew he was going to die without even knowing where he was.

A squat yellow man cried out, and then a negro, passing it on to others, white and brown and indiscriminate. The ranks split, flowing by the two at bay. Brutish faces stared, filthy paws pointed, weapons fell away into a wary but not deadly circle.

Coh Langham realized abruptly that they were looking at Kukulcan, blue and crimson on his arms and breast.

He realized something else, feeling Krim start as he, too, understood.

Both men spoke Quichua and Polynesian and several other dialects, with a smattering of Quanlan. These men spoke a sort of mongrel combination, which Langham found later was a lingua franca spoken everywhere, and which was nearly as clear to the strangers as English.

A man came shouldering through the press; the paunchy, ornamented man who led them. Coh Langham had seen his type before, in a hundred native quarters where crime slinks down the black alleys and carouses in the wine-shops of nights. Very quickly he replaced his belt, and prayed that his weapon had not been noticed.

"Look, Itzan," whispered a one-eyed cutthroat. "He bears the sign of the Creator two-fold on his breast!"

Itzan studied the two, his vast shoulders bowed over his bloody sword, his coarse, cross-breed's face shining with sweat. Little blood-shot eyes traced the twin serpents up Langham's arms, and just for an instant Langham fancied he saw a flicker of fear. Then Itzan shrugged and straightened.

"We take the two of them to Xacul," he said. "Then if they be demons from Naga the Creator, why, the blame will be on Xacul's head, not mine." And he laughed, his belly shaking with the press of mirth that was silent save for a wheezing in his throat.

They were herded to where the three captives stood, the young man white and swaying, the girl like a leashed tigress, the old man with a bitter calm. Itzan laughed again, his ornaments clanking as he walked, and said softly: "Xacul's commands have been carried out, except for one thing. The old wolf was to die before his cubs were taken to the Master."

He placed the point of his sword at the base of the old man's throat and pressed. Itzan gave a sudden practised twist; the old man fell and was still, and Itzan's laughter wheezed and whistled in his throat.

Coh Langham saw the girl's face. It was like white marble, still and set and terrible.

Past the gutted buildings they were led, Krim and Langham shackled now like the others, and to a meadow where long gleaming metal cars rested on the grass. The cars had no wheels, and there were curving shells at the forward end. Langham, looking, saw Simon Krim's unshaven face as amazed as he knew his own must be.

He had read, in ancient Naga temples in India, of just such ships that flew thirty thousand years before the flood. But he had not quite believed.

THE loot-laden mob split, most of them going off across the meadows to, Langham supposed, other homes waiting to be gutted. Some forty were left, and these were divided between the two cars -- Simon Krim and the wounded man in one, Langham and the girl with Itzan in the other. As they were parted, the girl cried "Sigri!" and struggled to break free. Itzan's hand caught her, held her as though she were chained to a post, although Langham was astonished at her strength.

Sigri, swaying against the wide eyed, unbelieving Krim, stained with blood from his wounded side, turned a thin face set with wildly burning eyes, and cried: "Don't be afraid, Helva. We've already escaped them, and what's happened, has happened!"

"Crazy," thought Langham. And Sigri looked it, his scarlet kilt in ribbons, dark hair streaming from a fillet of gold wire, his thin body quivering like a nervous horse. But suddenly, looking fair into those

feverish dark eyes, Langham knew that he was seeing a sane and brilliant man driven by an awful fear, and that his cry to Helva was more a cry of hope than a statement of fact.

Sigri's hand, held tight over the bleeding wound, dropped quickly to his girdle, felt something hidden there, and returned. Only Langham looking intently, saw the slight movement.

They went into the cars. Globes of clear quartz enclosing intricate prisms were raised just aft of the curving windscreens, covered with shields of what looked like lead, but appeared to be heavier and different in texture. These shields were cranked aside. Slowly a swirling, coruscating brilliance was born in the globes, flashing from facet to facet of the prism, boiling in a splendor of living light. Langham felt a thrumming of power through the body of the ship, and saw the ground dropping away beneath it.

Silently they rose, until the keel made safe clearance of the low hills. Then a second, smaller globe was raised at the stern, so that the ship maintained a steady level, and the cover of the small globe removed. Again Langham saw the birth of light in the prism, felt a surge of power, and the ground was streaming away beneath them.

The two ships fled together under the ugly, shrouded sun. A sulphurous wind snarled around the shield, whipping the girl Helva's long fair hair into Langham's face, catching at the scarlet cloth that bound his own. Coh Langham's square, scarred jaw was set, his eyes eagle-bright above his Roman nose.

"If I'm going to die," he said aloud, "I'm damned if I won't find out where and why first! You, girl, tell me, while that ape-faced butcher is busy up in front."

The girl Helva looked at him, and for the first time, she really saw Her

sea-colored eyes took him in, the dungarees and rubber-soled shoes, strong brown body and scarred brown face, coming at last to rest on Kukulcan. Her hand went to a silver amulet at her throat, and she whispered: "Who are you, in such strange clothing, with the Creator's symbol on your body?"

"Coh Langham," he said, "from...."

"From Mayax?" interrupted the girl, and something of the awe left her. "A prince of the house of Coh?"

Well, Langham thought, that's who I was named for, and he said, "Yes." Mayax meant Central America, and the Feathered Serpent was the Mayan version of Naga the Creator. Langham wondered whether that whim of decoration was going to do him good or evil. It had saved his life once, but might it yet kill him through giving religious offence? Then, as the full meaning of Helva's words percolated through his head, the knowledge that he had been fighting off since he first landed struck him squarely between the eyes. Gripping the girl's shoulders in crushing fingers, he demanded: "What land is this, and what year?"

There was fear in the girl's eyes, fear that he was mad, but she didn't flinch. "This is the Northern Kingdom of Mu, and the year of the Sun is two hundred thousand and six."

Langham's hands fell away. "According to ancient reckoning," he said in a flat voice, "Mu was that old when she sank. Mu sank...my God! I've traveled twelve thousand years in time!"

Chapter III

THE NEW GOD

HELVA caught him fiercely. "What do you know of the sinking of Mu? Are you as mad as Sigri? Or are you a demon, or a godling come to doom Xacul and his butchers?"

Langham shook his head dazedly. "I hardly know myself, Helva."

Her face was clear and lovely, her body strong and full and gracious in tunic. Her loss was in her eyes; the sorrow of them hurt him. Caught in a quite unfamiliar emotional surge, he took her hands in his, the chains of both of them clashing, and said: "But I want to be your friend. Perhaps we can help each other."

Helva shook her head. "Only God can help us now. We are being taken to Manoa for judgment, and with Xacul, that means death."

"You'll have to tell me what's going on. So much has happened since we came through the hole, and I don't...."

"The Hole!" Helva's fingers sank into his arm. "What do you know about the Hole?"

"Nothing. Only Krim and I were dragged through it somehow in our submarine. That's how we got here."

"Then...then Sigri is right!" whispered Helva, and Langham was startled at the look that came over her face. Not even when she was captured had she shown fear, but it was there now, stark and icy "Sigri is right. But it's mad! Mad!"

There was silence there in the hot wind, with Coh Langham staring into Helva's eyes, that looked beyond at something terrible.

A voice asked, "How goes it, demon?" Coh Langham glared up into Itzan's coarse dark face. He came to his feet, fingers instinctively at

his belt, but the girl forestalled him. She sprang like a tigress, silent and blazing eyed, swinging clenched hands weighted with metal cuffs and chain.

Itzan twisted, taking the blow on one great shoulder. His left hand caught Helva's wrists, his right swung open-palmed to her head. Langham caught her as she sagged back, and Itzan, looking down at her, laughed wheezingly until his paunch shook with it.

"Spitfire!" he said. "Xacul will give us rare sport with her!"

There was a red, animal rage surging in Langham, but he fought it down, realizing the futility of violence.

"Who is Xacul?" he demanded. "And why are butchers like you turned loose on the people?"

Itzan's ornaments clashed as he sat down, well out of reach and ready with his sword. He opened his mouth, then grinned and pointed over the side.

"There's the reason. If you are a demon, you should know. If you're not, well, there it is."

"Don't you care?" asked Langham, and Itzan shrugged.

"That's for Xacul to worry about."

Langham looked over the side. For a second he thought the motion of the ship had made him dizzy; the ground was wavering like a badly focussed film. Then he realized that he was watching an earthquake. More as concussion than sound he heard its roar, and saw green meadows slashed as though by a great sword with smoking fingers.

Itzan chuckled. "There won't be any more of those when Xacul and I

have killed all you Naga-worshippers."

"Why?" asked Langham incredulously.

"You're stupid for a demon," said Itzan. "Xacul tells us that the Creator either never was, or has deserted us, and that those who worship him bring evil on us instead of good. It's very simple. All we have to do is kill everybody, mostly people like the little spitcat with much land and loot, who refuses to deny Naga, or Kukulcan, or the Almighty, or whatever name you choose to call Him. Then with no one to call down evil, the quakes and the fire-spoutings stop." "Who is this Xacul?"

"He says he's God." Itzan rose, yawning, stretching his wide, squat body "I don't care. As long as he gives me sport and loot and the wine-shops afterward, he can call himself what he likes."

Laughing, he added, "Take care of the pretty hell-cat. She mustn't die yet!"

He lumbered away, up forward. Coh Langham's scarred face was murderous. Then Langham said, "Helva! Helva!" and lifted the dazed girl.

THERE was much he wanted to ask her; about Xacul, about the Hole and Sigri, and about this crazy revolution. But Itzan's blow had done something. Langham was glad it had, knowing that emotion too long dammed has ugly ways of breaking out. Helva cried, sitting hunched with her hair over her like a veil; sobbed over her father and her brother and her home until she was cried out. Then she swayed against him like a tired child, and Langham cradled her in his shackled arms.

Looking down at her, feeling the young vitality of her so close, Coh

Langham felt again that stirring of unhappiness in him, far stronger than when Krim's words had waked it. He had lost something, what he didn't know. The search had prodded him on during the ten years since his father's fruitless death, and left him as empty handed as when he started.

As always, an impatient anger rose in him, shaking off the mood. But his eyes, as the ship raced through the sulphurous sky, were drawn often to Helva's face.

The low sun was tingeing the coppery murk with red when Coh Langham began to see farms and roads below, with smoke from burning homesteads and groups of men fighting and running. The revolution, he thought, must be very new Presently he saw the walls and terraced buildings of a city rising ahead, and knew that it was Manoa.

He came near to forgetting his own danger. In spite of himself, he was living the dream that archeologists have and never realize; the chance to go back and see how the ruins looked when they were whole and peopled, how men lived and loved and died in the buried cities before they were buried. In this field the fountainhead was lost, and only cryptic hints were scattered throughout the world; hints that were laughed to scorn by most scientists. Now, through some miracle he couldn't understand, he was in Mu, the land whence, if you believed what the ruins and the carvings told you, the ten tribes descended from Adam and Eve had gone out to colonize the world, black, white, brown, and yellow.

The girl asleep in his arms was pure Norse, speaking the Quanlan of ancient Norway. King Quetzal had led his fair-haired people from Mayax to Cimmeria, leaving legends of blond Indians all through Central America. Itzan was mixed swarthy white, the Latin forerunners, and Negro, with a streak of brown thrown in. Brown that

had gone from Hiranypura in Mu to India, taking the Naga symbol with them.

Now, just ahead, rose the towering majesty of a pyramid, which had gone with the Murians to Central America, on to lost Atlantis, and from there with a priest's son named Thoth to Sais in Egypt.

The other ship, bearing Krim and Sigri, drew in closer. Langham saw his partner's shaggy head thrust over the side, avidly examining everything, and grinned. Apparently nothing worried him but seeing as much of Mu as he could. Irrationally, Langham was suddenly envious.

Looking at the glowing balls of crystal, he wondered for the hundredth time what raised the ships and made them go. It was not until much later that he learned that the Murians had for centuries had the secret of the cosmic ray, catching the boundless power in the prisms and using it to change the molecular vibration patterns of metals so that a repulsion field was created. Here in Mu, thousands of years before the Tertiary Era, when the world was flat because the mountains had not yet been born, the secret of anti-gravity was in everyday use.

In that way the great slabs of Baalbek, the images of Easter Island had been lifted and set in place. Just a network of metal set around the vast dressed blocks, the cosmic-ray globes unshielded, and the stones floated weightless as toy balloons.

The ships passed the city walls; there were fine stone buildings and paved streets black with people, and here and there fighting and looting still going on. The vast pyramid loomed above everything. Built around its base was the carved magnificence of a palace. The ships headed straight for the broad flat top of the pyramid, settled down.

Helva woke, sliding out of his arms with a look of silent gratitude.

Pushing back her golden mane of hair, she said quietly, "Because of this day, we might have been comrades. I'm sorry, Coh, that we must die--and without vengeance!"

Her sea-eyes were on Itzan's bejeweled ungainliness, and Langham remembered seeing the same look in the eyes of a wounded she-leopard. Then the cross-breed's great shoulders were bent above them, and he said: "Come and meet God, and celebrate the end of earthquakes! At least, we'll celebrate. Xacul is inclined to be too quick and unimaginative; he spoils our sport if we don't take care."

As they were herded out of the car to be joined with Krim and Sigrí, Langham asked for the third time, "Who is Xacul?"

Helva shook her head. "He came out of the southern forests; men say he was a hunter. My father said he was mad, but the people are driven mad too, with fear of the quakes, and they follow him. He has been preaching to them for a long time. Two days ago there was a quake that destroyed many towns and many people, and he said it was a sign for them to rise and destroy us. You have seen."

Coh Langham nodded. He had seen. And he hated Xacul as he hated the devil, before he ever saw him.

Simon Krim was as eagerly watchful as a child at a circus. He had bound Sigrí's wound with strips from his undershirt, and the slender, feverish man seemed to have caught a little strength. Langham ached to question him, but Itzan forbade further speech.

The four and their guards, headed by Itzan, marched down a ramp that spiraled toward the ground, passing level after level of rooms in which Langham glimpsed parchments and maps and instruments,

priceless records of a lost world. Simon Krim saw them too; Langham heard him swear as though the heart was being ripped out of him, and smiled. It would be nice to care as much as that about anything.

The ramp widened to a vast hall covered with magnificent murals and roofed with beams of gilded cedar. Ahead there were bronze doors twenty feet high, with the symbols of the Sacred Four and the flat Uighur Lahun set in jewels upon them. Itzan stopped to speak with the gilt-armored guards before the doors, and Langham felt a body sag close against him.

It was Sigri. At first he thought the man had fainted. Then he heard his urgent whisper, and knew that he was shamming. "Prophecy to Xacul!" Sigri's nervous vitality was like electricity to Langham. "Prophecy the destruction of Mu! It may win us time." Langham had a sudden horrible premonition. "Destruction?" "At dawn. I know!"

Sigri staggered away as the guards moved in. The great bronze doors swung open to a wild thrumming of harps, and they marched into Xacul's judgment chamber.

Chapter IV

THE EARTH ROCKS!

COH LANGHAM'S gaze swept across the floor inlaid with the lotus symbol of Mu, past two harpers alone in silent splendor, up seven steps of black basalt to the throne, which was a lotus flower cut from a single block of chrysoprase. There it stopped, seeing the hunter from the southern forests who called himself God.

Dull-gleaming ebony against the pale green lotus, with no stitch nor ornament on him but a leather clout, his body a towering symmetry of

muscle and sinew striped across the breast with the five great scars of a leopard's claws; straight black hair unbound, framing a face of Grecian purity, the face of a Tamil prince; sombre dark eyes that held still, far flames in their depths, and a little marmoset nestled against the curve of his columned neck; this was Xacul, who would stop the earthquake.

He looked at them like a man surfeited with wine.

"Today," he murmured, "I have killed a king. No lesser blood shall wash away the taste of that killing, until I have savored it."

Itzan swore under his breath. "But, Lord, these two are demons," he said hopefully. "The tall one bears the Snake on his breast. He says they have come from the Eternal to punish you."

Xacul, sunk and dazed in his vaulting dream, stroked the tiny marmoset and said softly:

"There is no Eternal, and I am Lord. My word goes through the land, even to the place of the Sun himself. In five moons I will rule all Mu, having the Colonies at my feet. Take these traitors below to the dungeons; tomorrow I will kill them. But today, I have spilled the blood of a king!"

Itzan's vast shoulders shrugged resignedly. Coh Langham, looking back as they were led out, saw those dark eyes still fixed on some mad and splendid distance, the marmoset like a grey puff-ball on an ebon shoulder.

"Get torches," said Itzan, and turned to his prisoners. "The regular prison is full, so you must go into the old pits. And you may stay there a week, Xacul has so many piled up ahead of you. There's a fine crop; it'll take me some time to get through them."

"You?" asked Langham. "Do you execute them all?"

"Only the strongest men. The rest the common butcher handles. The thing is, Xacul wants them killed quickly. I like a little sport. I let them fight me, man to man. Of course, I can't take too many chances, so their arms aren't as good as mine, but at least, they have a sporting chance."

Langham grunted. The torches were brought, and the guards turned off down a side corridor that presently went down and down without a break. Langham saw Sigri's face in the torchlight, thin and wild-eyed, and frightened. And once more there was that furtive movement to something hidden in his girdle.

"It was no use to prophesy," whispered Langham. "Xacul is quite mad. It either would have made no impression on him, or would have angered him to killing us out of hand."

Sigri nodded. "But it's true. We must escape before dawn!"

They came into a stone corridor that reeked of moldy dampness, where phosphorescent fungi held the torchlight after it was past. And twice on that descent Langham felt the earth heave and groan under him. The quakes hadn't yet obeyed Xacul.

Itzan stopped at last before the first of a row of rusty metal doors. "I'll put you together, because I don't want you going mad or committing suicide before your turn comes. The two demons should fight well; and I may even give the pretty spitcat a chance, by way of variety!"

Langham would have beaten Itzan's head in if he could have reached him. But the spears prodded them into the cell and the door clanged shut. Langham heard Itzan's wheezing laughter mingling with the retreating sandal-scuffs. Then there were darkness and silence.

The earth rolled and shivered and was still. Langham heard Helva's quick-drawn breath, and then her voice, saying: "Sigri! These men came through the Hole!"

"I know; the one called Krim told me. Again Langham sensed the driving nerve force in Sigir. He was like a taut wire, pulled almost to the breaking point. "Listen to me. You too, Helva, for I've never told you everything. I've hoped I was wrong, but the quakes and the fire-spoutings leave no doubt.

"You know the pyramid beside the Hole. When I was a small boy, it fascinated me so that I spent all my time there, while the others were playing. Krim will understand; it was the ancient things that drew me, the carvings on the walls. Seven thousand years old, and the secret has been lost. It's taken me all my life to decipher those carvings, but I've done it. And I wish I had never seen them!"

SIGRI'S voice shook. Then it went on again, calm over a depth of near hysteria. "No, I don't mean that. I was happy, working over those carvings, making them give up their secret. It's the secret that terrifies me!

"Tomorrow at dawn, the carvings say, this land, this beautiful land of mine will be destroyed. All the palaces, the temples, the farmlands, the great cities and the quiet places, all destroyed! Krim says it is true, that Mu will sink. That alone would be enough. But..."

His voice broke off weakly. Langham heard a rustle, a groan, a soft thud. Sigri had sat down, and his voice came again, stronger.

"The carvings say something else, something so strange that I thought for a long time I must be wrong in my translation. But the Hole has always been there. You know that now! The carvings explain it.

There is much I don't understand; I'm no scientist, only a lover of the past, But I'll try and tell you. You must understand! It means your lives."

There was a pause. Langham waited, feeling Helva taut beside him, sensing Simon Krim's methodical intentness. Sigri began again, slowly, choosing his words with care.

"The universe, according to the carvings, is something like a spool, winding the ribbon of time around it. The axis of the spool is the fourth dimension. By tapping it, you can go to any spot in happened time. So much I can grasp. But the rest is incredible! "The man who built the pyramid and made the carvings must have been myself! Because he, who found the way to tap the fourth dimension by twisting the warp of time and space as an augur bores wood, did so in order to escape the destruction of Mu! On the very dawn of Mu's sinking, he escaped to the past, seven thousand years.

"Now the cycle has been relived. I am again at the starting point. If Helva and I don't repeat the first action--the man took his sister with him--we'll not only be destroyed with Mu, but we'll cause some horrible disruption in the time-stream. Happened time cannot be altered!"

There was silence for some time. Then Krim said, "But the Hole only sucks one way. How can you go back through it?"

"You don't understand." Sigri's voice was ragged with urgency. "The Hole was first made when Mu was as she is now. You came upon it as Mu is in your time, which hadn't happened when--when I went through first. Dawn tomorrow ends the cycle. The revolving time-factors will close the Hole as the time of its first boring approaches. I'll have to bore it again, using the time machine that is also in the pyramid.

"There will be a moment, before the closing, when the field will be neutralized, so that you can escape back to your own time. You can't come with us, because you didn't come the first time, and we can't alter what's happened. If you stay, it means destruction."

Langham was silent, thinking hard. Once he would have said Sigri was mad. But there was no doubt that the Hole existed.

"I don't understand," he said at length. "You say that happened time may not be altered. Yet this time you copy the secret from a carved wall, not discover it yourself. We weren't here the first time. Xacul must have been, but were you captured?"

Sigri said slowly, "I don't know. Some of the carvings have been destroyed by quakes. That has puzzled me too, but the best I can figure is that some things may be fitted into the time-stream without disturbing it, if the place is wisely chosen, so that men can travel in time if they know how. Other things would conflict with happened things that were important, or leave a gap in time. In other words, although the method of approach may differ, the things that have happened must happen again."

Langham grunted. "Perhaps. But escape isn't going to be easy. It's a long Hight back, and it was sundown when we came into Manoa."

"There was a far-off roaring, coming closer. The stones leaped under them, rocked for two solid minutes, and were still. From the sound and feel, Coh Langham, who knew earthquakes, decided that the palace was built directly over a fault. If Sigri was right, if the convulsion that had plunged the continent to her death was starting, the palace would be first to go down.

He thought of the immeasurable tons of stone above them and shuddered. Yes, they must get out. Even if Sigri was crazy as a loon,

there were Xacul and his butcher Itzan, waiting.

Chapter V

STRUGGLE FOR LIFE

"THERE'S one thing more," said Sigri. It was almost a groan. "I don't know how the time-machine works. Alone, I haven't been able to decipher the carvings." There was a rustle as he drew something from his girdle; the thing, Langham knew, that he had been terrified of losing. "I was afraid another quake might destroy them, so I copied them on a strip of linen. You, Krim; you love the old things, like I do. Can you help me?"

Memories rose in Langham; things taught him in boyhood by his father, things learned from crumbling walls and cracked clay tablets. He stepped forward. "I'll help."

There was a sudden burst of light in the blackness as Simon Krim's cigarette lighter crackled, The tiny flame showed his face, heavy and dark-stubbed under his tangled hair, his eyes very steady "You had the makings of an archeologist when you were a boy, Coh," he said slowly "You wasted them. If Sigri, with his years of work, couldn't crack those carvings, you wouldn't be any more help than--than Itzan." He stopped, studying Coh Langham in the feeble glimmer of the flame.

"You're like Itzan, Coh," he said abruptly. "Sensation is all you live for. I imagine you're getting a great kick out of this. No, you can't help us, unless you can figure out some way to get us out of here. Which I doubt."

He squatted down beside Sigri, bending over the strip of cloth, and in a second he and the Murian were off in a world of their own.

Langham glared at them a moment, stung, furious. Then he turned to pacing restlessly up and down the cell, purposely keeping his eyes from the dull glint of gold that was Helva's hair. He knew that she was studying him from where she sat against the wall, and wished suddenly that she wouldn't.

Escape. He had to think out some way to escape. Somehow the thoughts wouldn't come, and his gaze kept going unbidden to the corner where the two men labored in the feeble light.

Up and down, up and down, with Kukulcan rippling to his impatient movements, his scarred hawk face catching bronze glints from the lighter-flame. Krim's words rang in his mind, pricking him to a blind anger. Like Itzan, was he, living only for sensation? Far better than living like a grub, sweating his life away like his father had, for nothing.

And yet, was it?

He stopped, standing tigerishly over the two men, lean hands at his belt. The old anger was hot in him, and suddenly he recognized it for what it was; a defense, a wall he had built against truth. It cooled away, leaving an ash of bitter loneliness. For ten years he had chased excitement, trying to drown the longing in him that he hadn't admitted even to himself. Now he was facing the ultimate thrill, death, and he had nothing to show for the days he had lived.

Krim and Sigri would have their monuments; small and unimportant, perhaps, but the fruits of work they had done because they loved it. His father had had that, too. He himself would have nothing.

Looking at those two, lost even to fear, Coh Langham realized the bitterest thing of all. He didn't belong. There was no one he could call friend, no group to which he was drawn. It wasn't just archeology. It

would have been the same in any line of work. He was nothing, like Itzan, a creature living solely for its own pleasure.

He wanted to help, and he was barred. His strength, his courage, were useless here. And he had nothing else to offer. He was merely a body, following a lone and aimless track, wasting soul and brain and life.

He turned suddenly and went down beside the girl; he couldn't have said why. He took her hands in his and bent his head over them, and whispered:

"I've been a fool, Helva. A fool, a fool!"

How long he stayed that way he never knew. Quakes slid down the fault, shook them, roared on. Krim and Sigri labored on. Helva never spoke, but her hands were strong and comradely in his. They calmed him, brought back his confidence, so that hope began to rise again. And they brought something else, a dim something he didn't understand.

Krim stirred, stretching cramped muscles. "We've cracked it! Now all we need is time."

Helva's fingers tightened suddenly. Langham listened, then sprang up. "Hide the linen!" he whispered. "Someone's coming!"

Footsteps and torchlight; many men, armed. The door grated open, and Itzan stood grinning at them, jeweled arms folded above his paunch.

"God wants to see you," he said. "These quakes you're making upset his dinner, demon, and I'm to punish you by death, right in the Lotus Hall. Yes, all of you; but the tall demon first!"

The Lotus Hall was crowded with men, sitting at long trestle tables down both sides of the vast room. The air was heavy with wine and the rich odors of food, and the harpers, over against the dais, played wild, throbbing music. In the cleared space between the tables a man danced near-naked with shining swords.

There were no women. And above the feasting and the dancer, a tower of ebony rising from a pale green base, Xacul sat and brooded, fondling the marmoset.

The music broke, the dancer stopped, the feasters were silent. Xacul's eyes, dark-veiled flames set in a Grecian mask of jet, dwelt on Coh Langham and the writhing splendor of Kukulcan.

"Demon," he said softly, "you dare too much. You mock me with these quakes. It is only because they fear me more than the earth-shock that my people stay at this feast; and I must show them that no demon is mightier than I.

"Slay him, Itzan!"

Coh Langham leaped forward. "Why Itzan?" he cried. "Why not you, Xacul?"

A gasp ran around the room. Xacul smiled and held out his right hand. Coh Langham saw that it was splashed to the elbow with dried blood.

"This was the blood of a king," murmured Xacul. "Three are left; the Southern and the Middle Kings, and the King of Kings, the Sun of Mu himself. To these three only will I bend my hand:' "Then I will prophesy!" cried Langham. A chance, perhaps; anything to gain time. "These little quakes are only the forerunners. Mu dies with the morning sun, and you with it, Xacul. The Eternal has sent me to warn you. Let us go, and perhaps He will have mercy."

Xacul's eyes were veiled. He stroked the marmoset, and whispered, "Slay him, Itzan!"

Coh Langham saw Helva's face, saw reflected in it what was in his own heart. He knew then that he loved her. Now that he knew his mistake, now that he could live, he couldn't die! Xacul was mad, and the only way to break him was to break his godship, to show his crazed mind a greater power. And Langham groaned. Even if Itzan didn't kill him, he couldn't see a way to win freedom from Xacul.

The harps struck a wild chord as Itzan strode forward, and in the same instant the ground roared and shook beneath them. The harps were abruptly silent, though the player's hands still plucked the strings, save for a weird, scattered disharmony.

Langham felt a shivering inside his ears and staggered dizzily. All over the room men swayed for a split second. Then the earth was silent and the dizziness was gone.

"The earthquake," Langham thought. Then he looked at the harps and a fierce light burst in his scarred hawk face.

He smiled as he whipped off his belt and stood to meet Itzan, thong around his tattooed hand, the great buckle swinging free. If he could win this fight, there as a way, perhaps.

Itzan came, vast shoulders hunched, sword swinging. Langham took a deep breath. Everything he had learned of fighting out there on the edges of the world he was going to need now.

They were alone between the tables, ringed with staring, nervous faces, the floor jarring under them and a rolling of thunder in the distance--thunder that Langham recognized as a volcano in

eruption. The time was growing desperately short.

Itzan's sword swung high, to end the fight with a single stroke. Langham crouched under it like a cat, sprang aside and leaped past, aiming a slashing blow that took Itzan under the ear. The cross-breed staggered and swore. He hadn't realized the portent of that heavy buckle. He came in again more warily, but Langham, vastly quicker of foot, cut him twice about the face before his next blow was aimed.

Itzan grinned suddenly. His head sank like a boxer's between his shoulders. His left arm, shielded with broad bracelets, came up to protect his face, and his long blade whistled as it swung. Langham's only target now was the thick ridge of muscle that ran across his shoulders. His only choice was to fall back before that murderous sword.

Back and back, leaping and dodging, seeking desperately for an opening, while the palace-pyramid groaned and shuddered almost with the regularity of a man's heartbeats and the tense-faced watchers drew closer to panic. Xacul, on his lotus throne, neither moved nor spoke.

Langham tripped suddenly, went to one knee and crouched there, panting as though spent, and Itzan, sure now of victory, paused for one instant with his sword upraised for the death-stroke, while his laughter wheezed and bubbled in his throat. And Langham's right arm swung like a striking snake.

The heavy buckle caught Itzan's heaving belly fair, stopping his laughter in a grunt of pain. His sword rang on the rock, but Langham was not beneath it. His lithe body shot in against Itzan's knees, crashing him backward to the floor, and in the instant that he lay half-stunned, Langham's belt was around his throat, Langham's knees were crushing his chest, and the iron muscles were straining across

Langham's back.

FOR the space of three long breaths, the Lotus Hall was silent. Then there sounded a snap like a twig breaking, and Coh Langham rose laughing from the body of Itzan, with Kukulcan sweat-shining on his heaving chest.

"I've killed your butcher, Xacul," he cried. "Naga protects me. Now is my blood worth your spilling?"

Xacul's answer whispered across the nervous quiet. "I was a hunter, and in the hot green forests I learned my strength. I am master of the trees, for I cut down the mightiest to build my shelter. I am master of men, for I have broken the strongest in my hands. I am master even of the beasts, for --" and he touched the five great scars on his breast--"I have killed the black leopard alone and weaponless. And one day I stood on a spur of rock while a mountain burst and fires flowed around me and the ground was shaken and split, and I was not harmed. And I knew then that I was master of all things. I am God!"

"Yet," said Langham, "I will show you a greater power, And any man who touches me to prevent me, shall die as Itzan died!" He swung about, crying, "Helva!"

She came, straight and unafraid across the shuddering stone, her hair a golden banner in the torch-flames. Coh Langham gripped her shoulders, and she paled before the urgency in his face.

"I don't know whether you play the harp," he said. "But go and play it, girl! Wait for the earthquakes and strike only the low notes. Strike them hard!" Taking his handkerchief, he ripped it apart and thrust half of it into her hand. "Stuff your ears with this. If you feel dizzy, hang onto something or lie on the floor. But don't stop hitting those strings!"

She went, and the harpers fled before Langham's imperious gesture. Langham yelled in English, "Krim! Stuff your ears with cloth, and make Sigri do it too. Watch yourselves!"

There was a sudden roaring shock that nearly threw him.

Great cracks opened in the walls and floor, and there was sound outside as of heavy things bounding and falling. Panic, hovering over the men at the tables, caught them now by the throat. God or no God, Xacul's authority, already weakened by Langham's unpunished challenge, lost its grip on them. They surged out like maddened cattle for the streets, leaving only trampled wreckage.

For an instant Langham thought he saw the way clear to escape; probably the soldiers that filled the halls had already run away. Then Xacul strode by him like a black colossus, and before Langham could gather his party and break for the door, it was barred and Xacul stood before it, arms folded across his scarred chest, the marmoset hugging his shoulder.

Langham gasped. He had not realized Xacul's size. Now, standing straight and on a level with him, he saw that Xacul's height was close to seven feet and that his shoulders were broader by four hands' breadth than burly Simon Krim's. To this giant, who had killed a black leopard unarmed, physical assault such as he and Krim could offer would be merely the slappings of children, "Play, Helva!" he shouted. "Play!"

Low thunder drummed in the distance where volcanoes burst. The earthquakes boomed along the fault beneath them. And Helva's fingers swept the harp-strings into thrumming life.

The low notes met and mingled. And Xacul said softly: "You are strong, demon. You are worthy of death at my hands."

Langham said, "The Snake protects me! Without arms I'll overthrow you, make you helpless as a babe to stand erect! You are no god, Xacul, and I'll prove it!"

IN HIS heart Coh Langham prayed--prayed desperately that what had happened once might happen again.

Back and back he went before Xacul's slow advance, across the cracked and rocking lotus floor. Krim stood white-faced in the shadows with Sigri leaning against him. Helva bent across the harp-strings. And the muted thunder, the earth-deep drumroll surged and echoed against the music.

Back back, praying that the harp would not be drowned, praying that the palace would not be thrown down, praying that Helva should strike the right chord before Xacul's hand took his throat and crushed it.

"Louder, Helva! Louder and deeper!" He didn't know whether she could hear him; the sounds were dim in his muffled ears.

Back and back he went across the shuddering stones, until the steps of the dais caught his heels and tripped him, so that he lay against them, watching Xacul's black face bend over him. And suddenly Helva's hands found a chord, a chord that met and silenced the low, dull thunder and was itself silenced. From the harp-strings broke a wild disharmony, so close to the two men that even through the cloth in his ears Langham heard it, and felt the vast shuddering of silent noise in the air.

Again and again, under Helva's strong brown hands that voiceless chord surged out. Great eddies of tortured air whirled about them, silent echoes were flung thundering from the walls and ceiling. Langham's head was filled with a rushing dizziness, a sense of sound

beating its wings to be heard. He saw Helva's body sag against the harp, but her hands never faltered on the strings.

Xacul stopped, his eyes wide and burning, and the marmoset shrieked on his shoulder. His hands went to his head, and he swayed.

"You're beaten, Xacul!" shouted Langham. "I have overthrown you. You are no God, only a man. A man, Xacul, a man!"

Xacul fell, sprawling on the riven stones. He tried to rise, and fell again, helpless as a baby. Langham saw his face. There was terror in it, but most of all a great crushing despair.

Coh Langham rose and stood over him, fighting for balance, and somehow there was no joy in his triumph. He looked at Xacul's mighty body thrown in useless beauty on the stones, at his eyes that were blank and cold and fixed on a black and hideous distance.

"I am no god," Xacul whispered. "I am no god. I am no god!"

Helva fell beside the harp. The horrible compression, the shuddering of leashed sound was gone, leaving only the muttering of the earth and the far volcanoes. Langham picked her up, carried her toward the door. A shock stronger than any before struck as the four went out, and Langham, looking back through the veil of dust that fell from cracking walls, saw Xacul still lying on the broken lotus paving, with the little marmoset huddled at his throat.

Chapter VI

BACK THROUGH TIME

THE pyramid was rocking dangerously as they fled up the ramp to

where the flying ships were kept. The end was near. Langham held Helva until she found her feet. She whispered, "What did we do?"

Langham told her, jerkily and without pride, as they struggled upward through a hell of cracking walls and falling rock and dust.

"You remember how the harps sounded when Itzan came out to fight me, and how the low notes were blanked out when the quake struck? Everyone in the hall was dizzy for a minute. I thought it was the quake. Then I realized that the noise of the earth, which wasn't very strong, had neutralized...look out!"

He held her as a mass of rock fell from the ceiling, almost blocking the passageway. They climbed over, Krim helping the feverish Sigri, and Langham went on.

"It neutralized the sound of the harp-strings, as any two notes in the same phase will neutralize each other. The vibrations didn't quite match; the disharmony we heard was the sum of the difference between the notes. But between the 'different notes' and the tremendous silent vibrations, the air in the hall was set in motion in a freakish way. The vibrations in the air apparently transmitted themselves to the lymph in the utriculus of the ear. That's the fluid that presses on the balance hairs and tells us which way is up. The balance centers were so confused that we nearly fell.

"I thought that what happened--God! Feel that jar! We've got to hurry!--might happen again, so I sent you to the harp and prayed. You finally hit it right. Xacul's balance centers were completely deranged. Of course, when he fell as I told him he would, and he saw me standing, his faith in himself was broken." Langham's mouth made a grim line above his scarred chin. "He was mad, and deadly. I had to do it. But I can't help feeling..."

They came out onto the flat top, under a moon as veiled and turgid as the sun had been, and stopped involuntarily. From west to east the northern sky was filled with flame where volcanoes burst, a vast leaping glare that flooded the whole country. In its light the land shook like a troubled sea, filled with the crash of falling buildings and the shrieks of little beings that ran and were swallowed up. Deep in the earth there were great drums booming, answered with thunder and dry lightning from low-scudding clouds, and from somewhere, far off, came a great rushing of water as the sea engulfed the lowlands.

Coh Langham thought of the age-old symbol of the lotus drowned, and was filled with a longing and a tight-throated pity.

The parapet broke away with part of the roof. Langham leaped for the nearest ship, giving Krim a hand with Sigri while Helva cranked furiously at the anti-gravity globe. The car shot upward, and Langham, looking back, saw the pyramid collapse onto the ruins of the palace like a child's castle of pebbles undermined by the sea.

Hot, sulphurous wind tore at him as he raised the directional globe. Krim and Sigri were lost again in their private world, huddled over the linen in the light of the larger globe. Langham smiled, but he was no longer bitter. He knew now what he wanted.

He took Helva in his arms, down on the floor of the pitching ship; his scarred hawk face was gentle, and the restlessness was gone from his eyes. "Helva," he said, "I can't leave you."

Her wind-whipped hair caressed him. "You must. There is no other way." Her hands tightened suddenly on his wrists, and her face was hidden.

"There may be a way," he whispered. "Kiss me, and let me think."

On westward, they went, above the deathbed of a continent, over toppling hills and riven fields and lakes of sudden fire. Dawn was pale through the sprouting flames when they sighted the pyramid, miles away but still standing.

Krim raised his shaggy head, and said wearily, "We've done it. We can run the time machine."

"Will it hold four, Sigri?" asked Langham.

Sigri's dark eyes went wide in his white face. "Easily. Why?"

"Well," said Coh Langham slowly, "it seems I've made a mess of my life in one time. I'd like to try righting it in another. You see, I've just discovered I was born to be an archeologist, and it's seldom one can go back to his ruins when they were new! I think I know Krim well enough to know he won't pass up the chance either. I hope not, because I'm going to need him, to teach me the things I need to know. Later, perhaps, when we've written a book about Mu that'll knock the greybeards out of their complacency, we'll go back to our own time. I'd like Helva to see London and the Rhine and Switzerland...."

He stopped at the sight of Krim's face, and laughed. Then he held out his hand. Krim took it and crushed it without speaking.

Helva's hands were tight on Langham's shoulders. "What are you saying? You can't come with us. Sigri says it would mean destruction, for us and everyone!"

"Sigri's theory has too many holes in it. He says that the large, the important things must not be altered. Who can judge what an 'important' thing is? Sometimes the smallest things change continents. And surely if the big things happened, the little things did

too, and can't be changed by so much as the cutting of a fingernail.

"He says that he and Helva must go through the Hole again, because it was done before, or suffer dire consequences. I don't think so, except that they'd surely be killed with the rest of the Murians if they stayed. I don't think so because no other part of their lives has exactly coincided with the lives of the first two who made the Hole. Therefore, if some things could be altered on the 'ribbon of time,' so could others."

DAWN brightened where the land burned itself out. The pyramid loomed closer. Langham went on.

"I think this is nearer right, Sigri. I think that instead of one ribbon wound on the spool of the universe, there are many, existing in different space-time continuums as people exist in different room's, without conflict. I think that each given time has a problematical future, a 'might-have-happened; and that if one goes back in time, one simply starts another ribbon winding on the cosmic spool toward another future, without disturbing the one, or the many, that already exist.

"In other words, Sigri, instead of reliving happened time, you have simply come to a similar point on the new ribbon that the first Sigri started. Your future hasn't already been lived; it's as problematical as mine or Krim's.

"How about it, Sigri? Does it appeal to your sense of logic?"

"Yes," answered the Murian thoughtfully. "Yes, it does. As I say, I'm no scientist. But I'm willing to take the chance." His brilliant dark eyes went to Helva. The girl's smile was glorious. Sigri held out a hesitant hand.

"This means friendship, doesn't it? After what you saved us from, Coh, I could be nothing but your friend. You, Krim; we are friends already!"

Langham felt, for the first time in his life, almost insanely happy as he sent the ship plunging down.

The ground groaned and split about them as they dashed for the doorway. White, staggering, Sigri led them to a strange machine in the dark interior; a circular platform surmounted by a vast corkscrew spiral of metal.

"On the platform!" he shouted, and threw a switch on a complex control-board, A prism began to whirl within the coil.

Helva's upturned face smiled at him in the coruscating brilliance. Langham had a fleeting glimpse of stone walls split and falling beyond a swirl of alien light. Then he was flying through blind, whirling space to start another ribbon winding on the cosmic spool.

No Man's Land in Space

I

The angry clamor rang through the narrow, stifling streets. In his headquarters, which were roofless and brick-walled like all the houses in the outlaw town of Sark, Geoffrey Dana heard it as it swelled and surged closer. His dark, satanically pointed face hardened, his light eyes narrowed and grew colder still.

Loren, the Venusian, jerked aside the fiber matting at the doorway. Heavy, acrid ground vapors sucked in around his feet. Dana caught the added grimness in his bitter young face, the veiled defiance in his blue eyes.

"More trouble?" asked Dana. Beyond the Venusian he could see men crowding around his doorway, silent and ill at ease now that they were here. Loren nodded his wheat-straw head. Two men came past him with a stretcher, and Dana rose, tall and deceptively slender in his white spun-glass coverall. The darkness of the asteroid's night seemed to pour in with the bitter air. Dana knew what he was going to see before he looked. In the last seven days five of his men had been brought to him this way. Six more had vanished. And his little kingdom of wolves, already sullen and restless because the Earth-Venus war had knocked their looting into a cocked hat, were getting ugly about it.

"Thompson the Earthman," said Dana softly, his steel-grey head bent. The corpse was big and powerful. Yet it had a curiously pale fragility, a transparency.

"Bled empty, like the others," said Loren. "Dana, the men..."

"Ah, yes. The men." Dana went to the doorway, staring out over the grumbling, uneasy crowd. "Well," he snapped. "What do you want?"

"You know what we want!" A big Venusian swamp-lander, condemned for piracy on three worlds, shouted it. "Where are our men going? What kills them? And what are you doing about it?"

"If you don't like what I'm doing about it," said Dana silkily, "you can always leave Sark."

Well hidden in the back, someone, a Martian by his accent, yelled, "You can't get out of it that way, Dana!"

"No," growled the Venusian pirate. "You know damn well this asteroid is the only place in the System our hides are safe. But we've got a right..."

"A right!" The lamplight from his table cut sharp planes on Dana's pointed face, laid black shadows in the scars, of living as much as of battle, about his thin mouth and cold grey eyes.

"You bleat about protection," he said. "Who gives it to you? Who found this asteroid beyond Interplanetary Law? Who built this city, where you can run to cover? I've saved all your necks, and don't forget it." A mutter of assent ran through the crowd. Dana took his advantage.

"I know this war is making things tough. Blockades and space-torpedoes are too much competition for good piracy. The big-shots are staying close to home, so there's no kidnapping, and there's damned little trading in valuables even on Mars. You know how my secret service works. The minute there's anything stirring anywhere, you'll know about it. In the meantime..."

"We wait," said the Venusian, and spat. "Blasted Earthmen! If they hadn't been so stubborn, we'd have fat cargo ships..."

"Earthmen!" an angry voice cried. "If you bloody insolent Venusians hadn't wanted so much..."

Men began to shout, dropping from lingua franca into their own tongues. Groups milled, split, formed into factions. Fists were doubled, and a few knives came out. Dana forbade guns.

"Stop it!" Dana roared. "Stop it, I say!" His voice softened, but it carried to the last man in the crowd.

"Listen, all of you. You're not Martians, or Venusians, or Earthmen any longer. Get that, and remember it. Your worlds have kicked you out. Forget them, because they're gone.

"I've banned war news. The first man who listens to it, the first man who starts trouble over the war, gets a poisoned needle in his neck. Sark is my world. I built it, and I'll run it.

"Hear that, you scum? We have no nationality. We're gone geese here on Sark, with no law, no hope, and no god but me!"

He let it sink in, watching them with cynical amusement. Then he turned quietly to Loren.

"Where did you find the body?"

"Out by No Man's Land," returned the Venusian sullenly.

"Oh," said Dana, and smiled like a wolf. To the men he said, "Go and get armed. Form into posses and fan out to cover the whole circle of the town. I'll give you action, if that's what you want." They went. Dana turned inside, reaching down his heavy needle-guns, loaded with

deadly poison instead of the harmless anesthetic he allowed his men. Loren the Venusian stood waiting beside the stretcher, his flat, drilled shoulders stubborn. The bearers had gone. Dana, settling the guns on his lean hips, studied the corpse.

Like the five other bodies brought to him in the last seven days Thompson the Earthman had a hole in his throat. A neat, clean hole whose edges were white as though with compression. His body was drained of blood. Bending closer, Dana caught a faint pungency mingling with the acid reek of the air. That, too, had been on the five other bodies. It had a nagging familiarity.

He shook his steel-grey head impatiently, and looked up at Loren.

"I'm waiting," he said.

Loren looked steadily over Dana's shoulder.

"Thompson and Neta the Venusian had a quarrel in one of the dives," he said.

"They went out to No Man's Land to settle it."

"And," continued Dana evenly, "when you followed to back up our countryman, you found Thompson dead. Where's Neta?"

"Gone."

Dana nodded.

"Six dead, seven vanished. You forgot, didn't you, Loren?" Rebellious blue eyes suddenly met Dana's.

"Forgot what?"

That the outskirts of town are forbidden after dark, until we clear up this mystery. What was the fight about, Loren?"

The Venusian's eyes didn't flicker, and his mouth set. Dana's lean fingers tightened over his gun-butts, but he didn't draw. Then someone moved in the shadows by the door, and a voice said,

"He won't tell you, Dana."

Daddy Gibbs came into the circle of light, a little unsteady on his feet, as always. Frowsy white hair straggled into faded blue eyes that had, at times, an almost childlike clarity.

Yet Daddy Gibbs, in his heyday, had looted thirty-one of the proudest liners in space in one year.

Dana scowled. He was in no mood to fool with the old man now.

"I don't have to be told, Daddy," he snapped, and stepped closer to Loren.

"Someone's been listening to war news," he said silkily. "It was the war, wasn't it, Loren?"

"Yes, damn it!" The young Venusian's space-burned face was suddenly ablaze.

"Venus is at war. I can't help caring! Neither could you, an Earthman, if you were a man instead of a damned cold-blooded snake!" The knotted veins stood out on Dana's forehead, but he said quietly,

"You're getting away with it this time. There's trouble brewing here, and I need every man I can trust. I know just how far I can trust you. I know you were cashiered from the Venusian Space Fleet, and I know why.

"You needn't jump. No man lands on Sark unless I know his background. And my secret service has ways of finding out.

"So I'm letting you go, this time. But not again, Loren. Remember that. Not again."

He hadn't noticed Daddy Gibbs heading for the televisor. Now it blared sharply.

"...struck again. The Venusian forces were driven back with heavy losses, but not before Terran cities had suffered from long range bombing. Retaliation

...

Geoffrey Dana said with dangerous calm,

"Shut it off, Daddy."

But Gibbs, urged on by a chronic overdose of tequin, was leaning against the table, weeping.

"Earth," he muttered. "Beautiful green Earth."

"Mars," blared the announcer, "following her traditional policy, is remaining neutral..."

"Until she sees which side is winning," snapped Dana. "Shut it off, you drunken fool!"

The announcer went on unperturbed.

"So far Earth is holding her own. Military experts give her an even chance, provided Mars does not actively ally herself with Venus.

However, many neutral observers believe this is only a matter of time, since Mars has a high stake in Venusian water."

"Earth," moaned Daddy Gibbs. "Why did I ever leave her?" Dana's hand choked the announcer off in mid-sentence. Fighting down a black fury which surprised even him, he whispered,

"If you weren't a drunken old man, Daddy, you'd be dead. Ordinarily I can put up with your baiting. But not now."

"All right, Dana." Daddy Gibbs hiccupped and wiped his nose on a dirty shirtsleeve. "If you hate Earth so much..."

"Hate Earth!" roared Dana. "I don't give a damn for Earth, except that this war is making trouble for me! Come on, Loren. We can get out there before those drunken louts get organized."

Daddy Gibbs said, very clearly and steadily,

"You're a liar."

The sheer effrontery of it stopped Dana. He stared at Daddy.

"You must be very drunk," he said. Daddy laughed, looking like an ancient, mischievous child.

"I am. In vino, veritas. I've found you out, Dana. You're still an Earthling. just like Loren's a Venusian. If you weren't, you wouldn't get so mad at me." The black fury welled up in Dana, brought the blood hot and blinding back of his cold eyes. It was as though Daddy tried to bind him to something, bridle the freedom that had been the cynical watchword of his life. His lean hand closed cruelly on the neck of Daddy's dirty shirt.

"I have forgotten Earth," he said, so low and quiet that Loren,

watching hawk-like from the doorway, shivered. "And if you want to live, Daddy, you'd better forget, too."

He dropped the old man and strode out, leaving Loren to follow.

II: THE BEAST

Geoffrey Dana had good control of himself. Following Loren's gesture, running at an easy lope, his rage was quickly downed.

He had a certain affection for Daddy Gibbs, just as he had for Loren. They were different from the usual mob that inhabited his kingdom. He couldn't break them as he could the others. They'd die, but they wouldn't bend. For that reason, it was perfectly possible that he might have to kill Loren. Unless he could forget Venus and the war, the boy was going to be an impulsive and rebellious trouble-maker. He'd done a crazy, sentimental thing and been exiled for it, but he still loved his world, and longed to be fighting for it. Dana knew his polyglot wolves, and he was going to have peace on Sark if he had to kill to get it.

Shrugging that aside, Dana put all his attention on the dead, puzzling thing that threatened his kingdom.

Seven of his men had vanished without a trace from these black streets, during the hours when the people of Sark took advantage of the relative coolness to pleasure themselves in the dives.

Fights and killings were no unusual things on Sark. The corrosive pools of No Man's Land had taken many a body, But seven in one week, coupled with the six dead men, made natural causes impossible.

Sweat beaded his face, and the taste of it on his lips was bitter. The

sluggish south-polar breeze whispered through the roofless houses, keeping them comparatively free of fumes, but here in the streets the acid reek was choking.

Loren coughed and swore, and Dana grinned.

"Don't be too hard on the climate," he said, "It's what keeps anyone else from prospecting, colonizing, or claiming. It keeps us safe from Interplanetary Law, my boy."

Loren grunted. They were well into the outskirts now, and the sound of their running steps had an empty ring.

"What's behind all this, Dana?" demanded the Venusian.

"I don't know." Dana's satanic face darkened. "But by the gods of space, I'll find out. And when I do, someone will drown in the Ashi Geyser!" He meant it, cruelly, and Loren shot him a quick glance.

"Were you born without a heart?" he asked quietly. Dana spoke without stopping, his cold grey eyes intent on the deserted houses.

"The heart, as Voltaire once said, is a muscle. Sentiment got you kicked out of the Fleet --you should have let your brother take his own rap. Learn your lesson, Loren. Only fools are soft."

He didn't bother to see how his advice was taken. The last crumbling houses of the town showed No Man's Land through their broken ranks, and Dana's right-hand gun came out of its holster.

"Is this where you found Thompson?"

Loren's wheat-straw head nodded in the starshine.

"Dana!" he said suddenly. "Could it be Jordan Andrews?"

Dana followed Loren's half-seen gesture. Beyond the houses lay Sark's equatorial belt, the barren waste that gave it its Martian name --Bitter. Pitted with sullen, fuming pools and geyser basins, hung with choking vapor, it was the outlet for the corrosive flux that filled the half-hollow worldlet, boiling up in deadly fury from the furnace core.

Looming on a rise of higher ground in the heart of No Man's Land, the tight grey citadel of the Andrews Chemical Works thumbed its nose at Dana's kingdom. Its smug righteousness was a sore point with Dana's men, but Dana, the realist, had suffered it to exist.

It was nothing to him if Jordan Andrews wanted to sink every last Universal Credit he owned into building that chemical plant, to try, by tapping one of the asteroid's vast underground lakes of acid, to recoup his broken fortune. He had let Andrews build it without disturbing the armed ship that had protected him. He left unmolested the freighters that called thrice yearly to leave supplies and pick up cargo.

Sark was unclaimed, beyond Interplanetary Law. Dana well knew that the Interplanetary Control would give its soul for an excuse to move in on Sark and do away with his kingdom.

An act of violence against Jordan Andrews might conceivably give them a pretext. Dana wasn't giving it. And presently, he thought, Andrews would fail and go home.

Now Geoffrey Dana shook his head.

"Andrews has nothing to do with this. What would he want with seven of my black sheep? And the dead men, with all their blood sucked out?" An involuntary shiver touched him.

"No, it isn't Andrews. It's something --queer. Those men were strong and tough, yet they died without a struggle."

He tensed sharply, iron-grey head erect.

"Listen!"

Across the uneasy silence of No Man's Land came the muffled crack of heavy needle guns in action.

"Andrews!" Loren exclaimed. "What in hell. . ." Dana's lean cheeks creased in a wolfish smile. There were six men out there; Andrews and five assistants, cooped up in their air-conditioned fortress.

"Probably," he said softly, "their own purity became unbearable. All right, let's get busy. Don't get too far away from me, show your light as little as possible, and be careful."

Loren nodded and moved away. Dana permitted himself a puzzled scowl in Andrews' direction. The firing had grown ragged. Abruptly it stopped. Dana shrugged and went on.

He would have had no warning at all, but for the brick that fell beside him from the top of a crumbling wall. Leaping away, he had just time to see a vast unhuman shape rise against the stars and hurtle down upon him.

His gun barked once before an arm like a python whipped about his body and pinned his elbow to his side. Lashing out savagely with his left against a bulk that glimmered ghostly white, Dana felt thick soft hair under his knuckles, and beneath that an armor of iron muscle.

His needles had either failed to penetrate the thick coat, or were harmless to this nameless creature. The sickness of futility came to

Dana as he felt the impact of sheer size, the vast unhurried strength of the thing. And then he caught the odor --the peculiar, pungent smell that had clung to the six corpses.

"My God!" he whispered. "This is it!" Again memory stirred, urgently, but the arm around his body was slowly crushing the air from his lungs. Drawn close against a tremendous chest, smothered by soft fur, Dana bent his lean body and clawed out blindly with his free hand.

He had no leverage for striking. Instead, his fingers found a small round head, groped...

Something in him contracted with a chill stab of horror. On that blank, round ball there was nothing --no ears, no eyes, no nose. Nothing but a three-sided puckering in the center of the front surface that drew open with a suggestion of razor fangs beneath soft bare flesh, and nuzzled his groping palm in a sucking motion, like an unclean kiss. He cried out hoarsely and wrenched away, but the strength of the thing was incredible. A second arm wrapped him, held him closer, pressed him into the pungent mat of fur.

As though activated by special nerves, the fur puffed out like a cat's tail, enveloping his face, closing mouth and nose and eyes. The pungent smell grew stronger.

Dana fought with silent viciousness. He was weakening. Was he going to find out where the vanished men went? Or would Loren find him, drained dry, with a hole in his throat?

Most of all, what was this horror, and how had it got to Sark? There was no native life here save moss and scaly lizards.

His lungs burned, his temples throbbed, his crushed ribs stabbed with pain. Then the constricting arms loosened sharply, forcing breath

into him. The warm, heavy scent of the creature went deep into him. A soothing dusk settled over his brain.

In a last lucid flash, he knew why the men died without fighting. Dimly he felt the ground shake under him, heard a queer high-pitched whistling that deepened into a deafening roar. The crushing arms loosened as the furry body jerked, then dropped him altogether.

Dana fell heavily, caught through blurred eyes a glimpse of the monster vanishing into a crumbling house some distance away, its shapeless paws over its head.

Lying there gasping the hot, bitter air, Dana laughed weakly.

"Thanks," he whispered. "Thanks, you damned little ball of fire!" Out in No Man's Land, the Ashi Geyser hurled its fearful corrosive spout high in the air.

III: DEATH BLOW

Getting groggily to his feet, Dana found the gun he had dropped in the struggle. The weird anesthetic was wearing off. Cautiously, he approached the house into which the thing had gone --and stood staring into a deserted room. The beast had vanished.

Through the bull-roar of the Ashi the sound of voices reached him, and the thud of running feet.

"Dana! Geoffrey Dana!"

It was Daddy Gibbs' voice, and it had a note of urgency. Dana shouted, and flares began to bob along between the houses. Daddy's white haystack of hair emerged from the hot dark. The old man had been running hard.

"Dana!" he gasped. "Something important. . . what's happened?"

"One of Satan's special imps jumped me a moment ago," said Dana dryly. "The Ashi went up and scared it off."

Daddy shook his head solemnly.

"God saved you, Dana, for a very special duty." Dana's hard smile flashed.

"I don't think I've done enough for God so that He should bother much about me. What duty?"

Daddy beckoned to someone behind him. A tall Terro-Venusian half-breed stepped forward, his eyes alight with keen excitement.

Dana swore.

"Varno! What are you doing here?"

"I landed just after you left," said the tall man rapidly. "I have news, Dana, the biggest news of the century. I couldn't trust it to the code band --too many military spies. So I took a chance and came."

"Well?" said Dana, still scowling. Varno was the head of his Venusian intelligence department. He had them on every planet --men not yet known to the authorities, who kept tabs on everything that might be turned into profit for Dana's outlaw empire.

They knew what ships carried cargo worth looting, what men of importance could dig up big ransom money, what trader in jewels might be safely robbed, who could be blackmailed.

They were the coordinators of the vast network of crime Dana ruled. And when things got too hot, there was Sark for a refuge. Dana was

no piker. He worked in high places, and there was plenty of grease for greedy palms to see that the pleas of the Interplanetary Control for the destruction of Sark went unheeded.

"The news had better be important," said Dana grimly. "You had my orders to stick with Venus."

"It is," said Varno, his eyes glittering. "Listen. Have you ever heard of Faruk of Venus?"

"He's a scientist," put in Daddy Gibbs.

"And a good one," said Varno. "He's been condemned as a renegade by all the scientific foundations for perverting discoveries to his own ends. But now he's working on a secret weapon, which Venus says will end the war. And Mars, because of it, is right on the edge of jumping in against Earth."

"You know what that will mean, Dana," said Daddy urgently.

"Earth knows," Varno went on. "They almost got the secret, and the scientist. So Venus sent him into space in a camouflaged ship, to let him finish his experiments in peace on some asteroid."

Dana's cold eyes glittered. He was beginning to get the idea.

"How did you get all this?"

"We had something on one of the Venusian High Command, and blackmailed it out of him. No one knew just where Faruk was going, but it narrowed down to this general sector of space. Now, if we could find Faruk.

"We could sell him for enough to make up what the five months of this

blasted war have cost us!" Dana's wolf smile cut deep vertical scars in his lean cheeks. "The highest bidder --and every world would pawn its soul to get him, if you're right about the weapon."

"I am," said Varno. "Nobody knows what it is, but it exists, all right." He frowned briefly. "Funny thing. We do know that Faruk was using a Lunar primate in his experiments, and I can't see how that ties in with military weapons."

Dana stiffened, his memory jarred to sudden life. Lunar primate! That pungent odor clinging to the corpses. No wonder it had seemed familiar! Once, in his almost forgotten childhood, he had seen a Lunar primate in a zoo, and screamed with the nightmare for a week.

Understanding came with a rush. That huge, pale-furred body spawned in the cold black caves of Earth's moon, the tiny, featureless head.

"They don't need eyes," said Dana half to himself. "They use infra-red pits, like pit-vipers, to detect the heat frequencies of their prey. The air's thin, so they have sensitive diaphragms instead of external ears, judging their distance from objects by reflection of sound waves. That's why he dropped me when the Ashi went up. Any loud noise causes pain." He cracked one lean fist into the other palm.

"That explains the throat-wounds and the blood being drawn. The primates put their victims to sleep with that anesthetic stink and the fluffy fur, and then suck 'em dry. They rarely kill by crushing, because that lets the blood leak out, but when they're angry or frightened...

"By the gods of space!" he whispered, his pale eyes widening. "That means --

Great Lucifer, it means Faruk is here! Here on Sark. He's using my

men for food for his beast, and for..."

Seeing Varno's blank face, he sketched the situation rapidly. The half-breed swore with incredulous joy.

"The nerve of him!" he said. "And yet, Sark would just suit him. If he needs men in his experiments --though I'm damned if I see why - he'd have to go where there were some. Sark is only habitable in certain limits --he'd be safer than on some asteroid with prospectors snooping around. And it's beyond the Law. He can do as he pleases."

"But not beyond my law," said Dana.

Daddy Gibbs gripped his arm.

"Dana, you can't do what you're planning! If you capture Faruk, you can't sell him to enemies of Earth!"

"Oh, shut up," snarled Dana. "Well, now we know what we're up against. We'll find where he's hiding, and then... Where's Loren?"

"Loren!" Daddy spun around to study the eagerly listening men. "He's not here. He's been listening. Dana, he'll warn that Venusian, save him from you. You've got to stop him. Venus mustn't have that weapon!"

Dana's pointed face hardened.

Loren wanted desperately to go back to Venus. If he could save the life of this scientist for his world, he could get reinstatement as his reward. If he warned Faruk, helped him escape, he robbed Dana of a fortune. Dana well knew the law of his kind. When the king-wolf slips, the pack is eager to pull him down. And the pack was already ugly

and short of temper. If this rich morsel was snatched from under their noses, it was the end of his rule.

"Spread out," he said quietly to the men. "Find Loren." It was Daddy who found his prints leading into the same house into which the Lunar ape had vanished, not five feet from where they had spoken. They didn't come out --but Loren was gone.

Then, like the blow of a cosmic hammer, a roaring shock broke the silence. Thrown to his knees by a convulsive lurch of the earth, Dana saw a vast flame burst up from No Man's Land.

"Andrews!" he gasped, watching huge blocks of concrete geyser upward like pebbles into the first of the dawn.

Swearing in forty different dialects, the men stared out at that column of flame. It flared, died, flared again, and subsided to a sullen rolling of smoke.

Dana, remembering the unexplained gunfire of a short while ago, scowled in thought. He wasn't much of a chemist, but he knew that the acids and other compounds stored in their pure state could cause trouble. Still, it was unlikely that the chemical tanks had let go of themselves. Dana shook his head. No time now for conjecture. No Man's Land writhed. Choking fumes shot in plumes of burning steam from active blowholes. The baked earth shivered, and Dana realized that the explosion had set off subterranean disturbances that might have hideous consequences.

The town of Sark was built on the one solid plateau on the asteroid. If that should break, develop fissures...

The Ashi went up suddenly, followed by the smaller geysers, spouting wildly, their internal pressure upset by the force of the explosion.

Basins overflowed, sending seething torrents of acid to claw at the edges of the plateau.

"Back into the town!" yelled Dana. "Get into the houses, or you'll suffocate!" The men, with Varno, turned and ran. Dana, coughing in the bitter mist, grabbed Daddy Gibbs and started to follow. The ground leaped under him, and behind them the Ashi roared up and up.

A second shock threw both men down. Dana's skin burned, his lungs were stabbed with pain. They had to get back into the higher part of town quickly, or not at all.

And he reflected bitterly that if Sark was really breaking up, every man on it was doomed. There were no ships but Varno's little two-seater, not even the battered tramp that brought supplies every two months. Daddy Gibbs made a queer, high-pitched sound.

"My God, Dana!" he choked. "Look!" Dana swore savagely, a cold stricture tightening round his heart. A few feet away the brick pavement was cracked wide in a fissure that stretched as far as he could see, cutting them off irrevocably from the town.

IV: INTO THE PIT

The house beside them was their only hope. Fuming rivulets crawled up the street in the new blaze of the sun. The clouds grew thicker. There was just a bare chance that the breeze-created vacuum inside the walls would remain breathable, and that the bricks would hold back the flood. Then he remembered the Lunar ape, and Loren. Loren's footprints led inside and vanished, as the ape's had done. Hustling Daddy inside, Dana stooped and examined the dust of the floor.

There was only one explanation. It answered the question of how the ape had caught his victims, coming from nowhere and disappearing as though into thin air.

With a twinge of excitement, he found what he was looking for.

"A trap-door, Daddy," he said, touching the marks of other fingers in the dust. Loren must have seen the ape go down here, and have followed, knowing that he'd find the scientist.

Dana shuddered, thinking what Loren might find down there in the honeycomb of black tunnels under Sark, if the walls of the acid lakes gave way. He took his hands away and said, "No. Later, if and when this earthquake stops."

The air by the floor was bitter, but still breathable - for how long, he didn't know. There was a hissing sound outside, like the voices of many snakes; acids, flowing in from the gorged pools.

"What a rotten death," Dana grunted.

Daddy looked at him.

"I'm not worried about dying. It's Earth I'm thinking about."

"Blast it!" snapped Dana. "Can't you forget Earth?" A rush of impatient anger surged in him, and he added, "And who the hell are you to be preaching?" Daddy grinned.

"'They that be whole need not a physician'," he quoted. "I've had a lot of time to think since I washed up on your beach, Dana. Besides, I'm not preaching. Just remembering.

"Remembering how the moon used to shine, and how the parks smelled after a rain. And snow. How we used to curse the snow!

Drifts piled against the buildings, and the wind like a knife." He coughed into the dust, and swore.

"But a clean knife, Dana. None of this hell-fired acid." Dana felt the stinging sweat drip from his face into the dust, listened to the growing hiss of the acid. Swift rage drew his lips back like a wolf's.

"So what?" he grated. "I'm hunting down the Venusian. Earth can buy him, if he wants. Isn't that enough?"

Every shudder of Sark under his body had an echo in his heart. Sark was his, built with his brain and strength, ruled with his power. He was surprised to find how much he minded losing it.

"No," said Daddy quietly. "It's not enough." Dana's dark, murderous face should have stopped him, but he only blinked and licked dry lips.

"Wish I had a drink. No, Dana, I want you to admit the truth. Admit you're an Earthling. Otherwise..."

Dana's voice was silkily soft.

"I'll sell to the highest bidder. Venus, Earth, or Mars." The bull-roar of the Ashi almost drowned Daddy's words.

"You're an Earthman, Dana. Don't let your hardness trick you into doing something you'll regret."

The cords stood out on Dana's forehead. Again that feeling of being bound, that attempt at shackling his free choice, woke the dark anger in him. He whispered, "Shut up," and turned his head away.

What he saw stiffened him in cold horror. Rising through the trapdoor, between them and the door, were the tiny head and vast silvery

shoulders of the Lunar primate!

Dana heard Daddy scuff to his knees, letting go a sharp breath that broke in a cough. Through the thickening mist he saw the blank, featureless ball swivel on its neckless mount, sensing the vibrations of living bodies. Round, hairless lips writhed back to emit a whistling roar. Razor fangs clicked. Then it hurtled up with incredible speed, throwing itself toward the men.

Dana fired without hope, remembering his former encounter, and waited grimly. This would be a battle to the death. The ape, muscles twitching, was goaded to madness by the heat, the tainted air, and the convulsive heaving of the earth. He was conscious of Daddy standing beside him, cursing or praying - he couldn't tell which --in a flat monotone. As a purely reflex action, he jammed his left-hand gun back into the holster and let the other buck itself empty in his palm.

The beast didn't stop. The needles were futile. Arms like silver tree-trunks wrapped the two of them close against stifling fur. A wave of musky odor came through the acid reek.

Daddy fought, tearing at the white fur with futile hands. Dana watched the vast arm tighten, heard the slow, deliberate crunch of Daddy's bones. The old man turned his head, just for a flashing instant, Dana saw his eyes as the pain left them --clear and untroubled.

Daddy's lips framed the one word, "Earth!" Then he was dead, and the beast held him high, like a rag doll, roaring.

Dana heard the thud of the body striking the floor. A smoking little river crawled in through the door. The beast stood still, shaking, Dana half forgotten in his arms.

Then, with what was almost a whimper, it turned and bolted through

the trapdoor, dropping down into utter dark.

Dana, held like a forgotten toy, fought down a swift surge of panic. The air was thick and bitter, hot with a dead, terrible heat. The ape ran with incredible speed through the blind corridors, which had once been blow-holes for the molten core of Sark.

In the subterranean silence, Dana could hear far-off concussions, dull and ominous, and sometimes the ape staggered as the floor trembled under him. Sark was breaking up.

The ape, Dana guessed, was heading for the Venusian's hide-out, whither he had been trained to bring victims - for what purposes he still couldn't guess. If the scientist had not already fled, his ship offered Dana a mode of escape. Remembering Daddy, he smiled grimly. If there was any way of salvaging anything from the wreck, he was going to do it. His plan would have to be slightly modified, that was all.

The great underground lakes heaved in their beds. Dana heard the distant hiss and surge of them against their walls. When one of those walls should fissure, it would mean death for any living thing caught in the flooded tunnels. In spite of the heat, the sweat turned cold on Dana's body. He wondered if Loren had managed to find his countryman. If the ape didn't get where it was going soon, it wouldn't matter. The explosion had set off successive breakdowns in the half-hollow structure of the asteroid. He thought of his men, crouching in the mud-brick houses, waiting, or fighting for Varno's little ship. There was a woman he remembered, too - a slim Martian with wicked green eyes. All of them, trapped and waiting for death. Bitter sweat ran into his mouth as he cursed in silent fury.

V: FARUK

Abruptly there was light, a radium torch in a small natural cave. The beast plunged through a curtained doorway in the far wall and stood still, whimpering.

Dana saw a natural cave, radium-lighted, fitted with the barest comforts, an operating table and considerable scientific paraphernalia, and what seemed to be an intricate radio transmitter. Trays of chemicals kept the air reasonably clear.

A man lay on the operating table, his skull half shaven. Two flat discs lay beside surgical instruments of the most advanced type. Against the wall sat seven men --the seven who had vanished from Sark. They sat like sleepers, with closed eyes, and their heads, too, were shaven and marked with three red scars, across the temples and the top of the skull. In one side of the cave was a cage of heavy metal bars. This held five men, packed close together, watching tensely what went on in the room. Beside the operating table, the razor still in his hand, stood a man in a stained surgeon's smock. The light caught on his sharp cheekbones and ruthless jaw, glinted angry copper in his eyes, set like sparks deep under a bald, magnificent brow.

Facing the man, his needle-gun rock-steady in his hand, was Loren. The ape dropped Dana and crouched shivering at the feet of the man in the surgeon's smock, whom Dana knew to be Faruk, the renegade Venusian scientist. The man's hand dropped automatically to one vast shoulder, and he shot a fierce glance at Dana. Loren, never shifting his aim, jerked his head toward the disturbance, and his blue eyes widened.

"Dana!" he gasped. Then, "Get your hands up, and turn around!" Dana shrugged and obeyed, his mind racing. Loren had managed to find his countryman. But he had him at bay. What had changed him so, from a patriotic defender to a captor?

Had he misjudged Loren? Was the Venusian, in the final pinch, as cynical as Dana himself?

"You too," snapped Loren to Faruk. "Get over beside Dana. Keep away from the transmitter. And if you turn the ape on me, I'll get you before he gets me."

Watching out of the corner of his eye, Dana saw Loren sidle over toward the cage and reach down a key ring hanging on the wall. Never taking his gaze from his prisoners, he fumbled for the padlock key and handed it to a gaunt, grey haired man in the cage.

"Open it," he said. "Come out, stay behind me so as not to block my gun, and get into the ship. I'll come after you."

Dana knew the man in the cage from his pictures. It was Jordan Andrews. The other five, including the man on the table, must be his assistants. They all looked pretty groggy, as though the effects of anesthetic needles were just wearing off.

Dana glanced at the man beside him, absently fondling the ape. A little pulse was beating ominously under the heavy jaw, and the eyes were narrowed but not afraid.

Under cover of the clanking padlock, Dana whispered, "Those are anesthetic needles."

The scientist shot him a quick, searching look.

"The swine said they were poison," he muttered. "Look out for yourself, then!" His order to the ape was quite inaudible to Dana, but the beast's sensitive diaphragms heard. Silently he whirled and shot toward Loren, arms outstretched.

Jordan Andrews was outside the cage. He tried to get back in, but the press was too great. He tumbled out, followed by the others, whose forward momentum was too great to stop, even though they saw the huge primate bearing down on them.

Loren fired, fast and straight, but the needles slid harmlessly off the thick fur. The scientist had flung himself out of sight behind the radio transmitter. The ape roared and swung its arms.

Then it stopped, its sensory pits baffled by the nearness of Jordan Andrews and his men. Loren sprang aside, shouting to Andrews, and the beast shook its head, whimpering.

Dana's wolf smile flashed briefly. His own poison-loaded gun sprang into his palm.

"Drop your gun, Loren!" he shouted. "You, call off your ape." Everything froze to tableau stillness as the scientist blew inaudibly on a silver whistle. The ape crouched, shaking its head and roaring softly. Loren dropped his gun close to his foot, his dark young face dangerous under the pale-blond tousled hair.

Faruk stood up slowly, his hands resting over the controls of the transmitter, sweeping the room with his angry copper gaze.

"The ape," he said softly, "will stay where it is, ready to spring. Now --" Dull thunder drowned his words, and the rock floor jarred. Dana's keen ears caught a faint crack! and a sibilant hiss, as of an awakened cobra.

"That damned explosion started something," he said between his teeth. "What caused it?"

"Andrews," said Faruk evenly. "He opened his chemical tanks in the

hope of trapping my men in the tunnel, but he was unsuccessful.

"Unfortunately, my men lack self-determination, which is essential in circumstances. This lack of balance is the chief flaw I'm trying to eliminate. They didn't shut off the flow of chemicals, which mixed with drastic results." He indicated the operating table.

"I wasn't anticipating either the explosion or its results." Dana's cold light eyes swung to Jordan Andrews.

"I should," he said, "have killed you the day you landed here."

"Don't be a fool, Dana!" Loren broke in. "Andrews was fighting for his life. This rotten murdering swine.

"I had use for Jordan Andrews," said Faruk quietly. "Which is no one's business but my own."

"He was going to make me work for him." Andrews' gaunt, shrewd face was grim.

"Use my chemical knowledge to help him make those --" he pointed to the seven who sat against the wall --"or become one of them along with my men." Andrews' eyes met Dana's, and the outlaw sensed the strength that had kept the manufacturer fighting when his life was broken and gone.

"If you kill this man, Dana," said Andrews slowly, "you'll have done one decent thing to justify your life."

Dana's mirthless smile cut deep vertical scars in his cheeks.

"And you, Mr. Andrews, have just snuffed a thousand-odd lives out of existence. This asteroid is breaking up."

Faruk shrugged.

"They'll be a small loss, Dana. What's your game?" The veins stood clear on the outlaw's forehead, but his voice was level. Almost too level.

"The same as yours. Escape."

"Doesn't your conscience hurt, leaving your men to die alone?"

"Not in the least," said Dana, and knew abruptly that he lied. Again the floor jarred, and the ape moaned, cringing. The time was short.

"My gun is loaded with poison," Dana said quietly. "I want your ship, Faruk, and you, unarmed. Quite frankly, you're a valuable property, and I intend making the most of you. If you behave yourself, you'll probably be none the worse off.

"If you don't, I shall take your ship and leave you here to die. Is that clear?"

Jordan Andrews said,

"What about us?"

"Nobody asked you to come to Sark," Dana returned coldly. "Well?" The Venusian stared at the muzzle of Dana's gun, and abruptly the truculent light went out of his eyes. His shoulders sagged wearily, and he sank down on the stool back of the transmitter.

"Everything's gone wrong," he sighed, and dropped his head dejectedly between his hands.

Dana's jaw tightened. He hated whining above all things.

"Get up," he said. "Get up and come on."

"Dana!" It was Loren, and Dana was a little startled. The sullen, repressed mask was gone from the Venusian's young face. It was ablaze with urgency, with some deep emotion.

"Dana, don't take this man back!"

Dana laughed mockingly. He was backing toward the only other doorway in the cave, which he knew must lead to Faruk's ship, keeping Loren and Andrews and the four men covered.

"Not even to Venus?" he said. "Where's your patriotism, Loren?"

"It's because I love Venus that I say it," returned Loren quietly. "Do you know what the secret weapon is?"

Dana didn't, and said so.

"Come on, blast you!" he snapped at the scientist.

"Listen to me, Dana! Why do you think I turned against my countryman? Why do you think I want to rob my world of the certainty of victory? Because I won't have Venus go down in history as a world of monsters!

"If Venus can gain power honorably, well and good. But to rule the System with his weapon, to see my people enslaved..."

"It may not go to Venus," Dana told him, "so relax." Jordan Andrews took one step forward, and Dana read danger in his gaunt face.

"It mustn't go to Earth, Dana. It mustn't go anywhere." Faruk's voice broke in suddenly, changed from its former dejection, ringing with harsh strength.

"It will go to Venus, you Earthling dogs! And you, Loren --renegade. Venus will rule the System --and I will rule Venus!"

Things happened, suddenly, bewilderingly. Faruk was safe behind the transmitter. The ape lurched forward as the cave heaved and shuddered. Loren ducked for his gun and sent a stream of needles searching for Dana, who had thrown himself flat behind a metal chair.

Someone screamed. Men surged forward, fell back before the threat of Dana's gun. The ape caught one hapless man and swung him high, its round mouth wide to a whistling roar.

Dana swore viciously. He should have known that a man with a jaw like that wouldn't crumple so easily.

What was he doing there, silent behind the transmitter?

Loren's voice rose sharply high above the bedlam.

"Look out! Here they come!"

The seven sleepers had awakened.

VI: THE FINAL CHOICE

Dana glimpsed them, beyond the charging body of the ape. They were like beasts crouched for the kill, their faces distorted with sheer animal blood-lust. All were armed with their own anesthetic-loaded guns. The scars on their shaven heads flushed darkly in the radium light. Dana felt a sudden chill sweep over him.

What was this secret weapon?

The Lunar ape stood erect and roaring. His victim was quite still now.

The seven men that had been Dana's advanced.

There was a sudden silence in the cave. Then one of Andrews' men cried out and broke for the door. He wobbled helplessly to his knees, his voluntary centers deadened under a hail of needles from the guns of the seven who marched across the room like a sickle of doom.

Loren's gun barked. Dana saw the glittering needles spray into the oncoming line, lodging in unprotected faces and necks --and the anesthetic had no effect!

Dana knew that drug --a powerful preparation of Earthly hashish and the sister Venusian drug. It paralyzed the voluntary centers instantaneously, disorganizing thought and leaving the victim helpless but with no lasting impairment.

Yet it was useless against these "subjects" of Faruk's experiment!

Loren's voice rose, shouting his name.

"Dana! Will you sell the Solar System into slavery to these?" A singing silver rain of needles swept over Jordan Andrews and his remaining men. They fell, just as Dana opened up.

Shooting from a bad angle, he saw his first volley miss, go past them toward the operating table. The second caught the nearest man. He went down, and Dana shouted. They weren't immune to poison!

Loren was barricaded behind an overturned metal table, holding his useless fire.

"Dana," he cried. "For God's sake, think what this will mean to Earth, as I'm thinking of Venus! I'll take you wherever you want to go - if you'll not let Faruk live."

Dana's wolf smile scarred his cheeks.

"Sorry", he said. "I'm neither patriotic nor virtuous." His accurate fire had brought down three more of the seven. Now, as though under definite orders, the remaining four charged him. Lying tense, his gun jolting in his palm, Dana's mind raced. Those metal discs beside the instruments on the operating table. The scars on skull and temple. The immunity to drugs, but not to poison. The sudden bursting of lifelessness into a savage urge for destruction. And the scientist, out of sight behind his transmitter. Bits of the puzzle that had plagued him these last seven days began to fall into place.

The ape had brought men to the scientist. Faruk had performed some bizarre operation, turning the men into servants, who in turn went out to gather more men. Thus he had subjects for experiment, and a growing army for attack or defense.

Attack! That was it. These four men, oblivious to the deaths of their comrades, ignoring his fire, came rushing on.

He thought of legions of these creatures, manning ships, aircraft, mechanized land units, formed into battalions of infantry, ploughing with unconcerned ferocity into, over, and through all defenses, simply because they knew no fear --nothing but the command to kill.

Two more were down, and his clip was running out. There would be no time to reload. If one of those anesthetic needles caught him, he might as well be dead.

The thunder of dissolution all through the asteroid was growing louder. The hiss of acid increased as the pressure of the lake widened the fissure in its walls. The time was perilously short.

Dana gripped his protecting chair and rose.

They were almost on top of him. The heavy metal frame smashed the head of the leader like a rotten melon. The other, surprised by the sudden move, leveled his gun for a finishing shot.

Dana dropped his hands to the floor and pivoted in a perfect savatte kick. The gun went flying. Straightening his bent body like a spring Dana drove the man's jaws together so that his teeth splintered.

It was strange to do this to men whose necks he had saved. Men who had drunk and gambled with him. How many men on Earth would be faced with the same necessity?

How many in the whole Solar System, for that matter? How many worlds would be wrecked, as Sark had been wrecked, to satisfy ambition --Faruk's, or that of the world that bought his secret?

"The hell with it!" snarled Geoffrey Dana. Just in time he saw Loren's wheat-straw head raised, and dodged the shot. The man with the splintered teeth was coming up again, his expression unchanged except for the torn and bloody mouth. Dana caught up the chair and swung it again, and saw metal circles in the wreckage of the man's skull as he went down.

Those metal discs. The radio transmitter. And then he glimpsed Faruk's head upraised, and saw the helmet, with the wires running from the crest... Radio-telepathic control! Surgical destruction of the voluntary centers of the brain, amplifying discs, and an especially tuned transmitter linked to the mind of the leader. Better than robots, because the raw human material was cheaper, more plentiful, more adaptable. Dana felt suddenly sick. Without stopping the arc of his swing, Dana hurled the chair. It swept over the top of Loren's barricade, knocked him backward. His gun went off at the ceiling. And Dana followed the chair.

The cave jolted convulsively. A deep booming roar broke out, a splintering sound, a rush of liquid. The wall of the lake had given way. The ape screamed as Dana wrenched the gun from the stunned Loren's hand.

"Come on, damn you!" he roared at Faruk.

The Venusian rose slowly. His copper eyes were veiled, and Dana saw his lips move silently.

The cave was filled with thunder. A crack opened above the doorway leading to the ship, widened ominously.

Dana knew the ape was coming. He forestalled it, doing the only thing he could do. He leaped straight for the vast silver shoulders, clinging with his left arm around the blind head.

Even in that moment, Dana felt pity for the brute. It surprised him that he did. The ape roared, and he fired into its throat, tearing open the great veins.

It strangled and flung him off, and fell like a stricken tree. Dana saw swift, raging sorrow cross Faruk's face, and wondered that a man who could invent such a horrible form of warfare could feel affection for anything. He backed into the doorway. Dust sifted down from the crack above his head. Loren was rising to his knees. He didn't say anything, but his eyes spoke. Andrews and his men moaned and stirred on the heaving floor. Earth-men. Sheep, trapped by the wolves.

The air was suddenly choking, bitter with acid fumes. Dana could hear the rush and surge of tons of liquid, out beyond the inner cave. The two men faced him --Loren and Faruk. And Dana hesitated. Raged, cursed himself, and hesitated.

Quite unbidden, Daddy Gibbs' peaceful, dying face flashed across his memory. There was that same inner peace in Loren's face now, even knowing that he had lost.

Both he and Daddy Gibbs had done their best.

The dead men on the floor stirred eerily as the quivering earth shook them. Men with metal discs in their heads, who could rule the System. Rule, and destroy. Destroy worlds that other men loved, as he was discovering he loved Sark.

With Faruk in his hands, Dana could bargain for almost anything. Loren had had the same chance. He had thrown it away, because he wouldn't see his world disgraced and enslaved.

Sark rocked in agony. Dana was filled with sweeping rage that laid the veins like knotted cords on his forehead.

First Sark, and then --Earth?

All planets are Earth to someone.

Deliberately, Dana aimed and pulled the trigger. Faruk fell without a cry, over the body of his ape.

Dana sprang for the nearest of Jordan Andrews' men.

"Hurry up," he snapped. "Help me get them into the ship." Again Loren didn't speak, but Dana saw his eyes and smiled. A sardonic smile, because he had violated his own code of never thinking of anyone but himself.

The air was strangling when they got the last of the semi-conscious men into Faruk's ship, which lay ready for flight on a ridge close

above the cave.

"Let's go," said Loren. "The whole crust is breaking... My God! We forgot the man on the operating table! He's still alive, under anesthesia." Dana shook his head and started to speak. But he stopped. He could just see the walls of Sark over the short curve of the horizon --

walls that crumbled and fell. Smoking rivers of acid rolled over them, and fierce, chaotic winds brought him faint screams.

An empire of wolves, built with his brain and heart, to prey upon the sheep. The planets were closed to him. With the destruction of Sark, his empire would crumble. There was no place where he might rebuild it. His era was over, the last of the outlaw kingdoms of the System. Going back would mean only imprisonment, the triumph of enemies he had held at bay for a lifetime. He was an exile now, from life itself.

"Get in the ship," he said. "I'll get the man. Oh, cut the heroics, blast you!"

He took Loren's impulsively offered hand. "Make for Earth. Andrews still has enough influence to help you. And it's a damned nice world." Then he turned abruptly back into the passage to the cave.

The far wall had fallen, blocking the mouth of the tunnel through which the ape had come. Rivulets of acid seeped through. The crack above the outer door groaned as he entered, split wider.

A stone fell from the block in the tunnel, followed by a corrosive spout. There was a racking shudder, stronger than any before, and the whole wall collapsed behind Dana, shutting him in beyond hope of escape. He stood among the dead, watching the acid spout claw

away the stones around it and form a growing lake on the floor.

He felt suddenly very tired. Closing his cold grey eyes to ease the burn of the air, he ran lean fingers through his grey hair and sighed. Then he laughed harshly.

"I hope you're satisfied, Daddy," he said. "I hope the devil mixes brimstone with your tequin!"

The acid was lapping toward his boots. The town of Sark must be gone now, a heap of bricks and dissolving bodies.

He climbed up on the operating table, fastidiously unwilling to be consumed until the last moment, and took his heavy gun out of its holster. There were still a few needles in the clip.

By this time Loren and his cargo of humans would be safely away. Dana's hard smile flashed in the radium light. For once, the wolves were giving the sheep a break.

The ironic side of it struck him, and he chuckled.

"It will," he murmured, "give the Solar System an awful bellyache to know that I'm the spotless hero who saved it from a fate worse than death. Ha! Wonder if they'll erect a monument to me --or dedicate a new gallows?"

"Move over," he added, giving the body beside him a shove. It rolled over, exposing what Loren had not seen; the buried needles of Dana's first volley, that had overshot Faruk's human robots and killed the hapless man. He lay down, raising the heavy gun to his temple. The bark of it was drowned in the roaring hiss of acid, pouring through the broken barricade.

A World Is Born

By Leigh Brackett

Mel Gray flung down his hoe with a sudden tigerish fierceness and stood erect. Tom Ward, working beside him, glanced at Gray's Indianesque profile, the youth of it hardened by war and the hells of the Eros prison blocks.

A quick flash of satisfaction crossed Ward's dark eyes. Then he grinned and said mockingly.

"Hell of a place to spend the rest of your life, ain't it?"

Mel Gray stared with slitted blue eyes down the valley. The huge sun of Mercury seared his naked body. Sweat channeled the dust on his skin. His throat ached with thirst. And the bitter landscape mocked him more than Wade's dark face.

"The rest of my life," he repeated softly. "The rest of my life!"

He was twenty-eight.

Wade spat in the damp black earth. "You ought to be glad--helping the unfortunate, building a haven for the derelict...."

"Shut up!" Fury rose in Gray, hotter than the boiling springs that ran from the Sunside to water the valleys. He hated Mercury. He hated John Moulton and his daughter Jill, who had conceived this plan of building a new world for the destitute and desperate veterans of the Second Interplanetary War.

"I've had enough 'unselfish service'," he whispered. "I'm serving

myself from now on."

Escape. That was all he wanted. Escape from these stifling valleys, from the snarl of the wind in the barren crags that towered higher than Everest into airless space. Escape from the surveillance of the twenty guards, the forced companionship of the ninety-nine other veteran-convicts.

Wade poked at the furrows between the sturdy hybrid tubers. "It ain't possible, kid. Not even for 'Duke' Gray, the 'light-fingered genius who held the Interstellar Police at a standstill for five years'." He laughed. "I read your publicity."

Gray stroked slow, earth-stained fingers over his sleek cap of yellow hair. "You think so?" he asked softly.

Dio the Martian came down the furrow, his lean, wiry figure silhouetted against the upper panorama of the valley; the neat rows of vegetables and the green riot of Venusian wheat, dotted with toiling men and their friendly guards.

Dio's green, narrowed eyes studied Gray's hard face.

"What's the matter, Gray? Trying to start something?"

"Suppose I were?" asked Gray silkily. Dio was the unofficial leader of the convict-veterans. There was about his thin body and hatchet face some of the grim determination that had made the Martians cling to their dying world and bring life to it again.

"You volunteered, like the rest of us," said the Martian. "Haven't you the guts to stick it?"

"The hell I volunteered! The IPA sent me. And what's it to you?"

"Only this." Dio's green eyes were slitted and ugly. "You've only been here a month. The rest of us came nearly a year ago--because we wanted to. We've worked like slaves, because we wanted to. In three weeks the crops will be in. The Moulton Project will be self-supporting. Moulton will get his permanent charter, and we'll be on our way.

"There are ninety-nine of us, Gray, who want the Moulton Project to succeed. We know that that louse Caron of Mars doesn't want it to, since pitchblende was discovered. We don't know whether you're working for him or not, but you're a troublemaker.

"There isn't to be any trouble, Gray. We're not giving the Interplanetary Prison Authority any excuse to revoke its decision and give Caron of Mars a free hand here. We'll see to anyone who tries it. Understand?"

Mel Gray took one slow step forward, but Ward's sharp, "Stow it! A guard," stopped him. The Martian worked back up the furrow. The guard, reassured, strolled back up the valley, squinting at the jagged streak of pale-grey sky that was going black as low clouds formed, only a few hundred feet above the copper cables that ran from cliff to cliff high over their heads.

"Another storm," growled Ward. "It gets worse as Mercury enters perihelion. Lovely world, ain't it?"

"Why did you volunteer?" asked Gray, picking up his hoe.

Ward shrugged. "I had my reasons."

Gray voiced the question that had troubled him since his transfer. "There were hundreds on the waiting list to replace the man who died. Why did they send me, instead?"

"Some fool blunder," said Ward carelessly. And then, in the same casual tone, "You mean it, about escaping?"

Gray stared at him. "What's it to you?"

Ward moved closer. "I can help you?"

A stab of mingled hope and wary suspicion transfixed Gray's heart. Ward's dark face grinned briefly into his, with a flash of secretive black eyes, and Gray was conscious of distrust.

"What do you mean, help me?"

Dio was working closer, watching them. The first growl of thunder rattled against the cliff faces. It was dark now, the pink flames of the Dark-side aurora visible beyond the valley mouth.

"I've got--connections," returned Ward cryptically. "Interested?"

Gray hesitated. There was too much he couldn't understand. Moreover, he was a lone wolf. Had been since the Second Interplanetary War wrenched him from the quiet backwater of his country home an eternity of eight years before and hammered him into hardness--a cynic who trusted nobody and nothing but Mel 'Duke' Gray.

"If you have connections," he said slowly, "why don't you use 'em yourself?"

"I got my reasons." Again that secretive grin. "But it's no hide off you, is it? All you want is to get away."

That was true. It would do no harm to hear what Ward had to say.

Lightning burst overhead, streaking down to be caught and grounded by the copper cables. The livid flare showed Dio's face, hard with worry and determination. Gray nodded.

"Tonight, then," whispered Ward. "In the barracks."

Out from the cleft where Mel Gray worked, across the flat plain of rock stripped naked by the wind that raved across it, lay the deep valley that sheltered the heart of the Moulton Project.

Hot springs joined to form a steaming river. Vegetation grew savagely under the huge sun. The air, kept at almost constant temperature by the blanketing effect of the hot springs, was stagnant and heavy.

But up above, high over the copper cables that crossed every valley where men ventured, the eternal wind of Mercury screamed and snarled between the naked cliffs.

Three concrete domes crouched on the valley floor, housing barracks, tool-shops, kitchens, store-houses, and executive quarters, connected by underground passages. Beside the smallest dome, joined to it by a heavily barred tunnel, was an insulated hangar, containing the only space ship on Mercury.

In the small dome, John Moulton leaned back from a pile of reports, took a pinch of Martian snuff, sneezed lustily, and said.

"Jill, I think we've done it."

The grey-eyed, black-haired young woman turned from the quartzite window through which she had been watching the gathering storm overhead. The thunder from other valleys reached them as a dim barrage which, at this time of Mercury's year, was never still.

"I don't know," she said. "It seems that nothing can happen now, and yet.... It's been too easy."

"Easy!" snorted Moulton. "We've broken our backs fighting these valleys. And our nerves, fighting time. But we've licked 'em!"

He rose, shaggy grey hair tousled, grey eyes alight.

"I told the IPA those men weren't criminals. And I was right. They can't deny me the charter now. No matter how much Caron of Mars would like to get his claws on this radium."

He took Jill by the shoulders and shook her, laughing.

"Three weeks, girl, that's all. First crops ready for harvest, first pay-ore coming out of the mines. In three weeks my permanent charter will have to be granted, according to agreement, and then...."

"Jill," he added solemnly, "we're seeing the birth of a world."

"That's what frightens me." Jill glanced upward as the first flare of lightning struck down, followed by a crash of thunder that shook the dome.

"So much can happen at a birth. I wish the three weeks were over!"

"Nonsense, girl! What could possibly happen?"

She looked at the copper cables, burning with the electricity running along them, and thought of the one hundred and twenty-two souls in that narrow Twilight Belt—with the fierce heat of the Sunside before them and the spatial cold of the Shadow side at their backs, fighting against wind and storm and heat to build a world to replace the ones the War had taken from them.

"So much could happen," she whispered. "An accident, an escape...."

The inter-dome telescreen buzzed its signal. Jill, caught in a queer mood of premonition, went to it.

The face of Dio the Martian appeared on the screen, still wet and dirty from the storm-soaked fields, disheveled from his battle across the plain in the chaotic winds.

"I want to see you, Miss Moulton," he said. "There's something funny I think you ought to know."

"Of course," said Jill, and met her father's eyes. "I think we'll see, now, which one of us is right."

The barracks were quiet, except for the mutter of distant thunder and the heavy breathing of exhausted men. Tom Ward crouched in the darkness by Mel Gray's bunk.

"You ain't gonna go soft at the last minute, are you?" he whispered. "Because I can't afford to take chances."

"Don't worry," Gray returned grimly. "What's your proposition?"

"I can give you the combination to the lock of the hangar passage. All you have to do is get into Moulton's office, where the passage door is, and go to it. The ship's a two-seater. You can get her out of the valley easy."

Gray's eyes narrowed in the dark. "What's the catch?"

"There ain't none. I swear it."

"Look, Ward. I'm no fool. Who's behind this, and why?"

"That don't make no difference. All you want ... ow!"

Gray's fingers had fastened like steel claws on his wrist.

"I get it, now," said Gray slowly. "That's why I was sent here. Somebody wanted me to make trouble for Moulton." His fingers tightened agonizingly, and his voice sank to a slow drawl.

"I don't like being a pawn in somebody else's chess game."

"Okay, okay! It ain't my fault. Lemme go." Ward rubbed his bruised wrist. "Sure, somebody--I ain't sayin' who--sent you here, knowin' you'd want to escape. I'm here to help you. You get free, I get paid, the Big Boy gets what he wants. Okay?"

Gray was silent, scowling in the darkness. Then he said.

"All right. I'll take a chance."

"Then listen. You tell Moulton you have a complaint. I'll...."

Light flooded the dark as the door clanged open. Ward leaped like a startled rabbit, but the light speared him, held him. Ward felt a pulse of excitement beat up in him.

The long ominous shadows of the guards raised elongated guns. The barracks stirred and muttered, like a vast aviary waking.

"Ward and Gray," said one of the guards. "Moulton wants you."

Gray rose from his bunk with the lithe, delicate grace of a cat. The monotony of sleep and labor was ended. Something had broken. Life was once again a moving thing.

John Moulton sat behind the untidy desk. Dio the Martian sat grimly against the wall. There was a guard beside him, watching.

Mel Gray noted all this as he and Ward came in. But his cynical blue eyes went beyond, to a door with a ponderous combination lock. Then they were attracted by something else--the tall, slim figure standing against the black quartz panes of the far wall.

It was the first time he had seen Jill Moulton. She looked the perfect sober apostle of righteousness he'd learned to mock. And then he saw the soft cluster of black curls, the curve of her throat above the dark dress, the red lips that balanced her determined jaw and direct grey eyes.

Moulton spoke, his shaggy head hunched between his shoulders.

"Dio tells me that you, Gray, are not a volunteer."

"Tattletale," said Gray. He was gauging the distance to the hangar door, the positions of the guards, the time it would take to spin out the combination. And he knew he couldn't do it.

"What were you and Ward up to when the guards came?"

"I couldn't sleep," said Gray amiably. "He was telling me bedtime stories." Jill Moulton was lovely, he couldn't deny that. Lovely, but not soft. She gave him an idea.

Moulton's jaw clamped. "Cut the comedy, Gray. Are you working for Caron of Mars?"

Caron of Mars, chairman of the board of the Interplanetary Prison Authority. Dio had mentioned him. Gray smiled in understanding. Caron of Mars had sent him, Gray, to Mercury. Caron of Mars was

helping him, through Ward, to escape. Caron of Mars wanted Mercury for his own purposes--and he could have it.

"In a manner of speaking, Mr. Moulton," he said gravely, "Caron of Mars is working for me."

He caught Ward's sharp hiss of remonstrance. Then Jill Moulton stepped forward.

"Perhaps he doesn't understand what he's doing, Father." Her eyes met Gray's. "You want to escape, don't you?"

Gray studied her, grinning as the slow rose flushed her skin, the corners of her mouth tightening with anger.

"Go on," he said. "You have a nice voice."

Her eyes narrowed, but she held her temper.

"You must know what that would mean, Gray. There are thousands of veterans in the prisons now. Their offenses are mostly trivial, but the Prison Authority can't let them go, because they have no jobs, no homes, no money.

"The valleys here are fertile. There are mines rich in copper and pitchblende. The men have a chance for a home and a job, a part in building a new world. We hope to make Mercury an independent, self-governing member of the League of Worlds."

"With the Moultons as rulers, of course," Gray murmured.

"If they want us," answered Jill, deliberately missing the point. "Do you think you have the right to destroy all we've worked for?"

Gray was silent. Rather grimly, she went on.

"Caron of Mars would like to see us defeated. He didn't care about Mercury before radium was discovered. But now he'd like to turn it into a prison mining community, with convict labor, leasing mine grants to corporations and cleaning up big fortunes for himself and his associates.

"Any trouble here will give him an excuse to say that we've failed, that the Project is a menace to the Solar System. If you try to escape, you wreck everything we've done. If you don't tell the truth, you may cost thousands of men their futures.

"Do you understand? Will you cooperate?"

Gray said evenly, "I'm my own keeper, now. My brother will have to take care of himself."

It was ridiculously easy, she was so earnest, so close to him. He had a brief kaleidoscope of impressions--Ward's sullen bewilderment, Moulton's angry roar, Dio's jerky rise to his feet as the guards grabbed for their guns.

Then he had his hands around her slim, firm throat, her body pressed close to his, serving as a shield against bullets.

"Don't be rash," he told them all quietly. "I can break her neck quite easily, if I have to. Ward, unlock that door."

In utter silence, Ward darted over and began to spin the dial. At last he said, "Okay, c'mon."

Gray realized that he was sweating. Jill was like warm, rigid marble in his hands. And he had another idea.

"I'm going to take the girl as a hostage," he announced. "If I get safely

away, she'll be turned loose, her health and virtue still intact. Good night."

The clang of the heavy door had a comforting sound behind them.

The ship was a commercial job, fairly slow but sturdy. Gray strapped Jill Moulton into one of the bucket seats in the control room and then checked the fuel and air gauges. The tanks were full.

"What about you?" he said to Ward. "You can't go back."

"Nah. I'll have to go with you. Warm her up, Duke, while I open the dome."

He darted out. Gray set the atmosphere motors idling. The dome slid open, showing the flicker of the auroras, where areas of intense heat and cold set up atmospheric tension by rapid fluctuation of adjoining air masses.

Mercury, cutting the vast magnetic field of the Sun in an eccentric orbit, tortured by the daily change from blistering heat to freezing cold in the thin atmosphere, was a powerful generator of electricity.

Ward didn't come back.

Swearing under his breath, tense for the sound of pursuit in spite of the girl, Gray went to look. Out beyond the hangar, he saw a figure running.

Running hard up into the narrowing cleft of the valley, where natural galleries in the rock of Mercury led to the places where the copper cables were anchored, and farther, into the unexplored mystery of the caves.

Gray scowled, his arrogant Roman profile hard against the flickering aurora. Then he slammed the lock shut.

The ship roared out into the tearing winds of the plain. Gray cut in his rockets and blasted up, into the airless dark among the high peaks.

Jill Moulton hadn't moved or spoken.

Gray snapped on the space radio, leaving his own screen dark. Presently he picked up signals in a code he didn't know.

"Listen," he said. "I knew there was some reason for Ward's running out on me."

His Indianesque face hardened. "So that's the game! They want to make trouble for you by letting me escape and then make themselves heroes by bringing me in, preferably dead.

"They've got ships waiting to get me as soon as I clear Mercury, and they're getting stand-by instructions from somebody on the ground. The somebody that Ward was making for."

Jill's breath made a small hiss. "Somebody's near the Project...."

Gray snapped on his transmitter.

"Duke Gray, calling all ships off Mercury. Will the flagship of your reception committee please come in?"

His screen flickered to life. A man's face appeared--the middle-aged, soft-fleshed, almost stickily innocent face of one of the Solar Systems greatest crusaders against vice and crime.

Jill Moulton gasped. "Caron of Mars!"

"Ward gave the game away," said Gray gently. "Too bad."

The face of Caron of Mars never changed expression. But behind those flesh-hooded eyes was a cunning brain, working at top speed.

"I have a passenger," Gray went on. "Miss Jill Moulton. I'm responsible for her safety, and I'd hate to have her inconvenienced."

The tip of a pale tongue flicked across Caron's pale lips.

"That is a pity," he said, with the intonation of a preaching minister. "But I cannot stop the machinery set in motion...."

"And besides," finished Gray acidly, "you think that if Jill Moulton dies with me, it'll break John Moulton so he won't fight you at all."

His lean hand poised on the switch.

"All right, you putrid flesh-tub. Try and catch us!"

The screen went dead. Gray hunched over the controls. If he could get past them, lose himself in the glare of the Sun....

He looked aside at the stony-faced girl beside him. She was studying him contemptuously out of hard gray eyes.

"How," she said slowly, "can you be such a callous swine?"

"Callous?" He controlled the quite unreasonable anger that rose in him. "Not at all. The war taught me that if I didn't look out for myself, no one would."

"And yet you must have started out a human being."

He laughed.

The ship burst into searing sunlight. The Sunside of Mercury blazed below them. Out toward the velvet dark of space the side of a waiting ship flashed burning silver.

Even as he watched, the flare of its rockets arced against the blackness. They had been sighted.

Gray's practised eye gauged the stranger's speed against his own, and he cursed softly. Abruptly he wheeled the ship and started down again, cutting his rockets as the shadow swallowed them. The ship was eerily silent, dropping with a rising scream as the atmosphere touched the hull.

"What are you going to do?" asked Jill almost too quietly.

He didn't answer. Maneuvering the ship on velocity between those stupendous pinnacles took all his attention. Caron, at least, couldn't follow him in the dark without exhaust flares as guides.

They swept across the wind-torn plain, into the mouth of the valley where Gray had worked, braking hard to a stop under the cables.

"You might have got past them," said Jill.

"One chance in a hundred."

Her mouth twisted. "Afraid to take it?"

He smiled harshly. "I haven't yet reached the stage where I kill women. You'll be safe here--the men will find you in the morning. I'm going back, alone."

"Safe!" she said bitterly. "For what? No matter what happens, the Project is ruined."

"Don't worry," he told her brutally. "You'll find some other way to make a living."

Her eyes blazed. "You think that's all its means to us? Just money and power?" She whispered, "I hope they kill you, Duke Gray!"

He rose lazily and opened the air lock, then turned and freed her. And, sharply, the valley was bathed in a burst of light.

"Damn!" Gray picked up the sound of air motors overhead. "They must have had infra-red search beams. Well, that does it. We'll have to run for it, since this bus isn't armed."

With eerie irrelevancy, the teleradio buzzed. At this time of night, after the evening storms, some communication was possible.

Gray had a hunch. He opened the switch, and the face of John Moulton appeared on the screen. It was white and oddly still.

"Our guards saw your ship cross the plain," said Moulton quietly. "The men of the Project, led by Dio, are coming for you. I sent them, because I have decided that the life of my daughter is less important than the lives of many thousands of people."

"I appeal to you, Gray, to let her go. Her life won't save you. And it's very precious to me."

Caron's ship swept over, low above the cables, and the grinding concussion of a bomb lifted the ship, hurled it down with the stern end twisted to uselessness. The screen went dead.

Gray caught the half stunned girl. "I wish to heaven I could get rid of you!" he grated. "And I don't know why I don't!"

But she was with him when he set out down the valley, making for the cliff caves, up where the copper cables were anchored.

Caron's ship, a fast, small fighter, wheeled between the cliffs and turned back. Gray dropped flat, holding the girl down. Bombs pelted them with dirt and uprooted vegetables, started fires in the wheat. The pilot found a big enough break in the cables and came in for a landing.

Gray was up and running again. He knew the way into the explored galleries. From there on, it was anybody's guess.

Caron was brazen enough about it. The subtle way had failed. Now he was going all out. And he was really quite safe. With the broken cables to act as conductors, the first thunderstorm would obliterate all proof of his activities in this valley. Mercury, because of its high electrical potential, was cut off from communication with other worlds. Moulton, even if he had knowledge of what went on, could not send for help.

Gray wondered briefly what Caron intended to do in case he, Gray, made good his escape. That outpost in the main valley, for which Ward had been heading, wasn't kept for fun. Besides, Caron was too smart to have only one string to his bow.

Shouts, the spatter of shots around them. The narrow trail loomed above. Gray sent the girl scrambling up.

The sun burst up over the high peaks, leaving the black shadow of the valley still untouched. Caron's ship roared off. But six of its crew came after Gray and Jill Moulton.

The chill dark of the tunnel mouth swallowed them. Keeping right to avoid the great copper posts that held the cables, strung through

holes drilled in the solid rock of the gallery's outer wall, Gray urged the girl along.

The cleft his hand was searching for opened. Drawing the girl inside, around a jutting shoulder, he stopped, listening.

Footsteps echoed outside, grew louder, swept by. There was no light. But the steps were too sure to have been made in the dark.

"Infra-red torches and goggles," Gray said tersely, "You see, but your quarry doesn't. Useful gadget. Come on."

"But where? What are you going to do?"

"Escape, girl. Remember? They smashed my ship. But there must be another one on Mercury. I'm going to find it."

"I don't understand."

"You probably never will. Here's where I leave you. That Martian Galahad will be along any minute. He'll take you home."

Her voice came soft and puzzled through the dark.

"I don't understand you, Gray. You wouldn't risk my life. Yet you're turning me loose, knowing that I might save you, knowing that I'll hunt you down if I can. I thought you were a hardened cynic."

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"If you were, you'd have kicked me out the waste tubs of the ship and gone on. You'd never have turned back."

"I told you," he said roughly, "I don't kill women." He turned away, but her harsh chuckle followed him.

"You're a fool, Gray. You've lost truth--and you aren't even true to your lie."

He paused, in swift anger. Voices the sound of running men, came up from the path. He broke into a silent run, following the dying echoes of Caron's men.

"Run, Gray!" cried Jill. "Because we're coming after you!"

The tunnels, ancient blowholes for the volcanic gases that had tortured Mercury with the raising of the titanic mountains, sprawled in a labyrinthine network through those same vast peaks. Only the galleries lying next the valleys had been explored. Man's habitation on Mercury had been too short.

Gray could hear Caron's men circling about through connecting tunnels, searching. It proved what he had already guessed. He was taking a desperate chance. But the way back was closed--and he was used to taking chances.

The geography of the district was clear in his mind--the valley he had just left and the main valley, forming an obtuse angle with the apex out on the wind-torn plain and a double range of mountains lying out between the sides of the triangle.

Somewhere there was a passage through those peaks. Somewhere there was a landing place, and ten to one there was a ship on it. Caron would never have left his men stranded, on the off chance that they might be discovered and used in evidence against him.

The men now hunting him knew their way through the tunnels, probably with the aid of markings that fluoresced under infra-red light. They were going to take him through, too.

They were coming closer. He waited far up in the main gallery, in the mouth of a side tunnel. Now, behind them, he could hear Dio's men. The noise of Caron's outfit stopped, then began again, softly.

Gray smiled, his sense of humor pleased. He tensed, waiting.

The rustle of cloth, the furtive creak of leather, the clink of metal equipment. Heavy breathing. Somebody whispered,

"Who the hell's that back there?"

"Must be men from the Project. We'd better hurry."

"We've got to find that damned Gray first," snapped the first voice grimly. "Caron'll burn us if we don't."

Gray counted six separate footsteps, trying to allow for the echoes. When he was sure the last man was by, he stepped out. The noise of Dio's hunt was growing--there must be a good many of them.

Covered by their own echoes, he stole up on the men ahead. His groping hand brushed gently against the clothing of the last man in the group. Gauging his distance swiftly, he went into action.

One hand fastened over the fellow's mouth. The other, holding a good-sized rock, struck down behind the ear. Gray eased the body down with scarcely a sound.

Their uniforms, he had noticed, were not too different from his prison garb. In a second he had stripped goggles, cap, and gun-belt from the body, and was striding after the others.

They moved like five eerie shadows now, in the queer light of the leader's lamp. Small fluorescent markings guided them. The last man

grunted over his shoulder,

"What happened to you?"

"Stumbled," whispered Gray tersely, keeping his head down. A whisper is a good disguise for the voice. The other nodded.

"Don't straggle. No fun, getting lost in here."

The leader broke in. "We'll circle again. Be careful of that Project bunch--they'll be using ordinary light. And be quiet!"

They went, through connecting passages. The noise of Dio's party grew ominously loud. Abruptly, the leader swore.

"Caron or no Caron, he's gone. And we'd better go, too."

He turned off, down a different tunnel, and Gray heaved a sigh of relief, remembering the body he'd left in the open. For a time the noise of their pursuers grew remote. And then, suddenly, there was an echoing clamor of footsteps, and the glare of torches on the wall of a cross-passage ahead.

Voices came to Gray, distorted by the rock vaults.

"I'm sure I heard them, just then." It was Jill's voice.

"Yeah." That was Dio. "The trouble is, where?"

The footsteps halted. Then, "Let's try this passage. We don't want to get too far into this maze."

Caron's leader blasphemed softly and dodged into a side tunnel. The man next to Gray stumbled and cried out with pain as he struck the wall, and a shout rose behind them.

The leader broke into a run, twisting, turning, diving into the maze of smaller tunnels. The sounds of pursuit faded, were lost in the tomblike silence of the caves. One of the men laughed.

"We sure lost 'em!"

"Yeah," said the leader. "We lost 'em, all right." Gray caught the note of panic in his voice. "We lost the markers, too."

"You mean...?"

"Yeah. Turning off like that did it. Unless we can find that marked tunnel, we're sunk!"

Gray, silent in the shadows, laughed a bitter, ironic laugh.

They went on, stumbling down endless black halls, losing all track of branching corridors, straining to catch the first glint of saving light. Once or twice they caught the echoes of Dio's party, and knew that they, too, were lost and wandering.

Then, quite suddenly, they came out into a vast gallery, running like a subway tube straight to left and right. A wind tore down it, hot as a draught from the burning gates of Hell.

It was a moment before anyone grasped the significance of that wind. Then someone shouted,

"We're saved! All we have to do is walk against it!"

They turned left, almost running in the teeth of that searing blast. And Gray began to notice a peculiar thing.

The air was charged with electricity. His clothing stiffened and

crackled. His hair crawled on his head. He could see the faint discharges of sparks from his companions.

Whether it was the effect of the charged air, or the reaction from the nervous strain of the past hours, Mel Gray began to be afraid.

Weary to exhaustion, they struggled on against the burning wind. And then they blundered out into a cave, huge as a cathedral, lighted by a queer, uncertain bluish light.

Gray caught the sharp smell of ozone. His whole body was tingling with electric tension. The bluish light seemed to be in indeterminate lumps scattered over the rocky floor. The rush of the wind under that tremendous vault was terrifying.

They stopped, Gray keeping to the background. Now was the time to evade his unconscious helpers. The moment they reached daylight, he'd be discovered.

Soft-footed as a cat, he was already hidden among the heavy shadows of the fluted walls when, he heard the voices.

They came from off to the right, a confused shout of men under fearful strain, growing louder and louder, underscored with the tramp of footsteps. Lights blazed suddenly in the cathedral dark, and from the mouth of a great tunnel some hundred yards away, the men of the Project poured into the cave.

And then, sharp and high and unexpected, a man screamed.

The lumps of blue light were moving. And a man had died. He lay on the rock, his flesh blackened jelly, with a rope of glowing light running from the metal of his gun butt to the metal buttons on his cap.

All across the vast floor of that cavern the slow, eerie ripple of motion grew. The scattered lumps melted and flowed together, converging in wavelets of blue flame upon the men.

The answer came to Gray. Those things were some form of energy-life, born of the tremendous electric tensions on Mercury. Like all electricity, they were attracted to metal.

In a sudden frenzy of motion, he ripped off his metal-framed goggles, his cap and gun-belt. The Moultons forbade metal because of the danger of lightning, and his boots were made of rubber, so he felt reasonably safe, but a tense fear ran in prickling waves across his skin.

Guns began to bark, their feeble thunder all but drowned in the vast rush of the wind. Bullets struck the oncoming waves of light with no more effect than the eruption of a shower of sparks. Gray's attention, somehow, was riveted on Jill, standing with Dio at the head of her men.

She wore ordinary light slippers, having been dressed only for indoors. And there were silver ornaments at waist and throat.

He might have escaped, then, quite unnoticed. Instead, for a reason even he couldn't understand, he ran for Jill Moulton.

The first ripples of blue fire touched the ranks of Dio's men. Bolts of it leaped upward to fasten upon gun-butts and the buckles of the cartridge belts. Men screamed, fell, and died.

An arm of the fire licked out, driving in behind Dio and the girl. The guns of Caron's four remaining men were silent, now.

Gray leaped over that hissing electric surf, running toward Jill. A

hungry worm of light reared up, searching for Dio's gun. Gray's hand swept it down, to be instantly buried in a mass of glowing ropes. Dio's hatchet face snarled at him in startled anger.

Jill cried out as Gray tore the silver ornaments from her dress. "Throw down the guns!" he yelled. "It's metal they want!"

He heard his name shouted by men torn momentarily from their own terror. Dio cried, "Shoot him!" A few bullets whined past, but their immediate fear spoiled both aim and attention.

Gray caught up Jill and began to run, toward the tube from which the wind howled in the cave. Behind him, grimly, Dio followed.

The electric beasts didn't notice him. His insulated feet trampled through them, buried to the ankle in living flame, feeling queer tenuous bodies break and reform.

The wind met them like a physical barrier at the tunnel mouth. Gray put Jill down. The wind strangled him. He tore off his coat and wrapped it over the girl's head, using his shirt over his own. Jill, her black curls whipped straight, tried to fight back past him, and he saw Dio coming, bent double against the wind.

He saw something else. Something that made him grab Jill and point, his flesh crawling with swift, cold dread.

The electric beasts had finished their pleasure. The dead were cinders on the rock. The living had run back into the tunnels. And now the blue sea of fire was flowing again, straight toward the place where they stood.

It was flowing fast, and Gray sensed an urgency, an impersonal haste, as though a command had been laid upon those living ropes

of flame.

The first dim rumble of thunder rolled down the wind. Gripping Jill, Gray turned up the tunnel.

The wind, compressed in that narrow throat of rock, beat them blind and breathless, beat them to their bellies, to crawl. How long it took them, they never knew.

But Gray caught glimpses of Dio the Martian crawling behind them, and behind him again, the relentless flow of the fire-things.

They floundered out onto a rocky slope, fell away beneath the suck of the wind, and lay still, gasping. It was hot. Thunder crashed abruptly, and lightning flared between the cliffs.

Gray felt a contracting of the heart. There were no cables.

Then he saw it--the small, fast fighter flying below them on a flat plateau. A cave mouth beside it had been closed with a plastic door. The ship was the one that had followed them. He guessed at another one behind the protecting door.

Raking the tumbled blond hair out of his eyes, Gray got up.

Jill was still sitting, her black curls bowed between her hands. There wasn't much time, but Gray yielded to impulse. Pulling her head back by the silken hair, he kissed her.

"If you ever get tired of virtue, sweetheart, look me up." But somehow he wasn't grinning, and he ran down the slope.

He was almost to the open lock of the ship when things began to happen. Dio staggered out of the wind-tunnel and sagged down beside Jill. Then, abruptly, the big door opened.

Five men came out—one in pilot's costume, two in nondescript apparel, one in expensive business clothes, and the fifth in dark prison garb.

Gray recognized the last two. Caron of Mars and the errant Ward.

They were evidently on the verge of leaving. But they looked cheerful. Caron's sickly-sweet face all but oozed honey, and Ward was grinning his rat's grin.

Thunder banged and rolled among the rocks. Lightning flared in the cloudy murk. Gray saw the hull of a second ship beyond the door. Then the newcomers had seen him, and the two on the slope.

Guns ripped out of holsters. Gray's heart began to pound slowly. He, and Jill and Dio, were caught on that naked slope, with the flood of electric death at their backs.

His Indianesque face hardened. Bullets whined round him as he turned back up the slope, but he ran doubled over, putting all his hope in the tricky, uncertain light.

Jill and the Martian crouched stiffly, not knowing where to turn. A flare of lightning showed Gray the first of the firethings, flowing out onto the ledge, hidden from the men below.

"Back into the cave!" he yelled. His urgent hand fairly lifted Dio. The Martian glared at him, then obeyed. Bullets snarled against the rock. The light was too bad for accurate shooting, but luck couldn't stay with them forever.

Gray glanced over his shoulder as they scrambled up on the ledge. Caron waited by his ship. Ward and the others were charging the

slope. Gray's teeth gleamed in a cruel grin.

Sweeping Jill into his arms, he stepped into the lapping flow of fire. Dio swore viciously, but he followed. They started toward the cave mouth, staggering in the rush of the wind.

"For God's sake, don't fall," snapped Gray. "Here they come!"

The pilot and one of the nondescript men were the first over. They were into the river of fire before they knew, it, and then it was too late. One collapsed and was buried. The pilot fell backward, and then other man died under his body, of a broken neck.

Ward stopped. Gray could see his face, dark and hard and calculating. He studied Gray and Dio, and the dead men. He turned and looked back at Caron. Then, deliberately, he stripped off his gun belt, threw down his gun, and waded into the river.

Gray remembered, then, that Ward too wore rubber boots, and had no metal on him.

Ward came on, the glowing ropes sliding surf-like around his boots. Very carefully. Gray handed Jill to Dio.

"If I die too," he said, "there's only Caron down there. He's too fat to stop you."

Jill spoke, but he turned his back. He was suddenly confused, and it was almost pleasant to be able to lose his confusion in fighting. Ward had stopped some five feet away. Now he untied the length of tough cord that served him for a belt.

Gray nodded. Ward would try to throw a twist around his ankle and trip him. Once his body touched those swarming creatures....

He tensed, watchfully. The rat's grin was set on Ward's dark face. The cord licked out.

But it caught Gray's throat instead of his ankle!

Ward laughed and braced himself. Cursing, Gray caught at the rope. But friction held it, and Ward pulled, hard. His face purpling, Gray could still commend Ward's strategy. In taking Gray off guard, he'd more than made up what he lost in point of leverage.

Letting his body go with the pull, Gray flung himself at Ward. Blood blinded him, his heart was pounding, but he thought he foresaw Ward's next move. He let himself be pulled almost within striking distance.

Then, as Ward stepped, aside, jerking the rope and thrusting out a tripping foot, Gray made a catlike shift of balance and bent over.

His hands almost touched that weird, flowing surf as they clasped Ward's boot. Throwing all his strength into the lift, he hurled Ward backward.

Ward screamed once and disappeared under the blue fire. Gray clawed the rope from his neck. And then, suddenly, the world began to sway under him. He knew he was falling.

Some one's hand caught him, held him up. Fighting down his vertigo as his breath came back, he saw that it was Jill.

"Why?" he gasped, but her answer was lost in a titanic roar of thunder. Lightning blasted down. Dio's voice reached him, thin and distant through the clamor.

"We'll be killed! These damn things will attract the bolts!"

It was true. All his work had been for nothing. Looking up into that low, angry sky, Gray knew he was going to die.

Quite irrelevantly, Jill's words in the tunnel came back to him. "You're a fool ... lost truth ... not true to lie!"

Now, in this moment, she couldn't lie to him. He caught her shoulders cruelly, trying to read her eyes.

Very faintly through the uproar, he heard her. "I'm sorry for you, Gray. Good man, gone to waste."

Dio stifled a scream. Thunder crashed between the sounding boards of the cliffs. Gray looked up.

A titanic bolt of lightning shot down, straight for them. The burning blue surf was agitated, sending up pseudopods uncannily like worshipping arms. The bolt struck.

The air reeked of ozone, but Gray felt no shock. There was a hiss, a vast stirring of creatures around him. The blue light glowed, purpled.

Another bolt struck down, and another, and still they were not dead. The fire-things had become a writhing, joyous tangle of tenuous bodies, glowing bright and brighter.

Stunned, incredulous, the three humans stood. The light was now an eye-searing violet. Static electricity tingled through them in eerie waves. But they were not burned.

"My God," whispered Gray. "They eat it. They eat lightning!"

Not daring to move, they stood watching that miracle of alien life, the feeding of living things on raw current. And when the last bolt had

struck, the tide turned and rolled back down the wind-tunnel, a blinding river of living light.

Silently, the three humans went down the rocky slope to where Caron of Mars cowered in the silver ship. No bolt had come near it. And now Caron came to meet them.

His face was pasty with fear, but the old cunning still lurked in his eyes.

"Gray," he said. "I have an offer to make."

"Well?"

"You killed my pilot," said Caron suavely. "I can't fly, myself. Take me off, and I'll pay you anything you want."

"In bullets," retorted Gray. "You won't want witnesses to this."

"Circumstances force me. Physically, you have the advantage."

Jill's fingers caught his arm. "Don't, Gray! The Project...."

Caron faced her. "The Project is doomed in any case. My men carried out my secondary instructions. All the cables in your valley have been cut. There is a storm now ready to break.

"In fifteen minutes or so, everything will be destroyed, except the domes. Regrettable, but...." He shrugged.

Jill's temper blazed, choking her so that she could hardly speak.

"Look at him, Gray," she whispered. "That's what you're so proud of being. A cynic, who believes in nothing but himself. Look at him!"

Gray turned on her.

"Damn you!" he grated. "Do you expect me to believe you, with the world full of hypocrites like him?"

Her eyes stopped him. He remembered Moulton, pleading for her life. He remembered how she had looked back there at the tunnel, when they had been sure of death. Some of his assurance was shaken.

"Listen," he said harshly. "I can save your valley. There's a chance in a million of coming out alive. Will you die for what you believe in?"

She hesitated, just for a second. Then she looked at Dio and said, "Yes."

Gray turned. Almost lazily, his fist snapped up and took Caron on his flabby jaw.

"Take care of him, Dio," he grunted. Then he entered the ship, herding the white-faced girl before him.

The ship hurtled up into airless space, where the blinding sunlight lay in sharp shadows on the rock. Over the ridge and down again, with the Project hidden under a surf of storm-clouds.

Cutting in the air motors, Gray dropped. Black, bellowing darkness swallowed them. Then he saw the valley, with the copper cables fallen, and the wheat already on fire in several places.

Flying with every bit of his skill, he sought the narrowest part of the valley and flipped over in a racking loop. The stern tubes hit rock. The nose slammed down on the opposite wall, wedging the ship by sheer weight.

Lightning gathered in a vast javelin and flamed down upon them. Jill flinched and caught her breath. The flame hissed along the hull and vanished into seared and blackened rock.

"Still willing to die for principle?" asked Gray brutally.

She glared at him. "Yes," she snapped. "But I hate having to die in your company!"

She looked down at the valley. Lightning struck with monotonous regularity on the hull, but the valley was untouched. Jill smiled, though her face was white, her body rigid with waiting.

It was the smile that did it. Gray looked at her, her tousled black curls, the lithe young curves of throat and breast. He leaned back in his seat, scowling out at the storm.

"Relax," he said. "You aren't going to die."

She turned on him, not daring to speak. He went on, slowly.

"The only chance you took was in the landing. We're acting as lightning rod for the whole valley, being the highest and best conductor. But, as a man named Faraday proved, the charge resides on the surface of the conductor. We're perfectly safe."

"How dared you!" she whispered.

He faced her, almost angrily.

"You knocked the props out from under my philosophy. I've had enough hypocritical eyewash. I had to prove you. Well, I have."

She was quiet for some time. Then she said, "I understand, Duke. I'm glad. And now what, for you?"

He shrugged wryly.

"I don't know. I can still take Caron's other ship and escape. But I don't think I want to. I think perhaps I'll stick around and give virtue another whirl."

Smoothing back his sleek fair hair, he shot her a sparkling look from under his hands.

"I won't," he added softly, "even mind going to Sunday School, if you were the teacher."

Retreat To The Stars

Leigh Brackett

Arno was just entering the big common hall when the lights blinked One-two. One-two. That meant ships landing on the icy field outside. And ships meant only one thing this time. Ralph's squadron had come back. He stopped beside the doorway to let the mob stream through from the dormitories, workshops and kitchen. Everything stopped when those lights blinked, except the ceaseless hammering from the place where the rebels labored on their great ship. Arno watched them come; the men whose drawn lots had said No, the erect, brazen women, the children, the old and the maimed. They would make my world like that! thought Arno. The hate, unveiled for a brief moment, made his straight, strong features like marble. Those people, streaming into the big, barren hall to wait, breathless, until the ships landed and brought news of the raid--they would bring their dissonance into his ordered, patterned world; their restlessness, their pagan heresies, their eternal striving.

It made him feel savagely good, that tall blond man standing in the shadow, to know that through him, the State held their destiny to its own pleasure. Marika came striding from the workshop, the sweat and grime of labor dark on her naked arms and legs. Arno noted her broad shoulders, her wide brow and clear, authoritative eyes, with distaste. The women of these incorrigibles offended him far more than the men. And yet Marika, dressed in her brief leather kirtle, her tawny mane falling heavy on her shoulders.... Arno hated himself for having to control even the slightest impulse toward Marika. There should be none in him. And yet....

"They're back, Arno!" she said. "Ralph's back!" She caught his arm,

and they fought their way together toward the doors on the far side. The spy, his mask of friendship slipped easily into place, still could not stop the question that rose so often in his mind.

"It would matter a lot, wouldn't it, if Ralph didn't come back?"

"It would matter everything!" said Marika softly. "Everything. But he has, this time. If anything ever happens to him, I'll know." Arno wondered how, and shook his head mentally for the thousandth time. The mechanics of this barbaric relationship between men and women he accepted, but he could not understand. Though he was only twenty-five, he had already given the State three sons and a daughter, and he couldn't conceive of either one of his appointed mates caring more for him than he did for them. If his life should be snuffed out, it wouldn't change their lives any. Woman's sole duty was the bearing of children and the keeping of the living quarters, wherever the State saw fit to send her.

* * *

The hall was full now, silent as nearly seven thousand people can make a place. The distant clangor from the mysterious ship-building echoed loudly. Arno could follow the operations outside as clearly as though he saw them; battered ships roaring in one after the other from the dark space, landing on the frigid, airless field, being towed by ancient tugs into the camouflaged dome of the hangar.

Arno well knew how the ships of the Tri-State, combing the Solar System for this last outpost of anarchy, had passed by the savage Trojans, over the very structures that housed their quarry.

A slender, dark girl with a child in her arms came to Marika, and again Arno, acknowledging her shy smile with a friendly, "Hello, Laura," was stricken with the wastefulness of these rebels. They

cheerfully coddled and supported people unable to do their full share of work--women like Laura, crippled men who should have been eliminated as deterrent factors.

Laura said, "I'm frightened, Marika. I'm always frightened, for fear Karl.... He has come back, hasn't he, Marika?"

"Of course!" Marika took woman and child in the curve of one sturdy arm.

"Listen. That's the lock opening."

The crowd surged forward just a bit. Heavy double doors swung back. And there was Ralph, with his men shouldering through behind him. Ralph, fighting leader of the rebels, was neither tall, nor handsome, nor powerfully built. One's eyes slid past him, were caught somehow, forced back to see the compact, challenging strength of him, the tough, indestructible something that looked from his reckless blue eyes, spoke in his harshly vibrant voice, laughed from his cynical mouth. And once seeing, they never forgot.

Ralph wasn't laughing now. The crowd knew the instant he came in that something was wrong. He was white with weariness, his stubbled jaw set and ugly. Arno felt a little pulse of excitement stir in his heart; he knew so well what was coming.

A wave of sound swept the hall, people shouting questions, names. Ralph raised his hand, and the clamor died.

"We lost three ships," he said quietly, but the words rang to the far corners.

"Vern, Parlo, and Karl. The raid was a failure." There was a moment of utter silence. Arno saw Laura's white face, saw Marika's strong

arm ease her sudden fall. Somewhere a woman sobbed, a child sent up a wail.

Then a man, one of the weary, hard-driven scientists, shouted, "But damn it, Ralph, this is the third time! We've got to have supplies, equipment, if we're to go on!"

"You'll get them," said Ralph. The stubborn fire of his gaze swept them. "Go easy on what you have. We'll try again."

He turned to Marika, his men mingling with the crowd.

"Poor kid," he muttered, looking down at Laura. "I wish it had been...."

"No!" blazed Marika. "Never wish it had been you! It may be soon enough." She kissed him, with a strange, bitter fierceness.

Ralph smiled.

"Black becomes you," he said mockingly. "Don't you want to be a hero's widow?" He stopped her lips with another kiss. Laura's boy was squalling. Ralph gave him to Marika and picked up the white, still girl. "Come on. I want food and a shave. Arno, will you get Frane and Father Berrens and bring them along?"

"Of course." A small flame of triumph was burning behind Arno's mask. Ralph had lost three ships, thirty men--ships and men he could ill afford to lose. Fools, to think they could defy the State! The scar on his temple, placed there by Tri-State's skillful surgeons, reddened with the flow of blood to his brain, and he put his hand up to hide it, lest it betray him. That scar kept him from being assigned to fighting duty, kept him at base, where the information was.

Before he found the two men who, with Ralph, controlled the destinies of the Trojan base, therefore of all the rebels in the System, Arno retired to his own small room. Concealed in the heavy buckle of his belt was a tiny, incredibly powerful radio, operating on a tight beam that changed synchronization automatically every fourth second. Only the receiver of the People's Protector, back on Terra, could catch that beam. Arno gave his call letter and waited until the cold, precise voice of the People's Protector, head of all the anti-revolution activities of the Tri-State, answered him.

Then he said, "They are much upset over the failure of the raid. They need supplies, metal especially, for fuel and repairs. I am being drawn daily more close to the heart of things; Ralph and Marika are particularly friendly. I will transmit information as I receive it."

"You have not yet found the secret of the ship they build?"

"No. They guard that carefully."

"Nor the location of their planetary headquarters?"

"No."

"These things are most important. The destruction of these anarchists must be complete, to the last man." The Protector's voice altered just the faintest trifle from its emotionless inflexibility. "You are in a unique position. The State would find it most difficult, under the circumstances, to replace you. Remember your duty, your faith, and be cautious. There must be no failure." The contact broke with a click, and Arno was conscious of a small, uneasy twinge. Strange that in these eight months he hadn't quite realized that. Accustomed from birth to consider himself merely a more or less efficient cog in a machine, replaceable at a moment's notice, he hadn't quite understood how his status had changed. He had a moment of

positive vertigo, as though the firm ground on which he stood had suddenly given way.

And then he recovered himself. There would be no failure. The State had classified him as Brain-type 1-04, best adapted to this type of work. The State had assigned and trained him. He couldn't fail. All he had to do was follow orders.

* * *

Twenty minutes later he sat in the cubicle that served Ralph and Marika as home. Frane, the head of the scientific group, sat on a metal chair taken from a wrecked ship; a stringy, tired man with grey hair. Berrens, civilian chief, occupied the table. He was a priest of their pagan religion, and wore a bit of cloth about his throat to show it. His big frame showed the universal signs of underfeeding, but his chin and eyes were stubborn, his mouth twisted in a smile that wouldn't die. Ralph, with his usual restlessness, paced the floor, puffing savagely at a battered pipe.

That left Arno to sit with Marika on the worn remains of a couch. She had changed her working leather for a carefully mended dress of sultry red that offended Arno's eye, yet provoked a buried something in him. Time and again he found his gaze straying back to her. She was so different from the colorless, broad-hipped women of his world. He could feel the unwomanly strength of her, see it in the sweeping lines of her body.

She never took her eyes off Ralph. What strange thing was it that made a woman look at a man like that?

Ralph swung about abruptly. "Sorry, Arno. Council of war. Come and have dinner with us."

"Right." Arno smiled and rose.

Marika jumped up too.

"I'll go with you. I'm anxious about Laura." The door closed behind them, shutting them out of that council. Arno felt a moment of rage. If only he could get at the heart of things, instead of relying on generalities picked up from Marika, with an occasional specific bit about the raids.

Marika sighed and thrust back her tawny mane with work-hardened fingers. "It must have been wonderful in the old days! To have lived in real houses, walked on real earth, with sunlight and real air! To have had pretty clothes and silk stockings, and something to do besides work and worry and shake hands with Death every morning!"

Her vehemence startled him. "Why, Marika...."

"Two thousand years ago. Why couldn't I have been born two thousand years ago?"

* * *

The strangeness of it came over Arno--how Marika could look back to the Twentieth Century as day before darkness, and he as darkness before dawn. In the Twenty-first Century the last Terran rebels had fled to Venus, and from there to Mars, and from there to the state where they were now. The all-encompassing strength of the State had followed them, driving out their heresies, their anarchies, their haphazard individualism. Now there was peace and system everywhere, except for the hidden plague-spots on the planets and this barren asteroid, which, through him, the Tri-State would soon destroy.

"I wonder," said Marika, softly, "what it would be like to be full fed, and full clothed, and to kiss your husband goodbye knowing that he'd live to be kissed hello?"

Her mouth quivered, and there were tears on her lashes. Arno's heart gave a strange, sudden leap, quite beyond his comprehension. He downed it firmly.

"What will Ralph do now?"

"Do!" said Marika savagely. "He'll go out again, and again, and again, until he dies, like Karl." She stopped and faced him, almost defiantly under the dim radium light. "I've got to cry, Arno. I've held it in and held it in, but I can't hold it any longer. We're fighting a losing battle, Arno. Ralph's going to die for it. All of us. And just once, I've got to stop being brave!" And all at once she was crying, with her hands painfully tight on his arms and her tawny head thrust hard against his shoulder. In spite of himself, some tiny crack was made in the armor surrounding his brain, and he saw this place as she saw it; a tomb of dead hope, dead glory, dead life. What made them struggle on, knowing this?

He found his hands on Marika, his arms around her. He didn't remember putting them there. She was like an animal, warm and vitally alive. He caught his hands away, shaken with sudden fear. It was as though he recoiled from the brink of a chasm, from the unknown. He stood silently while she cried herself out, still silently when she had her breath again and moved away from him. His arms ached where her fingers had gripped. Marika dashed an arm across reddened eyes and swore. "Damn me for a sniveling ass! But I feel better. Guess a woman's got to be one once in a while, even if she is a mechanic! Don't tell Ralph, and—well, thanks, Arno." He watched her go, down the corridor to Laura's home. Her red dress was almost black in that light, her hair dull gold. Arno tried to think about that

meeting back there, about his duty. But his eyes followed Marika.

* * *

On the other side of the locked door, Ralph paced restlessly in a cloud of smoke.

"Something's wrong," he said. "With that new invisible paint, we should have been safe, since the ships are non-magnetic. But they took us in the back, as though they knew where to look."

Both men eyed him sharply. "You know what you're saying?"

"I know!" Ralph rumped his short brown hair with impatient fingers. "It's incredible that one of our own people.... No, Tri-State may have planted a spy."

"A possibility. Remote, but a possibility." Father Berrens shook his head wearily.

"If there's a spy," said Frane grimly, "we'll have to catch him quickly. We need supplies."

"How long can we last without them, Frane?"

"Three weeks, possibly a day or two longer. No more."

"Good God." Ralph's strong-boned face tightened; the knowledge took him like a blow over the heart. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were doing your best," said Father Berrens gently. "We didn't want to make it harder."

"Three weeks! My God, has it come so close to the end? To fight for two thousand years, and now....Three weeks!"

Berrens managed a smile. "You'll make a successful raid."

"But if I don't! If I don't!" Ralph paced savagely. Responsibility, weariness, a sense of futility weighed on him like a leaden cloud. The room was silent for a long moment. Then, "The ship, Frane. You've got to have it finished in ten days."

Frane nodded. "I'll triple the shifts. I'll have to strip the domes for the metal."

"Anything, as long as we can still breathe. But get that ship finished!"

"Perhaps," said Frane somberly, "it would be better to call the people in from the planetary bases, without waiting."

"No! This Solar System belongs to us. I'm not going to surrender it without fighting!"

"But we've fought so long, Ralph." Father Berrens' voice was infinitely tired.

"The Tri-State has twenty centuries of rigid weeding and training behind it. It's hard to break through that wall. And their people are at least housed and fed. When a man's belly is full it's hard to stir him, even if his brain and soul are starved."

"Granted. But damn it..." Ralph came to a truculent stand, his eyes reckless and uncompromising. "We've got to hang on! Their machine is running down of its own weight. They've lost their best brains to us; that, or purged them. They're beginning to stagnate, and stagnation means retrogression. Without their science they wouldn't have stood two centuries. Now even their science is failing them. They've produced nothing new in the last ninety years."

"If we can just hang on a little longer...." Frane's mouth shut hard. "You can't fight without men and weapons."

"We can do with the men we have. And I'll bring you the metal you need. Give me four hours to sleep, and I'll go out again. This time I'll try Titan."

"Titan! You're mad, Ralph! It's the strongest mining center in the System. You'll be destroyed!"

"Perhaps. But that needn't worry anyone but me. I'm going alone, in the old Sparling."

Ralph knew, as well as the others, that he had one chance in a thousand. The Sparling was a relic of other days, an intricate fighting mechanism capable of being controlled by one man and equipped with tractor beams for hauling prizes back to base. But it needed a super-man to fly it. It was tricky and temperamental and capable of an infinite variety of misdeeds. That was why they hadn't built any more after the first ten. They lost nine in a month. Ralph went on. "They won't be looking for me near Titan. There'll be less chance of detection with one ship. If I'm not back in ten days, start loading."

Berrens said, "Try once more with the squadron."

"There isn't time if we fail. And the way the last three raids have gone, there isn't much use anyway. Understand, I want no one to know where I've gone, or when. Not even Marika."

"But," said Frane, "if there is a spy here, Tri-State knows the location of the base. Why don't they simply bomb us out of the sky?"

"They want information," said Ralph grimly. "But they may bomb us yet. However, that's something we'll just have to pray about. Find the

spy if you can. But get ready, and don't wait for me!"

Father Berrens shook his head. Barring a miracle, they'd never in three weeks catch a spy clever enough to have evaded all their safeguards and actually penetrated the base.

"It seems a case for prayer," he admitted. "We'll try, Ralph. Be careful--and for all our sakes, come back."

* * *

It was more than four hours later that Arno, checking a series of reports for the commissary and exulting over the shortness of supplies, looked up to see Marika standing by his desk. She was white and rigid, her hands locked tight, every bone in her face gauntly clear. "Arno," she said, "Ralph's gone. He wouldn't tell me where, but I checked his men. He's gone alone, and I found out that the old Sparling is missing. Arno, I'm afraid." Ralph gone on a lone raid! He'd have to tell the Protector. He'd play out his part as Marika's good friend until he could get rid of her, and then.... What was it that made a woman look that way about a man? What barbaric emotion was it that the State had taken out of its people?

He had lived among these rebels for eight months, and viewed them as impersonally as a scientist views a microbe. He had been a coldly efficient machine, carrying out orders in the most effective way possible to him. He had not understood these people, nor wished to understand them. His whole devotion had been to the State, the will of the State, the needs of the State. But the machine that was Arno suddenly was not responding as it should. Things were growing in him, impulses, the strangeness and power of which frightened him, the more so because they were inexplicable by his philosophy.

"Arno," whispered Marika, "I'm frightened. I've been frightened too

often. I'm not strong any more. Ralph's gone. He's going to die." She's a rebel, thought Arno. She sets herself above the State. He told himself that it was only because he had a part to play that he stepped forward. Her arms went out to him, quite naturally, like a child that needs comforting. He felt the life flowing through her, meeting something that leaped in himself. Her lips were close to his, cut full and clear in the marble of her face. He kissed her. And was stricken with horror, with self-hatred. He had never kissed a woman before. It was treachery--a weakening to the individual, a subtle challenge to the State.

He broke roughly away and left her standing, staring after him. Arno locked his door and took the radio from his belt. Twice he started to send out his call letter, and twice he stopped. He was aghast at his own hesitancy, but Marika's face kept coming between him and the radio. What would she do if Ralph didn't come back? Would she be like Laura, like so many of the women who lost their men? Why did he care? He felt unsteady, lost, shaken. The tiny thing in his hand looked up at him accusingly, and it steadied him. These rebels and their barbarisms were no concern of his. The State had given him certain orders. The entire end and aim of his life was to serve the State, without question or thought.

The words of the Creed, taught from infancy, came to him. "I believe in the State, which protects me, and deny all faiths but this, that my life may be spent in obedience and service."

What greater end could a man have than to serve the State?

Arno's voice was steady as he spoke to the People's Protector.

"The war leader has gone on a lone raid in an obsolete ship--a Sparling. Destination unknown, but the rebels are desperate for supplies."

"All mines will be warned," said the Protector. "Continue to follow orders."

* * *

Frane was as good as his word. Shifts were tripled, taking every available man, woman and youth. Even Arno, still pleading his simulated head injury, was pronounced fit for light work and sent to the hangar. Because of the need for haste, much of the veil of secrecy was discarded. Only the ultimate purpose of the ship and the design of the engines were kept quiet. Arno gasped at his first sight of the ship. It was enormous. He estimated that it could hold fully ten thousand people and concentrated supplies. There was nothing like it, even in the trade lanes of the Tri-State. Gossip was rife among the people, of course. These rebels were terribly lax; anyone might talk as he pleased. All kinds of rumors circulated. The ship was a weapon of offense. It was going to destroy the planets. It was going to become a floating world. It was going to haunt the space-lanes, picking off the State ships.

Arno reported all this, but got no nearer to the truth. Nine days passed with no word from Ralph. There was no ship-to-base radio, because of the danger of triangulation and subsequent discovery of the Trojan base. Rations were cut. Fuel for light and heat was cut to a minimum, but the food synthesizers clacked and roared incessantly. The domes were stripped of everything metallic save the walls themselves and the pumping units. Forges worked day and night. Endless streams of men and women labored, carrying, welding, hammering, fitting. Sleep was reduced to four-hour periods, pitifully inadequate for exhausted bodies.

And on the tenth day, it was finished.

Men dropped in their tracks to rest. Frane and Father Berrens spoke to Marika beneath the huge loom of the ship, and Arno, who took care never to be far from his source of information, overheard.

There wasn't much to overhear.

Frane said dully, "Ten days. I'll have to begin calling them in." Marika, too tired even for emotion, stared at them. "Ralph's not coming back, is he?"

Father Berrens put a hand on her shoulder. "It's not too late to hope. We don't leave for nearly two weeks yet."

Arno kept his eyes from Marika's face. Call who in? Leave for where? He must watch, and report carefully. The Rebels were planning some desperate attempt; the State must be warned.

He remembered the Protector's words: There must be no failure.

* * *

The Sparling hung motionless, an invisible mote in utter darkness. Saturn wheeled its flashing rings against infinity. Ralph, cramped with fourteen days of close confinement, red-eyed with lack of sleep, hunched over a telescopic view-plate in the midst of a bewildering tangle of instruments. He was following Titan, watching the rocket flares of ore carriers as they took off. For the ten days he had hung here not one had been sufficiently under-convoyed so that he might have the faintest chance of succeeding.

"There must be a spy at base," he said aloud, for the hundredth time. The sound of his harsh voice echoing against metal was some relief for the ghastly silence. "He's not getting intimate information, but he doesn't need it. Just general movements, and the Tri-State can

blanket everything. Oh, God, give Frane and Berrens the wit not to let him sabotage that ship!" Ralph's cynical mouth twisted to a short laugh. "He can't sabotage it. Short of an atomite bomb, he can't touch it, and he couldn't have got an atomite bomb past the searchers when he entered base. The only thing he can do...."

He shook his thoughts savagely away from that possibility. Mustn't for a second let himself believe that. Somehow, they'd get through all right. God wouldn't let them down, not after all the centuries they'd fought. Gnawing hunger forced his attention away from the view-plate. He let one of his meager supply of food capsules dissolve slowly, thinking of the things he'd read about in the old books. Real steaks, fresh vegetables, juicy fruits. The concentrate broke through to his tongue. He swallowed hurriedly, cursing. Through the view-plates he could see Earth, Venus and Mars, flying in wide-flung orbits about the tiny, distant Sun. He'd been born on Trojan base. He'd never seen sunlight, or blue skies, or grass, or breathed air that didn't come from a chemical tank. All those things the State had taken from his people, except for the gallant handful that lived and preached in hiding on the planets.

"Someday," said Ralph softly, "we'll have them back." His reckless blue eyes, the fire of them dulled with weariness, went back to Titan. The chronometer clacked off the hours. Five ore carriers went out into the void, heavily convoyed. Inevitably, sleep overtook him. When he woke, the fifteenth day was gone.

"I've got to go, if I'm going with them. Four days to get back." He cursed bitterly. It was hard to give up after all this time. Hard to be beaten because of a few tons of metal. Unwillingly, his hand went out to the starting lever.

And then he stiffened. A streak of flame shot across the view-plate, up from Titan. An ore carrier, with only a three-ship convoy! A

chance! A mad, tempting chance!

* * *

Too tempting. Why, having sent six fighters out with the others, cut the guards to three? A trap, perhaps. They couldn't know he was here, but they might be doing the same thing at all mines. And then again, they might have relaxed vigilance, thinking he'd given up.

He thought of that ship at base and all it meant to him. He thought of Marika. Most of all, he thought of Marika. And then he looked at those three worlds that had once been theirs, and at the ore carrier that meant they might have them again. He knew he was right about the Tri-State. If they could only hold on....

"Come on, sweetheart," he whispered to the Sparling. "Let's see what you can do!"

Like a wild meteor he plunged down on that ore carrier, his hands flying over the banks of keys before him. One convoy ship burst into flame under his ray. Another shot fused the tubes of the carrier, so that she hurtled on at constant velocity, a mere hulk.

The Sparling bucked dangerously under his hands. He cursed it, whirled it toward another fighter. The third was maneuvering for a tube shot. Ralph's heat-ray raked out. The fighter, hulled, reeled away as her men died in the vacuum.

The Sparling wrenched frantically aside, and the stern shot took her briefly in the ribs instead. In spite of himself, Ralph screamed with the searing heat. Half blinded, he fought the ship to safety, and then he poised for his final attack.

And then he saw them--Tri-State ships pouring out from bases on

Saturn's moons. It had been a trap! No chance to fight now. No chance to hitch a tractor beam to that ore carrier. Just run. Run--and pray!

The Sparling danced perversely. Ralph cursed it, cursed the man who invented it, cursed himself for a fool. A mad angle shot fused the tubes of the remaining fighter.

A beam raked his hull, heating it cherry-red, and then he was free. He poured speed into the Sparling, but she wobbled. One of those heat-beams had damaged some filament in her intricate controls. He could hear a change in the rhythmic vibration of the ship, and she handled more and more sluggishly. The Tri-State ships were coming up fast.

For just a moment he sat quite still, staring at his hands spread over the keys. After all, he'd known this day would come. He'd chosen this career of his own free will, knowing that. It hurt like hell, now that it was here--knowing Marika was waiting, knowing about the ship. But.... He could afford it now. He swallowed his remaining capsules and opened the cock on the oxygen tank. He'd go out at least with a full belly and his lungs full of air.

Swinging the bucking Sparling around, he headed back toward Saturn and that flight of ships.

His mouth twisted, and his harsh voice said, quite conversationally, "Hold the airlocks open, God. Here comes a free man."

* * *

The eighteenth day had come and gone. The domes were cold, almost too cold to endure. The air was thin. One pump had stopped entirely, worn out, so that ten thousand men, women and children

huddled gasping in the hangar and the workshops. Hidden in a far corner behind a massive pillar, Arno was speaking in a low voice.

"They're all here. All the people from the planetary bases. The last ship came in an hour ago. The purpose of the big ship is still unknown, but all loading has been completed. They're waiting for Ralph, but they must do what they plan to do within the next two days. Fuel is almost gone." Then he asked, because he couldn't help it, "Is Ralph dead?"

"Yes." The voice of the People's Protector was precise, cold. "There is no need to know the purpose of the ship. Since all the Rebel population of the System is collected in the Trojan base, it can be destroyed at once." Arno nodded. That meant a fleet, of course, and bombs. His work was done.

"How will I be taken off, Excellency?"

There was just the faintest note of surprise in the Protector's voice. "Taken off? The task for which the State chose and prepared you is done. The State has no further use for you."

The tiny radio in Arno's hand was abruptly silent. He stood staring at it, with a spinning cloud across his eyes.

But of course. He'd given three sons and a daughter to the State. He'd done his job. He was a specialized cog; he wouldn't fit anywhere else. And the State had no dearth of cogs.

Terra was the nearest Tri-State base--a two-hour trip for their fast bombers at the present orbital intersection. Two hours. The rebels would wait until the last minute for Ralph, who was dead. That meant at least another day. Two hours! If only it had been at once! The waiting, the tension--!

The bombs would destroy the domes, shatter them to cosmic dust, and the asteroid with them. Two thousand years of agitation would end, and there would be peace in the Tri-State.

The whirling cloud steadied as Arno saw the truth, the logical, inescapable truth. He himself was nothing. His usefulness to the State was ended. What matter if he died?

He was still staring at the useless radio. Now he saw the hand that held it--a strong, young hand, corded with sinews, the healthy blood ruddy under the skin.

His hand. The Tri-State directed it, but he felt the pain if it was injured. The radio smashed on the floor, but he didn't notice it. He was looking at his body as though he had never seen it before, running his fingers along the hard curve of his thighs, feeling the breath lift his lungs, hearing the beat of his blood along his veins. Then he looked out, across the vast, barren dome, with those ten thousand men, women and children waiting under the loom of the ship.

A group of young men were singing off to his right, an old, old forbidden song about a girl named Susannah. Here and there a family--that anarchistic word never heard in the Tri-State--pressed close together, talking softly. Arno searched their faces. Some were happy, some sad, some frightened, some eager, but each face was different. There was no unit of so many males, so many females, so many young. There were ten thousand people. Arno caught fiercely at his creed. And then he realized that these people had a creed too, and served it with their lives. Like Karl, and Ralph. Ralph--on whose return ten thousand people waited.

* * *

Two hours! How would these people feel if they knew that in two hours they would die? Maybe they did know. They knew the ship meant something strange. They guessed it might mean something impossible. But they were going. The State chose... the State prepared... the State has no further use

Arno put his hands to his head to stop its blasphemy, and his touch only made him more conscious of his own flesh.

He plunged out into that sea of humanity, stumbling over legs, catching at shoulders.

Bodies, and eyes that looked at him, and brains behind them! He could feel the tension that filled the dome, feel the queer life-wave that always comes with a large crowd.

Marika's tawny head and broad shoulders rose against the black mass of the hull, and Arno went toward her. Men cursed him as he stumbled over them, but he had to get to Marika. He didn't know why, only that he had to. He saw Laura beside her. Laura had her son clasped in her arms. She spoke to Marika. Then she kissed the boy and smiled.

Arno thought, I gave three sons to the State, but I never kissed them. It was a duty.

Duty! It was his duty now to die for the State. That duty had been so well understood he'd never thought of it subjectively. How had these rebels poisoned him, that he found it strange now?

He was close to Marika now.

She was pale, and her face was lined, but she asked, "What's the matter, Arno?"

"You look ill."

"I—I don't know."

He stared at her, and suddenly he knew what was the matter with him. He'd read all about it in the forbidden books given him to prepare him for this duty. He was in love.

Out in space, Tri-State bombers were thundering up. His duty was plain before him. And he was in love--in love, like a pagan rebel!

Marika's strong hand caught his ragged tunic, shook him. "What's the matter, Arno? Tell me!"

He couldn't meet her eyes. And then Father Berrens' voice rang out over the audio system, and every head in that vast place turned to listen.

"It is time," said the priest quietly, "to explain why we've called you here, and why we've built this ship. We have kept it secret for two reasons. We wished to take no chance of having our purpose reported to the Tri-State, and we saw no reason to upset all our people while there was still a chance that we wouldn't have to use it. Now...."

Bombers, thought Arno. How long now?

Father Berrens went on. "We'll wait till the last minute for Ralph, but we must be prepared. In four hours we'll begin shipping you. Please listen, and try to understand. Have courage and faith! We need them both now, more than ever before.

"For two thousand years we've fought against tyranny, against regimentation, against the destruction of God and man as an

individual. We've been weak; the State has been strong. We waited too long in the beginning. Now, just as it began to seem we might have a chance, just as the machine of the State was bogging down in the mire of its own creation, we learned we might have to go--because of a few tons of metal.

"If there is truly a spy among you, I congratulate him. The State should reward him well. Our men have died trying, but we have no metal. All that's left is flight--or death at the hands of the State." Arno heard him through a haze. The minutes ticked away with his heartbeats. His heartbeats--which the State could destroy but not control.

* * *

Marika's hand was half throttling him. Laura was standing motionless beyond her, the child held tight, whimpering. He could feel those ten thousand people, listening, waiting.

"Don't wait any longer for Ralph," he said.

He didn't want to say it. It was because Marika was looking at him so. Her hand tightened. "Why not, Arno?"

"I--nothing. It's foolish, that's all."

"Foolish! When he's out there, alone, trying.... Arno! What do you know?" Her hands were hurting his arms now, as they had that day she cried in the hall.

In a little while even pain would be gone.

The State has no further use....

But suppose he did? Suppose he, Arno, wanted his body, wanted to know what it felt like to love a woman and father a child that was his

own and not a cog in a machine? He looked wildly away from Marika, putting up a last battle for his belief, his religion.

And he saw ten thousand people--waiting.

He met Marika's eyes.

"Ralph's dead," he said. "I killed him. I killed Karl and all the others. I'm the spy."

She fell away from him. Laura cried out, a strange, high-pitched wail, and Father Berrens stopped talking.

"Ralph!" whispered Marika. "Ralph.... But I knew it. A spy!" Arno gasped, stricken with horror at what he had done, lost in the chaos of shattering standards. He could still destroy them. He had only to keep still about the bombers, and it wouldn't matter.

Ten thousand people.... Frane and Berrens and Laura.... Marika, with a cold, terrible something growing in her eyes, something he had put there because he'd killed Ralph. His own mates would never miss him. They'd bear children patiently for some other unsmiling cog in the machine of State. Marika. Always Marika. She was his downfall, and his answer. She was everything. Looking at her, watching what was growing back of her eyes, Arno shivered with awe and bitter longing. If only he could have known, before....

"Father Berrens!" he shouted.

It seemed the words came out of themselves. And though some stubborn part of himself recoiled in horror, he spoke more words and more words. When he was finished, Berrens' face was grim, his voice unfamiliarly harsh as he issued orders.

There was chaos about Arno, and then a kind of frenzied order. In a world miles beyond him, lines of men and women formed and streamed into the ship through vast ports. But all he could see was Marika.

It would be nice to believe, as the rebels believed, that a man lived after his body died.

That was blasphemy in the State. But it would be nice. Father Berrens came up, breathing hard. "Time! Time! But we may do it. God helping, we may do it!"

Then Berrens was shouting, "Marika!"

He couldn't stop her. The gun she had taken from Frane's belt was already aimed. Arno saw it coming.

The poisoned needle made a fiery prick over his heart. He had a last glimpse of Marika's broad-browed face, her tawny mane lying heavy on her wide shoulders. She was like a thing of stone. She watched him fall, dispassionately, as she would have watched a roach die in strangling powder. Then she turned and went steadily into the ship. A dark mist rolled across his brain, dulled the sound of exodus. Through it he heard Laura's voice.

"But Father! All the planets are closed to us. Where can we go?"

"For the time, we've lost the planets, yes. But the ship was built to go beyond them. My daughter, the stars still remain."

Child of the Green Light

Son felt the distant, ringing shiver of the metal under him. The whole close-packed mass of broken hulks shifted slightly with the impact, turning wheel-like around the shining Light.

Son half rose. He'd been sprawled full length on the crest of the wheel, trying to make the Veil get thin enough to see through. They had both seen that it was thinner than ever, and Aona, on the other side of it, had danced for him, a misty shifting light beyond the queer darkness. Several times he thought he had almost seen her outlines. He could hear her mind now, tickling his brain with impish thought-fingers. She must have heard his own thought change, because she asked, "What is it, Son? What's happened?"

"Another ship, I think." Son rose lazily, the green Light from below rippling around him like clear water.

He looked out over his domain, feeling the savage sun-fire and the spatial cold of the shadows touch his naked body with little whips of ecstasy. His face was a boy's face, handsome and bright-eyed. His fair head burned like a torch in the blinding glare.

The sun made a blazing canopy across half the sky. The rest was open space, velvet dark and boundless, flecked with the little fires of the stars. Between sun and space lay the wheel, built of space ships that lay side by side, over and under and sometimes through, broken and bent and dead, bound close by the power of the Light.

The Light, lying below Son's naked feet at the very heart of the wheel, burning green through the packed hulks--the Light that was his bridge to Aona. Son's blue eyes, unshaded, looked for the wreck. He knew it would be a wreck. Only one ship in the wheel, the one in which his

memories began, was whole. Then he stood quite still, staring, feeling every muscle tense and tighten. He saw the ship, lying high on the outer rim of the wheel. It was not broken. Tubes burned red at the front end. There was a door opening in the side. Things began to come out of it.

Things shaped like Son, only thick and clumsy, with queer gleaming bulbs on their heads.

A strange contracting shiver ran through Son. Since sound and breath had gone, and the effigies that lay in his ship had ceased to move, nothing had stirred on the wheel but Son himself.

In the broken ships there was never anything but scraps of odd substance, scattered as though by some bursting inner force. Son and Aona had talked idly of living beings, but Son hadn't bothered his head about them much. He was Himself. He had the sun, and space, and Aona. It was sufficient. Aona said impatiently, "Well, Son?"

"It's a ship," he answered, with his mind. "Only it isn't wrecked. Aona, there are living things coming out of it."

He stood staring at the Veil, and the misty light beyond.

"Aona," his mind whispered. "In my head I'm cold and hot all at once. I want to go and do, but I don't know where or what. What's the matter with me, Aona?"

"It's fear," she told him softly. "I have it, too." Son could feel it, pulsing from her mind. In all the years of life he had never felt it before. Now it had him by the throat.

Aona cried, "What if these creatures should harm you, or the Light?"

"You have said that nothing in this universe could harm me now. And"--Son shivered--"no one would do what has to be done to destroy the Light."

"But these creatures--we don't know what knowledge they may have. Son, if anything should happen..."

Son raised his arms to the darkness.

"I don't want you to be afraid, Aona. Tear away the Veil!"

"I can't, darling. You know neither of us can, until the Veil of itself passes behind you."

"How long, Aona?"

She laughed, with an attempt at her old sweet teasing. "How long is 'long' in your world, Son? How long have you lived? How long have we talked? No one knows. Only, the Veil grows thinner every time we meet, every time we talk like this.

"Stay by the Light, Son. Don't let anyone harm it!" Son's blue eyes narrowed. "I love you," he said quietly. "No one shall harm the Light."

"I'll stay with you," she said. "They won't be able to see--yet." Son turned and went, across the tumbled plain of dead ships, with Aona's misty light following beyond the blurred and pulsing dark.

* * *

There were seven of the invaders. They stood in a close knot beside their ship, staring at the green fire of the Light. Three of them began to dance clumsily. The others placed shapeless hands on each other's shapeless shoulders and shook and pounded.

Son's eyes were as sharp as the spear-points of the stars. He lay behind a steering-jet housing, watching, and he saw with shock that there were faces under the glittering helmets.

Faces very like his own.

There were three round, smooth faces. They belonged to the ones who danced. There was one deeply lined face with bushy eyebrows and a framing straggle of white hair. Then there were two others, which Son sensed to be of different races.

One was round and green and small, with shining eyes the color of space, and a mouth like a thin wound. The other differed from the first three only in subtle points of line and shape, but its face was like a mask beaten out of dark iron, with deep-set, sullen eyes.

The seventh face drove all the others out of Son's mind. It was bronzed and grim and strong, with some driving inner force about it that was like the pulse Son felt beating in space, when he lay on the crest of the wheel watching the sun and the burning stars.

This last man seemed to be the leader. He turned to the others, his mouth moving. Then the mouths of the others moved also. Presently five of the invaders turned. Son thought they were going away again. But two of them--the white-haired one and the one with the dark, vital face--started together, out across the broken plain of ships. And Son tensed where he lay.

They were heading toward the heart of the wheel, where the glow of the Light danced like the fire-veils of the sun.

Who knew what knowledge, what powers they might have? Son called to Aona, and followed, keeping out of sight, his blue eyes narrowed and hard. They were almost over the Light when Son heard

the first human thought-voice, as though the power of the Light brought it out. It was faint and indistinct. He could catch only fragments.

"... here, inside Mercury's orbit... heat!... found it, after five years..."

That was the bronzed man speaking. Then--

"Yes, thank God! Now if we can..."

Son wished the voices were clearer. There was a terrible, disturbing urgency about them.

The invaders paused where the green light was strongest, at the heart of the wheel.

The mind of the grim, dark man said, "Down there." He started to lower himself into a crevice between two hulls. And Son, driven by a sudden stab of anger, leaped up.

He came striding across the searing metal, naked and erect and beautiful, his fair head burning in the sunlight.

He flung up one corded arm, and his mind cried out, "No! You can't go down." The invaders straightened, staring. The face of the bronzed, strong man went white, the lines of it blurring into slackness. The white-haired man swayed on his feet.

"The radiation's getting me, Ransome," he whispered. "I'm having hallucinations."

"No. No, I see it, too." The eyes of the bronzed man burned into Son's. "A man, naked in open space."

He stumbled forward, his gaze fixed on the powerful body outlined

against the stars.

Son watched him come, conscious of a curious pulsing excitement. Anger, resentment, fear for the Light, and something else. Something like the first time he had spoken to Aona through the Veil.

The bronzed man stopped before him. His lips moved in that queer way they had. Son heard his mind speaking, faintly.

"What are you?"

"I am Son," he answered simply. "What do you want with the Light?" Again he heard the faint mind-voice. "You can't understand me, of course. I don't know what you are, god or demon, but don't try to stop us! For God's sake, don't make it any harder!"

"But I do understand. You can't go down there." Ransome turned. "Dick," he said, "Lord only knows what this--this creature is, or what it will do. But we've got to get down there and study this thing. If it tries to stop us, I'll kill it."

Dick nodded his white head. His face was lined and very tired. "Surely nothing will stop us now," he said. "Not now."

"I'll cover you," said Ransome. Dick slid down into the crevice. The bronzed man drew something from his belt and waited.

Son stepped forward, anger and fear cording his muscles. The dark man said, "I don't want to kill you. I have no right to kill you, because of what you are. But that thing down there is going to be destroyed." Son stopped, quite still. A great flaming pulse shot through him. And then he gathered himself.

The spring of his corded thighs carried him full over the crack down

which the white-haired man had gone. One long arm reached down. The hand closed angrily on smooth glass.

The helmet shattered. Son had a momentary glimpse of a lined, weary face upturned, faded eyes staring in unbelieving horror. Then the flesh of the face split into crimson ribbons, and the body under the space suit altered strangely.

* * *

Son got up slowly, feeling strange and unsteady in his thoughts. He hadn't wanted to destroy the man, only to make him come back. He became aware, then, of Ransome, standing with a metal thing in his hand, staring at him with eyes like the savage, dying red stars.

"It didn't touch him," Ransome's mind was saying. "A heat ray strong enough to fuse steel, and it didn't touch him. And Dick's dead." Ransome hurled the gun suddenly into Son's face.

"Do you know what you've done?" his mind shouted. "Dick was a physicist--about the only one with any knowledge that hasn't died of old age. He might have found the way to destroy that thing. Now, if our weapons don't work on it...

"The effect is accelerating. Every child born since the Cloud is horribly susceptible. There isn't any time any more for any thing. There won't be anyone to follow us, because now there's no time to learn." Ransome stepped close to Son. His head was thrown back, his face a grim, hard mask streaked suddenly by little shining things that ran from those savage eyes.

"You don't know what that means, do you? You don't know how old Dick was, with his white hair and his wrinkles. Thirty-six! Or me. I'm nineteen--nineteen. And my life is already half gone.

"All over the Solar System it's like that, because of this hellish thing that came in the Cloud. We've hunted the System over for five years, all of us that could, for a thing that wouldn't react to any test or show on any instrument. And when we found it.

He stopped, the veins knotted across his forehead, a little muscle twitching in one lean cheek.

Then, very calmly, he said, "Get him, boys." Son jerked around, but it was too late. The five who had stayed in the ship were all around him. For a long time Son had been conscious only of these two men, and the strange confusion in his mind--a confusion made worse, somehow, by those mysterious crystal drops running from Ransome's eyes. They caught him, somewhere, deep.

Ropes of light metal fell around him. He fought like a Titan in the naked blaze of the sun. But they were experts with their ropes. They caught his wrists and ankles, dividing his power, baffling him with tenuous cords of elastic strength.

Son knew that his mass was still sufficiently in phase to be subject to such laws as gravity and tension. He fought. But presently he was spread-eagled on the burning metal, helpless.

The man with the face like beaten metal and the sullen eyes said, "We were watching from the ship. We thought we must be crazy when we saw this--man standing out here. Then we thought you might need help." He stopped, staring at Son. "The heat ray didn't touch him."

"No," said Ransome quietly. "That's how he got Dickson." The one with the queer green face snapped, "Dickson's dead?" Ransome nodded. "Down in the crack there. We were trying to get down to study the light. He--it didn't want us to go."

The green-faced one said, "My God!"

"Quite. Arun, you and one of the boys guard the ship. Teck, you mount guard here with the other. Greenough, come with me."

One of the round-faced ones stepped forward. His eyes were light blue, oddly empty in spite of their brightness. He looked down at the crevice where Dickson's body was, and his mind said, "I'm afraid. I don't want to go down there. I'm afraid."

"Come on, Greenough," Ransome snapped. His lips started to move again, and stopped abruptly.

Son caught the thought, "Got to hurry. God knows what this radiation will do to us, right on top of it."

"Sir," said Greenough jerkily, "what if there are more like him down there?" Ransome turned his grim, hard face on the boy. Son felt again that force, the strength that pulsed between the stars.

"Well," said Ransome, "what if there are?" He turned and slid down into the crevice.

Greenough closed his pale, scared eyes, licked his lips, and followed.

* * *

Teck, the man with the sullen eyes, laughed--a biting mind-sound as hard as his jaw-line. "Hell of a gunnery officer."

Arun said absently, "He's only eleven." His eyes, purple-black and opaque as a dark nebula, swung jerkily from Son to the crevice where Dickson lay, and back again.

Teck was a big man, as big as Son, but Arun topped him by a foot. He was very slender, moving with a queer rubbery grace.

"What if we can't do it?" he said suddenly. "What if our weapons won't work on it any more than they did on him?"

"Then," answered Teck evenly, "the last generation of mankind will die of old age within fifty years." His sullen gaze roved over Son, over and over, and his mind was whispering to itself.

"Mutation," he said abruptly "That's it. Complete change of cellular structure, metabolism, brain tissue, everything. Mutation in the living individual. I wonder how long..."

"Look at that green light," whispered Arun. "Remember how it filled the whole sky when we came into the Cloud? Cosmic dust, the scientist said. Temporary effect. But it stayed, when the Cloud went."

His long thin arms came up in a blind sort of gesture. "We were millions of miles away, then. What will it do to us now?"

Teck studied his hands. "We're not aging, anyway. Concentrated effect is probably different. Feel anything?"

"Deep. Deep inside me. I--"

"Your cellular structure is different from ours, anyway." Arun swayed slightly, watching the green light pulse up from below. Beads of sweat ran down his face.

"Yes," he whispered. "Different. You know how the Cloud affected us on Tethys. If our life-span were not almost three times as long as your--" He bent suddenly over Son, and more of the queer shining things were trickling out of his eyes.

"For five years we've watched our people die, hunting for this thing. Dickson was our only chance. And you, you damned freak--" He lifted his long arms again, as though to cover his head. "I'll get back to the ship now," he said abruptly, and turned.

Teck hesitated for a heartbeat, scowling at Arun. Then he stepped in front of him, the thing they called a heat gun in his hand.

"Sit down, Arun."

"You heard Ransome's orders." The Tethysman was trembling.

"In the Martian Drylands, where I come from," murmured Teck, "men sometimes get what we call esht--desert-fear. They take other men's water and vaards, and run away. You're the engineer, Arun, and even without me to do the navigating Sit down, Arun."

The Tethysman sat, a fluid folding of thin length. The two round-faced boys stood by, not moving nor speaking, the fear so strong in their minds that Son could hear it shouting.

He saw and heard all this with a small part of his brain. Most of it was thinking of the Light and the men working their way down to the queer hole where it lay among the tangled ships.

This talk of age and years and dying and humanity meant nothing to him. In all his universe there was only himself, the wheel, the sun, the distant stars, and Aona. There was no day or night, no time.

He was angry and afraid, full of hatred and resentment and a queer tearing at his throat, as though he had lost some vital part of him--the Light. Were they going to take the horrible way of destruction that Aona had told him of? Or did they know another way?

He tensed his corded body against the metal ropes, and his mind cried out,

"Aona!" as though he were seeing her vanish forever beyond the Veil.

* * *

The Martian said, softly, "He used to be human. I wonder..." He leaned forward suddenly. "Can you hear me?"

Son answered, "Yes." He was beginning to realize something. The mouth-movements of these men had something to do with speaking, and their clearest, loudest thoughts came with them.

Teck must have caught the motion of his eyes, for he cried out.

"Yes! But you can't speak, because you don't breathe air. Probably lost both lungs and vocal cords. You must be a telepath. I'll bet that's what you are!" The Martian's dark-iron mask of a face was eager; his sullen eyes full of little sparks.

"You hear me think, is that it? Nod your head once, if you do." Son hesitated, studying the men with narrow eyes. If he talked with them, he might find out how much they knew. He nodded.

Teck was quite still for a moment. Arun sat rigid, staring with eerie purple eyes at the Light.

"How long have you been here?" asked Teck.

Son shook his head.

"Where did you come from?" Again Son shook his head, and Teck asked, "You know no other place than this?"

Again the negative.

Teck drew a long breath.

"You must have been born here, then. In one of the first ships swept up by the magnetic force of this thing as it passed through the Solar System. Then your ship cannot have been wrecked. Probably the counter-pull of some planet saved it, as our new Elker drive saved us."

His deep eyes blazed. "Your body was the same as mine, once. How long would it take to change me to a being like you?"

Arun got up suddenly. "I've got to get back to the ship." Teck's gun hand was steady. "Sit down!"

Arun's thought rose tightly. "But I've got to! Something's wrong--" Teck's gun thrust forward menacingly. Arun sat down again, slowly. The green light wavered around him, making his face curiously indistinct. Teck's thought hammered at Son.

"You know what the light is?"

Son hesitated, sending Aona a rapid question.

Her mind said, "No! Don't tell, Son. It might help them destroy it." He shook his head. "No."

Teck's lips drew back. "You're lying," he said, and then whirled around, his dark hard face taut.

Arun had risen, and the single wild shriek in his mind stabbed Son's brain so that he writhed in his shackles.

The two boys backed off, their faces white and staring. Even Teck drew back a bit, and his gun hand trembled.

Arun was changing. Son watched tensely, forgetting for a moment even his agony of fear for the Light.

The lines of the green, smooth face of the Tethysman blurred and shifted in the green light, like something seen under water. Strange writhing tremors shook his body.

His mind cried out with his moving lips: "Something's happening to me. Oh, God! And all for nothing."

He staggered forward. His eyes were night-black and luminous, horribly steady in that blurred face, fixed on Son.

Son knew, lying there chained, that he was in deadly peril. Because Arun was on his own plane, though a little past him.

"All for nothing--mankind lost," wailed the thought-voice. "I'm going blind. No. No! I'm seeing--through... "

His scream shivered cold as space along Son's nerve-channels. The tall rubbery form loomed over him, bending closer...

* * *

One of the boys fainted quietly, rolling like an ungainly bundle into a deep shaft between two wrecks. Teck caught his breath.

"I'm not through with him yet," he muttered, and raised his gun. The glassite helmet melted and ran. The head and the glowing purple eyes beneath it were untouched.

And then no one moved, nor spoke. Arun's head and face quivered,

merging imperceptibly into the blurred darkness of the Veil.

Aona cried out suddenly, "He's coming through!" And then, "No! The change was too swift. Too many atoms in transition. He's caught..." Shivering against Son's mind, like the single wild shaft of a distant comet, came Arun's thought.

"No, not here! Not here--between!"

And then he was gone. His space suit crumpled down, quite empty. Teck swayed, the dark hardness of his face bleached and rigid. "What did he mean--'between'?"

Son lay quite still, hearing Aona sob beyond the Veil. He knew. Aona had told him. Between universes--the darkness, the nothingness, the nowhere. He felt the cold dark crawling in his mind.

Teck laughed suddenly, biting and defiant. His deep eyes were fixed on Son, sprawled like a young god in the raw blaze of the sun.

"By the gods," he whispered, "it's worth the risk!" Greenough came stumbling up out of the crevice.

He looked more like a child than ever. His round face was dazed and bewildered, screwed up strangely. Even to Son, there was something terrible and unholy in that child's shallow-eyed face on a man's strong body. Teck drew a slow breath. Son felt a dark, iron strength in him, different from the strength of the bronzed Ransome, that was like the beat of space itself, but great, too. Great, and dangerous.

"What did you find out?" asked Teck. "Where's Ransome?" Son's brain burned within him with fear, though he saw that the green Light was still unchanged.

"Down there," said Greenough, and whimpered. He blinked his eyes, moving his head and pawing at his helmet as though to clear it.

"I only looked at it a minute. It was too little and too big all at once, and I was frightened."

Teck caught him by the shoulders and shook him roughly. "Looked at what?" he demanded. "What's happened?"

"At the light," said Greenough, in a far-away voice. "We found it inside a ship. We could look right through the metal. I only looked a minute because I was frightened. I was frightened, I was..."

Teck's strong hands snapped his teeth together. "What was it?" Greenough's shallow eyes wandered to his. "Ransome says it's part of another universe. He's still there, looking. Only..." Greenough's voice broke in a little hiccough. "Only he can't see any more." Son felt a great surge of relief. The Light was safe, so far. Greenough slipped suddenly from Teck's hands, sitting wide-legged on the battered hull.

"I'm scared," he said. "I want Mama." Big slow drops ran down his cheeks, and again Son was stirred by something deep and strange.

Teck turned slowly to Son. "He was six years old when the Cloud came. You can build a man's body in eleven years, but not his brain." He was silent, looking down with deep, intense eyes.

* * *

He spoke, after a bit, slowly and deliberately.

"So it's part of another universe. Diluted by distance, its radiation speeds human metabolism, causing swift age. Concentrated, it changes the human organism into an alien metabolism, alien flesh.

"Slim almost made it through, but his peculiar chemical balance destroyed him. You must be in the same transition stage, but much slower, being passed by the changing of your basic vibratory rate into another space-time continuum." Son couldn't hide the sudden flicker in his eyes. He hated this dark Martian suddenly, this man who guessed so much.

"So it's true," said Teck. "Confirmation of the old conception of coexisting universes on different vibratory planes. But how would you know, unless--unless you can talk to that other universe?"

He laughed at the bitter look in Son's blue eyes.

"Afraid, aren't you? That means you have something to hide, or protect." He dropped suddenly to one knee, catching his fingers in Son's fair hair.

"Look at me. I want to watch your eyes. You do know what that light is, and how it can be destroyed. If I could get a body like yours, and still not cross over...

"Do you feed on the green light, or the sun?" The question came so quickly that Son's eyes flicked to the canopy of fire overhead, before he could stop them. Teck sat back on his heels with a long, slow sigh.

"That's all I needed," he murmured. "Your friends on the other side evidently can't help you, or you'd be free now." He rose abruptly. "Greenough! You, there, sailor! Help me get this loose hull-section over here." The two pale, empty-eyed boys rose obediently and helped. The heavy metal plates, uptilted by the force of the original crash, were not far from Son. They had only to heat the bottom with cutting torches and bend it. Son lay, then, in black, utter dark.

"Now then," said Teck. "Back to the ship, both of you." The boys

stumbled off across the broken ships. Son could see them, out in the glare beyond his prison shadow. Teck waited until their backs were well turned.

The beam of his heat gun flickered briefly, twice. Two crumpled shapes fell and were still. Teck turned, smiling tightly.

"No need to have a whole race of supermen." He inspected the spiderweb of metal ropes that bound Son, and nodded, satisfied.

"When you get hungry enough for energy, you'll tell me how to destroy the light. And then--" His hard dark face was cut deep with triumph, his eyes fierce with dreams.

"After I destroy the light, the aging process will stop. People will start to live again. And I'll be virtually a god, untouchable, impervious." He laughed, softly and deep within him, rolling Son's head with his foot.

"You wouldn't know what that means, would you? Think it over while I'm down taking care of Ransome!"

He turned and slid down into the crevice.

Son cried out in anguish, "Aona!"

* * *

The Veil, the darkness that was everywhere and nowhere, that was all though the wheel and yet not of it, shimmered and swirled.

"Son! Son, what has happened?"

His mind had been too busy to tell her before. Now he hesitated, thinking of Teck clambering down to kill the man with the strength of the stars in him; thinking of Arun's agony and Greenough's fear and

the tired face of the man he had killed; thinking most of all of the strange shining drops that ran from their eyes.

"Aona, what is age?"

"We had it, long ago. The legends hardly remember, except that it was ugly, and sad."

"What are years?" He tried to give her the thoughts as he had taken it from their minds. But the idea was so alien to him, the time-concept so vague in itself, that he couldn't make himself clear.

She said, "I don't know, Son."

"And Aona--what is death?"

"No one knows that, Son. It's like sleep, only one never awakens. But we live so long before it comes, there's time for everything. And even in the little part of our universe that's left, there are so many worlds to see." Already, there in the shadow, he was hungry for the sun. He would starve for energy if he couldn't get free. He gathered himself to try... And then, quite suddenly, it happened. The thing he'd waited all his life for. He looked into the shimmering blur of the Veil and cried, "Aona! Aona! I can see you!"

He surged against his ropes, aflame inside him with a joy like the fire of the sun itself.

The Veil was still there, hiding most of Beyond. But it was closer and thinner. He could see the slim silver shaft of her standing against soft blurred colors, could almost see the luminous brightness of her eyes.

"Oh, darling," she cried. "Almost!" Everything, all memory of the invaders and their alien troubles, left Son's mind. He stared hungrily

into the Veil, watching the pale blur of her face steady, become clear.

"You're beautiful," he whispered. "Beautiful as a blue star."

"And you... Oh Son, go down to the Light. The force is strongest there. The Veil will pass more quickly."

"But I can't. I'm tied." He told her briefly what had happened. She laughed. "You've changed since then. The ratio has changed. More of your atoms are vibrating in phase with my universe than with yours. From now on the change will be very swift. Try again!"

He tried, pitting his strength against the ropes. Slowly their resistance slackened. His wrists and ankles slid through them, as though they were heavy smoke.

He rose and shook himself, and looked once more at the wheel and the stars and the blazing sun. Then he turned to Aona, and a pulse of joy rose in him until he thought surely his head would burst.

He plunged downward, toward the Light.

* * *

He found that he had no need to clamber though the broken ships. The matter of their metal walls resisted him as water resists a swimmer, no more. He went downward through the green light that grew stronger as he went, until it was like the water at the bottom of a green lake.

Aona followed, running on little white feet across pale blue grass, with a great sweep of sky growing clearer behind her. Her silver draperies whipped in something she had called a wind. Her eyes were silvery, too, tilted with impish piquancy, and there was a crest of some

feathery stuff on her head, burning red-gold like his own sun.

His mind shouted to hers and hers laughed back, and the barrier between their universes was growing thin.

It was almost a shock to Son to see Teck crawling through a doorway in the wrecked saloon of a liner, just above the Light itself. Ransome crouched on the deck before him, his back turned, quite still. The Martian's hard lips smiled. He drew his heat gun. Son stopped, the sheer happiness of the moment shattered. His dark hatred for this man came back, his instinctive loathing of what the fingers of his mind had brushed against in Teck's brain. Also, dimly, it had to do with Ransome. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he sprang at Teck. His arm sheared harmlessly through the matter of Teck's helmet and head. Son realized then that he had no more power over the stuff of his universe. But Teck started and cried out, and his aim was spoiled. The heat beam flicked across Ransome's shoulder, melting a little hole in the fabric of his space suit.

The Martian's sullen, fiery eyes were wide.

"You've changed," he whispered. "Like Arun. I can see through you." Then, furiously he shouted, "Damn you! Look out!" He lurched sideways, but he was just too late. A searching tongue of heat ranged across him, across Son and the metal wall behind him, leaving a little molten trail. It rose and fell methodically, weaving a net of death across that whole space.

Teck's space suit collapsed. Son witnessed again, this time with a curious satisfaction, the disruption of an alien organism.

Alien. Yes. And yet...

He turned to see Ransome crouched on one knee, holding the

shoulder of his suit with one hand and the heat gun--not firing now--in the other. His eyes were open, but they didn't see. Son knew what had happened. Ransome had looked too long at the Light, and the distances, the planes and angles and curves of it had pulled his sight too far.

Son said, "He's dead."

Ransome nodded. "I heard his mind die. This thing down here--I can hear you, too. I couldn't, up there."

A strange, subtle thrill crept along Son's consciousness. Something in him reached out to that mind, strong even now, strong as the pulse-beat of space.

"You're not bad," said Ransome. "You just don't understand. I don't suppose you could, although you were human once."

He dropped the gun, as though it didn't matter any more. "I'm going to die, you know. There's a hole in my suit. In a few minutes the air will leak out. But there's no time here, is there? And you've forgotten what air is, or why I need it."

The bronzed, grim face smiled, but it was not humorous. "So humanity dies, because one of its sons has no conception of time."

* * *

"Son!" It was Aona calling, peering through the thinning Veil. Ransome lifted his head. "Who's that?"

Son said, "It's Aona. She's waiting for me." His surroundings were getting indistinct.

The Veil was passing.

"Aona. Someone you love. Son--that's what she called you, isn't it? Son, what is this light? Where did it come from?"

The strength of Ransome's mind was bright and terrible. It was like the fire of a dying star.

"It's--Aona, you tell him." Son's thoughts were strangely chaotic.

"It's a part of my universe," she said slowly. There was a quality of stillness in her thought, a subtle forerunner of fear. "Something happened, in one small corner of space, to the electrical tension that holds the fabric of the universe together. There was a release of energy so unthinkable vast..."

Her burning crest drooped as she shivered. "Scraps of our universe were hurled right through the walls of vibration that separate us from other space-time continua. Only a very little bit of ours survived.

"The bit of our universe in yours, vibrating at a different basic rate, makes a sort of bridge between us, by altering atomic speeds. Son has changed almost completely. Only a few of his atoms now vibrate in phase with your universe." Ransome nodded. "And that alien vibration is destroying us. Can't you take it back?"

Aona shook her glowing head. "We could not possibly generate enough energy to draw it back." Her silvery, tilted eyes went to Son, and the terror in them stabbed him.

"I hear you," said Ransome softly. "Then there is a way." Aona whispered, "Yes."

All Son's being went out to her. And yet, some tiny scrap of his mind clung to Ransome's, as though to something he must not lose.

"I don't understand," he said slowly. "Years, age, time--they mean nothing."

"No." Ransome's grim dark head strained back in his helmet. His face was veined and glistening with sweat.

"Think of it this way. You love Aona. She's beautiful--I can hear that in your mind. Suppose that now, while you looked at her, she were to wither and crumple and die..."

He broke off, as though fighting for strength. Not the pulsing strength of his mind, but the power of his body. When his thought came again, it was weaker.

"Look at your own body, Son. Think of it, now, growing weak and ugly and bent."

He staggered up suddenly, his eyes like the last embers of a dying sun, fixed on nothingness.

"You're mankind's only hope, Son. Son. Remember the people who called you that. They were human. Remember. Son--of humanity." Ransome's suit collapsed with a rush. Son shut his eyes.

"Son," he whispered. "His thought said--" He couldn't phrase it clearly, only that it meant coming from something, being a part of it, as he, already, was part of Aona.

And Aona whispered, "I feel it growing in your mind. Oh, Son..." He could see the flowers around her feet now, the distant fires of some great sun. A strange tremor shook his body, a shifting and changing. The Veil was thinner.

"Son, they're not your people any longer. You couldn't even

understand."

"No. No, but I could feel." He turned abruptly. "There's something I have to do. Quickly."

He plunged off, rushing through the dissolving matter of his universe. Up, and into the ship he thought of as his, though he had left it long ago. He hated it, down here away from the sun.

Aona followed him, her feet like little white stars in the grass.

* * *

Things grew dimmer, more vague. Son had only to wait, to put off thinking until it was too late. But something drove him on.

Presently he stood in the cabin of his ship, looking down at the still effigies. The people who had called him Son.

He shivered with something more than the shock of change. These still faces--Dickson's face, and Arun's, and Ransome's.

These still shapes, that had touched him and called him Son and shed queer shining drops from their eyes.

Something caught at him, wrung him so that he cried out.

"I don't want to. Aona, I don't want to. But I must!" Her thought was a mere tremor across his mind. "I think I knew, when he spoke to you. I try to think, if they were my people, suffering and dying--"

"I don't want to, Aona. But he said--Son of humanity." Only to postpone, to wait until it was too late. The Veil was so thin. Son beat his hands together, very softly. Then, blindly, he rushed back toward the Light.

Something had got hold of him, was driving him. He knew it was right. But he wanted to fight it, to hold it off until it couldn't hurt him. And he was afraid.

He stopped in the ship above the Light, where Ransome lay dead. He raised his corded arms and cried, "No! I can't. I don't understand!" He saw Aona watching him on her shining hilltop, not moving or speaking. And slow silver drops rolled from her tilted eyes and down her cheeks. Then he knew. Then he was calm and steady, and not very much afraid. Because he understood why the bright drops had rolled from the eyes of the strange men.

He smiled at Aona. He took a long, sweeping look at the sun and the sky and the blowing grass, and the silver shaft of her standing in the midst of it. Then he went slowly down toward the Light.

He knew what would happen. Aona had told him. Most of his substance was in her universe now. Part of it was still in his own. But there were atoms in him just changing. Atoms that were--Between.

Because of the atoms that matched its own, he could penetrate the Light. The atoms in transition would set up a vibration in the Light that had not been in Son, because of the balancing pull of two universes.

The vibratory balance of the Light would be destroyed, because Son's universe had no hold on it. It would be pushed back through the wall of that universe, but not back to its own.

A little green roundness that could be held in his hand, that yet was not round at all and that stretched into soaring distance. Color and line and form that melted and flowed and were not.

Son went, without stopping, straight into the heart of the Light. For an

instant, or an eternity, he was lost in chaos. He knew nothing--whether he moved or was still, whether he saw the black-green rushing darkness or whether it was only the picture of his own fear.

He didn't fight. He caught only two things to him in his mind--Ransome's strength and Aona, standing on her shining hilltop.

An instant, or an eternity. And then there was stillness, a cessation. Son opened his eyes and looked about--at the space Between.

The Sorcerer of Rhiannon

He had been without water for three days. The last of his concentrated food, spared by the sandstorm that had caught him away from his ship and driven him beyond all hope of finding it, rattled uselessly in his belt pouch, because his throat refused to swallow.

Now Max Brandon stood on a dune of restless ocher dust, watching the coming of another storm.

It rolled crouching across the uneasy distances of the desert, touched blood-red above by the little far sun of Mars. Brandon heard the first faint keening of it above the thin whine of the eternal winds that wander across the dead sea bottoms.

Brandon's sharp-cut face, handsome with its sea-blue eyes and bronzed skin, and the thin scars of battle that enhanced rather than marred, creased into a grin.

"So the grave-robber is going to be buried instead this time," he whispered. The skirling wind blew ocher dust in his eyes and mouth, the gold-brown stubble of beard.

"All right," he said to the storm. "See if you can make me stay down." He waved a mocking hand at it and staggered down into the hollow. To himself, he said ironically, "There's no one here to see your act, Brandy. No pretty ladies, no interplanetary televisions. The storm doesn't care. And you're going to die, dead, just like ordinary mortals." His knees buckled under him, flung him headlong in the stifling dust. The simplest thing to do would be just to lie there. Drowning in these Martian sea bottoms was just like drowning in the sea. All you had to do was breathe. He thought of all the ships that

had foundered when there was water here, and how his bones would join theirs in the end. Red dust, blowing forever in the wandering wind.

His white grin flashed briefly. "I always said, Brandy, that you knew too much to take advice."

Everybody had advised him not to come. Jarthur, head of the Society for the Preservation of Martian Relics. Sylvia Eustace. And Dhu Kar of Venus. Jarthur wanted to put him in the Phobos mines for looting, which was bad. Sylvia wanted to marry him, which was worse. And Dhu Kar, his best competitor and deadliest enemy, wanted to get to the Lost Islands first, which was worst of all.

"So I came," Brandon reflected. "Right in the middle of the stormy season. And here, apparently, I stay."

But he couldn't stay down. Something drove him up onto his feet again, something that wouldn't listen to what his reason was saying about its being no use.

He went on, part of the time on hands and knees, to nowhere, with the Martian desert-thirst burning him like living fire, and the first red-dun veils of the storm blowing past him.

He began to see things in the clouds. Ships in full sail, the ancient high-prowed Martian galleys. He could hear the thrumming of their rigging, knowing with the last sane scrap of his mind that it was his own blood drumming in his ears.

The wind screamed over him and the red dust rolled like water. It was dark, and the galleys rushed by faster and faster. They got clearer, so that he knew that he was going, and still he wouldn't lie down.

And then, through those fleeing phantom ships, he saw a wreck tossing. Her masts were gone, her hull canted, her high-flared bow thrust up in a last challenge to the wind. Max Brandon knew, because he could see so clearly the wide-winged bird that made her figurehead, that he was almost dead. His dust-filled eyes lost even the phantom ships. He wondered distantly why he should imagine a wreck among them. The wind hurled him on. He fell. And, driven by some blind, dogged stubbornness, struggled up again. The wind flung him with spiteful viciousness against something. Something solid. Something hard and unmoving, in the heart of the restless Martian desert.

It hurt. He went down and would have stayed there, but for the stubborn thing that lashed him on.

There was metal under his hands, singing with the impact of the storm. He looked up, forcing himself to see. A deck slanted down to him, bare of everything but the stumps of broken masts.

He stared at the ship, not believing his sight. But his aching body told him it was there. He thumped it with his hand, and it rang thinly. It wasn't any use, really, because he had no water. But the thing that had driven him kicked him now up over the broken rail and along the canting deck to the broad cabin in the stern.

Feeble and distant, his heart was pounding with excitement. A ship, sunk ages ago in the Sea of Kesh, sailing through the red clouds of the storm--

It was impossible. He was delirious. But the closed door of the cabin was before him, and he tried to open it.

There was no catch.

He grew angry. He'd come this far. He wouldn't be balked. He drew himself erect, his tawny hair whipping in the storm, and roared at the door, commanding it to open.

It did. Max Brandon walked through, and it closed silently. There was soft light in the cabin, and a faint choking pungency. A table of Martian teak inlaid with gold stood in the center of a room shaped to the curve of the galley's stern, furnished in somber richness. A man sat in a carved chair beside the table. He was fair and slight in a plain black robe, with no ornament but a curious band of gray metal about his head, bearing the figure of a wide-winged bird.

His face was gentle, grave, rather young. Only in the strong lines about his mouth and the fathomless darkness of his eyes was there any hint--

Of what? Max Brandon, dying on his feet, knew that the man wasn't there. Simply wasn't, because he couldn't be.

He looked alive, but he was too rigid, and his eyes didn't wink. Didn't wink or move, staring at the girl who sat facing him.

She was hardly more than a child, with the supple strength of a sleeping deer in the long lines of her, and the stamp of a burning, vital pride still on her clear-cut face.

She wore a short white tunic with a jeweled girdle, and the cloth was no whiter than her skin. Her eyes looked at the man, unconquered even in death. They were golden, those eyes, clear and rich as pure metal. Her hair grew low in a peak between them, swept back and down and hung rippling over her shoulders.

Max Brandon stared at it, swaying on his feet, feeling the blood swell and throb in his throat.

Her hair was blue.

Blue. The deep, living blue of an Earthly sea, with tints of cobalt in its ripples and the pale color of distance where it caught the light. He followed it down across her white arms, and then he saw the shackles on her wrists. Her hands lay on the table, slim and strong, and on the thumb of the left one was a ring with a dull-blue stone.

Brandon's brain burned with more than thirst.

"The Prira Cen!" he whispered, "The Blue Hairs, the oldest race of Mars. Half mythical. They were almost extinct when the Sorcerers of the Lost Islands were the governing brain of the planet, and that was forty thousand years ago!" A wave of blackness closed over him, as much from that staggering thought as from his desperate weakness. He fought it off, clinging to life for just that one instant longer--

Something sparkled dully on the table, close by the arm of the man in black. A small, transparent bottle, filled with amber liquid. Somehow he crossed the deck. The bottle was sealed with some curious substance. He struck the neck off against the table. A drop of the fluid splashed on his hand. It tingled as though charged with a strong current, but Brandon was beyond caring. He drank. It was strong, burning and cooling all at once. Some of the madness died out of Brandon's eyes. He stood for a moment looking at that beautiful, incredible, impossible girl with the sea-blue hair.

A racing bolt of flame went through him suddenly, a queer shivering agony that had a perverse pleasure in it. He felt his mind rocking in its bed like an engine with a broken shaft, and then there was darkness and a great silence. He came to sprawled in a heap of dust. For a moment he thought he was back in the desert again. Then the madness that had happened swept back, and he got up, blinking

into utter darkness. The light mechanism must have failed at last.

Dust rose and choked him. He blundered into a corner of the table, and something fell behind him with a dry, soft whoosh. He couldn't see the door at all. When he finally found it with his hands, there was no catch. Blind panic shook him for a moment, until he remembered how he had got in. A little incredulously, he shouted at the door.

"Open!"

It didn't budge. And Brandon stood in the darkness like a trapped rat. From somewhere, quite unbidden, a thought came.

"Set your hands on it and push. It will come open." He did. His palms barely touched the metal, his muscles had hardly gathered for the effort. The door broke from its hinges and fell with a thin clash on the deck.

Pale Martian daylight flooded the cabin. Brandon saw now that the cushions and hangings had crumbled to dust. The teakwood table still stood, but its grain was splitting and softening. The man in black had vanished completely, save for the gray metal circlet that lay in a scatter of dust on the floor. Brandon knew now what had fallen behind him. His gaze darted to the woman, and his heart contracted with a faint stab of pain.

There was only a naked skeleton, beautiful even now in its curved white perfection. The shackles, the blue stone of the thumb ring glinted dully on fleshless bones, the jeweled girdle burned across a splintered pelvis. That little puff of air he had let in must have done it. Whatever mechanism had controlled the door--he made a wild guess at some seleno-cell sensitive to thought currents instead of light--had gone with the rest. Remembering the faint pungent odor, he wondered if that had had anything to do with preserving the bodies.

The cabin appeared to be hermetically sealed. The metal of the ship was some unfamiliar alloy, incredibly strong to resist the ages of immersion on the sea floor, and the further ages of dryness and wind and rubbing sand. It was worn thin as paper under his fingers, but uncorroded. They had had knowledge, those ancient scientists of the Lost Islands, that no one had ever found again. That was why men lost their lives in the desert, hunting for them.

Brandon looked forward along the deck. The storm had nearly buried the ship again, but the wings of the bird on the high prow still gleamed defiantly. He grinned half derisively at the thick pulse of excitement beating in him. He was lionized as a dashing explorer, publicly cursed and secretly patronized by scientific men, the darling of wealthy collectors--all because of the archaeological treasures he stole from under the noses of planetary governments.

All this gave him money and fame and adoring fans, mostly feminine. It gave him the continual heady excitement of dancing on the edge of disaster. It gave him glamour and a gay flamboyant theatricalism, in all of which he reveled. But underneath all that was the something that drew him to the old forgotten places and the lost and buried things. The poignant something that was real and sincere and that he didn't understand at all.

Only that he loved catching glimpses through the veil of time, finding the scraps of truth that lay solid under legends.

He went back into the cabin. The gray metal circlet he scooped out of the dust and set jauntily on his gold-brown hair. He paused over the skeleton of the woman, reluctant to touch it, but he wanted the girdle. He reached for it. And then, oddly, he took the dull-blue ring instead. He put it on his ring finger and was suddenly giddy. He gulped a food tablet and felt better. The woman's skeleton had fallen into grayish

powder, broken by his slight touch.

He picked the girdle out of it and clasped it around his lean waist and turned to search the cabin.

There were chests of scrolls acid-etched on thin metal that blackened and flaked as he looked at them. The letters he did glimpse were older than any he had ever seen.

There were instruments and gadgets of utterly inexplicable design, far too many to carry. The frailer ones were ruined, anyway. He stuffed a few of the more enduring into his pockets and went out.

At the broken door he paused with a small, unpleasant shiver. To break down a door simply by touching it--

Then he grinned. "Duck up, Brandy. This metal is so thin that a baby could knock holes in it."

As though in mocking answer, the port rail crumpled, sending a flood of red sand across the deck. The bird on the prow trembled, and for an instant Brandon thought it was going to fly.

It fell into the dust, and was buried.

He got away from there, and watched the ship die her final death in the dry red sea, And then he said to himself:

"Now what? No water, precious little food, no idea of where I am. Speaking of water--"

That stuff in the bottle had certainly been potent. It had revived him like a shot of adrenalin. But now--

He was thirsty again.

He tried to ignore it, making his plans. He had thought he was near the Lost Islands when he landed. In fact, he'd landed because he thought he saw the outline of dry harbors and stone quays.

"But I didn't. And the position of the Lost Islands is only conjecture, anyway. No two authorities agree."

He stood there, his scarred, handsome face twisted into a defiant grin that he knew was as hollow as his stomach, the wide-winged bird on the gray circlet glittering above his forehead. Then he forced himself to shrug jauntily and start off across the ocher sand.

Thirst grew in him with the arid touch of dust. The wind whined at him, and presently he heard a voice in it. He knew it was delirium, and refused to listen.

The spurt of strength the strange amber fluid had given him drained away. He fell in the blowing dust and cursed it in a choking whisper. And the voice said:

"Strike it with your hand."

He did, because he thought it was his own desire speaking. He struck the side of the dune before him, weakly, with his doubled fist. There was a flash and a small thunderclap, and water ran. He caught it in his cupped hands and drank like an animal, splashing himself, sobbing. Then he got up and stood staring at the wet place in the dust and his wet hands.

He backed off, slowly, his blue eyes widening and paling in a stricken face. He shuddered and passed a hand across his damp beard.

"Merciful heavens!" he whispered. And gripped hard at the rising

terror in him.

"The power isn't yours," said a gentle thought voice in his brain. "It's merely transmitted through your body."

Brandon closed his eyes and held his clenched fists against his temples.

"No," he said. "I'll die decently of thirst if I have to. But I won't go mad."

"You're not mad," said the voice. "Don't be frightened." The last was faintly condescending, which made Brandon angry. He threw his head back, so that he looked rather like the bird of prey on his circlet.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "And where?"

"I am Tobul, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms. My body is dust. But the essential frequencies that activated that body are in you."

"That's witchcraft," said Brandon curtly, "and that's madness."

"Witchcraft to the ignorant," murmured the voice coolly. "Simple science to the learned. Life is essentially a matter of electrical frequencies, a consumption and emission of energy. There is nothing strange about charging metal with electrical life. Why should there be anything strange in charging any other substance with any other phase of the basic stuff of the universe?" Brandon looked at the restless desert, tasted the dust on his tongue, listened to the wailing wind.

He pulled a hair from his tawny beard, and felt the hurt of it. He took a deep breath.

"All right," he said. "How did you get into me?"

But the voice whispered now, and not to him.

"Desolation," it said. "Death and desolation. The sea, the clouds, the strength and power of life, all gone. Is this truly Mars?" Max Brandon felt a wrenching sadness, go through him, and then a swift stab of fear, very faint, like things in a half-forgotten dream.

"I must get to Rhiannon," said the voice of Tobul. "At once." There was no emotion in it now. Brandon sensed an iron control, an almost barbarian strength.

"Rhiannon," he repeated. "I never heard--You said Tobul, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms?"

Brandon sat down, because his knees wouldn't hold him.

"Rhiannon," he whispered. "That's the ancient name for the Lost Islands. And

'Lord of the Seven Kingdoms' was the title of the sorcerer-scientist who ruled half Mars, from his seat in Rhiannon."

Ancient things. Things deeply buried, nearly forgotten, clouded by superstition and legend. Forty thousand years--

Brandon sat still, just clinging to his sanity. At length he repeated quietly:

"How did you get into me?"

"When the ship sank, so suddenly that nothing could be done, I transferred my essential to a bottle of liquid prepared for the purpose--a faintly radioactive suspension medium. Those were troubled times--one went prepared.

"The collective frequencies that form my consciousness remained there unharmed, until you drank the liquid. Fortunately it was not poisonous, and you gave me easy entry into a satisfactory host." A picture of the man at whose side the bottle had been came back to Brandon--the fair, grave face and the impenetrable eyes. That man, dead forty thousand years.

Brandon ran his tongue over dry lips. "When are you going to get out of me?"

"Probably never. I should have to build another body, and the secret of that is known only. . . Brandon!"

It was as though a hand gripped his brain. The impact of that will was terrifying. Brandon felt his mind stripped naked, probed and searched and shaken, and then dropped,

"Her jeweled girdle he took," murmured Tobul, "and my circlet, and some instruments. The girdle is only metal and jewel--look at your hands!" Brandon looked, raging, but unable to help himself.

"The blue ring, Brandon, that you took from her thumb, is it there?" It glinted dully in the sun. Brandon looked at it and said simply: "I don't understand. What ring?"

Tobul whispered: "His eyes don't see, he has no memory. Yet I can't be sure. I was faint with the effort of breaking the door, after so many centuries of quiescence. She may have blanked his mind. But it's a chance I must take.

"Brandon, we go to Rhiannon."

Brandon got up, and there was something ominous in the set of his broad shoulders.

"Just a minute," he said evenly. "I want to find the Lost Islands, too. This possession business has its fascinating angles, I'll admit, so I'm trying to be tolerant of you. But I won't be ordered about."

"Take the instrument out of your left-hand pocket and look at it." Tobul's voice was utterly without emotion.

"Do you hear me, Tobul? I won't have the privacy of my mind invaded. I won't be ordered--"

He stopped. Again the hand of that iron will closed on his brain. The sheer calm strength of it numbed him, as though he had been an ant trying to stem an avalanche.

He fought, until sweat ran down the channels of his face and his lean body ached, fought to keep his hand from reaching into his pocket for the instrument.

But the dark iron power of Tobul's mind rolled in on him, wrapped and crushed and smothered him with a slow, patient ease.

Trudging over the ocher waste, following the mysterious, quivering needle in Tobul's instrument, Max Brandon still could grin.

"Brandy, Brandy," he murmured. "I always said drinking would get you into trouble!"

Two chill Martian nights passed, and two days. Brandon got used to drawing water from the dust with a blow of his fist. It pleased him, like a small boy with a firecracker.

Tobul, in a rare fit of communicativeness, said it was simply a matter of releasing mental energy which caused oxygen and hydrogen to unite from the air. The blow was only a means of directing the mental

concentration. The Lord of the Seven Kingdoms had withdrawn himself utterly. Brandon felt no discomfort, nothing different from his usual tough health. Only when he tried to disobey the pointing of the compass, he was forced back to obedience. It galled him, but there was nothing he could do. It was terrible to think of living out his life as host for a parasitic intelligence. It outraged his pride, his individuality.

And yet, to have contact with a mind forty thousand years old; to be taken to the Lost Islands of Rhiannon, the greatest archaeological mystery of Mars--

He asked about the compass. Tobul answered absently.

"It obeys a directional impulse from the vault." And then, even more distantly: "The vault is still there, safe, in all this." For a fleeting instant, through his own excitement at the mention of a vault, Brandon caught the unguarded sorrow of Tobul, looking through an alien's eyes at the withered mummy of his world.

More and more, as he accustomed himself to his strange condition, Brandon's mind went back to the girl with blue hair, sitting proud in her shackles across from Tobul.

"Who was she?" he asked.

The leashed fury of Tobul's answer startled him.

"The most dangerous creature on Mars. In a short time I should have destroyed her. But, somewhere, her mind lives as mine does, and defies me--Brandon! Go on!"

But Brandon stood still, with a curious chilly crinkle to his spine.

"Sorry," he said. "But the compass is shot." Tobul's armor dropped,

then, for an instant. Brandon felt what a lost planet must feel, torn from its sun. He never forgot it.

"Kymra! Somehow, she has gone before me--Go on, Brandon!" Brandon shrugged and went. "May as well die walking as sitting," he said. "It may not be Kymra of the Prira Cen, though. It may be just plain Dhu Kar of Venus, which is worse!"

And then, just before the swift sunset, a flier came droning low over the ocher sand, swinging in wide circles, searching.

Brandon danced like a madman on the top of a dune, obeying Tobul's command as well as his own urge. The flier came down.

A tall, slender figure in grease-stained flying togs leaped from the port and ran toward him in a cloud of dust.

"Brandy!" yelled a clear voice. "Brandy, you idiot!"

"Good Lord!" said Brandon. "Sylvia." She swept into his arms, kissed him, cursed him, and shook him all at once.

"Are you all right? What happened? I've been hunting for three days." He helped her off and grinned into her eager gamin face, framed in a perpetually tousled mop of curly black hair, set with eyes as sea-blue and adventurous as his own, and smudged slightly with grease.

"Syl," he said, "for once I'm glad to see you."

"Some day," she grinned back, "you'll realize my sterling worth and marry me. Then I shan't have to fight mom about being a glamour girl, and pop about you being a bandit hunting the Eustace cash--"

"And I won't be able to rob graves in peace--" She was suddenly pressed against him, gripping his arms with painful fingers, making

choking, sounds at his shoulder.

"Oh, Brandy," she whispered. "I thought you were dead." Tobul spoke harshly in Brandon's mind. "Hurry. Get into the flier. We'll try to find Rhiannon from the air. Hurry!"

Brandon was apprehensive about that, because of the compass suddenly going dead. If Kymra of the Blue Hair was really there ahead of them, it meant trouble for Tobul, which meant trouble for Max Brandon, and, consequently, for Sylvia.

He hesitated, and Sylvia said, "Brandy, you'd better give up hunting for the Lost Islands. Jarthur is hopping mad, because you know what relics from there would mean to Mars, and Dhu Kar--"

"Dhu Kar?" snapped Brandon.

"He left the day after you did, as soon as he found out. And Jarthur went storming off with a bunch of policemen, to look for both of you. Of course," she added hopefully, "they may have got lost in a sandstorm." Brandon shook his head. "It's a big desert, and they may not have been fools like me. I got too far away from my ship."

If it was Dhu Kar who had broken into the vault at Rhiannon, that meant trouble, too. The Venusian played for keeps. Brandon had skirmished with him before, and he knew.

And yet, if he could help it, he wasn't going to let that semi-human pirate from the Venusian coal swamps steal Rhiannon from him. He stood there, thinking these things, his profile hawk-clear with the wide-winged bird glittering above it, the red sunlight caught in his fair beard and shaggy hair, looking rather like a Viking. And Sylvia Eustace, with a curiously puzzled look in her blue eyes, took the ring from Brandon's finger and put it on her own. Then she said calmly:

"Come on, Brandy. We're going to Rhiannon." He followed her, not noticing the ring. Tobul, grim and silent inside him, seeing only through his eyes, knew nothing of it, either.

The flier was small, fast, lovingly worked over and expertly handled. Sylvia went directly to the controls. Brandon scowled, trying to plot the most likely course, combining his own conjectures of the position of the Lost Islands with the way shown by Tobul's compass.

Sylvia sent the ship hurtling upward. When he started to speak, she cut him short.

"I think I know the way."

He stared at her. "Nobody does. It's all guesswork."

"Well," she snapped, "can't I guess, too?" He shrugged and sat back in the padded seat. Sylvia's tall, boyish form, the despair of her society-loving mother, hunched over the controls. The flier shivered with the thrust of power from the rockets, and the thin, cold air screamed along the hull.

Sylvia always flew fast, but there was a tenseness about her now that was unlike her.

"We can't do much looking at this pace," he said mildly.

"I tell you, I've studied up on it and I know the way!" There was an imperious bugle note in her voice that startled him.

Then she glanced at him. Just for an instant her eyes were puzzled and frightened and altogether Sylvia's. But that was gone in a flash, and the ship rushed on, racing the rising moons.

In the third hour before dawn, with little Phobos rushing ahead of them and Diemos a ball of cold fire overhead, Brandon saw a shadow more solid than the shifting dunes.

Sylvia put the ship down. "We're there," she said. Then she laughed and shook him by the shoulders, and her blue eyes sparkled.

"Think of it, Brandy! The Lost Islands. And we'll see them together!"

"Yes," said Brandon, and the lines of his scarred brown face were deeper. He was thinking: "Funny she knew the way." There came before him suddenly the picture of a reckless, vital face set with unconquerable golden eyes, and hair like a living waterfall.

Tobul said softly: "I see what is in your mind. Kymra may have taken her, as I took you. I dare take no chances. Kill her."

"No!"

Sylvia looked at him, startled. He gripped his seat with corded hands, and argued desperately.

"It wouldn't do any good! If Kymra is in Sylvia, she'd only go back into--wherever she was before."

"Into some inanimate thing, Brandon. Perhaps in that state she could be forced--She would be helpless to move, as we both were in the ship. The cohesive frequencies of a disembodied intelligence undergo a violent change under solar bombardment, unless protected by some denser matter."

"I won't!" whispered Brandon.

He clung to the seat, fighting the inexorable command of Tobul's mind. He looked at Sylvia's eager, vital face, and his heartstrings

knotted in him like the straining muscles of his body.

It was futile. Slowly he drew the small needle gun he always carried and slid the clip of poisoned needles into place. He raised it and aimed, at the girl who neither moved nor spoke.

He fired.

The needles vanished in midair with little bright spurts of flame. And Sylvia laughed,

"Tobul," she said, and the ringing bugle note that was not Sylvia's was in her voice again. "Not that easily, Tobul! I'll fight you, just as I fought in the old days, to the last ditch!"

As though of its own volition, Brandon's voice came, gentle and strange to his ears, with a feel of barbaric iron under the velvet.

"That vault is all that is left to me of Mars, Kymra. It is mine by right of conquest and the blood my people shed."

"Barbarian!" Sylvia tossed her head like a war horse scenting battle. "What is in that vault is mine by right of having built it, and the blood my people shed defending it! The secret of the things you stole from us lies locked in my brain. The things of your own borrowed civilization you shall not have, either.

"This dusty shell is still Mars, and though my race is dead, its people are still mine. I'll not have them misruled by a dog of a nomad, with only four centuries of borrowed culture behind him!"

Brandon felt a blind stab of rage through Tobul's guard, and some of the velvet sloughed away from the iron ring in his voice.

Borrowed or not, I have the knowledge. The need to rule is as strong in me as it is in you, woman of the Prira Cen!

"Your people were soft with age and culture. You conquered us, yes, because you knew more. But our blood was strong. We took what we wanted and used it against you, and we were not bound by scruples about blood-letting!

"I'm beginning to find myself again. From what I have taken from this man's mind, I see that Mars needs new rule, new strength, the knowledge that I can give it. Mars can live again. But in my way, Kymra! The way of strength and manhood."

"The way of stupid, blundering beasts," said Sylvia, her voice deep with some powerful emotion. "You slaughtered the Prira Cen, the kindest, wisest, gentlest race on Mars, because you were jealous of our knowledge. You called it 'foreign domination,' though we never killed a man of your people, and did you more good in ten years than you yourselves could have done in a century.

"Because we kept our race pure, you were jealous of us. Because we kept the secret of our one deadly weapon, you feared us, though we did it for your own protection."

"We crushed you without it," said Tobul.

"Only because we waited, not wanting to destroy you, and were betrayed. You were taking me to Rhiannon in chains, Tobul, but I tell you that no torture you could devise could have forced me to tell the secret of that weapon. Nor," she added with deliberate malice, "another secret, which you would like now, but cannot have."

Tobul did not answer her. Silently in Brandon's mind he said, "Take the small tube from your right-hand pocket."

The vise-grip of Tobul's will on his made even a pretense of resistance impossible. Brandon dropped the useless needle gun and did as he was told.

"She has nothing but the power of her mind," murmured Tobul. "She can't fight the strength of the projector long. Fire, Brandon!" With some foreign knowledge, he pressed a stud. A faint beam of light leaped out, splattering in blazing incandescence against the barrier of force Kymra had built around Sylvia's body.

It burned and blazed, and the force wall held stubbornly, and Sylvia's blue eyes stared at him through the fire.

"You, too, Brandy?" she said, and now the voice was her own. "She made me understand, all in a flash. She can't hold out long. It's all so mad! Brandy, she's weakening. Brandy, can't you do something!" He couldn't, though the sweat of agony needled his face. Out of some dim distance he sensed a growing heat and glare and thought it was from the clashing energies before him, until he realized it was in the wrong direction. The stern plates of the cabin were glowing cherry-red.

Somehow he found his voice. "The fuel tanks!" he yelled. "Got to get out. Somebody's got a heat beam on us."

Miraculously, those two warring intelligences understood. The blazing battle of force broke off. The hull plates paled--

They ran. With all their strength they leaped through the port and pelted over the desert, trailing crazy shadows from the double moons. Light gravity and long legs took them barely out of danger. Brandon threw Sylvia flat just as the tanks let go. A thundering, howling wind swept over them with a solid wall of dust, and a vast

flame pillared up into the sky. For an incredibly long moment it painted every detail of the scene in wicked crimson--the gaunt, worn shell of a volcanic cone dead and buried for unnumbered centuries and bared capriciously now by the restless sand, a few Cyclopean blocks of Terellan marble cut to shapeless lumps by the passing years, tumbled about a gaping hole.

Directly in front of the hole was a big, fast, convertible spaceship. From it had come the heat beam.

"Dhu Kar," said Brandon, coughing dust.

"Why does this Dhu Kar wish to kill you?" asked Tobul.

"For the same reasons I'd like to kill him," returned Brandon grimly. "Except that he's a vandal and a swine, and I'm a very charming fellow. Wait a bit. You'll see."

He got up, and Sylvia, as usual, scrambled up before he could help her. Her face was pale and a little frightened, but her blue eyes danced.

"I've always wanted real adventure," she said, with a shaky little laugh. "I'm getting it!"

They went toward the spaceship. And up out of the black pit, looking like a misshapen demon in the light of the double moons, came a squat shape bearing a burden--a radio-controlled robot carrier.

Brandon felt the tendrils of Tobul's mind reaching out to search the mind of the man who blocked his way to the vault.

"He's looting my vault," whispered Tobul. "My vault, built and sealed against time forty thousand years ago. This outland dog!"

"And what he can't carry away he'll destroy, partly to cover his tracks, mostly to keep anyone else from profiting." Brandon's tawny head came up. "Let me handle Dhu Kar myself."

"I can't afford to risk your body, Brandon." Brandon said angrily. "Look here, Tobul--"

The iron hand of Tobul's will closed on his mind. He shrugged, and went on in silence, Sylvia's firm shoulder close to his.

Dhu Kar of Venus came out of the air lock of his ship. He loomed hugely in the shifting light. The fish-belly white of his face and hands gleamed sharply out of the dark furs he wore against the Martian chill. He was bareheaded, according to the custom of his people, his snowy hair intricately coiled.

He held a needle gun in his hand, and his eyes were cold little chips of moonlight in his broad white face.

"Didn't know you had a woman aboard, Brandon," he said. His voice was harsh and slurring. "Yes, I recognize you, Miss Eustace. I'm glad you weren't harmed."

"He'll be happy to take you home, darling, for a small consideration. Say a million credits or so."

Brandon was advancing slowly, poised on the balls of his feet. Dhu Kar grinned.

"How right you are, Brandon. For once you're bringing me business instead of getting it away. But you can relax, Brandon. You won't have to worry about it."

He raised his gun slightly. Sylvia cried out and made a move toward

Brandon. The gun hissed softly.

The needles splattered harmlessly against a wall of force, just as Brandon's had done back in the ship. And Sylvia Eustace turned and ran.

"I'm not doing this, Brandy," she yelled, her long legs flashing through the dust. "Are you all right?"

"All right!" he yelled back, and rushed after her, impelled by Tobul's furious command to get to the vault tunnel first.

Dhu Kar was staring from his gun to the running man in open-mouthed amazement. Then his jaw shut hard. The girl didn't matter--he could catch her. But Brandon--

If something was wrong with his gun, he'd try something else. He fumbled in a capacious pocket, and his powerful arm flexed.

The gas capsule burst just at Brandon's feet, Tobul, concentrating every effort on catching Kymra, was caught off guard. Before he could stop himself, Brandon had breathed enough of it to drop him dazed in the sand. He floundered away to windward, and realized that Tobul, associated as he was with Brandon's physical medium, was momentarily affected, too. Sylvia's flying form vanished into the pit mouth. Dhu Kar laughed and ran toward Brandon, very light and swift for such a big man. Brandon got to his feet and stood swaying, lost in a roaring mist, his hands raised blindly, waiting.

A pair of vast white hands came out of the darkness toward his throat. He caught them. He fought to hold them off, but his sinews were water. The hands got closer. There was a face behind them now, broad and pale and contentedly smiling. Brandon's white teeth showed through his tawny beard. He gulped the clean desert air and

scourged his lagging strength into his arms, to hold those hands away.

But the stuff he'd breathed sent a black tide swirling through his brain. The hands and the smiling face were drowned in it.

The wide-winged bird on his circlet gleamed in the cold light of Diemos; the lines of his scarred, handsome face were deep and strong. He dropped Dhu Kar's wrists.

The last desperate backlash of his strength went into his forward surge, the thrust of his hands, to Dhu Kar's throat.

The Venusian laughed and flung him off. Brandon crumpled on the sand, and looked up at death. He was grinning, the reckless grin that women sighed at on the television screens.

Some little mocking imp in his blacked-out brain whispered: "No audience, Brandy! You can quit."

But he didn't. And death came down in two white hands. And vanished, in a sudden, coruscating puff of light.

Tobul's voice spoke, through the stifling darkness in his mind. The velvet was all gone from it now. It was clean, barbaric steel.

"I was affected only for an instant. I could have saved you this. But Kymra was gone then, and I wanted to see how men fight today.

"That circlet you wear was the crown of my fathers, when they were nomads living on raided herds and stolen grain. Keep it, Brandon. And believe me when I say I regret having to use your body. I shall try not to do it violence." Brandon felt a tingling fire sweep through him, and quite suddenly the effects of the gas were gone. Some vibration

Tobul freed, stimulating the natural processes of his body to instantaneous reaction. He got up.

"Tobul," he said, "did you say that Kymra knew the secret of building a body for you?"

"Yes. But there is no way now of forcing her to do it. The girl fights well, for all she's a Blue Hair."

"I'll find a way," said Brandon.

Tobul's voice came deep and strong in his brain.

"I admire you, Brandon. I wish to help you all I can. But this fight is between Kymra and me. We are of opposing races, opposing creeds. The will, the actual need to rule is inherent in both of us, as the need to breathe is in you. Not the will merely for power, but for the guidance of millions of people to what we believe is a better way of life.

"We have different ways, Kymra and I. There is not room on Mars for both of them.

"We will go, Brandon. Down into the vault. Kymra is there ahead of me, but I still have some powers. One of us will not come out." Brandon went, down into the Stygian shadow of the tunnel. Somewhere ahead was Sylvia, and Kymra of the Prira Cen, and the powerful things in the vault he could only guess at.

Behind him, outside, was sleeping Mars, resigned to the slow advance of death, living out its little days in peace.

Behind him, too, long after the tunnel roof had killed all sound from beyond, four ships came flashing down through the moonlight, drawn

by the great pyre of Sylvia's flier.

Jarthur, president of the Society for the Preservation of Martian Relics, looked out at the worn stump of the volcano--a tall, weedy man with sad Martian eyes and semi-military authority.

"These things are all we have left," he said to an assistant. "These bones and shards of our history. And even these the outlanders strip from us." He flipped open the intership radio connection.

"Cover this area thoroughly. Issue orders that everyone found here is to be arrested. If they resist, fire. Anesthetic needles. No one is to be allowed to escape."

It was cold in the tunnel, and musty with the dead smell of time. It was dark, too, but Brandon had no trouble finding his way. The square passageway, sheathed in metal of the same forgotten alloy as Tobul's ship, ran straight ahead and down.

Tobul explained it, answering Brandon's question.

"Those were troubled times. I knew that Rhiannon might be destroyed at any time. So I built this vault, sheathed in metal that will not corrode and is harder than the finest steel. It's air-tight, and filled with a preservative gas--or was, before the Venusian broke in.

"In it I had placed the sum of our knowledge, science and arts and pleasures, and with them the two secrets we took from the Pira Cen but could not use--the machine of regeneration and the weapon.

"They're still here, waiting. They mean the rule of Mars." Presently Brandon came to massive metal doors that barred his way. The controls were locked from the inside. Tobul said:

"The projector, Brandon. The same one."

He pressed the stud. The faint beam of light focused on the door. The metal glowed, wavered, and crumbled away into fine powder.

"It upsets molecular cohesion, reducing the metal to fine particles of its original elements," Tobul explained.

Brandon shuddered, thinking what would have happened to Sylvia. The beam ate and ate into the door, crumbling a hole around the massive controls. It went through nearly a solid foot of metal, and went dead.

"Age," snarled Tobul. "And all this time, Kymra--" He broke off. "Put your hands in the hole, Brandon."

He obeyed, remembering the cabin door on the ship and wondering if he'd be destroyed by Kymra's secret weapon as soon as he entered, or whether he'd live long enough to say goodbye to Sylvia.

The weakened metal went through, under the power impulse from Tobul's brain. The massive valves swung back--

Brandon stood frozen on the threshold.

The vault stretched away into gleaming distances filled with machines, with racks of metal scrolls and objects of a million shapes and sizes. All the life and learning of ancient Mars, the scientific powers of the Sorcerers of Rhiannon, preserved by the foresight of one man.

But it wasn't that sight, tremendous as it was, that set the blood hammering into Brandon's throat and wrists.

Directly across from the door, as though brought in just before it was

closed, was a huge glass cabinet set in an intricate web of coils. These shimmered in a halo of light, at once subdued and fierce.

Beneath the cabinet were several self-sealing metal containers. On the floor of it, inside, were trays and bowls of chemicals.

Above these, in the very center of the soft, deep glow, a shimmering thing stood, already vaguely formulated.

Witch fires danced over the chemicals, whirling upward in a spiral of incandescence. As though painted by a rapid brush, line and color took shape--

The fires died down, the glass door opened, and a girl stepped out. A tall, long-limbed girl, naked as the moon and as white. She moved with a vital grace, and her eyes were like bits of living gold, proud, unconquerable, meeting Brandon's own.

And her hair was blue, rippling down over her shoulders like the curl of a living wave over foam white coral.

Brandon heard a long, quivering sigh through his mind, and Tobul said:

"Kymra."

The girl nodded and turned to a curious thing raised on a metal tripod. It seemed to be mainly a crystal prism forming the core of a helix, which was of some material midway between crystal and metal--partially transparent, and made up of countless intricate facets.

The helix broke at its lower end into a score of shining strands which fanned out into a circle.

Sylvia Eustace suddenly from where she stood, at one side of Kymra and a little behind her.

"What are you going to do?"

Kymra's voice was very grave when she answered. Her golden eyes watched Brandon with somber regret.

"I am going to kill," she said quietly.

Her clear, muted voice rang softly from the metal vault, heavy with regret.

"For the first time one of the Prira Cen is going to take life willfully. I'm sorry, Max Brandon, that you must be the innocent victim--doubly sorry because of what I have read in this girl's mind.

"But you--and I--are less important than Mars." Tobul, speaking aloud through Brandon's throat, said harshly: "So you have had to come to my way at last."

She shook her head, that glorious shining hair like the forgotten sea that had lapped this island.

"No, Tobul. Because I take no pride in it, only sorrow. If my people had seen in time that they must deal with your barbarians as they would with a horde of wild beasts, humanely but firmly--" Her white shoulders shimmered through the shadowy blue.

"But they didn't," said Tobul, and his voice held a bitter satisfaction.

"You'll be all alone, Kymra, in an alien world."

"No. You're not the only one who looked ahead, Tobul! My seven wisest councilors took refuge in sensitized stones, which you brought

here to this vault. They knew that I would live, as they do. It was the thought-impulses of their minds that led me here, after Dhu Kar broke your sending mechanism moving it.

"Their atomic patterns are inherent in the frequencies of their consciousness. That's the secret of building bodies, Tobul. Given the consciousness and the necessary chemicals, that machine can create an identical replica, as you see in me.

"Sylvia, my dear," she added gently, "it will be quite painless. If I had any other sure weapon to use against Tobul's strength, I would, and then rebuild Brandon's body. But this force projects the consciousness into some unknown dimension, just as solar rays will. It cannot be recalled." Her hands dropped out of sight below the prism. Brandon could see the ripple of firm muscles along her arms as she went through some complicated operation.

"Goodbye, Tobul," she said softly. "Strange that we must end like this, in a world so different from the one we knew."

The prism began to glow with some queer perversion of light that seemed rather luminous darkness. It ran along the facets of the helix, faster and faster, stranger, darker, more dazzling.

Brandon felt every drop of blood in him stop for a second, and then race on again, with the swirl of that mad, black luminosity. A cold terror caught him, a thing that hadn't come at all when Dhu Kar's hands were at his throat. He felt Tobul's being surge within him, fierce and rebellious and bitter. Not afraid, much. Only ragingly sad at his defeat, and the thought of his people being ruled by Kymra of the Prira Cen.

"Negative energy," said Kymra's voice, ringing through the great vaulted rooms like a muted bugle. "It taps the power of the galactic

wheel itself, turning against the cohesive force of space. Energy so close to the primal warp of creation that it needs only the slightest charge to push it over into the negative--the opposite balance that everything possesses." The grave, sad voice beat against Brandon's ears.

"There is no defense against it, Tobul. All your force screens and projectors are worse than useless. They attract now, instead of repelling. Do you wonder we kept this weapon secret?"

The little threads of blackness spiraled out into a cone, and grew. Brandon's heart thundered in his throat. The mocking devil in his brain laughed because the reckless grin was on his lips, playing to the audience--Sylvia's stricken eyes.

He was sorry for Sylvia. She'd be alone now, in an alien world of wealth and decorum, that only he could have taken her out of.

Alone, in an alien world--

Brandon swallowed his heart. A sudden, desperate hope flared in him. Useless, but he had to try. The thing that had driven him through the desert made him try.

He started to cry out, "Kymra!" And Tobul's will clamped his tongue to silence.

"I will not beg for life," he said.

Things happened then, all at once. Sylvia made a long-legged leap forward, into the path of that blackness that ribboned and twisted out from the helix. In a second it would have touched her. But Brandon, moving instinctively, so that Tobul had no time to catch his conscious thought and block it, flung himself against her.

She went sprawling over out of harm's way. Kymra caught her breath sharply and started to move the projector to a new focus. And Brandon, looking up, cried suddenly:

"Jarthur!"

He stood there, the tall, thin Martian with the sad eyes. He had a needle gun in his hand, and six or seven black-clad policemen just behind him. He stared, momentarily stunned, at the vault and Kymra, with the blue hair cascading over her naked shoulders.

Kymra made a sharp movement. The dark light in the prism changed. The black cone unraveled itself, back into the helix. Brandon's heart gave a wild shudder of relief. Kymra was reluctant to take innocent lives. He scrambled up, sensing Tobul's dangerous alertness. Jarthur, forcing himself to steadiness in spite of his amazement, said:

"Max Brandon, you're under arrest."

Tobul acted with the swiftness of his barbarian ancestors. With anesthetic needles splattering in flames from his force shield, he charged into the middle of Jarthur's group.

The shock of Brandon's immunity demoralized them. Tobul's mind put forth tendrils of iron force.

"Surround me," he said. "Walk forward," Brandon saw the look in Jarthur's eyes, midway between nightmare and reluctant acceptance of insanity. Then he obeyed. Tobul moved forward, surrounded by a living shield.

Kymra stood irresolute behind the projector, reluctant even then to destroy more of her people. And then Sylvia moved.

She uncoiled from the floor with every ounce of her lithe strength, hurtling into Kymra. Kymra's mental force shield must have been momentarily dispersed by the shock of Jarthur's entrance and Tobul's sudden maneuver. Sylvia crashed into her, knocking her away from the projector. She yelled,

"Brandy! Do something!" But it was Tobul who flung away his unwilling protectors and gained the control board behind the projector. Kymra rose, dignified and beautiful even then, standing beside the regenerator.

"It's no use, Tobul," she said. "You can't use it." Brandon heard his voice say softly:

"You forgot the girl. She was where she could see your hands--and she didn't blank her mind to what she saw."

Tobul's hands moved over the intricate controls. Almost as an afterthought, he said to Jarthur, through Brandon's mouth:

"You are no longer needed. Go."

Jarthur's sad eyes became furious.

"See here, Brandon! I don't know what kind of madness this is--probably some secret you've stolen from this place. But you're through looting. I'm going to send you to Phobos if I die doing it!"

"You will," said Tobul calmly, and shrugged. "Please yourself." Kymra said steadily: "You don't know how to control the force. Every living thing beyond its focus will be destroyed, and part of the inanimate substance, before you can stop it even by smashing the projector."

"You said yourself, Kymra, that Mars is more important than any of

us." The prism began to glow with its queer, black light. And Brandon said desperately: "Tobul!"

"I'm sorry to cheat you of your body, Brandon. But this must be done." Black rage suddenly took Brandon's mind, drowning out even the flashes of Jarthur's needles dying against the force screen.

"You fool!" he snarled. "Can't you see that the world has changed? The things you're fighting over don't exist anymore!"

"Silence, Brandon!"

The black threads were weaving themselves again around the focus of the projector, twisting out toward Kymra of the Prira Cen. In a few seconds they'd blast her out of existence, and the regenerator with her—and Brandon's only chance to get rid of Tobul and be a normal man again. He could foresee Tobul's mind moving to silence his own. His hands were free from the projector now.

With a characteristic flourish, he ripped the circlet from his head and held it up.

"By this crown, Tobul, I've earned the right to speak!" The mocking imp in Brandon's brain whispered: "Every inch the hero!" And behind it he could feel the struggle in Tobul's mind. It seemed an eternity before the quiet, curt answer came. "Speak, then." Brandon spoke, aloud, to Kymra as much as to Tobul.

"You say that Mars is your first consideration, and I believe you. But you still live in the past. Can't you see that the war between Tobul's people and the Prira Cen is as dead as the dust of your bodies?

"What right has either of you to rob Mars of the other? The two of you, working together as balancing forces instead of enemies, could

make Mars the greatest planet in the System. You could give her water again, and the air she's losing, the courage and will to live that she's lost.

"You could bring her the knowledge of the Lost Islands and the Prira Cen--complete, not in half-forgotten fragments. Kymra's councilors are invaluable to all humanity. What right have you, Tobul, to destroy them?

"The world has changed. With each of you, the other is the only link to the world you knew. There can be no real companionship for you with anyone else.

"What human would mate with someone forty thousand years old? Yet you're both young. Think of that, for a minute. To live for well-nigh endless years with no one to speak to, no understanding, only awe and fear and perhaps hate?

"For Heaven's sake, Tobul, if you're the brave man, the great man you believe yourself to be, face this out and see the truth in it!" The little black threads wove out and out, and Kymra's eyes were burning gold, proud and steady.

Sylvia spoke up furiously. "He's right, you know. You're just fooling yourselves. You don't care who you hurt as long as you don't have to share your power!"

"That's not true," said Kymra gently. And Tobul echoed: "No--" Brandon felt Tobul's mind gather into itself, thinking. For an instant his body was free from compulsion. He raised his foot and sent the projector crashing to the floor.

It shattered, became meaningless, shining fragments. But the fragments lay about a gaping hole, where the little black worms had

gnawed. Jarthur had stopped the useless firing. His eyes were dazed, bewildered, but his back was stubbornly straight.

"I don't understand," he said. "I may be only playing into your hands, Brandon. But if there are really beings from the past who can help Mars to live again--I beg them both to do it."

Tobul whispered in Brandon's mind: "What is all this to you, Brandon? You, an Earthman."

He shrugged. "I'm a human being, too. And I think I'm seeing what I've always wanted to see. The thing that, subconsciously, has drawn me to hunt up the old, forgotten places. I'm seeing the past--the past that is as real as the future or the present--come into its own."

"You're a looter, Brandon," said Jarthur harshly.

"But I've never destroyed anything. Oh, I'm not excusing myself. And I'm beginning to see the error of my ways."

"Perhaps," said Tobul shrewdly, "because this looks more exciting?" Kymra said softly: "Your barbarian ancestors, Tobul, prided themselves on being honest with themselves. Let us be."

Brandon could feel the struggle that went on in Tobul's mind. It seemed to him that the whole universe had stopped breathing, waiting. And at last, reluctantly, Tobul said:

"Brandon speaks the truth. Much as I hate it, it is the truth. Blast you, Brandon, why did I give you my crown to wear?"

"You may have it back." Brandon was suddenly weak, almost hysterical with relief. "I don't want much--"

"Much?"

"Well, my body has served as your draft animal. I'm giving up a profitable career of grave robbing in order to act as your ambassador, your link between the past and the present--"

"Ambassador!" said Kymra, turning her imperious, golden gaze on him. "Who has asked you?"

"Hm-m-m," said Brandon. "You'll need a personal diplomat, too. Can't expect love and kisses all in one minute, after forty thousand years--know anybody who could do it better?"

Kymra looked at Brandon's handsome head cocked back, with the wide-winged bird glittering above it and his white teeth gleaming. She laughed.

"You're mad, as well as insolent. But--Tobul?"

"Why not? Kymra, you will restore my body, of course. But before I leave this Brandon, there is something I want to do--to tame him." Brandon's heart gave a swift, little jerk of apprehension. He stammered:

"What--" But the iron grip of Tobul's will was on his mind. He found himself walking over to Sylvia. He found himself taking her in his arms, and whispering something, and then--

"So that," said Tobul, "is how it's done now. The world hasn't changed so much!"

Child Of The Sun

Leigh Brackett

Eric Falken stood utterly still, staring down at his leashed and helpless hands on the controls of the spaceship Falcon.

The red lights on his indicator panel showed Hiltonist ships in a three-dimensional half-moon, above, behind, and below him. Pincer jaws, closing fast.

The animal instinct of escape prodded him, but he couldn't obey. He had fuel enough for one last burst of speed. But there was no way through that ring of ships. Tractor-beams, criss-crossing between them, would net the Falcon like a fish.

There was no way out ahead, either. Mercury was there, harsh and bitter in the naked blaze of the sun. The ships of Gantry Hilton, President of the Federation of Worlds, inventor of the Psycho-Adjuster, and ruler of men's souls, were herding him down to a landing at the lonely Spaceguard outpost. A landing he couldn't dodge. And then....

For Paul Avery, a choice of death or Happiness. For himself and Sheila Moore, there was no choice. It was death.

The red lights blurred before Falken's eyes. The throb of the plates under his feet faded into distance. He'd stood at the controls for four chronometer days, ever since the Hiltonists had chased him up from Losangles, back on Earth.

He knew it was because he was exhausted that he couldn't think, or stop the nightmare of the past days from tramping through his brain,

hammering the incessant question at him. How?

How had the Hiltonists traced him back from New York? Paul Avery, the Unregenerate recruit he went to get, had passed a rigid psycho-search—which, incidentally, revealed the finest brain ever to come to the Unregenerate cause. He couldn't be a spy. And he'd spoken to no one but Falken. Yet they were traced. Hiltonist Black Guards were busy now, destroying the last avenues of escape from Earth, avenues that he, Falken, had led them through.

But how? He knew he hadn't given himself away. For thirty years he'd been spiriting Unregenerates away from Gantry Hilton's strongholds of Peace and Happiness. He was too old a hand for blunders.

Yet, somehow, the Black Guards caught up with them at Losangles, where the Falcon lay hidden. And, somehow, they got away, with a starving green-eyed girl named Kitty....

"Not Kitty," Falken muttered. "Kitty's Happy. Hilton took Kitty, thirty years ago. On our wedding day."

A starving waif named Sheila Moore, who begged him for help, because he was Eric Falken and almost a god to the Unregenerates. They got away in the Falcon, but the Hiltonist ships followed.

Driven, hopeless flight, desperate effort to shake pursuit before he was too close to the Sun. Time and again, using precious fuel and accelerations that tried even his tough body, Falken thought he had escaped. But they found him again. It was uncanny, the way they found him. Now he couldn't run any more. At least he'd led the Hiltonists away from the pitiful starving holes where his people hid, on the outer planets and barren asteroids and dark derelict hulks floating far outside the traveled lanes. And he'd kill himself before the Hiltonist psycho-search could pick his brain of information about the

Unregenerates. Kill himself, if he could wake up. He began to laugh, a drunken, ragged chuckle. He couldn't stop laughing. He clung to the panel edge and laughed until the tears ran down his scarred, dark face.

"Stop it," said Sheila Moore. "Stop it, Falken!"

"Can't. It's funny. We live in hell for thirty years, we Unregenerates, fighting Hiltonism. We're licked, now. We were before we started.

"Now I'm going to die so they can suffer hell a few weeks more. It's so damned funny!"

* * *

Sleep dragged at him. Sleep, urgent and powerful. So powerful that it seemed like an outside force gripping his mind. His hands relaxed on the panel edge.

"Falken," said Sheila Moore. "Eric Falken!" Some steely thing in her voice lashed him erect again. She crouched on the shelf bunk against the wall, her feral green eyes blazing, her thin body taut in its torn green silk.

"You've got to get away, Falken. You've got to escape." He had stopped laughing. "Why?" he asked dully.

"We need you, Falken. You're a legend, a hope we cling to. If you give up, what are we to go on?"

She rose and paced the narrow deck. Paul Avery watched her from the bunk on the opposite wall, his amber eyes dull with the deep weariness that slackened his broad young body.

Falken watched her, too. The terrible urge for sleep hammered at

him, bowed his grey-shot, savage head, drew the strength from his lean muscles. But he watched Sheila Moore.

That was why he had risked his life, and Avery's, and broken Unregenerate law to save her, unknown and untested. She blazed, somehow. She stabbed his brain with the same cold fire he had felt after Kitty was taken from him.

"You've got to escape," she said. "We can't give up, yet." Her voice was distant, her raw-gold hair a detached haze of light. Darkness crept on Falken's brain.

"How?" he whispered.

"I don't know... Falken!" She caught him with thin painful fingers.

"They're driving you down on Mercury. Why not trick them? Why not go--beyond?" He stared at her. Even he would never have thought of that. Beyond the orbit of Mercury there was only death.

Avery leaped to his feet. For a startled instant Falken's brain cleared, and he saw the trapped, wild terror in Avery's face.

"We'd die," said Avery hoarsely. "The heat..." Sheila faced him. "We'll die anyway, unless you want Psycho-Change. Why not try it, Eric? Their instruments won't work close to the Sun. They may even be afraid to follow."

The wiry, febrile force of her beat at them. "Try, Eric. We have nothing to lose."

Paul Avery stared from one to the other of them and then to the red lights that were ships. Abruptly he sank down on the edge of his bunk and dropped his broad, fair head in his hands. Falken saw the cords

like drawn harp-strings on the backs of them.

"I... can't," whispered Falken. The command to sleep was once more a vast shout in his brain. "I can't think."

"You must!" said Sheila. "If you sleep, we'll be taken. You won't be able to kill yourself. They'll pick your brain empty. Then they'll Hiltonize you with the Psycho-Adjuster.

"They'll blank your brain with electric impulses and then transmit a whole new memory-pattern, even shifting the thought-circuits so that you won't think the same way. They'll change your metabolism, your glandular balance, your pigmentation, your face, and your fingerprints." He knew she was recounting these things deliberately, to force him to fight. But still the weak darkness shrouded him.

"Even your name will be gone," she said. "You'll be placid and lifeless, lazing your life away, just one of Hilton's cattle." She took a deep breath and added, "Like Kitty."

He caught her shoulders, then, grinding the thin bone of them. "How did you know?"

"That night, when you saw me, you said her name. Perhaps I made you think of her. I know how it feels, Eric. They took the boy I loved away from me." He clung to her, the blue distant fire in his eyes taking life from the hot, green blaze of hers. There was iron in her. He could feel the spark and clash of it against his mind.

"Talk to me," he whispered. "Keep me awake. I'll try." Waves of sleep clutched Falken with physical hands. But he turned to the control panel.

The bitter blaze of Mercury stabbed his bloodshot eyes. Red lights

hemmed him in. He couldn't think. And then Sheila Moore began to talk. Standing behind him, her thin vital hands on his shoulders, telling him the story of Hiltonism.

"Gantry Hilton's Psycho-Adjuster was a good thing at first. Through the mapping and artificial blanking of brain-waves and the use of electro-hypnotism--the transmission of thought-patterns directly to the brain--it cured non-lesional insanity, neuroses, and criminal tendencies. Then, at the end of the Interplanetary War..."

Red lights closing in. How could he get past the Spaceguard battery? Sheila's voice fought back the darkness. Speed, that was what he needed. And more guts than he'd ever had to use in his life before. And luck.

"Keep talking, Sheila. Keep me awake."

"... Hilton boomed his discovery. The people were worn out with six years of struggle. They wanted Hiltonism, Peace and Happiness. The passion for escape from life drove them like lunatics."

He found the emergency lever and thrust it down. The last ounce of hoarded power slammed into the rocket tubes. The Falcon reared and staggered. Then she shot straight for Mercury, with the thin high scream of tortured metal shivering along the cabin walls.

Spaceshells burst. They shook the Falcon, but they were far behind. The ring of red lights was falling away. Acceleration tore at Falken's body, but the web of sleep was loosening. Sheila's voice cried to him, the story of man's slavery.

The naked, hungry peaks of Mercury snarled at Falken. And then the guns of the Spaceguard post woke up.

"Talk, Sheila!" he cried. "Keep talking!"

"So Gantry Hilton made himself a sort of God, regulating the thoughts and emotions of his people. There is no opposition now, except for the Unregenerates, and we have no power. Humanity walks in a placid stupor. It cannot feel dissatisfaction, disloyalty, or the will to grow and change. It cannot fight, even morally.

"Gantry Hilton is a god. His son after him will be a god. And humanity is dying."

There was a strange, almost audible snap in Falken's brain. He felt a quick, terrible stab of hate that startled him because it seemed no part of himself. Then it was gone, and his mind was clear.

He was tired to exhaustion, but he could think, and fight. Livid, flaming stars leaped and died around him. Racked plates screamed in agony. Falken's lean hands raced across the controls. He knew now what he was going to do.

Down, down, straight into the black, belching mouths of the guns, gambling that his sudden burst of speed would confuse the gunners, that the tiny speck of his ship hurtling bow-on would be hard to see against the star-flecked depths of space.

Falken's lips were white. Sheila's thin hands were a sharp unnoticed pain on his shoulders. Down, down.... The peaks of Mercury almost grazed his hull. A shell burst searingly, dead ahead. Blinded, dazed, Falken held his ship by sheer instinct. Thundering rockets fought the gravitational pull for a moment. Then he was through, and across.

Across Mercury, in free space, a speeding mote lost against the titanic fires of the Sun.

* * *

Falken turned. Paul Avery lay still in his bunk, but his golden eyes were wide, staring at Falken. They dropped to Sheila Moore, who had slipped exhausted to the floor, and came back to Falken and stared and stared with a queer, stark look that Falken couldn't read.

Falken cut the rockets and locked the controls. Heat was already seeping through the hull. He looked through shaded ports at the vast and swollen Sun. No man in the history of space travel had ventured so close before. He wondered how long they could stand the heat, and whether the hull could screen off the powerful radiations.

His brain, with all its knowledge of the Unregenerate camps, was safe for a time. Knowing the hopelessness of it, he smiled sardonically, wondering if sheer habit had taken the place of reason.

Then Sheila's bright head made him think of Kitty, and he knew that his tired body had betrayed him. He could never give up.

He went down beside Sheila. He took her hands and said:

"Thank you. Thank you, Sheila Moore."

And then, quite peacefully, he was asleep with his head in her lap.

* * *

The heat was a malignant, vampire presence. Eric Falken felt it even before he wakened. He was lying in Avery's bunk, and the sweat that ran from his body made a sticky pool under him.

Sheila lay across from him, eyes closed, raw-gold hair pushed back from her temples. The torn green silk of her dress clung damply. The starved thinness of her gave her a strange beauty, clear and brittle.

like sculptured ice. She'd lived in alleys and cellars, hiding from the Hiltonists, because she wouldn't be Happy. She was strong, that girl. Like an unwanted cat that simply wouldn't die.

Avery sat in the pilot's chair, watching through the shaded port. He swung around as Falken got up. The exhaustion was gone from his square young face, but his eyes were still veiled and strange. Falken couldn't read them, but he sensed fear.

He asked, "How long have I slept?"

Avery shrugged. "The chronometer stopped. A long time, though. Twenty hours, perhaps."

Falken went to the controls. "Better go back now. We'll swing wide of Mercury, and perhaps we can get through." He hoped their constant velocity hadn't carried them too far for their fuel.

Relief surged over Avery's face. "The size of that Sun," he said jerkily.

"It's terrifying. I never felt..."

He broke off sharply. Something about his tone brought Sheila's eyes wide open.

Suddenly, the bell of the mass-detector began to ring, a wild insistent jangle.

"Meteor!" cried Falken and leaped for the Visor screen. Then he froze, staring.

It was no meteor, rushing at them out of the vast blaze of the Sun. It was a planet.

A dark planet, black as the infinity behind it, barren and cruel as

starvation, touched in its jagged peaks with subtle, phosphorescent fires. Paul Avery whispered, "Good Lord! A planet, here? But it's impossible!" Sheila Moore sprang up.

"No! Remember the old legends about Vulcan, the planet between Mercury and the Sun? Nobody believed in it, because they could never find it. But they could never explain Mercury's crazy orbit, either, except by the gravitational interference of another body."

Avery said, "Surely the Mercurian observatories would have found it?" A pulse began to beat in his strong white throat.

"It's there," snapped Falken impatiently. "And we'll crash it in a minute if we... Sheila! Sheila Moore!"

The dull glare from the ports caught the proud, bleak lines of his gypsy face, the sudden fire in his blue eyes.

"This is a world, Sheila! It might be a world for us, a world where Unregenerates could live, and wait!"

She gasped and stared at him, and Paul Avery said:

"Look at it, Falken! No one, nothing could live there." Falken said softly, "Afraid to land and see?" Yellow eyes burned into his, confused and wild. Then Avery turned jerkily away.

"No. But you can't land, Falken. Look at it." Falken looked, using a powerful search-beam, probing. Vulcan was smaller even than Mercury. There was no atmosphere. Peaks like splinters of black glass bristled upward, revolving slowly in the Sun's tremendous blaze. The beam went down into the bottomless dark of the canyons. There was nothing there, but the glassy rock and the dim glints of light through it.

"All the same," said Falken, "I'm going to land." If there was even a tiny chance, he couldn't let it slip.

Unregeneracy was almost dead in the inhabited worlds. Paul Avery was the only recruit in months. And it was dying in the miserable outer strongholds of independence.

Starvation, plague, cold, and darkness. Insecurity and danger, and the awful lost terror of humans torn from earth and light. Unless they could find a place of safety, with warmth and light and dirt to grow food in, where babies could be born and live, Gantry Hilton would soon have the whole Solar System for his toy.

There were no more protests. Falken set the ship down with infinite skill on a ledge on the night side. Then he turned, feeling the blood beat in his wrists and throat.

"Vac suits," he said. "There are two and a spare." They got into them, shuffled through the airlock, and stood still, the first humans on an undiscovered world.

* * *

Lead weights in their boots held them so that they could walk. Falken thrust at the rock with a steel-shod alpenstock.

"It's like glass," he said. "Some unfamiliar compound, probably, fused out of raw force in the Solar disturbance that created the planets. That would explain its resistance to heat."

Radio headphones carried Avery's voice back to him clearly, and Falken realized that the stuff of the planet insulated against Solar waves, which would normally have blanketed communication.

"Whatever it is," said Avery, "it sucks up light. That's why it's never been seen. Only little glimmers seep through, too feeble for telescopes even on Mercury to pick up against the Sun. Its mass is too tiny for its transits to be visible, and it doesn't reflect."

"A sort of dark stranger, hiding in space," said Sheila, and shivered "Look, Eric! Isn't that a cave mouth?"

Falken's heart gave a great leap of hope. There were caves on Pluto. Perhaps, in the hidden heart of this queer world....

They went toward the opening. It was surprisingly warm. Falken guessed that the black rock diffused the Sun's heat instead of stopping it. Thin ragged spires reared overhead, stabbing at the stars. Furtive glints of light came and went in ebon depths. The cave opened before them, and their torches showed glistening walls dropping sheer away into blackness. Falken uncoiled a thousand-foot length of synthetic fiber rope from his belt. It was no larger than a spider web, and strong enough to hold Falken and Avery together. He tied one each of their metal boots to it and let it down. It floated endlessly out, the lead weight dropping slowly in the light gravity. Eight hundred, nine hundred feet. When there were five feet of rope left in Falken's hand it stopped.

"Well," he said. "There is a bottom." Paul Avery caught his arm. "You aren't going down?"

"Why not?" Falken scowled at him, puzzled. "Stay here, if you prefer. Sheila?"

"I'm coming with you."

"All right," whispered Avery. "I'll come." His amber eyes were momentarily those of a lion caught in a pit. Afraid, and dangerous.

Dangerous? Falken shook his head irritably. He drove his alpenstock into a crack and made the rope fast.

"Hang onto it," he said. "We'll float like balloons, but be careful. I'll go first. If there's anything wrong down there, chuck off your other boot and climb up fast."

They went down, floating endlessly on the weighted rope. Little glints of light fled through the night-dark walls. It grew hot. Then Falken struck a jog in the cleft wall and felt himself sliding down a forty-five-degree offset. Abruptly, there was light.

Falken yelled, in sharp, wild warning.

The thing was almost on him. A colossus with burning eyes set on foot-long stalks, with fanged jaws agape and muscles straining. Falken grabbed for his blaster. The quick motion over-balanced him. Sheila slid down on him and they fell slowly together, staring helplessly at destruction charging at them through a rainbow swirl of light. The creature rushed by, in utter silence.

Paul Avery landed, his blaster ready. Falken and Sheila scrambled up, cold with the sweat of terror.

"What was it?" gasped Sheila.

Falken said shakily, "God knows!" He turned to look at their surroundings. And swept the others back into the shadow of the cleft. Riders hunted the colossus. Riders of a shape so mad that even in madness no human could have conceived them. Riders on steeds like the arrowing tails of comets, hallooing on behind a pack of nightmare hounds.... Cold sweat drenched him. "How can they live without air?" he whispered. "And why didn't they see us?"

There was no answer. But they were safe, for the moment. The light, a shifting web of prismatic colors, showed nothing moving.

They stood on a floor of the glassy black rock. Above and on both sides walls curved away into the wild light--sunlight, apparently, splintered by the shell of the planet. Ahead there was an ebon plain curving to match the curve of the vault.

Falken stared at it bitterly. There was no haven here. No life as he knew it could survive in this pit. Yet there was life, of some mad sort. Another time, they might not escape.

"Better go back," he said wearily, and turned to catch the rope. The cleft was gone.

Smooth and unbroken, the black wall mocked him. Yet he hadn't moved more than two paces. He smothered a swift stab of fear.

"Look for it," he snapped. "It must be here." But it wasn't. They searched, and came again together, to stare at each other with eyes already a little mad.

Paul Avery laughed sharply. "There's something here," he said. "Something alive."

Falken snarled, "Of course, you fool! Those creatures...."

"No. Something else. Something laughing at us."

"Shut up, Avery," said Sheila. "We can't go to pieces now."

"And we can't just stand here glaring." Falken looked out through the rainbow dazzle. "We may as well explore. Perhaps there's another way out." Avery chuckled, without mirth. "And perhaps there isn't. Perhaps there was never a way in. What happened to it, Falken?"

"Control yourself," said Falken silkily, "or I'll rip off your oxygen valve. All right. Let's go."

They went a long way across the plain in the airless, unechoing silence, slipping on glassy rock, dazzled by the wheeling colors. Then Falken saw the castle.

It loomed quite suddenly--a bulk of squat wings with queer, twisted turrets and straggling windows. Falken scowled. He was sure he hadn't seen it before. Perhaps the light...

They hesitated. Icy moth-wings flittered over Falken's skin. He would have gone around, but black walls seemed to stretch endlessly on either side of the castle.

"We go in," he said, and shuddered at the thought of meeting folk like those who hunted the flaming-eyed colossus.

Blasters ready, they went up flat titanic steps. A hall without doors stretched before them. They went down it.

* * *

Falken had a dizzy sense of change. The walls quivered as though with a wash of water over them. And then there were doors opening out of a round hall. He opened one. There was a round hall beyond, with further doors. He turned back. The hall down which they had come had vanished. There were only doors. Hundreds of them, of odd shapes and sizes, like things imperfectly remembered. Paul Avery began to laugh.

Falken struck him, hard, over the helmet. He stopped, and Sheila caught Falken's arm, pointing.

Shadows came, rushing and wheeling like monstrous birds. Cold dread caught Falken's heart. Shadows, hunting them...

He choked down the mad laughter rising in his own throat. He opened another door.

Halls, with doors. The shadows swept after them. Falken hurled the doors open, faster and faster, but there was never anything beyond but another hall, with doors.

His heart was gorged and painful. His clothing was cold on his sweating body. He plunged on and on through black halls and drifting shards of light, with the shadows dancing all around and doors, doors, doors. Paul Avery made a little empty chuckle. "It's laughing," he mumbled and went down on the black floor. The shadows leaped.

Sheila's eyes were staring fire in her starved white face. Her terror shocked against Falken's brain and steadied it.

"Take his feet," he said harshly. "Take his feet." They staggered on with their burden. And presently there were no more doors, and no roof overhead. Only the light and the glassy walls, and the dancing shadows.

The walls were thin in places. Through them Falken saw the dark colossus with its flaming eyes, straining through the spangled light. After it came the hounds and hunters, not gaining nor falling back, riding in blind absorption. The walls faded, and the shadows. They were alone in the center of the black plain. Falken looked back at the castle.

There was nothing but the flat and naked rock.

He laid Avery down. He saw Sheila Moore fall beside him. He

laughed, one small, mad chuckle. Then he crouched beside the others, his scarred gypsy face a mask of living stone.

Whether it was then, or hours later that he heard the voice, Falken never knew. But it spoke loudly in his mind, that voice. It brought him up, his futile blaster raised.

"You are humans," said the voice. "How wonderful!" Falken looked upward, sensing a change in the light. Something floated overhead. A ten-foot area of curdled glory, a core of blinding brilliance set in a lacy froth of fire.

The beauty of it caught Falken's throat. It shimmered with a sparkling opalescence, infinitely lovely—a living, tender flame floating in the rainbow light. It caught his heart, too, with a deep sadness that drifted in dim, faded colors beneath the brilliant veil.

It said, clearly as a spoken voice in his mind:

"Yes. I live, and I speak to you."

Sheila and Avery had risen. They stared, wide-eyed, and Sheila whispered,

"What are you?"

The fire-thing coiled within itself. Little snapping flames licked from its edges, and its colors laughed.

"A female, isn't it? Splendid! I shall devise something very special." Colors rippled as its thoughts changed. "You amaze me, humans. I cannot read your minds, beyond thoughts telepathically directed at me, but I can sense their energy output.

"I had picked the yellow one for the strongest. He appeared to be so.

Yet he failed, and you others fought through."

Avery stared at Falken with the dawn of an appalled realization in his amber eyes. Falken asked of the light:

"What are you?"

The floating fire dipped and swirled. Preening peacock tints rippled through it, to be drowned in fierce, proud scarlet. It said: "I am a child of the Sun."

It watched them gape in stunned amazement, and laughed with mocking golden notes.

"I will tell you, humans. It will amuse me to have an audience not of my own creating. Watch!"

A slab of the glassy rock took form before them. Deep in it, a spot of brilliance grew:

It was a Sun, in the first blaze of its virile youth. It strode the path of its galactic orbit alone. Then, from the wheeling depths of space, a second Sun approached.

It was huge, burning with a blue-white radiance. There was a mating, and the nine worlds were born in a rush of supernal fire.

And there was life. Not on the nine burning planets. But in free space, little globes of fire, bits of the Sun itself shocked somehow to intelligence in the vast explosion of energy.

The picture blurred. The colors of the floating light were dulled and dreamy.

"There were many of us," it sighed. "We were like tiny Suns, living on

the conversion of our own atoms. We played, in open space...." Dim pictures washed the screen, glories beyond human comprehension--a faded vision of splendor, of alien worlds and the great wheeling Suns of outer space. The voice murmured:

"Like Suns, we radiated our energy. We could draw strength from our parent, but not enough. We died. But I was stronger than the rest, and more intelligent. I built myself a shell."

"Built it!" whispered Avery. "But how?"

"All matter is built of raw energy, electron and proton existing in a free state. With a part of my own mass I built this world around myself, to hold the energy of the Sun and check the radiation of my own vitality.

"I have lived, where my race died. I have watched the planets cool and live and die. I am not immortal. My mass grows less as it drains away through my shell. But it will be a long, long time. I shall watch the Sun die, too." The voice was silent. The colors were ashes of light. Falken was stricken with a great poignant grief.

Then, presently, the little malicious flames frothed to life again, and the voice said.

"My greatest problem is amusement. Here in this black shell I am forced to devise pleasures from my own imagination."

Falken gasped. "The hunters, the cleft that vanished, and that hellish castle?" He was suddenly cold and hot at once.

"Clever, eh? I created my hunt some eons ago. According to my plan the beast can neither escape nor the hunters catch him. But, owing to the uncertainty factor, there is one chance in some hundreds of billions that one or the other event may occur. It affords me endless

amusement."

"And the castle?" said Falken silkily. "That amused you, too."

"Oh, yes! Your emotional reactions.... Most interesting!" Falken raised his blaster and fired at the core of the light.

Living fire coiled and writhed. The Sun-child laughed.

"Raw energy only feeds me. What, are there no questions?" Falken's voice was almost gentle. "Do you think of nothing but amusement?" Savage colors rippled against the dim, sad mauves. "What else is there, to fill the time?"

Time. Time since little frozen Pluto was incandescent gas.

"You closed the opening we came through," said Avery abruptly.

"Of course."

"But you'll open it again? You'll let us go?" The tone of his voice betrayed him. Falken knew, and Sheila.

"No," said Sheila throatily. "It won't let us go. It'll keep us up here to play with, until we die."

Ugly dark reds washed the Sun-child. "Death!" it whispered. "My creatures exist until I bid them vanish. But death, true death--that would be a supreme amusement!"

* * *

A DESPERATE, helpless rage gripped Falken. The vast empty vault mocked him with his dead hopes. It jeered at him with solid walls that were built and shifted like smoke by the power of this lovely, soulless

flame. Built, and shifted...

Sudden fire struck his brain. He stood rigid, stricken dumb by the sheer magnificence of his idea. He began to tremble, and the wild hope swelled in him until his veins were gorged and aching.

He said, with infinite care, "You can't create real living creatures, can you?"

"No," said the Sun-child. "I can build the chemicals of their bodies, but the vital spark eludes me. My creatures are simply toys activated by the electrical interplay of atoms. They think, in limited ways, and they feel crude emotions, but they do not live in the true sense."

"But you can build other things? Rocks, soil, water, air?"

"Of course. It would take a great deal of my strength, and it would weaken my shell, since I should have to break down part of the rock to its primary particles and rebuild. But even that I could do, without serious loss." There was silence. The blue distant fires flared in Falken's eyes. He saw the others staring at him. He saw the chances of failure bulk over him like black thunderheads, crowned with madness and death.

But his soul shivered in ecstasy at the thing that was in it. The Sun-child said silkily, "Why should I do all this?"

"For amusement," whispered Falken. "The most colossal game you have ever had." Brilliant colors flared. "Tell me, human!"

"I must make a bargain first."

"Why should I bargain? You're mine, to do with as I will."

"Quite. But we couldn't last very long. Why waste your imagination on

the three of us when you might have thousands?"

Avery's amber eyes opened wide. A shocked incredulity slackened Sheila's rigid muscles. The voice cried:

"Thousands of humans to play with?"

The eager greed sickened Falken. Like a child wanting a bright toy--only the toys were human souls.

"Not until the bargain is made," he said.

"Well? What is the bargain? Quick!"

"Let us go, in return for the game which I shall tell you."

"I might lose you, and then have nothing."

"You can trust us," Falken insisted. He was shaking, and his nerves ached.

"Listen. There are thousands of my people, living like hunted beasts in the deserts of the Solar System. They need a world, to survive at all. If you'll build them one in the heart of this planet, I'll bring them here.

"You wouldn't kill them. You'd let them live, to admire and praise you for saving them. It would amuse you just to watch them for some time. Then you could take one, once in a while, for a special game.

"I don't want to do this. But it's better that they should live that way than be destroyed."

"And better for you, too, eh?" The Sun-child swirled reflectively. "Breed men like cattle, always have a supply. It's a wonderful idea..."

"Then you'll do it?" Sweat dampened Falken's brow.

"Perhaps... Yes! Tell me, quickly, what you want!" Falken swung to his stunned and unbelieving companions. He gripped an arm of each, painfully hard.

"Trust me. Trust me, for God's sake!" he whispered. Then, aloud, "Help me to tell it what we need."

There was a little laughing ripple of golden notes in the Sun-child's light, but Falken was watching Sheila's eyes. A flash of understanding crossed them, a glint of savage hope.

"Oxygen," she said. "Nitrogen, hydrogen, carbon dioxide...."

"And soil," said Falken. "Lime, iron, aluminum, silicon...."

* * *

They came to on a slope of raw, red earth, still wet from the rain. A range of low hills lifted in the distance against a strange black sky. Small tattered clouds drifted close above in the rainbow's light.

Falken got to his feet. As far as he could see there were rolling stretches of naked earth, flecked with brassy pools and little ruddy streams. He opened his helmet and breathed the warm wet air. He let the rich soil trickle through his fingers and thought of the Unregenerates in their frozen burrows. He smiled, because there were tears in his hard blue eyes. Sheila gave a little sobbing laugh and cried, "Eric, it's done!" Paul Avery lifted dark golden eyes to the hills and was silent. There was a laughing tremble of color in the air where the Sun-child floated. Small wicked flames drowned the sad, soft mauves. The Sun-child said:

"Look, Eric Falken. There, behind you."

Falken turned--and looked into his own face.

It stood there, his own lean body in the worn vac suit, his own gypsy face and the tangle of frosted curls. Only the eyes were different. The chill, distant blue was right, but there were spiteful flecks of gold, a malicious sparkle that was like....

"Yes," purred the Sun-child. "Myself, a tiny particle, to activate the shell. A perfect likeness, no?"

A slow, creeping chill touched Falken's heart. "Why?" he asked.

"Long ago I learned the art of lying from men. I lied about reading minds. Your plan to trick me into building this world and then destroy me was plain on the instant of conception."

Laughing wicked colors coiled and spun.

"Oh, but I'm enjoying this! Not since I built my shell have I had such a game!

Can you guess why I made your double?"

Falken's lips were tight with pain, his eyes savage with remorse at his own stupidity.

"It--he will go in my ship to bring my people here." He knew that the Sun-child had picked his unwitting brain as cleanly as any Hiltonist psycho-search.

In sudden desperation he drew his blaster and shot at the mocking likeness. Before he tripped the trigger-stud a wall of ebon glass was raised between them. The blast-ray slid away in harmless fire and

died, burned out. The other Falken turned and strode away across the new land. Falken watched him out of sight, not moving nor speaking, because there was nothing to do, nothing to say.

The lovely wicked fire of the Sun-child faded suddenly.

"I am tired," it said. "I shall suckle the Sun, and rest." It floated away. For all his agony, Falken felt the heart-stab of its sad, dim colors. It faded like a wisp of lonely smoke into the splintered light. Presently there was a blinding flash and a sharp surge of air as a fissure was opened. Falken saw the creature, far away, pressed to the roof of the vault and pulsing as it drank the raw blaze of the Sun.

"Oh, God," whispered Falken. "Oh, God, what have I done?" Falken laughed, one harsh wild cry. Then he stood quite still his hands at his sides, his face a mask cut deep in dark stone.

"Eric," whispered Sheila. "Please. I can't be brave for you all the time." He was ashamed of himself then. He shook the black despair away with cynical fatalism.

"All right, Sheila. We'll be heroes to the bitter end. You, Avery. Get your great brain working. How can we save our people, and, incidentally, our own skins?"

Avery flinched as though some swift fear had stabbed him. "Don't ask me, Falken. Don't!"

"Why not? What the devil's the matter...." Falken broke off sharply. Something cold and fierce and terrifying came into his face. "Just a minute, Avery," he said gently. "Does that mean you think you know a way?"

"I... For God's sake, let me alone!"

"You do know a way," said Falken inexorably. "Why shouldn't I ask you, Paul Avery? Why shouldn't you try to save your people?" Golden eyes met his, desperate, defiant, bewildered, and pitiful all at once.

"They're not my people," whispered Avery.

They were caught, then, in a strange silence. Soundless wheeling rainbows brushed the new earth, glimmered in the brassy pools. Far up on the black crystal of the vault the Sun-child pulsed and breathed. And there was stillness, like the morning of creation.

Eric Falken took one slow, taut step, and said, "Who are you?" The answer whispered across the raw red earth.

"Miner Hilton, the son of Gantry."

* * *

Falken raised the blaster, forgotten in his hand. Miner Hilton, who had been Paul Avery, looked at it and then at Falken's face, a shield of dark iron over cold, terrible flame.

He shivered, but he didn't move, nor speak.

"You know a way to fight that thing," said Falken, very softly, in his throat.

"I want to kill you. But you know a way."

"I--I don't know. I can't..." Golden tortured eyes went to Sheila Moore and stayed there, with a dreadful lost intensity.

Falken's white teeth showed. "You want to tell, Miner Hilton. You want to help us, don't you? Because of Sheila!"

Young Hilton's face flamed red, and then went white. Sheila cried sharply,

"Eric, don't! Can't you see he's suffering?" But Falken remembered Kitty, and the babies who were born and died on freezing rock, without sun or shelter. He said, "She'd never have you, Hilton. And I'll tell you this. Perhaps I can't force out of you what you know. But if I can't, I swear to God I'll kill you with my own hands." He threw back his head and laughed suddenly "Gantry Hilton's son--in love with an Unregenerate!"

"Wait, Eric." Sheila Moore put a hand on his arm to stop him, and went forward. She took Miner Hilton by the shoulders and looked up at him, and said, "It isn't so impossible, Miner Hilton. Not if what I think is true." Falken stared at her in stunned amazement, beyond speech or movement. Then his heart was torn with sudden pain, and he knew, with the clarity of utter truth, that he loved Sheila Moore.

She said to Miner Hilton, "Why did you do this? And how?" Young Hilton's voice was flat and strained. He made a move as though to take her hands from his shoulders, but he didn't. He stared across her red-gold head, at Falken.

"Something had to be done to stamp out the Unregenerates. They're a barrier to complete peace, a constant trouble. Eric Falken is their god, as--as Sheila said. If we could trap him, the rest would be easy. We could cure his people.

"My father couldn't do it himself. He's old, and too well-known.

"He sent me, because mine is the only other brain that could stand what I had to do. My father has trained me well.

"To get me by the psycho-search, my father gave me a temporary

brain pattern. After I was accepted as a refugee, I established mental contact with him...."

"Mental contact," breathed Falken. "That was it. That's why you were always so tired, why I couldn't shake pursuit."

"Go on," said Sheila, with a queer gentleness. Hilton stared into space, without seeing.

"I almost had you in Losangles, Falken, but you were too quick for the Guards. Then, when we were trapped at Mercury, I tried to make you sleep. I was leading those ships, too.

"But I was tired, and you fought too well, you and Sheila. After that we were too close to the Sun. My thought waves wouldn't carry back to the ships." He looked at Falken, and then down at Sheila's thin face.

"I didn't know there were people like you," he whispered. "I didn't know men could feel things, and fight for them like that. In my world, no one wants anything, no one fights, or tries... And I have no strength. I'm afraid." Sheila's green eyes caught his, compelled them.

"Leave that world," she said. "You see it's wrong. Help us to make it right again."

In that second, Falken saw what she was doing. He was filled with admiration, and joy that she didn't really care for Hilton--and then doubt, that perhaps she did.

Miner Hilton closed his eyes. He struck her hands suddenly away and stepped back, and his blaster came ready into his hand.

"I can't," he whispered. His lips were white. "My father has taught me. He trusts me. And I believe in him. I must!"

Hilton looked where the glow of the Sun-child pulsed against ebon rock. "The Unregenerates won't trouble us anymore."

He raised the muzzle of his blaster to his head.

* * *

It was then that Falken remembered his was empty. He dropped it and sprang. He shocked hard against Hilton's middle, struck him down, clawing for his gun arm. But Hilton was heavy, and strong.

He rolled away and brought his barrel lashing down across Falken's temple. Falken crouched, dazed and bleeding, in the mud.

He laughed, and said, "Why don't you kill me, Hilton?" Hilton looked from Falken's uncowed, snarling face to Sheila. The blaster slipped suddenly from his fingers. He covered his face with his hands and was silent, shivering.

Falken said, with curious gentleness, "That proves it. You've got to have faith in a thing, to kill or die for it."

Hilton whispered, "Sheila!" She smiled and kissed him, and Falken looked steadfastly away, wiping the blood out of his eyes.

Hilton grasped suddenly at the helmet of his vac-suit. He talked, rapidly, as he worked.

"The Sun-child creates with the force of its mind. It understands telekinesis, the control of the basic electrical force of the universe by thought, just as the wise men of our earth understood it. The men who walked on the water, and moved mountains, and healed the sick.

"We can only attack it through its mind. We'll try to weaken its

thought-force, destroy anything it sends against us." His fingers flashed between the helmet radio and the repair kit which is a part of every vac suit, using wires, spare parts, tools.

"There," said Hilton, after a long time. "Now yours." Falken gave him his helmet. "Won't the Sun-child know what we're doing?" he asked rather harshly.

Hilton shook his fair head. "It's weak now. It won't think about us until it has fed. Perhaps two hours more."

"Can you read its thoughts?" demanded Falken sourly.

"A very little," said Hilton, and Sheila laughed, quietly. Hilton worked feverishly. Falken watched his deft fingers weaving a bewildering web of wires between the three helmets, watched him shift and change, tune and adjust. He watched the Sun-child throb and sparkle as the strength of the Sun sank into it. He watched Sheila Moore, staring at Hilton with eyes of brilliant green.

He never knew how much time passed. Only that the Sun-child gave a little rippling sigh of light and floated down. The fissure closed above it. Sheila caught her breath, sharp between her teeth.

Hilton rose. He said rapidly,

"I've done the best I can. It's crude, but the batteries are strong. The helmets will pick up and amplify the energy-impulses of our brains. We'll broadcast a single negative impulse, opposed to every desire the Sun-thing has.

"Stay close together, because if the wires are broken between the helmets we lose power, and it's going to take all the strength we have to beat that creature."

Falken put on his helmet. Little copper discs, cut from the sheet in the repair kit and soldered to wires with Hilton's blaster, fitted to his temples. Through the vision ports he could see the web of wires that ran from the three helmets through a maze of spare grids and a condenser, and then into the slender shaft of a crude directional antenna.

Hilton said, "Concentrate on the single negative, No." Falken looked at the lovely shimmering cloud, coming toward them.

"It won't be easy," he said grimly, "to concentrate." Sheila's eyes were savage and feral, watching that foam of living flame. Hilton's face was hidden. He said, "Switch on your radios." Power hummed from the batteries. Falken felt a queer tingle in his brain. The Sun-child hovered over them. Its mind-voice was silent, and Falken knew that the electrical current in his helmet was blanking his own thoughts. They linked arms. Falken set his brain to beating out an impulse, like a radio signal, opposing the negative of his mind to the positive of the Sun-child's.

* * *

Falken stood with the others on spongy, yielding soil. Dim plant-shapes rose on all sides as far as he could see, forming an impenetrable tangle of queer geometric shapes that made him reel with a sense of spatial distortion. Overhead, in a sea-green sky, three tiny suns wheeled in mad orbits about a common center. There was a smell in the air, a rotting stench that was neither animal or vegetable.

Falken stood still, pouring all his strength into that single mental command to stop.

The tangled geometric trees wavered momentarily. Dizzily, through the wheeling triple suns, the Sun-child showed, stabbed through with

puzzled, angry scarlet.

The landscape steadied again. And the ground began to move. It crawled in small hungry wavelets about Falken's feet. The musky, rotten smell was heavy as oil. Sheila and Hilton seemed distant and unreal, their faces hidden in the helmets.

Falken gripped them together and drove his brain to its task. He knew what this was. The reproduction of another world, remembered from the Sun-child's youth. If they could only stand still, and not think about it.... He felt the earth lurch upward, and guessed that the Sun-child had raised its creation off the floor of the cavern.

The earth began to coil away from under his feet.

* * *

For a giddy instant Falken saw the true world far below, and the Sun-child floating in rainbow light.

It was angry. He could tell that from its color. Then suddenly the anger was drowned in a swirl of golden motes.

It was laughing. The Sun-child was laughing.

Falken fought down a sharp despair. A terrible fear of falling oppressed him. He heard Sheila scream. The world closed in again.

Sheila Moore looked at him from between two writhing trees. He hadn't let her go. But she was there. Hairy branches coiled around her, tore her vac-suit. She shrieked....

Falken cried out and went forward. Something held him. He fought it off, driven by the agony in Sheila's cry.

Something snapped thinly. There was a flaring shock inside his helmet. He fell, and staggered up and on, and the hungry branches whipped away from the girl.

She stood there, her thin white body showing through the torn vac-suit, and laughed at him.

He saw Miner Hilton crawling dazed on the living ground, toward the thing that looked like Sheila and laughed with mocking golden motes in its eyes. A vast darkness settled on Falken's soul. He turned. Sheila Moore crouched where he had thrown her from him, in his struggle to help the lying shell among the trees.

He went and picked her up. He said to Miner Hilton, "Can we fix these broken wires?"

Hilton shook his head. The shock of the breaking seemed to have steadied him a little. "No," he said. "Too much burned out."

"Then we're beaten." Falken turned a bitter, snarling face to the green sky, raised one futile fist and shook it. Then he was silent, looking at the others.

Sheila Moore said softly, "This is the end, isn't it?" Falken nodded. And Miner Hilton said, "I'm not afraid now." He looked at the trees that hung over them, waiting, and shook his head. "I don't understand. Now that I know I'm going to die, I'm not afraid." Sheila's green eyes were soft and misty. She kissed Hilton, slowly and tenderly, on the lips.

Falken turned his back and stared at the twisted ugly trees. He didn't see them. And he wasn't thinking of the Unregenerates and the world he'd won and then lost.

Sheila's hand touched him. She whispered, "Eric..." Her eyes were deep, glorious green. Her pale starved face had the brittle beauty of wind-carved snow. She held up her arms and smiled. Falken took her and buried his gypsy face in the raw gold of her hair.

"How did you know?" he whispered. "How did you know I loved you?"

"I just--knew."

"And Hilton?"

"He doesn't love me, Eric. He loves what I stand for. And anyway... I can say this now, because we're going to die. I've loved you since I first saw you. I love you more than Tom, and I'd have died for him." Hungry tree branches reached for them, barely too short. Buds were shooting up underfoot. But Falken forgot them, the alien life and the wheeling suns that were only a monstrous dream, and the Sun-child who dreamed them. For that single instant he was happy, as he had not been since Kitty was lost. Presently he turned and smiled at Hilton, and the wolf look was gone from his face. Hilton said quietly, "Maybe she's right, about me. I don't know. There's so much I don't know. I'm sorry I'm not going to live to find out."

"We're all sorry," said Falken, "about not living." A sudden sharp flare lighted his eyes. "Wait a minute!" he whispered. "There may be a chance...."

He was taut and quivering with terrible urgency, and the buds grew and yearned upward around their feet.

"You said we could only attack it through its mind. But there may be another way. Its memories, its pride...."

He raised his scarred gypsy face to the green sky and shouted, "You, Child of the Sun! Listen to me! You have beaten us. Go ahead and kill us. But remember this. You're a child of the Sun, and we're only puny humans, little ground-crawlers, shackled with weakness and fear.

"But we're greater than you! Always and forever, greater than you!" The writhing trees paused, the buds faltered in their hungry growth. Faintly, very faintly, the landscape flickered. Falken's voice rose to a ringing shout.

"You were a child of the Sun. You had the galaxy for a toy, all the vast depths of space to play in. And what did you do? You sealed yourself like a craven into a black tomb, and lost all your greatness in the whimsies of a wicked child.

"You were afraid of your destiny. You were too weak for your own strength. We fought you, we little humans, and our strength was so great that you had to beat us by a lying trick.

"You can read our minds, Sun-child. Read them. See whether we fear you. And see whether we respect you, you who boast of your parentage and dream dreams of lost glory, and hide in a dark hole like a frightened rat!"

* * *

For one terrible moment the alien world was suffused with a glare of scarlet--anger so great that it was almost tangible. Then it greyed and faded, and Falken could see Sheila's face, calm and smiling, and Hilton's fingers locked in hers.

The ground dropped suddenly. Blurred trees writhed against a fading sky, and the suns went out in ebon shadow. Falken felt clean earth

under him. The rotting stench was gone.

He looked up. The Sun-child floated overhead, under the rocky vault. They were back in the cavern world.

The Sun-child's voice spoke in his brain, and its fires were a smoldering, dusky crimson.

"What was that you said, human?"

"Look into my mind and read it. You've thrown away your greatness. We had little, compared to you, but we kept it. You've won, but your very winning is a shame to you, that a child of the Sun should stoop to fight with little men."

The smoldering crimson burned and grew, into glorious wicked fire that was sheer fury made visible. Falken felt death coiling to strike him out of that fire. But he faced it with bitter, mocking eyes, and he was surprised, even then, that he wasn't afraid.

And the raging crimson fire faded and greyed, was quenched to a trembling mist of sad, dim mauves.

"You are right," whispered the Sun-child. "And I am shamed." The ashes of burned-out flame stirred briefly. "I think I began to realize that when you fought me so well. You, Falken, who let your love betray you, and then shook your fist at me. I could kill you, but I couldn't break you. You made me remember..."

Deep in the core of the Sun-child there was a flash of the old proud scarlet.

"I am a child of the Sun, with the galaxy to play with. I have so nearly forgotten. I have tried to forget, because I knew that what I did was

weak and shameful and craven. But you haven't let me forget, Falken. You've forced me to see, and know.

"You have made me remember. Remember! I am very old. I shall die soon, in open space. But I wish to see the Sun unveiled, and play again among the stars. The hunger has torn me for eons, but I was afraid. Afraid of death!

"Take this world, in payment for the pain I caused you. My creature will return here in Falken's ship and vanish on the instant of landing. And now...."

The scarlet fire burned and writhed. Shafts of joyous gold pierced through it. The Sun-child trembled, and its little foaming flames were sheer glory, the hearts of Sun-born opals.

It rose in the rainbow air, higher and higher, rushing in a cloud of living light toward the black crystal of the vault.

Once more there was a blinding flash and a quick sharp rush of air. Faintly, in Falken's mind, a voice said, "Thank you, human! Thank you for waking me from a dying sleep!"

A last wild shout of color on the air. And then it was gone, into open space and the naked fire of the Sun, and the rocky roof was whole. Three silent people stood on the raw red earth of a new world.

Cube From Space

Chapter ONE

Coffin Ship

He'd been falling toward Jupiter for a long time. He knew that, because he could feel the thickness of his red beard against the curve of his helmet. It was hard to remember why, hard to think of anything except the sharp, exquisite agony of breathing.

He raised his head with a blind, instinctive defiance. The slight movement set him spinning slowly. He watched the moving stars with savage blue eyes, and cursed them.

He was an infinitely tiny thing against all that empty, star-shot vastness--a red-haired man, dying in a vac suit.

Almost as sheer reflex action, he opened the oxygen jet. There was no response. "Empty," he mumbled. "Empty." He cursed it. His head throbbed, and the throbbing went down and burned in his throat and lungs. He tried to remember why he was here, to take his mind off the strangling. Ships, spaceguard ships--very dimly that memory came back. The dirty sons had finally trapped him. He'd fought them, but there were too many, and he'd gone into the deadly Belt to lose them.

"Wouldn't follow," he whispered, and laughed. "No guts. Planet-bred, and soft. They couldn't follow Red!"

But it hadn't mattered. Ships weren't built to buck the Belt. His automatic deflectors burned out from the overload. He got lost. And then there was a crash.

He'd bailed out. There was no way of telling where he was until, miraculously, his hand rockets kicked him free of the asteroids. Then he saw Jupiter, and knew that he was in that vast gulf that no ship had yet penetrated. He knew then that he was finished. There would be no one to pick him up. He couldn't get back. He'd live just as long as his air held out. Now there was no more air.

Red hated dying. He hated meeting something he couldn't beat, either by cleverness or sheer strength. But he grinned, his strong teeth gleaming white in the tangle of his red beard.

"I lasted--" he whispered, "longer than any planet-bred man." He laughed out at space, the black fire-shot immensity of it. "You couldn't drive me crazy, anyway. Not me, Red!"

The stars were getting blurred. There were great drums beating in his head. His face was twisted; the cords of his throat were like bundled wires. He clenched his fists, gathering the last shreds of his strength. Death was going to have to fight for him.

It was then that the black cube drifted past, between him and the golden blaze of Jupiter.

Its gravitational field pulled him, broke his slow aimless arc toward Jupiter. The motion jarred his dull brain a little. It was hard to see, harder still to think. But the sharp perfection of that black mass spurred him. It was man-made. He could see the rivets on it, the studded outline of an airlock on the nearest face.

His lungs strained against the thick, foul air. Sweat ran from his hair roots, into his eyes and mouth. It was agony to move.

But he forced his hands to find the rocket lanyards at his belt, to fumble the little things to a grip and fire them.

There wasn't much charge left in them. He'd used it all getting away from the Belt. But there was enough--just enough.

He clawed for the outer handle of the lock door. He could hardly see it, and his hand didn't belong to him anymore. But the handle moved smoothly on its delicate balances.

He clawed his way inside, grinning with the exquisite torture of it. The door closed automatically behind him. A dull reddish light came on overhead. Dimly he heard the hiss of air.

He pawed the latch of his helmet open. Air rushed into his lungs. It had a queer taste to it, but it was air, and breathable.

Red lay there a long time. Part of it he was unconscious. But his lungs stopped hurting and the drums stopped battering his head. After a while he sat up, viciously thirsty, shaky, but alive.

It was then that the first chill of fear crawled over him.

* * *

He looked at the walls of rusty black metal, the way the rivet heads were cut, the mechanism of the lock door. It wasn't Martian work, nor Venusian, nor Terran.

Besides, all the Triangle ships were round or cigar-shaped, never cubed. And this was the Jovian Gulf, where no Triangle ship had ever come. He got up very quietly, and shucked the clumsy vac suit. He flexed his great thick-muscled body, testing it, and was fairly satisfied. There was a heavy blaster on the suit belt. He took it in a huge, scarred fist with hairs standing on it like red-gold wires against the burn of space. Very carefully he opened the inner door of the lock, his blue eyes narrowed and ugly under red brows.

A light came on, like the one in the lock, showing a narrow passage. Red padded down it on his soft Martian sandals. It was so still he could hear the rustle of his tunic, blue-green Venusian spider-silk, rumpled and open over his hairy chest.

The passage came to a square well, cross-braced with girders, with balconies of black metal above and below, connected by ladders. They were dark, but far down below there was light, a dim rusty-red glow.

There was a sound in the well too, a queer, soft, steady sound, almost like breathing, as a giant might breathe in his sleep.

Red started down. Suddenly, clear and sharp in his brain, a voice said,

"Stop!"

Telepathy was nothing new to Red. He'd worked with Martian Low-Canalers in the glory holes. He sprang away from the ladder head and got his back against the wall, looking around, his blaster up.

There was light in his eyes then, a stabbing blue-white dagger of it. He made a sharp animal cry of pain and covered his eyes with his free hand. But the light speared through the flesh, and his optic nerves contracted in agony. He snarled and fired blindly out into the well. He heard, with his ears, a hard little laugh. The light burned into his closed eyes, stabbed his brain with searing blades.

He fired again, uselessly. The pain got him in the stomach. He was already weak from what he'd been through. He tried to hold his ground, but his head turned, and then his shoulders and his whole body, trying to escape the light. It followed, ruthlessly. He retched, and

his knees gave. His blaster made a distant ringing clang on the balcony floor.

The voice said, "Drop the weapon over the edge." Red gripped it, stubbornly, and the light was intensified. Nothing shut it out. His whole brain was seared with it.

"In one more minute," said the voice, "you will be blind." Red pushed the blaster over the edge. It struck a girder, and then, distantly, something that rang. A great bellowing roar echoed up the well, a sound that made Red's heart skip a beat.

The light was gone then. He crouched, trembling, breathing hard, with the sweat salty in his mouth, letting the blessed darkness flow through him. There was no sound. The cords of Red's jaw knotted in anger, but he was afraid. He was no fool. And he knew he couldn't fight that light. When he could begin to see again he squinted out into the dim well. Something moved between the rusty girders, and the voice said in his mind,

"Here, in front of you."

* * *

At first Red saw only a faint, fuzzy glow. It focused slowly into a small metal disc, perhaps three feet across, hovering in the well. Above it, apparently growing out of its center, was the upper body of a man. It was not really a man--manlike, but not human. Red felt that in the nerves of his skin, the prickling of his hair roots. He stared with hard, wary blue eyes. There were shoulders, narrow but powerful, and long wiry arms ending in strong, slender hands with seven fingers. There was a head, magnificently domed, and a face that was rather too small, though the features were beautiful and cut with uncompromising strength.

Crowning that splendid skull was a crest of something soft and feathery that shimmered iridescently. The whole creature glowed with a faint, pulsing phosphorescence.

The eyes that watched Red were long and opalescent, slightly tilted. They burned with little flickering points of fire. Red shivered suddenly. There was an eagerness about those eyes, a hunger and a towering, driving hope, almost as though Red were a symbol.

He said sullenly, "What are you?"

The creature laughed. Its teeth were pointed like a cat's and its tongue was blue.

"So there is life in this solar system--human life!" The feathery crest rose and began to pulse with rippling light, as though the hairs were hollow and filled with fire.

There was a stirring down below. Red looked down. Little shining discs began to pour up through the well, rushing with a strange, excited eagerness between the girders.

There were ten of them presently, hovering in front of the red-haired man. Some were older than the first; one was younger. But all had the same opalescent eyes and the same terrible, fierce hope.

Red caught the thought of one. "Is it possible, after all this time... Korah! Is it possible?"

The first one smiled. "We'll make it possible. You, human! There's no life in this gulf. How did you get into our airlock?"

Red told him, briefly. His body was strung tight and his nerves ached. He was in a trap, and he couldn't see a way out.

Korah's opal eyes narrowed. "The lawmen of your people chased you, eh? That means you're an outcast. What's your name?"

"Red. I never had another."

"We have just entered your solar system. Tell me about the inner planets." Scowling, Red told him. Then he demanded, "What are you? Where did you come from? What are you doing here?"

Korah's face was a hard white mask. "We were a great people once. We came from the world of another star. For more time than your little brain could conceive we have drifted across interstellar space, fighting, in this iron coffin, to keep alive."

His sinewy hands gripped the rim of his floating disc and there was a look in his eyes that made Red's heart jerk.

"All this time," whispered Korah. "All this darkness and loneliness and suffering, these maimed bodies, because of a man. A human, Red, a human like you."

He caught something swiftly and raised it, a queer thick tube aimed at Red. "I ought to blind you," he said softly. "I ought to burn the brain in your stupid skull!"

One of the older creatures caught his arm. "Wait. This man was sent to us. Let's try to use him."

He floated closer. His fine-cut face had deep, grim lines in it, and his eyes were infinitely tired--but not soft.

He said, "Red, is there any place on these three worlds you speak of where we could land, colonize, and live unnoticed until--until we have regained our strength?"

"No. You'd be spotted the moment you got into the space lanes beyond the Belt. They'd either take you in or blow you apart. Besides, all the usable land is already being used."

"And there's no other place?"

"Listen," said Red. "What is all this? And what is in it for me?"

"Your life," said Korah evenly. "If you're of no use to us, we'll use you as a slave--as long as you last."

Red's dark, scarred face was ugly. "I don't make a good slave."

"That depends on the master," said Korah gently. "Well?"

"How can I tell you where to go?" Red's body was clammy with sweat, prickling with the cold, dry hate he felt in them.

The old one said slowly, "Perhaps you don't understand. I'm Saran. My body is older than Korah's, less impetuous. I'll try to explain.

"We are near death. If we don't find a suitable place very soon, our race will become extinct. If you can help us to such a place, you will be rewarded. If not..."

He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "We have no reason to love your breed." Red looked at the rust on the walls, the dim light, listened to the whispering silence of the great empty cube. He saw Korah's eyes, burning with deep, terrible fires, and the others with their beautiful crested heads straining forward.

He shivered. The white scar stood livid against the burn of his face, where old Wick had broken his nose with a spanner. Earth, Venus, Mars; swamp and desert and teeming cities; spaceguard ships--

where could he tell them to go?

"If I do tell you," he said, "how do I know you won't welsh?"

"We keep our word," whispered Saran, "even to humans." Somehow Red believed him. But the younger ones, Korah--He licked dry lips and tried to think. They waited, pale and glowing in the dim well, hardly breathing.

And suddenly, in the tight silence, there was a voice, a man's voice, faint and distant, down below in the rusty dimness, cursing. Cursing with such a low, blistering intensity that the whisper of it carried like a spear. Red's muscles tightened. "What's that? Some other fool who did you a favor?" Korah laughed very softly, the point of his blue tongue flicking across his pointed teeth.

"Yes, Red, a very great favor. But that doesn't concern you now. Three planets beyond the Belt. Our instruments showed us four."

"Mercury!" cried Red. He'd forgotten it. Nobody thought about little fireball much. Then he shut his jaw and his mind tight.

Saran said wearily, "Don't bother, Red. We can drug you and pick your mind at leisure. You'll have to trust us."

Korah's thought smashed across the older man's. "Then there is a place!"

"I don't know," said Red slowly. "Maybe." Their glowing shapes blurred. He took hold of the balcony rail and closed his eyes. Quite suddenly the last of his tough strength was used up.

The last thing he heard was the man's voice, cursing down in the rusty well.

Red realized two things when he came to. The first was that the ship was moving. He was as sensitive to every quiver of a spaceship as a good rider is to his mount. He knew that the great cube was limping slowly along a definite course.

The second thing was that he'd been out a long time. He was completely rested. He was neither thirsty nor hungry. And there was the mark of a hypodermic needle on his wrist.

He scowled at it, remembering Saran's words. They'd moved him off the balcony. He lay on a mattress of some spongy stuff in a little iron cubicle. He got up and tried the door. It opened. A little surprised, he went out onto a balcony, like the first one but much lower down.

And suddenly a mind invaded his, gripped it, shook it, tramped about in it like a black wind.

Red started instinctively to fight it off, but it cried, "You, human! Come down! Come down!"

Red looked over the rail. There was no sign of the shining creatures. The floor of the well was just below him, partly obscured by the pattern of the girders, murky in the dim light.

He went down, slowly, the mind force pulling at him with terrible intensity. It wasn't a mind like Korah's. It was wild and savage and powerful, but it was human.

His sandaled foot touched bottom. He turned. Heavy riveted doors pricked the black walls on four sides. In the center of the space were three great blocks of iron, kept free of rust.

The two outer blocks bore clustered vats and coils and apparatus in glassite cases. The rhythmic breathing sound which Red had heard before came from them. The middle block was higher and larger. There was something on it, connected by transparent tubes to the others, so that the whole thing formed a cross. The red light was dim. He padded forward. Then he stopped, the pulses hammering in his throat and wrists.

Spreadeagled on the center block was a man in armor. He must have measured nearly seven feet. His black armor was dulled and crusted with age, dented with the marks of great blows. His mailed feet were shackled to the block with iron bands. The wristlets had been stripped from his wide-spread arms and there too were shackles, grown deep into the flesh. Below them the transparent tubes ran into the veins, pumping a fluid that glinted darkly in the dull light. Black hair grew from the man's head, flowed down the block and out over the metal floor in a pool of shadow. His black beard spread out over his battered breastplate, falling down to mingle with the darkness of his hair. Something dangled from the girders overhead. It was a chain, and a sword hung from the end of it by its grip. A great two-handed sword, its queer blunt point just above the face of the giant.

Red stopped. The pit of his belly was cold. The man's head turned suddenly, so that his hair made a dark, whispering sound on the rusty plates, and eyes were watching him from under shaggy black brow--eyes half mad, but human. The mind-voice said to Red, "You've given them refuge. You've given them life. You've betrayed your kind!"

* * *

Red looked at the mark on his wrist and smiled without mirth. "The dirty sons!

So we're headed for Mercury."

"They got everything--orbits, spaceguard patrol boundaries, everything you know about the planet. Korah told me. He was pleased to tell me." The black eyes went to the sword overhead, swinging slowly in a vagrant current of air. They followed the motion in a way that made Red shiver. Suddenly the prisoned body moved convulsively, fighting the shackles, and the rusty armor groaned and rang.

"The devils! They've won out after all. All this--the darkness, the suffering, the time--for nothing!"

His gaze swung back to Red, only half seeing him. "I drove them out of one solar system. I sacrificed myself to do it. And I've stood the punishment, the drifting and the time because I thought they'd never find a home again. And now you--little red man that I could break in my two hands--you make it all for nothing!"

Remembering Korah's opal eyes, Red wondered if it was all for nothing for him too. His hand strayed uneasily to where his blaster should have been, and his narrow blue eyes searched the darkness.

He said, "I don't get this. Who are you? What are they? Where did you come from, and why? And--how long ago?"

He looked at the dull, rusted armor and the shackles grown into the flesh of the man's wrists, and the black hair heavy on the deck.

"How long, little man? How long is eternity?" Those suffering, elemental eyes went again to the swinging sword. "I am Crom. I was king once, in a land called Yf. And they are the Rakshi. The time came when we had to fight them, we humans, because we couldn't take any more.

"They were different then. They were beautiful and numerous and very strong. They knew a lot we didn't know, the shining devils! But they didn't know us--not the heart, the guts of us."

Crom's hands clenched into great scarred fists and the glass tubes swayed into his wrists. He smiled, his teeth white in the black tangle of his great beard.

"That was a fight," he whispered. "They almost beat us. But they were fighting from this ship, all the best brains of them, and I thought of something. I got in through a space-vent while they were busy deciding how to finish us off in a hurry, too busy to hear my mind. I killed two of them in the engine room, and poured every last ounce of power they had into their drive.

"The terrific acceleration tore us clean away from our solar system, as I hoped it would. It also burned out the motors. Even if they could have fixed the motors they couldn't have got the ship back because they use sun-power and there wasn't any sun."

Crom laughed, the harsh roar of it echoing in the rusty balconies. "Can you conceive how they felt? They had me, but that was all. Me, and interstellar space! Haie! That memory is almost compensation for the rest. All this load of mighty brains, rushing at constant speed through nothing to nowhere, and helpless, because of me!

"I thought they'd kill me, but they had better ideas. Trust them! They kept me alive--alive to meditate on my sins, with my sword mocking me overhead. But I could mock them too. I could say, 'My people are safe from you,' and laugh at them, all through those black empty ages of drifting.

"But now we've been drawn into the field of another sun. And you... "

His head turned, and the voice of his mind shuddered like distant thunder in Red's brain. "And you have let them win."

* * *

It took all Red had to meet Crom's eyes. He said, half angrily, "That's too bad. But how could I help it?"

Crom whispered, "You could have thrown yourself from the balcony." Red stared at him, and then laughed. "Hey, wait a minute! This isn't my fight. All I want is my neck safe and a getaway."

"Not your fight!" said Crom. "The gods blast you! There's a colony on Mercury, isn't there?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Korah told me. He took particular pleasure in telling me. They picked your brain clean, Red, and it gave them ideas. You know why you're here talking to me, don't you?"

"No." He was liking things less by the minute.

"You're here to make me squirm," said Crom with savage quiet. "They're throwing my laughter back in my teeth, through you. Do you know what they'll do to that colony on Mercury?"

"No." The red shadows were still empty. Red's hide prickled uneasily. He knew he was being watched, and he didn't like it.

"They'll take them for slaves, Red, use them like beasts, for work they won't do and for experiments. You don't know the Rakshi, how they live on and on in different bodies. You don't know the agony they can cause. They worship power, Red, as men worship their gods--power, pure and naked, for its own sake. They don't want world conquest or

domination by force, nothing as stupid and mentally unimaginative as that.

"They like to sit in their beautiful fortress and play with men like pieces on a chess board, for the sheer mental pleasure of the game. They get power in many ways--giving scientific secrets to unscrupulous men, powerful new weapons to lawbreakers, the gift of prolonged life to men whose minds they test and approve. Minds," he added softly, "like yours, Red." Red's blue eyes were suddenly hot and bright. "What are you getting at?"

"I mean they can use you. They'll give you power under them, the status of--well, ambassador to the human forces they wish to contact. Power, Red, and virtual immortality."

A thick, hot pulse began to beat in Red's temples. His lips were dry. He licked them, and whispered, "Yeah?"

There were thoughts tramping around in his head--huge, thundering dreams. Circe, the Pleasure World, with the wealth of three planets there for the plundering. The Treasure City of Mars and the lost, water-buried secrets of Venus.

He spread out his big, scarred hands and looked at them. Age was like death to him, a sneaking thief to steal his strength and his cunning. To defeat age, to jeer at death....

It was while he was off guard, thinking these things, that Crom attacked him. The shackled Titan looked up at the swinging sword with eyes as deep and elemental as primal space. And the strength of his brain shocked against Red's, huge and savage and terrible.

"Free me!" roared the voice of his mind. "Give me my sword. Free me! Free me!" It was very still in the dark well. Red's eyes closed. His

body stiffened, bent like a straining bow. Sweat needled his face, oiled the red-gold hair of his chest.

It was agony, the beating of that mind against his, greater than the blow of Wick's spanner across his face, a great thundering pain, the pain of iron under the hammer. He snarled, and the veins of his brow and throat stood out like knotted cords.

And suddenly it was gone. Crom lay limp on the block, his teeth white in the black tangle of his beard and the breath harsh between them.

"They were right," he whispered. "The gods curse you, Red. The gods blast you to hell!"

A cold, black fury swept across Red's heart. "What do you want me to do?"

"Look at that door. That's the Temple. The Temple of the Flame, the light that makes them shine the way they do, and stimulates their tissues so that they live on and on. Do you know how many there are sealed up in there, waiting for bodies? Three hundred of them, the best brains of their stinking race!

"My sword was forged in Yf. It has a power beyond steel, a flame of its own that will destroy their Flame. Give me my sword. Free me, let me blast the Flame. You're human, Red. Remember your duty!"

Red laughed, a harsh, ugly bark. He stripped off the rumpled silken tunic and stood with the red light spilling over his bull neck and great thick-muscled body.

"Look," he said.

Crom's black eyes went from the white scar of the spanner across

Red's broken nose, down the tangled pattern of old weals across his back and breast, to the puckered gashes of a spiked Martian knuckle-duster across his flat belly.

"Most of that," Red said dispassionately, "I got before I was fifteen. I was born on a tramp freighter. I never knew who my parents were or never cared much. Had all I could worry about just staying alive.

"They sold me from one tramp to another, to sweat in the galleys and the glory holes. I never set foot on any ground until I was sixteen. Then I ran away from the ship I was in. It was a dirty little tramp port. I got shanghaied aboard Wick's rotten hulk. I stood him for two voyages, and then he hit me once too often. I woke up. I took the spanner away from him, and I never heard whether he died or not. I got away in a life-skiff. Nobody touched me. They knew I wasn't a kid any more, and they were scared.

"Since then I've made my way alone, getting what I could and not doing badly. Black Cargo running, hijacking, straight piracy." He pulled the tunic on again, running his palm over the soft, rich silk.

"I haven't said I'd take their offer, if they make it. I don't like taking orders. But if I do decide to..."

He shrugged and gave a slow, hard grin. "I have no world," he said softly,

"and I never met a man I didn't hate."

Crom looked at him. He didn't speak nor move, but a cold, iron something slid through Red and held him.

He snarled and jerked his head away, and saw Korah coming toward him, a swift silver gleam in the red dusk.

The Rakshi's tilted eyes burned like living opals, a shifting fire that warmed his beautiful white face. He set the great sword swinging over Crom's head and laughed silently, the points of his teeth like ivory needles.

"Come into the control room, Red," he said. "We're landing on Mercury."

Chapter Two

Port of Death

Red stood in the control room, looking into a visilens of unfamiliar shape. The bitter blaze of Mercury stabbed in at him. The Rakshi had made a long curve in their ship, clear outside the orbital range of planets or spaceguard patrols.

They were coming in now toward the Sunside. As they drew nearer, Red could see the black line of the Darkside slicing thin across the farther hemisphere, and the naked mountains of the Twilight Belt raking at the sky like Titan spear-points.

He was used to the sleek fast ships of the System, and the great cube seemed clumsy and unmaneuverable.

He said uneasily, "Do you think she'll do it?" Korah hovered beside him. He answered in Red's own mongrel tongue, learned from his drugged brain along with the information on himself and Mercury.

"If we had full power, there'd be no doubt. But we had only proper metal enough to repair one motor. And since we had none of these problems in our own sphere of activity, we're not prepared for them." He looked at the visilens. The opalescent fire of his eyes was suddenly misted.

"No more darkness," he whispered. "No more hunger. No more ages of little death in the Temple. We can have bodies again, strong fine bodies, and breathe clean air and feel sunlight."

The muscles stood out on his pale, shining jaw. "We've got to make it." Saran spoke from a complicated panel of indicators and delicate reaction gauges.

"There's unlimited power from the Sunside, and raw materials of every kind in the rock and soil. Notice the topography, Korah--a jumble of tremendous peaks with deep valleys isolated between them. A fortress cut in any one of those peaks would be completely hidden and impregnable." The youngest one of the ten Rakshi grunted. He was watching still another set of instruments.

"The human is right, though, Mercury is highly metallic. It cuts the sun's magnetic field in an eccentric orbit, and dangerously close to the source. With full power in all our anti-gravity plates--which we haven't--it would still be hard to land."

Korah said grimly, "The ship is strong. The Temple is doubly protected. Even if we crash, some of us will live."

Red looked at him admiringly. Human or not, these Rakshi had the tough kind of insides he liked.

Korah must have caught his thought. He turned suddenly on the man, his tilted eyes and feathery crest alive with savage fire.

"Guts!" he said. "You don't know. Your brain couldn't conceive. Over three hundred of us trapped in this iron coffin, without adequate supplies of any kind, and a hundred human slaves. We had to learn, human--learn how to handle brains as separate entities, keeping

them alive and safe after the body was worn out. Learn how to create new bodies from the living tissue of the slaves, grown and kept in a plasma culture.

"We are a long-lived race. But the time we've drifted, the bitter, empty time!

There were not bodies enough, even for the few permitted them. We had to design these hideous legless things and these magnetic cars, so that we could save flesh and energy. We worked a miracle. We stripped the inside of the cube of metal to keep our air pumps and heating units going. We designed bodies that needed almost no food. We lived, in spite of Crom, in spite of humanity.

"Now there is no more flesh for new bodies. We'll get it down there. We're not going to be beaten now, even if the ship is smashed to bits!"

* * *

Red scratched his bearded jaw. The idea of growing bodies from living tissue was unpleasant to him. But so were pain and hunger and hate, and he'd lived with those all his life. He said, "That offer Crom told me about--is that on the level?"

Saran looked up from his dials. "Yes. Do you accept?" Red shrugged. "I don't know yet."

Korah's pointed teeth flashed. "There's no hurry, Red." For some subtle reason Red disliked the way he said it. "Now, what's this Temple, and the Flame? Crom said--"

"Red." Korah's silky voice slid across his like cold steel. "Those are questions not to be asked. Remember that."

Red's mouth set. And then the young Rakshi cried out, "Look! In the visilens. Isn't that the Earthman's beacon?"

Red looked into the screen. The night shadow was cutting in across the peaks of the Twilight Belt, drawn by the rocking of the planet on its axis. On one gigantic, airless pinnacle was a shaft of metal topped by a glowing ball--a perpetual beacon powered by Mercury's own electric potential--set there to guide the infrequent ships that dared the planet to bring supplies and fresh colonists. Without it there was no way of identifying the colonist's valley. No compass or radio of any kind could work near little fireball. Korah touched a stud on a bank beside him. A single beam of light licked out and touched the beacon. It flared once, then there was only a molten puddle on the rock.

"An enlarged version of the weapon you experienced, Red. Using sun-power, it can reproduce light of any frequency and any concentration. By modulation, we can induce burning, blindness, or spontaneous combustion. Simple, and very effective."

"Very," said Red grimly. They dropped lower over the valley. It was dark now, and there was a storm raging down in the atmosphere. He could see the lightning flashes.

This was Markham Chandler's haven for waifs and strays--one little man tackling a job too tough even for the mining companies. The last man Red had talked to, in a crimp port while fueling, had said there were about eight hundred dopes sweating their hearts out in the valley.

The naked peaks came closer. The cube lurched with sharp suddenness. Seven-fingered hands began to fly over key-banks. There was dead silence in the control room, except for the spitting

hum of power. Red got hold of a stanchion and braced his feet. He disliked the feeling of helplessness. But the controls of the cube were a mystery to him. Besides, they had forgotten his existence.

Pale, glowing faces bent over instruments. The young Rakshi had the tip of his blue tongue hard between his teeth, thin strong fingers racing. There was a singing tension in the air.

The cube lurched again, heavily. Now that they were close, Saran had slid the metal shutters from the huge square ports. Walls of naked rock reared up beyond them.

Red wasn't quite clear about what happened next. The magnetic pull of the cliffs made the cube rattle like a die in a box. The snarl of overloaded transformer banks rose, stuttered, and choked out.

Somebody yelled, sharp and high. There was a shattering, grating crash of metal on stone. The cube tilted over and began to drop. Red hung fiercely to his stanchion, his legs dangling. The glowing shapes of the Rakshi moved erratically in the dull red light. He heard Crom laughing far down the well, a great taunting roar. The cube dropped with a scream of tortured metal.

There was an impact. Red got only a confused chaos of sound. He lost his grip and fell a long way through grinding, wrenching darkness. Hot, wet air struck him, and lashing rain. The noise of crashing metal blended into the stunning roar of thunder. There was earth under him, soft and wet and warm.

He got blindly to his knees, gasping. Blood was running into his mouth and eyes with the savage rain.

And suddenly there were hard human hands on his body, and a hard human voice yelling in his ear, "Get up! For God's sake, hurry! Back

into the caves!"

* * *

He ran, but without sight or knowledge. There were flashes of fierce light, and then another light that was fiercer and didn't go away. The man with him cursed in a sobbing voice.

There were feet trampling the wet ground, a lot of them. Voices crying out. Red tried to break free from the hands that held him, but there were more of them, helping, urging. His head spun and sang.

His eyes began to hurt--the familiar, blinding pain of Korah's tube. The running feet began to falter. A man's voice cried out, wild and strong and, even in that dazed moment, infinitely thrilling.

"The caves! Run, all of you! Never mind the pain. Come on!" Up a steep, rocky slope, Red stumbled, drenched, his head a burning agony. The man had stopped cursing. And then darkness came sudden and sharp, like a blow. The rain was gone; the thunder muted. Voices, footsteps ran back queerly. The vibrant voice said, "Back to the third chamber--quickly." They stumbled on in utter dark, in uneasy silence. A child was whimpering and someone moaned softly, but that was all. Then the sounds of their going flicked away, as though the walls and roof had opened out. It did that twice more, and by that time Red was getting his grip back. In the third cavern they all stopped. Someone lighted torches. Red blinked and shook himself away.

The man who had picked him up started to speak, stared, and then yelled, "Hey!

All of you! This man--"

The babble that had started hushed abruptly. In the utter silence, every wet, stricken face turned to Red, standing huge in the torchlight, blood and water dripping from his beard, his blue-green tunic molded tight across his bunched, taut muscles.

The man said with grim quiet, "I picked him up in Tenney's field, right under the thing. He must have come from it."

In the silence Red could hear the beat and rush of his own blood. The air was furnace-hot, but his skin was cold. They were a hardy lot of people, big and tough and work-hardened. Just now they were furious in a grim, dangerous way. He said, "I did. Got thrown free when the ship crashed." His voice was steady

"They had me prisoner in her."

A man pushed forward. He was little, broad and thick and ugly. Thinning gray-brown hair was plastered wetly to a clumsy skull, and his face was almost funny, even now. But his brown eyes had something in them that made Red's heart jump a little, just as Crom's voice had.

The little man said, "I'm Markham Chandler. What are the creatures in that--ship, you said? We couldn't see it clearly." There was no point in lying. Red told them as well as he could. The man who had helped him watched him with hard green eyes. He was a Martian with Drylander blood in him, as big as Red, with a stern, dark face and thick, dark hair.

"Drifted in from outer space, eh?" he said. "How'd they get you then?"

"Suspicious, aren't you?" growled Red, and explained, including the spaceguard, because there was no other credible reason for his

being beyond the Belt.

"Spaceguard, eh?" said Chandler. "Well, we hold nothing against you for that. Many of us have been in trouble at one time or another." That sounded strange to Red. But Chandler's eyes were neither soft nor foolish.

The Earthman went on: "What do they--the Rakshi--want of us?" Red told them that too. He watched faces go whiter and harder, eyes widen in stunned disbelief. Suddenly the big Martian caught Red's tunic at the throat.

"You're lying," he said, his green eyes ugly "You're either pirates or slavers."

Red's hand went up toward the Martian's face, and was caught suddenly by another--a cool, strong, brown hand, a woman's hand.

"Let him alone, Jat. He's hurt--and he's not lying. I saw the thing crash and something shiny was thrown out of a broken port. It wasn't human, and the ship isn't a Triangle ship."

Red looked into a woman's face, not far below his own. Tangled, curling hair the color of wheat-straw framed its brownness, softened the clear sharp lines of brow and jaw.

She smiled at him. Her hazel eyes were hard and grim, but not afraid. She said, "Come over here and I'll fix your head." Chandler nodded. He looked very tired. "Yes. I'll count noses, and then we'll see what to do next. Jat, you get some of the men and guard the passage. We may be attacked at any time."

* * *

Jat went away reluctantly. Markham turned back into the crowd, and there began to be a stir of voices and purposeful movement. Red studied the girl with flat, hard eyes.

"What's the game, sister?"

She stared at him. "Game? I just want to patch up that cut. Remembering the women in the crimp ports, Red put his eyebrows up. Then he shrugged and fell in beside her. She moved easily, with a springy litheness. Her body, in a plain short tunic of rough homespun, was built of long, clean curves.

It came to Red that she was something he'd never seen before. He scowled uncertainly and asked, "What's your name?" She laughed. "Hildegarde Smith. They call me Hildy. What's yours?"

"Red. What do you do here?"

"Work on my father's farm." Her face sharpened as though with a sudden pain, and she glanced at the cave entrance and away again.

"He didn't make it," said Red.

She nodded. "It all happened so suddenly. I was visiting in the upper part of the settlement. We all made for the caves when we heard the crashing--sometimes the cliffs crack and there are slides during a heavy storm. Our place is farther down the valley. I started back, but I knew it was no use. I--" She broke off and bent over a chest marked First Aid.

Red scratched his matted beard. The girl had sand. He wanted suddenly to get away, back to the Rakshi. But there was no way without tipping his hand, and that meant death.

"Sit down," she said. Red obeyed reluctantly. If the girl had been one of the kind he understood, it wouldn't have mattered. But she wasn't. He had no precedent, nothing to judge her by. It made him uneasy. Looking out over the cave, he realized with a sharp, cold shock that he had no precedent for any of those people. They were as alien to him as the Rakshi. And he was trapped with them.

Hildy's fingers were cool and deft on his skin. They made him feel strange, uneasy. He watched her tensely while she bandaged the cut, sponged his face and beard clean.

She gave him water, caught the look and smiled. "What's the matter? Did I hurt you?"

"No. Only nobody ever did that for me before." She looked at the scar of Wick's spanner across his face, her eyes both angry and compassionate.

She said quietly, "You've suffered, haven't you?" He shrugged and took his eyes away. "I guess so."

"Then you can understand." The people in the cave were breaking up into orderly groups, supplying themselves with food, water, and blankets from big chests. Hildy watched them, the torchlight making deep, harsh shadows on her face.

"We've worked so hard, Red. God knows what we'd have done without this place, and Markham Chandler. And now, to have it stolen from us, to be threatened and tortured...."

She moved her clenched hands savagely. Chandler came up, rolling heavily on his short legs.

"Four hundred and twenty-seven," he said, and put his hands wearily

over his face. "The cube crashed almost in the center of the valley. The others were cut off, or caught by the light."

Red had a mental picture of how the Rakshi were doing it. The high-power light mechanism would make the people blind and helpless long enough to be disarmed and divided up, herded into the few remaining rooms of the ship that still had doors.

Chandler went on, "I'm sending the women and children back into the caves in small scattered groups, with a few men. The rest of the men will go up into the galleries to try and get a line on how to fight these devils." His brown eyes met Red's blue ones suddenly, very clear and direct. "Red, you know about these Rakshi. You'll help us."

Hildy took his hand. "Of course he will." She smiled at him, her hazel eyes warm and deep with friendliness.

All the meaning, the implication of trust and comradeship and understanding behind Hildy's eyes took Red with a sudden violence. He took his hand away roughly and opened his mouth, but no words came.

He saw Hildy's eyes go cold and bright as spear points, saw the furrows deepen and tighten in Chandler's ugly, tired face. Then, through the bitter silence, there came the roar of blasters out in the passage.

They broke off raggedly. There was a noise of running feet. Jat stumbled into the cavern, his hands over his eyes, followed by the men who had gone with him.

A voice spoke out in Red's brain. He knew the others heard it too from the way they stiffened and gasped.

It said, "Submit and you will not be harmed. Resistance will only mean pain."

* * *

Korah came floating through the entrance, a shining blur against the dark of the passage, four other Rakshi behind him. His crest was erect, a living, pulsing flame, and his eyes were godlike.

Hildy's face was a mask cut from gray bone. Only the eyes were alive in it, alive and hating. In a single blurred motion she caught up a heavy tin box from the first aid chest and threw it straight at Korah's head. The Rakshi jerked aside in his floating car. The box went past him, crashing harmlessly into the rock wall. He showed his sharp teeth and the tip of his blue tongue in a smile, and raised his light tube.

Hildy cried out and turned away, shielding her eyes. Jat couldn't see her, but he knew her voice. He raised his blaster blindly. Korah's tube flicked a beam across his hand. He screamed and dropped the blaster. Red saw the smoke from the burn.

There was chaos after that for a brief time. They fought with everything they had, tools, weapons, fragments of rock. And the five Rakshi flitted batlike through the smoky torchlight, burning, blinding, laughing with their blue tongues and pointed teeth.

Red stayed out of it, against the wall. He dragged Hildy back of the chest and growled, "You'll be able to see again soon." She didn't answer. He stood watching the fight. The Rakshi were mere pallid blurs, moving too fast for the eye to see. Their reactions were much quicker than the humans', because they didn't miss a shot.

They weren't out to kill. Men and women, blinded by the light,

blundered into each other, so that those who could still see had to stop fighting lest they kill their own people.

Markham Chandler's ringing voice made itself heard finally, over the din, telling them to stop. They did, reluctantly. Hildy got up without looking at Red and went uncertainly toward Jat, crouched and snarling over his seared hand.

Korah said aloud, silkily, "That's better. You'll learn to obey. Form ranks, please. We're going back to the ship."

Chandler came forward. His brown eyes were bloodshot, tortured slits, but his voice was clear and steady.

"What right have you to do this?"

Korah's eyes burned on him. "The right of survival."

"We haven't harmed you. This is ours. Our lives aren't yours to take or control. You can't do this!"

Korah's soft voice carried across the whole cavern, and it made Red shiver.

"We can do it because we must, or perish. Your race is not at stake. You're only a handful, a pinch of dust. But we are all. Do you say, when you kill a beast to feed your children, 'We have no right'?"

"A pinch of dust!" It was Hildy's voice, ringing out like the music of a steel blade.

She stood erect, with her hand on Jat's broad shoulder. Her face in the torchlight had the primal beauty of a tigress. Red licked dry lips, watching it. The palms of his hands were wet.

"Who are you to judge us as nothing? You, a monster from another world! What right have you here, stealing and maiming? This is not your earth, nor your air, nor your sun!"

Korah turned to her slowly. It was a long time before he spoke.

"No," he said very quietly "It's not our earth, nor air, nor sun. All those we had once, and a human stole them from us."

He moved his free hand down his body to the metal car. The muscles tightened in his glowing face, ridged and bitter.

He whispered, "Monster!" and raised his tube. He didn't go for her eyes this time. The hot beam flicked like a whiplash. She bared her teeth and her eyes closed, but she didn't move. Red saw the red weals of the burns come out across her face and throat. Jat roared and started to his feet, but Red was quicker. He took the stabbing beam on his own back and snarled, "Stop it, damn you!" Korah let the beam stay just long enough to set the silk of his tunic smoldering. Then he flicked it off and said, "Well, Red. We thought we'd lost you."

"The port split when we struck," said Red sullenly. "I fell through and got caught in the stampede." Hildy hadn't moved, but her fingers bit deep into the muscles of Jat's shoulder. The Martian's green eyes were the eyes of a tortured fiend.

Red said, "Did you have to do that?"

"Why?" Korah's eyes were mocking. "I thought you hated humans."

"She was kind to me," said Red sulkily. It sounded a weak, silly thing to say. His heart was pounding and the veins in his neck hurt. He was confused and viciously angry, and he didn't know why.

Red felt Korah's mind probing into his. He tried to shut his mind, but the anger and confusion slowed his reflexes. Korah's thought withdrew, and Korah's eyes danced with wicked fires.

"About that offer, Red. Will you take it?"

"I'll tell you later." He was safe enough, with five light tubes holding the colonists.

But the hate, the loathing in them prickled across his hide.

"Now, Red," said Korah softly.

Red felt Korah's thought, and knew it was now. He tried to think of Circe and the Martian Treasure City, and strength beyond the span of other men's strength.

But all he could think of was Hildy's gentle fingers on his head and the burns red and ugly across her face.

He looked at Korah, and there was a new, wary understanding in him.

"I won't bargain with you. Where's Saran?"

"Dead, in the crash. Don't you trust me?"

"No." He knew nothing of the process of longevity. Korah could play any sort of a trick on him at any time. And he didn't like reins on him. If he took orders from the Rakshi, he'd never be free.

Hildy's face, stony white and barred with livid burns; Jat, dark and tortured; Markham Chandler's ugly, gentle face with eyes that Red couldn't meet--all those people, alien, new, beyond his

understanding--and Hildy, saying, "You've suffered. You can understand."

"There must be a ship in the colony. Give me that and let me go." Korah laughed. His crest shimmered in the torchlight. "No." Fear began to tighten along Red's nerves. "You promised me life."

"Have I said you were not to live? Think of this, Red. If you go to the culture vats, you'll live a very long time indeed!" Red said very softly, "You dirty son!"

Korah laughed again. "Your crazy, inconsistent little minds! You humans run with every mood that blows across you. No matter how well I think I know a human brain, something latent may develop in a few short minutes and upset all my plans. I wouldn't have trusted you, Red, if you had accepted. You don't know it yourself yet, but you've changed. You're like Crom, too tough to be broken. You'd betray us before we were ready.

"I think, my friend, that the culture vats will be much the safest place for you, if--" he let his tilted eyes move across the tense white faces, waiting under the threat of the Rakshi beams--"you live to reach them." Red didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. He stood still while the Rakshi saw to the disarming of the crowd.

When it was done, Korah said, "We're short of food for the humans. Why the large stock here?"

Markham Chandler answered, in a voice utterly drained of emotion, "The storms at perihelion often drive us out of the valley." Korah nodded. "Fetch it along. You'll need it while we're classifying you." The youngest Rakshi had been preoccupied for some time, his crest glittering. Now he drifted close to Korah and spoke in his own tongue. Korah threw back his head in fierce exultation. His crest too rose and

pulsated, and the three others joined in.

Red knew that the Rakshi back in the ship were communicating. He'd picked up the rudiments of telepathy from the Martian stokers in the tramp ships. Now he tried to use them.

He wasn't good at it. All he could catch were vagrant thoughts concerning

"plasma shortage--hurry." But he could fill in. They were making plasma for the culture vats; they were short-handed, and they wanted help in a hurry. He wondered if the brains in the Temple were getting impatient for bodies. It was just by sheer chance that Red caught the brief flame of inspiration in Jat's green eyes. The Rakshi were too busy to catch the thought back of it. But Red watched the Martian go very obediently to the store chests against the wall and haul out a side of bacon.

Watching that, Red saw Markham Chandler's quick start, the urgent touch of his hand on Jat's shoulder, and the swift interchange of whispers between them. Chandler too got a side of bacon.

They came back together to Hildy, very patient and drooping. The ranks formed in sullen quiet and trailed out into the passage, with the Rakshi floating overhead, tubes raised and alert.

At low power the tubes lighted the way plainly. Red made his mind as nearly blank as possible and stayed close to Jat, Chandler, Hildy, and the fat sides of bacon.

They went through the second chamber, where the Rakshi's light was swallowed up in vaulting darkness, then back through the corridor beyond that, and into the first of the three caverns.

Again the light was swallowed up, the sound of their slow, sullen departure dispersed. And Red found out why Jat had insisted on bacon.

Chapter Three

Sword of Light

The cave roof was high and very black. Nothing happened for a minute or two, until the bacon was well out across the floor. Then Red heard them, cutting swift and shrill across the hot, still air--wings, huge, wide wings arrowing down.

Somebody yelled, and a woman screamed. The ranks fell apart. Red saw Korah's opal eyes dart upward, and his light tube brightened. There were gleams up there in the dark, metallic purple and green, hard and bright. Red saw wings with small light bodies between them and little fanged heads, rushing down toward them.

They were going so fast that the light didn't stop them. Jat threw his bacon high up beside Korah. A cloud of the shiny things swooped at it like gulls. Red saw that their thin wings were scaled.

The Rakshi turned up their power. Even at burning concentration the bat creatures didn't pay much attention. Chandler threw his load at the nearest Rakshi. Then he turned and ran, his arm around Hildy. Red followed them. The Rakshi were recovering from their surprise now. Winged bodies were beginning to clatter down. One of the yarns he'd heard in a fueling port came back to Red: The Mercurian hunting bats, sheathed in glass-like, silicate scales to defy the lightning.

It was probably the salt they were after in the bacon. There wasn't much of it on Mercury.

Jat was leading the way toward a small side passage. There was no time to collect others from the confused mob. They could only run, hoping that the brief margin of time would be long enough.

The Rakshi, battling desperately against the hard-sheathed bats, didn't see them go. The little dark hole swallowed them up, Jat, Hildy, Chandler, and Red, following unnoticed.

They went a long way, quite slowly but as though Jat knew the way. The echoes didn't betray the extra pair of footsteps. They came out presently into a gallery that seemed to run just inside the cliff, because there was blinding daylight pouring in farther along it.

Red let the others get ahead of him. They stopped by the cleft in the rock. He caught Chandler's low hard voice: "Our valley. Our valley, damn them!" Jat said, "The ship's still there. If I only had bombs!"

"But we haven't," Hildy put her hands on their shoulders. "There must be some way! We can't lose it all now."

Jat said, very low, "That swine Red might know a way." His big body flexed.

"I'd like to tear it out of him!"

Chandler sighed. "Poor devil. He's caught in his own trap." Red, padding toward them on his soft sandals, stopped, scowling. Hildy shook her light curly hair away from her burned face.

"Red's not bad," she said. "He saved me, you know. He's suffered a lot, and he's bitter. I don't think he ever saw a decent human being before. He just doesn't understand."

Jat made a wordless snarling noise. Chandler looked at him with the

ghost of a smile on his tired face.

"You haven't forgotten, Jat, how you felt when you came out of the Jekkara quarries?"

The line of Jat's shoulders sagged. "All right. But that doesn't help us now. Look down there. They got rid of the bats. And there go the last of our people into their cursed ship."

Red ran his hand through his beard, and then up across the mark of Wick's spanner. His fingers touched the bandage on his forehead. He looked at Hildy's face, clear and strong in the sunlight.

He went forward then, and said, "Hildy."

* * *

They turned, the three of them, startled. Chandler put a hand on Jat's arm and said, "Wait."

Red said, "Hildy, I've got to ask you something. There's a ship down there. Are you three going to escape in it?"

She frowned. "I suppose Jat will try and get back to Venus for help. Why?"

"You're not going?"

"Not without my father."

"And you, Chandler?"

"Those people are my friends. There may be some way I can help. A lot of them will die before help can possibly get here."

Red measured Jat's strength. "I can take that ship from you." Hildy's face was suddenly brighter than the sunlight. She put her hands on his arms and smiled and said, "But you won't. You're beginning to see, Red, aren't you? You're realizing that the people you've known are only a small part of humanity. Haven't you ever felt lonely, Red? Out there in space, with no one to speak to, nothing to trust, nothing to work for?" He looked away from her, out to the insulated hangar that meant freedom, the old life. Her hands were warm and strong on him, and they never quivered.

"Lonely?" he whispered. "I never knew till now." He broke away sharply. "Jat, take that ship and clear out. Get help here as fast as you can. Chandler--"

Chandler said, "Hold on. There's Rakshi."

They looked out. Far below, a little floating dot pressed over the hangar dome, trailing a pencil of pale flame. Then it flashed away, back to the great black cube tilted drunkenly in the neat green fields, with one corner crumpled and the square ports split.

"Fused the hangar opening," said Jat bitterly. "So that's that." Chandler turned his brown eyes to Red. "Do you know of any way?"

"Perhaps." He was thinking of a man in black armor, and a vengeance that had waited too long. "Anyway, I'll try."

He sat down with them to wait until dark. And he laughed suddenly. "It doesn't make sense, any of it. You know that."

Markham Chandler smiled. "The best things," he said softly, "seldom do."

* * *

Plans were completed by dark. Red and the Martian went cautiously back to the caves for arms. There was no sign of a search.

"Too busy," growled Red. "That's what I'm gambling on. They're in a fever for new bodies, and there are only nine of 'em to work." Coming back, Red had an idea. He stripped the heavy glassy-scaled wings from several of the fallen bats. "Armor," he said briefly. When it was time, they went out into the stifling, moonless dark, going down the valley toward the broken cube. Steam from the hot springs choked them, and the rich earth was warm underfoot.

There was a Rakshi on guard. Red grinned. "All right," he whispered. "Cover me. And if I don't see you again..."

Hildy said, "Good luck, Red. God go with you." She kissed him, firmly on the lips. Jat and Markham Chandler shook hands with him. Red let his head drop.

"I still don't know why I'm doing this. Maybe if I come back..." He shrugged and went away, going softly through thick undergrowth. The glassy bat wings hanging against his body made a tiny clicking. The Rakshi stopped suddenly in his drifting patrol. He didn't look at Red, but beyond, and Red smiled. The three he had just left were thinking hard at the Rakshi, thinking threats and plans, trying to cover Red's mind. He crept on, his mind guarded.

The Rakshi made a single dart toward the noisy minds. Red got behind him. His blaster made a brief bright flare in the blackness.

"Eight," he said grimly, and climbed in through the riven port. There was no one in the control room, or the dark well beyond. He could hear muffled sounds from the prisoners. He didn't try to release them. Their suddenly-altered thought pattern would warn the Rakshi no matter what they were doing. But two brains, wary and guarded,

might be blanketed, might go unnoticed long enough...

One mind, if Crom had died in the wreck. But Crom's sword would still be there.

The floor of the well tilted crazily, but the walls, here in the heart of the cube, were not much buckled. The Titan in black mail lay still on his block, his eyes open, fixed on the sword.

Red padded softly across the floor. The heavy iron doors were all shut. He came up beside the block and whispered, "Crom!" He thought for a long moment that the man was dead. The black, fixed eyes never wavered. Then, from a vast, cold distance, "Go away. The stink of you makes me sick."

Red said, "I discovered something, Crom. I am a human--and proud of it." The eyes moved then. They came slowly to Red's face, and a fire began to burn in them, deep and terrible.

"You lie. The gods blast you!"

Red said doggedly, "How do I get you loose?" The mad black eyes seared into his, but this time he could meet them. He felt Crom's brain beating at his, and he didn't stop it.

"Gods, gods, gods!" whispered Crom. "Don't give me hope again!" Red said, "How, Crom? Before it's too late." This time he couldn't meet Crom's eyes.

"Take out the tubes and bind my wrists. I'll live long enough." He did it, binding the round holes tight with strips from his tunic. "Now, Crom. The shackles."

"Take down my sword. Hold it by the grip only." Red climbed on the

block. The sword was heavy in his hands. He got it free and climbed down again.

"Lay the blade across the iron bands."

Wild violet light sheeted out. Molten metal sparked and ran. Red stood back, pulses hammering thick and hot in his throat and head. Slowly, slowly, Crom rose from his block and stood.

Red put the sword in his hands. A cold shudder shook him. It wasn't Crom's body doing this impossible thing. It was something beyond, something primal and burning strong as the sun.

There was a grating clang of metal behind him. He spun around. Korah floated in the red dusk, smiling, his light tube raised.

"Well, Red," he said softly, "I thought you might come back." Then he saw the giant standing, his hair spread like a sable cloak over the block and the rusty iron floor.

His face turned to a pale, glowing mask, and his opal eyes had death in them. He didn't speak. But the light tube steadied.

The blinding beam struck Crom fairly across the eyes.

* * *

Red fired. The flame of his blaster shot wide as Korah made his car dip aside. Crom cried out, a great thundering roar. Red cursed silently and went in closer.

He fired again, and missed again. The Rakshi was diabolically quick. Crom was abruptly quiet. Korah laughed, the tip of his blue tongue sharp between his pointed teeth. His beam flicked to Red.

Red smiled without mirth. With his free hand he held one of the bat wings to shield his face, firing from the shelter of it.

The blaster flame just grazed Korah's gleaming shoulder. Red heard, behind him, the ring and groan of Crom's armor and the heavy, dragging whisper of his hair. Korah's face tightened.

His beam shifted strength, shot down below Red's guard to leave a seared weal across his midriff. Then it went to Crom again.

Red shut his teeth together and went in between them. The hot beam struck against his shield of hard-scaled wings.

Then, almost contemptuously, it darted down, found his unprotected legs and struck them from under him. His hands came out to stop the fall, and the beam smoked across them. Red screamed and lay still.

The beam touched the fallen blaster and brightened. The weapon vanished in a molten blob.

"Little men," whispered Korah. "Foolish little humans, to think you could stop us now!"

Crom moved across the floor in slow, ragged jerks. Korah danced out of the way of his sword, laughing without sound.

"Go on, Crom, every step of the way. Is there a bitter, deathly taste in your mouth, the taste of defeat, Crom? The bitter bread you fed us. Suck it, Crom!

Chew it, and strangle on it!"

He let his burning beam play with exquisite skill across Crom's face. The weals stood scarlet against the deathly white skin, and the eyes were black seared shadows under the heavy brows. But he didn't

stop, moving step by step toward the door of the Temple.

Down on the floor, Red twitched and drew his muscles tight. His mind stood at a great distance, looking down at his body and telling it what to do. Korah floated below, lost in the ecstasy of his triumph over Crom. There was no time to Red, nothing but his mind detached in a clear white light directing the formless agony that was his body. He got up, very slowly, and went up behind Korah.

His great seared hands went up. They pulled the floating metal disc off balance and down, and jerked up to the Rakshi's glowing neck. Korah cried out. He tried to turn, but Red's hands held him. He stepped up the power of his beam and turned it backward against Red's body. The hard bat wings began to melt, but not soon enough.

Korah's crest, for the first time, rose in an effort to warn the Rakshi in the temple. But it dropped again with the snapping of his neck in Red's fingers. Crom made a harsh animal sound in his throat and staggered forward against the prop of his sword. Red saw his face through a dark veil, the face of a dead man, driven only by the fire that burned in him.

Red said, "Give me the sword, Crom."

"Open the door," whispered Crom.

"You're dying. Give me the sword."

"The gods blast you! Open the door!"

Red pushed the handle down with his elbow. The metal door swung back. Light flooded out, warm opalescent light that pricked his skin with tiny needles. Red looked into the Temple of the Flame.

Seven Rakshi hovered over huge vats, turning startled faces to the door. The square room was very large. Stacked against the walls in transparent containers were naked brains in clear fluid, bathed in the light. The light came from a pedestal in the center of the space. The heart of it was too bright to look at. But Red knew dimly that in some way it was life. Red whispered, "You can't make it. Give me the sword. You can't even see it."

"I can feel it," said Crom softly, and smiled. The sweep of one great arm struck Red back out of the way. He went on into the Temple, his head erect, carrying the weight of his rusted armor and the black hair that dragged behind him as though they were nothing.

The Rakshi made a strange wailing cry and their tubes came out. Crom's armor glowed and his hair became a bursting aureole of flame. He laughed out of it, a great ringing shout beyond pain, beyond anything human. He crashed forward, and the blade of his sword smote fairly across the heart of the Flame.

* * *

There was nothing after that but light. Lying on the floor of the well, seeing very dimly, Red watched it swell out and out in a pulsing fury of strength. The Rakshi vanished in it, and the vats, and the brains in their stacked containers.

Presently the inner surface of the heavy walls vanished too, in a flood of molten metal. Then the fire died away and there was darkness, and utter silence.

Red smiled. It was a boy's peaceful, tired smile. His body ached. He looked down and said, "Hildy'll fix it."

He fainted, quite happily, on the rusty iron floor beside the empty

block.

Outpost on Io

MacVickers stopped at the brink of the dark round shaft. It was cold and he was stark naked except for the silver collar welded around his neck. But it was more than cold that made him shiver and clamp his long bony jaw.

He didn't know what the shaft was for, or where it led. But he had a sudden feeling that once he went down he was down for good. The small, round metal platform rocked uneasily under his feet. Beyond the railing, as far as MacVickers could see to the short curve of Io's horizon, there was mud. Thin, slimy blue-green mud.

The shaft went down under the mud. MacVickers looked at it. He licked dry lips, and his grey-green eyes, narrow and hot in his gaunt dark face, flashed a desperate look at the small flyer from which he had just been taken. It bobbed on the heaving mud, mocking him. The eight-foot European guard standing between it and MacVickers made a slow weaving motion with his tentacles.

MacVickers studied the European with the hating eyes of a wolf in a trap. His smooth black body had a dull sheen of red under the Jupiter-light. There was no back nor front to him, no face. Only the four long rubbery legs, the roundish body, and the tentacles in a waving crown above. MacVickers bared white, uneven teeth. His big bony fists clenched. He took one step toward the European.

A tentacle flicked out, daintily, and touched the silver collar at the Earthman's throat. Raw electric current, generated in the European's body, struck into him, a shuddering, blinding agony surging down his spine. He stumbled backward, and his foot went off into emptiness.

He twisted blindly, catching the opposite side of the shaft, and hung there, groping with his foot for the ladder rungs, cursing in a harsh, toneless voice. The tentacle struck out again, with swift, exquisite skill. Three times like a red-hot lash across his face, and twice, harder, across his hands. Then it touched the collar again.

MacVickers retched and let go. He fell jarringly down the ladder, managed to break his fall onto the metal floor below, and crouched there, sick and furious and afraid.

The hatch cover clanged down over him like the falling hammer of doom.

MacVickers dropped into a circular room thirty feet across, floored and walled with metal and badly lighted. The roof was of thick glassite plates. Through them, very clearly, MacVickers could see four European guards, watching.

"They're always there," said the Venusian softly. "You'll come to love them, stranger."

There were men standing around the ladder foot, thirteen of them, with the Venusian. Earthmen, Martians, Venusians, pale, stark naked, smeared with a blue-green stain. Their muscles stood out sharp on their gaunt bodies, their silver collars a mocking note of richness.

Deep, deep, inside himself, MacVickers shivered. His nostrils wrinkled. There was fear in the room. The smell of it, the shudder of it in the air. Fear that was familiar and accustomed, lying in uneasy sleep, but ready to awake. There were other men, four or five of them, back in the shadows by the wall bunks. They didn't speak, nor come out.

He took a deep breath and said steadily, "I'm Chris MacVickers. Deep-space trader out of Terra. They caught me trying to get through the Asteroid lines." Their eyes glistened at him, looking from him to something behind them that he couldn't see. They were waiting, and there was something ghoulish in it. The Venusian said sharply, "Tough luck, MacVickers. I'm Loris, late of the Venusian Guard. Introduce yourselves, boys."

They did, in jerky detached voices, their eyes sliding from him to the hidden something. Loris drew a little closer, and one of the Earthmen in the group came toward him.

"I'm Pendleton," he said. "The Starfish. Remember?" MacVickers stared at him. The furrows deepened in his craggy face. He said,

"My God!" very softly, and not as a curse. "Pendleton!" The man grinned wryly. He was English, the ravaged ghost of the big, ruddy, jovial spaceman MacVickers remembered.

"Quite a change, eh? Well, perhaps we're lucky, MacVickers. We shan't have to see the smash."

MacVickers' head dropped forward. "Then you saw it coming, too?" Loris made a little bitter laugh that was almost a sob. All the desperate boyish humor was gone from his face, leaving it old and grim.

"Who hasn't? I've been here --God knows. An eternity. But even before my ship was taken, we knew it. We can't build spaceships as fast as their Jovium destroys them. When they break through the Asteroid line...." Pendleton's quiet voice was grave. "Mars is old and tired and torn with famine. Venus is young, but her courage is undisciplined. Her barbarians aren't suited to mechanized warfare. And Earth...." He sighed. "Perhaps if we hadn't fought so much

among ourselves...." MacVickers said harshly, "It wouldn't make much difference. When a man has a weapon that causes metal to explode its own atoms, it doesn't make any difference what you stack up against him."

He shook his craggy head impatiently. "What is this place? What are you doing here? The Jovies just brought me here and dumped me in without a word of explanation."

Pendleton shrugged. "We, too. There's a pit below, full of machinery. We work it, but we're not told why. Of course, we do a lot of guessing."

"Guessing!" The word rose sharp on the thick hot air. A man burst out of the group and stood swaying with the restless motion of the floor. He was a swart Low-Canal Martian. His yellow cat-eyes glittered in his hatch-face, and his thin ropy muscles twitched.

"I'll tell you what this place is, Earthman. It's a hell! And we're caught in it. Trapped, for the rest of our lives." He turned on Pendleton. "It's your fault. We were in a neutral port. We might have been safe. But you had to get back...."

"Janu!" Pendleton's voice cracked like a whip. The Martian went silent, watching him. There was more than hate in his yellow eyes. Dando, the beginning of the trap-madness. MacVickers had seen it in men who couldn't stand the confinement of a deep-space voyage.

The Englishman said quietly, "Janu was my glory-hole foreman. He rather holds this against me."

The Martian snarled, and then coughed. The cough became a paroxysm. He stumbled away, grey-faced and twitching, bent almost double.

"It's the heat," said Loris, "and the damp. Poor devil."

MacVickers thought of the air of Mars, cold and dry and pure. The floor rocked under him. Eyes, with the queer waiting shine to them, slid furtively to the hidden thing behind the standing men.

The hot wet air lay on his lungs. He sweated. There was a stir of nausea in him and the lights swirled. He shut his jaw hard.

He said, "What did Janu mean, the rest of our natural lives? They'll let us go when the war's over --if there's anything left to go to." There was a tight little silence. And then, from the shadows against the wall, there came a brittle, whispering laugh. "The war? They let us go before that!" The group parted. MacVickers had a brief glimpse of a huge man crouched in a strange position on the floor. Then he couldn't see anything but the shape that came slowly out into the light.

It moved with a stiff, tottering gait, and its naked feet made a dry clicking sound on the metal floor. MacVickers' hand closed hard on the ladder behind him.

It had been a man, an Earthman. His body was still tall, his features still fine. But there was a film over him, a pale blue-green sheathe that glistened dully.

He thrust out an arm, with a hand on it like a hand carved in aquamarine.

"Touch it," he whispered.

MacVickers touched it. It was quite hard, and warm only with the heat of the air. MacVickers' grey-green eyes met the sunken, sheathed eyes of the Earthman. His body hurt with the effort to control it.

"When we can no longer move," the whispering voice said, "they take us up the shaft and throw us over, into the mud. That's why you're here - because we were one man short."

MacVickers put his hand back on the ladder rung. "How long?"

"About three Earth months."

He looked at the blue-green stain that smeared them all. The color of the mud. His hands sweated on the ladder rung.

"What is it?"

"Something in the mud. A radioactivity, I think. It seems to turn the carbon in human flesh to a crystalline form. You become a living jewel. It's painless. But it's...." He didn't finish. Beads of sweat stood on MacVickers' forehead. The men standing watching him smiled a little. There was motion behind them. Loris and Pendleton stiffened, and their eyes met.

MacVickers said steadily, "I don't understand. The mud's outside." Loris said with a queer, hurried urgency, "You will. It's almost time for the other shift...."

He broke off. Men scattered suddenly, crouching back in a rough circle, grinning with feral nervousness. The room was suddenly quiet. The crouching man had risen. He stood with his huge corded legs wide apart, swaying with the swaying of the floor, his round head sunk between ridges of muscle, studying the Earthman out of pale, flat eyes. Loris put his old, bitter boy's face close to MacVickers. His whisper was almost inaudible.

"Birek. He's boss here. He's mad. Don't fight him."

MacVickers' grey-green eyes narrowed. He didn't move. Birek breathed in slow, deep sighs. He was a Venusian, a coal-swamper from his size and pallor and the filthy-white hair clubbed in his neck.

He shimmered, very faintly in the dim light. The first jewel-crust was forming across his skin.

Knife-sharp and startling across the silence, a round hatch-cover in the floor clashed open. Sweat broke cold on MacVickers. Men began to come out of the hole, just at the edge of his vision. Naked, dirty men with silver collars. They had been talking, cursing, jostling. The first ones saw Birek and stopped, and the silence trickled back down the shaft. It was utterly quiet again, except for the harsh straining of things against the hot, wet air and the soft sounds of naked men climbing the ladder.

The cords ridged on MacVickers' jaw. He shifted his balance slightly, away from the ladder. He could see the faces thrust forward in the dim light, eager, waiting.

Shining eyes, shining teeth, cheek-bones shining with sweat. Frightened, suffering men, watching another man fear and suffer, and being glad about it. Birek moved forward, slowly. His eyes held a pale glitter, like distant ice, and his lips smiled.

"I prayed," he said softly. "I was answered. You, new man! Get down on your belly."

Loris grinned at Birek, but there was no humor in his eyes. He had drawn a little away from MacVickers. He said carelessly:

"There's no time for that now, Birek. It's our shift. They'll be burning us

if we don't go."

Birek repeated, "Down on your belly," not looking at Loris. A vein began to throb on MacVickers' forehead. He looked slight, almost small against the Venusian's huge bulk.

He said quietly, "I'm not looking for trouble."

"Then get down."

"Sorry," said MacVickers. "Not today." Pendleton's voice cracked out sharply. "Let him alone, Birek! You men, down the ladder! They're going for the shockers."

MacVickers was aware of movement overhead, beyond the glass roof. Men began to drop slowly, reluctantly, down the ladder. There was sweat on Pendleton's forehead and Loris' face was as grey as his eyes.

Birek said hoarsely, "Down! Grovel! Then you can go."

"No." The ladder was beyond Birek. There was no way past him. Loris said, in a swift harsh whisper, "Get down, MacVickers. For God's sake get down, and then come on!"

MacVickers shook his head stubbornly. The giant smiled. There was something horribly wrong about that smile. It was the smile of a man in agony when he feels the anesthetic taking hold. Peaceful, and happy. He struck out, startlingly fast for such a big man. MacVickers shrank aside. The fist grazed past his head, tearing his ear. He crouched and went in, trying for a fast body-blow and a sidestep.

He'd forgotten the glimmering sheathe. His fist struck Birek on the mark, and it was like striking glass that didn't shatter. The pain shot

up his arm, numbing, slowing, sickening. Blood spattered out from his knuckles. Birek's right swept in, across the side of his head. MacVickers went down, on his right side. Birek put a foot in the small of his back. "Down," he said.

"Grovel."

MacVickers twisted under the foot, snarling. He brought up his own feet viciously, with all his strength. The pain of impact made him whimper, but Birek staggered back, thrown off balance.

There was no sign of hurt in his face. He stood there, looking down at MacVickers. Suddenly, shockingly, he was crying. He made no sound. He didn't move. But the tears ran out of his eyes.

A deep, slow shudder shook MacVickers. He said softly, "There's no pain, is there?"

Birek didn't speak. The tears glistened over the faint, hard film on his cheeks. MacVickers got up slowly. The furrows were deep and harsh in his face and his lips were white.

Loris pulled at him. Somewhere Pendleton's voice was yelling, "Hurry! Hurry, please!"

The guards were doing something overhead. There was a faint crackling sound, a flicker of sparks in a circle around the top of the wall. Shivering, tingling pain swept through MacVickers from the silver collar at his throat. Men began to whisper and curse. Loris clawed at him, shoved him down the ladder, kicked his face to make him hurry. The pain abated. MacVickers looked up. The great corded legs of Birek were coming, down, the soles of the feet making a faint, hard sound on the rungs. The hatch closed overhead. The voice of the dying Earthman came dry and soft over his shoulder.

"Here's where you'll work until you die. How do you like it?" MacVickers turned, scowling. It was hot. The room above was cool by comparison. The air was thick and sluggish with the reek of heated oil and metal. It was a big space, running clear to the curving wall, but the effect was of stifling, cramped confinement.

Machinery crammed the place, roaring and hissing and clattering, running in a circuit from huge intake pumps through meaningless bulking shapes to a forced-air outlet, with oil-pumps between them.

The pumps brought mud into a broad sluice, and the blue-green stain of it was everywhere.

There were two glassite control boxes high on the walls, each with a black, tentacled European. About five feet overhead was a system of metal catwalks giving complete coverage of the floor area. There were Europeans on the walks, too, eight of them, patrolling, steadily.

Their sleek, featureless bodies were safe from contact with the mud. They carried heavy plastic tubes in their tentacles, and there were heavy-duty shockers mounted at every intersection.

MacVickers grinned dourly "Trustful lot."

"Very." Pendleton nudged him over toward a drive motor attached to some kind of a centrifugal separator. Loris and the blue-sheathed Earthman followed, with Birek coming slowly behind him.

MacVickers said. "What's all this for?"

Pendleton shook his head. "We don't know. But we have an idea that Jovium comes from the mud."

"Jovium!" MacVickers' grey-green eyes began to grow hot, "The stuff

that's winning this war for them. The metal destroyer!"

"We're not sure, of course." Pendleton's infinitely weary eyes turned across the stretch of greasy metal deck to the end of the circuit. But look there. What does that suggest to you?"

The huge pipe of the forced-air ejector ran along the deck there behind a screen of heavy metal mesh. Just above it, enclosed behind three thicknesses of glassite, was a duct leading upward. The duct, from the inordinate size of its supports and its color, was pure lead.

Lead. Lead pipe, lead armor. Radiations that changed living men into half-living diamonds. Nobody knew what Jovium was or where it came from - only it did.

But scientists on the three besieged worlds thought it was probably an isotope of some powerful radioactive metal, perhaps uranium, capable of setting up a violent progressive breakdown in metallic atoms.

"If," said MacVickers softly, "the pipe were lined with plastic.... Blue mud! I've traded through these moons, and the only other deposit of that mud is a saucepan full on J-XII! This must be their only source." Loris shoved an oil can at him. "What difference does it make?" he said savagely.

MacVickers took the can without seeing it. "They store it up there, then, in the space between the inner wall and the outer. If somebody could get up there and set the stuff off...."

Pendleton's mouth twisted. "Can you see any way?" He looked. Guards and shockers, charged ladders and metal screens. No weapons, no place to conceal them anyway. He said doggedly:

"But if someone could escape and get word back.... This contraption is a potential bomb big enough to blow lo out of space! The experts think it only takes a fraction of a grain of the pure stuff to power a disintegrator shell." There was a pulse beating hard under his jaw and his grey-green eyes were bright.

Loris said, "Escape." He said it as though it were the most infinitely beautiful word in existence, and as though it burned his mouth.

"Escape," whispered the man with the shimmering, deadly sheathe of aquamarine.

"There is no escape but --this."

MacVickers said, into the silence that followed, "I'm going to try. One thing or the other, I'm going to try."

Pendleton's incredibly tired eyes looked at the livid burns on MacVickers'

face. "It's been tried. And it's no use." Birek moved suddenly out of his queer, dazed stillness. He looked up and made a hoarse sound in his throat. MacVickers caught a flicker of motion overhead, but he didn't pay attention to it. He went on, speaking quietly in a flat, level voice. "There's a war on. We're all in it. Soldiers, civilians, and kings, the big fellows and the little ones. When I got my master's ticket, they told me a man's duty wasn't done until his ship was cradled or he was dead.

"My ship's gone. But I haven't died, yet." Pendleton's broad, gaunt shoulders drooped. He turned his head away. Loris'

face was a death-mask carved from grey bone. He said, almost inaudibly:

"Shut up, damn you. Shut up."

The movement was closer overhead, ominously close. The men scattered across the pit had stopped working, watching MacVickers with glistening, burning eyes across hot oil-filmed metal.

MacVickers said harshly, "I know what's wrong with you. You were broken before you came, thinking the smash was coming and it was no use." Pendleton whispered, "You don't know, the things they do to you." Stiff and dry out of the Earthman's aquamarine mask, came the words, "You'll learn. There's no hope, MacVickers, and the men have all they can bear without pain.

"If you bring them more suffering, MacVickers, they'll kill you." Heat. Oil and reeking metal, and white stiff faces filmed with sweat. Eyes shining, hot and glittering with fear. Rocking floor and sucking pumps and a clutching nausea in his belly. Birek, standing straight and still, watching him. Watching. Everybody, watching.

MacVickers put his hand flat on the engine-housing beside him. "There's more to it than duty," he said softly, and smiled, without humor, the vertical lines deep in his cheeks. His gaunt Celtic head had a grim beauty. His voice rang clear across the roar of the machines. "I'm Christopher Rory MacVickers. I'm the most important thing in the universe. And if I have to give my life, it'll not be without return on the value of it!" Janu the Martian, away on the other side of the pit, made a shrill wailing cry, Loris and Pendleton flinched away like dogs afraid of the whip, looking upward.

MacVickers glimpsed a dark tentacled shape on the catwalk above, just before the shattering electricity coursed through him. He screamed, once. And then Birek moved.

He struck Loris and Pendleton and the blue-sheathed Earthman out

of the way like children. His left leg took MacVickers behind the knees in the same instant that his right hand pushed MacVickers' face. MacVickers fell heavily on his back, screaming at the contact of the metal floor. Then Birek sprawled over him, shielding his body with the bulk of his own.

The awful shocking pain was lessened. Lying there, looking up into Birek's pale eyes, MacVickers made his twitching lips say, "Why?" Birek smiled. "The current doesn't hurt much anymore. And I want you for my self--to break."

MacVickers drew a deep, shuddering breath and smiled back, the lines deep in his lean cheeks.

He had no clear memories of that shift.

Heat and motion and strangling air, and Janu coughing with a terrible, steady rhythm, his own hands trying to guide the oil can. Toward the end of the time he fainted, and it was Birek who carried him up the ladder. He had no way of knowing how long after that he came to. There was no time in that little hell. The first thing he noticed, with the hair-trigger senses of a man trained to ships, that the motion of the room was different. He sat up straight on the bunk where Birek had laid him. "The tidal wave," he said, over a quick stab of fear. "What..."

"We ride it out," said Loris bitterly. "We always have." MacVickers knew the Jovian Moons pretty well. Remembering the tremendous tides and winds caused by the gravitational pull of Jupiter, he shuddered. There was no solid earth on Io, nothing but mud. And the extraction plant, from the feel of it, was a hollow bell stink under it, perfectly free. It had to be free. No mooring cable made could stand the pull of a Jupiter-tide.

"One thing about it," said Pendleton with quiet viciousness. "It makes

the bloody Jovies seasick."

Janu the Martian made a cracked, harsh laugh. "So they keep a weak current on us all the time." His hatchet-face was drawn, his yellow cat-eyes lambent in the dim light.

The men sprawled on their bunks, not talking much. Birek sat on the end of his, watching MacVickers with his pale still eyes. There was a tightness in the room.

It was coming. They were going to break him now, before he hurt them. Break him, or kill him.

MacVickers wiped the sweat from his face and said, "I'm thirsty." Pendleton pointed to a thing like a horse-trough against the bulkhead. His eyes were tired and very sad. Loris was scowling at his stained and faintly filmed feet.

There wasn't much water in the trough. What there was brackish and greasy. MacVickers drank and splashed some on his face and body. He saw that he was already stained with the mud. It wouldn't wash off. The dying Earthman whispered, "There is food also." MacVickers looked at the basket of spongy synthetic food, and shook his head. The floor dipped and swung. There was a frightening, playful violence about it, like the first soft taps of a tiger's paw. Loris looked up at the glass roof with the black shapes beyond.

"They get the pure air," he said. "Our ventilator pipes are only a few inches wide, lest we crawl up through them."

Pendleton said, rather loudly, "The swine breathe through the skin, you know. All their sense organs, sight and hearing.

"Shut up," snarled Jaru. "Stop talking for time." The sprawled men on

the bunk's drew themselves slowly tight, breathing hard and deep in anticipation. And Birek rose.

MacVickers faced them, Birek and the rest. There was no lift in his heart. He was cold and sodden, like a chuted ox watching the pole-axe fall. He said, with a bitter, savage quiet,

"You're a lot of bloody cowards. You, Birek. You're scared of the death creeping over you, and the only way you can forget the fear is to make someone else suffer.

"It's the same with all of you. You have to trample me down to your own level, break me for the sake of your souls as much as your bodies." He looked at the numbers of them, at Birek's huge impervious bulk and his great fists. He touched his silver collar, remembering the agony of the shock through it.

"And I will break. You know that, damn you." He gave back three paces and set his feet. "All right. Come on, Birek. Let's get it over with."

The Venusian came toward him across the heaving floor. Loris still looked at his feet and Pendleton's eyes were agonized. MacVickers wiped his hands across his buttocks. The palms were filmed and slick with oil from the can he had handled.

There was no use to fight. Birek was twice his size, and he couldn't be hurt anyway. The diamond-sheathe even screened off the worst of the electric current, being a non-conductor.

That gave the dying men an advantage. But even if they had spirit enough left by that time to try anything, the hatches were still locked tight by air-pressure and the sheer numbers of their suffering mates would pull them down. Also, the Jovies were as strong as four men.

Non-conductor. Sheathed skin. Birek's shoulders tensing for the first blow. Sweat trying to break through the film of oil on his palms, the slippery feel of his hands as he clenched them.

Birek's fist lashed out. MacVickers dodged under it, looking for an opening, dreading the useless agony of impact. The bell lurched wildly. A guard moved abruptly overhead. The motion caught MacVickers' eye. Something screamed sharply in his head: Pendleton's voice saying, "They breathe through the skin. All their sense organs..."

He sensed rather than saw Birek's fist coming. He twisted, enough to take the worst of it on his shoulder. It knocked him halfway across the deck. And then the current came on.

It was weak, but it made him jerk and twitch. He scrambled up on the pitching deck and started to speak. Birek was coming again, leisurely, smiling. Then, quite suddenly, the hatch cover clanged open, signaling the change of the shifts. MacVickers stood still for a second. Then he laughed, a queer little chuckle, and made a rush for the hatch.

III

He went down it with Birek's hand brushing past his head. Men yelled and cursed. He trampled on them ruthlessly. The ones lower down fell off the ladder to avoid his feet.

There was a clamor up above. Hands grabbed at him. He lashed out, kicking and butting. His rush carried him through and out across the pit, toward the space between the end points of the horseshoe circuit.

He slowed down, then. The guards had noticed the scuffle. But it

seemed to be only the shift changing, and MacVickers looked like a man going peacefully for oil.

Peacefully. The blood thundered in his head, he was cold, and the skin of his back crawled. Men shoved and swore back by the ladder. He went on, not too fast, fighting the electric shiver in his brain.

Fuel and lubricating oils were brought up, presumably from tanks in a still lower level, by big pressure pumps. All three sets of pumps, intake, outlet, and oil, worked off the same compressed-air unit.

He set the lubricating-oil pump going and rattled cans into place. The men of his shift were straggling out from the ladder, twitching from the light current, seared, angry, but uncertain.

There was a subtle change in the attitude of the European guards. Their movements were sluggish, faintly uncertain. MacVickers grinned viciously. Seasick. They'd be sicker --if they didn't get him too soon. The surging pitch of the bell was getting worse. The tide was rising, and the mud was playing with the bell like a child throwing a ball. Nausea began to clutch at MacVickers' stomach.

The pressure-gauge on the pump was rising. He let it rise, praying, his grey-green eyes hot and bright. Going with the motion of the deck, he sprawled over against the intake pumps.

He spun the wheel on the pressure-control as far as it would go. A light wrench, chained so that it could not be thrown, lay at his feet. He picked it up, his hand jerking and tingling, and began to work at the air-pipe coupling. Hands gripped his shoulder suddenly, slewing him around. The yellow eyes of Janu the Martian glared into his.

"What are you doing here, Earthman? This is my station." Then he saw the pressure gauge. He let out a keening wail, cut short by the

crunch of MacVickers' fist on his mouth. MacVickers whirled and swung the wrench.

The loose coupling gave. Air burst whistling from the pipe, and the rhythm of the pumps began to break.

But Janu's cry had done it. Men were pelting toward him, and the guards were closing in overhead.

MacVickers flung himself bodily on the short hose of the oil-pump. Birek, Loris, Pendleton, the dying Earthman, the hard faces behind them. The guards were manning the shockers. Up in the control boxes black tentacles were flashing across banks of switches. He had to work fast, before they cut the pressure.

Birek was ahead of the others, very close. MacVickers gave him the oil-stream full in the face. It blinded him. Then the nearest shocker came on, focused expertly on MacVickers.

He shut his teeth hard, whimpering through them, and turned the hard forced stream of oil into the hoarsely shrieking blast from the open pipe. Oil sprayed up in a heavy, blinding fog. Burning, shuddering agony shook MacVickers, but he held his hose, his feet braced wide, praying to stand up long enough.

The catwalks were hidden in the oily mist. The ventilating blowers caught it, thrusting it across the whole space. MacVickers yelled through it, his voice hardly recognizable as human.

"You, out there! All of you. This is your chance. Are you going to take it?" Something fell, close by, with a heavy thrashing thud. Something black and tentacled and writhing, covered with a dull film.

MacVickers laughed, and, the laughter was less human than the

voice.

"Cowards!" he cried. "All right. I'll do it all myself." Somebody yelled, "They're dying. Look!" There was another heavy thud. The hot strangling fog roiled with hidden motion. MacVickers gasped and retched and shuddered helplessly. He was going to drop the hose in a minute. He was going to fall down and scream.

If they stepped the power up one more notch, he was going to fall down and die. Only they were dying too, and forgetting about power. It seemed a static eternity to MacVickers, but it had all happened in the space of a dozen heartbeats. There were yells and shouts and, a sort of animal tumult in the thick haze. Suddenly Pendleton's voice rang out of it.

"MacVickers! I'm with you, man! You others, listen. He's giving us the break we needed. Don't let him down!"

And Janu screamed, "No! He's killed the guards, but there are more. They'll fry us from the control boxes if we help him." The pressure was dropping in the pipe as the power cut out. There was a last hiss, a spurt of oily spray, then silence. MacVickers dropped the hose. Janu's voice went on, sharp and harsh with fear. "They'll fry us, I tell you. We'll lie here and jerk and scream until we're crazy. I'm going to die. I know it. But I won't go through that, for nothing! I'm going back by the ladder and pray they won't notice me."

More seconds, more tumult. Men suddenly torn between hope and abject terror. MacVickers said wearily into the fog,

"If you help me, we can win the war for our worlds. Destroy this bell, start the Jovium working, destroy lo --victory for us. And if you don't, I hope you fry here and in Hell afterward."

They wavered. MacVickers could hear their painful breathing, ragged with the emotion in them. Some of them started toward the sound of Pendleton's voice. Janu made an eerie wailing sound, like a hurt cat, and went for him.

MacVickers started to help, but the current froze him to the metal floor. He strained, feeling his nerves, his brain dissolving in a shuddering fire. He knew why the others had broken so soon. The current did things to you, inside. He couldn't see what was happening. The heavy mist choked his eyes, his throat, his nostrils. The pitching of the bell was a nightmare thing. Men thrashed and struggled and cursed.

So he had killed the guards. So what. There were still the control boxes. If they didn't rush them before the oil settled, they wouldn't have a chance. Why not give up? Let himself dissolve into the blackness he was fighting off?

A great pale shape came striding through the mist toward him. Birek. This was it, then. Well, he'd had his moment of fun. His fists came up in a bland, instinctive gesture.

Birek laughed. The current made him jerk only a little, in his thin diamond sheathe. He bunched his shoulders and reached out. MacVickers felt himself ripped clear of the floor. In a second he was out of focus of the shocker and the pain was gone. He came nearest to fainting then, but Birek's huge hand shook him by the hair and Birek's voice shouted

"Tell 'em, little man! Tell 'em it's better to die quick, now, than go mad with fear."

"Come on!" yelled Pendleton. "Here's our chance to show we're still men. Hurry up, you sons!"

MacVickers looked at the Venusian's face. The terrible frozen fear was gone from his eyes. He wanted to die, now, quickly, fighting for vengeance. The gray, pinched face of Loris loomed abruptly out of the fog. It was suddenly young again, and the smile was genuine. He said,

"Let's teach 'em to mind, Birek. MacVickers, I..." He shook his head, looking away. "You know."

"I know. Hurry up with it."

Pendleton's voice burst out of the fog, triumphantly. Janu crouched on the heaving deck, bleeding and whimpering. MacVickers yelled,

"Who's with me? We're going to take the control boxes. Who wants to be a hero?"

Birek laughed and threw him bodily up, onto the catwalk overhead. Most of the men came forward then. The three or four that were left looked at the Martian and followed.

The Halfling

I: Primitive Venus

I was watching the sunset. It was something pretty special in the line of California sunsets, and it made me feel swell, being the first one I'd seen in about nine years. The pitch was in the flatlands between Culver City and Venice, and I could smell the sea. I was born in a little dump at Venice, Cal., and I've never found any smell like the clean cold salt of the Pacific--not anywhere in the Solar System.

I was standing alone, off to one side of the grounds. The usual noises of a carnival around feeding time were being made behind me, and the hammer gang was pinning the last of the tents down tight. But I wasn't thinking about Jade Greene's Interplanetary Carnival, The Wonders of the Seven Worlds Alive Before Your Eyes.

I was remembering John Damien Greene running barefoot on a wet beach, fishing for perch off the end of a jetty, and dreaming big dreams. I was wondering where John Damien Greene had gone, taking his dreams with him, because now I could hardly remember what they were.

Somebody said softly from behind me, "Mr. Greene?" I quit thinking about John Damien Greene. It was that kind of a voice--sweet, silky, guaranteed to make you forget your own name. I turned around. She matched her voice, all right. She stood about five-three on her bronze heels, and her eyes were more purple than the hills of Malibu. She had a funny little button of a nose and a pink mouth, smiling just enough to show her even white teeth. The bronze metal-cloth dress she wore hugged a chassis with no flaws in it anywhere. I tried to find some.

She dropped her head, so I could see the way the last of the sunlight tangled in her gold-brown hair.

"They said you were Mr. Greene. If I've made a mistake...." She had an accent, just enough to be fascinating.

I said, "I'm Greene. Something I can do for you?" I still couldn't find anything wrong with her, but I kept looking just the same. My blood pressure had gone up to about three hundred.

It's hard to describe a girl like that. You can say she's five-three and beautiful, but you can't pass on the odd little tilt of her eyes and the way her mouth looks, or the something that just comes out of her like light out of a lamp, and hooks into you so you know you'll never be rid of it, not if you live to be a thousand.

She said, "Yes. You can give me a job. I'm a dancer." I shook my head. "Sorry, miss. I got a dancer." Her face had a look of steel down under the soft kittenish roundness. "I'm not just talking," she said. "I need a job so I can eat. I'm a good dancer. I'm the best dancer you ever saw anywhere. Look me over." That's all I had been doing. I guess I was staring by then. You don't expect fluffy dolls like that to have so much iron in them. She wasn't bragging. She was just telling me.

"I still have a dancer," I told her, "a green-eyed Martian babe who is plenty good, and who would tear my head off, and yours too, if I hired you."

"Oh," she said. "Sorry. I thought you bossed this carnival." She let me think about that, and then grinned. "Let me show you." She was close enough so I could smell the faint, spicy perfume she wore. But she'd stopped me from being just a guy chinning with a pretty girl. Right then I was Jade Greene, the carny boss-man, with scars on my

knuckles and an ugly puss, and a show to keep running. Strictly Siwash, that show, but my baby--mine to feed and paint and fuel. If this kid had something Sindi didn't have, something to drag in the cash customers--well, Sindi would have to take it and like it. Besides, Sindi was getting so she thought she owned me. The girl was watching my face. She didn't say anything more, or even move. I scowled at her.

"You'd have to sign up for the whole tour. I'm blasting off next Monday for Venus, and then Mars, and maybe into the Asteroids."

"I don't care. Anything to be able to eat. Anything to--" She stopped right there and bent her head again, and suddenly I could see tears on her thick brown lashes. I said, "Okay. Come over to the cooch tent and we'll have a look."

Me, I was tempted to sign her for what was wrapped up in that bronze cloth--but business is business. I couldn't take on any left-footed ponies. She said shakily, "You don't soften up very easily, do you?" We started across the lot toward the main gate. The night was coming down cool and fresh. Off to the left, clear back to the curving deep-purple barrier of the hills, the slim white spires of Culver, Westwood, Beverly Hills and Hollywood were beginning to show a rainbow splash of color under their floodlights. Everything was clean, new and graceful. Only the thin fog and the smell of the sea were old.

We were close to the gate, stumbling a little in the dusk of the afterglow. Suddenly a shadow came tearing out from between the tents. It went erratically in lithe, noiseless bounds, and it was somehow not human even though it went on two feet. The girl caught her breath and shrank in against me. The shadow went around us three times like a crazy thing, and then stopped.

There was something eerie about that sudden stillness. The hair

crawled on the back of my neck. I opened my mouth angrily.

The shadow stretched itself toward the darkening sky and let go a wail like Lucifer falling from Heaven.

I cursed. The carny lights came on, slamming a circle of blue-white glare against the night.

"Laska, come here!" I yelled.

The girl screamed.

* * *

I put my arm around her. "It's all right," I said, and then, "Come here, you misbegotten Thing! You're on a sleighride again!" There were more things I wanted to say, but the girl cramped my style. Laska slunk in towards us. I didn't blame her for yelping. Laska wasn't pretty. He wasn't much taller than the girl, and looked shorter because he was drooping. He wore a pair of tight dark trunks and nothing else except the cross-shaped mane of fine blue-gray fur that went across his shoulders and down his back, from the peak between his eyes to his long tail. He was dragging the tail, and the tip of it was twitching. There was more of the soft fur on his chest and forearms, and a fringe of it down his lank belly. I grabbed him by the scruff and shook him. "I ought to boot your ribs in! We got a show in less than two hours."

He looked up at me. The pupils of his yellow-green eyes were closed to thin hairlines, but they were flat and cold with hatred. The glaring lights showed me the wet whiteness of his pointed teeth and the raspy pinkness of his tongue.

"Let me go. Let me go, you human!" His voice was hoarse and

accented.

"I'll let you go!" I cuffed him across the face. "I'll let you go to the immigration authorities. You wouldn't like that, would you? You wouldn't even have coffee to hop up on when you died."

The sharp claws came out of his fingers and toes, flexed hungrily and went back in again.

I dropped him.

"Go on back inside. Find the croaker and tell him to straighten you out. I don't give a damn what you do on your own time, but you miss out on one more show and I'll take your job and call the I-men. Get it?"

"I get it," said Laska sullenly, and curled his red tongue over his teeth. He shot his flat, cold glance at the girl and went away, not making any sound at all.

The girl shivered and drew away from me. "What was--that?"

"Cat-man from Callisto. My prize performer. They're pretty rare."

"I--I've heard of them. They evolved from a cat-ancestor instead of an ape, like we did."

"That's putting it crudely, but it's close enough. I've got a carload of critters like that, geeks from all over the System. They ain't human, and they don't fit with animals either. Moth-men, lizard-men, guys with wings and guys with six arms and antennae. They all followed evolutionary tracks peculiar to their particular hunks of planet, only they stopped before they got where they were going. The Callistan kitties are the aristocrats of the bunch. They've got an I. Q. higher than a lot of humans, and wouldn't spit on the other halflings."

"Poor things," she said softly. "You didn't have to be so cruel to him." I laughed. "That What's-it would as soon claw my insides out as soon as look at me--or any other human, including you--just on general principles. That's why Immigration hates to let 'em in even on a work permit. And when he's hopped up on coffee...."

"Coffee? I thought I must have heard wrong!"

"Nope. The caffeine in Earthly coffee berries works just like coke or hashish for 'em. Venusian coffee hits 'em so hard they go nuts and then die, but our own kind just keeps 'em going. It's only the hoppy ones you ever find in a show like this. They get started on coffee and they have to have it no matter what they have to do to get it."

She shuddered a little. "You said something about dying."

"Yeah. If he's ever deported back to Callisto his people will tear him apart. They're a clannish bunch. I guess the first humans on Callisto weren't very tactful, or else they just hate us because we're something they're not and never can be. Anyway, their tribal law forbids them to have anything to do with us except killing. Nobody knows much about 'em, but I hear they have a nice friendly religion, something like the old-time Thugs and their Kali worship."

I paused, and then said uncomfortably, "Sorry I had to rough him up in front of you. But he's got to be kept in line."

She nodded. We didn't say anything after that. We went in past the main box and along between the burglars readying up their layouts--Martian getak, Venusian shalil and the game the Mercurian hillmen play with human skulls. Crooked? Sure--but suckers like to be fooled, and a guy has to make a living. I couldn't take my eyes off the girl. I thought, if she dances the way she walks....

She didn't look much at the big three-dimensional natural-color pictures advertising the geek show. We went by the brute top, and suddenly all hell broke loose inside of it. I've got a fair assortment of animals from all over. They make pretty funny noises when they get started, and they were started now.

They were nervous, unhappy noises. I heard prisoners yammering in the Lunar cell-blocks once, and that was the way this sounded--strong, living things shut up in cages and tearing their hearts out with it--hate, fear and longing like you never thought about. It turned you cold.

The girl looked scared. I put my arm around her again, not minding it at all. Just then Tiny came out of the brute top.

Tiny is a Venusian deep-jungle man, about two sizes smaller than the Empire State Building, and the best zooman I ever had, drunk or sober. Right now he was mad.

"I tell that Laska stay 'way from here," he yelled. "My kids smell him. You listen!"

I didn't have to listen. His "kids" could have been heard halfway to New York. Laska had been expressly forbidden to go near the brute top because the smell of him set the beasts crazy. Whether they were calling to him as one animal to another, or scared of him as something unnatural, we didn't know. The other halflings were pretty good about it, but Laska liked to start trouble just for the hell of it.

I said, "Laska's hopped again. I sent him to the croaker. You get the kids quiet again, and then send one of the punks over to the crumb castle and tell the cook I said if he ever gives Laska a teaspoonful of coffee again without my say-so I'll fry him in his own grease."

Tiny nodded his huge pale head and vanished, cursing. I said to the girl,

"Still want to be a carny?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "Anything, as long as you serve food!"

"That's a pretty accent you got. What is it?"

"Just about everything. I was born on a ship between Earth and Mars, and I've lived all over. My father was in the diplomatic corps." I said, "Oh. Well, here's the place. Go to it."

* * *

Sindi was sitting cross-legged on the stage, sipping thil and listening to sad Martian music on the juke box behind the screen of faded Martian tapestry. She looked up and saw us, and she didn't like what she saw. She got up. She was a Low-Canaler, built light and wiry, and she moved like a cat. She had long emerald eyes and black hair with little bells braided in it, and clusters of tiny bells in her ears. She was wearing the skin of a Martian sand-leopard, no more clothes than the law forced her to wear. She was something to look at, and she had a disposition like three yards of barbed wire.

I said, "Hi, Sindi. This kid wants a try-out. Climb down, huh?" Sindi looked the kid over. She smiled and climbed down and put her hand on my arm. She sounded like a shower of rain when she moved, and her nails bit into me, hard.

I said between my teeth, "What music do you want, kid?"

"My name's Laura--Laura Darrow." Her eyes were very big and very purple. "Do you have Enhali's Primitive Venus?"

Not more than half a dozen dancers in the System can do justice to that collection of tribal music. Some of it's subhuman and so savage it scares you. We use it for mood music, to draw the crowd.

I started to protest, but Sindi smiled and tinkled her head back. "Of course, put it on, Jade."

I shrugged and went in and fiddled with the juke box. When I came out Laura Darrow was up on the stage and we had an audience. Sindi must have passed the high sign. I shoved my way through a bunch of Venusian lizard-men and sat down. There were three or four little moth-people from Phobos roosting up on the braces so their delicate wings wouldn't get damaged in the crush. The music started. Laura kicked off her shoes and danced. I don't think I breathed all the time she was on the stage. I don't remember anyone else breathing, either. We just sat and stared, sweating with nervous ecstasy, shivering occasionally, with the music beating and crying and surging over us.

The girl wasn't human. She was sunlight, quicksilver, a leaf riding the wind—but nothing human, nothing tied down to muscles and gravity and flesh. She was—oh, hell, there aren't any words. She was the music. When she was through we sat there a long time, perfectly still. Then the Venusians, human and half-human, let go a yell and the audience came to and tore up the seats.

In the middle of it Sindi looked at me with deadly green eyes and said, "I suppose she's hired."

"Yeah. But it doesn't have anything to do with you, baby."

"Listen, Jade. This suitcase outfit isn't big enough for two of us. Besides, she's got you hooked, and she can have you."

"She hasn't got me hooked. Anyway, so what? You don't own me."

"No. And you don't own me, either."

"I got a contract."

She told me what I could do with my contract.

I yelled, "What do you want me to do, throw her out on her ear? With that talent?"

"Talent!" snarled Sindi. "She's not talented. She's a freak."

"Just like a dame. Why can't you be a good loser?" She explained why. A lot of it didn't make sense, and none of it was printable. Presently she went out, leaving me sore and a little uneasy. We had quite a few Martians with the outfit. She could make trouble. Oh, hell! Just another dame sore because she was outclassed. Artistic temperament, plus jealousy. So what? Let her try something. I could handle it. I'd handled people before.

I jammed my way up to the stage. Laura was being mobbed. She looked scared--some of the halfings are enough to give a tough guy nightmares--and she was crying.

I said, "Relax, honey. You're in." I knew that Sindi was telling the truth. I was hooked. I was so hooked it scared me, but I wouldn't have wiggled off if I could.

She sagged down in my arms and said, "Please, I'm hungry." I half carried her out, with the moth-people fluttering their gorgeous wings around our heads and praising her in their soft, furry little voices. I fed her in my own quarters. She shuddered when I poured her coffee and refused it, saying she didn't think she'd ever enjoy it again. She took

tea instead. She was hungry, all right. I thought she'd never stop eating. Finally I said, "The pay's forty credits, and found." She nodded.

I said gently, "You can tell me. What's wrong?" She gave me a wide, purple stare. "What do you mean?"

"A dancer like you could write her own ticket anywhere, and not for the kind of peanuts I can pay you. You're in a jam."

She looked at the table and locked her fingers together. Their long pink nails glistened.

She whispered, "It isn't anything bad. Just a--a passport difficulty. I told you I was born in space. The records got lost somehow, and living the way we did--well, I had to come to Earth in a hurry, and I couldn't prove my citizenship, so I came without it. Now I can't get back to Venus where my money is, and I can't stay here. That's why I wanted so badly to get a job with you. You're going out, and you can take me." I knew how to do that, all right. I said, "You must have had a big reason to take the risk you did. If you're caught it means the Luna cell-blocks for a long time before they deport you."

She shivered. "It was a personal matter. It delayed me a while. I--was too late."

I said, "Sure. I'm sorry." I took her to her tent, left her there and went out to get the show running, cursing Sindi. I stopped cursing and stared when I passed the cooch tent. She was there, and giving.

She stuck out her tongue at me and I went on.

That evening I hired the punk, just a scrawny kid with a white face, who said he was hungry and needed work. I gave him to Tiny, to help

out in the brute top.

II: Voice of Terror

We played in luck that week. Some gilded darling of the screen showed up with somebody else's husband who wasn't quite divorced yet, and we got a lot of free publicity in the papers and over the air. Laura went on the second night and brought down the house. We turned 'em away for the first time in history. The only thing that worried me was Sindi. She wouldn't speak to me, only smile at me along her green eyes as though she knew a lot she wasn't telling and not any of it nice. I tried to keep an eye on her, just in case. For five days I walked a tightrope between heaven and hell. Everybody on the pitch knew I was a dead duck where Laura was concerned. I suppose they got a good laugh out of it--me, Jade Greene the carry boss, knocked softer than a cup custard by a girl young enough to be my daughter, a girl from a good family, a girl with talent that put her so far beyond my lousy dog-and-pony show.... I knew all that. It didn't do any good. I couldn't keep away from her. She was so little and lovely; she walked like music; her purple eyes had a tilt to them that kept you looking, and her mouth--

I kissed it on the fifth night, out back of the cooch tent when the show was over. It was dark there; we were all alone, and the faint spicy breath of her came to me through the thin salt fog. I kissed her. Her mouth answered mine. Then she wrenched away, suddenly, with a queer fury. I let her go. She was shuddering, and breathing hard. I said, "I'm sorry."

"It isn't that. Oh, Jade, I--" She stopped. I could hear the breath sobbing in her throat. Then she turned and ran away, and the sound of her weeping came back to me through the dark.

I went to my quarters and got out a bottle. After the first shot I just sat

staring at it with my head in my hands. I haven't any idea how long I sat there. It seemed like forever. I only know that the pitch was dark, sound asleep under a pall of fog, when Sindi screamed.

I didn't know it was Sindi then. The scream didn't have any personality. It was the voice of terror and final pain, and it was far beyond anything human. I got my gun out of the table drawer. I remember my palm was slippery with cold sweat. I went outside, catching up the big flashlight kept for emergencies near the tent flap. It was very dark out there, very still, and yet not quiet. There was something behind the darkness and the silence, hiding in them, breathing softly and waiting.

The pitch began to wake up. The stir and rustle spread out from the scream like ripples from a stone, and over in the brute top a Martian sand-cat began to wail, thin and feral, like an echo of death.

I went along between the tents, walking fast and silent. I felt sick, and the skin of my back twitched; my face began to ache from being drawn tight. The torch beam shook a little in my hand.

I found her back of the cooch tent, not far from where I'd kissed Laura. She was lying on her face, huddled up, like a brown island in a red sea. The little bells were still in her ears.

I walked in her blood and knelt down in it and put my hand on her shoulder. I thought she was dead, but the bells tinkled faintly, like something far away on another star. I tried to turn her over.

She gasped, "Don't." It wasn't a voice. It was hardly a breath, but I could hear it. I can still hear it. I took my hand away.

"Sindi--"

A little wash of sound from the bells, like rain far off--"You fool." she whispered. "The stage. Jade, the stage--"

She stopped. The croaker came from somewhere behind me and knocked me out of the way, but I knew it was no use. I knew Sindi had stopped for good. Humans and halflings were jammed in all round staring, whispering, some of them screaming a little. The brute top had gone crazy. They smelt blood and death on the night wind, and they wanted to be free and a part of it.

"Claws," the croaker said. "Something clawed her. Her throat--" I said, "Yeah. Shut up." I turned around. The punk was standing there, the white-faced kid, staring at Sindi's body with eyes glistening like shiny brown marbles.

"You," I said. "Go back to Tiny and tell him to make sure all his kids are there.... All the roustabouts and every man that can handle a gun or a tent stake, get armed as fast as you can and stand by.... Mike, take whatever you need and guard the gate. Don't let anybody or anything in or out without permission from me, in person. Everybody else get inside somewhere and stay there. I'm going to call the police."

The punk was still there, looking from Sindi's body to me and around the circle of faces. I yelled at him. He went away then, fast. The crowd started to break up.

Laura Darrow came out of it and took my arm.

She had on a dark blue dressing-gown and her hair was loose around her face. She had the dewy look of being freshly washed, and she breathed perfume. I shook her off. "Look out," I said. "I'm all-blood." I could feel it on my shoes, soaking through the thin stuff of my trouser legs. My stomach rose up under my throat. I closed my eyes

and held it down, and all the time Laura's voice was soothing me. She hadn't let go of my arm. I could feel her fingers. They were cold, and too tight. Even then, I loved her so much I ached with it.

"Jade," she said. "Jade, darling. Please--I'm so frightened." That helped. I put my arm around her and we started back toward my place and the phone. Nobody had thought to put the big lights on yet, and my torch beam cut a fuzzy tunnel through the fog.

"I couldn't sleep very well," Laura said suddenly. "I was lying in my tent thinking, and a little while before she screamed I thought I heard something--something like a big cat, padding."

The thing that had been in the back of my mind came out yelling. I hadn't seen Laska in the crowd around Sindi. If Laska had got hold of some coffee behind the cook's back....

I said, "You were probably mistaken."

"No. Jade."

"Yeah?" It was dark between the tents. I wished somebody would turn the lights on. I wished I hadn't forgotten to tell them to. I wished they'd shut up their over-all obligato of gabbling, so I could hear....

"Jade. I couldn't sleep because I was thinking--" Then she screamed.

* * *

He came out of a dark tunnel between two storage tents. He was going almost on all fours, his head flattened forward, his hands held in a little to his belly. His claws were out. They were wet and red, and his hands were wet and red, and his feet. His yellow-green eyes had a crazy shine to them, the pupils slitted against the light. His lips were

peeled back from his teeth. They glittered, and there was froth between them--Laska, coked to hell and gone!

He didn't say anything. He made noises, but they weren't speech and they weren't sane. They weren't anything but horrible. He sprang. I pushed Laura behind me. I could see the marks his claws made in the dirt, and the ridging of his muscles with the jump. I brought up my gun and fired, three shots.

The heavy slugs nearly tore him in two, but they didn't stop him. He let go a mad animal scream and hit me, slashing. I went part way down, firing again, but Laska was still going. His hind feet clawed into my hip and thigh, using me as something to push off from. He wanted the girl. She had backed off, yelling bloody murder. I could hear feet running, a lot of them, and people shouting. The lights came on. I twisted around and got Laska by the mane of fur on his backbone and then by the scruff. He was suddenly a very heavy weight. I think he was dead when I put the fifth bullet through his skull.

I let him drop.

I said, "Laura, are you all right?" I saw her brown hair and her big purple eyes like dark stars in her white face. She was saying something, but I couldn't hear what it was. I said, "You ought to faint, or something," and laughed.

But it was me, Jade Greene, that did the fainting.

I came out of it too soon. The croaker was still working on my leg. I called him everything I could think of in every language I knew, out of the half of my mouth that wasn't taped shut. He was a heavy man, with a belly and a dirty chin.

He laughed and said, "You'll live. That critter damn near took half your

face off, but with your style of beauty it won't matter much. Just take it easy a while until you make some more blood."

I said, "The hell with that. I got work to do." After a while he gave in and helped me get dressed. The holes in my leg weren't too deep, and the face wasn't working anyway, I poured some Scotch in to help out the blood shortage, and managed to get over to the office.

I walked pretty well.

That was largely because Laura let me lean on her. She'd waited outside my tent all that time. There were drops of fog caught in her hair. She cried a little and laughed a little and told me how wonderful I was, and helped me along with her small vibrant self. Pretty soon I began to feel like a kid waking up from a nightmare into a room full of sunshine. The law had arrived when we got to the office. There wasn't any trouble. Sindi's torn body and the crazy cat-man added up, and the Venusian cook put the lid on it. He always took a thermos of coffee to bed with him, so he'd have it first thing when he woke up--Venusian coffee, with enough caffeine in it to stand an Earthman on his head. Enough to finish off a Callistan cat-man. Somebody had swiped it when he wasn't looking. They found the thermos in Laska's quarters.

* * *

The show went on. Mobs came to gawk at the place where the killing had happened. I took it easy for one day, lolling in a shiny golden cloud with Laura holding my head.

Along about sundown she said, "I'll have to get ready for the show."

"Yeah. Saturday's a big night. Tomorrow we tear down, and then Monday we head out for Venus. You'll feel happier then?"

"Yes. I'll feel safe." She put her head down over mine. Her hair was like warm silk. I put my hands up on her throat. It was firm and alive, and it made my hands burn.

She whispered, "Jade, I—" A big hot tear splashed down on my face, and then she was gone.

I lay still, hot and shivering like a man with swamp-fever, thinking, Maybe. ...

Maybe Laura wouldn't leave the show when we got to Venus. Maybe I could make her not want to. Maybe it wasn't too late for dreaming, a dream that John Damien Greene had never had, sitting in a puddle of water at the end of a jetty stringer and fishing for perch.

Crazy, getting ideas like that about a girl like Laura. Crazy like cutting your own throat. Oh, hell. A man never really grows up, not past believing that maybe miracles still happen.

It was nice dreaming for a while.

It was a nice night, too, full of stars and the clean, cool ocean breeze, when Tiny came over to tell me they'd found the punk dead in a pile of straw with his throat torn out, and the Martian sand-cat loose.

III: Carnival of Death

We jammed our way through the mob on the midway. Lots of people having fun, lots of kids yelling and getting sick on Mercurian jitsi-beans and bottled Venusian fruit juice. Nobody knew about the killing. Tiny had had the cat rounded up and caged before it could get outside the brute top, which had not yet opened for business.

The punk was dead, all right--dead as Sindi, and in the same way.

His twisted face was not much whiter than I remembered it, the closed eyelids faintly blue. He lay almost under the sand-cat's cage.

The cat paced, jittery and snarling. There was blood on all its six paws. The cages and pens and pressure tanks seethed nastily all around me, held down and quiet by Tiny's wranglers.

I said, "What happened?"

Tiny lifted his gargantuan shoulders. "Dunno. Everything quiet. Even no yell, like Sindi. Punk kid all lonesome over here behind cages. Nobody see; nobody hear. Only Mars kitty waltz out on main aisle, scare hell out of everybody. We catch, and then find punk, like you see."

I turned around wearily. "Call the cops again and report the accident. Keep the rubes out of here until they pick up the body." I shivered. I'm superstitious, like all carnies.

They come in threes--always in threes. Sindi, the punk--what next?

Tiny sighed. "Poor punk. So peaceful, like sleeper with shut eye."

"Yeah." I started away. I limped six paces and stopped and limped back again. I said, "That's funny. Guys that die violent aren't tidy about their eyes, except in the movies."

I leaned over. I didn't quite know why, then. I do now. You can't beat that three-time jinx. One way or another, it gets you.

I pushed back one thin, waxy eyelid. After a while I pushed back the other. Tiny breathed heavily over my shoulder. Neither of us said anything. The animals whimpered and yawned and paced.

I closed his eyes again and went through his pockets. I didn't find

what I was looking for. I got up very slowly, like an old man. I felt like an old man. I felt dead, deader than the white-faced kid.

I said, "His eyes were brown."

Tiny stared at me. He started to speak, but I stopped him, "Call Homicide, Tiny. Put a guard on the body. And send men with guns...." I told him where to send them. Then I went back across the midway. A couple of Europeans with wiry little bodies and a twenty-foot wing-spread were doing Immelmans over the geek top, and on the bally stand in front of it two guys with six hands apiece and four eyes on movable stalks were juggling. Laura was out in front of the cooch tent, giving the rubes a come-on. I went around behind the tent, around where I'd kissed her, around where Sindi had died with the bells in her ears like a wash of distant rain. I lifted up the flap and went in.

The tent was empty except for the man that tends the juke box. He put out his cigarette in a hurry and said, "Hi, Boss," as though that would make me forget he'd been smoking. I didn't give a damn if he set the place on fire with a blowtorch. The air had the warm, musty smell that tents have. Enhali's Primitive Venus was crying out of the juke box with a rhythm like thrown spears.

I pulled the stage master, and then the whites. They glared on the bare boards, naked as death and just as yielding.

I stood there a long time.

After a while the man behind me said uneasily, "Boss, what--"

"Shut up. I'm listening."

Little bells, and a voice that was pain made vocal.

"Go out front." I said. "Send Laura Darrow in here. Then tell the rubes there won't be a show here tonight."

I heard his breath suck in, and then catch. He went away down the aisle. I got a cigarette out and lit it very carefully, broke the match in two and stepped on it. Then I turned around.

* * *

Laura came down the aisle. Her gold-brown hair was caught in a web of brilliants. She wore a sheath-tight thing of sea-green metal scales, with a short skirt swirling around her white thighs, and sandals of the shiny scales with no heels to them. She moved with the music, part of it, wild with it, a way I'd never seen a woman move before.

She was beautiful. There aren't any words. She was--beauty. She stopped. She looked at my face and I could see the quivering tightness flow up across her white skin, up her throat and over her mouth, and catch her breath and hold it. The music wailed and throbbed on the still, warm air. I said, "Take off your shoes, Laura. Take off your shoes and dance." She moved then, still with the beat of the savage drums, but not thinking about it. She drew in upon herself, a shrinking and tightening of muscles, a preparation.

She said, "You know."

I nodded. "You shouldn't have closed his eyes. I might never have noticed. I might never have remembered that the kid had brown eyes. He was just a punk. Nobody paid much attention. He might just as well have had purple eyes--like yours."

"He stole them from me." Her voice came sharp under the music. It had a hiss and a wail in it I'd never heard before, and the accent was harsher. "While I was in your tent, Jade. I found out when I went to

dress. He was an F-man. I found his badge inside his clothes and took it." Purple eyes looking at me--purple eyes as phony as the eyes on the dead boy. Contact lenses painted purple to hide what was underneath.

"Too bad you carried an extra pair, Laura, in case of breakage."

"He put them in his eyes, so he couldn't lose them or break them or have them stolen, until he could report. He threw away the little suction cup. I couldn't find it. I couldn't get the shells off his eyeballs. All I could do was close his eyes and hope--"

"And let the sand-cat out of his cage to walk through the blood." My voice was coming out all by itself. It hurt. The words felt as though they had fishhooks on them, but I couldn't stop saying them.

"You almost got by with it, Laura. Just like you got by with Sindi. She got in your way, didn't she? She was jealous, and she was a dancer. She knew that no true human could dance like you dance. She said so. She said you were a freak."

That word hit her like my fist. She showed me her teeth, white, even teeth that I knew now were as phony as her eyes. I didn't want to see her change, but I couldn't stop looking, couldn't stop.

I said, "Sindi gave you away before she died, only I was too dumb to know what she meant. She said, 'The stage.' "

I think we both looked, down at the stark boards under the stark lights, looked at the scratches on them where Laura had danced barefoot that first time and left the marks of her claws on the wood.

She nodded, a slow, feral weaving of the head.

"Sindi was too curious. She searched my tent. She found nothing, but she left her scent, just as the young man did today. I followed her back here in the dark and saw her looking at the stage by the light of matches. I can move in the dark, Jade, very quickly and quietly. The cook tent is only a few yards back of this one, and Laska's quarters close beyond that. I smelt the cook's coffee. It was easy for me to steal it and slip it through the tent flap by Laska's cot, and wake him with the touch of my claws on his face. I knew he couldn't help drinking it. I was back here before Sindi came out of the tent to go and tell you what she'd found."

She made a soft purring sound under the wicked music.

"Laska smelt the blood and walked in it, as I meant him to do. I thought he'd die before he found us--or me--because I knew he'd find my scent in the air of his quarters and know who it was, and what it was. My perfume had worn too thin by then to hide it from his nose."

I felt the sullen pain of the claw marks on my face and leg. Laska, crazy with caffeine and dying with it, knowing he was dying and wanting with all the strength of his drugged brain to get at the creature who had killed him. He'd wanted Laura that night, not me. I was just something to claw out of the way. I wished I hadn't stopped him.

I said, "Why? All you wanted was Laska. Why didn't you kill him?" The shining claws flexed out of her fingertips, under the phony plastic nails--very sharp, very hungry.

She said huskily, "My tribe sent me to avenge its honor. I have been trained carefully. There are others like me, tracking down the renegades, the dope-ridden creatures like Laska who sell our race for human money. He was not to die quickly. He was not to die without knowing. He was not to die without being given the chance to redeem himself by dying bravely."

"But I was not to be caught. I cost my people time and effort, and I am not easily replaced. I have killed seven renegades, Jade. I was to escape. So I wanted to wait until we were out in space."

She stopped. The music hammered in my temples, and inside I was dead and dried up and crumbled away.

I said, "What would you have done in space?" I knew the answer. She gave it to me, very simply, very quietly.

"I would have destroyed your whole filthy carnival by means of a little bomb in the jet timers, and gone away in one of the lifeboats." I nodded. My head felt as heavy as Mount Whitney, and as lifeless. "But Sindi didn't give you time. Your life came first. And if it hadn't been for the punk...."

No, not just a punk—an Immigration man. Somewhere Laura had slipped, or else her luck was just out. A white-faced youngster, doing his job quietly in the shadows, and dying without a cry. I started to climb down off the stage. She backed off. The music screamed and stopped, leaving a silence like the feel of a suddenly stopped heart.

Laura whispered, "Jade, will you believe something if I tell you?"

"I love you, Jade." She was still backing off down the aisle, not making any sound. "I deserve to die for that. I'm going to die. I think you're going to kill me, Jade. But when you do, remember that those tears I shed—were real." She turned and ran, out onto the midway. I was close. I caught her hair. It came free, leaving me standing alone just inside the tent, staring stupidly.

* * *

I had men out there, waiting. I thought she couldn't get through. But she did. She went like a wisp of cloud on a gale, using the rubes as a shield. We didn't want a panic. We let her go, and we lost her. I say we let her go. We couldn't help it. She wasn't bothering about being human then. She was all cat, just a noiseless blur of speed. We couldn't shoot without hurting people, and our human muscles were too slow to follow her. I knew Tiny had men at the gates and all around the pitch, anywhere that she could possibly get out. I wasn't worried. She was caught, and pretty soon the police would come. We'd have to be careful, careful as all hell not to start one of those hideous, trampling panics that can wreck a pitch in a matter of minutes.

All we had to do was watch until the show was over and the rubes were gone. Guard the gates and keep her in, and then round her up. She was caught. She couldn't get away. Laura Darrow....

I wondered what her name was, back on Callisto. I wondered what she looked like when she let the cross-shaped mane grow thick along her back and shoulders. I wondered what color her fur was. I wondered why I had ever been born.

I went back to my place and got my gun and then went out into the crowd again. The show was in full swing; lots of people having fun, lots of kids crazy with excitement; lights and laughter and music--and a guy out in front of the brute top splitting his throat telling the crowd that something was wrong with the lighting system and it would be a while before they could see the animals. A while before the cops would have got what they wanted and cleaned up the mess under the sand-cat's cage.

The squad cars would be coming in a few minutes. There wasn't anything to do but wait. She was caught. She couldn't escape.

The one thing we didn't think about was that she wouldn't try to. A Mercurian cave-tiger screamed. The Ionian quags took it up in their deep, rusty voices, and then the others chimed in, whistling, roaring, squealing, shrieking, and doing things there aren't any names for. I stopped, and gradually everybody on the pitch stopped and listened. For a long moment you could hear the silence along the midway and in the tents. People not breathing, people with a sudden glassy shine of fear in their eyes and a cold tightening of the skin that comes from way back beyond humanity. Then the muttering started, low and uneasy, the prelude to panic. I fought my way to the nearest bally stand and climbed on it. There were shots, sounding small and futile under the brute howl. I yelled, "Hey, everybody! Listen! There's nothing wrong. One of the cats is sick, that's all. There's nothing wrong. Enjoy yourselves." I wanted to tell them to get the hell out, but I knew they'd kill themselves if they started. Somebody started music going again, loud and silly. It cracked the icy lid that was tightening down. People began to relax and laugh nervously and talk too loudly. I got down and ran for the brute top. Tiny met me at the tent flap. His face was just a white blur. I grabbed him and said, "For God's sake, can't you keep them quiet?"

"She's in there, Boss--like shadow. No hear, no see. One man dead. She let my kids out. She--"

More shots from inside, and a brute scream of pain. Tiny groaned.

"My kids! No lights, Boss. She wreck 'em." I said, "Keep 'em inside. Get lights from somewhere. There's a blizzard brewing on the pitch. If that mob gets started...." I went inside. There were torch beams spearing the dark, men sweating and cursing, a smell of hot, wild bodies and the sweetness of fresh blood. Somebody poked his head inside the flap and yelled, "The cops are here!" I yelled back, "Tell 'em to clear the grounds if they can, without starting trouble. Tell--"

Somebody screamed. There was a sudden spangle of lights in the high darkness, balls of crimson and green and vicious yellow tumbling towards us, spots of death no bigger than your fist--the stinging fireflies of Ganymede. Laura had opened their case.

We scattered, fighting the fireflies. Somewhere a cage went over with a crash. Bodies thrashed, and feet padded on the packed earth--and somewhere above the noise was a voice that was sweet and silky and wild, crying out to the beasts and being answered.

I knew then why the brute top went crazy when Laska was around. It was kinship, not fear. She talked to them, and they understood. I called her name.

Her voice came down to me out of the hot dark, human and painful with tears.

"Jade! Jade, get out; go somewhere safe!"

"Laura, don't do this! For God's sake--"

"Your God, or mine? Our God forbids us to know humans except to kill. How, if we kept men as you kept Laska?"

"Laura!"

"Get out! I'm going to kill as many as I can before I'm taken. I'm turning the animals loose on the pitch. Go somewhere safe!" I fired at the sound of her voice.

She said softly, "Not yet, Jade. Maybe not at all." I beat off a bunch of fireflies hunting for me with their poisoned stings. Cage doors banged open. Wild throats coughed and roared, and suddenly the whole side wall of the tent fell down, cut free at the top, and there

wasn't any way to keep the beasts inside any more.

A long mob scream went up from outside, and the panic was on.

* * *

I could hear Tiny bellowing, sending his men out with ropes and nets and guns. Some huge, squealing thing blundered around in the dark, went past me close enough to touch, and charged through the front opening, bringing part of the top down. I was close enough behind it so that I got free. I climbed up on the remains of the bally stand. There was plenty of light outside--blue-white, glaring light, to show me the packed mass of people screaming and swaying between the tents, trampling toward the exits, to show me a horde of creatures sweeping down on them, caged beasts free to kill, and led by a lithe and leaping figure in shining green. I couldn't see her clearly. Perhaps I didn't want to. Even then she moved in beauty, like wild music--and she had a tail.

I never saw a worse panic, not even the time a bunch of Nahali swamp-edgers clemmed our pitch when I was a pony punk with Triangle. The morgues were going to be full that night. Tiny's men were between the bulk of the mob and the animals. The beasts had had to come around from the far side of the tent, giving them barely time to get set. They gave the critters all they had, but it wasn't enough.

Laura was leading them. I heard her voice crying out above all that din. The animals scattered off sideways between the tents. One Martian sand-cat was dead, one quag kicking its life out, and that was all. They hadn't touched Laura, and she was gone.

I fought back, away from the mob, back into a temporarily empty space behind a tent. I got out my whistle and blew it, the rallying call.

A snake-headed kibi from Titan sneaked up and tried to rip me open with its double-pointed tail. I fed it three soft-nosed slugs, and then there were half a dozen little moth-people bouncing in the air over my head, squeaking with fear and shining their great eyes at me.

I told them what I wanted. While I was yelling the Europeans swooped in on their wide wings and listened.

I said finally, "Did any of you see which way she went?"

"That way." One of the mothlings pointed back across the midway. I called two of the Europeans. The mothlings went tumbling away to spread my orders, and the bird-men picked me up and carried me across, over the crowd. The animals were nagging at their flanks, pulling them down in a kind of mad ecstasy. There was a thin salt fog, and blood on the night wind, and the cage doors were open at last.

They set me down and went to do what I told them. I went alone among the swaying tents.

All this hadn't taken five minutes. Things like that move fast. By the time the Europeans were out of sight the mothlings were back, spotting prowling beasts and rolling above them in the air to guide men to them—men and geeks. Geeks with armor-plated backs and six arms, carrying tear-gas guns and nets; lizard-men, fast and powerful, armed with their own teeth and claws and whatever they could pick up; spider-people, spinning sticky lassos out of their own bodies; the Europeans, dive-bombing the quags with tear gas. The geeks saved the day for us. They saved lives, and the reputation of their kind, and the carnival. Without them, God only knows how many would have died on the pitch. I saw the mothlings dive into the thick of the mob and pick up fallen children and carry them to safety. Three of them died, doing that. I went on, alone.

I was beyond the mob, beyond the fringe of animals. I was remembering Laura's voice saying, "Not yet, Jade. Maybe not at all." I was thinking of the walls being down and all California free outside. I was hearing the mob yell and the crash of broken tents, and the screams of people dying--my people, human people, with the claws bred out of them.

I was thinking--

Guns slamming and brute throats shrieking, wings beating fast against the hot hard glare, feet pounding on packed earth. I walked in silence, a private silence built around me like a shell....

Four big cats slunk out of the shadows by the tent. There was enough light left to show me their eyes and their teeth, and the hungry licking of their tongues.

Laura's voice came through the canvas, tremulous but no softer nor more yielding than the blue barrel of my gun.

"I'm going away, Jade. At first I didn't think there was any way, but there is. Don't try to stop me. Please don't try."

* * *

I could have gone and tried to find a cop. I could have called men or half-men from their jobs to help me. I didn't. I don't know that I could have made anybody hear me, and anyway they had enough to do. This was my job. My job, my carnival, my heart.

I walked toward the tent flap, watching the cats.

They slunk a little aside, belly down, making hoarse, whimpering noises. One was a six-legged Martian sand-cat, about the size of an

Earthly leopard. Two were from Venus, the fierce white beauties of the high plateaus. The fourth was a Mercurian cave-cat, carrying its twenty-foot body on eight powerful legs and switching a tail that had bone barbs on it.

Laura called to them. I don't know whether she said words in their language, or whether her voice was just a bridge for thought transference, one cat brain to another. Anyway, they understood.

"Jade, they won't touch you if you go."

I fired.

One of the white Venusians took the slug between the eyes and dropped without a whimper. Its mate let go a sobbing shriek and came for me, with the other two beside it.

I snapped a shot at the Martian. It went over kicking, and I dived aside, rolling. The white Venusian shot over me, so close its hind claws tore my shirt. I put a slug in its belly. It just yowled and dug its toes in and came for me again. Out of the tail of my eye I saw the dying Martian tangle with the Mercurian, just because it happened to be the nearest moving object. I kicked the Venusian in the face. The pain must have blinded it just enough to make its aim bad. On the second jump its forepaws came down on the outer edges of my deltoids, gashing them but not tearing them out. The cat's mouth was open clear to its stomach.

I should have died right then. I don't know why I didn't, except that I didn't care much if I did. It's the guys that want to live that get it, seems like. The ones that don't care go on forever.

I got a lot of hot bad breath in my face and five parallel gashes in back, where its hind feet hit me when I rolled up. I kicked it in the

belly. Its teeth snapped a half inch short of my nose, and then I got my gun up under its jaw and that was that. I had four shots left.

I rolled the body off and turned. The Martian cat was dead. The Mercurian stood over it, watching me with its four pale, hot eyes, twitching its barbed tail.

Laura stood watching us.

* * *

She looked just like she had the first time I saw her. Soft gold-brown hair and purple eyes with a little tilt to them, and a soft pink mouth. She was wearing the bronze metal-cloth dress and the bronze slippers, and there was still nothing wrong with the way she was put together. She glinted dully in the dim light, warm bronze glints.

She was crying, but there was no softness in her tears. The cat flicked its eyes at her and made a nervous, eager whine. She spoke to it, and it sank to its belly, not wanting to.

Laura said, "I'm going, Jade."

"No."

I raised my gun hand. The big cat rose with it. She was beyond the cat. I could shoot the cat, but a Mercurian lives a long time after it's shot.

"Throw down your gun, Jade, and let me go." I didn't care if the cat killed me. I didn't care if Death took me off piggy-back right then. I suppose I was crazy. Maybe I was just numb. I don't know. I was looking at Laura, and choking on my own heart. I said, "No."

Just a whisper of sound in her throat, and the cat sprang. It reared up

on its four hind feet and clawed at me with its four front ones. Only I wasn't where it thought I was. I knew it was going to jump and I faded--not far, I'm no superman--just far enough so its claws raked me without gutting me. It snapped its head down to bite.

I slammed it hard across the nose with my gun. It hurt, enough to make it wince, enough to fuddle it just for a split second. I jammed the muzzle into its nearest eye and fired.

Laura was going off between the tents, fast, with her head down, just a pretty girl, mingling with the mob streaming off the pitch. Who'd notice her, except maybe to whistle?

I didn't have time to get away. I dropped down flat on my belly and let the cat fall on top of me. I only wanted to live a couple of seconds longer. After that, the hell with it!

The cat was doing a lot of screaming and thrashing. I was between two sets of legs. The paws came close enough to touch me, clawing up the dirt. I huddled up small, hoping it wouldn't notice me there under its belly. Everything seemed to be happening very slowly, with a cold precision. I steadied my right hand on my left wrist.

I shot Laura three times, carefully, between the shoulders. The cat stopped thrashing. Its weight crushed me. I knew it was dead. I knew I'd done something that even experienced hunters don't do in nine cases out of ten. My first bullet had found the way into the cat's little brain and killed it.

It wasn't going to kill me. I pulled myself out from under it. The pitch was almost quiet now, the mob gone, the animals mostly under control. I kicked the dead cat. It had died too soon.

My gun was empty. I remember I clicked the hammer twice. I got

more bullets out of my pocket, but my fingers wouldn't hold them and I couldn't see to load. I threw the gun away.

I walked away in the thin, cold fog, down toward the distant beat of the sea.

The Citadel Of Lost Ships

Roy Campbell woke painfully. His body made a blind, instinctive lunge for the control panel, and it was only when his hands struck the smooth, hard mud of the wall that he realized he wasn't in his ship any longer, and that the Guard wasn't chasing him, their guns hammering death.

He leaned against the wall, the perspiration thick on his heavy chest, his eyes wide and remembering. He could feel again, as though the running fight were still happening, the bucking of his sleek ship beneath the calm control of his hands. He could remember the pencil rays lashing through the night, searching for him, seeking his life. He could recall the tiny prayer that lingered in his memory, as he fought so skillfully, so dangerously, to evade the relentless pursuer.

Then there was a hazy period, when a blasting cannon had twisted his ship like a wind-tossed leaf, and his head had smashed cruelly against the control panel. And then the slinking minutes when he had raced for safety--and then the sodden hours when sleep was the only thing in the Universe that he craved. He sank back on the hide-frame cot with something between a laugh and a curse. He was sweating, and his wiry body twitched. He found a cigarette, lit it on the second try, and sat still, listening to his heartbeats slow down. He began to wonder, then, what had wakened him.

It was night, the deep indigo night of Venus. Beyond the open hut door, Campbell could see the liha-trees swaying a little in the hot, slow breeze. It seemed as though the whole night swayed, like a dark blue veil. For a long time he didn't hear anything but the far-off

screaming of some swamp beast on the kill. Then, sharp and cruel against the blue silence, a drum began to beat.

It made Campbell's heart jerk. The sound wasn't loud, but it had a tight, hard quality of savagery, something as primal as the swamp and as alien, no matter how long a man lived with it.

The drumming stopped. The second, perhaps the third, ritual prelude. The first must have wakened him. Campbell stared with narrow dark eyes at the doorway. He'd been with the Kraylens only two days this time, and he'd slept most of that. Now he realized that in spite of his exhaustion, he had sensed something wrong in the village.

Something was wrong, very wrong, when the drum beat that way in the sticky night.

He pulled on his short black boots and went out of the hut. No one moved in the village. Thatch rustled softly in the slow wind, and that was the only sign of life.

Campbell turned into a path under the whispering liha-trees. He wore nothing but the tight black pants of his space garb, and the hot wind lay on his skin like soft hands. He filled his lungs with it. It smelled of warm still water and green, growing things, and....

Freedom. Above all, freedom. This was one place where a man could still stand on his legs and feel human.

The drumming started again, like a man's angry heart beating out of the indigo night. This time it didn't stop. Campbell shivered. The trees parted presently, showing a round dark hummock.

It was lit by the hot flare of burning liha pods. Sweet oily smoke curled up into the branches. There was a sullen glint of water through the

trees, but there were closer glints, brighter, fiercer, more deadly. The glinting eyes of men, silent men, standing in a circle around the hummock. There was a little man crouched on the mound in the center. His skin had the blue-whiteness of skim milk. He wore a kilt of iridescent scales. His face was subtly reptilian, broad across the cheekbones and pointed below. A crest of brilliant feathers--they weren't really feathers, but that was as close as Campbell could get--started just above his brow ridges and ran clean down his spine to the waist. They were standing erect now, glowing in the firelight.

He nursed a drum between his knees. It stopped being just a drum when he touched it. It was his own heart, singing and throbbing with the hate in it. Campbell stopped short of the circle. His nerves, still tight from his near-fatal brush with the Spaceguard, stung with little flaring pains. He'd never seen anything like this before.

The little man rocked slightly, looking up into the smoke. His eyes were half closed. The drum was part of him and part of the indigo night. It was part of Campbell, beating in his blood.

It was the heart of the swamp, sobbing with hate and a towering anger that was as naked and simple as Adam on the morning of Creation.

* * *

Campbell must have made some involuntary motion, because a man standing at the edge of the hummock turned his head and saw him. He was tall and slender, and his crest was pure white, a sign of age.

He turned and came to Campbell, looking at him with opalescent eyes. The firelight laid the Earthman's dark face in sharp relief, the lean hard angles, the high-bridged nose that had been broken and not set straight, the bitter mouth.

Campbell said, in pure liquid Venusian, "What is it, Father?" The Kraylen's eyes dropped to the Earthman's naked breast. There was black hair on it, and underneath the hair ran twisting, intricate lines of silver and deep blue, tattooed with exquisite skill.

The old man's white crest nodded. Campbell turned and went back down the path. The wind and the liha-trees, the hot blue night beat with the anger and the hate of the little man with the drum.

Neither spoke until they were back in the hut. Campbell lit a smoky lamp. The old Kraylen drew a long, slow breath.

"My almost-son," he said, "this is the last time I can give you refuge. When you are able, you must go and return no more."

Campbell stared at him. "But Father! Why?" The old man spread long blue-white hands. His voice was heavy.

"Because we, the Kraylens, shall have ceased to be." Campbell didn't say anything for a minute. He sat down on the hide-frame cot and ran his fingers through his black hair.

"Tell me, Father," he said quietly, grimly. The Kraylen's white crest rippled in the lamplight. "It is not your fight." Campbell got up. "Look. You've saved my neck more times than I can count. You've accepted me as one of your own. I've been happier here than any--well, skip that. But don't say it isn't my fight."

The pale, triangular old face smiled. But the white crest shook.

"No. There is really no fight. Only death. We're a dying tribe, a mere scrap of old Venus. What matter if we die now--or later?" Campbell lit a cigarette with quick, sharp motions. His voice was hard. "Tell me, Father. All, and quick."

Opalescent eyes met his. "It is better not."

"I said, 'tell me'!"

"Very well." The old man sighed. "You would hear, after all. You remember the frontier town of Lhi?"

"Remember it!" Campbell's white teeth flashed. "Every dirty stone in it, from the pumping conduits on up. Best place on three planets to fence the hot stuff."

He broke off, suddenly embarrassed. The Kraylen said gently, "That is your affair, my son. You've been away a long time. Lhi has changed. The Terra-Venusian Coalition Government has taken it for the administration center of Tehara Province."

Campbell's eyes, at mention of the Coalition Government, acquired a hot, hard brightness. He said, "Go on."

The old man's face was cut from marble, his voice stiff and distant.

"There have been men in the swamps. Now word has been sent us. It seems there is coal here, and oil, and certain minerals that men prize. They will drain the swamps for many miles, and work them."

Campbell let smoke out of his lungs, very slowly. "Yeah? And what becomes of you?"

The Kraylen turned away and stood framed in the indigo square of the doorway. The distant drum sobbed and shouted. It was hot, and yet the sweat turned cold on Campbell's body.

The old man's voice was distant and throbbing and full of anger, like the drum. Campbell had to strain to hear it.

"They will take us and place us in camps in the great cities. Small groups of us, so that we are divided and split. Many people will pay to see us, the strange remnants of old Venus. They will pay for our skills in the curing of leshen-skins and the writing of quaint music, and tattooing. We will grow rich."

Campbell dropped the cigarette and ground it on the dirt floor. Knotted veins stood out on his forehead, and his face was cruel. The old man whispered:

"We will die first."

* * *

It was a long time since anyone had spoken. The drumming had stopped, but the echo of it throbbed in Campbell's pulses. He looked at his spread, sinewy hands on his knees and swallowed because the veins of his neck were swollen and hurting.

Presently he said, "Couldn't you go farther back into the swamps?" The old Kraylen spoke without moving. He still stood in the doorway, watching the trees sway in the slow wind.

"The Nahali live there. Besides, there is no clean water and no earth for crops. We are not lizard eaters."

"I've seen it happen," said Campbell somberly. "On Earth, and Mars, and Mercury, and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. Little people driven from their homes, robbed of their way of life, exploited for the gaping idiots in the trade centers. Little people who didn't care about progress, and making money. Little people who only wanted to live, and breathe, and be let alone." He got up in a swift savage rush and hurled a gourd of water crashing into a corner and sat down again.

He was shivering. The old Kraylen turned.

"Little people like you, my son?"

Campbell shrugged. "Maybe. We'd worked our farm for three hundred years. My father didn't want to sell. They condemned it anyhow. It's under water now, and the dam runs a hell of a big bunch of factories."

"I'm sorry."

Campbell looked up, and his face softened. "I've never understood," he said.

"You people are the most law-abiding citizens I ever met. You don't like strangers. And yet I blunder in here, hot on the lam and ugly as a swamp-dragon, and you...."

He stopped. It was probably the excitement that was making his throat knot up like that. The smoke from the lamp stung his eyes. He blinked and bent to trim it.

"You were wounded, my son, and in trouble. Your quarrel with the police was none of ours. We would have helped anyone. And then, while you had fever and your guard was down, you showed that more than your body needed help. We gave you what we could."

"Yeah," said Campbell huskily. He didn't say it, but he knew well enough that what the Kraylens had given him had kept him from blowing his top completely. Now the Kraylens were going the way of the others, straws swept before the great broom of Progress. Nothing could stop it. Earth's empire surged out across the planets, building, bartering, crashing across time and custom and race to make money and the shining steel cage of efficiency. A cage wherein a sheep

could live happily enough, well-fed and opulent. But Campbell wasn't a sheep. He'd tried it, and he couldn't bleat in tune. So he was a wolf, now, alone and worrying the flock.

Soon there wasn't going to be a place in the Solar System where a man could stand on his own feet and breathe.

He felt stifled. He got up and stood in the doorway, watching the trees stir in the hot indigo gloom. The trees would go. Wells and mines, slag and soot and clattering machinery, and men in sweat-stained shirts laboring night and day to get, to grow, to produce.

Campbell's mouth twisted, bitter and sardonic. He said softly:

"God help the unconstructive!"

The old Kraylen murmured, "What happened to those others, my son?" Campbell's lean shoulders twitched. "Some of them died. Some of them submitted. The rest..."

He turned, so suddenly that the old man flinched. Campbell's dark eyes had a hot light in them, and his face was sharply alive.

"The rest," he said evenly, "went to Romany."

* * *

He talked, then. Urgently, pacing the hut in nervous catlike strides, trying to remember things he had heard and not been very much interested in at the time. When he was through, the Kraylen said:

"It would be better. Infinitely better. But--" He spread his long pale hands, and his white crest drooped. "But there is no time. Government men will come within three days to take us--that was the time set. And since we will not go ..."

Campbell thought of the things that had happened to other rebellious tribes. He felt sick. But he made his voice steady.

"We'll hope it's time, Father. Romany is in an orbit around Venus now—I nearly crashed it coming in. I'm going to try, anyhow. If I don't--well, stall as long as you can."

Remembering the drum and the way the men had looked, he didn't think that would be long. He pulled on a loose shirt of green spider-silk, slung the belt of his heavy needle-gun over one shoulder, and picked up his black tunic. He put his hand on the Kraylen's shoulder and smiled. "We'll take care of it, Father."

The old man's opalescent eyes were shadowed. "I wish I could stop you. It's hopeless for us, and you are--hot is that the word?" Campbell grinned. "Hot," he said, "is the word. Blistering! The Coalition gets awfully mad when someone pulls their own hijacking stunt on them. But I'm used to it."

It was beginning to get light outside. The old man said quietly, "The gods go with you, my son."

Campbell went out, thinking he'd need them.

It was full day when he reached his hidden ship--a sleek, souped-up Fitts-Sothern that had the legs of almost anything in space. He paused briefly by the airlock, looking at the sultry green of liha-trees under a pearl-gray sky, the white mist lapping around his narrow waist. He spent a long time over his charts, feeding numbers to the computers. When he got a set-up that suited him, he took the Fitts-Sothern up on purring

'copters, angling out over the deep swamps. He felt better with the

ship under his hands.

The Patrol blanket was thin over the deep swamps, but it was vigilant. Campbell's nerves were tight. They got tighter as he came closer to the place where he was going to have to begin his loop over to the night side. He was just reaching for the drive switch when the little red light started to flash on the indicator panel.

Somebody had a detector beam on him. And he was morally certain that the somebody was flying a Patrol boat.

II

THERE was one thing about the Venusian atmosphere. You couldn't see through it, even with infra-beams, at very long range. The intensity needle showed the Patrol ship still far off, probably not suspicious yet, although stray craft were rare over the swamps.

In a minute the copper would be calling for information, with his mass-detectors giving the stray a massage. Campbell didn't think he'd wait. He slammed in the drive rockets, holding them down till the tubes warmed. Even held down, they had plenty.

The Fitts-Sothern climbed in a whipping spiral. The red light wavered, died, glowed again. The cop was good with his beam. Campbell fed in more juice. The red light died again. But the Patrol boat had all its beams out now, spread like a fishnet. The Fitts-Sothern struck another, lost it, struck again, and this time didn't break out.

Campbell felt the sudden racking jar all through him. "Tractor beams," he said. "You think so, friend?"

The drive jets were really warming now. He shot it to them. The Fitts-Sothern hung for a fractional instant, her triple-braced hull shuddering

so that Campbell's teeth rang together.

Then she broke, blasting up right through the netted beams. Campbell jockeyed his port and starboard steering jets. The ship leaped and skittered wildly. The cop didn't have time to focus full power on him anywhere, and low power to the Fitts-Sothorn was a nuisance and nothing more.

Campbell went up over the Patrol ship, veered off in the opposite direction from the one he intended to follow, hung in a tight spiral until he was sure he was clean, and then dived again.

The Patrol boat wasn't expecting him to come back. The pilot was concentrating on where Campbell had gone, not where he had been. Campbell grinned, opened full throttle, and went skittering over the curve of the planet to meet the night shadow rushing toward him.

He didn't meet any more ships. He was way off the trade lanes, and moving so fast that only blind luck could tag him. He hoped the Patrol was hunting for him in force, back where they'd lost him. He hoped they'd hunt a long time. Presently he climbed on slowed and muffled jets, out of the atmosphere. His black ship melted indistinguishably into the black shadow of the planet. He slowed still more, just balancing the Venus-drag, and crawled out toward a spot marked on his chart.

An Outer Patrol boat went by, too far off to bother about. Campbell lit a cigarette with nervous hands. It was only a quarter smoked when the object he'd been waiting for loomed up in space.

His infra-beam showed it clearly. A round, plate-shaped mass about a mile in diameter, built of three tiers of spaceships. Hulks, ancient, rusty, pitted things that had died and not been decently buried, welded together in a solid mass by lengths of pipe let into their

carcasses.

Before, when he had seen it, Campbell had been in too much of a hurry to do more than curse it for getting in his way. Now he thought it was the most desolate, Godforsaken mass of junk that had ever made him wonder why people bothered to live at all.

He touched the throttle, tempted to go back to the swamps. Then he thought of what was going to happen back there, and took his hand away.

"Hell!" he said. "I might as well look inside." He didn't know anything about the internal set-up of Romany--what made it tick, and how. He knew Romany didn't love the Coalition, but whether they would run to harboring criminals was another thing.

It wouldn't be strange if they had been given pictures of Roy Campbell and told to watch for him. Thinking of the size of the reward for him, Campbell wished he were not quite so famous.

Romany reminded him of an old-fashioned circular mousetrap. Once inside, it wouldn't be easy to get out.

"Of all the platinum-plated saps!" he snarled suddenly.

"Why am I sticking my neck out for a bunch of semi-human swamp-crawlers, anyhow?"

He didn't answer that. The leading edge of Romany knifed toward him. There were lights in some of the hulks, mostly in the top layer. Campbell reached for the radio.

He had to contact the big shots. No one else could give him what he needed. To do that, he had to walk right up to the front door and

announce himself. After that....

The manual listed the wavelength he wanted. He juggled the dials and verniers, wishing his hands wouldn't sweat.

"Spaceship Black Star calling Romany. Calling Romany." His screen flashed, flickered, and cleared. "Romany acknowledging. Who are you and what do you want?"

* * *

Campbell's screen showed him a youngish man--a Taxil, he thought, from some Mercurian backwater. He was ebony-black and handsome, and he looked as though the sight of Campbell affected him like stale beer.

Campbell said, "Cordial guy, aren't you? I'm Thomas Black, trader out of Terra, and I want to come aboard."

"That requires permission."

"Yeah? Okay. Connect me with the boss."

The Taxil now looked as though he smelled something that had been dead a long time. "Possibly you mean Eran Mak, the Chief Councilor?"

"Possibly," Campbell admitted, "I do." If the rest of the gypsies were anything like this one, they sure had a hate on for outsiders. Well, he didn't blame them. The screen blurred. It stayed that way while Campbell smoked three cigarettes and exhausted his excellent vocabulary. Then it cleared abruptly.

Eran Mak sounded Martian, but the man pictured on the screen was no Martian. He was an Earthman, with a face like a wedge of granite

and a frame that was all gaunt bones and thrusting angles.

His hair was thin, pale-red and fuzzy His mouth was thin. Even his eyes were thin, close slits of pale blue with no lashes. Campbell disliked him instantly.

"I'm Tredrick," said the Earthman. His voice was thin, with a sound in it like someone walking on cold gravel. "Terran Overchief. Why do you wish to land, Black?"

"I bring a message from the Kraylen people of Venus. They need help." Tredrick's eyes became, if possible, thinner and more pale.

"Help?"

"Yes. Help." Campbell was struck by a sudden suspicion, something he caught flickering across Tredrick's granite features when he said "Kraylen." He went on, slowly, "The Coalition is moving in on them. I understand you people of Romany help in cases like that."

There was a small, tight silence.

"I'm sorry," said Tredrick. "There is nothing we can do." Campbell's dark face tightened. "Why not? You helped the Shenyat people on Ganymede and the Drylanders on Mars. That's what Romany is, isn't it—a refuge for people like that?"

"As a latnik, there's a lot you don't know. At this time, we cannot help anyone. Sorry, Black. Please clear ship."

The screen went dead. Campbell stared at it with sultry eyes. Sorry The hell you're sorry. What gives here, anyway?

He thrust out an angry hand to the transmitter. And then, quite

suddenly, the Taxil was looking at him out of the screen.

The hostile look was gone. Anger replaced it, but not anger at Campbell. The Taxil said, in a low rapid voice:

"You're not lying about coming from the Kraylens?"

"No. No, I'm not lying." He opened his shirt to show the tattoo.

"The dirty scut! Black, clear ship, and then make contact with one of the outer hulks on the lowest tier. You'll find emergency hatchways in some of the pipes. Come inside, and wait."

His dark eyes had a savage glitter. "There are some of us, Black, who still consider Romany a refuge!"

* * *

Campbell cleared ship. His nerves were singing in little tight jerks. He'd stepped into something here. Something big and ugly. There had been a certain ring in the Taxil's voice.

The thin, gravelly Mr. Tredrick had something on his mind, too. Something important, about Kraylens. Why Kraylens, of all the unimportant people on Venus?

Trouble on Romany. Romany the gypsy world, the Solar System's stepchild. Strictly a family affair. What business did a public enemy with a low number and a high valuation have mixing into that?

Then he thought of the drum beating in the indigo night, and an old man watching liha-trees stir in a slow, hot wind.

Roy Campbell called himself a short, bitter name, and sighed, and reached lean brown hands for the controls. Presently, in the infrafield,

he made out an ancient Krub freighter on the edge of the lowest level, connected to companion wrecks by sections of twelve-foot pipe. There was a hatch in one of the pipes, with a handwheel.

The Fitts-Sothern glided with exquisite daintiness to the pipe, touched it gently, threw out her magnetic grapples and suction flanges, and hung there. The airlock exactly covered the hatchway.

Campbell got up. He was sweating and as edgy as a tomcat on the prowl. With great care he buckled his heavy gun around his narrow hips. Then he went into the airlock.

He checked grapples and flanges with inordinate thoroughness. The hatch wheel jutted inside. He picked up a spanner and turned it, not touching the frigid metal.

There was a crude barrel-lock beyond. Campbell ran his tongue once over dry lips, shrugged, and climbed in.

He got through into a space that was black as the Coalsack. The air was thin and biting cold. Campbell shivered in his silk shirt. He laid his hand on his gun butt and took two cautious steps away from the bulge of the lock, wishing to hell he were someplace else.

Cold green light exploded out of nowhere behind him. He half turned, his gun blurring into his palm. But he had no chance to fire it. Something whipped down across the nerve center in the side of his neck. His body simply faded out of existence. He fell on his face and lay there, struggling with all his might to move and achieving only a faint twitching of the muscles.

He knew vaguely that someone rolled him over. He blinked up into the green light, and heard a man's deep, soft voice say from the darkness behind it:

"What made you think you could get away with it?" Campbell tried three times before he could speak. "With what?"

"Spying. Does Tredrick think we're children?"

"I wouldn't know." It was easier to speak this time. His body was beginning to fade in again, like something on a television screen. He tried to close his hand. It didn't work very well, but it didn't matter. His gun was gone. Something moved across the light. A man's body, a huge, supple muscular thing the color of dark bronze. It knelt with a terrible tigerish ease beside Campbell, the bosses on its leather kilt making a clinking noise. There was a jeweled gorget of reddish metal around the base of its throat. The stones had a wicked glitter.

The deep, soft voice said, "Who are you?"

Campbell tried to force the returning life faster through his body. The man's face was in shadow. Campbell looked up with sultry, furious eyes and achieved a definite motion toward getting up.

The kneeling giant put out his right arm. The green light burned on it. Campbell's eyes followed it down toward his throat. His face became a harsh, irregular mask cut from dark wood.

The arm was heavily, beautifully muscled. But where the hand should have been there was a leather harness and a hook of polished Martian bronze.

* * *

Campbell knew what had struck him. The thin, hard curve of the hook, more potent than the edge of any hand.

The point pricked his throat, just over the pulse on the left side. The

man said softly: "Lie still, little man, and answer." Campbell lay still. There was nothing else to do. He said, "I'm Thomas Black, if that helps. Who are you?"

"What did Tredrick tell you to do?"

"To get the hell out. What gives with you?" If that Taxil was spreading the word about him, he'd better hurry. Campbell decided to take a chance. The guy with the hook didn't seem to love Tredrick.

"The black boy in the radio room told me to come aboard and wait. Seems he's sore at Tredrick, too. So am I. That makes us all pals, doesn't it?"

"You lie, little man." The deep voice was quietly certain. "You were sent to spy. Answer!"

The point of the hook put the exclamation point on that word. Campbell winced away. He wished the lug wouldn't call him "little man." He couldn't remember ever having felt more hopelessly scared.

He said, "Damn your eyes, I'm not lying. Check with the Taxil. He'll tell you."

"And betray him to Tredrick? You're clumsy, little man." The hook bit deeper. Campbell's neck began to bleed. He felt all right again otherwise. He wondered whether he'd have a chance of kicking the man in the groin before his throat was torn out. He tried to draw farther away, but the pipe wall wouldn't give.

A woman's voice spoke then, quite suddenly, from beyond the green light. Campbell jumped. He hadn't even thought about anyone else being there. Now it was obvious that someone was holding the light.

The voice said, "Wait, Marah. Zard is calling me now." It was a clear, low voice. It had music in it. Campbell would have loved it if it had croaked, but as it was it made his nerves tingle with sheer ecstasy. The hook lifted out of the hole it had made, but it didn't go away. Campbell raised his head a little. The lower edge of the green light spilled across a pair of sandaled feet. The bare white legs above them were as beautiful as the voice, in the same strong clear way.

There was a long silence. Marah, the man with the hook, turned his face partly into the light. It was oblong and scarred and hard as beaten bronze. The eyes in it were smoky amber, set aslant under a tumbled crest of tawny hair. After a long time the woman spoke again. Her voice was different this time. It was angry, and the anger made it sing and throb like the Kraylen's drum.

"The Earthman is telling the truth, Marah. Zard sent him. He's here about the Kraylens."

The big man--a Martian Drylander, Campbell thought, from somewhere around Kesh--got up, fast. "The Kraylens!"

"He asked for help, and Tredrick sent him away." The light moved closer. "But that's not all, Marah. Tredrick has found out about--us. Old Ekla talked. They're waiting for us at the ship!"

III

Marah turned. His eyes had a greenish, feral glint like those of a lion on the kill. He said, "I'm sorry, little man."

Campbell was on his feet now, and reasonably steady "Think nothing of it," he said dourly. "A natural mistake." He looked at the hook and mopped the blood from his neck, and felt sick. He added, "The name's Black. Thomas Black."

"It wouldn't be Campbell?" asked the woman's voice. "Roy Campbell?" He squinted into the light, not saying anything. The woman said, "You are Roy Campbell. The Guard was here not long ago, hunting for you. They left your picture."

He shrugged. "All right. I'm Roy Campbell."

"That," said Merah softly, "helps a lot!" He could have meant it any way. His hook made a small, savage flash in the green light.

"There's trouble here on Romany. Civil war. Men are going to be killed before it's over--perhaps now. Where's your place in it?"

"How do I know? The Coalition is moving in on the Kraylens. I owe them something. So I came here for help. Help! Yeah."

"You'll get it," said the woman. "You'll get it, somehow, if any of us live." Campbell raised his dark brows. "What goes on here, anyhow?" The woman's low voice sang and throbbed against the pipe walls. "A long time ago there were a few ships. Old ships, crowded with people who had no homes. Little, drifting people who made a living selling their odd handicrafts in the spaceports, who were cursed as a menace to navigation and distrusted as thieves. Perhaps they were thieves. They were also cold, and hungry, and resentful.

"After a while the ships began to band together. It was easier that way--they could share food and fuel, and talk, and exchange ideas. Space wasn't so lonely. More and more ships drifted in. Pretty soon there were a lot of them. A new world, almost.

"They called it Romany, after the wandering people of Earth, because they were gypsies, too, in their own way.

"They clung to their own ways of life. They traded with the noisy, trampling people on the planets they had been driven away from because they had to. But they hated them and were hated, just as gypsies always are.

"It wasn't an easy life, but they were free in it. They could stand anything, as long as they were free. And always, anywhere in the Solar System, wherever some little lost tribe was being swallowed up and needed help, ships from Romany went to help them."

Her voice dropped. Campbell thought again of the Kraylen's drum, singing the anger in the indigo night.

"That was the creed of Romany," she whispered. "Always to help, always to be a refuge for the little people who couldn't adjust themselves to progress, who only wanted to die in dignity and peace. And now...."

"And now," said Marah somberly, "there is civil war."

* * *

Campbell drew a long, unsteady breath. The woman's voice throbbed in him, and his throat was tight. He said, "Tredrick?" Marah nodded. "Tredrick. But it's more than that. If it were only Tredrick, it wouldn't be so bad."

He ran the curve of his hook over his scarred chin, and his eyes burned like candle flames.

"Romany is growing old, and soft. That's the real trouble. Decay. Otherwise, Tredrick would have been kicked into space long ago. There are old men in the Council, Campbell. They think more of comfort than they do of--well...."

"Yeah. I know. What's Tredrick's angle?"

"I don't know. He's a strange man--you can't get a grip on him. Sometimes I think he's working for the Coalition."

Campbell scowled. "Could be. You gypsies have a lot of wild talents and some unique skills--I've met some of them. The man that controlled them would be sitting pretty. The Coalition would like it, too." The woman said bitterly, "And they could always exhibit us. Tours, at so much a head. So quaint--a cross-section of a lost world!"

"Tredrick's the strong man," Marah went on. "Eran Mak is Chief Councilor, but he does as Tredrick tells him. The idea is that if Romany settles down and stops getting into trouble with the Planetary Coalition, we can have regular orbits, regular trade, and so on."

"In other words," said Campbell, dryly, "stop being Romany."

"You understand. A pet freak, a tourist attraction, a fat source of revenue." Again the savage flash of the hook. "A damned circus!"

"And Tredrick, I take it, has decided that you're endangering the future of Romany by rebellion, and put the finger on you."

"Exactly." Marah's yellow eyes were bright and hard, meeting Campbell's. Campbell thought about the Fitts-Sothern outside, and all the lonely reaches of space where he could go. There were lots of Coalition ships to rob, a few plague-spots left to spend the loot in. All he had to do was walk out. But there was a woman's voice, with a note in it like a singing angry drum. There was an old man's voice, murmuring, "Little people like you, my son?" It was funny, how a man could be alone and not know he minded it, and then suddenly walk in on perfect strangers and not be alone any more--alone inside, that is--and know that he had minded it like hell.

It had been that way with the Kraylens. It was that way now. Campbell shrugged. "I'll stick around."

He added irritably, "Sister, will you for Pete's sake get that light out of my eyes?"

She moved it, shining it down. "The name's Stella Moore." He grinned. "Sorry. So you do have a face, after all." It wasn't beautiful. It was pale and heart-shaped, framed in a mass of unruly black hair. There were long, gray eyes under dark-gold brows that had never been plucked, and a red, sullen mouth.

Her teeth were white and uneven, when she smiled. He liked them. The red of her sullen lips was their own. She wore a short tunic the color of Tokay grapes, and the body under it was long and clean-cut. Her arms and throat had the whiteness of pearl.

Marah said quietly, "Contact Zard. Tell him to throw the PA system wide open and say we're taking the ship, now, to get the Kraylens!"

* * *

Stella stood absolutely still. Her gray eyes took on an eerie, remote look, and Campbell shivered slightly. He'd seen telepathy often enough in the System's backwaters, but it never seemed normal.

Presently she said, "It's done," and became human again. The green light went out. "Power," she explained. "Besides, we don't need it. Give me your hand, Mr. Campbell."

He did, with absolutely no aversion. "My friends," he said, "generally call me Roy." She laughed, and they started off, moving with quick sureness in the black, icy darkness.

The ship, it seemed, was up on the second level, on the edge of the living quarters. Down here was all the machinery that kept Romany alive--heat, light, water, air, and cooling systems--and a lot of storage hulks. The third tier was a vast hydroponic farm, growing the grain and fruit and vegetables that fed the Romany thousands.

Stumbling through pipes and dismantled hulks that smelled of sacking and dried vegetables and oil, Campbell filled in the gaps.

The leaders of the rebel element had held a meeting down here, in secret. Marah and the girl had been coming from it when Campbell blundered into them. The decision had been to rescue the Kraylens, no matter what happened. They'd known about the Kraylens long before Campbell had. Gypsies trading in Lhi had brought word. Now the Kraylens were a symbol over which two points of view were clashing in deadly earnest.

Remembering Tredrick's thin, harsh face, Campbell wondered uneasily how many of them would live to take that ship away.

He became gradually aware of a broken, rhythmic tap and clank transmitted along the metal walls.

"Hammers," said Stella softly. "Hammers and riveters and welders, fighting rust and age to keep Romany alive. There's no scrap of this world that wasn't discarded as junk and reclaimed by us."

Her voice dropped. "Including the people." Campbell said, "They're scrapping some beautiful things these days." She knew what he meant. She even laughed a little. "I was born on Romany. There are a lot of Earth people who have no place at home."

"I know." Campbell remembered his father's farm, with blue cold water over the fields instead of sky. "And Tredrick?"

"He was born here, too. But the taint is in him...." She caught her breath in a sudden sharp cry. "Marah! Marah, it's Zard!" They stopped. A pulse began to beat under Campbell's jaw. Stella whispered,

"He's gone. I felt him call, and now he's gone. He was trying to warn us." Marah said grimly, "Tredrick's got him, then. Probably knocked him out while he was trying to escape from the radio room."

"He was frightened," said Stella quietly. "Tredrick has done something. He wanted to warn us."

Marah grunted. "Have your gun ready, Campbell. We go up, now."

* * *

They went up a wooden ladder. It was suddenly getting hot. Campbell guessed that Romany was in the sun again. The Martian opened a door at the top, very, very slowly.

A young, vibrant voice sang out, "All clear!" They piled out of the doorway. Four or five husky young Paniki barbarians from Venus stood grinning beside two bound and slumbering Earthmen.

Campbell stared past them. The air was still and hot, hung with veils of steamy mist. There was mossy earth dotted with warm pools. There were liha-trees, sultry green under a pearly light that was still brightening out of indigo gloom.

A slow, hot breath of wind stirred the mist and liha-trees. It smelt of warm still water and growing things, and--freedom.

Campbell drew a long breath. His eyes stung and the veins in his neck hurt. He knew it was a dead hulk, with an iron sky above the

pearl-gray mist. But it smelled of freedom.

He said, "What are we waiting for?"

Marah laughed, and the young Venusian laughed. Barbarians, going to fight and laughing about it. Stella's gray eyes held a sultry flame, and her lips were blood-orange and trembling.

Campbell kissed them. He laughed, too, softly, and said, "Okay, gypsy. Let's go."

They went, through the seven hulks of the Venusian Quarter. Because of the Kraylens, most of the Venusians were with the rebels, but even so there were angry voices raised, and fists, and a few weapons, and some blood got spilled. More tow-headed young men joined them, and squat little upland nomads who could talk to animals, and three four-armed serpentine crawlers from the Lohari swamps.

They came presently to a huge dismantled freighter on the edge of the Venusian Quarter. There were piles of goods waiting lading through the row of airlocks, into smaller trading ships. Marah stopped, his gorget shooting wicked jeweled sparks in the sunlight that seared in through half-shuttered ports, and the others flowed in behind him.

They were on a narrow gallery about halfway up the inner wall. Campbell looked down. There were people on the ladders and the two balcony levels below. A sullen, ugly mob of people from Earth, from Venus, from Mars and Mercury and the moons of Jupiter and Saturn.

Men and near-men and sheer monstrosities, silent and watching in the hot light. Here a crest of scarlet antennae burning, there the sinuous flash of a scaled back, and beyond that the slow ominous

weaving of light-black tentacles.

A creature like a huge blue spider with a child's face let out a shrill unearthly scream. "Traitor! Traitor!"

The whole packed mass on the ladders and the galleries stirred like a weird tapestry caught in a gust of wind. The rushing whisper of their movement, their breathing, and their anger sang across Campbell's nerves in points of fire.

Anger. Anger in the Kraylen's drum and Stella's voice and Marah's yellow eyes. Anger like the sunlight, hot and primal. The anger of little men flogged into greatness.

A voice spoke from across the deck below, cold, clear, without the faintest tremor.

"We want no trouble. Return to your quarters quietly"

"The Kraylens!"

The name came thundering out of all those angry throats, beating down against the gaunt, erect figure standing in the forefront of a circle of Earthmen guarding the locks with ready guns.

Tredrick's thin, red head never stirred from its poised erectness. "The Kraylens are out of your hands, now. They harbored a dangerous criminal, and they are now being imprisoned in Lhi to answer for it." Roy Campbell gripped the iron railing in front of him. It seemed to him that he could see, across all that space, the cold, bright flame of satisfaction in Tredrick's eyes.

The thin, calm voice slid across his eardrums with the cruel impersonality of a surgeon's knife.

"That criminal, Roy Campbell, is now on Romany. The Guard is on its way here now. For the sake of the safety of your families, for the future of Romany, I advise no one to hide him or help him escape."

IV

Campbell stood still, not moving or speaking, his hard, dark face lined and dead, like old wood. From a great distance he heard Marah's smothered, furious curse, the quick catch of Stella's breath, the sullen breathing and stirring of the mob that was no longer sure what it wanted to do. But all he could see was the pale, kind face of an old man smiling in the warm, blue night, and the dirty, sordid stones of Lhi. A voice spoke, from beside the circle of armed men. Campbell heard it with some part of his brain. An old voice, dry and rustling, possessed of great dignity and great pain.

"My children," it said. "Have patience. Have faith that we, your leaders, have the good of Romany at heart."

Campbell looked with dead, dark eyes at the speaker, standing beside Tredrick. A small man in a robe of white fur. A Martian from one off the Polar Cities, frail, black-eyed, grave, and gently strong.

"Remember the cold, the hunger, the uncertainty we have endured. We have a chance now for security and peace. Let there be no trouble, now or when the Guard comes. Return to your quarters, quietly"

"Trouble!" Marah's voice roared out across the hot, still air. Every face down there below turned up toward the balcony. Campbell saw Tredrick start, and speak to one of the guards. The guard went out, not too fast. Campbell swore under his breath, and his heart began to tick over again, swift and hard. Marah thundered on, a bronze Titan in the sultry glare. His gorget, his yellow eyes, the bosses on his kilt,

held points of angry flame.

"You, Eran Mak, a Martian! Have you forgotten Kesh, and Balakar, and the Wells of Tamboina? Can you crawl to the Coalition like a sindar for the sake of the bones they throw you? You, Tredrick! You've sold us out. Since when have latniks been called to meddle in Romany's affairs?" Tredrick's cold voice was quite steady. "The Kraylens are beyond reach, Marah. A revolt will get you nothing. Do you want blood on your hands?"

"My hand," said Marah softly. His hook made a burning, vicious arc in the hot light. "If there's blood on this, the Coalition spilled it when their Frontier Marshal lopped my sword hand for raising it against him." The mob stirred and muttered. And Campbell said swiftly, "Tredrick's right. But there's still a chance, if you want to take it." Stella Moore put a hand on Marah's arm. "How?" Tredrick was still pretending he hadn't seen Campbell, pretending there weren't men crawling through dark tunnels to trap him.

"It'll mean trouble. It may mean death or imprisonment. It's a million-to-one shot. You'd better give me up and forget it."

The point of Marah's hook pricked under his jaw. "Speak quickly, little man!"

"Okay. Tell them to behave. Then get me out of here, fast!"

* * *

Tredrick's men knew their way around. A lot of gypsies, moreover, who weren't with Tredrick, joined the hunt for the latnik. They didn't want trouble with the Guard.

Campbell stumbled through a maze of dark and stifling passages,

holding Stella's hand and thinking of the Guard ships sweeping closer. They were almost caught a dozen times, trying to get across Romany to his ship. The hunt seemed to be an outlet for the pent feelings of Romany. Campbell decided he would never go hunting again. And then, just above where his ship lay, they stepped into a trap.

They were in the Saturnian Quarter, in the hulk devoted to refugees from Titan. There were coolers working here. There was snow on the barren rocks, glimmering in weird light like a dark rainbow.

"The caves," said Stella. "The Baraki." There was an echoing clamor of voices all around them, footsteps clattering over metal and icy rock. They ran, breathing hard. There were some low cliffs, and a ledge, and then caves with queer blue-violet fires burning in them. Creatures sat at the cave mouths. They were small, vaguely anthropoid, dead white, and unpleasantly rubbery. They were quite naked, and their single eyes were phosphorescent. Marah knelt.

"Little Fathers, we ask shelter in the name of freedom." The shouts and the footsteps were closer. There was sweat on Campbell's forehead. One of the white things nodded slightly.

"No disturbance," it whispered. "We will have no disturbance of our thoughts. You may shelter, to stop this ugly noise."

"Thank you, Little Father." Marah plunged into the cave, with the others on his heels. Campbell snarled, "They'll come and take us!" Stella's sullen lips smiled wolfishly. "No. Watch." The cave, the violet fire were suddenly gone. There was a queer darkness, a small electric shiver across Campbell's skin. He started, and the girl whispered:

"Telekinesis. They've built a walled off area around us. On the outside

it seems to be rock like the cave wall."

Marah moved, the bosses on his kilt clinking slightly. "When the swine are gone, there's a trap in this hulk leading down to the pipe where your ship is. Now tell us your plan."

Campbell made a short, bitter laugh. "Plan, hell. It's a gamble on a fixed wheel, and you're fools if you play it."

"And if we don't?"

"I'm going anyway. The Kraylens--well, I owe them something."

"Tell us the plan."

He did, in rapid nervous sentences, crouched behind the shielding wall of thought from those alien brains. Marah laughed softly.

"By the gods, little man, you should have been a Keshi!"

"I can think of a lot of things I should have been," said Campbell dourly.

"Hey, there goes our wall."

It hadn't been more than four minutes. Long enough for them to look and go away again. There might still be time, before the Guard came. There was, just. The getaway couldn't have been more perfectly timed. Campbell grinned, feeding power into his jets with exquisite skill. He didn't have a Chinaman's chance. He thought probably the gypsies had less than that of coming through. But the Kraylens weren't going to rot in the slave-pens of Lhi because of Roy Campbell.

Not while Roy Campbell was alive to think about it. And that, of

course, might not be long.

He sent the Fitts-Sothern shooting toward the night side of Venus, in full view and still throttled down. The Guard ships, nine fast patrol boats, took out after him, giving Romany the go-by. No use stopping there. No mistaking that lean, black ship, or whose hands were on the controls. Campbell stroked the firing keys, and the Fitts-Sothern purred under him like a cat. Just for a second he couldn't see clearly.

"I'm sorry, old girl," he said. "But that's how it has to be."

* * *

It was a beautiful chase. The Guard ships pulled every trick they knew, and they knew plenty. Campbell hunched over the keys, sweating, his dark face set in a grin that held no mirth. Only his hands moved, with nervous, delicate speed.

It was the ship that did it. They slapped tractors on her, and she broke them. They tried to encircle her, and she walked away from them. That slight edge of power, that narrow margin of speed, pulled Roy Campbell away from what looked like instant, easy capture.

He got into the shadow, and then the Guard began to get scared as well as angry. They stopped trying to capture him. They unlimbered their blasters and went to work.

Campbell was breathing hard now, through his teeth. His dark skin was oiled with sweat, pulled tight over the bones and the ridges of muscle and the knotted veins. Deliberately, he slowed a little.

A bolt flamed past the starboard ports. He slowed still more, and veered the slightest bit. The Fitts-Sothern was alive under his hands. He didn't speak when the next bolt struck her. Not even to curse. He

didn't know he was crying until he tasted the salt on his lips. He got up out of the pilot's seat, and then he said one word:

"Judas!"

The follow-up of the first shot blasted the control panel. It knocked him back across the cockpit, seared and scorched from the fusing metal. He got up, somehow, and down the passage to the lock compartment. There was a lot of blood running from his cheek, but he didn't care.

He could feel the ship dying under him. The timers were shot. She was running away in a crazy, blind spiral, racking her plates apart. He climbed into his suit. It was a special one, black even to the helmet, with a special harness-jet, illegally baffled. He hoped his hands weren't too badly burned.

The ship checked brutally, flinging him hard into the bulkhead. Tractors! He clawed toward the lock, an animal whimper in his throat. He hoped he wasn't going to be sick inside the helmet.

The panel opened. Air blasted him out, into jet-black space. The tiny spearing flame of the harness-rocket flickered briefly and died, unnoticed among the trailing fires of the derelict.

Campbell lay quite still in the blackened suit. The Guard ships flared by, playing the Fitts-Sothern like a tarpon on the lines of their tractor beams. Campbell closed his eyes and cursed them, slowly and without expression, until the tightness in his throat choked him off.

He let them get a long way off. Then he pressed the plunger of the rocket, heading down for the night-shrouded swamps of Tehara Province. He retained no very clear memory of the fall. Once, when he was quite low, a spaceship blazed by over him, heading toward

Lhi. There were still about eight hours' darkness over the swamps.

He landed, eventually, in a clearing he was pretty sure only he knew about. He'd used it before when he'd had stuff to fence in Lhi and wasn't sure who owned the town at the time. He'd learned to be careful about those things. There was a ship there now, a smallish trader of the inter-lunar type. He stared at it, not really believing it was there. Then, just in time, he got the helmet off.

When the world stopped turning over, he was lying with his head in Stella's lap. She had changed her tunic for plain spaceman's black, and it made her face look whiter and lovelier in its frame of black hair. Her lips were still sullen, and still red.

Campbell sat up and kissed them. He felt much better. Not good, but he thought he'd live. Stella laughed and said, "Well! You're recovering." He said, "Sister, you're good medicine for anything." A hand which he recognized as Marah's materialized out of the indigo gloom. It had a flask in it. Campbell accepted it gladly. Presently the icy deadness around his stomach thawed out and he could see things better.

He got up, rather unsteadily, and fumbled for a cigarette. His shirt had been mostly blown and charred off of him and his hands hurt like hell. Stella gave him a smoke and a light. He sucked it in gratefully and said:

"Okay, kids. Are we all ready?"

They were.

* * *

Campbell led off. He drained the flask and was pleased to find

himself firing on all jets again. He felt empty and relaxed and ready for anything. He hoped the liquor wouldn't wear off too soon.

There was a path threaded through the hammocks, the bogs and potholes and reeds and liha-trees. Only Campbell, who had made it, could have followed it. Remembering his blind stumbling in the mazes of Romany, he felt pleased about that. He said, rather smugly:

"Be careful not to slip. How'd you fix the getaway?" Marah made a grim little laugh. "Romany was a madhouse, hunting for you. Some of the hot-headed boys started minor wars over policy on top of that. Tredrick had to use most of his men to keep order. Besides, of course, he thought we were beaten on the Kraylen question."

"There were only four men guarding the locks," said Stella. "Marah and a couple of the Paniki boys took care of them."

Campbell remembered the spaceship flashing toward Lhi. He told them about it.

"Could be Tredrick, coming to supervise our defeat in person." Defeat! It was because he was a little tight, of course, but he didn't think anyone could defeat him this night. He laughed.

Something rippled out of the indigo night to answer his laughter. Something so infinitely sweet and soft that it made him want to cry, and then shocked him with the deep and iron power in it. Campbell looked back over his shoulder. He thought:

"Me, hell. These are the guys who'll do it, if it's done." Stella was behind him. Beyond her was a thin, small man with four arms. He wore no clothing but his own white fur and his head was crowned with feathery antennae. Even in the blue night the antennae and the man's eyes burned living scarlet.

He came from Callisto and he carried in his four hands a thing vaguely like a harp, only the strings were double banked. It was the harp that had spoken. Campbell hoped it would never speak against him.

Marah brought up the rear, swinging along with no regard for the burden he bore. Over his naked shoulder, Campbell could see the still white face of the Baraki from Titan, the Little Father who had saved them from the hunters. There were tentacles around Marah's big body like white ropes. Four gypsies and a public enemy. Five little people against the Terra-Venusian Coalition. It didn't make sense.

A hot, slow wind stirred the liha-trees. Campbell breathed it in, and grinned.

"What does?" he wondered, and stopped to part a tangle of branches. There was a stone-lined tunnel beyond.

"Here we go, children. Join hands and make like little mousies." He took Stella's hand in his left. Because it was Stella's he didn't mind the way it hurt. In his right, he held his gun.

V

He led them, quickly and quietly, along the disused branch of an old drainage system that he had used so often as a private entrance. Presently they dropped to a lower level and the conduit system proper.

When the rains were on, the drains would be running full. Now they were only pumping seepage. They waded in pitch darkness, bypassed a pumping station through a side tunnel once used for cold storage by one of Lhi's cautious business men, and then found steep,

slippery steps going up.

"Careful!" whispered Campbell. He stopped them on a narrow ledge and stood listening. The Callistan murmured, with faint amusement:

"There is no one beyond."

Antennae over ears. Campbell grinned and found a hidden spring. "Lhi is full of these things," he said. "The boys used to keep their little wars going just for fun, and every smart guy had several bolt holes. Maps used to sell high." They emerged in a very deep, very dark cellar. It was utterly still. Campbell felt a little sad. He could remember when Martian Mak's was the busiest thieves' market in Lhi, and a man could hear the fighting even here. He smiled bitterly and led the way upstairs.

Presently they looked down on the main gate, the main square, and the slave pens of Lhi. The surrounding streets were empty, the buildings mostly dark. The Coalition had certainly cleaned up when it took over the town. It was horribly depressing.

Campbell pointed. "Reception committee. Tredrick radioed, anyway. One'll get you twenty he followed it up in person."

The gate was floodlighted over a wide area and there were a lot of tough-looking men with heavy-duty needle guns. In this day of anesthetic charges you could do a lot of effective shooting without doing permanent damage. There were more lights and more men by the slave pens. Campbell couldn't see much over the high stone walls of the pens. Vague movement, the occasional flash of a brilliant crest. He had known the Kraylens would be there. It was the only place in Lhi where you could imprison a lot of people and be sure of keeping them.

Campbell's dark face was cruel. "Okay," he said. "Let's go."

* * *

Down the stone steps to the entrance. Stella's quick breathing in the hot darkness, the rhythmic clink of the bosses on Marah's kilt. Campbell saw the eyes of the Callistan harper, glowing red and angry. He realized he was sweating. He had forgotten his burns.

Stella opened the heavy steel-sheathed door. Quietly, slowly. The Baraki whispered, "Put me down."

Marah set him gently on the stone floor. He folded in upon himself, tentacles around white, rubbery flesh. His single eye burned with a cold phosphorescence.

He whispered, "Now."

The Callistan harper went to the door. Reflected light painted him briefly, white fur and scarlet crest and outlandish harp, and the glowing, angry eyes. He vanished. Out of nowhere the harp began to sing.

Through the partly opened door Campbell had a clear view of the square and the gate. In all that glare of light on empty stone nothing moved. And yet the music rippled out.

The guards. Campbell could see the startled glitter of their eyeballs in the light. There was nothing to shoot at. The harping was part of the night, as all-enveloping and intangible.

Campbell shivered. A pulse beat like a trip-hammer under his jaw. Stella's voice came to him, a faint breath out of the darkness.

"The Baraki is shielding him with thought. A wall of force that turns the

light."

The edge of the faint light touched her cheek, the blackness of her hair. Marah crouched beyond her, motionless. His hook glinted dully, curved and cruel.

They were getting only the feeble backwash of the harping. The Callistan was aiming his music outward. Campbell felt it sweep and tremble, blend with the hot slow wind and the indigo sky.

It was some trick of vibrations, some diabolical thrusting of notes against the brain, like fingers, to press and control. Something about the double-banked strings thrumming against each other under the cunning of four skilled hands. But it was like witchcraft.

"The Harp of Dagda," whispered Stella, and the Irish music in her voice was older than time. The Scot in Campbell answered it.

Somewhere outside a man cursed, thickly, like one drugged with sleep and afraid of it. A gun went off with a sharp slapping sound. Some of the guards had fallen down.

The harp sang louder, throbbing along the gray stones. It was the slow wind, the heat, the deep blue night. It was sleep.

The floodlights blazed on empty stone, and the guards slept. The Baraki sighed and shivered and closed his eye. Campbell saw the Callistan harper standing in the middle of the square, his scarlet crest erect, striking the last thrumming note.

Campbell straightened, catching his breath in a ragged sob. Marah picked up the Baraki. He was limp, like a tired child. Stella's eyes were glistening and strange. Campbell went out ahead of them.

It was a long way across the square, in the silence and the glaring lights. Campbell thought the harp was a nice weapon. It didn't attract attention because everyone who heard it slept.

He flung back the three heavy bars of the slave gate. The pain of his burned hands jarred him out of the queer mood the harping and his Celtic blood had put on him. He began to think again.

"Hurry!" he snarled at the Kraylens. "Hurry up!" They came pouring out of the gate. Men, women with babies, little children. Their crests burned in the sullen glare.

Campbell pointed to Marah. "Follow him!" They recognized him, tried to speak, but he cursed them on. And then an old man said:

"My son."

Campbell looked at him, and then down at the stones. "For God's sake, Father, hurry." A hand touched his shoulder gently. He looked up again, and grinned. He couldn't see anything. "Get the hell on, will you?" Somebody found the switch and the nearer lights went out.

The hand pressed his shoulder, and was gone. He shook his head savagely. The Kraylens were running now, toward the house. And then, suddenly, Marah yelled. Men were running into the square. Eight or ten of them, probably the bodyguard of the burly gray-haired man who led them. Beside the gray-haired man was Tredrick, Overchief of the Terran Quarter of Romany.

* * *

They were startled. They hadn't been expecting this. Campbell's battle-trained eye saw that. Probably they had been making a routine tour of inspection and just stumbled onto the crash-out.

Campbell fired from the hip. Anesthetic needles sprayed into the close-packed group. Two of them went down. The rest scattered, dropping flat. Campbell wished there had been time to kill the gate lights. At least, the shadows made shooting tricky.

He bent over and began to run, guarding the rear of the Kraylen's line. Stella, in the cover of the doorway, was laying down a methodical wall of needles. Campbell grinned.

Some of the Kraylens caught it and had to be carried. That slowed things down. Campbell's gun clicked empty. He shoved in another clip, cursing his burned fingers. A charge sang by him, close enough to stir his hair. He fired again, blanketing the whole sector where the men lay. He wished he could blow Tredrick's head off.

The Kraylens were vanishing into the house. Marah and the Callistan had gone ahead, leading them. Campbell groaned. Speed was what they needed. Speed. A child, separated from his mother in the rush, knelt on the stones and shrieked. Campbell picked him up and ran on.

Enemy fire was slackening. Stella was doing all right. The last of the Kraylens shoved through the door. Campbell bounded up the steps. Stella got up off her belly and smiled at him. Her eyes shone. They were halfway through the door when the cold voice behind them said, "There are lethal needles in my gun. You had better stop."

Campbell turned slowly. His face was wooden. Tredrick stood at the bottom of the steps. He must have crawled around the edge of the square, where the shadows were thick under the walls.

"Drop your gun, Campbell. And you, Stella Moore." Campbell dropped it. Tredrick might be bluffing about those needles. But a Mickey at this stage of the game would be just as fatal. Stella's gun

clattered beside him. She didn't say anything, but her face was coldly murderous.

Tredrick said evenly, "You might as well call them back, Campbell. You led them in, but you're not going to lead them out." It was funny, Campbell thought, how a man's voice could be so cold when his eyes had fire in them. He said sullenly, "Okay, Tredrick. You win. But what's the purpose behind this?"

Tredrick's face might have been cut from granite, except for the feral eyes.

"I was born on Romany. I froze and starved in those rotten hulks. I hated it. I hated the darkness, the loneliness, the uncertainty. But when I said I hated it, I got a beating.

"Everybody else thought it was worth it. I didn't. They talked about freedom, but Romany was a prison to me. I wanted to grow, and I was stifled inside it. Then I got an idea.

"If I could rule Romany and make a treaty with the Coalition, I'd have money and power. And I could fix it so no more kids would be brought up that way, cold and hungry and scared.

"Marah opposed me, and then the Kraylens became an issue." Tredrick smiled, but there was no mirth or softness in it. "It's a good thing. The Coalition can take care of Marah and you others who were mixed up in this. My way is clear."

Stella said softly between her teeth, "They'll never forgive you for turning Romany people over to the latniks. There'll be war." Tredrick nodded soberly. "No great change is made without bloodshed. I'm sorry for that. But Romany will be happier."

"We don't ask to be happy. We only ask to be free." Campbell said wearily, "Stella, take the kid, will you?" He held out the little Kraylen, droopy and quiet now. She looked at him in quick alarm. His feet were spread but not steady, his head sunk forward. She took the child. Campbell's knees sagged. One seared arm in a tattered green sleeve came up to cover his face. The other groped blindly along the wall. He dropped, rather slowly, to his knees.

The groping hand fell across the gun by Stella's foot. In one quick sweep of motion Campbell got it, threw it, and followed it with his own body.

* * *

The gun missed, but it came close enough to Tredrick's face to make him move his hand. The involuntary muscular contraction of his whole body spoiled his aim. The charge went past Campbell into the wall.

They crashed down together on the stones. Campbell gripped Tredrick's wrist, knew he couldn't hold it, let go with one hand and slashed backward with his elbow at Tredrick's face.

The gun let off again, harmlessly. Tredrick groaned. His arm was weaker. Campbell thrashed over and got his knee on it. Tredrick's other fist was savaging his already tortured body.

Campbell brought his fist down into Tredrick's face. He did it twice, and wept and cursed because he was suddenly too weak to lift his arm again. Tredrick was bleeding, but far from out. His gun was coming up again. He didn't have much play, but enough.

Campbell set his teeth. He couldn't even see Tredrick, but he swung again. He never knew whether he connected or not.

Something thrummed past his head. He couldn't say he heard it. It was more like feeling. But it was something deadly, and strange. Tredrick didn't make a sound. Campbell knew suddenly that he was dead.

He got up, very slow, shaking and cold. The Callistan harper stood in the doorway. He was lowering his hands, and his eyes were living coals. He didn't say anything. Neither did Stella. But she laughed, and the child stirred and whimpered in her arms.

Campbell went to her. She looked at him with queer eyes and whispered, "I called him with my mind. I knew he'd kill."

He took her face in his two hands. "Listen, Stella. You've got to lead them back. You've got to touch my mind with yours and let me guide you that way, back to the ship."

Her eyes widened sharply. "But you can come. He's dead. You're free now."

"No." He could feel her throat quiver under his hands. Her blood was beating. So was his. He said harshly, "You fool, do you think they'll let you get away with this? You're tackling the Coalition. They can't afford to look silly. They've got to have a scapegoat, something to save face!

"Romany, so far, is beyond planetary control. Slap your tractors on her, tow her out. Clear out to Saturn if you have to. Nobody saw the Callistan. Nobody saw anybody but me and the Kraylens, and an unidentifiable somebody up here on the porch. Nobody, that is, but Tredrick, and he won't talk. Do you understand?"

She did, but she was still rebellious. Her sullen lips were angry, her eyes bright with tears and challenging. "But you, Roy?" He took his

hands away. "Damn you, woman! If I hide out on Romany I bring you into Guard jurisdiction. I'll be trapped, and Romany's last chance to stay free will be gone."

She said stubbornly, "But you can get away. There are ships."

"Oh, sure. But the Kraylens are there. You can't hide them. The Coalition will search Romany. They'll ask questions. I tell you they've got to have a goat!" He was really weak, now. He hoped he could hold out. He hoped he wouldn't do anything disgraceful. He turned away from her, looking out at the square. Some of the guards were beginning to stir.

"Will you go?" he said. "Will you get to hell out?" She put her hand on him. "Roy..."

He jerked away. His dark face was set and cruel. "Do you have to make it harder? Do you think I want to rot on Phobos in their stinking mines, with shackles on my feet?" He swung around, challenging her with savage eyes.

"How else do you think Romany is going to stay free? You can't go on playing cat and mouse with the big shots this way. They're getting sick of it. They'll pass laws and tie you down. Somebody's got to spread Romany all over the Solar System. Somebody's got to pull a publicity campaign that'll make the great dumb public sit up and think. If public opinion's with you, you're safe." He smiled. "I'm big news, Stella. I'm Roy Campbell. I can splash your lousy little mess of tin cans all over with glamour, so the great dumb public won't let a hair of your little head be hurt. If you want to, you can raise a statue to me in the Council hall.

"And now will you for God's sake go?"

She wasn't crying. Her gray eyes had lights in them. "You're wonderful, Roy. I didn't realize how wonderful."

He was ashamed, then. "Nuts. In my racket you don't expect to get away with it forever. Besides, I'm an old dog. I know my way around. I have a little money saved up. I won't be in for long."

"I hope not," she said. "Oh, Roy, it's so stupid! Why do Earthmen have to change everything they lay their hands on?"

He looked at Tredrick, lying on the stones. His voice came slow and somber.

"They're building, Stella. When they're finished they'll have a big, strong, prosperous empire extending all across the System, and the people who belong to that empire will be happy.

"But before you can build you have to grade and level, destroy the things that get in your way. We're the things--the tree-stumps and the rocks that grew in the way and can't be changed.

"They're building; they're growing. You can't stop that. In the end it'll be a good thing, I suppose. But right now, for us...." He broke off. He thrust her roughly inside and locked the steel-sheathed door.

"You've got to go now."

It was dark, and hot. The Kraylen child whimpered. He could feel Stella close to him. He found her lips and kissed them.

He said, "So long. And about that statue. You'd better wait until I come back to pose for it."

His voice became a longing whisper.

"I will be back!" he promised.

Last Call For Sector 9G

By LEIGH BRACKETT

Out there in the green star system; far beyond the confining grip of the Federation, moved the feared Bitter Star, for a thousand frigid years the dark and sinister manipulator of war-weary planets.

MARTIE said monotonously, "There is someone at the door sir shall I answer? There is someone at the door sir shall I--"

Durham grunted. What he wanted to say was go away and let me alone. But he would only grunt, and Artie kept repeating the stupid question. Artie was a cheap off-brand make, and bought used and he lacked some cogs. Any first class servall would have seen that the master had passed out in his chair and was in no condition to receive guests. But Artie did not, and presently Durham got one eye open and then he began to hear the persistent knocking, the annunciator being naturally out of order. And he said quite clearly.

"If it's a creditor, I'm not in."

"--shall I answer?"

Durham made a series of noises. Artie took them for an affirmative and trundled off. Durham put his face in his hands and struggled with the pangs of returning consciousness, He could hear a mutter of voices in the hall. He thought suddenly that he recognized them, and he sprang, or rather stumbled up in alarm, hastily combing his hair with his fingers and trying to pull the wrinkles out of his tunic. Through a thick haze he saw the bottle on the table and he picked it up and hid it under a chair, ashamed not of its emptiness but of its label. A gentleman should not be drunk on stuff like that.

Paulsen and Burke came in.

Durham stood stiffly beside the table, hanging on. He looked at the two men. "Well," he said. "It's been quite a long time." He turned to Artie. "The gentlemen are leaving."

Burke stepped quickly behind the servall and pushed the main toggle to OFF, Artie stopped, with a sound ridiculously like a tired sigh. Paulsen went past him and locked the door. Then both of them turned in to face Durham.

Durham scowled. "What the devil do you think you're doing?"

Burke and Paulsen glanced at each other as though resolve had carried them this far but had now run out, leaving them irresolute in the face of some distasteful task. Both men wore black dominos, with the cowls thrown back.

"Were you afraid you'd be recognized coming here?" Durham said. A small pulse of fright began to beat in him, and this was idiotic. It made him angry. "What do you want?"

Paulsen said in a reluctant voice, not looking at him, "I don't want anything Durham, believe me." Durham had once been engaged to Paulsen's sister, a thing both of them preferred not to ren but couldn't quite forget. He went on, "We were sent here."

Durham tried to think who might sent them. Certainly not any of the girls; certainly not any one of the people he owed money to. Two members of the Terran World Embassy corps, even young and still obscure members in the lower echelons, were above either of those missions.

"Who sent you?"

Burke said, "Hawtree."

"No," said Durham. "Oh no, you got the name wrong. Hawtree wouldn't send for me if I was the last man in the galaxy. Hawtree, indeed."

"Hawtree," said Paulsen. He drew a deep breath and threw aside his domino. "Come on, Burke."

Burke took off his domino. They came on together.

Durham drew back. His shoulders dropped and his fists came up. "Look out," he said. "What you going to do? Look out!"

"All right," said Burke, and they both jumped together and caught his arms, not because Durham was so big or so powerful that he frightened them, but because they disliked the idea of brawling with a drunken man. Paulsen said,

"Hawtree wants you tonight, and he wants you sober, and that, damn it, is the way he's going to get you."

AN HOUR and seven minutes later Durham sat beside Paulsen in a 'copter with no insigne and watched the roof of his apartment tower fall away beneath him.

Burke had stayed behind, and Durham wore the Irishman's domino with the cowl up over his head. Under the domino was his good suit, the one he had not sent to the pawnbroker because he could not, as yet, quite endure being without one good suit. He was scrubbed and shaved and perfectly sober. Outside he did not look too bad. Inside he was a shambles.

The 'copter fitted itself into a north-south lane. Paulsen, muffled in his cowl, sat silent. Durham felt a similar reluctance to speak. He looked out over The Hub, and tried to keep from thinking. Don't run to meet it, don't get your hopes up. Whatever it is, let it happen, quietly.

The city was beautiful. Its official name was Galactic Center, but it was called The Hub because that is what it was, the hub and focus of a galaxy. It was the biggest city in the Milky Way. It covered almost the entire land area of the third planet of a Type G star that someone with a sense of humor had christened Pax. The planet was chosen originally because it was centrally located and had no inhabitants, and because it was within the limits of tolerance for the humanoid races. The others mostly needed special accommodations anyway.

And so from a sweet green any world with nothing on it but trees and grass and a few mild-natured animals The Hub had grown to have a population of something like ten billion people, spread horizontally and stacked up vertically and dug in underneath, and every one of them was engaged in some governmental function, or in espionage, or in both. Intrigue was as much a part of life in The Hub as corpuscles are a part of blood. The Hub boasted that it the only inhabited world in space where no single grain of wheat or saddle of mutton was grown, where nothing was manufactured and nobody worked at a manual job.

Durham loved it passionately.

Both moons were in the sky now, One was small and low, like a white pearl hung just out of reach. The other was enormous. It had an atmosphere, and it servedd as warehouse and supply base for the planet city, handling the billions of tons of shipping that kept it going. The two of them made a glorious spectacle verhead, but Durham did not bother to see them. The vast glow of the city paled them, made

them unimportant. He was remembering how he had seen it when he was fresh from Earth, for the first time--the supreme capital, beside which the world capitals were only toy cities, the heart and center of the galaxy where the decisions were made and the great men came and went. He was remembering how he had felt how he had been so sure of the future that he never gave it a second thought.

But something happened.

What?

Liquor, they said, and the accident.

No, not liquor, the hell with them. I could always carry my drinks.

The accident. Well, what of it? Didn't other people have accidents? And anyway, nobody really got hurt out of it. He didn't, and the girl didn't--what if she wasn't his fiancée?--and the confidential file he had in the 'copter hadn't fallen into anybody's hands. So there wasn't anything to that.

No. Not liquor and not the accident, no matter what they said. It was Hawtree, and a personal grudge because he, Durham, had had Hawtree's daughter out with him in the 'copter that night. And so what? He was only engaged to Willa Paulsen, not married to her, and anyway Susan Hawtree knew what she was doing. She knew darn well.

Hawtree, a grudge, and a little bad luck. That's what happened. And that's all.

The 'copter swerved and dropped onto a private landing stage attached to a penthouse. Durham knew it well, though he hadn't seen it for over a year. He got out, aware of palpitations and a gone feeling

in the knees. He needed a drink, but he knew that he would have to go inside first and he forced himself to stand up and walk beside Paulsen as though nothing had ever happened. The head high, the face proud and calm, just a touch of bitterness but not too much.

Hawtree was alone in the living room. He glanced at Durham as he came in through the long glass doors. There was a servall standing in the corner and Hawtree said to it, "A drink for the gentleman, straight and stiff."

A small anger stirred in Durham. Hawtree might at least have given him the choice. He said sharply, "No thanks."

Hawtree said, "Don't be a fool." He looked tired, but then he always had. Tired and keyed up, full of the drive and the brittle excitement of one who has juried peoples and nations, expressed as black marks on sheets of varicolored paper for so long that it has become a habit as necessary and destructive as hashish. To Paulsen he said, "I'll ring when I need you."

Paulsen went out. The servall placed the drink in Durham's hand. He did not refuse it.

"Sit down," said Hawtree, and Durham sat, Hawtree dismissed the servall. Durham drank part of his drink and felt better. Well, he said, "I'm listening".

"You were a great disappointment to me, Durham."

"What am I supposed to say to that?"

"Nothing. Go ahead, finish your drink, I want to talk to a man, not a zombie."

Durham finished it angrily. "If you brought me all the way here to shake your finger at me, I'm going home again." That was what he said aloud. Inside, he wanted to get down and embrace Hawtree's knees and beg him for another chance.

"I brought you here," said Hawtree, "to offer you a job. If you do it, it might mean that certain doors could be opened for you again.

Durham sat perfectly still. For a moment he did not trust himself to speak. Then he said, "I'll take it."

Certain doors. That's what I've waited for, living like a bum, dodging creditors, hocking my shoes, waiting for those doors to open again.

HE TRIED not to show how he felt, sitting stiffly at ease in the chair, but a red flush began to burn in his cheeks and his hands moved. About time. About time, damn you, Hawtree, that you remembered me.

Damn you, oh damn you for making me sweat so long!

Hawtree said, "Did you ever hear of Nanta Dik?"

"No. What is it?"

"A planet. It belongs to a green star system, chart designation KL421, Sub-sector 9G, Sector 80, Quadrant 7. It's a very isolated system, the only inhabited one in 9G, as a matter of fact. 9G is a Terran quota sector, and since Nanta Dik is humanoid, it's become headquarters for our nationals who are engaged in business in that sub-sector."

Durham nodded. Unassimilated territory lying outside the Federation was divided among Federation members, allowing them to engage

in trade only in their allotted sectors and subject to local law and license. This eliminated competitive friction between Federation worlds, threw open new areas to development, and eventually--usually under the sponsorship of the federated world--brought the quota sectors into the vast family of suns that had already spread over more than half the galaxy. There were abuses now and again, but on the whole as a system, it worked pretty well.

"I take it that Nanta Dik is where I'm going."

"Yes. Now listen. First thing in the morning, go and book a third-class passage to Earth on the Sylvania Merchant, leaving on the day following. Let your friends know you're going home. They won't be surprised."

"Don't rub it in."

"Sorry. When you reach the spaceport walk across the main rotunda near the newsstand. Drop your ticket and your passport, folded together, go on to the newsstand and wait. They will be returned to you by a uniformed attendant, only your passport will be in a different name and your ticket will now be on a freighter outbound for Nanta Dik. You will then embark at once. Is that all clear?"

"Everything but the reason."

"I'll come to that. How good is your memory?"

"As good as it ever was."

"All right. When you reach Nanta Dik a man will meet you as you leave the ship. He will ask if you are the ornithologist. You will say yes. Then--pay close attention to this--you will say, The darkbuds will soon fly. Got that?"

"The darkbirds will soon fly. Simple enough. What's it mean?"

"9G is a rich sector, isolated, improperly policed, underpopulated. There has been a certain amount of trouble, poaching, claim jumping, outright piracy. The 'darkbirds' are a couple of suspected ships. We want to set a trap for them, and you know how things are on The Hub. If a man buys a pair of socks, the news is all across the galaxy in a week. That's the reason for all the secrecy."

"Is that all?"

"No." Hawtree got up, turning his I on Durham. He said harshly, "Listen Lloyd." It was the first time he had used Durham's Christian name. "This is an important job. It may not seem like one, but it is. Do it. There's somebody else who ited you to have another chance."

Durham did not say anything. He waited for Hwtree to turn around and face him and say the name. But he didn't, and finally Durham said,

"Susan?"

"I don't know what she sees in you," said Hawtree, and pushed a button. Paulsen came in. Hawtree jerked a thumb at Durham. "Take him back. And tell Burke to give him the money."

Durham went out and got into the 'copter. He felt dizzy, and this time it was not from drinks or the lack of them. He sat, and Paulsen took the 'copter off.

Hawtree watched it from inside the glass doors until it was out of sight above the roof. And another man came from behind a door that led into Hawtree's private study, and watched it with him.

"Are you sure about him?" asked the man.

"I know him," Hawtree said. "He's a slob."

"But are you sure?"

"Don't worry, Morrison," Hawtree said. "I know him. He'll talk. Bet you a hundred he never even makes the spaceport."

"Blessed are the fools," said Morrison, "for they shall inherit nothing."

II

BAYA sat on the bed and watched him pack. She was from one of the worlds of Mintaka, and as humanoid as they came, not very tall but very well shaped, and colored one beautiful shade of old bronze from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, except for her mouth, which was a vivid red.

"It seems funny," she said, "to think of you not being here tomorrow."

"Will you die of missing me?"

"Probably, for a day or two. I was comfortable. I hate upheavals."

Durham reached across her for his small stack of underwear. She was wearing the yellow silk thing that made her skin glow-by contrast. He saw that it was dubiously clean about the neck, and when he paused to kiss her he noticed the tiny lines around her mouth and eyes, the indefinable look of wear and hardness that was more destructive to beauty than the mere passing of years. Yesterday they had been two of a kind, part of the vast backwash left behind by other people's successes. Today he was far above her. And he was glad.

"The least you could do," she said, "would be to make this a really

big evening. But I suppose you couldn't run to that."

"I've got money." Burke had given him some, but that was for expenses and he would neither mention it nor touch it. "Artie brought a pretty good price, so did the furniture." There was nothing left in the apartment but the bed, and even that was sold. He had bought back a few of his better belongings, and he still had a wad of credits. He felt good. He felt joyous and expansive. He felt like a man again. He poured two drinks and handed one to Baya.

"All right," he said, "here's to a big last evening. The biggest."

They had cocktails in a bar called The Moonraker because it was the highest point in that hemisphere of the city. It was the hour between sunset and moonrise, when the towers stood sharply defined against a sky of incredible dark blueness, with the brighter stars pricked out in it, and the dim canyons at the feet of the towers were lost in the new night, spectral, soft and lovely. And the night deepened, and the lights came on.

They wandered for a while among the high flung walkways that spanned the upper levels of the towers so that people need not spend half their lives in elevators. They skirted the vast green concourse from which the halls of government rose up white and unadorned and splendid. They only skirted one corner of it, because this galactic Capitol Hill ran for miles, dominating the whole official complex, and one enormous building of it was fitted up so that the non-humanoid Members of Universal Parliament could "attend" the sessions in comfort, never leaving their especially pressurized and congenially poisonous suites. Between humanoid and non-humanoid there were many scientific gradations of form. But for governmental purposes it boiled down simply to oxygen-breather or non-oxygen-breather.

"Human or not," said Durham, standing on an upper span, with the good liquor burning bright inside him, "human or not, they're only men like me. What they've done, I can do."

"This is dull," said Baya.

"Dull," said Durham. He shook his head in wonderment, staring at her. She was beautiful. Tonight she wore white, and her hair curled softly on her neck, and her mouth was languorous, and her eyes--her eyes were hard. They were always hard, always making a liar out of that pliant, generous mouth. "Doll, he said. "No wonder you never got anywhere."

She flared up at that, and said a few things about him. He knew they were no longer true, so he could afford to be amused by them. He smiled and said,

"Let's not quarrel, Baya. This is goodbye, remember. Come on, we'll have a drink at the Miran."

They floated down on the bright spider web levels of the walkways, drifting east, stopping at the Miran and then going on to another drinking place, and then to another. The walks were thronged with other people, people from hundreds of stars, thousands of worlds. People of an infinite variety of sizes, shapes and colors, dressed in every imaginable and unimaginable fashion. Ambassadors, MP's, wives and mist couriers, calculator jockeys, topologists and graph men, office girls, hairdressers, janitors, pimps, you-name-it. Durham saw them through a golden haze, and loved them, because they were the city and he was a part of them again.

He was out of the backwash of not-being. Hawtree had had to give in, and this footling errand to some dust speck nobody ever heard of was simply a necessary device to save his own face. All right,

Hawtree, fine. We will go along with the gag. And you may inform the haughty Miss Hawtree, who can, believe us, be also the naughty Miss Hawtree, that we don't know if we want her back or not. We'll see.

"--take me with you," Baya was saying. Durham shook his head. "Lone trip, honey. Can't possibly."

"Are you ashamed of me, Lloyd? That's it, you're ashamed to take me to Earth."

"No. No. Now, Baya--"

He looked at her. His vision was a bit blurred by now, he could see just enough background to wonder how the devil they'd got to this closed-in-looking drinking place. But Baya's face was clear enough. She was crying.

"Now, Baya, honey, it s not that--it s not that at all."

"Then why can't I go with you to Earth?"

"Because--listen, Baya, can you keep a secret?" He laughed, and his own laughter sounded blurred too. "Promise?"

"Promise."

"I--"

DEAD stop. The words rattled on his tongue, but remained unspoken. Why? Was it because of Baya's eyes, that wept tears but had no sorrow in them? He could see them quite clearly, and they were not sorrowful at all, but avid.

"I promised, Lloyd. You can tell me." There was a table under his hands, with an exotically patterned cloth on it. He had no memory of

having sat down at it. There was a wall of plasticoid cement covered with a crude mural in bright primaries. There was a low, vaulted ceiling, also painted. There were no windows.

"How did we get here?" Durham asked stupidly. "It's underground."

"It's just a place," Baya said impatiently. And then she said sharply, "What's the matter with you?"

Blood and fumes hammered together in his bulging temples, and his back felt cold. "Where's the men's room, Baya?"

Her mouth set in anger and disgust. She called, "Varnik!"

A tall powerful man with a very long neck and skin the color of a ripe plum came up to the table. He wore an apron.

Baya said, "Better take him there, Varnik."

The plum colored man took him and ran him to a door and put him through it. From there a servall took over. It was very efficient.

"Are you through, sir?"

"God, no. Not nearly."

One more word and you would have been through. Forever. Drunken blabbermouth Durham, smart aleck Durham, would-be big shot Durham, ready to babble out his secret and blow his last chance of a comeback. But why did Baya have to be so insistently curious?

Why, indeed?

He began to feel both sick and scared.

After a time he made it to the row of basins and splashed cold water on his face and head. There was a mirror above the basin. He looked into it. "Hello, bum," he said.

Face it, Durham. You're a drunken bum. You are exactly what Willa Paulsen said you were, what Susan Hawtree said you were, what they all said you were. You get a second chance, and you go right out and get drunk and blow it Or, almost. Another minute and you'd have blabbed everything you know to Baya.

Baya, who cried because he wouldn't tell her; who had brought him to this rathole. He took a clearer look at it when he went shakily out of the men's room. The place almost empty, and it had a close, smothery feeling. Durham had never liked these underground streets, this vaguely un-demi-world that wound itself around the foundations of the city. It was considered smart to go slumming here, but this place was somehow wrong.

There were a man and woman at a table across the room, a young, pale green couple who pretended too carefully not to see him. There was Varnik, the plum colored proprietor, at a tall desk beside the main door. And there was Baya at their table.

She handed him a glass when he came over. "Feel better? I ordered you a sedative." Without sitting down he put the glass to his lips. It did not taste like any sedative he could remember, and he thought he had tried them all.

"I don't want it."

"Don't be a fool, Lloyd. Take it." Her eyes were cold now, and he was suddenly quite sure why he had been brought here.

Durham said softly, "Good night, tramp. Giod night and good-bye."

He ran around the table and made a rush for the entrance.

Varnik stepped from the tall desk to bar his way, holding out a piece of paper. "Sir," he said. "Your check."

Durham heard three chairs scrape behind him. He did not pause. He bent and drove the point of his shoulder as hard as he could at a spot just above Varnik's wide belt. Varnik let go a gasping sigh and wheeled away. Durham went out the door.

The underground street was brightly lighted. It ran straight to right and left, under a low roof, and disappeared on either hand around a right angle turn. Durham went to the left for no particular reason. There were people on the street. He dodged among them, running. They stopped and stared at him, and there was an echo of other feet behind him, also running. He sped around the corner, and it occurred to him that he was completely lost, that he did not even know what part of the city lay above him, or how far. There were different levels to this under-city, following down the foundations, the conduits and tubes and sewers and pumping stations. For the first time he began to feel genuinely trapped, and genuinely afraid.

The street ran straight ahead until it ended against a buttressed foundation wall. There were doors and windows on either side of it. People lived here. There were joints, some fancy-exotic for the carriage trade, others just joints. A couple of smaller streets opened off it, darker and more winding. Durham plunged into one, pausing briefly to look back. Fleeting like deer around the corner were the young pale green couple who had sat at the other table in Varnik's. There was something about the purposeful way they ran that sent a quiver of pure terror through Durham's insides.

He ran again, as hard as he could, wondering who the devil they were and what they wanted with him.

What did anyone want with him, and the small bit of a secret he carried?

THE narrow street wound and twined. Clearly echoing along the vault of the roof he could hear footsteps. One. Two. Coming fast. He saw an opening no wider than a crack in the wall. He turned into it. It was quite dark in there and he knew he could not go much farther, and that fact added to his burden of shame. There had been a time when this much of a sprint would hardly have breathed him. He tottered on, looking for a place to hide in, and there wasn't any, and his heart banged and floundered against his ribs, and the muscles of his thighs were like wet strings.

There was a square opening with blank walls all around it and a great big manhole cover in the middle. There was the way he had come in, and there was another narrow way he might have come out, but Varnik was coming through it, running a little crooked and breathing hard. He stopped when he saw Durham. Baya, panting up behind, almost ran into him. Varnik grunted and sprang.

With feeble fierceness, Durham resisted. It got him nowhere. The plum colored man struck him several times out of pure pique, cursing Durham for making trouble, for bruising his gut, for making him run like this. Baya stood by and watched.

"Will you behave now?" Varnik demanded. He whacked Durham again, and Durham glared at him out of dazed eyes and felt the world tilt and slide away from him.

Suddenly there were new voices, footsteps, confusion. He fell, what seemed a long way but was really only to his hands and knees.

The young couple had come into the square space. They were small

like the people, muscled like ocelots and their skin color was a pale green, very pretty, and characteristic of several different races, but no good for identification here. The girl's tunic had slipped aside over the breast, and the skin there was a clear gold, like new country butter. They both had guns in their strong little fists, and they were speaking over Durham to Varnik and Baya.

"We will question this man alone." "Oh, no," said Varnik angrily. "You don't get away with that." Baya bent over Durham. "Come on, lover," she said. "Get up." Her voice was cooing. To the strangers she said, "That wasn't our deal at all." "You failed," said the girl with the two-colored skin, and she fired a beam with frightening accuracy, exactly between them. A piece of the wall behind them fused and flared. Varnik's eyes came wide open.

"Well," he said. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it."

He turned. Baya hesitated, and the muzzle of the gun began to move her way. She snarled something in her own language and decided to go after Varnik.

Durham got his hands and feet bunched under him. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew that once he was left alone with the two small fleet strangers he would eventually talk, and after that it would not matter much what happened to him.

He said to them, hopefully, "You have the wrong man. I don't know--"

There were the five of them in the small space. There were the two couples facing each other, and Durham on his knees between them. And then there was something else.

There was a spiky shadow, perfectly black, of undetermined size and nameless shape, except that it was spiky.

Baya did not quite scream. She pressed against Varnik, and they both recoiled into the alley mouth. The young couple paled under their greenness, and they, too, drew back. Durham crouched on the ground.

The shadow bounded and rolled and leaped through the air and hung cloudlike over Durham's head. Suddenly it shrieked out, in a high, toneless voice like that of a deaf child, a clatter of gibberish in which one syllable stood clear, repeated several times.

"Jubb!" said the shadow. "Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!"

III

JUBB. It might have been a name, a curse, or a battle cry. Whatever it was, the young couple did not like it. Their faces twisted into slim masks of hate. They raised their guns at the shadow, and the shadow laughed. Abruptly it bunched up small and shot at them.

Durham heard them yell, in pain or fright or both, and he heard their running feet, but he did not see what happened to them. He was going away himself, down the narrow alley that Varnik and Baya were no longer interested in blocking. When he reached the end of the alley he came out onto a well lighted street with lots of people on it, but he still did not feel safe.

Varnik and Baya were not far away. Baya was leaning against a wall, with her mouth wide open. She was not used to running. Varnik was standing beside her looking sulky. He scowled at Durham when he came out of the alley. Durham stopped, bracing himself and ready to yell for help. But Varnik shook his h "Nyuh!" he said.

Baya panted. "What's the matter, you afraid?"

"Yes," said Varnik. "Those two little green ones, they are not playing for fun. And that black one--" He quivered all over. I'm afraid. I see you again, Baya." He went away. Baya was close onto tears, partly from her own fright, partly from sheer fury and frustration. But she did not. She turned and looked at Durham. "What got into you?" she said. "It was all set, and then you had to louse it up." She cursed him. "It's just like you, Lloyd, to cost me a nice chunk of money."

"Who are those people, Baya?"

"They didn't tell me. I didn't ask."

"Total strangers, eh?"

"Turned up this afternoon at my apartment. I should think you could tell. They're not the type I run with."

"No." He frowned, still breathing hard and wiping sweat from his face. "How did they know about us?"

She shrugged, and said maliciously, "Somebody must have told them. Well, so long, Lloyd. I wish you all the luck you deserve."

She walked off slowly, patting her hair into place, straightening the line of her white dress. She did not look back. Durham watched her for a second. Then he began to walk fast as he could in the opposite direction, keeping in the brightest lights. After a bit he found a stairwalk. He rode up on it through two levels, and all the while the roots of his hair were prickling and he was darting nervous glances over his shoulder and into the air over his head.

Jubb. Jubb. Jubb.

He envied Varnik who could go away and forget the whole thing.

It was still night when he reached the surface. The shadow did not seem to have followed him, but how could you tell? Even a city as brilliantly lighted as The Hub always has shadowy corners by night. He kept listening for that high, flat, hooting voice. It did not speak to him, and he hailed a skycab, appalled by how little time he had left to catch the pre-dawn ferry.

He made it with no minutes to spare. He found a place on the dark side and settled himself for the four-hour run, and then everything caught up to him at once and he began to shake. He sat there in the grip of a violent reaction, living over again Hawtree's instructions and the evening with Baya and the nightmare run through the underground streets, and the coming of the shadow. The dark birds will soon fly. Was that enough for people to kill for? It might be if they had an interest in those ships, but the young couple did not look the type. And the shadow?

He shivered and looked out the port. The long thin shadow of the ship extended itself indefinitely into space, but all around it there was light, and the curve of the planet below was a blaze of gold. Down there was Hawtree and a big part of his life. Above and ahead was the huge cool face of the moon, and that was the future, all unexplored. Durham clenched his cold hands together between his knees and thought, I've got to do this, stay sober and do it, a little for Hawtree but mostly for myself. A man can't look at himself twice the way I did tonight. Once is all he can stand. And once ought to be enough.

The brightness blurred and swam. Presently he slept, and his dreams were thronged with shadows hooting "Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!"

Four hours later Durham walked across the vast main rotunda of the lunar spaceport, dropping his little bundle of passport and ticket as casually as he could. He continued on to the newsstand and made a

pretense of looking over the half credit microbooks, waiting.

While he waited he wondered. He wondered how the young couple had known about Baya. He wondered what the shadow md where it came from, and why it had defended him from the young couple, and what was the meaning of the rather ridiculous word "Jubb." He wondered if he wasn't crazy not to pick up his ticket to Earth and use it.

He wanted a drink very badly.

A uniformed attendant came and said, "I think you dropped this, sir."

He held out a passport with a ticket folded in it. Durham examined them, put them in his pocket, and tipped the attendant, who went away. Durham bought three microbooks and moved on. He could not see anybody watching him, and he told himself it was only nerves that made the skin creep on his back as though eyes were boring into it.

The switch had been made all right on his papers. His name was now John Mills Watson and he had a passage to Nanta Dik aboard the freighter Margaretta K. He still wanted a drink. He was determined that he would not go and get it, and he headed grimly for a stairwalk that led down to the port cab system. He had almost stepped onto it, and then from the loudspeakers all over the huge rotunda a voice boomed out, saying, "Mr. Lloyd Durham, please come to the Information Desk."

Durham flinched as though somebody had struck him. He thought, Hawtree's sent word to recall me. Perhaps it was a trap.

HE APPROACHED the desk cautiously, while his name continued to blare forth from the loudspeakers. Somebody was standing there. A woman, with her back to him. He had not seen that back for over a

year, not since the night of the accident, but he had not forgotten it.

"Hello, Susan," he said.

She turned around, and he added bitterly, "He needn't have sent you." He was convinced now that she had come to call him back.

She seemed surprised. "Who?"

"Your father."

"Dad? Good heavens, Lloyd, you don't suppose he knows I'm here!" She was tall, as he remembered her, and handsome, and beautifully dressed, and very self-assured. She smiled, one of those brittle things with no humor in it, and then she asked, "How long have you before take-off?"

Durham said slowly, "Time enough."

"We can't talk here."

"No. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

They walked in silence to the crowded, noisy spaceport bar. They found a place and sat down. Durham ordered. Susan Hawtree sat opening and closing her handbag as though the operation was of the most absorbing interest.

He asked, "Why did you come here?" "It seemed as though somebody ought to say good-bye."

"Who told you I was leaving?" "I have a friend in the travel office. She tells me if anybody I know books passage home."

"Convenient."

"Yes."

The drinks came. There was a clatter of voices, speaking in a thousand tongue laughing, crying, saying hello and good-bye and till we meet again. Susan turned her glass round and round in her fingers, and Durham watched her.

"I'm sorry, Lloyd. Sorry everything could not have turned out better."

"Yes. So am I."

"I hope you'll have better luck at home."

"Thanks."

Another silence in which Durham tried hard to figure her angle.

He said, "I heard you tried to talk your father into giving me another chance. Thanks for that."

She stared at him blankly and shook her head. "You know how Dad feels about you. I've never dared mention your name." A cold feeling settled in the pit of Durham's stomach. There's somebody else, Lloyd, who wanted you to have another chance. Fatherly intuition?

Or a big fat lie?

Let's face it, Durham, why would Hawtree send you on a mission to the dog pound? There are ten billion people on The Hub. He could have found somebody else.

The whole business smells. It reeks. But wait. Suppose he sent Susan here to test me; to see if I'd talk? Not too believable, but a pleasanter belief than the alternative. Let's see.

"Susan. Look, I can say this now because I'm going home and that's the end of it. We won't see each other any more. I should never have got engaged to Willa, I didn't love her. It was you all the time."

He caught the quick glint of tears in her eyes and was appalled. Tears for him? From Susan Hawtree?

"That's why I went with you that night," she whispered. "I thought I could take you from her. I thought I could make you be what you ought to be--oh, damn you, Lloyd, I should never have come here!"

She jumped up and walked rapidly a from the table. He followed her, with his I his eyes and his mouth both wide open and something very strange happening inside him.

One thing sure. She was no plant.

"Susan."

"Don't you have to get aboard or something?"

"Yes, but--Susan, ride down with me I want to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about. But she went to the stairwalk with him, and rode down, her face turn, her head held so high she seemed to tower over him.

"Susan," he said. "Do you think--could you give me--"

No, that's not the gambit. But what do you say--Susan, I'm a changed man. Susan, wait for me?

The stairwalk slid them gently off onto a very long platform. There was a crowd on it, sorting itself into the endless lines of purple monorail

taxi that moved along both sides.

"Susan."

"Good-bye, Lloyd."

"No, wait a minute. Plea I don't know quite how--"

Suddenly they were not alone. A young couple had joined them. The color of their skin had changed from pale green to a n burnt orange, and their clothing was different, but Durham recognized them without difficulty. A hard object prodded him in the side, and the young man, smiling, said to him, "Get into that cab." The woman, also smiling, said to Susan Hawtree, "Don't scream. Keep perfectly quiet."

Susan's face went white. She looked at Durham, and Durham said to the young man, "Let her go, she has nothing to do with this!"

"Get in the cab," said the young man.

"Both of you."

"I think," said Susan, "we'd better do it."

They got in. The doors closed automatically behind them. The young man, with his free hand, took out a ticket and laid it in the scanner slot, with the code number of the ship's docking area uppermost. The taxi clicked, hummed, and took off smoothly.

Durham saw the ticket as the young man removed it from the scanner. It was a passage to Nanta Dik aboard the freighter Margaretta K.

THE MONORAILS came out onto the surface in bunches like very massive cables and then began to branch out, the separate "wires" of the cables eventually spreading into a network that covered the entire moon. The taxi picked up speed, clicking over points as it swerved and swung, feeling its way onto the one clear track that led where its scanner had told it to go. Durham was aware obliquely of other monorail taxis in uncountable numbers going like the devil in all directions, and of other types of machines moving below on the surface, and of mobile cranes that walked like buildings, and of an horizon filled with the upthrust noses of great ships like the towers of some fantastic city. Beside him Susan Hawtree sat, rigid and quivering, and before him on the opposite seat were the two young people with the guns.

Durham said, in a voice thick with anger and fright, "Why did you have to drag her into it?"

The man shrugged. "She is perhaps part of the conspiracy. In any case, she would have made an alarm."

"What do you mean, conspiracy? I'm going home to Earth. She came to say goodbye--" Durham leaned forward. "You're the same two bastards from last night. What do you--"

"Please," said the man, contemptuously. He gestured with the gun. "You will both sit still with your hands behind your heads. So. Wanbecq-ai will search you. If either one should attempt to interfere, the other will suffer for it."

The wiry young woman did her work swiftly and efficiently. "No weapons," she said. "Hai! Wanbecq, look here!" She began to gabble in a strange tongue, pointing to Durham's passport and ticket, and then to Susan's ID card. Wanbecq's narrow eyes narrowed still further.

"So," he said to Durham. "Your name has changed since yesterday, Mr. Watson. And for one who returns to Sol III, you choose a long way around."

Susan stared hard at Durham. "What's he talking about?"

"Never mind. Listen, you--Wanbecq, is that your name? Miss Hawtree has nothing to do with any of this. Her father--"

"Is a part of the embassy which sent you out," said Wanbecq, flicking Susan's ID card with his finger. "Do not expect me to believe foolishness, Mr. Watson-Durham." He spoke rapidly to Wanbecq-ai. She nodded, and they both turned to Susan.

"Obviously you were sent with instructions for Mr. Durham, Will you tell us now what they were?"

Susan's face was such a blank of amazement that Durham would have laughed if the situation had not been so extremely unfunny.

"Nobody sent me with anything. Nobody even knows I came. Lloyd, are these people crazy? Are you crazy? What's going on here?"

He said, "I'm not sure myself. But I think there are only two possibilities. One, your father is a scoundrel. Two, he's a fool being used by scoundrels. Take your pick. In either case, I'm the goat."

Her white cheeks turned absolutely crimson. She tried twice to say something to Durham. Then she turned and said to the Wanbecqs, "I've had enough of this. Let me out."

They merely glanced at her and went on talking.

"You might as well relax," said Durham to her, in colloquial English,

hoping the Wanbecqs could not understand it. "I'm sorry you got into this, and I'll try to get you out, but don't do anything silly."

She called him a name she had never learned in the Embassy drawing rooms. There was a manual switch recessed in the body of the taxi, high up and sealed in with a special plastic. It said EMERGENCY on it. Susan took off her shoe and swung. The plastic shattered. Susan dropped the shoe and grabbed for the switch. Wanbecq yelled. Wanbecq-ai leaped headlong for in and bore her back onto the seat. She was using her gun flatwise in her hand, solely as a club. Susan let out one furious wail.

And Durham, moving more by instinct than by conscious thought, grabbed Wanbecq-ai's uplifted arm and pulled her over squalling onto his lap. Wanbecq started forward from the opposite scat.

"Don't," said Durham. He had Wanbecq-ai's wrist in one hand and her neck in the other, and he was not being gentle. Wanbecq-ai covered him, and the two of them together covered Susan. Wanbecq stood with his knees bent for a spring, his gun flicking back and forth uncertainly. Wanbecq-ai had stopped squalling. Her face was turning dark. Susan huddled where she is, half stunned. Durham shifted his grip on Wanbecq-ai's arm and got the gun into his own hand.

"Now," he said to Wanbecq. "Drop it."

Wanbecq dropped it. Durham scrabbled it in with his heel until it was between his own feet. Then he heaved Wanbecq-ai forcibly at her husband. It was like heaving a rag doll, and while Wanbecq was dealing with her Durham managed to pick up the other gun.

Susan lifted her head. She looked around with glassy eyes and then, with single-minded persistence, she got up. Durham said sharply, "Sit down!"

Susan reached up for the emergency. Durham smacked her across the stomach with the back of his left hand, not daring to take his eyes off the Wanbecqs. She doubled over it and sat down again. Durham said, "All right now, damn it, all of you sit still!"

THE taxi sped on it humming rail, farther and farther into the reaches of the spaceport. Below there were the wide clear spaces of the landing aprons, and great ships standing in them, their tails down and their noses high in the air, high above the monorail, towering over the freight belts and the multitude of machines that served them.

Ahead there was the onracing edge of twilight, and beyond it, coming swiftly, was the lunar night.

Durham said to Wanbecq, "What's this all about?"

Wanbecq sneered.

"You know," said Durham, "there's a law against changing the color of your skin for the purpose of committing criminal acts. That's so the wrong people won't get blamed. There's a law against carrying lethal weapons. There is even, humorously enough, a law against espionage on The Hub. You know I'm going to turn you over to the authorities?"

Again Wanbecq sneered. He was a hateful little man, but he looked so young and so proudly martyred that Durham almost felt sorry for him. Almost. Not quite.

"On second thought," he said, "I guess I'll save you both for Jubb."

That was a random shot, prompted by the memory of how their faces looked when the shadow-thing had squealed that word at them. It hit. Wanbecq's face became distorted with a fanatic hatred, and

Wanbecq-ai, rubbing her throat, croaked, "Then you are in league with The Beast." She pronounced that name with unmistakable capitals.

"Who said I was?" asked Durham. "The darkbird came to help you. It told us Jubb had claimed you."

"It did," said Durham softly, "did it?" The dark birds will soon fly. The dark birds merely refer to a couple of ships engaged in poaching. That's what you say, Mr. Hawtree.

"What is a darkbird? You mean that shadow thing

"They are the servants, the familiars of The Beast," said Wanbecq. "The instruments by which he hopes to enslave all humanity. Do not pretend, Mr. Durham."

"I'm not. This Jubb--what is he beside The Beast?"

Wanbecq stared at and Durham made a menacing gesture. "Come on, I want to know."

"Jubb is the ruler of Senya Dik."

"And Senya Dik?"

"Our sister planet. A dark and evil sister, plotting our destruction. A demon sister, Mr. Durham. Have you ever heard of the Bitter Star?"

"I never heard of any of it but I find it interesting. Go on."

"Whoever controls the darkbirds controls the Star, and whoever controls the Star can do anything he wishes. This is Jubb." Wanbecq thrust out his hands. "You're human, Mr. Durham. If you have sold your soul, take it back again. Fight with us, not against us."

"I assume," said Durham, "that Jubb is not human."

Wanbecq-ai made an abrupt sound of disgust. "This is silly, Mr. Durham. If you know so little why are you going to Nanta Dik at all?"

Durham did not answer. He did not have any answer to that one. Wondered if ever he would have it.

"If you are so ignorant," continued Wanbecq-ai viciously, "of course you don't know that the Terran consul Karlovic is over his head in intrigue, conniving with Jubb in order to make this treaty of Federation." Durrham sat up straight. "A treaty of what?"

"The sector," said Wanbecq slowly, "will belong either to the human race or to the beast, but it cannot belong to both."

"Federation," said Durham, answering his own question. And suddenly many formless things began to fit together into a shape that was still cloudy but had a sinister solidity. In order for a solar system to become a member of the Federation its member planets were required to have achieved unity among the ith common citizenship, a common council, common laws. And in order for a sub-sector to become federated, all its systems must have reached a like accord.

In this case, since the system of the two Diks was the only inhabited one in the sub-sector, the two things were the same.

The fate of 9G rested solely on the behaviour of two planets.

If 9G remained unfederated, the company or companies engaged in mining or other business under local license could continue to operate in almost any way they chose as long as they kept the local officials happy. They could strip the whole area of its mineral

resources, pile up incredible fortunes, and leave the native worlds with nothing. But if 9G became a member of the Federation, Federation law would immediately step in, and Federation enforcement of same, and if there were any abuses of native rights, the people responsible would suffer for it.

Postulate a company. Postulate a connection between it and Hawtree. Postulate and postulate.

At around three hundred miles an hour the taxi plunged into the twilight zone. Light sprang on automatically. Outside it became dark very swiftly, and the darkness roared, and glittered with a million lamps.

"Who," asked Durham, "is principally against your two worlds uniting so that the treaty can go through?"

"All of us," said Wanbecq fiercely. "Shall we give up our rights, our independence, our human institutions, everything our race has stood for--"

Wanbecq-ai cried out, "We will never unite, never! No one can force us to betray our species!"

Susan began to cry.

"Please," said Durham. "Baby? You're all right."

"You hit me."

"I had to. I'll apologize later. Be quiet now, Susan, please." He turned back to the Wanbecqs. "Everybody on Nanta Dik feels that way?"

"There are traitors everywhere," said Wanbecq darkly. "Some of them, unfortunately, are in positions of power."

"They won't be for long," said Wanbecq-ai. "Look here, Mr. Durham, you're going to Nanta Dik with a message. We aren't the only ones who want to know what it is. Jubb has sent a darkbird for you. Take my advice. Tell us your message and back to The Hub."

Susan said in a nasty muffled voice, "You're insane. Nobody would trust him with a message to the milkman. He lost his job because he couldn't be trusted."

Without rancor, Durham said, "You're absolutely right, darling. And wouldn't it be strangely fitting if that's why I got my job back again?" He said to the Wanbecqs, "Somebody tipped you off about me. Who?"

"We know him only as a friend of humanity."

"Somebody must have sent you here from Nanta Dik."

"On our world there are many friends of humanity. Think of them, Mr. Durham, when you kiss the Bitter Star."

The taxi slowed, strongly, smoothly. The blurred panorama of lights and ships became separable into individual shapes. Durham stared out ahead. There was the form of a freighter, ugly and immensely powerful, on a landing apron only partially lighted. The Margareta K.

Durham asked, "Who owns her?"

"Universal Minerals."

"And who owns Universal Minerals?"

"Several people, I think, all Earthmen."

"Who speaks for Universal Minerals on Nanta Dik?"

A little reluctantly, Wanbecq said "There is a man named Morrison."

The name rang no bell in Durham's mind. It brought no visible reaction to Susan's face either, though he was watching it closely.

"And how," he asked, "does Morrison feel about humanity?"

"Ask the Bitter Star," said Wanbecq, and the taxi slid to a halt beside the platform on which Durham now saw that several men were standing. Wanbecq and Wanbecq-ai hunched forward expectantly.

"No," said Durham. "I'm getting out, but you're not." He nudged Susan. "Get ready."

The doors slid open automatically. Susan scrambled out. Durham went right behind her, twisted like a cat in the opening, and splashed a brief warning blast off the floor at the feet of the Wanbecqs, who had raised a frantic cry and were trying to follow.

Susan said breathlessly, "Oh!"

The men who had been standing on the platform were now rushing forward. Three were lean and butter-colored. One was a burly Earthman, who said in a tone of amazement, "What the hell--"

"Hold it!" Durham shouted. He swept Susan behind him and tried to cover all fronts at once, not knowing whether the men were there to capture him or were only there by chance and responding to the Wanbecqs' cry for help. "These people attacked us. I have passage on your ship--"

From out of the night there came a shrill, flat, hooting cry of "Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!"

The butter-colored men yelled. They scattered away and out, their feet scrabbling on the platform. The Earthman was slower and more belligerent. He turned around and the spiky little blob of darkness came leaping at him. He put up his hands and struck at it, and the darkbird hooted as the fists passed through it, crackling. The Earthman opened his mouth in a round shocked O and went rigid, rising up on the tips of his toes. The darkbird seemed to merge with his skull for the fraction of a second, and he crumpled down with his mouth still open and his chest rising and falling heavily. The darkbird swooped toward Durham.

Durham fired at it.

It soaked up part of the beam and left the rest, like a well-fed cat rejecting an overplus of milk. It darted past Durham and into the taxi, where it bounced agilely, once and twice. Wanbecqand and Wanbecq-ai fell down on the floor. The doors closed softly and the taxi mechanism whirred and the rail hummed as it took off, heading back to the main terminal. The darkbird returned to Durham.

Susan said in a strange voice, "What is that?"

"Never mind now. Come on."

He started to drag her toward the ramp that led down from the platform. She fought him. She was getting hysterical, and he didn't blame her. The darkbird followed along behind. When they readied the level, Susan planted her feet mulishly and refused to go any farther.

"I don't dare leave you alone out here," he said desperately. "Come along to the ship and the captain will see that you get back safely--"

The darkbird circled and dived at Susan. She bolted. It dived at Durham. He bolted too, off to the right, to the edge of the apron, where he caught up with Susan again. They ran between the storage sheds, onto a spur of the freight-belt system. It was still now, not carrying any freight. They tried to run across it to the other side, but the darkbird drove them back. It was immediately apparent, of course, that the thing was herding them. He shouted at it to let Susan alone, but it did not listen to him. And he thought, it wants us to go somewhere, so it won't knock us out. Maybe? It's worth a try.

He took Susan and jumped off the belt and ran.

The darkbird touched him, ever so gently. He tried to yell, gave up, and tottered back where it wanted him to go, with every nerve in him pulled taut and twanglig in a horrible half-pleasurable fashion that made his legs and arms move unnaturally, as though he were dancing. The darkbird followed, once again placid and unconcerned.

They went along the belt for some distance. It was limber, sagging a bit between the giant rollers, and it boomed under their feet with a sharp slapping sound. Susan stumbled so often he picked her up and carried her. There was nobody to call to, nobody to ask for help. The towering ships were far away.

The darkbird nudged him again at last, out across a landing apron where a very strange looking ship stood in the solitary of majesty of impending take-off. The flood lights were blinking at twenty-second intervals, visual warning to stand clear, and Durham ran staggering through a stroboscopic nightmare, with the white-faced girl in his arms.

Dark, light. Black, bright. A haze of exhaustion swam before his eyes. Things moved in it, jerky shapes in an old film, in in antique penny peep show. Day, night. Dark, bright. The things moved closer,

unhuman things clad in fantastic pressure suits. Durham screamed.

He tried to run again, and the darkbird touched him. Once more there was the unbearable twitching of the nerves and he danced in the black, bright, day, night. He danced into a large box that was waiting for him, and he kept going until he struck the end wall of hard metal. He turned then and saw the very thick door go sighing shut and the dogs go slipping into place snick-snick or the other, and it was too late even to try to get out again.

He set Susan down as gently as he could and sank down beside her. The floor moved up under him sharply. There was a clanging and clattering of tackle overhead, and then a sickening sidewise lurch. The on-off pattern of the light changed outside the two round windows that were in the box. It became a steady green, in which his hands showed like two sickly-white butterflies on his knees. There were more noises, hollow and far away, and then a second lurch, a lift, a drop, and after that a larger motion encompassing the box and the entire locus in which it stood.

Durham put his face in his hands and gave up.

V

SUSAN was screaming. Let me out. She was pounding on something. Durham started up. He must have slept or passed out. The box was perfectly still now. There was no sense of motion. But he could tell by the change in gravity that the ship was in space.

Susan was by one of the windows. She was pounding on it with her favorite implement, the heel of her shoe. Durl went to her and glanced out. Cold sweat broke out on him, and he grabbed her hand.

"Stop it! Are you crazy?" He wrenched the shoe from her and threw it

across the small space of the box. Then he felt of the glass, peering at it, frantic lest she should have cracked it.

"I'm going to get," said Susan grimly, and groped around for something heavier.

"Look." He shook her and turned her face to the window. "Do you see that air out there?"

The box now stood in a large empty hold. He could see the curve of the ship's hull, ribbed with tremendous struts of steel, and a deck of metal plates, glistening in the green light. Green light? Earth should have a yellow-white type light, the kind that the sun gives off. Well, yes--but suppose that the sun was green?

Nanta Dik circles a green star.

So does Senya Dik. Those creatures outside the ship were anything but humanoid. Jubb's darkbird herded us in here. Easy. Now we know.

"What about the air?" asked Susan. "Let go of me."

"It's poisonous. Can't you tell by looking at it?" It rolled and roiled and sluggishly shifted in vapors of thick chartreuse and vivid green. "And don't you remember, they were wearing pressure suits? They couldn't live in our atmosphere. We surely couldn't live in theirs."

There was no answer.

"Susan. Susan?"

"I want to go home," she said, and began to cry.

"There now, Susie. Take it--"

"Don't call me Susie!"

"All right, but take it easy. I'll find out what the situation is and then I'll--"

"You'll what? You'll make a mess of things just like you always have. You'll get me into more trouble, just like you got me into this. You're no good, Lloyd, and I wish I'd never seen you. I wish I'd never come to say good-bye!" She rushed to the window and began to pound on it again, this time with her fists.

Durham hauled her away and shook her until her jaw rattled together. "I'm sorry you came too," he said savagely. "You're the last person in the galaxy I'd pick to be in trouble with. A damned spoiled female with no honesty, no courage, no nothing but your father's position to trade on." He wrapped his arms tight around her. "Hell, this is no time to be quarrelling. Let's both keep our mouths shut. Come on, honey, we're not dead yet."

She choked a little, and stood trembling against him. Then she said,

"I think I fell over a chair a while ago. Maybe there's a lamp. Let's look."

The green light was dim, but their eyes were used to it. They found a lamp and turned it on. The box was flooded with a clear white glare, very grateful to Earthly senses. Durham looked around and said slowly, "I'll be damned."

The box was about the size of a small room. It had in it an armchair, a bunk, compact cupboards and lockers, a sink and hotplate, and a curtained-off corner with a sanitary device. Durham turned on one of the sink taps. Water came out. He turned it off and went and sat down

in the armchair.

"I'm damned," he said again. "Freezer," said Susan, looking into tilings. "Food concentrates. Pots and pans. Blanket. Change of clothes--all men's. Booze, two bottles of it. Rack of micro-books. Somebody went to a lot of trouble."

"Yes."

"Pretty comfortable. Everything you need, all self-contained."

"Uh."

"But Lloyd--it's only for one." He said dismally, "We'll take turns on the bunk." But it wasn't the bunk that worried him. He went and looked out of the other window. By craning his head he could see an assembly of storage tanks, pressure tanks, pumps, purifiers, blower units, all tightly sealed against any admixture of Senyan air. That, too, was only for one. A most ghastly claustrophobia came over Durham, and for a moment he saw Susan, not as a spoiled and pretty girl, but as his rival for the oxygen that was life.

Susan said, "Lloyd. Something is coming in."

For an instant he thought she meant into the box, and then he realized that the reverberating clang he heard must be the hatch door of the hold. He joined her at the opposite window.

There were two--no, three dark shapes coming toward the box, moving swiftly through the green and chartreuse vapors. They undulated on two pairs of stubby legs set fore and aft under a flexible lower body. Their upper bodies, carried erect, were rather bulbous and tall, with well-defined heads and two sets of specialized arms, the lower ones thick and powerful for heavy work, the upper ones as

delicate as an engraver's fine tools. Their skin was a glossy black, almost like patent leather. They wore neat harnesses of what looked like metal webbing in the way of dress, and on the breast strap each one carried an insigne.

"Ship's officers," Durham guessed. "Probably one of them's the captain."

"They're horrible," said Susan. She backed away from window until the end of the bunk caught her behind the knees and she sat down.

Durham laughed. "Fine pair of cosmopolites we are. We're used to the idea of non-humanoids. There are a lot of them on The Hub, but they're mostly segregated by necessity, so we practically never really see any. But now we're the ones who have to be segregated. And the reality is quite another thing from the idea, isn't it?"

HE BACKED away himself, two, until shame made him stop. The three non-humanoids came and looked with large iridescent eyes, through the window. Their oddly shaped mouths moved rapidly, so he knew that they were talking, and their slender upper arms were as mobile and expressive as the hands of so many girls at a sorority tea. Then one of them turned and did something to the wall of the box, and suddenly Durham could hear them clearly. There was a speaker device beside the window. Durham sprang at it.

"Can you hear me? Can you hear me out there? Listen, you have no right to do this, you've got to take us back! Miss Hawtree is the daughter of--"

"Mr. Durham." The voice, was unhuman but strong, and the esperanto it spoke was perfectly understandable. "Please calm yourself and listen to what I have to say. I appreciate your feelings--" "Hah!"

"--but there is nothing I can do about it. I have my orders, and I can assure you--"

"From Jubb?"

"You'll be fully informed when you reach Senya Dik. Meanwhile, I can assure you that no harm will come to you, now or later. So please put your fears at rest. A little patience--"

Susan had leaped up. Now she flung herself upon the speaker mike. "What about me?"

"Your presence was unexpected, and I fear it's going to be rather difficult for you both. But you must make the best of it. In regard to air and water, I must caution you that the supply will hardly be adequate for you both unless you are extremely careful."

This had not occurred to Susan before.

"You mean--"

"I mean that you must use no more water than is absolutely necessary for drinking and preparing your food. The food you share between you, on half ration. As for the air--"

"Yes," said Durham. "What about the air."

"I believe that activity has the effect of increasing your metabolism, thereby consuming more oxygen. So I would advise you both to move and speak as little as possible. Remain calm. Remain quiet. In that way you should be able to survive. It is not that we are grudging. It is simply that we cannot share any of our supplies with you, because you are alien life forms and totally incompatible. If we had known there would be two, we would have prepared. As it is, you must work

together to conserve."

"But," said Susan, "but this isn't fair, it isn't right! You'll take me back or my father will see to it--"

"Keep this speaker open," said the Senyan, "so that you will be sure to hear the audio signal, a sustained note repeated at intervals of forty seconds. Prepare to enter overdrive."

He did not say good-bye. He merely went away with his two officers. Susan screamed after them. Durham clapped his hand over her mouth, and took her forcibly and put her on the bunk.

"Lie there," he said. "Quiet. Didn't you hear him? Don't move, don't talk."

He sat down in the chair, consciously trying not to breathe deeply.

"But--"

"Don't you say shut up to me, Lloyd-This is all your fault."

"My fault? Mine? Because you had to shove yourself in--"

"Shove myself? Father was right about you. And it is your fault. If you hadn't asked me to ride down with you--"

"Oh, shut up, damn it, that's just like a woman! If you knew your next breath was your last one you'd still have to use it for talk. You want to asphyxiate us both with your gabbling?"

She was quiet for a long while. Then he realized that she was crying.

"Lloyd, I'm scared."

"So am I." He began to laugh. "When I come to think of it, it was your father that got us both into this. I hope he sweats blood in great gory streams."

"You're a drunken ungrateful swine! If dad really did give you another chance--" "Ah ah! Remember the oxygen! He did. And I was such a fatheaded idiot I thought it was on the level. I even reformed." He laughed again, briefly. "Overcome with gratitude, I did exactly what I was supposed not to do. I sobered up and held my tongue."

"I don't understand at all."

"I was supposed to talk, Susan. I was given a message, and I was supposed to babble it all over The Hub. I don't know exactly what that message was intended to trigger off when it got into circulation. Probably a war. But I'll bet I know what I triggered off by not talking. Trouble for your old man."

"I don't believe a word of it."

Durham shrugged. It was very little effort to reach out and lift a bottle from a nearby cupboard. He opened it and took a long pull. Then he looked at the bottle, shook his head, and passed it to Susan.

She made a derisive noise, and he shrugged again.

"That's right. Funny thing. First I was stricken with remorse and determined to be worthy. Now I'm just mad. Before I get through, I'm going to hang your father higher than Haman."

The audio signal, shrill and insistent and sounding somehow as unhuman as the voices of the Senyans, came piercingly through the speaker.

Susan gasped. "Wherever they're taking us--they're not going to kill us, are they?"

"I think they want to question us. I think some dirty work is going on, one of those million-credit-swindle things you hear about once in a while, and I think your father is right up to his neck in it. If I'm right, that's the chief reason you were brought along."

"I think you're a dirty low down liar," she said, in a voice he could hardly hear.

The signal continued to squeal. Durham moved to the bunk. "Slide over."

"No."

But she did not fight him when he pushed himself in beside her and took her in his arms.

"The haughty Miss Hawtree," he said, and smiled. "You're a mess. Hair in your eyes. Make-up all smeared. Tears dripping off the end of your nose."

The light dimmed, became strange and eerie.

"They could have made this damned bunk a little wider."

"It doesn't matter. After a trip like this, I won't have any reputation left, anyway. Nobody would believe me on oath."

The fabric of the ship shifted, strained, slipped, moved. The fabric of Durham's body did likewise. He set his teeth and said, "Don't worry, dear. I can always ask the captain to marry us."

By the time the audio-signal shrilled again, heralding a return to solar

system speeds and space, it seemed that ages had passed.

THEY did not talk about marriage now, even in jest. They hated each other! "Cabin fever," they had said politely for a while, making excuses. But they did not bother with excuses any more. They just had simply and quietly loathed each other, as the long, timeless time went by.

Pity, too, thought Durham, looking at Susan where she lay in the bunk. She's really a handsome wench, even without all the makeup and the hairdo and those incredible undergarments that women use, as though they were semi-liquescient. Just lying there in her slip now, she looks younger, gentler, nice and soft, as though she'd be pleasant to hold in your arms again if you had the strength and the oxygen and if you didn't hate her so.

"Lloyd?"

"Huh?"

"How long before we land?"

"How should I know?"

"Well, you could find out."

"You find out. You can yell as loud as I can. Louder."

"I'll yell," said Susan ominously. "The second I get out of here, I'll yell so loud the whole galaxy will hear me."

"I should think they've already heard you clear out to Andromeda."

The lights dimmed. The peculiar noises and wrenchings that went with coming out of overdrive began. Durham braced himself.

"It's too bad you reformed," said Susan. "You used to be amusing company, at least. Now you're sour and bad tempered. You're also--"

What he was also Durham never heard. There was a crashing, roaring, rending impact. The chair went out from under him so that he fell face up into the ceiling. The lights went out entirely. He heard a thin faint sound that might have been Susan screaming. Then the ceiling slid away from him and spilled him down a wall. As he went scrabbling past the window he looked out and saw that there were now long vertical rents in the outer hull through which the stars were shining. The pumps had stopped.

A long settling groan and then silence. The artigrav field was dead. Durham floated, along with everything else that was not bolted down.

"Susan," he said. "Susan?"

"Here."

They met and clung together in mid air while the hull began a slow axial rotation around them.

"What happened?"

"We hit something."

"The Senyans--"

They must all be done for. The hull is split open. Head-on ram, I think, just as we came out of overdrive. They wouldn't have had time to get space armor."

"Then are we--"

"Hush. Don't talk. Just wait and see."

They clung together, silent. The hull turned without sound, and the stars shone in through the long slits, into the empty vacuum of the hold.

"Lloyd, I can't breathe."

"Yes you can. We still have as much air as ever. It just isn't circulating now."

"I don't know if I can stand this, Lloyd. It's such an awful way."

"There isn't any way that's good. It won't be so bad, really. You'll just go off to sleep."

"Hold onto me?"

"Sure."

"Lloyd."

"What?"

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

The hull turned and the stars glittered.

The vitiated air grew foul, grew thick and leaden. The man and woman floated in the closed space, their arms tight around each other, their faces close together.

Something jarred against the hull.

"Lloyd! I see a light!"

"It's only a star."

"No. Look through the window. Moving--"

Men, humans, wearing pressure suits, had come into the hull. Two of them were dragging oxygen bottles. They came up to the box and flashed their lights in through the windows. They knocked and made reassuring signs. After a minute or two fresh oxygen hissed in under pressure through the air duct. Susan laughed a little and then fainted. Durham still held her in his arms. Everything got pleasantly dark and far away, lost in the single simple joy of breathing.

There were sounds and motions but he did not pay much attention to them, and he was mildly surprised when he happened to float past a window and noticed that now there was only space outside, very large and full of hot and splendid lights. When he passed the other window he saw part of a ship, and he understood that the box was being hoisted across the interval between it and the wreck. It seemed a remarkably kind dispensation of fortune to have provided a ship at exactly the right time and place, and not just any ship but one equipped with the specialized tackle required for moving heavy loads in space.

A mighty cargo hatch swallowed the box. Susan came to, and they waited, weakly hysterical, Durham not even noticing that a spiky shadow had slipped in with the box. Suddenly again there was man-made light, and then the sound of heavy air pumps reached them. The pumps stopped, and, quite simply, men came in and opened the door of the box.

There was a considerable noise and confusion, everybody talking at once. Durham lost track of Susan. He was only partly conscious of

what he was doing, but he felt that everybody was in a hurry to get something done. Then there was a cabin with a port in it, and beyond the port there was space, and in that space a great light flared blindingly and was gone.

VI

MORRISON said, "Murder is a harsh word, Durham. After all, they weren't human." "There's no such difference under Federation law"

"We're not under Federation law here."

"No. And you're engaged in a life-or-death struggle to make sure you don't come under it. This happened to be one of the death parts."

Morrison looked at him in mild surprise. "You figured that out, Durham?" He was a lean gray, kindly looking man, the conventional father type. Susan was staring at him in blank horror, as though she could not believe what she was hearing. "I wasn't told you were that bright. Well, you're right. Universal Minerals and its various dummy corporations in this sub-sector are making such profits as you wouldn't believe if I told you, and we have no intention of giving it up."

"Even if you have to slaughter a whole ship's crew. What did you do, tow an asteroid into position?"

Morrison shrugged. "Special debris is not uncommon." "You could have killed us, too, you know," Durham said angrily. "You could have killed her. Hawtree wouldn't have liked that."

"It a risk we had to take. It was a small one." He looked Durham up and down. "You made us one whale of a mess of trouble. If my yacht wasn't a good bit faster than Jubb's ship, we'd have been whipped. What happened to you? Why didn't you talk like you were supposed

to?"

"You'd die laughing."

"I can control my emotions. Go ahead." Durham told him. "Virtue," he finished sourly, "is sure enough its own reward. I should have stayed drunk. I was happier that way. What happened to the Wanbecqs?"

Morrison was still laughing. "They had not come to when their taxi reached the terminus. The port police picked them up." He took a bottle out of a locker and pushed it and a glass across the cabin table to Durham. "Here. You've earned it. Wait till I tell Hawtree. And he was so sure of you. Just goes to show you can't trust anybody."

Susan said, "But why?" Shock was making her mind move slowly. It was a minute before they realized she was referring to the Senyan ship.

She added, very slowly, "It's true about my father?"

"I'm afraid it is," said Morrison. "But I wouldn't worry about it too much. He's a very rich man. He's also a shrewd one, and it looks now as though he's going to be all right. Give her a drink, Durham, she needs it. Would you like to lie down, Miss Hawtree? All right, then, I'll tell you why."

He leaned over her with no look of kindness at all. "Get this all clearly in mind, Miss Hawtree, so you'll understand that if at any time you try to hang me, you'll hang your father too. We're partners, equally guilty. You understand that."

"Yes." She looked so white that Durham was frightened. But she sat quietly and listened.

"For years now," Morrison said, "I have managed the company here, and Hawtree has used his position with the Embassy to see that I have a free hand. He sees that no complaints get to ears higher up. He sees that any annoying red tape is taken care of. Most important of all, he sees that any official communication from either of the Diks that might be unfavorable to us is permanently lost in the files—including all requests for aid in achieving Federation status. Our connection, naturally, is one of the best kept secrets in the galaxy.

"We had very easy sailing until Jubb rose to power on Senya Dik. Jubb is an able leader. He knows what's happening to the resources of the sector, and he knows the only way to put a stop to it. Unfortunately for us, all the leaders on Nanta Dik aren't fools either, and there is a growing movement toward unification. Jubb has pushed it and pushed it, so that we've been forced to take more and more vigorous steps. The human supremacy groups, made up of such people as the Wanbecqs, have been very useful. And of course Senya Dik has its lunatic fringe too, in reverse but equally useful. But Jubb started a campaign of petitioning the Embassy. He poured it on so hard that Hawtree knew he wasn't going to be able to pigeonhole all the petitions forever. Furthermore, it was obvious that Jubb knew there must be collusion somewhere and was hammering away to find it. So Hawtree sent for me."

"And," said Durham, "you said, 'Let's start a war between the two planets. Then unification can't possibly take place, and Jubb will have too much on his hands to bother us.' Maybe he'll even be eliminated. And you went looking for a goat."

"Exactly. You were given a message about dark birds that would have significance only to a Nantan. The Wanbecqs were put on your trail. All you had to do was talk."

"What if I had talked too much?"

"How could you? You didn't know anything. And Hawtree's story would be that he had simply given you passage home, which you had bought."

"And anyway," said Durham thoughtfully, "I would have been either dead in an alley somewhere, or aboard a ship going to Nanta Dik--which I would not have reached."

"It was a flexible situation."

Susan said, "Then you admit that you--" She could not finish.

MORRISON turned on her irritably. "You very nearly wrecked us, Miss Hawtree. Durham's disappearance wouldn't have raised a ripple, but the daughter of a highly placed diplomat vanishing was quite another thing. Your father had to think fast and talk faster, or public curiosity would have forced an investigation right then. Fortunately the Wanbecqs helped. They painted a pretty dark picture of Jubb, and Hawtree was able to smooth things over since everybody knew you'd been sweet on Durham and had obviously gone to say good-bye. Hawtree did such a good job, in fact, that he had the whole Hub seething with indignation against Jubb even before I left. So it turned out well, in spite of you."

"But why did you have to wreck the ship?"

"Well, we had to get you back. We couldn't let Jubb have Mr. Durham to use as a witness against us, and we certainly couldn't let him have Hawtree's daughter to use as a club over Hawtree. Now, you see, the situation is this."

He nodded to the cabin port beyond which the bright flare had come and gone, leaving nothing but emptiness.

"There's nothing left of the ship but atoms, and no one can say what happened to it. Jubb does not have you two, but he can't prove it as long as you're kept out of sight. So we keep you out of sight, and at the same time press demands to Jubb for your return. It looks as though he's hiding you, or has killed you, in fear of the storm he has raised. The more he doesn't give you up the more human opinion turns against him, and the more his own people figure he's made them nothing but trouble. Meanwhile, the Wanbecqs are on their way home with a big story. We can still have our war if we want it. And Jubb's days are numbered."

Durham said slowly, "What if he decides to use the Bitter Star?"

Morrison stared at him, and then laughed. "Don't try to frighten me with my own bogeyman. I took a story a thousand years old and resurrected it and talked it up until it caught. But that's all it is, a story."

"Are you sure? And what about the dark-birds? They seem to get around. Won't they tell Jubb where we are?"

"He'd have a hard time proving it on the word of a shadow. Besides, there are defenses against them. They won't interfere."

"I suppose," said Durham, taking the bottle into his hand as though to pour again, "that it wouldn't bother you to know that one of them is in here now."

Morrison did not take his eyes from Durham's face. "Hawtree made a stinking choice in you. Put down that bottle."

Durham grinned. He raised the bottle higher and chanted, "Jubb, Jubb, Jubb!"

Morrison said between his teeth, "This would have had to be done

anyway." Still watching Durham, he reached one swift hand into the belt of his tunic. Susan made a muffled cry and started to get up. None of the motions were finished. A shadow came out from the darkness of a corner behind Morrison's chair. It flicked against him and he fell across the table, quite still. The darkbird came and hung in the air in front of Durham.

"Jubb," it said.

Durham put down the bottle and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He looked at the darkbird, feeling cold and hollow.

"I want to go to him. You understand? To Jubb."

Up and down it bounced, like the nodding of a head.

Susan said, "What are. you going to do?"

"Try and steal a lifeboat."

"I'm going with you."

"No. Morrison doesn't want to kill you, but don't push him too far. You stay. Then if I don't make it you'll still be--" He broke off. "That's taking a lot for granted, isn't it? After all, Hawtree is your father."

She whispered, "I don't care."

"It's the biggest decision you'll ever make. Don't make it too fast." He kissed her. "Besides, if you wait, you may not have to make it at all."

He took Morrison's gun and went out, and the darkbird went with him, bunched small and darting so swiftly that the two men it struck down never saw it. Durham turned aside into the communications room, and the darkbird saw to it that there was no alarm. He damaged

radio and radar so that it would take some time to fix them. Then he went on down the corridor to the plainly marked hatch that led to Lifeboat No. 1. He got into it, with the darkbird. As soon as the boat hatch itself was shut, automatic relays blew him free of the pod on a blast of air.

"Jubb," said the darkbird. It touched him, and to his amazement there was no shock, only a chilly tingling that was not unpleasant. Then it simply oozed out through the solid hull, the way smoke oozes through a filter, and was gone.

Durham had no time for any more astonishments. The controls of the lifeboat were designedly very simple and plainly rmtked,

Durham got himself going and away from Morrison's ship as fast as he could. But he knew that it was not going to be anything like fast enough if the darkbird didn't hurry.

It hurried. And Durham was closer to Senya Dik than he realized. In less than three hours he was in touch with a planetary patrol ship, following it in toward the green blaze of KL421, and a dim cool planet that circled it, farther out than the orbit of Earth around Sol, but not quite so far as Mars.

VII

THE spaceport was in a vast flat plain. Far across the plain Durham could see the dark outline of a city. He stood at the edge of the landing area, between two Senyan officers from the ship. He wore a pressure suit from the lifeboat's equipment, and the wind blew hard, beating and picking and pushing at the suit and the bubble helmet. It was difficult for Durham to stand up, but the Senyans, braced on their four sturdy legs, stood easily and swayed their upper bodies back and forth like trees.

They were big. He had not really understood how big they were until he stood beside them. He gathered that they were waiting for a ground conveyance, and he was not surprised. Light air cabs were hardly suited to their build.

He had talked briefly to Karlovic by radio, and he was impatient to get to the consulate where Karlovic was waiting for him. The minute or two in which they waited for the truck seemed interminable. But it came, a great powerful thing like a moving van, and one of the Senyans said,

"Permit me?"

With his two lower arms he lifted Durham onto the platform. The two Senyans spoke to the driver and then got on themselves. The truck took off, going very fast in spite of its size. The Senyans held Durham between them, because there was nothing for a human to hang to, and nowhere to sit down.

They left the spaceport. Huge storage buildings lined the road, and then smaller buildings, and then patches of open country, inexpressibly dreary to Durham's eyes. High overhead the sun burned green and small in a sky of cloudy vapor from which fell showers of glinting rain. Poison rain from a poison sky. Durham shivered, and a deep depression settled on him. Nothing hopeful would be done in this place. Not by humans.

The truck roared on. Durham watched the city grow on the murky horizon, rising up into huge ugly towers and blocky structures like old prisons greatly magnified. It was a big city. It was a frightening city. He wished he had never seen it. He wished he was back in The Hub, standing on a high walk with the good hot sun pouring on him and no barriers between him and the good clean air. He wanted to weep

with mingled weariness and claustrophobia. Then he noticed that little crowds had collected along the way into the city. They shouted at the truck going by, and waved their arms, and some of them threw stones that rattled off the sides.

"What's the matter?" Durham asked.

"They are members of the anti-human party. Prejudice cuts both ways, a thing our neighbors of Nanta Dik do not seem to understand. Human and non-human are intellectual concepts. On the emotional level it is simply us or not-us. You are not-us, and as such quite distasteful to some. What I do not understand is how they knew you were coming."

"Morrison must have got his radio working. He's been using the extremists here just like the ones on Nanta Dik, to make trouble."

"There are times--" said the Senyan grimly. "But then I make myself remember that there are scoundrels among us, too."

The truck rumbled through the traffic of wide boulevards, between rows of massive buildings that had obviously never been designed with anything so small and frail as human beings in mind. There were Senyans on the streets, apparently going about whatever business they did, and Durham wondered what their home life was like, what games the children played, what they ate and how they thought, what things they worried about in the dark hours of the night. He felt absolutely alien. It was not a nice feeling.

Presently the truck turned into an open circle surrounded by mighty walls of stone.

In one place bright light shone cheerfully from the windows, and the Senyan said, "That is the consulate."

They set him off and showed him where the airlock was. Durham performed the ritual of the lock chamber, frantic to get out of the confining suit. When the inner door swung open he began to tear at the helmet, and a man came in saying, "Let me help."

When Durham was free of the suit, the man looked at him with very tired, very angry eyes. "I'm Karlovic. Jubb's waiting. Come on."

He led Durham down an echoing corridor that dwarfed them by its size. The colors of the polished wood and stone were not keyed to the glaring yellow light, and the rooms that Durham could see into as he passed were not keyed to the small incongruous furnishings that had been forced upon them. Somewhere below there was a throbbing of pumps, and the air smelted of refresher chemicals.

Durham said, "You knew I was being brought here, didn't you?"

Karlovic nodded. "You, yes. The girl, no. She was an overzealous mistake on the part of the darkbird. Yes, I was in on it. I hoped that finally we could get proof, a witness against whoever in the Embassy was working with Morrison. Hawtree, is it? I'm glad to know his name."

He pushed open a door. The room beyond it was only half a room, cut in the middle by a partition of heavy glass. On the other side of the glass wall was the thick green native air, and three Senyans, one of whom came forward when Durham and Karlovic came in. A darkbird hovered close above him. He said to Durham,

"I am Jubb"

There were communicator discs set in the glass. Jubb motioned Durham to a chair beside one. "First let me offer the apology that is due you. You were carrying a message which was not true, which

would have made the people of Nanta Dik believe that we were about to come against them with the Bitter Star. The darkbirds warned me, and I felt that I had no choice. I could not let that message be delivered."

Durham said, "No one could blame you for that."

"You understand, I had another motive, too."

"Yes. I don't think you could be blamed for that, either."

JUBB looked at him with his large inscrutable eyes, totally alien, unmistakably intelligent. "I didn't know what you would be like, Mr. Durham, whether you would be in sympathy with your employers or not. Now of course it is evident that you can't be."

Durham said quietly, "I've been to a lot of trouble already to put a rope around their necks. I'm ready to go to a lot more. They've used me like--" He could not think of the right word. Jubb nodded.

"Contempt is not an easy thing to take. I know. Then you will help?"

"In any way I can."

"I want you to go back with me to The Hub, Mr. Durham. Before, I was helpless without proof. Now, as head of a planetary government, I can insist on seeing the ranking Ambassador himself, and I can bypass Hawtree now that I know who he is. I want you to be my witness."

"Nothing," said Durham, "would please me more."

"Good," said Jubb. "Good. Karlovic, it looks as though the end of our long fight may be in sight at last. Take good care of Mr. Durham. He is more precious than gold."

"Meanwhile, Morrison had made us a problem on transportation. We provided that particular ship for the consul's comfort, when there was reason for him to travel in our territory, and we had planned to refit it so that it would accommodate two on the return journey. Now I must ask a ship from our friends on Nanta Dik, and that may take a little time. So rest well, Mr. Durham."

He went out, and Karlovic led Durham back into the hall and from there into a tall gloomy chamber that had a shiny little kitchen lost in one corner of it. There was a table and chairs. Durham sat down and watched Karlovic busy himself with packages of food.

"You don't look very happy about all this," he said.

"I'm-not unhappy. I'm worried."

"About what? Morrison can't do thing now."

"No? Listen, Mr. Durham, the emperors of Rome only ruled part of one little world, but they didn't give it up easily. Morrison won't, either. Remember, things are so bad for him now they can't possibly get any worse, only better."

Durham looked out the window. It was a double one, with a vacuum between the panes and protective mesh on the outside. The green air pressed thick against it. The sun had wheeled far over, and the shadows of the buildings were long and black.

"Do you stay here much?" he asked.

"I have lately," said Karlovic. "I had to. My life wasn't safe on Nanta Dik. You've no idea how high their feelings run there, thanks to Morrison." He began to set the table. Durham made no move to help. He was tired. He watched the shadows lengthen and fill the circle of

lofty walls with their darkness.

"Couldn't the government there protect you?"

"Only part of the government wants to. And Morrison is working hard to frighten them with all this propaganda about the Bitter Star."

"Propaganda. That's what he said. Is it?"

"Absolutely--as far as the Senyans using it is concerned. But the thing itself is real. It's in the city here. I've seen it."

Karlovic put the heated containers on the table and sat down. He began methodically to eat.

"It's kind of a weird story. Probably it could only have happened on a world like this, with a totally non-human, bio-chemical set-up. Senyan science started early and advanced fast, a good deal faster than it did on Nanta Dik, for some reason. They did a lot of experimenting with solar energy and atomics and the forces that lie just on the borderline of life--or maybe intelligence would be a better word."

"Aren't the two more or less synonymous?"

"A hunk of platinum sponge or a mess of colloids can be intelligent, but never alive. The Star is. The darkbirds are. They're not matter, they're merely a nexus of interacting particles. But they live and think."

"What about the Star?"

"The scientists were trying for an energy matrix that would absorb solar power and store it like a battery. Something slipped, and the result was the Bitter Star. It absorbs solar power, all right, but in the form of heat, and it will take heat from anything. And it doesn't give it up. It merely absorbs more and more until every living thing near it is

frozen and there's no more heat to be had. The Senyan scientists didn't know quite what to do with this thing they had created, but they didn't want to destroy it, either. It had too many angles they wanted to study. So they made the darkbirds, on the same pattern but without the heat-hunger, and with a readier intelligence, to be a bridge between themselves and the Star, to control it. They studied the thing until it proved too dangerous, and they prisoned it by simply starving it at a temperature of absolute zero. So it has stayed ever since, but the darkbirds still guard it in case anything should happen to free it again. They almost seem to love it, in some odd un-fleshly way."

Durham frowned. "Then it could be used against Nanta Dik."

"Oh yes," said Karlovic sombrely. "In fact it was, once. The Star shone in their sky in midsummer, and the crops blackened and the rivers froze, and men died where they stood in the fields. The Senyans won the war. That was a thousand years ago, but the Nantans never quite forgot it."

He got up and went morosely to the sink, carrying dishes. "I keep telling Jubb he ought to get rid of the thing. It's a sore point. But--"

Somewhere below there was a very loud noise. The floor rose up and then settled again. Almost at once the air was full of dust, and an alarm bell began a strident ringing. Karlovic's mouth opened and closed twice, as though he was trying to say something. He let the dishes fall clattering around his feet, and then he ran with all his might out of the room and along the hall.

Durham followed him. There was now no sound at all from below. The pumps had stopped.

Karlovic found his tongue. "Cover your face. Don't breathe,"

DURHAM saw a thin lazy whorl of greenish mist moving into the hall. He pressed his handkerchief over his mouth and nose and made his legs go, hard and fast. He was right on top of Karlovic when they stumbled into the airlock. It was still clear.

They helped each other into their suits, panting in the stagnant air. Then, through the helmet audio, Durham could hear sounds from outside, muffled shouts and tramlings. Karlovic went back into the consulate where the green mist was already clinging around his knees, and looked out a window into the circle. Over his shoulder Durham could see Senyans milling around and he thought they were rioters, but Karlovic said, "It's all right, they're Jubb's guards."

They went back to the airlock, and from there into the open circle. Senyans escorted them hastily into the adjoining building, and Durham saw that guard posts were being set up. There was a gaping hole in the side of the consulate and the pavement was shattered, and there were pieces of machinery and stuff lying around. Durham figured rapidly in his head how much oxygen he had in his suit pack, and how long it would take to repair the consulate and get the air conditioning working again, and how long it would be before a ship could get here from Nanta Dik. He looked at Karlovic, whose face was white as chalk inside his helmet.

"The lifeboat," he said. Karlovic nodded. Some color came back into his face. "Yes, the lifeboat. We can live in it until the ship comes." He ran his tongue over his lips as though they were very dry. "Didn't I tell you Morrison wouldn't give up easy? Oh lord, the lifeboat!" He began to jabber urgently at the Senyans in their own tongue, and again his expression was agonized. Durham didn't need to be told what he was thinking. If anything happened to that lifeboat, they were two dead men on a world where humans had no biological right to be.

They were brought into a room where Jubb was busy with a bank of

communicators and a batch of harried aides. The room was enormous, but it did not dwarf the Senyans, and the sombre colors did not seem depressing in their own light. Jubb said, as they came in the door,

"I've had a heavy guard set on your lifeboat. I don't think anyone can repeat that hit-and-run bombing--" He cursed in a remarkably human fashion, naming Morrison and the Senyan fools who let themselves be used. "You are all right, Karlovic--Mr. Durham? Quite safe? I've ordered a motor convoy. There are signs of unrest all over the city--apparently word has gone out that you, Durham, are carrying the unification agreement for my signature, and that the terms are a complete surrender on our part to human rule. Does it cheer you two to know that the human race is not alone in producing fools and madmen? Once on the spaceport you will be safe, my naval units will see to that, and my troops are already in the streets. They have orders to look out for you. Go with fortune."

They were taken out another way, where three heavy trucks and several smaller vehicles were drawn up. The Senyans in them wore a distinctive harness and were armed, and the vehicles all had armor plated bodies. Durham and Karlovic were lifted into one of the trucks, which was already filled with Senyan soldiers. The convoy moved off.

Durham braced himself in a corner and looked at Karlovic. "Happened fast, didn't it? Awfully fast."

"Violent things always do. You're not much used to violence, are you? Neither am I. Neither are most people. They get it shoved at them."

"I don't think we're through with it yet," said Durham.

Karlovic said, "I" told you."

For some time there was only the rushing and jolting of the truck, the roar of motors and a kind of dim uneasy background of sound as though the whole city stirred and seethed. Durham was frightened. The food he had eaten had turned against him, he was stifling in his own sweat, and he thought of Morrison cruising comfortably somewhere out in space, smoking cigarettes and drinking good whiskey and sending down a message now and then, the way a man pokes with a stick at a brace of beetles, stirring them casually toward death.

He ground his jaws together in an agony of hate and fear, and the taste of them was sour in his mouth.

Somebody said to them, "We're on the spaceport highway now. It won't be long." A minute later somebody shouted and Karlovic caught the Senyan word and echoed it. "Barricade!" The truck rocked and whirled about and there were great crashes in the night that had fallen. Durham was thrown to his knees. The truck raced at full speed. There were sounds of fighting that now rose and now grew faint, and the truck lurched and swerved, and then there were more roars and crashes and it came violently to a halt. The Senyans began firing out of the loopholes in the armored sides. Some of them leaped out of the truck, beckoning Durham and Karlovic to come after them. A large force of rioters was attacking what remained of the convoy, which had been forced back into the city! Four of the Senyan soldiers ran with the two men into a side street, but a small body of rioters caught up with them. The soldiers turned to fight, and Karlovic said in a that was now curiously calm,

"If we're quick enough they may lose sight of us in the darkness."

He turned into an areaway between two buildings, and then into another, and Durham ran beside him through the cold green mist and the dim glow of lamps that glimmered on the alien walls. The sound of

the fighting died away. They turned more corners, hunting always for the darkest shadows, hoping to meet a patrol. But the streets were deserted and all the doors barred tight. Finally Durham stopped. "How much oxygen you got left?" Karlovic peered at the illuminated indicator on the wrist of his suit. "Hour. Maybe less."

Both men were breathing hard, panting, burning up the precious stuff of life. Durham said,

"I won't last that long. Listen, Karlovic. Where is the Bitter Star?"

Karlovic's face was a pale blur inside his helmet. "You crazy? You can't "

Durham put his two hands on the shoulders of Karlovic's suit and leaned his helmet close so that it clicked on Karlovic's.

"Maybe I'm crazy. In thirty, forty minutes I'll be dead, so what will it matter then? Listen, Karlovic, I want to live." He pointed back the way they had come. "You think we can walk through that to the spaceport in time?"

"No."

"We got anyplace else to go?"

"No."

"All right then. Let's give 'em hell."

"But they're not all our enemies. Jubb, my friends--"

"Friend or enemy, they'll clear the way, We might just make it, Karlovic. You said the darkbirds control it, and you can talk to them." He shook Karlovic viciously. "Where is it? Don't you understand? If

we use it we can hound Morrison out of space!"

Karlovic turned and began to walk fast, sobbing as he went. "The darkbirds will never let us. You don't know what you're doing."

"I know one thing. I'm sick of being pushed, pushed, pushed, into corners, into holes, where I can't breathe. I'm going to--" He shut his teeth tight together and walked fast beside Karlovic, starting at every sound and shadow.

By twining alleys and streets where nothing moved for fear of the violence that was abroad that night, Karlovic led Durham to an open space like a park with vast locked gates that could keep a Senyan out but not a little agile human who could climb like a monkey with the fear of death upon him. Beyond the gates great wrinkled lichens as tall as trees grew in orderly rows, and a walk led inward. The lichens bent and rustled in the wind, and Durham's suit was wet with a poisonous dew.

The walk ended in a portico, and the portico was part of a building, round and squat as though a portion of its mass was underground. They passed through a narrow door into a place of utter silence, and a darkbird hung there, barring their way.

"Jubb," said Durham. "Tell it Jubb has sent us. Tell it the Bitter Star must be freed again to destroy Jubb's enemies."

Karlovic spoke to the shadow. Others came to join it. There was a flurry of ting and chittering, and then the one Karlovic had been speaking to disappeared in the uncanny fashion of its kind. The others stayed, a barrier between the two men and a ramp that led steeply down.

Karlovic sat down wearily on the chill stone. "It isn't any use," he said.

"I knew it wouldn't be. The darkbird has gone to ask Jubb if what we say is true."

Durham sat down, too. He did not even bother to look at the indicator on his wrist. No use. The end. Finish. He shut his eyes.

There was a stir and a hooting in the air. Karlovic gasped. Then he began to shake Durham, laughing like a woman who has heard a risqué story. "Didn't you hear? The bird came back, and Jubb said—Jubb said Morrison has been preaching the war of the Bitter Star, so let him have it."

He grasped Durham's suit by the shoulders and pulled him to his feet, and they ran with the cloud of shadows, down into the dimness below.

VIII

THERE was a small sealed chamber with a thick window, and beyond it was a circular space, not too large, walled with triple walls of glass with a vacuum between. The air was full of darkbirds, moving without hindrance through the walls or hovering where they chose, above the thing that slept inside.

Durham blinked and turned his head away, and then looked back again. And Karlovic said softly, "Beautiful, isn't it? But sad, too, somehow, I don't know why."

Durham felt it, a subliminal feeling without any reason to it, like the sadness of a summer night or of birth and laughter or of gull's wings white and swift against the sky. The Star shone, palely, gently. He tried to see if it was round or any other shape, if it was solid or vaporous, but he could not see anything but that soft shining, like mist around a winter moon.

Durham shook himself and wondered why, when he was already so sure of death, he should be so afraid. "All right," he said. "How is it freed?"

"The darkbirds do that. Watch."

He spoke to them, one word, and in the glass-walled prison there was a stirring and a swirling of shadows around the soft shining of the Star. Durham saw a disc set in the metal overhead. One of the darkbirds touched it. There was an intense blue flare of light, and Durham felt the throbbing of hidden dynamos, a secret surge of power. The glass walls darkened and grew dim, the low roof turned and opened to the sky. And through the barrier window, Durham watched the waking of a star.

He saw the frosty shining brighten and spread out in slow unfurling veils. There was a moment when the whole building seemed filled with moonfire as cold as the breath of outer space and as beautiful as the face of a dream, and then it was gone, and the darkbirds were gone with it.

"Come on," said Karlovic, a harsh incongruous voice in the stunned darkness that was left behind, and Durham came, up the ramp and out into the parklike space beyond, and all the tall lichens were standing dead and sheathed in ice.

High above, burning cold over the city, a new star shone.

They followed it, through a silence as deep as the end of the world. Everything had taken cover at the rising of that star, and only the two men moved, the thermal units of their suits turned on high, through streets all glazed with ice and cluttered here and there with the wreckage and the dead of the rioting. The darkbirds were forcing the Star to stay high, but even so nothing could live long without

protection in that sudden, terrible winter. The road to the port lay blank and bare. They found one of the smaller vehicles, its driver dead beside it. Karlovic got it going, moving the great levers with Durham's help. After that they rushed faster through the empty night. Durham shut his eyes, thinking.

He opened them, and the spaceport of Senya Dik lay black and deserted around him, and Karlovic was gasping to him for help. Together they pulled down the lever that stopped their conveyance. They scrambled down and ran out toward the small lifeboat, slipping and stumbling, dying inside their suits. They fell into the airlock, and Durham slammed the door and spun the wheel, waiting out the agonizing seconds while the tiny chamber cleared and then refilled, and they could tear off their helmets and breathe again. They looked at each other and la and hugged each other, and laughed againd and then went in to the cabin.

The communicator was flashing its light and burring stridently.

Durham switched it on. Jubb's face appeared in the tiny screen. "You are safe? Good, good. For a moment I thought--! Listen. I have word from my patrol that Morrison has other ships with him now, spread out to catch you if by chance you get through. That is what decided me to use the Bitter Star. I am angry, Karlovic. I am tired of mockery and lies and secret violence. I am tired of peace which is only a cloak for another man's aggression."

A darkbird came into the cabin and hung over Durham's shoulder. "It will carry your messages," said Jubb. "I am leaving now for the port, and my own flagship. We go together. Good luck."

The screen went dead. Durham said, "Strap in, we're taking off."

THE Star, with its herding pack of shadows, set a course that took

them steeply up out of Senya Dik's shadow, into the full flood of the green sun's light. The dark-bird spoke by Durham's shoulder, and Karlovic said, "The Star must feed--or recharge itself, as you would say, with solar heat. Watch it, Durham. Watch it grow."

He watched. The Star spread out its misty substance, spreading it wide to the sun, and the soft shining of it brightened to an angry glare that grew and widened and became like a burning cloud, not green like the sunlight but white as pearl.

Far off to one side of it Durham saw the glinting of a ship's hull. He pointed to it.

Karlovic worked with the communicator. In a minute the screen lit up, and Morrison's face was in it.

"Hello, Morrison," he said. "Hello, thief."

Morrison's face was as hard and white as something carved from bone.

"It wasn't just an old wife's tale, Morrison," he said. "It was true, and here it is. The Bitter Star, Morrison."

Karlovic reached over and shook him, pointing out the viewport. Coming swiftly in toward them was a small ship, curiously shaped before.

"Space-sweep," Karlovic said. "Those funny bulges are torpedo tubes, and the torpedoes carry heavy scatter charges to clear away debris so the ore ships can come in.

Durham said to the image in the screen, "Call him off."

Morrison showed the edges of his teeth, and asked, "Why should I?"

Durham nodded to Karlovic, who spoke to the darkbird. It disappeared. Within a few seconds the Star had begun to move. It moved fast, the angry gleaming of its body making a streak like a white comet across the green-lit void. It wrapped itself around the space-sweep, and then it lifted and the ship continued on its way unchanged. Morrison laughed.

The sweep rushed on toward the lifeboat. Its tubes were open, but nothing came out of them. Durham shifted course to clear it, and it blundered on by. In the screen, Morrison's image turned and spoke to someone, and the someone answered, "I cant, they just aren't there."

Morrison turned again to Durham, or rather to the image of him that was on his own screen. "I know what I'm supposed to say now, but I'm not going to say it. I've got Miss Hawtree with me, had you forgotten that? I don't think you've suddenly acquired that kind of guts."

Durham shook his head. "I don't need them. I want you alive, Morrison. But I don't give a tinker's damn what happens to anybody else in this whole backside of nowhere you call 9G. Nobody and nothing. And I have the Bitter Star to back me up. I am wondering how many loyal employees of Universal Minerals, and how many stupid Wanbccqs are going to sacrifice their lives just to keep me from getting my hands on you. Call them up, Morrison, and count them out, and we'll send the Star to see them."

The Star glowed and glimmered and crew to a great shining, and a look of worry deepened on Karlovic's face. Morrison did not answer, and Durham could see the thoughts going round and round in his mind, the possibilities being weighed and evaluated. Then the someone who was behind Morrison and out of scanner range said in a queer flat voice,

"The tug Varmey calling in, sir. They boarded the sweep."

"Well?"

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"All dead, sir. Frozen. Ever the air was frozen. They said to tell you they're going home."

"All right," said Morrison softly. "Durham, I'm going home too, to Nanta Dik. Let's see if you can follow me there."

He broke contact. In the distance Durham saw the bright speck that was Morrison's ship make a wheeling curve and speed away. Durham said grimly to Karlovic, "Tell the darkbirds to follow with the Star. And then get hold of somebody on Nanta Dik, somebody with authority. Tell them everything that's happened. Tell them Morrison is all we want. We'll see how close they let him get to home."

"I don't know," said Karlovic, busy with the communicator. Half an hour later he sighed and blanked the screen. "They're sending up a squadron to intercept Morrison. But they're scared. They're scared of the Star. I've promised then: and nothing had better happen, Durhan."

Durham said. "We'd better send word to Jubb."

For what seemed an eternity they fled through the green blaze of the sun, after the ship Durham could no longer see. And ahead of the lifeboat, a light and a portent in the void, went the Bitter Star with its attendant shadows. And Durham, too, began to worry, he was not sure why. Jubb's flagship closed up to them, a vast dark whale beside a minnow. And after a while a tiny bright ball that was a planet came spinning toward them. Karlovic pointed.

Hung like a net across space, between them and the planet, was a series of glittering metallic flecks.

"The squadron."

The communicator buzzed. Karlovic snapped it on, and the face of a Nantan officer appeared on the screen.

"We have Morrison," he said. "Come no closer with the Star."

Karlovic spoke to the darkbird. Durham's hands, heavy with weariness, slowed the lifeboat until it hung almost motionless. Jubb's great dark cruiser slowed also. Above and between them burned the Bitter Star. It had ceased to move.

Durham said, "The Star will come no closer. "

"Mr Karlovic," said the Nantan. "Bring your lifeboat in slowly, and alone."

The lifeboat came in among the ships or the squadron.

"Now," said the Nantan officer, "withdraw the Star." Karlovic said, "Jubb will do so--"

"No," said Durham suddenly, "Jubb will not. Look there!"

SHINING with a furious light, the Star had torn itself away from the clustering shadows that hung around it.

Durham's heart congealed with a foretaste of icy death. The face of the Nantan officer paled, and Karlovic said in a voice that was not like his voice at a11 . "I must talk to Jubb."

He reached out to shift their single screen, and the Nantan officer

said "Wait he is speaking on our alternate. I can adjust the scanner--"

The picture flopped, blurred, and cleared again, showing now in addition to the officer a part of the Nantan's alternate-channel screen. Jubb was speaking, and it seemed to Durham that the Senyan's strange face was clearly, humanly alarmed.

He said, "I cannot withdraw the Star. No, this is not a lie, a trick--hold your fire, you idiots! I'm the only hope you have now. The Star has profited by the lesson of its docility a thousand years ago, when it let itself be led back into captivity. Now it has grown too much. It cannot be brought back to any world."

Durham looked out at the beautiful deadly thing blazing so splendidly in the void. Can it be destroyed?"

"The darkbirds can destroy it," said Jubb. "If they will."

The Nantan officer, speaking from lips the color of ashes, said to the image of Jubb on the screen, "You have one minute to get it out of here before I fire "

Jubb turned his face away and spoke to something they could not see.

Durham turned to Karlovic. "He said, 'If they will' Does that mean--"

"I told you," said Karlovic, looking out the port, "that the darkbirds were created to guard the Star. And that, in a way they love it. Who can say how much?"

They watched.

Out in space the little cloud of darkbirds moved toward the Star. Then, hesitantly, they stopped.

"They won't," said Karlovic, in a whisper. Not even for Jubb."

Again Jubb spoke to the unseen messenger, as quietly as though it was a casual order. And presently a troubled movement rippled the swirling darkbirds

Suddenly they moved, again herding the Star Slowly at first, then more and more swiftly until it was only a streak of brilliant light, the darkbirds drove the Star straight toward the sun. And it was less a driving than an urging, a tempting, a promise of glory, a sweet betraying call from the mouth of the eternal Judas. The dark-birds led it, and it followed them.

In a moment, in that greater blaze, the star was lost to view.

Karlovic's breath came out of him in a long sigh. The only way it could be destroyed. Even its appetite for thermal energy could not swallow a sun."The darkbirds are coming back," Durham said. Then, wonderingly, "But they're not--"

The darkbirds were coming back from the green sun toward Jubb's ship. And not toward any planet. They were flying like blurring shadows toward outer space, and if they heard Jubb's calling voice they paid no heed at all.

"They're gone," Karlovic said unbelievably.

"Yes," said Jubb, very slowly. "They obeyed that order, but it was the last." He looked at the humans facing him, the men of Earth and the men-of Nanta Dik. He said, Do you see now that there is no difference between us, that we of Senya Dik can teach betrayal just like men?"

Durham looked out into the shining void but there was no sign now of the fleet and flying shadows. Intelligences, minds, beyond the understanding of heavy creatures like himself and Jubb. He wondered how far they would go, how long they would live, what things they would see.

Darkbirds, darkbirds, will you come back some day when we of flesh are ghosts and shadows, to frolic on our lonely worlds?

The Last Days of Shandakor

I

He came alone into the wineshop, wrapped in a dark red cloak, with the cowl drawn over his head. He stood for a moment by the doorway and one of the slim dark predatory women who live in those places went to him, with a silvery chiming from the little bells that were almost all she wore. I saw her smile up at him. And then, suddenly, the smile became fixed and something happened to her eyes. She was no longer looking at the cloaked man but through him. In the oddest fashion--it was as though he had become invisible.

She went by him. Whether she passed some word along or not I couldn't tell but an empty space widened around the stranger. And no one looked at him. They did not avoid looking at him. They simply refused to see him. He began to walk slowly across the crowded room. He was very tall and he moved with a fluid, powerful grace that was beautiful to watch. People drifted out of his way, not seeming to, but doing it. The air was thick with nameless smells, shrill with the laughter of women.

Two tall barbarians, far gone in wine, were carrying on some intertribal feud and the yelling crowd had made room for them to fight. There was a silver pipe and a drum and a double-banked harp

making old wild music. Lithe brown bodies leaped and whirled through the laughter and the shouting and the smoke. The stranger walked through all this, alone, untouched, unseen. He passed close to where I sat. Perhaps because I, of all the people in that place, not only saw him but stared at him, he gave me a glance of black eyes from under the shadow of his cowl--eyes like blown coals, bright with suffering and rage. I caught only a glimpse of his muffled face. The merest glimpse, but that was enough. Why did he have to show his face to me in that wineshop in Barrakesh?

He passed on. There was no space in the shadowy corner where he went but space was made, a circle of it, a moat between the stranger and the crowd. He sat down. I saw him lay a coin on the outer edge of the table. Presently a serving wench came up, picked up the coin and set down a cup of wine. But it was as if she waited on an empty table.

I turned to Kardak, my head drover, a Shunni with massive shoulders and uncut hair braided in an intricate tribal knot. "What's all that about?" I asked. Kardak shrugged. "Who knows?" He started to rise. "Come, JonRoss. It is time we got back to the serai."

"We're not leaving for hours yet. And don't lie to me, I've been on Mars a long time. What is that man? Where does he come from?" Barrakesh is the gateway between north and south. Long ago, when there were oceans in equatorial and southern Mars, when Valkis and Jekkara were proud seats of empire and not thieves' dens, here on the edge of the northern Drylands the great caravans had come and gone to Barrakesh for a thousand thousand years. It is a place of strangers.

In the time-eaten streets of rock you see tall Keshi hillmen, nomads from the high plains of Upper Shun, lean dark men from the south who barter away the loot of forgotten tombs and temples, cosmopolitan sophisticates up from Kahora and the trade cities,

where there are spaceports and all the appurtenances of modern civilization.

The red-cloaked stranger was none of these.

A glimpse of a face--I am a planetary anthropologist. I was supposed to be charting Martian ethnology and I was doing it on a fellowship grant I had wangled from a Terran university too ignorant to know that the vastness of Martian history makes such a project hopeless.

I was in Barrakesh, gathering an outfit preparatory to a year's study of the tribes of Upper Shun. And suddenly there had passed close by me a man with golden skin and un-Martian black eyes and a facial structure that belonged to no race I knew. I have seen the carven faces of fauns that were a little like it.

Kardak said again, "It is time to go, JonRoss!" I looked at the stranger, drinking his wine in silence and alone. "Very well, I'll ask him."

Kardak sighed. "Earthmen," he said, "are not given much to wisdom." He turned and left me.

I crossed the room and stood beside the stranger. In the old courteous High Martian they speak in all the Low-Canal towns I asked permission to sit. Those raging, suffering eyes met mine. There was hatred in them, and scorn, and shame. "What breed of human are you?"

"I am an Earthman."

He said the name over as though he had heard it before and was trying to remember. "Earthman. Then it is as the winds have said, blowing across the desert--that Mars is dead and men from other

worlds defile her dust." He looked out over the wineshop and all the people who would not admit his presence.

"Change," he whispered. "Death and change and the passing away of things." The muscles of his face drew tight. He drank and I could see now that he had been drinking for a long time, for days, perhaps for weeks. There was a quiet madness on him.

"Why do the people shun you?"

"Only a man of Earth would need to ask," he said and made a sound of laughter, very dry and bitter.

I was thinking, A new race, an unknown race! I was thinking of the fame that sometimes comes to men who discover a new thing, and of a Chair I might sit in at the University if I added one bright unheard-of piece of the shadowy mosaic of Martian history. I had had my share of wine and a bit more. That Chair looked a mile high and made of gold.

The stranger said softly, "I go from place to place in this wallow of Barrakesh and everywhere it is the same. I have ceased to be." His white teeth glittered for an instant in the shadow of the cowl. "They were wiser than I, my people. When Shandakor is dead, we are dead also, whether our bodies live or not."

"Shandakor?" I said. It had a sound of distant bells.

"How should an Earthman know? Yes, Shandakor! Ask of the men of Kesh and the men of Shun! Ask the kings of Mekh, who are half around the world! Ask of all the men of Mars—they have not forgotten Shandakor! But they will not tell you. It is a bitter shame to them, the memory and the name." He stared out across the turbulent throng that filled the room and flowed over to the noisy street outside. "And I am

here among them--lost."

"Shandakor is dead?"

"Dying. There were three of us who did not want to die. We came south across the desert--one turned back, one perished in the sand, I am here in Barrakesh." The metal of the wine-cup bent between his hands.

I said, "And you regret your coming."

"I should have stayed and died with Shandakor. I know that now. But I cannot go back."

"Why not?" I was thinking how the name John Ross would look, inscribed in golden letters on the scroll of the discoverers.

"The desert is wide, Earthman. Too wide for one alone." And I said, "I have a caravan. I am going north tonight." A light came into his eyes, so strange and deadly that I was afraid. "No," he whispered. "No!"

I sat in silence, looking out across the crowd that had forgotten me as well, because I sat with the stranger. A new race, an unknown city. And I was drunk. After a long while the stranger asked me, "What does an Earthman want in Shandakor?"

I told him. He laughed. "You study men," he said and laughed again, so that the red cloak rippled.

"If you want to go back I'll take you. If you don't, tell me where the city lies and I'll find it. Your race, your city, should have their place in history."

He said nothing but the wine had made me very shrewd and I could guess at what was going on in the stranger's mind. I got up.

"Consider it," I told him. "You can find me at the serai by the northern gate until the lesser moon is up. Then I'll be gone."

"Wait." His fingers fastened on my wrist. They hurt. I looked into his face and I did not like what I saw there. But, as Kardak had mentioned, I was not given much to wisdom.

The stranger said, "Your men will not go beyond the Wells of Karthedon."

"Then we'll go without them."

A long long silence. Then he said, "So be it." I knew what he was thinking as plainly as though he had spoken the words. He was thinking that I was only an Earthman and that he would kill me when we came in sight of Shandakor.

II

The caravan tracks branch off at the Wells of Karthedon. One goes westward into Shun and one goes north through the passes of Outer Kesh. But there is a third one, more ancient than the others. It goes toward the east and it is never used. The deep rock wells are dry and the stone-built shelters have vanished under the rolling dunes. It is not until the track begins to climb the mountains that there are even memories.

Kardak refused politely to go beyond the Wells. He would wait for me, he said, a certain length of time, and if I came back we would go on into Shun. If I didn't--well, his full pay was left in charge of the local headman. He would collect it and go home. He had not liked having the stranger with us. He had doubled his price.

In all that long march up from Barrakesh I had not been able to get a word out of Kardak or the men concerning Shandakor. The stranger had not spoken either. He had told me his name--Corin--and nothing more. Cloaked and cowed he rode alone and brooded. His private devils were still with him and he had a new one now--impatience. He would have ridden us all to death if I had let him. So Corin and I went east alone from Karthedon, with two led animals and all the water we could carry. And now I could not hold him back.

"There is no time to stop," he said. "The days are running out. There is no time!"

When we reached the mountains we had only three animals left and when we crossed the first ridge we were afoot and leading the one remaining beast which carried the dwindling water skins.

We were following a road now. Partly hewn and partly worn it led up and over the mountains, those naked leaning mountains that were full of silence and peopled only with the shapes of red rock that the wind had carved.

"Armies used to come this way," said Corin. "Kings and caravans and beggars and human slaves, singers and dancing girls and the embassies of princes. This was the road to Shandakor."

And we went along it at a madman's pace.

The beast fell in a slide of rock and broke its neck and we carried the last water skin between us. It was not a heavy burden. It grew lighter and then was almost gone.

One afternoon, long before sunset, Corin said abruptly, "We will stop here." The road went steeply up before us. There was nothing to be seen or heard. Corin sat down in the drifted dust. I crouched down

too, a little distance from him. I watched him. His face was hidden and he did not speak. The shadows thickened in that deep and narrow way. Overhead the strip of sky flared saffron and then red--and then the bright cruel stars came out. The wind worked at its cutting and polishing of stone, muttering to itself, an old and senile wind full of dissatisfaction and complaint. There was the dry faint click of falling pebbles.

The gun felt cold in my hand, covered with my cloak. I did not want to use it. But I did not want to die here on this silent pathway of vanished armies and caravans and kings.

A shaft of greenish moonlight crept down between the walls. Corin stood up.

"Twice now I have followed lies. Here I am met at last by truth." I said, "I don't understand you."

"I thought I could escape the destruction. That was a lie. Then I thought I could return to share it. That too was a lie. Now I see the truth. Shandakor is dying. I fled from that dying, which is the end of the city and the end of my race. The shame of flight is on me and I can never go back."

"What will you do?"

"I will die here."

"And I?"

"Did you think," asked Corin softly, "that I would bring an alien creature in to watch the end of Shandakor?"

I moved first. I didn't know what weapons he might have, hidden

under that dark red cloak. I threw myself over on the dusty rock. Something went past my head with a hiss and a rattle and a flame of light and then I cut the legs from under him and he fell down forward and I got on top of him, very fast. He had vitality. I had to hit his head twice against the rock before I could take out of his hands the vicious little instrument of metal rods. I threw it far away. I could not feel any other weapons on him except a knife and I took that, too. Then I got up.

I said, "I will carry you to Shandakor."

He lay still, draped in the tumbled folds of his cloak. His breath made a harsh sighing in his throat. "So be it." And then he asked for water. I went to where the skin lay and picked it up, thinking that there was perhaps a cupful left. I didn't hear him move. What he did was done very silently with a sharp-edged ornament. I brought him the water and it was already over. I tried to lift him up. His eyes looked at me with a curiously brilliant look. Then he whispered three words, in a language I didn't know, and died. I let him down again.

His blood had poured out across the dust. And even in the moonlight I could see that it was not the color of human blood.

I crouched there for a long while, overcome with a strange sickness. Then I reached out and pushed that red cowl back to bare his head. It was a beautiful head. I had never seen it. If I had, I would not have gone alone with Corin into the mountains. I would have understood many things if I had seen it and not for fame nor money would I have gone to Shandakor. His skull was narrow and arched and the shaping of the bones was very fine. On that skull was a covering of short curling fibers that had an almost metallic luster in the moonlight, silvery and bright. They stirred under my hand, soft silken wires responding of themselves to an alien touch. And even as I took my hand away the luster faded from them and the texture changed. When

I touched them again they did not stir. Corin's ears were pointed and there were silvery tufts on the tips of them. On them and on his forearms and his breast were the faint, faint memories of scales, a powdering of shining dust across the golden skin. I looked at his teeth and they were not human either.

I knew now why Corin had laughed when I told him that I studied men. It was very still. I could hear the falling of pebbles and the little stones that rolled all lonely down the cliffs and the shift and whisper of dust in the settling cracks. The Wells of Karthedon were far away. Too far by several lifetimes for one man on foot with a cup of water.

I looked at the road that went steep and narrow on ahead. I looked at Corin. The wind was cold and the shaft of moonlight was growing thin. I did not want to stay alone in the dark with Corin.

I rose and went on along the road that led to Shandakor. It was a long climb but not a long way. The road came out between two pinnacles of rock. Below that gateway, far below in the light of the little low moons that pass so swiftly over Mars, there was a mountain valley. Once around that valley there were great peaks crowned with snow and crags of black and crimson where the flying lizards nested, the hawk-lizards with the red eyes. Below the crags there were forests, purple and green and gold, and a black tarn deep on the valley floor. But when I saw it it was dead. The peaks had fallen away and the forests were gone and the tarn was only a pit in the naked rock.

In the midst of that desolation stood a fortress city. There were lights in it, soft lights of many colors. The outer walls stood up, black and massive, a barrier against the creeping dust, and within them was an island of life. The high towers were not ruined. The lights burned among them and there was movement in the streets.

A living city--and Corin had said that Shandakor was almost dead. A

rich and living city. I did not understand. But I knew one thing. Those who moved along the distant streets of Shandakor were not human. I stood shivering in that windy pass. The bright towers of the city beckoned and there was something unnatural about all light-life in the deathly valley. And then I thought that human or not the people of Shandakor might sell me water and a beast to carry it and I could get away out of these mountains, back to the Wells.

The road broadened, winding down the slope. I walked in the middle of it, not expecting anything. And suddenly two men came out of nowhere and barred the way.

I yelled. I jumped backward with my heart pounding and the sweat pouring off me. I saw their broadswords glitter in the moonlight. And they laughed. They were human. One was a tall red barbarian from Mekh, which lay to the east half around Mars. The other was a leaner browner man from Taarak, which was farther still. I was scared and angry and astonished and I asked a foolish question.

"What are you doing here?"

"We wait," said the man of Taarak. He made a circle with his arm to take in all the darkling slopes around the valley. "From Kesh and Shun, from all the countries of the Norlands and the Marches men have come, to wait. And you?"

"I'm lost," I said. "I'm an Earthman and I have no quarrel with anyone." I was still shaking but now it was with relief. I would not have to go to Shandakor. If there was a barbarian army gathered here it must have supplies and I could deal with them.

I told them what I needed. "I can pay for them, pay well." They looked at each other.

"Very well. Come and you can bargain with the chief." They fell in on either side of me. We walked three paces and then I was on my face in the dirt and they were all over me like two great wildcats. When they were finished they had everything I owned except the few articles of clothing for which they had no use. I got up again, wiping the blood from my mouth.

"For an outlander," said the man of Mekh, "you fight well." He chinked my money-bag up and down in his palm, feeling the weight of it, and then he handed me the leather bottle that hung at his side. "Drink," he told me. "That much I can't deny you. But our water must be carried a long way across these mountains and we have none to waste on Earthmen." I was not proud. I emptied his bottle for him. And the man of Taarak said, smiling, "Go on to Shandakor. Perhaps they will give you water."

"But you've taken all my money!"

"They are rich in Shandakor. They don't need money. Go ask them for water." They stood there, laughing at some secret joke of their own, and I did not like the sound of it. I could have killed them both and danced on their bodies but they had left me nothing but my bare hands to fight with. So presently I turned and went on and left them grinning in the dark behind me. The road led down and out across the plain. I could feel eyes watching me, the eyes of the sentinels on the rounding slopes, piercing the dim moonlight. The walls of the city began to rise higher and higher. They hid everything but the top of one tall tower that had a queer squat globe on top of it. Rods of crystal projected from the globe. It revolved slowly and the rods sparkled with a sort of white fire that was just on the edge of seeing. A causeway lifted toward the Western Gate. I mounted it, going very slowly, not wanting to go at all. And now I could see that the gate was open. Open--and this was a city under siege!

I stood still for some time, trying to puzzle out what meaning this might have—an army that did not attack and a city with open gates. I could not find a meaning. There were soldiers on the walls but they were lounging at their ease under the bright banners. Beyond the gate many people moved about but they were intent on their own affairs. I could not hear their voices. I crept closer, closer still. Nothing happened. The sentries did not challenge me and no one spoke.

You know how necessity can force a man against his judgment and against his will?

I entered Shandakor.

III

There was an open space beyond the gate, a square large enough to hold an army. Around its edges were the stalls of merchants. Their canopies were of rich woven stuffs and the wares they sold were such things as have not been seen on Mars for more centuries than men can remember. There were fruits and rare furs, the long-lost dyes that never fade, furnishings carved from vanished woods. There were spices and wines and exquisite cloths. In one place a merchant from the far south offered a ceremonial rug woven from the long bright hair of virgins. And it was new. These merchants were all human. The nationalities of some of them I knew. Others I could guess at from traditional accounts. Some were utterly unknown. Of the throngs that moved about among the stalls, quite a number were human also. There were merchant princes come to barter and there were companies of slaves on their way to the auction block. But the others... I stayed where I was, pressed into a shadowy corner by the gate, and the chill that was on me was not all from the night wind.

The golden-skinned silver-crested lords of Shandakor I knew well enough from Corin. I say lords because that is how they bore

themselves, walking proudly in their own place, attended by human slaves. And the humans who were not slaves made way for them and were most deferential as though they knew that they were greatly favored to be allowed inside the city at all. The women of Shandakor were very beautiful, slim golden sprites with their bright eyes and pointed ears.

And there were others. Slender creatures with great wings, some who were lithe and furred, some who were hairless and ugly and moved with a sinuous gliding, some so strangely shaped and colored that I could not even guess at their possible evolution.

The lost races of Mars. The ancient races, of whose pride and power nothing was left but the half-forgotten tales of old men in the farthest corners of the planet. Even I, who had made the anthropological history of Mars my business, had never heard of them except as the distorted shapes of legend, as satyrs and giants used to be known on Earth.

Yet here they were in gorgeous trappings, served by naked humans whose fetters were made of precious metals. And before them the merchants drew aside and bowed.

The lights burned, many-colored—not the torches and cressets of the Mars I knew but cool radiances that fell from crystal globes. The walls of the buildings that rose around the market-place were faced with rare veined marbles and the fluted towers that crowned them were inlaid with turquoise and cinnabar, with amber and jade and the wonderful corals of the southern oceans. The splendid robes and the naked bodies moved in a swirling pattern about the square. There was buying and selling and I could see the mouths of the people open and shut. The mouths of the women laughed. But in all that crowded place there was no sound. No voice, no scuff of sandal, no chink of mail. There was only silence, the utter stillness of deserted places. I

began to understand why there was no need to shut the gates. No superstitious barbarian would venture himself into a city peopled by living phantoms.

And I—I was civilized. I was, in my non-mechanical way, a scientist. And had I not been trapped by my need for water and supplies I would have run away right out of the valley. But I had no place to run to and so I stayed and sweated and gagged on the acrid taste of fear.

What were these creatures that made no sound? Ghosts—images—dreams? The human and the non-human, the ancient, the proud, the lost and forgotten who were so insanely present—did they have some subtle form of life I knew nothing about?

Could they see me as I saw them? Did they have thought and volition of their own?

It was the solidity of them, the intense and perfectly prosaic business in which they were engaged. Ghosts do not barter. They do not hang jeweled necklets upon their women nor argue about the price of a studded harness. The solidity and the silence—that was the worst of it. If there had been one small living sound...

A dying city, Corin had said. The days are running out. What if they had run out? What if I were here in this massive pile of stone with all its countless rooms and streets and galleries and hidden ways, alone with the lights and the soundless phantoms?

Pure terror is a nasty thing. I had it then.

I began to move, very cautiously, along the wall. I wanted to get away from that market-place. One of the hairless gliding non-humans was bartering for a female slave. The girl was shrieking. I could see every drawn muscle in her face, the spasmodic working of her throat. Not

the faintest sound came out. I found a street that paralleled the wall. I went along it, catching glimpses of people--human people--inside the lighted buildings. Now and then men passed me and I hid from them. There was still no sound. I was careful how I set my feet. Somehow I had the idea that if I made a noise something terrible would happen.

A group of merchants came toward me. I stepped back into an archway and suddenly from behind me there came three spangled women of the serais. I was caught.

I did not want those silent laughing women to touch me. I leaped back toward the street and the merchants paused, turning their heads. I thought that they had seen me. I hesitated and the women came on. Their painted eyes shone and their red lips glistened. The ornaments on their bodies flashed. They walked straight into me.

I made noise then, all I had in my lungs. And the women passed through me. They spoke to the merchants and the merchants laughed. They went off together down the street. They hadn't seen me. They hadn't heard me. And when I got in their way I was no more than a shadow. They passed through me. I sat down on the stones of the street and tried to think. I sat for a long time. Men and women walked through me as through the empty air. I sought to remember any sudden pain, as of an arrow in the back that might have killed me between two seconds, so that I hadn't known about it. It seemed more likely that I should be the ghost than the other way around. I couldn't remember. My body felt solid to my hands as did the stones I sat on. They were cold and finally the cold got me up and sent me on again. There was no reason to hide any more. I walked down the middle of the street and I got used to not turning aside.

I came to another wall, running at right angles back into the city. I followed that and it curved around gradually until I found myself back at the market-place, at the inner end of it. There was a gateway, with

the main part of the city beyond it, and the wall continued. The non-humans passed back and forth through the gate but no human did except the slaves. I realized then that all this section was a ghetto for the humans who came to Shandakor with the caravans.

I remembered how Corin had felt about me. And I wondered--granted that I were still alive and that some of the people of Shandakor were still on the same plane as myself--how they would feel about me if I trespassed in their city. There was a fountain in the market-place. The water sprang up sparkling in the colored light and filled a wide basin of carved stone. Men and women were drinking from it. I went to the fountain but when I put my hands in it all I felt was a dry basin filled with dust. I lifted my hands and let the dust trickle from them. I could see it clearly. But I saw the water too. A child leaned over and splashed it and it wetted the garments of the people. They struck the child and he cried and there was no sound. I went on through the gate that was forbidden to the human race. The avenues were wide. There were trees and flowers, wide parks and garden villas, great buildings as graceful as they were tall. A wise proud city, ancient in culture but not decayed, as beautiful as Athens but rich and strange, with a touch of the alien in every line of it. Can you think what it was like to walk in that city, among the silent throngs that were not human--to see the glory of it, that was not human either?

The towers of jade and cinnabar, the golden minarets, the lights and the colored silks, the enjoyment and the strength. And the people of Shandakor! No matter how far their souls have gone they will never forgive me. How long I wandered I don't know. I had almost lost my fear in wonder at what I saw. And then, all at once in that deathly stillness, I heard a sound--the quick, soft scuffing of sandaled feet.

I stopped where I was, in the middle of a plaza. The tall silver-crested ones drank wine under canopies of dusky blooms and in the center a score of winged girls as lovely as swans danced a slow strange measure that was more like flight than dancing. I looked all around. There were many people. How could you tell which one had made a noise?

Silence.

I turned and ran across the marble paving. I ran hard and then suddenly I stopped again, listening. Scuff-scuff--no more than a whisper, very light and swift. I spun around but it was gone. The soundless people walked and the dancers wove and shifted, spreading their white wings. Someone was watching me. Some one of those indifferent shadows was not a shadow.

I went on. Wide streets led off from the plaza. I took one of them. I tried the trick of shifting pace and two or three times I caught the echo of other steps than mine. Once I knew it was deliberate. Whoever followed me slipped silently among the noiseless crowd, blending with them, protected by them, only making a show of footsteps now and then to goad me. I spoke to that mocking presence. I talked to it and listened to my own voice ringing hollow from the walls. The groups of people ebbed and flowed around me and there was no answer.

I tried making sudden leaps here and there among the passersby with my arms outspread. But all I caught was empty air. I wanted a place to hide and there was none.

The street was long. I went its length and the someone followed me. There were many buildings, all lighted and populous and deathly still. I thought of trying to hide in the buildings but I could not bear to be closed in between walls with those people who were not people.

I came into a great circle, where a number of avenues met around the very tall tower I had seen with the revolving globe on top of it. I hesitated, not knowing which way to go. Someone was sobbing and I realized that it was myself, laboring to breathe. Sweat ran into the corners of my mouth and it was cold, and bitter.

A pebble dropped at my feet with a brittle click.

I bolted out across the square. Four or five times, without reason, like a rabbit caught in the open, I changed course and fetched up with my back against an ornamental pillar. From somewhere there came a sound of laughter. I began to yell. I don't know what I said. Finally I stopped and there was only the silence and the passing throngs, who did not see nor hear me. And now it seemed to me that the silence was full of whispers just below the threshold of hearing.

A second pebble clattered off the pillar above my head. Another stung my body. I sprang away from the pillar. There was laughter and I ran. There were infinities of streets, all glowing with color. There were many faces, strange faces, and robes blown out on a night wind, litters with scarlet curtains and beautiful cars like chariots drawn by beasts. They flowed past me like smoke, without sound, without substance, and the laughter pursued me, and I ran.

Four men of Shandakor came toward me. I plunged through them but their bodies opposed mine, their hands caught me and I could see their eyes, their black shining eyes, looking at me....

I struggled briefly and then it was suddenly very dark. The darkness caught me up and took me somewhere. Voices talked far away. One of them was a light young shiny sort of voice. It matched the laughter that had haunted me down the streets. I hated it.

I hated it so much that I fought to get free of the black river that was carrying me. There was a vertiginous whirling of light and sound and stubborn shadow and then things steadied down and I was ashamed of myself for having passed out.

I was in a room. It was fairly large, very beautiful, very old, the first place I had seen in Shandakor that showed real age--Martian age, that runs back before history had begun on Earth. The floor, of some magnificent somber stone the color of a moonless night, and the pale slim pillars that upheld the arching roof all showed the hollowings and smoothnesses of centuries. The wall paintings had dimmed and softened and the rugs that burned in pools of color on that dusky floor were worn as thin as silk.

There were men and women in that room, the alien folk of Shandakor. But these breathed and spoke and were alive. One of them, a girl-child with slender thighs and little pointed breasts, leaned against a pillar close beside me. Her black eyes watched me, full of dancing lights. When she saw that I was awake again she smiled and flicked a pebble at my feet. I got up. I wanted to get that golden body between my hands and make it scream. And she said in High Martian, "Are you a human? I have never seen one before close to."

A man in a dark robe said, "Be still, Duani." He came and stood before me. He did not seem to be armed but others were and I remembered Corin's little weapon. I got hold of myself and did none of the things I wanted to do.

"What are you doing here?" asked the man in the dark robe. I told him about myself and Corin, omitting only the fight that he and I had had before he died, and I told him how the hillmen had robbed me.

"They sent me here," I finished, "to ask for water." Someone made a harsh humorless sound. The man before me said, "They were in a

jesting mood."

"Surely you can spare some water and a beast!"

"Our beasts were slaughtered long ago. And as for water..." He paused, then asked bitterly, "Don't you understand? We are dying here of thirst!" I looked at him and at the she-imp called Duani and the others. "You don't show any signs of it," I said.

"You saw how the human tribes have gathered like wolves upon the hills. What do you think they wait for? A year ago they found and cut the buried aqueduct that brought water into Shandakor from the polar cap. All they needed then was patience. And their time is very near. The store we had in the cisterns is almost gone."

A certain anger at their submissiveness made me say, "Why do you stay here and die like mice bottled up in a jar? You could have fought your way out. I've seen your weapons."

"Our weapons are old and we are very few. And suppose that some of us did survive--tell me again, Earthman, how did Corin fare in the world of men?" He shook his head. "Once we were great and Shandakor was mighty. The human tribes of half a world paid tribute to us. We are only the last poor shadow of our race but we will not beg from men!"

"Besides," said Duani softly, "where else could we live but in Shandakor?"

"What about the others?" I asked. "The silent ones."

"They are the past," said the dark-robed man and his voice rang like a distant flare of trumpets.

Still I did not understand. I had not understood at all. But before I could ask more questions a man came up and said, "Rhul, he will have to die." The tufted tips of Duani's ears quivered and her crest of silver curls came almost erect.

"No, Rhul" she cried. "At least not right away." There was a clamor from the others, chiefly in a rapid angular speech that must have predated all the syllables of men. And the one who had spoken before to Rhul repeated, "He will have to die! He has no place here. And we can't spare water."

"I'll share mine with him," said Duani, "for a while." I didn't want any favors from her and said so. "I came here after supplies. You haven't any, so I'll go away again. It's as simple as that." I couldn't buy from the barbarians, but I might make shift to steal. Rhul shook his head. "I'm afraid not. We are only a handful. For years our single defense has been the living ghosts of our past who walk the streets, the shadows who man the walls. The barbarians believe in enchantments. If you were to enter Shandakor and leave it again alive the barbarians would know that the enchantment cannot kill. They would not wait any longer." Angrily, because I was afraid, I said, "I can't see what difference that would make. You're going to die in a short while anyway."

"But in our own way, Earthman, and in our own time. Perhaps, being human, you can't understand that. It is a question of pride. The oldest race of Mars will end well, as it began."

He turned away with a small nod of the head that said kill him--as easily as that. And I saw the ugly little weapons rise.

V

There was a split second then that seemed like a year. I thought of

many things but none of them were any good. It was a devil of a place to die without even a human hand to help me under. And then Duani flung her arms around me.

"You're all so full of dying and big thoughts!" she yelled at them. "And you're all paired off or so old you can't do anything but think! What about me? I don't have anyone to talk to and I'm sick of wandering alone, thinking how I'm going to die! Let me have him just for a little while? I told you I'd share my water."

On Earth a child might talk that way about a stray dog. And it is written in an old Book that a live dog is better than a dead lion. I hoped they would let her keep me.

They did. Rhul looked at Duani with a sort of weary compassion and lifted his hand. "Wait," he said to the men with the weapons. "I have thought how this human may be useful to us. We have so little time left now that it is a pity to waste any of it, yet much of it must be used up in tending the machine. He could do that labor--and a man can keep alive on very little water." The others thought that over. Some of them dissented violently, not so much on the grounds of water as that it was unthinkable that a human should intrude on the last days of Shandakor. Corin had said the same thing. But Rhul was an old man. The tufts of his pointed ears were colorless as glass and his face was graven deep with years and wisdom had distilled in him its bitter brew.

"A human of our own world, yes. But this man is of Earth and the men of Earth will come to be the new rulers of Mars as we were the old. And Mars will love them no better than she did us because they are as alien as we. So it is not unfitting that he should see us out."

They had to be content with that. I think they were already so close to the end that they did not really care. By ones and twos they left as

though already they had wasted too much time away from the wonders that there were in the streets outside. Some of the men still held the weapons on me and others went and brought precious chains such as the human slaves had worn--shackles, so that I should not escape. They put them on me and Duani laughed.

"Come," said Rhul, "and I will show you the machine." He led me from the room and up a winding stair. There were tall embrasures and looking through them I discovered that we were in the base of the very high tower with the globe. They must have carried me back to it after Duani had chased me with her laughter and her pebbles. I looked out over the glowing streets, so full of splendor and of silence, and asked Rhul why there were no ghosts inside the tower.

"You have seen the globe with the crystal rods?"

"Yes."

"We are under the shadow of its core. There had to be some retreat for us into reality. Otherwise we would lose the meaning of the dream." The winding stair went up and up. The chain between my ankles clattered musically. Several times I tripped on it and fell.

"Never mind," Duani said. "You'll grow used to it." We came at last into a circular room high in the tower. And I stopped and stared.

Most of the space in that room was occupied by a web of metal girders that supported a great gleaming shaft. The shaft disappeared upward through the roof. It was not tall but very massive, revolving slowly and quietly. There were traps, presumably for access to the offset shaft and the cogs that turned it. A ladder led to a trap in the roof.

All the visible metal was sound with only a little surface corrosion.

What the alloy was I don't know and when I asked Rhul he only smiled rather sadly.

"Knowledge is found," he said, "only to be lost again. Even we of Shandakor forget."

Every bit of that enormous structure had been shaped and polished and fitted into place by hand. Nearly all the Martian peoples work in metal. They seem to have a genius for it and while they are not and apparently never have been mechanical, as some of our races are on Earth, they find many uses for metal that we have never thought of.

But this before me was certainly the high point of the metalworkers' craft. When I saw what was down below, the beautifully simple power plant and the rotary drive set-up with fewer moving parts than I would have thought possible, I was even more respectful. "How old is it?" I asked and again Rhul shook his head.

"Several thousand years ago there is a record of the yearly Hosting of the Shadows and it was not the first." He motioned me to follow him up the ladder, bidding Duani sternly to remain where she was. She came anyway. There was a raised platform open to the universe and directly above it swung the mighty globe with its crystal rods that gleamed so strangely. Shandakor lay beneath us, a tapestry of many colors, bright and still, and out along the dark sides of the valley the tribesmen waited for the light to die.

"When there is no one left to tend the machine it will stop in time and then the men who have hated us so long will take what they want of Shandakor. Only fear has kept them out this long. The riches of half a world flowed through these streets and much of it remained."

He looked up at the globe. "Yes," he said, "we had knowledge. More, I think, than any other race of Mars."

"But you wouldn't share it with the humans." Rhul smiled. "Would you give little children weapons to destroy you? We gave men better ploughshares and brighter ornaments and if they invented a machine we did not take it from them. But we did not tempt and burden them with knowledge that was not their own. They were content to make war with sword and spear and so they had more pleasure and less killing and the world was not torn apart."

"And you--how did you make war?"

"We defended our city. The human tribes had nothing that we coveted, so there was no reason to fight them except in self-defense. When we did we won." He paused. "The other non-human races were more stupid or less fortunate. They perished long ago."

He turned again to his explanations of the machine. "It draws its power directly from the sun. Some of the solar energy is converted and stored within the globe to serve as the light-source. Some is sent down to turn the shaft."

"What if it should stop." Duani said, "while we're still alive?" She shivered, looking out over the beautiful streets.

"It won't--not if the Earthman wishes to live."

"What would I have to gain by stopping it?" I demanded.

"Nothing. And that," said Rhul, "is why I trust you. As long as the globe turns you are safe from the barbarians. After we are gone you will have the pick of the loot of Shandakor."

How I was going to get away with it afterward he did not tell me. He motioned me down the ladder again but I asked him, "What is the globe, Rhul? How does it make the--the Shadows?"

He frowned. "I can only tell you what has become, I'm afraid, mere traditional knowledge. Our wise men studied deeply into the properties of light. They learned that light has a definite effect upon solid matter and they believed, because of that effect, that stone and metal and crystalline things retain a

'memory' of all that they have 'seen.' Why this should be I do not know." I didn't try to explain to him the quantum theory and the photoelectric effect nor the various experiments of Einstein and Millikan and the men who followed them. I didn't know them well enough myself and the old High Martian is deficient in such terminology.

I only said, "The wise men of my world also know that the impact of light tears away tiny particles from the substance it strikes." I was beginning to get a glimmering of the truth. Light-patterns "cut" in the electrons of metal and stone--sound-patterns cut in unlikely looking mediums of plastic, each needing only the proper "needle" to recreate the recorded melody or the recorded picture.

"They constructed the globe," said Rhul. "I do not know how many generations that required nor how many failures they must have had. But they found at last the invisible light that makes the stones give up their memories." In other words they had found their needle. What wave-length or combination of wave-lengths in the electromagnetic spectrum flowed out from those crystal rods, there was no way for me to know. But where they probed the walls and the paving blocks of Shandakor they scanned the hidden patterns that were buried in them and brought them forth again in form and color--as the electron needle brings forth whole symphonies from a little ridged disc. How they had achieved sequence and selectivity was another matter. Rhul said something about the "memories" having different lengths.

Perhaps he meant depth of penetration. The stones of Shandakor were ages old and the outer surfaces would have worn away. The earliest impressions would be gone altogether or at least have become fragmentary and extremely shallow. Perhaps the scanning beams could differentiate between the overlapping layers of impressions by that fraction of a micron difference in depth. Photons only penetrate so far into any given substance but if that substance is constantly growing less in thickness the photons would have the effect of going deeper. I imagine the globe was accurate in centuries or numbers of centuries, not in years.

However it was, the Shadows of a golden past walked the streets of Shandakor and the last men of the race waited quietly for death, remembering their glory.

Rhul took me below again and showed me what my tasks would be, chiefly involving a queer sort of lubricant and a careful watch over the power leads. I would have to spend most of my time there but not all of it. During the free periods, Duani might take me where she would.

The old man went away. Duani leaned herself against a girder and studied me with intense interest. "How are you called?" she asked.

"John Ross."

"JonRoss," she repeated and smiled. She began to walk around me, touching my hair, inspecting my arms and chest, taking a child's delight in discovering all the differences there were between herself and what we call a human. And that was the beginning of my captivity.

VI

There were days and nights, scant food and scant water. There was Duani. And there was Shandakor. I lost my fear. And whether I

lived to occupy the Chair or not, this was something to have seen.

Duani was my guide. I was tender of my duties because my neck depended on them but there was time to wander in the streets, to watch the crowded pageant that was not and sense the stillness and the desolation that were so cruelly real. I began to get the feel of what this alien culture had been like and how it had dominated half a world without the need of conquest. In a Hall of Government, built of white marble and decorated with wall friezes of austere magnificence, I watched the careful choosing and the crowning of a king. I saw the places of learning. I saw the young men trained for war as fully as they were instructed in the arts of peace. I saw the pleasure gardens, the theaters, the forums, the sporting fields--and I saw the places of work, where the men and women of Shandakor coaxed beauty from their looms and forges to trade for the things they wanted from the human world. The human slaves were brought by their own kind to be sold, and they seemed to be well treated, as one treats a useful animal in which one has invested money. They had their work to do but it was only a small part of the work of the city.

The things that could be had nowhere else on Mars--the tools, the textiles, the fine work in metal and precious stones, the glass and porcelain--were fashioned by the people of Shandakor and they were proud of their skill. Their scientific knowledge they kept entirely to themselves, except what concerned agriculture or medicine or better ways of building drains and houses. They were the lawgivers, the teachers. And the humans took all they would give and hated them for it. How long it had taken these people to attain such a degree of civilization Duani could not tell me. Neither could old Rhul.

"It is certain that we lived in communities, had a form of civil government, a system of numbers and written speech, before the human tribes. There are traditions of an earlier race than ours, from

whom we learned these things. Whether or not this is true I do not know."

In its prime Shandakor had been a vast and flourishing city with countless thousands of inhabitants. Yet I could see no signs of poverty or crime. I couldn't even find a prison.

"Murder was punishable by death," said Rhul, "but it was most infrequent. Theft was for slaves. We did not stoop to it." He watched my face, smiling a little acid smile. "That startles you--a great city without suffering or crime or places of punishment."

I had to admit that it did. "Elder race or not, how did you manage to do it?"

I'm a student of cultures, both here and on my own world. I know all the usual patterns of development and I've read all the theories about them--but Shandakor doesn't fit any of them."

Rhul's smile deepened. "You are human," he said. "Do you wish the truth?"

"Of course."

"Then I will tell you. We developed the faculty of reason." For a moment I thought he was joking. "Come," I said, "man is a reasoning being--on Earth the only reasoning being."

"I do not know of Earth," he answered courteously. "But on Mars man has always said, I reason, I am above the beasts because I reason. And he has been very proud of himself because he could reason. It is the mark of his humanity. Being convinced that reason operates automatically within him he orders his life and his government upon emotion and superstition."

"He hates and fears and believes, not with reason but because he is told to by other men or by tradition. He does one thing and says another and his reason teaches him no difference between fact and falsehood. His bloodiest wars are fought for the merest whim--and that is why we did not give him weapons. His greatest follies appear to him the highest wisdom, his basest betrayals become noble acts--and that is why we could not teach him justice. We learned to reason. Man only learned to talk."

I understood then why the human tribes had hated the men of Shandakor. I said angrily, "Perhaps that is so on Mars. But only reasoning minds can develop great technologies and we humans of Earth have outstripped yours a million times. All right, you know or knew some things we haven't learned yet, in optics and some branches of electronics and perhaps in metallurgy. But..." I went on to tell him all the things we had that Shandakor did not. "You never went beyond the beast of burden and the simple wheel. We achieved flight long ago. We have conquered space and the planets. We'll go on to conquer the stars!"

Rhul nodded. "Perhaps we were wrong. We remained here and conquered ourselves." He looked out toward the slopes where the barbarian army waited and he sighed. "In the end it is all the same." Days and nights and Duani, bringing me food, sharing her water, asking questions, taking me through the city. The only thing she would not show me was something they called the Place of Sleep. "I shall be there soon enough," she said and shivered.

"How long?" I asked. It was an ugly thing to say.

"We are not told. Rhul watches the level in the cisterns and when it's time ... "She made a gesture with her hands. "Let us go up on the wall." We went up among the ghostly soldiery and the phantom

banners. Outside there were darkness and death and the coming of death. Inside there were light and beauty, the last proud blaze of Shandakor under the shadow of its doom. There was an eerie magic in it that had begun to tell on me. I watched Duani. She leaned against the parapet, looking outward. The wind ruffled her silver crest, pressed her garments close against her body. Her eyes were full of moonlight and I could not read them. Then I saw that there were tears. I put my arm around her shoulders. She was only a child, an alien child, not of my race or breed...

"Jon Ross."

"Yes?"

"There are so many things I will never know." It was the first time I had touched her. Those curious curls stirred under my fingers, warm and alive. The tips of her pointed ears were soft as a kitten's.

"Duani."

"What?"

"I don't know..."

I kissed her. She drew back and gave me a startled look from those black brilliant eyes and suddenly I stopped thinking that she was a child and I forgot that she was not human and—I didn't care.

"Duani, listen. You don't have to go to the Place of Sleep." She looked at me, her cloak spread out upon the night wind, her hands against my chest.

"There's a whole world out there to live in. And if you aren't happy there I'll take you to my world, to Earth. There isn't any reason why you

have to die!"

Still she looked at me and did not speak. In the streets below the silent throngs went by and the towers glowed with many colors. Duani's gaze moved slowly to the darkness beyond the wall, to the barren valley and the hostile rocks.

"No."

"Why not? Because of Rhul, because of all this talk of pride and race?"

"Because of truth. Corin learned it."

I didn't want to think about Corin. "He was alone. You're not. You'd never be alone."

She brought her hands up and laid them on my cheeks very gently. "That green star, that is your world. Suppose it were to vanish and you were the last of all the men of Earth. Suppose you lived with me in Shandakor forever—would you not be alone?"

"It wouldn't matter if I had you."

She shook her head. "It would matter. And our two races are as far apart as the stars. We would have nothing to share between us." Remembering what Rhul had told me I flared up and said some angry things. She let me say them and then she smiled. "It is none of that, JonRoss." She turned to look out over the city. "This is my place and no other. When it is gone I must be gone too."

Quite suddenly I hated Shandakor.

I didn't sleep much after that. Every time Duani left me I was afraid she might never come back. Rhul would tell me nothing and I didn't

gare to question him too much. The hours rushed by like seconds and Duani was happy and I was not. My shackles had magnetic locks. I couldn't break them and I couldn't cut the chains.

One evening Duani came to me with something in her face and in the way she moved that told me the truth long before I could make her put it into words. She clung to me, not wanting to talk, but at last she said, "Today there was a casting of lots and the first hundred have gone to the Place of Sleep."

"It is the beginning, then."

She nodded. "Every day there will be another hundred until all are gone." I couldn't stand it any longer. I thrust her away and stood up. "You know where the 'keys' are. Get these chains off me!" She shook her head. "Let us not quarrel now, JonRoss. Come. I want to walk in the city."

We had quarreled more than once, and fiercely. She would not leave Shandakor and I couldn't take her out by force as long as I was chained. And I was not to be released until everyone but Rhul had entered the Place of Sleep and the last page of that long history had been written.

I walked with her among the dancers and the slaves and the bright-cloaked princes. There were no temples in Shandakor. If they worshipped anything it was beauty and to that their whole city was a shrine. Duani's eyes were rapt and there was a remoteness on her now.

I held her hand and looked at the towers of turquoise and cinnabar, the pavings of rose quartz and marble, the walls of pink and white and deep red coral, and to me they were hideous. The ghostly crowds, the mockery of life, the phantom splendors of the past were

hideous, a drug, a snare.

"The faculty of reason!" I thought and saw no reason in any of it. I looked up to where the great globe turned and turned against the sky, keeping these mockeries alive. "Have you ever seen the city as it is--without the Shadows?"

"No. I think only Rhul, who is the oldest, remembers it that way. I think it must have been very lonely. Even then there were less than three thousand of us left."

It must indeed have been lonely. They must have wanted the Shadows as much to people the empty streets as to fend off the enemies who believed in magic. I kept looking at the globe. We walked for a long time. And then I said, "I must go back to the tower."

She smiled at me very tenderly. "Soon you will be free of the tower--and of these." She touched the chains. "No, don't be sad, JonRoss. You will remember me and Shandakor as one remembers a dream." She held up her face, that was so lovely and so unlike the meaty faces of human women, and her eyes were full of somber lights. I kissed her and then I caught her up in my arms and carried her back to the tower.

In that room, where the great shaft turned, I told her, "I have to tend the things below. Go up onto the platform, Duani, where you can see all Shandakor. I'll be with you soon."

I don't know whether she had some hint of what was in my mind or whether it was only the imminence of parting that made her look at me as she did. I thought she was going to speak but she did not, climbing the ladder obediently. I watched her slender golden body vanish upward. Then I went into the chamber below.

There was a heavy metal bar there that was part of a manual control for regulating the rate of turn. I took it off its pin. Then I closed the simple switches on the power plant. I tore out all the leads and smashed the connections with the bar. I did what damage I could to the cogs and the offset shaft. I worked very fast. Then I went up into the main chamber again. The great shaft was still turning but slowly, ever more slowly. There was a cry from above me and I saw Duani. I sprang up the ladder, thrusting her back onto the platform. The globe moved heavily of its own momentum. Soon it would stop but the white fires still flickered in the crystal rods. I climbed up onto the railing, clinging to a strut. The chains on my wrists and ankles made it hard but I could reach. Duani tried to pull me down. I think she was screaming. I hung on and smashed the crystal rods with the bar, as many as I could.

There was no more motion, no more light. I got down on the platform again and dropped the bar. Duani had forgotten me. She was looking at the city. The lights of many colors that had burned there were burning still but they were old and dim, cold embers without radiance. The towers of jade and turquoise rose up against the little moons and they were broken and cracked with time and there was no glory in them. They were desolate and very sad. The night lay clotted around their feet. The streets, the plazas and the market-squares were empty, their marble paving blank and bare. The soldiers had gone from the walls of Shandakor, with their banners and their bright mail, and there was no longer any movement anywhere within the gates. Duani let out one small voiceless cry. And as though in answer to it, suddenly from the darkness of the valley and the slopes beyond there rose a thin fierce howling as of wolves.

"Why?" she whispered. "Why?" She turned to me. Her face was pitiful. I caught her to me.

"I couldn't let you die! Not for dreams and visions, nothing. Look, Duani. Look at Shandakor." I wanted to force her to understand. "Shandakor is broken and ugly and forlorn. It is a dead city--but you're alive. There are many cities but only one life for you."

Still she looked at me and it was hard to meet her eyes. She said "We knew all that, JonRoss."

"Duani, you're a child, you've only a child's way of thought. Forget the past and think of tomorrow. We can get through the barbarians. Corin did. And after that..."

"And after that you would still be human--and I would not." From below us in the dim and empty streets there came a sound of lamentation. I tried to hold her but she slipped out from between my hands. "And I am glad that you are human," she whispered. "You will never understand what you have done."

And she was gone before I could stop her, down into the tower. I went after her. Down the endless winding stairs with my chains clattering between my feet, out into the streets, the dark and broken and deserted streets of Shandakor. I called her name and her golden body went before me, fleet and slender, distant and more distant. The chains dragged upon my feet and the night took her away from me.

I stopped. The whelming silence rushed smoothly over me and I was bitterly afraid of this dark dead Shandakor that I did not know. I called again to Duani and then I began to search for her in the shattered shadowed streets. I know now how long it must have been before I found her. For when I found her, she was with the others. The last people of Shandakor, the men and the women, the women first, were walking silently in a long line toward a low flat-roofed building that I knew without telling was the Place of Sleep.

They were going to die and there was no pride in their faces now. There was a sickness in them, a sickness and a hurt in their eyes as they moved heavily forward, not looking, not wanting to look at the sordid ancient streets that I had stripped of glory.

"Duani!" I called, and ran forward but she did not turn in her place in the line. And I saw that she was weeping.

Rhul turned toward me, and his look had a weary contempt that was bitterer than a curse. "Of what use, after all, to kill you now?"

"But I did this thing! I did it!"

"You are only human."

The long line shuffled on and Duani's little feet were closer to that final doorway. Rhul looked upward at the sky. "There is still time before the sunrise. The women at least will be spared the indignity of spears."

"Let me go with her!"

I tried to follow her, to take my place in line. And the weapon in Rhul's hand moved and there was the pain and I lay as Corin had lain while they went silently on into the Place of Sleep.

The barbarians found me when they came, still half doubtful, into the city after dawn. I think they were afraid of me. I think they feared me as a wizard who had somehow destroyed all the folk of Shandakor. For they broke my chains and healed my wounds and later they even gave me out of the loot of Shandakor the only thing I wanted--a bit of porcelain, shaped like the head of a young girl.

I sit in the Chair that I craved at the University and my name is written

on the roll of the discoverers. I am eminent, I am respectable—I, who murdered the glory of a race.

Why didn't I go after Duani into the Place of Sleep? I could have crawled! I could have dragged myself across those stones. And I wish to God I had. I wish that I had died with Shandakor!

"The Lake Of The Gone Forever"

Leigh Brackett

Chapter I: Landing on Iskar

IN his cabin aboard the spaceship Rohan, Rand Conway slept--and dreamed. He stood in a narrow valley. On both sides the cliffs of ice rose up, sheer and high and infinitely beautiful, out of the powdery snow. The darkling air was full of whirling motes of frost, like the dust of diamonds, and overhead the shining pinnacles stood clear against a sky of deepest indigo, spangled with great stars.

As always the place was utterly strange to Conway and yet, somehow, not strange at all. He began to walk forward through the drifting snow and he seemed almost to know what he was seeking around the bend of the valley. Fear came upon him then but he could not stop.

And as always in that icy place his dead father stood waiting. He stood just as he had years ago, on the night he died, and he spoke slowly and sadly the words he had spoken then to his uncomprehending small son.

"I can never go back to Iskar, to the Lake of the Gone Forever." Tears dropped slowly from under the closed lids of his eyes and the echo went to and fro between the cliffs, saying, "... Lake of the Gone Forever... Gone Forever..."

Conway crept on, trembling. Above him the golden stars wheeled in the dark blue sky and the beauty of them was evil and the shimmering turrets of the ice were full of lurking laughter.

He passed into the shadows under the sheathed rocks that hid the end of the valley and as he did so the dead man cried out in a voice of agony, "I can never to back to Iskar!"

And the cliffs caught up the name and shouted it thunderously through the dream.

Iskar! Iskar!

Rand Conway started up in his bunk, wide awake, shaken and sweating as always by the strangeness of that vision. Then his hands closed hard on the edge of the bunk and he laughed.

"You couldn't go back," he whispered to the man dead twenty years. "But I'm going. By heaven, I'm going, at last!"

It seemed to him that the very fabric of the ship murmured the name as it rushed on into deep space, that the humming machines purred it, that the thundering jets bellowed it.

Iskar! Iskar!

A savage triumph rose in Conway. So many times he had awakened from that dream to hopelessness--the hopelessness of ever reaching his goal. So many times, in these years of hard dangerous spaceman's toil, the lost little world that meant power and riches had seemed remote beyond attainment. But he had hung on, too stubborn ever quite to give up. He had waited and planned and hoped until finally he had made his chance. And he was on his way now to the place that his father had lost and never regained.

"Iskar!"

* * *

Conway started up, his face swiftly losing its brooding look. That wasn't just an echo of his dream. Someone was shouting the name outside his cabin door.

"Conway! Rand Conway! We've sighted Iskar!" Of course! Why else would the jets be thundering? He had been half asleep still, not to know it at once. He sprang up and crossed the dimly-lighted cabin, a tall man, very lean and hard, yet with a certain odd grace about him, a certain beauty in the modeling of his bones. His eyes, of a color somewhere between grey and blue, were brilliant with excitement and full of a wolfish hunger.

He flung open the door. The glare from the corridor set him to blinking painfully--an inherited sensitivity to light was his one weakness and he had often cursed his father for passing it on to him. Through a dancing haze he saw Peter Esmond's mild good-looking face, as excited as his own. Esmond said something, but Conway neither heard it nor cared what it was. He pushed past him and went with long strides down the passage and up the ladder to the observation bridge.

It was dark up there under the huge port. Immediately everything came clear to his vision--the blue-black sky of the Asteroid Belt, full of flashing golden stars where the little worlds caught the light of the distant Sun. And ahead, dead ahead, he saw the tiny misty globe that was Iskar. He stood for a long time, staring at it, and he neither moved nor spoke except that a deep trembling ran through him.

Close beside him he heard Charles Rohan's deep voice. "Well, there's the new world. Quite a thrill, eh?"

Instantly Conway was on his guard. Rohan was no fool. A man does not make forty million dollars by being a fool and it was going to be hard enough to get away with this without tipping his hand to Rohan

now. Inwardly he cursed, not Rohan, but his daughter Marcia. It was she who had talked her father into going along to see about opening up trade with Iskar. Rohan controlled the lion's share of trade with the Jovian Moons and the idea was logical enough. Marcia's interest, naturally, was not financial. It was simply that she could not bear to be parted from Esmond and there was no other way for her to go with him.

Conway glanced at Marcia, who was standing with her arm around her fiancé. A nice girl. A pretty girl. Ordinarily he would have liked her. But she didn't belong here and neither did Rohan--not for Conway's purposes. Esmond alone he could have handled easily. Esmond was the Compleat Ethnologist to his fingertips. As long as he had a brand-new race to study and catalogue he would neither know nor care what other treasures a world might hold. Now that he looked back on it the whole chain of circumstances seemed flimsy and unsure to Conway--his meeting with Esmond on a deep-space flight from Jupiter, the sudden inspiration when he learned of Esmond's connection with the Rohans, the carefully casual campaign to get the ethnologist interested in the unknown people of Iskar, the final business of producing his father's fragmentary notes to drive Esmond quite mad with longing to see this inhabited world that only one other Earthman had ever seen.

Esmond to Marcia Rohan, Marcia to her father--and now here they were. Esmond was going to get a Fellowship in the Interplanetary Society of Ethnologists and Rand Conway was going to get what he had lusted for ever since he had stumbled upon his father's notes and read in them the story of what lay in the Lake of the Gone Forever, waiting to be picked up by the first strong pair of hands.

That portion of the notes he had never shown to anyone. Here they were, plunging out of the sky toward Iskar, and it had all been so

easy--too easy. Conway was a spaceman and therefore superstitious, whether he liked it or not. He had a sudden feeling that he was going to have to pay for that easiness before he got through.

* * *

Esmond had pressed forward in the cramped space, staring raptly out at the distant glittering of silver light that was Iskar.

"I wonder what they're like?" he said as he had said a million times before. Marcia smiled. "You'll soon know," she answered. "It is odd," said Rohan,

"that your father didn't tell more about the people of Iskar, Conway. His notes were strangely fragmentary--almost as though he had written much more and then destroyed it."

Conway tried to detect an edge of suspicion in Rohan's voice, but could not.

"Perhaps he did," said Conway. "I never could find any more." With that one exception it was the truth. Marcia's face was thoughtful and a little sad, in the dim glow of that outer sky.

"I've read those notes over and over again," she said. "I think you're right, Dad. I think Mr. Conway wrote his whole heart into those notes and then destroyed them because he couldn't bear to have them read, even by his son." She put a sympathetic hand on Conway's arm. "I can understand your wanting to know, Rand. I hope you'll find your answer."

"Thanks," said Conway gravely.

He had had to account for his own interest in Iskar and he had been

able to do that too without lying except by omission. The story of his father was true enough--the dark brooding man, broken in health and spirit, living alone with a child and a dream. He had died before Rand was ten, by his own hand and with the name of Iskar on his lips. I can never go back, to the Lake of the Gone Forever!

Conway himself had never doubted what his father's secret tragedy was. He had found a fortune on Iskar and had not been able to go back to claim it. That was enough to drive any man mad.

But it was easy, out of his childhood memories and those strangely incoherent notes, to build a romantic mystery around the lonely prospector's discovery of an unknown world and his subsequent haunted death. Marcia had found it all fascinating and did not doubt for a moment Conway's statement that he was seeking to solve that mystery which, he said, had overshadowed his whole life. And it had. Waking or sleeping, Rand Conway could not forget Iskar and the Lake of the Gone Forever.

He watched the misty globe grow larger in the sky ahead, and the beating of his heart was a painful thing. Already his hands ached with longing to close around Iskar and wring from it the power and the wealth that would repay him for all the bitter years of waiting.

He thought of his dream. It was always unpleasantly vivid, and remained with him for hours after he woke. But this time it was different. He thought of the vision of his father, standing in the crystal valley, alone with his dark sorrow, and he said to the vision, You should have waited. You should have had the courage to wait, like me.

For the first time he was not sorry for his father.

Then he forgot his father. He forgot time and Esmond and the

Rohans. He forgot everything but Iskar.

The Rohan shuddered rhythmically to the brake-blasts. Iskar filled the port, producing a skyline of shimmering pinnacles so like his dream that Conway shuddered too in spite of himself.

The pinnacles shot up swiftly into a wall of ice and the Rohan swept in to a landing.

Chapter II: The White City

The spaceship lay like a vast black whale, stranded on a spotless floe. Behind it the ice-wall rose, its upper spires carved by the wind into delicate fantastic shapes. Spreading away from it to the short curve of the horizon was a sloping plain of snow, broken here and there by gleaming tors. In the distance other ranges lifted sharply against the deep dark blue of the sky. Rand Conway stood apart from the others. His face had a strange look. He slipped the warm hood back, lifting his head in the icy wind. Great golden stars wheeled overhead and the air was full of dancing motes of frost. The wind played with the powdery snow, whirling it up into shining veils, smoothing it again into curious patterns of ripples. The pain, the sky, the frozen spires, had a wondrous beauty of color, infinitely soft and subtle. There was no glare here to plague Conway's eyes. Iskar glimmered in a sort of misty twilight, like the twilight of a dream. Iskar-the bulk of it solid under his feet at last after all these years. Conway trembled and found it difficult to breathe. His eyes, black and luminous as a cat's now with the expansion of the pupils, glistened with a hard light. Iskar!

Quite suddenly he was afraid.

Fear rushed at him out of the narrow valleys, down from the singing peaks. It came in the wind and rose up from the snow under his feet.

It wrapped him in a freezing shroud and for a moment reality slipped away from him and he was lost.

The shadows were deep under the icy cliffs and the mouths of the valleys were black and full of whispers. It seemed to him that the lurking terror of his dream was very close, close and waiting.

He must have made some sound or sign, for Marcia Rohan came to him and took him by the arm.

"Rand," she said. "Rand, what is it?" He caught hold of her. In a moment everything was normal again and he was able to force what might pass for a laugh.

"I don't know," he said. "Something came to me just then." He could not tell her about the dream. He told her instead what he knew must be the cause of it.

"My father must have told me something about this place when I was a child, something I can't remember. Something ugly. I—" He paused and then plunged on.

"I thought for a moment that I had been here before, that I knew..." He stopped. The shadow was gone now. To the devil with dreams and subconscious memories. The reality was all that mattered--the reality that was going to make Rand Conway richer than the Rohans. He stared away across the plain. For a moment his face was unguarded and Marcia was startled by the brief cruel look of triumph that crossed it.

The others came up, Rohan and young Esmond and Captain Frazer, the well-fed but very competent skipper of the Rohan. They were all shivering slightly in spite of their warm coveralls. Esmond looked at Conway, who was still bare-headed.

"You'll freeze your ears off," he said.

Conway laughed, not without a faint edge of contempt. "If you had kicked around in deep space as many years as I have you wouldn't be bothered by a little cold."

He pointed off to where the distant ranges were, across the plain.

"According to my father's maps, the village, or what have you, lies between those ranges."

"I think," said Marcia, "that we had better break out the sledges and go before Peter bursts something."

Esmond laughed. He was obviously trembling with eagerness.

"I hope nothing's happened to them," he said. "I mean, since your father was here. You know--famine, plague or anything."

"I imagine they're a pretty hardy lot," said Rohan, "or they couldn't have survived at all in this godforsaken place." He turned to Frazer, laughing.

"For heaven's sake, get the sledges."

* * *

Frazer nodded. The crew had come tumbling out and were rollicking like schoolboys in the snow, glad to be released from the long confinement of the voyage. The Second Officer and the engineer were coming up and Frazer went to meet them. The Second turned back to round up his men. The sledges came presently out of the cargo hatch. There were three of the light plastic hulls--two to carry the exploring party, one to be left with the ship in case of emergency.

They were fully equipped, including radio and the efficient Samson riot guns, firing shells of anesthetic gas. Rohan looked at his daughter. "I want you to stay here, Marcia." The girl must have been expecting that, Conway thought, because her only reaction was to set her jaw so that she looked ridiculously like her father--smaller and prettier but even more stubborn.

"No," said Marcia,

Esmond said, "Please, darling. These people may not be friendly at first. You can go next time."

"No," said Marcia.

"Marcia," said Rohan pleasantly. "I don't want any foolishness about this. Go with Frazer, back to the ship."

Marcia studied him. Then she turned and kissed Esmond lightly on the cheek and said, "Good luck, darling." She went off with Frazer. Conway saw that there were tears in her eyes. He warmed to Marcia. She hadn't been trying to show off. She just wanted to be with Esmond in case anything happened. Rohan said, "I guess we might as well go." They climbed in, six men to a sledge, all burly space-hands with the exception of Rohan and the ethnologist and Conway, who had sweated his way up from the ranks to Master Pilot.

The small jets hissed, roared and settled down to a steady thrumming. The sledges shot out across the trackless plain like two small boats on a white sea, throwing up waves of snowy spray.

Conway was in the leading sledge. He leaned forward like a leashed hound, impatient to be slipped. Part of him was mad with excitement and another part, completely cool and detached, was making plans.

The spaceship began to grow smaller. Almost imperceptibly the gleaming pinnacles of ice lengthened into the sky.

Presently the pace of the sledges grew slower and slower still. Tors, half rock, half ice, rose up out of the snow and here and there a reef, mailed and capped with the shining armor, was scoured clear by the wind. The man at the controls thrust his head forward, squinting.

"What's the matter?" asked Conway. "Why the delay?" The man said irritably, "I'm afraid of ramming into something, sir. It's so bloody dark and shadowy, I can't see."

"Is that all!" Conway laughed and shoved him aside. "Here--let an owl do it." He took the controls and sent the sledge spinning ahead. Every reef and tor, every ripple in the snow, was as clear to him as it would have been to most men in broad daylight. He laughed again.

"I'm beginning to like Iskar," he said to Rohan. "I think I'll start a colony for people with hemeralopia, and we can all be as happy as bats in the dark. My father must have loved it here."

Rohan glanced up at him. Conway had forgotten to put his hood back up. The wind was whipping an icy gale through his hair and there was rime on his lashes. He seemed to be enjoying it. Rohan shivered.

"I'm nyctalopic myself," he said. "I'll stick to plenty of sunlight--and heat!" Esmond did not bother to listen to either one of them. His dream was as strong as Conway's and at this moment he had room for nothing else. The sledges rushed on across the plain, the one following the tiny jet-flares of the other. The spaceship was lost in the white distance behind them. Ahead the twin ranges grew against the stars. Nothing stirred but the wind. It was very lovely, very peaceful, Conway thought. A cold, sweet jewel of a world. The words sang in his ears, the words that had themed his father's death and run

through his own life as a promise and a challenge. "The Lake of the Gone Forever--Gone Forever..."

He had long ago ceased to wonder what that name meant. Only in his nightmare dream did it have the power to frighten him. He wanted what was there and nothing else mattered.

The Lake of the Gone Forever. Soon--soon--soon!

Yet it seemed a very long time to Conway before they entered the broad defile between the twin ranges.

He was forced to slow his breakneck pace because here the ground was broken and treacherous. Finally he stopped altogether.

"We'll have to go on foot from here," he said.

* * *

In a fever of impatience he waited while the men climbed out, shouldering the Samson guns. They left two to guard the sledges and went on, scrambling in single file over the tumbled rocks. The wind howled between the mountain walls so that the air was blind with snow. There was no sight of the city. Conway was in the lead. He was like a man driven by fiends. Where the others slipped and stumbled he went over the rough ground like a cat, swift and surefooted even among the deceptive drifts. Several times he was forced to stop and wait lest he leave the party too far behind. Suddenly, above the organ notes of the wind, there was another sound. Conway lifted his head to listen. Clear and sweet and strong he heard the winding of horns from the upper slopes. They echoed away down the valley, calling one to the other with ringing voices that stirred Conway's blood to a wild excitement. He shook the snow out of his hair and plunged on, leaving the rest to follow as best they could.

A jutting shoulder of the mountains loomed before him. The wind blew and the deep-throated horns called and called again across the valley. The blown drifts leaped at him and the icy screes were a challenge to his strength but they could not slow him down. He laughed and went on around the shoulder and saw the white city glittering under the stars.

It spread across the valley floor and up the slopes as though it grew from the frozen earth, a part of it, as enduring as the mountains. At Conway's first glance, it seemed to be built all of ice, its turrets and crenellations glowing with a subtle luminescence in the dusky twilight, fantastically shaped, dusted here and there with snow. From the window openings came a glow of pearly light.

Beyond the city the twin ranges drew in and in until their flanks were parted only by a thin line of shadow, a narrow valley with walls of ice reaching up to the sky.

Conway's heart contracted with a fiery pang.

A narrow valley--The valley.

For a moment everything vanished in a roaring darkness. Dream and reality rushed together--his father's notes, his father's dying cry, his own waking visions and fearful wanderings beyond the wall of sleep. It lies beyond the city, in a narrow place between the mountains--The Lake of the Gone Forever. And I can never go back!

Conway said aloud to the wind and the snow and the crying horns, "But I have come back. I have come!"

Exulting, triumphant, he looked again at the city, the white beauty of it, the wind-carved towers bright beneath the golden stars.

It was a strong place, walled and fortified against whatever enemies there might be on this world of Iskar. Conway ran toward it and as he did so the braying of horns rose louder and then was joined by the shrill war-cry of pipes.

They went skirling along the wall and through the snow-mist he saw that men were there above him looking down. The glitter of their spears ran like a broken line of silver from both sides of the great stone gate. Chapter III: The Fear

Conway's blood leaped hot within him. The pipes set him mad and he flung up his arm and shouted at the men, a long hail. He could see them clearly now. They were tall lean men with bodies tough as rawhide and strong bone in their faces and eyes like the eyes of eagles. They wore the white furs of beasts kilted about them, thrown loosely over their naked shoulders, and they were bareheaded and careless of the cold. Their spears rose up and menaced him. He stopped. Once again he cried out, a cry as wild and shrill as the martial pipes. Then he stood still, waiting.

Slowly behind him came Rohan and the others. They formed into a sort of knot around him. Some of the men reached nervously for their riot guns and Rohan spoke sharply. The pipes fell silent and the sounding horns. They waited, all of them.

There was movement on the wall and an old man came forward among the warriors, a cragged gnarled old man with a proud face and fierce eyes, standing strong as a granite rock.

He looked down at the alien men below him. His hair and his long beard blew in the bitter wind, and the white furs whipped around him, and for a long time he did not speak. His eyes met Conway's and there was hatred in them and deep pain.

Finally he said, very slowly, as though the words came haltingly from some long-locked vault of memory, "Men of Earth!" Conway started. It had not occurred to him that his father might have left some knowledge of English behind him.

"Yes," he answered, holding out his empty hands, "Friends." The old man shook his head. "No. Go, or we kill." He looked again at Conway, very strangely, and a little chill ran through the Earthman. Was it possible that the old man saw in him some resemblance to the Conway he had known before? He and his father had not looked alike. Esmond stepped forward. "Please," he said. "We mean you no harm. We only want to talk to you. We will obey you, we will bring no weapons--only let us in!" He was very like a child pleading, almost on the verge of tears. It was unthinkable that he should be denied now.

The old man said again, "Go!"

Rohan spoke. "We have gifts, many things for your people. We want nothing. We come as friends."

The old man flung up his head and laughed, and his mirth was like vitriol poured on the wind.

"Friend! Conna was my friend. In my house, as my own son, lived Conna, my friend!"

He cried out something in his own harsh tongue and Conway knew that it was a curse and he knew that Conna was his own name. They had not forgotten his father on Iskar, it seemed.

He was suddenly angry, more terribly angry than he had ever been in his life. Beyond the city, almost within reach, lay the valley of the Lake and nothing, not all their spears, not death itself, was going to stop now. He strode up under the wall and looked at the old man with eyes

as black and baleful as his own.

"We know nothing of this Conna," he said. "We come in peace. But if you want war we will make war. If you kill us others will come--many others. Our ship is huge and very terrible. Its fire alone can destroy your city. Will you let us in, old man, or must we..."

After a long time the other said slowly, "What is your name?"

"Rand," said Conway.

"Rand," repeated the old man softly. "Rand." He was silent for a time, brooding, his chin sunk on his breast. His eyes were hooded and he did not look again at Conway.

Abruptly he turned and issued orders in his own tongue. Then, to the Earthmen, he shouted, "Enter!"

The great stone was rolled away.

Conway went back to the others. Both Esmond and Rohan were furious.

"Who gave you the right--" Rohan began, and Esmond broke in passionately, "You shouldn't have threatened them! A little more talk would have convinced them." Conway looked at them contemptuously.

"You wanted in, didn't you?" he demanded. "All right, the gate's open and they'll think twice about getting tough with us after we're through it"

* * *

He unbuckled his gun belt and tossed it, holster and all, to a man on

the wall. It was a gesture and no more because he had hidden a small anesthetic needle-gun under his coverall in case of need--but it would look good to the Iskarians.

"I'd do the same if I were you," he said to the others. "Also, I would send the men back. They're not going to do us any good inside the wall and they might do us harm. Tell them to bring the trade goods and one of the radios from the sledges and then return to the ship--and stand by." Rohan scowled. He did not like having the command taken from him. But Conway's orders made sense and he relayed them. Then he tossed his own gun to one of the warriors. Esmond did not carry one. The men went away, back to the sledges.

"Remember," said Conway, "you never heard of 'Conna', or his son." The others nodded. They turned then and went into the city and the stone gate was closed behind them.

The old man was waiting for them, and with him a sort of honor guard of fifteen tall fighting men.

"I am Krah," said the old patriarch. He waited politely until Esmond and Rohan had said their names and then he said, "Come." The guard formed up. The Earthmen went--half guest, half captive--into the streets of the city.

They were narrow winding streets, rambling up and down over the broken ground. In some places they were scoured clean to the ice by the whistling wind, in others they were choked by drifts. Conway could see now that the buildings were all of solid stone, over which the cold shining mail had formed for centuries, except where the openings were kept clear. The people of the city were gathered to watch as the strangers went by. It was a strangely silent crowd. Men, women and children, old and young, all of them as stalwart and handsome as mountain trees, with their wide black pupils and pale hair, the men

clad in skins, the women in kirtles of rough woolen cloth. Conway noticed that the women and children did not mingle with the men.

Silent, all of them, and watching. There was something disquieting in their stillness. Then, somewhere, an old woman sent up a keening cry of lament, and another took it up, and another, until the eerie ochone echoed through the twisting streets as though the city itself wept in pain. The men began to close in. Slowly at first, now one stepping forward, now another, like the first pebbles rolling before the rush of the avalanche. Conway's heart began to pound and there was a bitter taste in his mouth. Esmond cried out to the old man, "Tell them not to fear us! Tell them we are friends!"

Krah looked at him and smiled. His eyes went then to Conway and he smiled again.

"I will tell them!" he said.

"Remember," said Conway harshly. "Remember the great ship and its fires." Krah nodded. "I will not forget."

He spoke to the people, shouting aloud, and reluctantly the men drew back and rested the butts of their spears on the ground. The women did not cease to wail.

Conway cursed his father for the things he had not written in his notes. Quite suddenly, out of a steep side lane, a herd boy drove his flock with a scramble and a clatter. The queer white-furred beasts milled in the narrow space, squealing, filling the air with their sharp, not unpleasant odor. As though that pungency were a trigger, a shutter clicked open somewhere in Conway's mind and he knew that he had seen these streets before, known the sounds and smells of the city, listened to the harsh staccato speech. The golden wheeling of the star overhead hurt him with a poignant familiarity. Conway

plunged again into that limbo between fact and dream. It was far worse this time. He wanted to sink down and cling to something until his mind steadied again but he did not dare do anything but walk behind the old man as though nothing on Iskar could frighten him.

Yet he was afraid--afraid with the fear of madness, where the dream becomes the reality.

Beads of sweat came out on his face and froze there. He dug his nails into his palms and forced himself to remember his whole life, back to his earliest memory and beyond, when his father must have talked and talked of Iskar, obsessed with the thought of what he had found there and lost again. He had not spoken so much of Iskar when his son was old enough to understand. But it seemed that the damage was already done. The formative years, the psychologists call them, when the things learned and forgotten will come back to haunt one later on.

Conway was a haunted man, walking through that strange city. And old Krah watched him sidelong and smiled and would not be done with smiling. The women wailed, howling like she wolves to the dark heavens. Chapter IV: "Go Ask of Her..."

It seemed like centuries to Conway, but it could not have been so long in actual time before Krah stopped beside a doorway and pulled aside the curtain of skins that covered it.

"Enter," he said and the Earthmen filed through, leaving the guard outside, except for five who followed the old man.

"My sons!" said Krah.

All grown men, far older than Conway, and scarred, tough-handed warriors. Yet they behaved toward Krah with the deference of

children. The ground floor of the house was used for storage. Frozen sides of meat and bundles of a dried moss-like stuff occupied one side. On the other was a pen and a block for butchering. Apparently there was no wood on Iskar, for the pen was built of stone and there were no doors, only the heavy curtains. Krah lifted another one of these, leading the way up a closed stair that served as a sort of airlock to keep out the draughts and the extreme cold of the lower floor. The upper chamber was freezing by any Earthly standards but a small, almost smokeless fire of moss burned on the round hearth and the enormously thick walls were perfect insulation against the wind. Immediately Conway began to sweat, probably from sheer nervousness. A girl sat by the hearth, tending the spit and the cooking pot. Obviously she had only just run back in from the street, for there was still snow in her silvery hair and her sandals were wet with it.

She did not lift her head when the men came in, as though such happenings were not for her to notice. Yet Conway caught a sidelong glance of her eyes. In the soft light of the stone lamps her pupils had contracted to show the clear blue iris, and for all her apparent meekness, he saw that her eyes were bright and rebellious and full of spirit. Conway smiled.

She met his gaze fairly for a moment with a curious intensity, as though she would tear away his outer substance and see everything that lay beneath it—his heart, his soul, his innermost thoughts, greedily, all in a minute. Then the old man spoke and she was instantly absorbed in the turning of the spit.

"Sit," said Krah, and the Earthmen sat on heaps of furs spread over cushions of moss.

The five tall sons sat also but Krah remained standing.

"So you know nothing of Conna," he said, and Conna's son

answered blandly,

"No."

"Then how came you to Iskar?"

Conway shrugged. "How did Conna come? The men of Earth go everywhere." Unconsciously he had slipped into Krah's ceremonial style of phrasing. He leaned forward, smiling.

"My words were harsh when I stood outside your gate. Let them be forgotten, for they were only the words of anger. Forget Conna also. He has nothing to do with us."

"Ah," said the old man softly. "Forget. That is a word I do not know. Anger, yes--and vengeance also. But not forget."

He turned to Rohan and Esmond and spoke to them and answered them courteously while they explained their wishes. But his gaze, frosty blue now in the light, rested broodingly on Conway's face and did not waver. Conway's nerves tightened and tightened and a great unease grew within him. He could have sworn that Krah knew who he was and why he had come to Iskar. Reason told him that this was ridiculous. It had been many years since Krah had seen his father and in any case they were physically dissimilar. Nor did it seem likely that he should have preserved intact any of his father's mannerisms.

Yet he could not be sure and the uncertainty preyed upon him. The old man's bitter gaze was hard to bear.

The five sons neither moved nor spoke. Conway was sure that they understood the conversation perfectly and he reflected that, according to Krah, they had lived with Conna as his brothers. They seemed to be waiting, quite patiently, as though they had waited a

long time and could afford to wait a little longer.

From time to time the girl stole a secret smoldering look at Conway and in spite of his uneasiness he grew very curious about her, wondering what devil of unrest lurked in her mind. She had a fascinating little face, full of odd lights and shadows where the glow of the fire touched it.

"Trade," said Krah at last. "Friendship. Study. They are good words. Let us eat now, and then rest, and I will think of these good words, which I have heard before from Conna."

"Look here," said Rohan rather testily, "I don't know what Conna did here but I see no reason to condemn us for his sins."

"We speak the truth," said Esmond gently. He glanced at Conway, waiting for him to ask the question that was his to ask. But Conway could not trust himself and finally Esmond's curiosity drove him to blurt out, "What was Conna's crime?"

The old man turned upon him a slow and heavy look.

"Do not ask of me," he said. "Ask of her who waits, by the Lake of the Gone Forever."

* * *

That name stung Conway's nerves like a whiplash. He was afraid he had betrayed himself but if he started no one seemed to notice. The faces of Esmond and Rohan were honestly blank.

"The Lake of the Gone Forever," Esmond repeated. "What is that?"

"Let there be an end to talk," said Krah.

He turned and spoke to the girl in his own tongue and Conway caught the name Ciel. She rose obediently and began to serve the men, bringing the food on platters of thin carved stone. When she was done she sat down again by the fire and ate her own dinner from what was left, a slim, humble shadow whose eyes were no more humble than the eyes of a young panther. Conway stole her a smile and was rewarded by a brief curving of her red mouth. When the meal was finished Krah rose and led the Earthmen down a corridor. There were two curtained doorways on each side and beyond them were small windowless cells, with moss and furs heaped soft to make a sleeping place. Ciel came quietly to light the stone lamps and it seemed to Conway that she took special note of the cubicle he chose for his own.

"Sleep," said Krah, and left them. Ciel vanished down a narrow back stair at the end of the hall.

The Earthmen stood for a moment, looking at each other, and then Conway said sullenly, "Don't ask me any questions because I don't know the answers." He turned and went into his chamber, dropping the curtain behind him. In a vile mood he sat down on the furs and lighted a cigarette, listening to Rohan's low half-angry voice telling Esmond that he thought Rand was acting very strangely. Esmond answered soothingly that the situation would be a strain on anyone. Presently Conway heard them go to bed. He blew out his lamp. He sat for quite awhile, in a terrible sweat of nerves, thinking of Krah, thinking of the narrow valley that lay so nearly within his reach, thinking of his father, hating him because of the black memories he had left behind on Iskar, so that now the way was made very hard for his son. Heaven help him if old Krah ever found out!

He waited for some time after everything was still. Then, very carefully, he lifted the curtain and stepped out into the hall.

He could see into the big main room. Four of Krah's brawny sons slept on the furs by the embers. The fifth sat cross-legged, his spear across his knees, and he did not sleep.

Conway glanced at the back stair. He was perfectly sure that it led to the women's quarters and that any venturing that way would bring the whole house around his ears. He shrugged and returned to his cell. Stretched out on the furs he lay frowning into the dark, trying to think. He had not counted on the hatred of the Iskarians for Earthmen. He wondered for the hundredth time what his father had done to make all the women of Iskar wail a dirge when they were reminded of him. Ask of her who waits, by the Lake of the Gone Forever...

It didn't really matter. All that mattered was that they were under close watch and that it was a long way through the city for an Earthman to go and stay alive, even if he could get away from Krah.

Quite suddenly, he became aware that someone had crept down the hall outside and stopped at his door.

Without making a sound, Conway reached into the breast of his coverall and took hold of the gun that was hidden there. Then he waited. The curtain moved a little, then a little more, and Conway lay still and breathed like a sleeping man. Faint light seeped in, outlining the widening gap of the curtain, showing clearly to Conway's eyes the figure that stood there, looking in.

Ciel, a little grey mouse in her hoddan kirtle, her hair down around her shoulders like a cape of moonbeams. Ciel, the mouse with the wildcat's eyes. Partly curious to see what she would do, partly afraid that a whisper might attract attention from the other room, Conway lay still, feigning sleep. For a long moment the girl stood without moving, watching him. He could hear the sound of her breathing, quick and soft. At last she took one swift step forward, then paused, as though

her courage had failed her. That was her undoing.

The big man with the spear must have caught some flicker of movement, the swirl of her skirt, perhaps, for she had made no noise. Conway heard a short exclamation from the main room, and Ciel dropped the curtain and ran. A man's heavier footfalls pelted after her.

There was a scuffling at the other end of the hall and some low intense whispering. Conway crept over and pulled the curtain open a crack.

* * *

Krah's son held the girl fast. He seemed to be lecturing her, more in sorrow than in anger, and then, deliberately and without heat, he began to beat her. Ciel bore it without a whimper but her eyes glazed and her face was furious. Conway stepped silently out into the hall. The man's back was turned, but Ciel saw him. He indicated in pantomime what she should do and she caught the idea at once--or perhaps only the courage to do it.

Twisting like a cat, she set her teeth hard in the arm that held her. The man let her go from sheer astonishment rather than pain. She fled down the woman-stair and he stood staring after her, his mouth wide open, as dumbfounded as though the innocent stones he walked on had risen suddenly and attacked him. Conway got the feeling that such a thing had never happened before in the history of Iskar.

He leaned lazily against the wall and said aloud, "What's going on?" Krah's son turned swiftly and the look of astonishment was replaced instantly by anger.

Conway made a show of yawning, as though he had just waked up.

"Was that Ciel you were thrashing? She's a pretty big girl to be spanked." He grinned at the marks on the man's arm. "By the way, who is she--Krah's granddaughter?" The answer came slowly in stumbling but understandable English.

"Krah's fosterling, daughter of my sister's friend. Ciel drank wickedness with mother's milk--wickedness she learn from my sister, who learn from Conna." Quite suddenly the big man reached out and took Conway's jacket-collar in a throttling grip. Amazingly there were tears in his eyes and a deep, bitter rage.

"I will warn you, man of Earth," he said softly. "Go--go swiftly while you still live."

He flung Conway from him and turned away, back to the big room to brood again by the fire. And the Earth-man was left to wonder whether the warning was for them all or for himself alone.

Hours later he managed to fall into an uneasy sleep, during which he dreamed again of the icy valley and the hidden terror that waited for him beyond the wall of rock. It seemed closer to him than ever before, so close that he awoke with a strangled cry. The stone cell was like a burial vault, and he left it, in a mood of desperation such as he had never known before. Outside, the wind was rising.

He came into the big room just as Krah entered from the outer stair. Behind him, very white-faced and proud, came Marcia Rohan. Her cheek was bleeding and her lovely dark hair was wet and dragged and her eyes hurt Conway to look at them.

"Marcia!" he cried and she ran to him, clinging with tight hands like a frightened child. He held her, answering her question before she could gasp it out, "Peter's safe," he said. "So is your father. They're quite safe." Old Krah spoke. There was a strange stony quality about

him now, as though he had come to some decision from which nothing could shake him. He looked at Conway.

"Go," he said. "Call your friends." Chapter V: Warrior of Iskar

Conway went, taking Marcia with him. Rohan came out at once but Esmond was sleeping like the dead. Apparently he had worked for hours by the light of the stone lamp, making notes on the people of Iskar.

Conway wondered, as he shook him awake, whether any of that data was going to get safely back to Earth. He knew, as certainly as he knew his own name, that their stay here was ended and he did not like the look in Krah's eyes.

"It's nobody's fault," Marcia was saying, over and over. "I couldn't stand it. I didn't know whether you were alive or dead. Your radio didn't answer. I stole a sledge."

"Did you come alone?" asked Rohan.

"Yes."

"My God!" said Esmond softly, and picked her up in his arms. She laid her bleeding cheek against his and sobbed out. "They stoned me, Peter, the women did. The men brought me through the streets and the women stoned me." Esmond's mild face became perfectly white. His eyes turned cold as the snow outside. He strode down the hall bearing Marcia in his arms, and his very step was stiff with fury. Rohan followed, crowding on his heels. Old Krah never gave them a chance to speak. His five sons were ranged behind him and there was something very formidable about them, the five tall fair men and the tall old one who was like an ancient dog-wolf, white with years but still leader of the pack.

Krah held up his hand, and the Earthmen stopped. From her place by the fire Conway saw that Ciel was watching, staring with fascinated eyes at the alien woman who had come alone across the snow-fields to stand beside her men. The wind piped loud in the window embrasures, coming down from the high peaks with a rush and a snarl that set Conway's nerves to quivering with a queer excitement.

Krah spoke, looking at Marcia.

"For this I am sorry," he said. "But the woman should not have come." His frosty gaze rose then to take in all of them. "I offer you your lives. Go now--leave the city, leave Iskar and never return. If you do not I cannot save you."

"Why did they stone her?" demanded Esmond. He had one thing on his mind, no room for any other thought.

"Because she is different," said Krah simply, "and they fear her. She wears the garments of a man and she walks among men and these things are against their beliefs. Now, will you go?"

Esmond set the girl on her feet beside him, leaving his arm around her shoulders.

"We will go," he said. "And I will kill the first one who touches her." Krah was gentleman enough to ignore the emptiness of that very sincere threat. He bowed his head.

"That," he said, "is as it should be." He looked at Rohan.

"Don't worry," Rohan snapped. "We'll leave and may you all go to the devil. This is a fit world for wolves and only wolves live in it!" He started toward the door with Esmond and his daughter and Krah's eyes turned now to Conway. He asked softly, "And you, man who is

called Rand?" Conway shrugged, as though the whole thing were a matter of no importance to him. "Why should I want to stay?" His hands were shaking so that he thrust them into his pockets to conceal it and little trickles of sweat ran down his back. He nodded toward the window opening.

"There's a white wind blowing, Krah," he said. He drew himself erect, and his voice rose and rang. "It will catch us on the open plain. The woman will surely die and perhaps the rest of us also. Nevertheless we will go. But let it be told through the city that Krah has laid aside his manhood and put on a woman's kirtle, for he has slain by stealth and not by an honest spear!" There was silence. Esmond stopped and turned in the doorway, the girl held close in the circle of his arm. Rohan stopped also, and their faces showed the shock of this new thought.

Conway's heart beat like a trip-hammer. He was bluffing--with all the resources of the sledge, he thought, their chances of perishing were fairly small, but there was just that germ of truth to pitch it on. He was in agony while he waited to see if the bluff had worked. Once inside the city walls he knew that the Lake was lost to him as it had been to his father. After what seemed a very long time, Krah sighed and said quietly, "The white wind. Yes. I had forgotten that the Earth stock is so weak." A subtle change had come over the old man. It was almost as though he too had been waiting tensely for some answer and now it had come. A deep, cold light crept into his eyes and burned there, something almost joyous.

"You may stay," he said, "until the wind drops." Then he turned sharply and went away down the stair and his sons went with him.

Esmond stared after them and Conway was amused to see the wolfish fury in his round, mild face.

"He would have sent us out to die," said Esmond, as though he wished he could kill Krah on the spot. Danger to Marcia had transformed him from a scientist into a rather primitive man. He turned to Conway.

"Thanks. You were right when you threatened them on the wall. And if anything happens to us I hope Frazer will make them pay for it!"

"Nothing's going to happen," said Conway. "Take Marcia back to the sleeping rooms--it's warmer there and she can lie down." He looked at Ciel and said sharply, "Can you understand me?"

She nodded, rather sullenly.

Conway pointed to Marcia. "Go with her. Bring water, something to put on that cut."

Ciel rose obediently but her eyes watched him slyly as she followed the Earth-folk out and down the hall.

Conway was left quite alone.

* * *

He forced himself to stand still for a moment and think. He forced his head to stop pounding and his hands to stop shaking. He could not force either his elation or his fear to leave him.

His way was clear now, at least for the moment. Why was it clear? Why had Krah gone away and taken his sons with him?

The wind swooped and screamed, lifting the curtains of hide, scattering snow on the floor. The white wind. Conway started. He had this chance. He would never have another.

He turned and went swiftly into the second corridor that opened opposite the one where the others had gone. It too contained four small sleeping rooms. One, however, was twice as large as the others and Conway was sure it belonged to Krah.

He slipped into it, closing the curtain carefully behind him. All that he needed was there. All that he needed to make possible this one attempt that he could ever make upon the hidden valley of his dream. He began to strip. The coverall, the thin jersey he wore underneath, the boots--everything that was of Earth. He must go through the city and he could not go as an Earthman. He had realized that there was only one way. He was glad of the white wind, for that would make his deception easier. It would be cold and dangerous. But he was contemptuous of cold and beyond caring about danger. He was not going to eat his heart out and die, as his father had, because his one chance was lost forever. In a few minutes Rand Conway was gone and in the stone chamber stood a nameless warrior of Iskar, a tall fair man wrapped in white furs, shod in rough hide boots and carrying a spear.

He retained two things, hidden carefully beneath his girdle--the little gun and a small vial, sheathed and stoppered with lead.

He turned, and Ciel was standing there, staring at him with wide astonished eyes.

She had slipped in so quietly that he had not heard her. And he knew that with one loud cry she could destroy all his plans.

In two swift angry strides he had caught her and put one hand hard over her mouth.

"Why did you come here?" he snarled. "What do you want?" Her eyes looked up at him, steady and fierce as his own. He said, "Don't

cry out or I'll kill you." She shook her head and he took his hand away a little, not trusting her.

In slow painful English she said, "Take me with you."

"Where?"

"To Earth!"

It was Conway's turn to be astonished.

"But why?"

She said vehemently, "Earth-woman proud like man. Free." So that was the smoldering anger she had in her. She was not patient like the other women of Iskar, for she had had a glimpse of something else. He remembered what Krah's son had said.

"Did Conna teach this?"

She nodded. "You take me?" she demanded. "You take me? I run away from Krah. Hide. You take me?"

Conway smiled. He liked her. They were the same kind, he and she--nursing a hopeless dream and risking everything to make it come true.

"Why not?" he said. "Sure, I'll take you." Her joy was a savage thing. "If you lie," she whispered, "I kill you!" Then she kissed him.

He could tell it was the first time she had ever kissed a man. He could also tell that it was not going to be the last.

He thrust her away. "You must help me then. Take these." He handed her the bundle of his discarded clothing. "Hide them. Is there a back

way from the house?"

"Yes."

"Show it to me. Then wait for me--and talk to no one. No one. Understand?"

"Where you go?" she asked him. The look of wonder came back into her eyes, and something of fear. "What you do, man of Iskar?" He shook his head. "If you don't help me, if I die--you'll never see Earth."

"Come," she said, and turned.

Esmond and Rohan were still with Marcia, still full of their fears and angers--too full to worry about Conway, the outsider. The house of Krah was empty and silent except for the wind that swept through the embrasures with a shriek of laughter, like the laughter of wolves before the kill. Conway shivered, an animal twitching of the skin.

Ciel led him down a little stair and showed him a narrow passage built for the taking of offal from the slaughtering pen--woman's work, unfit for warriors.

"I wait," she said. Her fingers closed hard on the muscles of his arm. "Come back. Come soon!"

Her fear was not for him but for herself, lest now in this last hour her hope of freedom should be snatched away. Conway knew how she felt. He bent and gave her a quick rough kiss. "I'll come back." Then he lifted the curtain of hide and slipped out into the darkness.

Chapter VI: Echoes of a Dream

The city was alive and vocal with the storm. The narrow streets shouted with it, the icy turrets of the houses quivered and rang. No

snow was falling but the thick brown whiteness drove and leaped and whirled, carried across half of Iskar in the rush of the wind. Above the tumult the stars burned clear and steady in the sky.

The cold bit deep into Conway's flesh, iron barbs reaching for his heart. He drew the warm furs closer. His heartbeats quickened. His blood raced, fighting back the cold, and a strange exaltation came over him, something born out of the wild challenge of the wind. His pupils dilated, black and feral as a cat's. He began to walk, moving at a swift pace, setting his feet down surely on the glare ice and the frozen stones.

He knew the direction he must take. He had determined that the first time he saw the city and it was burned into his memory for all time. The way to the Lake, the Lake of the Gone Forever.

There were not many in the streets and those he passed gave him no second look. The white wind laid a blurring veil over everything and there was nothing about Conway to draw attention, a lean proud-faced man bent against the wind, a solitary warrior on an errand of his own. Several times he tried to see if he were being followed. He could not forget Krah's face with its look of secret joy, nor cease to wonder uneasily why the old man had so suddenly left the Earthfolk unwatched. But he could see nothing in that howling smother.

He made sure of the little gun and smiled.

He found his way by instinct through the twisting streets, heading always in the same direction. The houses began to thin out. Quite suddenly they were gone and Conway stood in the open valley beyond. High above he could distinguish the shining peaks of the mountains lifting against the stars. The full sweep of the wind met him here. He faced it squarely, laughing, and went on over the tumbled rocks. The touch of madness that had been in him ever since he

reached Iskar grew into an overwhelming thing. Part of his identity slipped away. The wind and the snow and the bitter rocks were part of him. He knew them and they knew him. They could not harm him. Only the high peaks looked down on him with threatening faces and it seemed to him that they were angry.

He was beginning to hear the echoes of his dream but they were still faint. He was not yet afraid. He was, in some strange way, happy. He had never been more alone and yet he did not feel lonely. Something wild and rough woke within him to meet the wild roughness of the storm and he felt a heady pride, a certainty that he could stand against any man of Iskar on his own ground. The city was lost behind him. The valley had him between its white walls vague and formless now, closing in upon him imperceptibly beyond the curtain of the storm. There was a curious timelessness about his journey, almost a spacelessness, as though he existed in a dimension of his own.

* * *

And in that private world of his it did not seem strange nor unfitting that Ciel's voice should cry out thinly against the wind, that he should turn to see her clambering after him, nimble-footed, reckless with haste. She reached him, spent with running. "Krah," she gasped. "He go ahead with four. One follow. I see. I follow too." She made a quick, sharp gesture that took in the whole valley. "Trap. They catch. They kill. Go back." Conway did not stir. She shook him, in a passion of urgency. "Go back! Go back now!"

He stood immovable, his head raised, his eyes questing into the storm, seeking the enemies he only half believed were there. And then, deep and strong across the wind, came the baying of a Hunter's horn. It was answered from the other side of the valley. Another spoke, and another, and Conway counted them. Six—Krah and his

five sons around and behind him, so that the way back to the city was closed.

Conway began to see the measure of the old man's cunning and he smiled, and animal baring of the teeth.

"You go," he said to Ciel. "They will not harm you."

"What I do they punish," she answered grimly. "No. You must live. They hunt you but I know trails, ways. Go many times to Lake of the Gone Forever. They not kill there. Come!"

She turned but he caught her and would not let her go, full of a quick suspicion.

"Why do you care so much about me?" he demanded. "Esmond or Rohan could take you to Earth as well."

"Against Krah's will?" She laughed. "They are soft men, not like you." Her eyes met his fairly in the gloom, the black pupils wide and lustrous, looking deep into him so that he was strangely stirred. "But there is more," she said.

"I never love before. Now I do. And--you are Conna's son." Conway said, very slowly, "How did you know that?"

"Krah know. I hear him talk."

Then it had been a trap all along, from the beginning. Krah had known. The old man had given him one chance to go from Iskar and he had not taken it--and Krah had been glad. After that he had withdrawn and waited for Conway to come to him.

The girl said, "But I know without hearing. Now come, son of Conna." She led off, swift as a deer, her skirts kilted above her knees.

Conway followed and behind and around them the horns bayed and answered with the eager voices of hounds that have found the scent and will never let it go. All down the long valley the hunters drove them and the mountain walls narrowed in and in, and the ringing call of the horns came closer. There was a sound of joy in them, and they were without haste. Never once, beyond the white spume of the blowing snow, did Conway catch a glimpse of his pursuers. But he knew without seeing that old Krah's face bore a bleak and bitter smile, the terrible smile of a vengeance long delayed.

Conway knew well where the hunt would end. The horns would cry him into the throat of the cleft, and then they would be silent. He would not be permitted to reach the Lake.

Again he touched the little gun and his face could not have been less savage than Krah's. He was not afraid of spears.

The girl led him swiftly, surely, among the tangled rocks and the spurs of ice, her skirt whipping like a grey flag in the wind. High overhead the cold peaks filled the sky, leaving only a thin rift of stars. And suddenly, as though they were living things, the walls of the valley rushed together upon him, and the shouting of the horns rose to an exultant clamor in his ears, racing, leaping toward him.

He flung up his head and yelled, an angry, defiant cry. Then there was silence, and through the driven veils of snow he saw the shapes of men and the dim glittering of spears.

He would have drawn the gun and loosed its bright spray of instant sleep into the warriors. The drug would keep them quiet long enough for him to do what he had to do. But Ciel gave him no time. She wrenched at him suddenly, pulling him almost bodily into a crack between the rocks.

"Hurry!" she panted. "Hurry!"

The rough rock scraped him as he jammed his way through. He could hear voices behind him, loud and angry. It was pitch dark, even to his eyes, but Ciel caught his furs and pulled him along--a twist, a turn, a sharp corner that almost trapped him where her smallness slipped past easily. Then they were free again and he was running beside her, following her urgent breathless voice.

For a few paces he ran and then his steps slowed and dragged at last to a halt. There was no wind here in this sheltered place. There were no clouds of blowing snow to blur his vision.

He stood in a narrow cleft between the mountains. On both sides the cliffs of ice rose up, sheer and high and infinitely beautiful out of the powdery drifts. The darkling air was full of whirling motes of frost, like the dust of diamonds, and overhead the shining pinnacles stood clear against a sky of deepest indigo, spangled with great stars.

He stood in the narrow valley of his dream. And now at last he was afraid. Truth and nightmare had come together like the indrawn flanks of the mountains and he was caught between them. Awake, aware of the biting cold and the personal sensation of his flesh, still the nameless terror of the dream beset him.

He could almost see the remembered shadow of his father weeping by the sheathed rocks that hid the end of the cleft, almost hear that cry of loss--I can never go back to the Lake of the Gone Forever!

He knew that now he was going to see the end of the dream. He would not wake this time before he passed the barrier rocks. The agonizing fear that had no basis in his own life stood naked in his heart and would not go. He had known, somehow, all his life that this time must come. Now that it was here he found that he could not face

it. The formless baseless terror took his strength away and not all his reasoning could help him. He could not go on. And yet he went, as always, slowly forward through the drifting snow. He had forgotten Ciel. He was surprised when she caught at him, urging him to run. He had forgotten Krah. He remembered only the despairing words whispered back and forth by the cold lips of the ice. Gone Forever.. Gone Forever ... He looked up and the golden stars wheeled above him in the dark blue sky. The beauty of them was evil and the shimmering turrets of the ice were full of lurking laughter.

Nightmare--and he walked in it broad awake.

It was not far. The girl dragged him on, drove him, and he obeyed automatically, quickening his slow pace. He did not fight. He knew that it was no use. He went on as a man walks patiently to the gallows. He passed the barrier rocks. He was not conscious now of movement. In a sort of stasis, cold as the ice, he entered the cave that opened beyond them and looked at last upon the Lake of the Gone Forever.

Chapter VII: Black Lake

It was black, that Lake. Utterly black and very still, lying in its ragged cradle of rock under the arching roof where, finally, the mountains met. A strange quality of blackness, Conway thought, and shuddered deeply with the hand of nightmare still upon him. He stared into it, and suddenly, as though he had always known, he realized that the lake was like the pupil of a living eye, having no light of its own but receiving into itself all light, all impression.

He saw himself reflected in that great unstirring eye and Ciel beside him. Where the images fell there were faint lines of frosty radiance, as though the substance of the Lake were gravating upon itself in glowing acid the memory of what it saw.

Soft-footed from behind him came six other shadows--Krah and his five sons--and Conway could see that a great anger was upon them. But they had left their spears outside.

"We may not kill in this place," said Krah slowly, "but we can keep you from the thing you would do."

"How do you know what I mean to do?" asked Conway and his face was strange as though he listened to distant voices speaking in an unknown tongue. Krah answered, "As your father came before you, so you have come--to steal from us the secret of the Lake!"

"Yes," said Conway absently. "Yes, that is so." The old man and his tall sons closed in around Conway and Ciel came and stood between them.

"Wait!" she said.

For the first time they acknowledged the presence of the girl.

"For your part in this," said Krah grimly, "you will answer later."

"No!" she cried defiantly. "I answer no! Listen. Once you love Conna. You learn from him good things. His mate happy, not slave. He bring wisdom to Iskar--but now you hate Conna, you forget.

"I go to Earth with Conna's son. But first he must come here. It is right he come. But you kill, you full of hate for Rand--so I come to save him." She stood up to Krah, the little grey mouse transfigured into a bright creature of anger, blazing with it, alive with it.

"All my life--hate! Because of Rand you try to kill memory of Conna, you teach people hate and fear. But my mother learn from Conna. I learn from her--and I no forget! Rand happy, free. My mother know--

and I no forget." It came to Conway with a queer shock that she was not speaking of him but of another Rand. He listened to the girl and there was a stillness in him as deep and lightless as the stillness of the lake.

"You not kill, old man," Ciel whispered. "Not yet. Let him see, let him know. Then kill if he is evil."

She swung around.

"Son of Conna! Look into the Lake. All the dead of Iskar buried here. They gone forever but memory lives. All come here in life, so that the Lake remember. Look, son of Conna, and think of your father!" Still with that strange quiet heavy on his heart Rand Conway looked into the Lake and did as Ciel told him to do. Krah and his sons looked also and did not move.

At first there was nothing but the black infinite depth of the Lake. It is semi-liquid, said his father's notes, the notes he had kept secret from everyone--and in this heavy medium are suspended particles of some transuranic element--perhaps an isotope of uranium itself that is unknown to us. Incalculable wealth--incalculable pain! My soul is there, lost in the Lake of the Gone Forever.

Rand Conway stood waiting and the thought of his father was very strong in him. His father, who had died mourning that he could never come back. Slowly, slowly, the image of his father took shape in the substance of the lake, a ghostly picture painted with a brush of cold firs against the utter dark.

It was no projection of Rand Conway's own memory mirrored there, for this was not the man he had known, old before his time and broken with longing. This man was young, and his face was happy.

He turned and beckoned to someone behind him, and the shadowy figure of a girl came into the circle of his outstretched arm. They stood together, and a harsh sob broke from old Krah's throat. Conway knew that his father and the pale-haired lovely girl had stood where he stood now on the brink of the Lake and looked down as he was looking, that their images might be forever graven into the heart of the strange darkness below.

They kissed. And Ciel whispered, "See her face, how it shines with joy." The figures moved away and were gone. Conway watched, beyond emotion, beyond fear. Some odd portion of his brain even found time to theorize on the electrical impulses of thought and how they could shape the free energy in the unknown substance of the Lake, so that it became almost a second subconscious mind for everyone on Iskar, storehouse from which the memories of a race could be called at will.

The eye of the Lake had seen and now, at the urging of those intense minds, it produced the pictures it had recorded like the relentless unreeling of some cosmic film.

* * *

Rand Conway watched, step by step, the disintegration of a man's soul. And it was easy for him to understand, since his own life had been ruled by that same consuming greed.

Conna came again and again to the Lake, alone. It seemed to hold a terrible fascination for him. After all he was a prospector, with no goal before him for many years but the making of a big strike. Finally he brought instruments and made tests and after that the fascination turned to greed and the greed in time to a sort of madness.

It was a madness that Conna fought against and he had reason. The

girl came again. With her this time were Krah and his sons, all younger and less bitter than now, and others whom Conway did not know. It was obviously a ritual visit and it had to do with the newborn child the girl held in her arms. Rand Conway's heart tightened until it was hardly beating. And through the frozen numbness that held him the old fear began to creep back, the nightmare fear of the dream where something was hidden from him that he could not endure to see.

Conna, the girl, and a new-born child.

I cannot escape. I cannot wake from this.

Conna's inward struggle went on. He must have suffered the tortures of hell, for it was plain that what he meant to do would cut him off from all he loved. But he was no longer quite sane. The Lake mocked him, taunted him with its unbelievable wealth, and he could not forget it.

The last time that Conna came to the Lake of the Gone Forever, he had laid aside the furs and the spear of Iskar, and put on again his spaceman's leather and the bolstered gun. He brought with him a leaden container, to take back proof of the Lake and what it held.

But while he worked to take his sample--the sample that would, in the end, mean the destruction of the Lake and all it meant to Iskar--the pale-haired girl came, her eyes full of pain and pleading, and the child was with her, a well-grown boy now, nearly two years old.

And Conna's son cried out suddenly and swayed so that Ciel put out her hand to him, and he clung to it, with the universe dark and reeling about him. I know now! I know the fear behind the dream!

Within the Lake the shadowy child watched with uncomprehending horror how his mother snatched the little heavy box from his father's

hands--his father who had grown so strange and violent and was dressed so queerly in black. He watched how his mother wept and cried out to his father, pleading with him, begging him to stop and think and not destroy them all. But Conna would not stop. He had fought his fight and lost and he would not stop.

He tried to take the box again. There was a brief moment when he and the girl swayed together on the brink of the Lake. And then--quickly, so very quickly that she had only time for one look at Conna as she fell --the girl fell over the edge. The disturbed cold fires of the Lake boiled up and overwhelmed her and there was no sight of her ever again.

The child screamed and ran to the edge of the rock. He too would have fallen if his father had not held him back.

For a long while Conna stood there, holding the whimpering child in his arms. The girl had taken the leaden box with her but Conna had forgotten that. He had forgotten everything except that his mate was dead, that he had killed her. And it was as though Conna too had died.

Then he turned and fled, taking the boy with him.

* * *

The surface of the Lake was as it had been, dark and still. Rand Conway went slowly to his knees. He felt dully as though he had been ill for a long time. All the strength was gone out of him. He stayed there on the icy rock, motionless and silent, beyond feeling, beyond thought. He was only dimly aware that Ciel knelt beside him, that he was still clinging to her hand.

Presently he looked up at Krah.

"That was why you gave me my chance to leave Iskar. I was Conna's son--but I was the son of your daughter, too."

"For her sake," said Krah slowly, "I would have let you go." Conway nodded. He was very tired. So many things were clear to him now. Everything had changed, even the meaning of the name he bore. Rand. It was all very strange, very strange indeed.

Ciel's hand was warm and comforting in his.

Slowly he took from his girdle the little gun and the leaden vial, and let them drop and slide away.

"Father of my mother!" he said to Krah, "let me live!" He bowed his head and waited.

But Krah did not answer. He only said, "Does Conna live?"

"No. He paid for her life, Krah, with his own."

"That is well," whispered the old man. And his sons echoed, "That is well." Conway stood up. His mood of weary submission had left him.

"Krah," he said. "I had no part in Conna's crime and for my own--you know. I am of your blood, old man. I not beg again. Take your spears and give me mine and we will see who dies!"

A ghost of a grim smile touched Krah's lips. He looked deeply into his grandson's eyes and presently he nodded.

"You are of my blood. And I think you will not forget. There will be no taking of spears."

He stepped back and Conway said, "Let the others go. They know

nothing of the Lake and will not know. I will stay on Iskar."

He caught Ciel to him. "One thing, Krah. Ciel must not be punished!" Again the grim smile. Some of the frosty cold had gone from Krah's eyes. In time, Conway thought, the old bitterness might vanish altogether.

"You have stood together by the Lake," said Krah. "It is our record of marriage. So if Ciel is beaten that is up to you." He turned abruptly and left the cavern and his sons went with him. Slowly, having yet no words to say, Rand Conway and Ciel followed them--into the narrow valley that held no further terrors for the man who had at last found his own world.

Behind them, the Lake of the Gone Forever lay still and black, as though it pondered over its memories, the loves and hatreds and sorrows of a world gathered from the beginning of time, safe there now until the end of it.

The Shadows

Leigh Brackett

FOR COUNTLESS numbers of its years there had been no sight or sound or sense of man upon the world of the little blue star. But now, without warning, a remembered thing had come suddenly into the air again--a quiver, a subtle throbbing that meant only one kind of life. The shadows felt it, the Shadows that had waited so long and patiently. They began to stir among the ruined walls. They rose and shook themselves, and a soundless whisper ran among them, a hungry whisper, wild and eager. "Man! Man! Man has come again!" THE GALACTIC SURVEY ship lay in an expanse of level plain, ringed on one side by low mountains and on the other by a curving belt of forest. A river ran across the plain and there was much grass. But nothing cropped it, and there were no tracks in the mud of the river bank to show that anything had. Hubbard sniffed the warm air and dug his feet into the soil, which was rich and dark. He grinned broadly. "This is something like it," he said. "A pretty world. Real pretty."

He was a young man. His field was anthropology, and this was his first voyage out. For him, the stars still shone brightly. Barrier looked at him between envy and sadness. He said nothing. His gaze roving off across the Main and the forest, studied the sky--a suspicious, sombre gaze. He was old enough to be Hubbard's father and he felt every year of it, pressed down and running over.

"Of course, the colors are all wrong," said Hubbard, "but that's nothing. After they'd lived with a blue sun for a while people would think it was the only kind to have."

Barrier grunted. "What people?"

"Why, the colonists, the people that will live here some day!" Hubbard laughed suddenly. "What's the matter with you? Here at last we've found a beautiful world, and you're as glum as though it were a hunk of dead rock."

"I guess," said Barrier slowly, "that I've seen too many hunks of dead rock, and too many beautiful worlds that--"

He broke off. This was no time to talk. In fact, it was not his place to talk at all. If he didn't like what he was doing any more he could go home to Earth and stay there, and leave the stars to the young men who had not yet lost their faith.

The mountains, the plain, and the forest were very still in the bright blue morning. Barrier could feel the stillness. No wing cut the sweet air, no paw rustled the tangled grass, no voice spoke from among the curious trees. He moved restlessly where he stood, looking rather like an old hound that scents danger where there should be game. That was Barrier's job, his science, the oldest science of mankind--to venture into strange country and feel the invisible, sense the unknown and survive. He was head of the Ground Exploration team, and an expert on exploring. He had been at it all his life. Too long.

Hubbard said, "I wish Kendall would come back. I want to get started."

"What do you think you're going to find?"

"How do I know? That's the fun of it. But on a world like this there's bound to be life of some kind."

"Human life?"

"Why not?"

Again Barrier grunted, and again he said nothing.

They waited. Other men were scattered about the and the river bank, taking samples of soil, rock, water, and vegetation. They stayed close to the ship, and all were armed. The technical staff, after checking solar radiation, atmospheric content, temperature, gravitation, and the million and one other things that go to make a world habitable or otherwise for Earthmen, had rated this planet Earth-Type A, and in obedience to Survey ruling the ship had landed to determine surface conditions. So far, they had all been favorable. So

Barrier fidgeted, and listened to the silence.

PRESENTLY a speck appeared far off in the sky. It gave off a thin droning, coming closer, and developed into a small 'copter which settled down beside the ship, gnat alighting beside a whale. Kendall and his observer and cameraman got out.

Barrier went up to him. "What did you find?"

"More of the same," said Kendall, "and nothing in Except--" He hesitated.

"Except what?"

"Over there beyond the forest. I thought it might be the ruins of a city."

"There!" cried Hubbard. "You see?" Kendall shrugged. "The boys said no, it was just a bunch of rocks grown over with the woods. I don't know. You can decide for yourselves when you see the pictures."

The men who were out on the plain and the river bank had come running up. They were all young men, like Hubbard. Only the Captain, the chief of Technical, a couple of research scientists and Barrier were old. There was an uproar of voices, all talking at once. The Survey ship had made few landings, and it had been a long time since the last one. They were like youngsters let out of confinement bursting with excitement and pride at what they had found. Barrier went with them into the ship, into the main salon. There was a brief wait while the film, which had been developed automatically on exposure, was fed into the projector. The lights were cut. The small screen came to life. They all watched, with intense interest. The panorama unfolded in natural color, like and yet unlike Earth. On closer inspection, the forest trees were not trees at all, but monstrous flowers with stems as thick as trunks, bearing clusters of brilliant and improbable blooms. Barrier caught a glimpse of something that might have been a butterfly or a drifting petal, but other than that, nothing moved.

He asked, "Were there any signs of animal life?" Kendall shook his head. "No." Impatiently, Hubbard said, "The 'copter probably frightened it away."

"Frightened things run," said Barrier. "There's nothing running." Hubbard swore under his breath, and Barrier smiled. It had become a personal necessity for Hubbard to discover life here, and no wonder. He had had very little chance to practice his anthropology, and the voyage was almost over. His insistence on animals arose from the fact that without them there were not likely to be men.

"There," said Kendall, and held up his hand. The film was stopped, on a frame showing an area of tree-flowers and clambering vines rather more open than the forest proper. Humps and ridges of stone showed here and there among the tangled growths.

"You see what I mean," said Kendall, and gestured again. The film rolled, repeating the long low swings the 'copter had made across the area. "I got as close as I could, and I still couldn't figure it."

"It sure looks like a city," said Hubbard. He was quivering with excitement.

"Look there. See how regular those lines are, like streets, with houses fallen down on other side."

Two other voices spoke up. Aiken, the expert on planetary archaeology, admitted cautiously that it might be a city. Caffrey, the geologist, said that it might just as well be a natural rock formation.

"What do you think, Barrier?" asked Captain Verlaine. "Can't tell from the picture, sir. I'd have to examine the stones."

"Well," said Verlaine, "that seems to settle it. Make that area your first objective. Don't you agree, Cristofek?"

Cristofek, who was Chief of Technical, nodded emphatically. "And Barrier, in case it does turn out to be a ruin, make every effort to discover what sort of inhabitants it had and, above all, what happened to them." Barrier stood up. "All right," he said. "Let's be on our way." The seven men of his team joined him--all, like Hubbard, specialists, young men picked for physical condition and trained in the use of arms. Aiken and Caffrey were among them, also a lad named Morris who was in charge of the walkie-talkie. Barrier consulted Kendall about bearings, and then went with the others to get his gear. Within a quarter of an hour they were marching off across the plain.

BARRIER felt a twinge of nostalgia so strong as to be a physical

pain--nostalgia for the days when he had been green and eager like the rest, leaving the ship, which he hated, for the uncrossed horizons of new worlds, full of a shivering fascination, full of hope. The hope had been the first to go, and then the fascination.

Now, looking at the bright landscape, beautiful in spite of its unearthly tints, he found himself thinking that he would like to be in a certain bar he remembered in Los Angeles, not worrying about anything, not pondering meanings and significances and the shapes of alien leaves, forgetting completely the dark conviction that had grown in him over the years. Schmidt, the entomologist, was chattering with Gordon, whose field was zoology, about worms and insect forms, of which many had been found. Hubbard speculated with Aiken on The City. They already called that. The high grasses swished against their boots. Wind blew softly and the sun was warm. But apart from the eight invading humans there was nothing sentient to enjoy these blessings. Barrier disliked the empty silence. It was unnatural in such a lush and joyous setting.

His eyes roved constantly, grey eyes set in a face the color of old leather and surrounded by the complex wrinkles that come from squinting against numberless foreign suns. For a long time they saw nothing. And then, more and more, they narrowed and watched a certain sector to their left. Barrier lifted his hand, and the little column stopped. "Over there," he said.

"Do you see those shadows?" They all stared. Hubbard laughed. "Cloud shadows."

"There are no clouds."

"Well, then, it's the wind making ripples in the grass." He glanced sidelong at Barrier. "What's the difference what makes them? They're only shadows!" Barrier said heavily, speaking to them all, "Will you

please try to remember that you are not on Earth? In a strange world anything, a shadow, a blade of grass, may be alive and deadly."

Their faces regarded him, intelligent, uncomprehending, trying not to show that they thought he was being a trifle ridiculous. He knew that they now felt hardened veterans of the star-worlds, with the vast experience of their four or five landings behind them, and all on planets that had had only normally dangerous life-forms. He could not make them understand the things he had seen, the inimical stealthy things that hated man.

He motioned them on again. They had already forgotten shadows, but he had not. There seemed to be number of them—how do you count shadows? Smallish clots of darkness they were that flitted along some distance away, losing themselves in the waving grass, difficult to see in the brilliant sunshine, but unmistakably They seemed to be running parallel with the men.

They looked like perfectly normal shadows and Barrier would not have given them a second thought, except that in his experience a shadow must be thrown by something, and here there was nothing, not even so much as a patch of cloud or a bird's wing.

They marched on across the beautiful, empty, silent plain. And then, again, Barrier called a halt.

They had come to the edge of a stream that ran down toward the river, cutting itself a cleft in the soil of the plain. Caffrey immediately scrambled down the steep bank and began to study the layers of silt and sand and clay. Gordon followed him, casting back and forth along edge of the water. He became vastly excited when discovered a hideous small creature that resembled a purple prawn. Something else, that might have been snake or an eel, went off with aropy slither between the wet rocks.

Hubbard danced up and down. "I told you there was life here!" Barrier said gently, "I never denied it."

He glanced upstream. The shadows were bunched together, hovering over the cleft. They had not come any closer, but they were watching. He could not see with his eyes that they were watching, for they were only featureless blobs of gloom. But he felt it, in every nerve, in every pore of his prickling skin. There was something ugly about being watched by shadows.

ABRUPTLY, Caffrey began to dig like a terrier in the soft ground midway up the bank. Presently he held up an object like a blackened, broken stick that was knobbed at one end. He handed it to Gordon, who voiced a sharp exclamation and cried out for Barrier.

"It's a bone," said Gordon. "The leg bone of a large deer, I should say, or a small horse. You know what I mean, the equivalents thereof." Hubbard was quite beside himself. "Vertebrate life. That proves that evolution here has followed practically the same path it did on Earth." He looked around, though he expected to see a man materialize from among the rocks. Barrier said to Gordon, "How old is that bone?" Gordon shook his head. "It's been in the ground a long time. How long would you say, Caffrey?"

Caffrey squinted at the bank. "Judging from its depth under the present topsoil, I should guess five or six hundred years, maybe more. That's only a guess of course. There are so many factors I haven't any data for."

"In other words," said Barrier, "a long time." He frowned at the ancient bone, and then at the deserte landscape around him.

Morris sent word of their find back to the ship. The marched on. The

shadows followed.

There were several miles of the flat grassland now between them and the ship. It lay glinting dully in the blue light, Leviathan at rest. The outposts of the forest, solitary clumps and little clustered groves of the giant flowers and equally lofty ferns, sprang up around the men, gradually screening off both the plain and the sky until they walked in a warm blue gloom shot through with the brilliant spectral colors of the blooms.

At first they went slowly, on the watch for dangerous plant-forms. Apparently there were none. Hansen, the botanist, chanted aloud with wonder at every step. Schmidt was entranced by huge butterflies and numerous insects that crept and flew and made tiny buzzings. Gordon and Hubbard peered eagerly, but there was nothing for them to see.

Barrier walked ahead, going with a lanky noiseless like an Indian. His eyes were anxious, and his senses on edge. It was very lovely in the forest, with the blooms of many colors nodding overhead. Barrier thought of a garden at the bottom of the sea. The glades were full of blueness like still water. There began to be wisps of mist along the ground.

He thought for a time that they had lost the shadows. Then he saw them again, low down, slipping along between the rough, pale flower-trunks. They had changed

formation. They were all around the men now, in a circle. They had come closer. Much closer.

Barrier made the men bunch up. He pointed out the hollows to them, and this time they were less inclined to shrug them off.

"Better let me talk to the ship," he said, and Morris clicked the switch

on the walkie-talkie. He did that several times, repeating the call letters, and then he shook his head.

"Sorry," he said nervously, "I'm blanked out. There's some electrical disturbance, very strong .. ."

Barrier glanced at the shadows. Creatures of force? They must be, since they were not solid matter. Electronic discharge from their bodies might well disrupt the small transmitter.

He considered turning back. They were now about equidistant from the ship and the area of the possible ruins, and if the shadows had anything evil in mind, turning back could not stop them. The ship was well out of reach. Besides, he had his orders, and if these shadows were a native life-form, it was his duty to find out about them.

They had made no hostile move as yet. Hostile or not, could shadows hurt men?

And if so, how did you fight them?

The ground mists were thickening. They must be approaching swampy ground, although he had not noticed any on Kendall's films. Tenuous wreaths and veils hung in the blue glades, each separate droplet glittering with diamond fires in the filtered sunlight. The breeze rippled them to and fro very prettily. They were not fever mists. Barrier forgot them, returning his watchful attention to the shadows.

Within the past few minutes they had drawn their circle in until they were only a few feet away from the men. They glided round and round, utterly silent, in a kind of nervous dance. The men were all watching them now. Hubbard spoke to Barrier, and his voice had an edge of fright.

"What are they? What do they want?"

"They're only shadows," said Barrier irritably. "What does it matter what they want?" Then he called out the others, "Keep together. If things get rough we'll be back. But no matter what happens, don't bolt. If you do, there won't be any way to help you."

THEY WENT on, treading on each other's heels staring around them. The shadows wove and bounded. Quite suddenly, Schmidt screamed. His gun went off with snarling hiss. It flared again and again into a clot of darkness, which did not flinch.

"It touched me," Schmidt shuddered. "It touched me!"

He began to run, not very far, because there was no space with the ring of shadows to run in. Barrier caught him by the arm.

"Shut up," he snarled. "Shut up!" Schmidt stood shivering. "It was cold. Cold as death."

"You're not dead, are you?"

"No."

"You're not hurt?"

"No."

"Then shut up." Barrier glared at Schmidt, at the others. "The next one of you that panics, I'll knock him flat."

He was afraid himself. Miserably afraid. But he said, "They haven't hurt us yet. Maybe they can't. Anyway, wait a while before we blow our tops." The young men swallowed and straightened their faces out into stiff lines and tried hard not to see the shadows. Schmidt

twitched as he walked. Barrier wished there was a sound in the forest. A squeak, a grunt, a war that meant something warm-blooded and alive. There wasn't. Even their own footfalls were deadened on the soft ground.

The mists thickened, sparkling, bright. The alien sun was blotted out. The shadows skulked and clung. Sweat poured down the cheeks of the men, stained their drill lockets. Hubbard said, licking his lips, "How much farther?"

"Another mile or two."

Barrier wished the mists were not there. They made him feel shut in and suffocated. He worried about bogs. The blue daylight was maddening. He thought of the honest yellow glare of Sol and wondered what madness it was that sent men out to the ends of the galaxy seeking other suns. He stumbled suddenly, and looked down. At first he thought the obstacle was a rounded stone half buried in the mold of fallen petals. And then he knew it wasn't. He stooped and lifted it up and held it out to Hubbard. "You wanted man," he said.

Hubbard rubbed his palms up and down along his thighs. He stared at the thing in Barrier's hands, and the others stared over their shoulders, and the thin grinned at them with a single gaping line of teeth. Hubbard reached out and took it.

"It's very old," he said. "As old as that." He pointed to Gordon's trophy. Schmidt said in a curiously shrill voice, "There were men here once, and animals. Now there aren't any. They're all dead, and I know what killed them." He stared hard at the shadows.

Barrier swore. "That's fine talk from a scientist. I thought you people were trained not to jump to conclusions."

Hubbard muttered, "Barrier is right." He looked at the skull and repressed a shiver. "Come on, I want to see those ruins." They went on, so close together that their shoulders rubbed. The mists grew denser and brighter and heavier. The men sweated, ignoring the shadows, desperately ignoring them.

Without any warning, the shadows sprang.

There was a moment's terrible screaming from the men, and then there was silence, and after that a few stifled, horrid sounds. The skull fell from Hubbard's grasp and rolled away, grinning a wise grin as it went. Barrier swayed where he stood, clawing blindly with his hands at his own flesh. He could see the others. Through a veil of shadowy gloom he could see them, dimly, and the gloom was behind his eyes and not before them. Some of them had tried to run, and the shadows had caught them as they ran. Two of them kicked and grovelled on the ground. Their outlines were indistinct, blurred over. Their eyes were crazy. So were Barrier's.

The shocking swiftness of that leap, the noiselessness the awful cold that poured in suddenly upon the flesh--the loathsome sense of an intruder grasping at mind and body, taking them over from within....it was inside him. The shadow was inside him. Its substance interpenetrated his warm and living flesh, alien and unreadable intelligence was clinging tight against his own, and it was shaking him, driving him, he was going to die.... They're dead, all the men and animals, and I know what killed them--Schmidt was gone, plunging off into the mist, taking with him the terrible invader in his flesh. There were still shadows, a lot of them, running loose, there had not been enough men. Some of these went after Schmidt.

Barrier forgot his orders, his command, his pride. Blind, black terror overwhelmed him and he ran. He wanted to outrun the thing that held him, to shake it free and lose it utterly, and go on running right off this

filthy blue-lit world. But he couldn't. It was part of him. He would not lose it till he died.

Hee ran, through the silent forest, where the nodding blossoms were shrouded thick in mist and the flower-trunks were hidden, and there was nothing but himself and the nightmare that dwelt in his flesh, and a darkness in the air around him.

Several times he fell, but something forced him up and on again. He had lost all track of the other men, He had almost forgotten them. Once, far off, he heard a shriek and knew that someone was dying, but he did not care. His mind was lost inside the shadow.

He was only distantly aware that suddenly the mists were gone and he was staggering over ground that had once been cleared but now was overgrown, though not so thickly as the forest. He stumbled among stones, reeled and scrambled around great hummocks from which peeped shattered cornices, and crossed an open space where his feet brought forth a sound of dry sticks cracking. He looked down and saw that the sticks were human bones. He sobbed and turned his head to see the little group of shadows that hovered at his heels.

"Are you waiting your turn?" he yelled at them, or tried to yell, and made only a hoarse whispering. His face, so strangely blurred and dimmed, twisted into a insensate mask of rage. He bent and picked up the old bare bones from around his feet and threw them at the shadows, and cursed, and sobbed, and then he ran again, five paces, ten, across the crackling open space, and there was a hummock too high to climb and too wide to go around. He butted himself against it, into a knee of stone that thrust out between the creepers, and then he fell. His body jerked convulsively, and was still.. HE WAS looking at a moon. It was a red moon, small but very close.

There were mountains on it, and gouge out hollows. His mind made idle pictures of them, face, a crouching rabbit. There were stars. He did not recognize them. Presently another moon came up, larger one, and pallid green. He tired of making pictures on the moons.

Someone was moaning, close at hand.

Mildly curious, Barrier turned his head. He saw a man, lying curled up with his knees against his chest and his arms clasped over his head. He seemed to know the man. He studied the partly visible face. Of course he knew him, it was young Hubbard, who had been looking for men.... Barrier sprang up. Cold sweat burst out on him and his body trembled, standing rigid in the moonlight. He searched inside himself as a man will search for a remembered pain, sick and praying not to find it.

It was gone. The shadow was gone. He clutched at Hubbard, and saw that the unholy dimness had left his features. He shook Hubbard and shouted at him, and he saw that there were other men huddled on the ground, two, three, four of them. He ran from one to the other, and they looked up at him with empty, frightened eyes. Schmidt was not among them, nor Morris. Six. Six living out of eight. And the shadows had gone away out of their flesh.

For one short second he was hopeful. Then he looked out across the open space where the bones were and saw the company of dark and restless blots that moved among the spiky ribs and tumbled, careless limbs. He almost laughed that he had considered hope.

He returned to Hubbard. "How did you get here?" he asked, and slapped the young man's face until he answered.

"I don't know. I--just ran." Hubbard gave a racking Oliver. "Oh God, Barrier, that thing inside me just like smoke blows through a bush,

and cold...." Barrier slapped him again. "Where're Schmidt and Morris?"

"I don't know"

Barrier set about getting the others on their feet. None of them knew precisely how they had gotten there. None of them knew what had happened to Morris, but Aiken said:

"I saw Schmidt. I was running and I passed by Schmidt lying on the ground, at least I think it was Schmidt, it had his specimen case still strapped around it, and it was dead. Oh yes, there wasn't any doubt at all about its being dead."

He turned away suddenly and tried hard to be sick. Barrier said slowly, "So they finished off two of us, and brought the rest of us here. I suppose they want to complete the job at their leisure. So here we are. We can't communicate with the ship, and they won't send Kendall out to look for us before morning. And if we're still alive by then, and Kendall does happen to find us, and lands--what do you think they'll do about it?" He glanced toward the shadows.

Nobody answered.

"I wonder," said Barrier at last, "if fire would keep them off." The others stared at him. They hurriedly scurried about, gathering dead creepers, dry grass, anything that would burn. They made fires, a ring of them across the mouth of the cul-de-sac where they were caught. They waited, breathless with hope.

The shadows crept up toward the flames. Then, as though delighted with them, they began to flit back and forth around the fires, frolicking over and through them, almost, it seemed, playing tag among the columns of smoke. Hubbard wept.

Mist was crawling up out of the forest. The small red moon was sinking, and the larger pale green one shed ghastly light. The fires burned low and the shadows danced around them.

"They look real cute there, don't they?" said Barrier viciously. "Having fun." The flames died down, became beds of embers. Some of the shadows began to make tentative small rushes toward Barrier and the five who were left of his team. Coffrey whispered, "I guess they're coming for us. He still had a withered blossom stuck in his buttonhole

The shadows darted nervously, toward the men and then back to the glowing red embers. Beyond them tenuous arms of mist advanced and coiled between the ruins. They began to obscure the remaining moon, and as the light faded the shadows moved more swiftly with a greater eagerness. Aiken had been rooting among the creepers that shrouded the hummock. Suddenly he bleated, "There a passage here, a doorway. Maybe we could get inside and--and barricade it."

"Against shadows?" said Barrier, and laughed. "It's better than nothing," Hubbard said. "Anything's better than just sitting here."

HE SCRAMBLED toward Aiken, who had disappeared, and the others followed. All at once, Barrier began to laugh. They stared at him, their faces round and startled. Barrier shouted at them, laughing.

"You still don't get it, do you? You still think you can run and hide, and put up little defences, and win out somehow in the end because you're men and man always wins out. You haven't learned yet, have you?"

"Learned what?" asked Hubbard, in a low, queer voice. Barrier studied the shadows. "Why should I tell you, though? It took me half a lifetime and a lot of worlds to learn the truth. Why shouldn't I keep it to

myself, and lot you die happy?"

Abruptly, Hubbard sprang at him. He was like an enraged child, boiling with a confused fury of which the greater part was the fear of death. Barrier caught his wrists.

"You dirty yellow-belly," Hubbard squealed. "You're opposed to be our leader, you're supposed to show us what to do, and what do you do? You give up." He called Barrier a number of evil names. "The great explorer, the big brave leader, hell! You're just an old man with all the guts run out of you. You should have gone back to Earth and let somebody that could fight take over."

Barrier thrust him away, quite hard but without anger.

"All right," he said, "I'll let you in on it. Earth was a soft planet. Oh, she tried to put her foot down--ice ages, volcanoes, plagues, floods, droughts, and famines--but it was too late, and it wasn't enough, and now we've got the upper hand of her. But the other worlds are tougher. sooner or later, they find a way....

"We aren't welcome in the universe. I don't know why. Maybe it's because we aren't content to be the animals we are, but must always be pretending that we're something else, prying about and upsetting things grasping after stars, making trouble and screaming because it hurts. I don't know. I only know that we're hated. Everywhere I've been, wherever there was a man they'd been gotten rid of somehow."

He glanced up at the alien stars, dimming now with the mist that rolled across them.

"They hate us," he said softly. "Their children hate us. Everywhere we have enemies, but never any friends."

Then he sighed. "You're right, Hubbard. I am an old man, with the guts worn out of me. You run on in and hide, now, and I wish you luck. Me, I don't like holes.

The shadows were hard upon him now. One brushed, against him, and its touch was cold, cold as the bone that lay in the open space. Swiftly, so swiftly that no of the men could stop him, Barrier whirled and leaped through them, running like a deer.

He took them by surprise, the small dark blots that hung so close to him. He got past them, trampling on the brittle bones. And then the shadows followed, spreading out fanwise behind him, with three or four racing on to catch him. He was some distance ahead of them. He heard Hubbard's voice shrieking after him, but not the words it said. He put out every ounce of strength that was in him, rushing between the heaped-up ruins, into the arms of mist that reached along the ground.

The shadows were closing in. But it was the mist that sprang. It rolled around and wrapped him in, and where it touched his flesh he knew that the glittering droplets were not drops of mist at all but tiny flecks of life, separate, sentient, gathered together in formidable colonies of cloud. And he knew two other things, in that second when it was too late for knowledge--that the mist had not touched him nor the others in the forest, and it had moved into the ruined city after them, against the wind. Tiny flecks of life, glittering like powdered gems. And they hated man with a curious, inherited enmity.

There was a numbing agony in Barrier, an ecstasy of curious anguish that made his body twitch and dance.

His throat convulsed, but no sound came out of it, and were filled with motes of fire. He tried to run and could not, and somewhere far away in another .. world, Hubbard was still shouting. The shadows came. A

broken thought went tumbling into the stricken emptiness of his mind. -They work together, damn them, and they both hate man. Then there was the horrid cold, the alien presence sweeping through him, and this was death.... The mists drew back. The tearing anguish left him, the chill darkness that possessed him was somehow healing to his seared nerves. It was like being shocked with icy water, so that suddenly he could see and think again, even through the gloomy veil that dimmed his sight and mind. The shadows leaped and swirled around him, and where they leaped the mists that were not mists at all drew back, sullen and reluctant, but coiling all the same upon themselves. And the shadow-thing that was in-side of Barrier made him turn and go back toward the ruins, not fast this time, but slowly because he had been hurt, giving Barrier, in some unfathomable way, of its own strength. The others came behind, a rear guard, dodging, weaving, pouncing on the stealthy tentacles of mist that ought to reach around them to the men who stood gaping by the great hummock. Here and there a glistening cloud engulfed a single shadow, and suddenly it was not.

Barrier's face, obscured by the dim aura, took on a strange expression. He sat down at Hubbard's feet and the Shadow left him, and they were as they had been before, the men the shadows, the little beds of ash still glowing, and the wavering mist beyond.

Hubbard swore meaningless oaths meant to conceal his shame. "Were you crazy, Barrier? Did you think you could draw them all away from us?" Aiken said, "He was trying to get away, to get a warning to the ship so maybe they could save us." He bent over. "Barrier, listen. Barrier...." He paid them no attention. He was watching the shadows that hovered between them and the mist. A few of them were darting as they had before, from the burned-out fires to the men and back again.

"They want us to put on more fuel," he said slowly, "The fires help them keep the mist away." He turned abruptly to the others. "They saved me, did you see that? They came after me, and one protected me with its own body, and some of them died." He was shaking a little. "We were wrong about them. They were trying to help us in the forest. They followed us like--" A word hovered on his tongue and he considered it, thinking of his boyhood and a small soiled terrier who had eaten his boots and loved him and once had interposed his body between Barrier and a fearsome hissing thing. It had only been a gopher snake, but the idea was the same.

"I think," he said, "that those shadows were the dogs, the protectors, of the men who lived here once. Different from our own, but trained to hunt down and turn aside enemies from their men. It was the mist that killed Schmidt and Morris, of course. We didn't keep together, and the shadows couldn't save us all."

The men stared at the shadows. It was hard to change their minds now, but they could not deny what they had seen. Their faces softened, just a little, losing some of the hard fear. Then Hubbard said:

But what about them?" and he pointed at the bones. Barrier shook his head.

"Whatever killed them, it wasn't the shadows." His voice had an odd far-away note. His mind was very busy with something, taking it apart and studying the pieces intently and then putting it back together a different way. At last he smiled and went toward the shadows. He began to talk to them, putting out his hands, and they clustered around him, bounding up playfully. They must have been lonesome all this time," he said, "guarding their masters' bones."

Aiken said, "Down there in that passage--it's built of solid rock and

hasn't crumbled a bit--there are some symbols cut in the wall. I haven't really looked at them, but well, it seems as though all the people in the city gathered here to die at once, and it could be that they left a message or two in the strongest places."

"Let's look," said Hubbard.

They went down through the opening Aiken had I found, all except Barrier, who was still playing with the shadow-dogs, and smiling. He was only mildly interested when they came back, Aiken and Hubbard both flushed and joyous.

"Those symbols," said Aiken. "They're pictographs, so simple and clear that anyone could read them. They must have hoped, those people, that someone would come along sooner or later. Anyway, they told what happened to them, or rather, what was going to happen. The planet had already entered the edges of a cloud that was death to lung breathers. That's why the animals died too, and only the lungless creatures lived. And Barrier...."

"Yes?"

"They mentioned the dogs. They drew quite clear pictures of them at work, so that strangers would know." Barrier nodded. He looked at the dark blots romping about his feet. "They've waited all this time. Well, they can wait a little longer."

Then he straightened up, still with that odd, wry smile.

"Seems like I spoke too soon," he said. "Maybe there enough worth in us that here and there some little world will give us another chance. Anyway, it's nice to know there's one place where we have some friends." They heaped fuel on the fires, and the shadows danced. Barrier watched them, looking somehow younger, like a man who

has rediscovered hope.

THE STELLAR LEGION

Silence was on the barracks like a lid clamped over tight-coiled springs. Men in rumpled uniforms--outlanders of the Stellar Legion, space-rats, the scrapings of the Solar System--sweated in the sullen heat of the Venusian swamplands before the rains. Sweated and listened.

The metal door clanged open to admit Lehn, the young Venusian Commandant, and every man jerked tautly to his feet. Ian Maclan, the white-haired, space-burned Earthman, alone and hungrily poised for action; Thekla, the swart Martian low-canaler, grinning like a weasel beside Bhak, the hulking strangler from Titan. Every quick nervous glance was riveted on Lehn. The young officer stood silent in the open door, tugging at his fair mustache; to Maclan, watching, he was a trim, clean incongruity in this brutal wilderness of savagery and iron men. Behind him, the eternal mists writhed in a thin curtain over the swamp, stretching for miles beyond the soggy earthworks; through it came the sound every ear had listened to for days, a low, monotonous piping that seemed to ring from the ends of the earth. The Nahali, the six-foot, scarlet-eyed swamp-dwellers, whose touch was weapon enough, praying to their gods for rain. When it came, the hot, torrential downpour of southern Venus, the Nahali would burst in a scaly tide over the fort.

Only a moat of charged water and four electro-cannons stood between the Legion and the horde. If those things failed, it meant two hundred lives burned out, the circle of protective forts broken, the fertile uplands plundered and laid waste. Maclan looked at Lehn's clean, university-bred young face, and wondered cynically if he was strong enough to do his job.

Lehn spoke, so abruptly that the men started. "I'm calling for volunteers. A reconnaissance in Nahali territory; you know well enough what that means. Three men. Well?"

Ian Maclan stepped forward, followed instantly by the Martian Thekla. Bhak the Titan hesitated, his queerly bright, blank eyes darting from Thekla to Lehn, and back to Maclan. Then he stepped up, his hairy face twisted in a sly grin. Lehn eyed them, his mouth hard with distaste under his fair mustache. Then he nodded, and said; "Report in an hour, light equipment." Turning to go, he added almost as an afterthought, "Report to my quarters, Maclan. Immediately." Maclan's bony Celtic face tightened and his blue eyes narrowed with wary distrust. But he followed Lehn, his gaunt, powerful body as ramrod-straight as the Venusian's own, and no eye that watched him go held any friendship. Thekla laughed silently, like a cat with his pointed white teeth. "Two of a kind," he whispered. "I hope they choke each other!" Bhak grunted, flexing his mighty six-fingered hands.

In his quarters, Lehn, his pink face flushed, strode up and down while Maclan waited dourly. It was plain enough what was coming; Maclan felt the old bitter defensive anger rising in him.

"Look," he told himself inwardly. "Books. Good cigars. A girl's picture on the table. You had all that once, you damn fool. Why couldn't you. . ." Lehn stopped abruptly in front of him, grey eyes steady. "I'm new here, Maclan," he said. "But we've been Legion men for five generations, and I know the law; no man is to be questioned about his past. I'm going to break the law. Why are you here, Maclan?"

Maclan's white head was gaunt and stubborn as Tantallon Rock, and he kept silent.

"I'm trying to help," Lehn went on. "You've been an officer; every man in the barracks knows that. If you're here for any reason but failure in

duty, you can be an officer again. I'll relieve you of special duty; you can start working for the examinations. No need to waste you in the ranks. Well?" Maclan's eyes were hidden, but his voice was harsh. "What's behind this, Lehn?"

"What the hell is it to you?"

The Venusian's level gaze wavered; for a moment the boy looked through the man, and Maclan felt a quick stab in his heart. Then all that was gone, and Lehn said curtly,

"If you find the barracks congenial, stay there, by all means. Dismissed!" Maclan glared at him half-blindly for a moment, his fine long hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. Then he 'bout faced with vicious smartness and went out.

Nearly an hour later he stood with the Martian Thekla on the earthworks, waiting. The monotonous pipes prayed on in the swamp; Maclan, looking up at the heavy sky, prayed just as hard that it would not rain. Not just yet. Because if it rained before the patrol left, the patrol would not leave; the Nahali would be on the march with the very first drop.

"And my chance would be gone," he whispered to himself. Thekla's bright black eyes studied him, as they always did; an insolent, mocking scrutiny that angered the Scot.

"Well," he said dryly. "The perfect soldier, the gallant volunteer. For love of Venus, Thekla, or love of the Legion?"

"Perhaps," said Thekla softly, "for the same reason you did, Earthman. And perhaps not." His face, the swart, hard face of a low-canal outlaw, was turned abruptly toward the mist-wrapped swamp. "Love of Venus!" he snarled. "Who could love this lousy sweatbox?"

Not even Lehn, if he had the brains of a flea!"

"Mars is better, eh?" Maclan had a sudden inspiration. "Cool dry air, and little dark women, and the wine-shops on the Jekkara Low-canal. You'd like to be back there, wouldn't you?"

To himself, he thought in savage pleasure, "I'll pay you out, you little scum. You've tortured me with what I've lost, until I'd have killed you if it hadn't been against my plan. All right, see if you can take it!" The slow dusk was falling; Thekla's dark face was a blur but Maclan knew he had got home. "The fountains in the palace gardens, Thekla; the sun bursting up over red deserts; the singing girls and the thil in Madame Kan's. Remember the thil, Thekla? Ice cold and greenish, bubbling in blue glasses?" He knew why Thekla snarled and sprang at him, and it wasn't Thekla he threw down on the soft earth so much as a tall youngster with a fair mustache, who had goaded with good intent. Funny, thought Maclan, that well-intentioned goads hurt worse than the other kind.

A vast paw closed on his shoulder, hauling him back. Another, he saw, yanked Thekla upright. And Bhak the Titan's hairy travesty of a face peered down at them.

"Listen," he grunted, in his oddly articulated Esperanto. "I know what's up. I got ears, and village houses got thin walls. I heard the Nahali girl talking. I don't know which one of you has the treasure, but I want it. If I don't get it. . ."

His fingers slid higher on Maclan's shoulder, gripped his throat. Six fingers, like iron clamps. Maclan heard Thekla choking and cursing; he managed to gasp:

"You're in the wrong place, Bhak. We're men. I thought you only strangled women."

The grip slackened a trifle. "Men too," said Bhak slowly. "That's why I had to run away from Titan. That's why I've had to run away from everywhere. Men or women--anyone who laughs at me."

Maclan looked at the blank-eyed, revolting face, and wondered that anyone could laugh at it. Pity it, shut it harmlessly away, but not laugh. Bhak's fingers fell away abruptly. "They laugh at me," he repeated miserably,

"and run away. I know I'm ugly. But I want friends and a wife, like anyone else. Especially a wife. But they laugh at me, the women do, when I ask them. And. . ." He was shaking suddenly with rage and his face was a beast's face, blind and brutal. "And I kill them. I kill the damned little vixens that laugh at me!"

He stared stupidly at his great hands. "Then I have to run away. Always running away, alone." The bright, empty eyes met Maclan's with deadly purpose.

"That's why I want the money. If I have money, they'll like me. Women always like men who have money. If I kill one of you, I'll have to run away again. But if I have someone to go with me, I won't mind." Thekla showed his pointed teeth. "Try strangling a Nahali girl, Bhak. Then we'll be rid of you."

Bhak grunted. "I'm not a fool. I know what the Nahali do to you. But I want that money the girl told about, and I'll get it. I'd get it now, only Lehn will come."

He stood over them, grinning. Maclan drew back, between pity and disgust. "The Legion is certainly the System's garbage dump," he muttered in Martian, loud enough for Thekla to hear, and smiled at the low-canaler's stifled taunt. Stifled, because Lehn was coming up, his

heavy water-boots thudding on the soggy ground.

Without a word the three fell in behind the officer, whose face had taken on an unfamiliar stony grimness. Maclan wondered whether it was anger at him, or fear of what they might get in the swamp. Then he shrugged; the young cub would have to follow his own trail wherever it led. And Maclan took a stern comfort from this thought. His own feet were irrevocably directed; there was no doubt, no turning back. He'd never have again to go through what Lehn was going through. All he had to do was wait.

The plank bridge groaned under them, almost touching the water in the moat. Most ingenious, that moat. The Nahali could swim it in their sleep, normally, but when the conductor rods along the bottom were turned on, they literally burned out their circuits from an overload. The swamp-rats packed a bigger potential than any Earthly electric eel.

Ian Maclan, looking at the lights of the squalid village that lay below the fort, reflected that the Nahali had at least one definitely human trait. The banging of a three-tiered Venusian piano echoed on the heavy air, along with shouts and laughter that indicated a free flow of "swamp juice." This link in the chain of stations surrounding the swamplands was fully garrisoned only during the rains, and the less warlike Nahali were busy harvesting what they could from the soldiers and the rabble that came after them. Queer creatures, the swamp-rats, with their ruby eyes and iridescent scales. Nature, in adapting them to their wet, humid environment, had left them somewhere between warm-blooded mammals and cold-blooded reptiles, anthropoid in shape, man-sized, capricious. The most remarkable thing about them was their breathing apparatus, each epithelial cell forming a tiny electrolysis plant to extract oxygen from water. Since they lived equally on land and in water, and since the swamp air was almost a mist, it suited them admirably. That was why they had to wait

for the rains to go raiding in the fertile uplands; and that was why hundreds of Interworld Legionnaires had to swelter on the strip of soggy ground between swamp and plateau to stop them. Maclan was last in line. Just as his foot left the planks, four heads jerked up as one, facing to the darkening sky.

"Ram!"

Big drops, splattering slowly down, making a sibilant whisper across the swamp. The pipes broke off, leaving the ears a little deafened with the lack of them after so long. And Maclan, looking at Lehn, swore furiously in his heart.

The three men paused, expecting an order to turn back, but Lehn waved them on.

"But it's raining," protested Bhak. "We'll get caught in the attack." The officer's strangely hard face was turned toward them. "No," he said, with an odd finality, "they won't attack. Not yet." They went on, toward the swamp that was worse in silence than it had been with the praying pipes. And Maclan, looking ahead at the oddly assorted men plowing grimly through the mud, caught a sudden glimpse of something dark and hidden, something beyond the simple threat of death that hung always over a reconnoitering patrol.

The swamp folded them in. It is never truly dark on Venus, owing to the thick, diffusing atmosphere. There was enough light to show branching, muddy trails, great still pools choked with weeds, the spreading liha-trees with their huge pollen pods, everything dripping with the slow rain. Maclan could hear the thudding of that rain for miles around on the silent air; the sullen forerunner of the deluge. Fort and village were lost in sodden twilight. Lehn's boots squelched onward through the mud of a trail that rose gradually to a ridge of higher ground. When he reached the top, Lehn turned abruptly, his

electro-gun seeming to materialize in his hand, and Maclan was startled by the bleak look of his pink young face.

"Stop right there," said Lehn quietly. "Keep your hands up. And don't speak until I'm finished."

He waited a second, with the rain drumming on his waterproof coverall, dripping from the ends of his fair mustache. The others were obedient, Bhak a great grinning hulk between the two slighter men. Lehn went on calmly.

"Someone has sold us out to the Nahali. That's how I know they won't attack until they get the help they're waiting for. I had to find out, if possible, what preparations they have made for destroying our electrical supply, which is our only vulnerable point. But I had a double purpose in calling this party. Can you guess what it is?"

Maclan could. Lehn continued:

"The traitor had his price; escape from the Legion, from Venus, through the swamp to Lhiva, where he can ship out on a tramp. His one problem was to get away from the fort without being seen, since all leaves have been temporarily cancelled."

Lehn's mist-grey eyes were icy. "I gave him that chance." Bhak laughed, an empty, jarring roar. "See? That's what the Nahali girl said. She said, 'He can get what he needs, now. He'll get away before the rains, probably with a patrol; then our people can attack.' I know what he needed. Money! And I want it."

"Shut up!" Lehn's electro-gun gestured peremptorily. "I want the truth of this. Which one of you is the traitor?"

Thekla's pointed white teeth gleamed. "Maclan loves the Legion, sir.

He couldn't be guilty."

Lehn's gaze crossed Maclan's briefly, and again the Scot had a fleeting glimpse of something softer beneath the new hardness. It was something that took him back across time to a day when he had been a green subaltern in the Terran Guards, and a hard-bitten, battle-tempered senior officer had filled the horizon for him.

It was the something that had made Lehn offer him a chance, when his trap was set and sprung. It was the something that was going to make Lehn harder on him now than on either Bhak or Thekla. It was hero-worship. Maclan groaned inwardly. "Look here," he said. "We're in Nahali country. There may be trouble at any moment. Do you think this is the time for detective work? You may have caught the wrong men anyway. Better do your job of reconnoitering, and worry about the identity of the traitor back in the fort."

"You're not an officer now, Maclan!" snapped Lehn. "Speak up, and I want the truth. You, Thekla!"

Thekla's black eyes were bitter. "I'd as well be here as anywhere, since I can't be on Mars. How could I go back, with a hanging charge against me?"

"Maclan?" Lehn's grey gaze was leveled stiffly past his head. And Maclan was quivering suddenly with rage; rage against the life that had brought him where he was, against Lehn, who was the symbol of all he had thrown away.

"Think what you like," he whispered, "and be damned!"

Bhak's movement came so swiftly that it caught everyone unprepared. Handling the Martian like a child's bean-bag, he picked him up and hurled him against Lehn. The electro-gun spat a harmless

bolt into empty air as the two fell struggling in the mud. Maclan sprang forward, but Bhak's great fingers closed on his neck. With his free hand, the Titan dragged Thekla upright; he held them both helpless while he kicked the sprawling Lehn in the temple. In the split second before unconsciousness took him, Lehn's eyes met Maclan's, and they were terrible eyes. Maclan groaned, "You young fool!" Then Lehn was down, and Bhak's fingers were throttling him.

"Which one?" snarled the Titan. "Give me the money, and I'll let you go. I'm going to have the money, if I have to kill you. Then the girls won't laugh at me. Tell me. Which one?"

Maclan's blue eyes widened suddenly. With all his strength he fought to croak out one word: "Nahali!"

Bhak dropped them with a grunt. Swinging his great hands, forgetting his gun completely, he stood at bay. There was a rush of bodies in the rain-blurred dusk, a flash of scarlet eyes and triangular mouths laughing in queer, noseless faces. Then there were scaly, manlike things hurled like battering-rams against the Legionnaires.

Maclan's gun spat blue flame; two Nahali fell, electrocuted, but there were too many of them. His helmet was torn off, so that his drenched white hair blinded him; rubber-shod fists and feet lashed against reptilian flesh. Somewhere just out of sight, Thekla was cursing breathlessly in low-canal argot. And Lehn, still dazed, was crawling gamely to his feet; his helmet had protected him from the full force of Bhak's kick.

The hulking Titan loomed in the midst of a swarm of redeyed swamp-rats. And Maclan saw abruptly that he had taken off his clumsy gloves when he had made ready to strangle his mates. The great six-fingered hands stretched hungrily toward a Nahali throat.

"Bhak!" yelled Maclan. "Don't... !" The Titan's heavy laughter drowned him out; the vast paws closed in a joyous grip. On the instant, Bhak's great body bent and jerked convulsively; he slumped down, the heart burned out of him by the electricity circuited through his hands.

Lehn's gun spoke. There was a reek of ozone, and a Nahali screamed like a stricken reptile. The Venusian cried out in sudden pain, and was silent; Maclan, struggling upright, saw him buried under a pile of scaly bodies. Then a clammy paw touched his own face. He moaned as a numbing shock struck through him, and lapsed into semi-consciousness.

He had vague memories of being alternately carried and towed through warm lakes and across solid ground. He knew dimly that he was dumped roughly under a liha-tree in a clearing where there were thatched huts, and that he was alone.

After what seemed a very long time he sat up, and his surroundings were clear. Even more clear was Thekla's thin dark face peering amusedly down at him. The Martian bared his pointed white teeth, and said, "Hello, traitor." Maclan would have risen and struck him, only that he was weak and dizzy. And then he saw that Thekla had a gun.

His own holster was empty. Maclan got slowly to his feet, raking the white hair out of his eyes, and he said, "You dirty little rat!" Thekla laughed, as a fox might laugh at a baffled hound. "Go ahead and curse me, Maclan. You high-and-mighty renegade! You were right; I'd rather swing on Mars than live another month in this damned sweat-box! And I can laugh at you, Ian Maclan! I'm going back to the deserts and the wine-shops on the Jekkara Low-canal. The Nahali girl didn't mean money; she meant plastic surgery, to give me another face. I'm free. And you're going to die, right here in the filthy mud!"

A slow, grim smile touched Maclan's face, but he said nothing.

"Oh, I understand," said Thekla mockingly. "You fallen swells and your honor!

But you won't die honorably, any more than you've lived that way." Maclan's eyes were contemptuous and untroubled.

The pointed teeth gleamed. "You don't understand, Maclan. Lehn isn't going to die. He's going back to face the music, after his post is wiped out. I don't know what they'll do to him, but it won't be nice. And remember, Maclan, he thinks you sold him out. He thinks you cost him his post, his men, his career: his honor, you scut! Think that over when the swamp-rats go to work on you—they like a little fun now and then—and remember I'm laughing!" Maclan was silent for a long time, hands clenched at his sides, his craggy face carved in dark stone under his dripping white hair. Then he whispered,

"Why?"

Thekla's eyes met his in sudden intense hate. "Because I want to see your damned proud, supercilious noses rubbed in the dirt!" Maclan nodded. His face was strange, as though a curtain had been drawn over it. "Where's Lehn?"

Thekla pointed to the nearest hut. "But it won't do you any good. The rats gave him an overdose, accidentally, of course, and he's out for a long time."

Macian went unsteadily toward the hut through rain. Over his shoulder he heard Thekla's voice: "Don't try anything funny, Maclan. I can shoot you down before you're anywhere near an escape, even if you could find your way back without me. The Nahali are gathering now, all over the swamp; within half an hour they'll march on the fort, and then on to

the plateaus. They'll send my escort before they go, but you and Lehn will have to wait until they come back. You can think of me while you're waiting to die, Maclan; me, going to Lhiva and freedom!"

Maclan didn't answer. The rhythm of the rain changed from a slow drumming to a rapid, vicious hiss; he could see it, almost smoking in the broad leaves of the liha-trees. The drops cut his body like whips, and he realized for the first time that he was stripped to trousers and shirt. Without his protective rubber coverall, Thekla could electrocute him far quicker even than a Nahali, with his service pistol.

The hut, which had been very close, was suddenly far off, so far he could hardly see it. The muddy ground swooped and swayed underfoot. Maclan jerked himself savagely erect. Fever. Any fool who prowled the swamp without proper covering was a sure victim. He looked back at Thekla, safe in helmet and coverall, grinning like a weasel under the shelter of a pod-hung tree-branch. The hut came back into proper perspective. Aching, trembling suddenly with icy cold, he stooped and entered. Lehn lay there, dry but stripped like Maclan, his young face slack in unconsciousness. Maclan raised a hand, let it fall limply back. Lehn was still paralyzed from the shock. It might be hours, even days before he came out of it. Perhaps never, if he wasn't cared for properly. Maclan must have gone a little mad then, from the fever and the shock to his own brain, and Thekla. He took Lehn's shirt in both hands and shook him, as though to beat sense back into his brain, and shouted at him in hoarse savagery.

"All I wanted was to die! That's what I came to the Legion for, to die like a soldier because I couldn't live like an officer. But it had to be honorably, Lehn! Otherwise. . ."

He broke off in a fit of shivering, and his blue eyes glared under his white, tumbled hair. "You robbed me of that, damn you! You and Thekla. You trapped me. You wouldn't even let me die decently. I was

an officer, Lehn, like you. Do you hear me, young fool? I had to choose between two courses, and I chose the wrong one. I lost my whole command. Twenty-five hundred men, dead.

"They might have let me off at the court-martial. It was an honest mistake. But I didn't wait. I resigned. All I wanted was to die like a good soldier. That's why I volunteered. And you tricked me, Lehn! You and Thekla." He let the limp body fall and crouched there, holding his throbbing head in his hands. He knew he was crying, and couldn't stop. His skin burned, and he was cold to the marrow of his bones.

Suddenly he looked at Lehn out of bright, fever-mad eyes. "Very well," he whispered. "I won't die. You can't kill me, you and Thekla, and you go on believing I betrayed you. I'll take you back, you two, and fight it out. I'll keep the Nahali from taking the fort, so you can't say I sold it out. I'll make you believe me!"

From somewhere, far off, he heard Thekla laugh.

Maclan huddled there for some time, his brain whirling. Through the rain-beat and the fever-mist in his head and the alternate burning and freezing that racked his body, certain truths shot at him like stones from a sling. Thekla had a gun that shot a stream of electricity. A gun designed for Nahali, whose nervous systems were built to carry a certain load and no more, like any set of wires. The low frequency discharge was strong enough to kill a normal man only under ideal conditions; and these conditions were uniquely ideal. Wet clothes, wet skin, wet ground, even the air saturated. Then there were metal and rubber. Metal in his belt, in Lehn's belt; metal mesh, because the damp air rotted everything else. Rubber on his feet, on Lehn's feet. Rubber was insulation. Metal was a conductor. Maclan realized with part of his mind that he must be mad to do what he planned to do. But he went to work just the same.

Ten minutes later he left the hut and crossed the soaking clearing in the downpour. Thekla had left the liha-tree for a hut directly opposite Lehn's; he rose warily in the doorway, gun ready. His sly black eyes took in Maclan's wild blue gaze, the fever spots burning on his lean cheekbones, and he smiled.

"Get on back to the hut," he said. "Be a pity if you die before the Nahali have a chance to try electro-therapy."

Maclan didn't pause. His right arm was hidden behind his back. Thekla's jaw tightened. "Get back or I'll kill you!"

Maclan's boots sucked in the mud. The beating rain streamed from his white hair, over his craggy face and gaunt shoulders. And he didn't hesitate. Thekla's pointed teeth gleamed in a sudden snarl. His thumb snapped the trigger; a bolt of blue flame hissed toward the striding Scot. Maclan's right hand shot out in the instant the gun spoke. One of Lehn's rubber boots cased his arm almost to the shoulder, and around the ankle of it a length of metal was made fast; two mesh belts linked together. The spitting blue fire was gathered to the metal circle, shot down the coupled lengths, and died in the ground.

The pistol sputtered out as a coil fused. Thekla cursed and flung it at Maclan's head. The Scot dodged it, and broke into a run, dropping Lehn's boot that his hands might be free to grapple.

Thekla fought like a low-canal rat, but Maclan was bigger and beyond himself with the first madness of fever. He beat the little Martian down and bound him with his own belt, and then went looking for his clothes and gun. He found them, with Lehn's, in the hut next door. His belt pouch yielded quinine; he gulped a large dose and felt better. After he had dressed, he went and wrestled Lehn into his coverall and helmet and dragged him out beside Thekla, who was groaning back

to consciousness in the mud. Looking up, Maclan saw three Nahali men watching him warily out of scarlet eyes as they slunk toward him.

Thekla's escort. And it was a near thing. Twice clammy paws seared his face before he sent them writhing down into the mud, jerking as the overload beat through their nervous systems. Triangular mouths gaped in noseless faces, hand-like paws tore convulsively at scaly breastplates, and Maclan, as he watched them die, said calmly: "There will be hundreds of them storming the fort. My gun won't be enough. But somehow I've got to stop them." No answer now. He shrugged and kicked Thekla erect. "Back to the fort, scut," he ordered, and laughed. The linked belts were fastened now around Thekla's neck, the other end hooked to the muzzle of Maclan's gun, so that the slightest rough pull would discharge it. "What if I stumble?" Thekla snarled, and Maclan answered, "You'd better not!"

Lehn was big and heavy, but somehow Maclan got him across his shoulders. And they started off.

The fringe of the swamp was in sight when Maclan's brain became momentarily lucid. Another dose of quinine drove the mists back, so that the fort, some fifty yards away, assumed its proper focus. Maclan dropped Lehn on his back in the mud and stood looking, his hand ready on his gun.

The village swarmed with swamp-rats in the slow, watery dawn. They were ranged in a solid mass along the edges of the moat, and the fort's guns were silent. Maclan wondered why, until he saw that the dam that furnished power for the turbine had been broken down.

Thekla laughed silently. "My idea, Maclan. The Nahali would never have thought of it themselves. They can't drown, you know. I showed them how to sneak into the reservoir, right under the fort's guns, and stay under water, loosening the stones around the spillway. The

pressure did the rest. Now there's no power for the big guns, nor the conductor rods in the moat." He turned feral black eyes on Maclan. "You've made a fool of yourself. You can't stop those swamp-rats from tearing the fort apart. You can't stop me from getting away, after they're through. You can't stop Lehn from thinking what he does. You haven't changed anything by these damned heroics!"

"Heroics!" said Maclan hoarsely, and laughed. "Maybe." With sudden viciousness he threw the end of the linked belts over a low liha-branch, so that Thekla had to stand on tiptoe to keep from strangling. Then, staring blindly at the beleaguered fort, he tried to beat sense out of his throbbing head. "There was something," he whispered. "Something I was saying back in the swamp. Something my mind was trying to tell me, only I was delirious. What was it, Thekla?" The Martian was silent, the bloody grin set on his dark face. Maclan took him by the shoulders and shook him. "What was it?" Thekla choked and struggled as the metal halter tightened. "Nothing, you fool!

Nothing but Nahali and liha-trees."

"Liha-trees!" Maclan's fever-bright eyes went to the great green pollen-pods hung among the broad leaves. He shivered, partly with chill, partly with exultation. And he began like a madman to strip Lehn and Thekla of their rubber coveralls.

Lehn's, because it was larger, he tented over two low branches. Thekla's he spread on the ground beneath. Then he tore down pod after pod from the liha-tree, breaking open the shells under the shelter of the improvised tent, pouring out the green powder on the groundcloth.

When he had a two-foot pile, he stood back and fired a bolt of electricity into the heart of it.

Thick, oily black smoke poured up, slowly at first, then faster and faster as the fire took hold. A sluggish breeze was blowing out of the swamp, drawn by the cooler uplands beyond the fort; it took the smoke and sent it rolling toward the packed and struggling mass on the earthworks. Out on the battlefield, Nahali stiffened suddenly, fell tearing convulsively at their bodies. The beating rain washed the soot down onto them harder and harder, streaked it away, left a dull film over the reptilian skins, the scaly breastplates. More and more of them fell as the smoke rolled thicker, fed by the blackened madman under the liha-tree, until only Legionnaires were left standing in its path, staring dumbly at the stricken swamp-rats. The squirming bodies stilled in death. Hundreds more, out on the edges of the smoke, seeing their comrades die, fled back into the swamp. The earthworks were cleared. Ian Maclan gave one wild shout that carried clear to the fort. Then he collapsed, crouched shivering beside the unconscious Lehn, babbling incoherently.

Thekla, strained on tiptoe under the tree-branch, had stopped smiling. The fever-mists rolled away at last. Maclan woke to see Lehn's pink young face, rather less pink than usual, bending over him.

Lehn's hand came out awkwardly. "I'm sorry, Maclan. Thekla told me; I made him. I should have known." His grey eyes were ashamed. Maclan smiled and gripped his hand with what strength the fever had left him.

"My own fault, boy. Forget it."

Lehn sat down on the bed. "What did you do to the swamp-rats?" he demanded eagerly. "They all have a coating as though they'd been dipped in paraffin!" Maclan chuckled. "In a way, they were. You know how they breathe; each skin cell forming a miniature electrolysis plant to extract oxygen from water. Well, it extracts hydrogen too, naturally, and the hydrogen is continually being given off, just as we give off

carbon dioxide.

"Black smoke means soot, soot means carbon. Carbon plus hydrogen forms various waxy hydrocarbons. Wax is impervious to both water and air. So when the oily soot from the smoke united with the hydrogen exuded from the Nahali's bodies, it sealed away the life-giving water from the skin-cells. They literally smothered to death, like an Earthly ant doused with powder." Lehn nodded. He was quiet for a long time, his eyes on the sickbay's well-scrubbed floor. At length, he said:

"My offer still goes, Maclan. Officer's examinations. One mistake, an honest one, shouldn't rob you of your life. You don't even know that it would have made any difference if your decision had been the other way. Perhaps there was no way out."

Maclan's white head nodded on the pillow.

"Perhaps I will, Lehn. Something Thekla said set me thinking. He said he'd rather die on Mars than live another month in exile. I'm an exile too, Lehn, in a different way. Yes, I think I'll try it. And if I fail again--" he shrugged and smiled--"there are always Nahali." It seemed for a minute after that as though he had gone to sleep. Then he murmured, so low that Lehn had to bend down to hear him:

"Thekla will hang after the court-martial. Can you see that they take him back to Mars, first?"

Terror Out Of Space

Lundy was flying the aero-space convertible by himself. He'd been doing it for a long time. So long that the bottom half of him was dead to the toes and the top half even deader, except for two separate aches like ulcerated teeth; one in his back, one in his head.

Thick pearly-grey Venusian sky went past the speeding flier in streamers of torn cloud. The rockets throbbed and pounded. Instruments jerked erratically under the swirl of magnetic currents that makes the Venusian atmosphere such a swell place for pilots to go nuts in.

Jackie Smith was still out cold in the copilot's seat. From in back, beyond the closed door to the tiny inner cabin, Lundy could hear Farrell screaming and fighting.

He'd been screaming a long time. Ever since the shot of avertin Lundy had given him after he was taken had begun to wear thin. Fighting the straps and screaming, a hoarse jarring sound with no sense in it. Screaming to be free, because of it.

Somewhere inside of Lundy, inside the rumpled, sweat-soaked black uniform of the Tri-World Police, Special Branch, and the five-foot-six of thick springy muscle under it, there was a knot. It was a large knot, and it was very, very cold in spite of the sweltering heat in the cabin, and it had a nasty habit of yanking itself tight every few minutes, causing Lundy to jerk and sweat as though he'd been spiked.

Lundy didn't like that cold tight knot in his belly. It meant he was afraid. He'd been afraid before, plenty of times, and he wasn't

ashamed of it. But right now he needed all the brains and guts he had to get It back to Special headquarters at Vhia, and he didn't want to have to fight himself, too. Fear can screw things for you. It can make you weak when you need to be strong, if you're going to go on living. You, and the two other guys depending on you.

Lundy hoped he could keep from getting too much afraid, and too tired--because It was sitting back there in its little strongbox in the safe, waiting for somebody to crack.

Farrell was cracked wide open, of course, but he was tied down. Jackie Smith had begun to show signs before he passed out, so that Lundy had kept one hand over the anesthetic needle gun bolstered on the side of his chair. And Lundy thought,

The hell of it is, you don't know when It starts to work on you. There's no set pattern, or if there is we don't know it. Maybe right now the readings I see on those dials aren't there at all....

Down below the torn grey clouds he could see occasional small patches of ocean. The black, still, tideless water of Venus, that covers so many secrets of the planet's past.

It didn't help Lundy any. It could be right or wrong, depending on what part of the ocean it was--and there was no way to tell. He hoped nothing would happen to the motors. A guy could get awfully wet, out in the middle of that still black water.

Farrell went on screaming. His throat seemed to be lined with impervium. Screaming and fighting the straps, because It was locked up and calling for help.

"I'm cold," he said. "Hi, Midget." Lundy turned his head. Normally he had a round, fresh, merry face, with bright dark eyes and a white,

small-boyish grin. Now he looked like something the waiter had swept out from under a table at four A.M. on New Year's Day.

"You're cold," he said sourly. He licked sweat off his lips. "Oh, fine! That was all I needed."

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, to joggle himself. His black tunic was open over his chest, showing the white strapping of bandages, and his left hand was thrust in over the locked top of the tunic's zipper. He was a big man, not any older than Lundy, with big, ugly, pleasant features, a shock of coarse pale hair, and a skin like old leather.

"On Mercury, where I was born," he said, "the climate is suitable for human beings. You Old-World pantywaists..." He broke off, turned white under the leathery burn, and said through set teeth, "Oi! Farrell sure did a good job on me."

"You'll live," said Lundy. He tried not to think about how nearly both he and Smith had come to not living. Farrell had put up one hell of a fight, when they caught up with him in a native village high up in the Mountains of White Cloud.

Lundy still felt sick about that. The bull-meat, the hard boys, you didn't mind kicking around. But Farrell wasn't that kind. He was just a nice guy that got trapped by something too big for him.

A nice guy, crazy blind in love with somebody that didn't exist. A decent hardworking guy with a wife and two kids who'd lost his mind, heart, and soul to a Thing from outer space, so that he was willing to kill to protect it. Oh, hell! thought Lundy wearily, wont he ever stop screaming?

The rockets beat and thundered. The torn grey sky whipped past.

Jackie Smith sat rigid, with closed eyes, white around the lips and breathing in shallow, careful gasps. And Vhia still a long way off.

Maybe farther off than he knew. Maybe he wasn't heading toward Vhia at all. Maybe It was working on him, and he'd never know it till he crashed. The cold knot tightened in his belly like a cold blade stabbing. Lundy cursed. Thinking things like that was a sure way to punch your ticket right straight to blazes.

But you couldn't help thinking, about It. The Thing you had caught in a special net of tight-woven metal mesh, aiming at something Farrell could see but you couldn't. The Thing you had forced into the glassite box and covered up with a black cloth, because you had been warned not to look at It. Lundy's hands tingled and burned, not unpleasantly. He could still feel the small savage Thing fighting him, hidden in the net. It had felt vaguely cylindrical, and terribly alive.

Life. Life from outer space, swept out of a cloud of cosmic dust by the gravitic pull of Venus. Since Venus had hit the cloud there had been a wave of strange madness on the planet. Madness like Farrell's, that had led to murder, and some things even worse.

Scientists had some ideas about that life from Out There. They'd had a lucky break and found one of The Things, dead, and there were vague stories going around of a crystalline-appearing substance that wasn't really crystal, about three inches long and magnificently etched and fluted, and supplied with some odd little gadgets nobody would venture an opinion about. But the Thing didn't do them much good, dead. They had to have one alive, if they were going to find out what made it tick and learn how to put a stop to what the telecommentators had chosen to call The Madness from Beyond, or The Vampire Lure.

One thing about it everybody knew. The guys who suddenly went sluggish and charged off the rails all made it clear that they had met the

ultimate Dream Woman of all women and all dreams. Nobody else could see her, but that didn't bother them any. They saw her, and she was--She. And her eyes were always veiled.

And She was a whiz at hypnosis and mind-control. That's why She, or It, hadn't been caught alive before. Not before Lundy and Smith, with every scientific aid Special could give them, had tracked down Farrell and managed to get the breaks.

The breaks. Plain fool luck. Lundy moved his throbbing head stiffly on his aching neck, blinked sweat out of his bloodshot eyes, and wished to hell he was home in bed.

Jackie Smith said suddenly, "Midget, I'm cold. Get me a blanket." Lundy looked at him. His pale green eyes were half open, but not as though they saw anything. He was shivering.

"I can't leave the controls, Jackie."

"Nuts. I've got one hand. I can hang onto this lousy tin fish that long." Lundy scowled. He knew Smith wasn't kidding about the cold. The temperatures on Mercury made the first-generation colonists sensitive to anything below the range of an electric furnace. With the wound and all, Smith might wind up with pneumonia if he wasn't covered.

"Okay." Lundy reached out and closed the switch marked A. "But I'll let Mike do the flying. He can probably last five minutes before he blows his guts out."

Iron Mike was just a patty cake when it came to Venusian atmosphere flying. The constant magnetic compensation heated the robot coils to the fusing point in practically no time at all.

Lundy thought fleetingly that it was nice to know there were still a couple of things men could do better than machinery.

He got up, feeling like something that had stood outside rusting for four hundred years or so. Smith didn't turn his head. Lundy growled at him.

"Next time, sonny, you wear your long woolen undies and let me alone!" Then he stopped. The knot jerked tight in his stomach. Cold sweat needled him, and his nerves stung in a swift rush of fire. Farrell had quit screaming.

There was silence in the ship. Nothing touched it. The rockets were outside it and didn't matter. Even Jackie Smith's careful breathing had stopped. Lundy went forward slowly, toward the door. Two steps.

It opened. Lundy stopped again, quite still.

Farrell was standing in the opening. A nice guy with a wife and two kids. His face still looked like that, but the eyes in it were not sane, nor even human. Lundy had tied him down to the bunk with four heavy straps. Breast, belly, thighs, and feet. The marks of them were on Farrell. They were cut into his shirt and pants, into his flesh and sinew, deep enough to show his bare white ribs. There was blood. A lot of blood. Farrell didn't mind.

"I broke the straps," he said. He smiled at Lundy. "She called me and I broke the straps."

He started to walk to the safe in the corner of the cabin. Lundy gagged and pulled himself up out of a cold black cloud and got his feet to moving. Jackie Smith said quietly, "Hold it, Midget. She doesn't like it there in the safe. She's cold and she wants to come out."

Lundy looked over his shoulder. Smith was hunched around in his seat, holding the needle-gun from Lundy's holster on the pilot's chair. His pale green eyes had a distant, dreamy glow, but Lundy knew better than to trust it. He said, without inflection, "You've seen her."

"No. No, but--I've heard her." Smith's heavy lips twitched and parted. The breath sucked through between them, hoarse and slow. Farrell went down on his knees beside the safe. He put his hands on its blank and gleaming face and turned to Lundy. He was crying.

"Open it. You've got to open it. She wants to come out. She's frightened." Jackie Smith raised the gun, a fraction of an inch. "Open it, Midget." he whispered. "She's cold in there."

Lundy stood still. The sweat ran on him and he was colder than a frog's belly in the rain; and for no reason at all he said thickly,

"No. She's hot. She can't breathe in there. She's hot." Then he jerked his head up and yelled. He came around to face Smith, unsteady but fast, and started for him.

Smith's ugly face twisted as though he might be going to cry. "Midget! I don't want to shoot you. Open the safe!"

Lundy said, "You damned fool," with no voice at all, and went on. Smith hit the firing stud.

The anesthetic needles hit Lundy across the chest. They didn't hurt much. Just a stinging prick. He kept going. No reason. It was just something he seemed to be doing at the time.

Behind him Farrell whimpered once like a puppy and lay down across the little safe. He didn't move again. Lundy got down on his hands and knees and reached in a vague sort of way for the controls.

Jackie Smith watched him with dazed green eyes.

Quite suddenly, Iron Mike blew his guts out. The control panel let go a burst of blue flame. The glare and heat of it knocked Lundy backward. Things hissed and snarled and ran together, and the convertible began to dance like a leaf in a gale. The automatic safety cut the rockets dead. The ship began to fall.

Smith said something that sounded like She and folded up his chair. Lundy rubbed his hand across his face. The lines of it were blurred and stupid. His dark eyes had no sense in them.

He began to crawl over the lurching floor toward the safe. The clouds outside ripped and tore across the ship's nose, and presently only water showed. Black, still, tideless water dotted with little islands of floating weed that stirred and slithered with a life of their own. Black water, rushing up.

Lundy didn't care. He crawled through Farrell's blood, and he didn't care about that, either. He pushed Farrell's body back against the cabin wall and began to scratch at the shiny door, making noises like a hound shut out and not happy about it.

The ship hit the water with a terrific smack. Spray geysered up, dead white against the black sea, fell back, and closed in. Presently even the ripples went away.

Dark green weed-islands twined sinuously upon themselves, a flock of small seadragons flapped their jeweled wings down and began to fish, and none of them cared at all about the ship sinking away under them. Not even Lundy cared, out cold in the space-tight cabin, with his body wedged up against the safe and tears drying with the sweat on his stubbled cheeks.

The first thing Lundy knew about was the stillness. A dead feeling, as though everything in creation had stopped breathing.

The second thing was his body. It hurt, like hell, and it was hot, and it didn't like the thick, foul air it was getting. Lundy pushed himself into a sitting position and tried to boot his brain into action. It was hard work, because someone had split his head open four ways with an axe. It wasn't really dark in the cabin. A wavering silver glow almost like moonlight came in through the ports. Lundy could see pretty well. He could see Farrell's body sprawled out on the floor, and a mess of junk that had once been equipment.

He could see the safe.

He looked at it a long time. There wasn't much to look at. Just an open safe with nothing in it, and a piece of black cloth dropped on the floor.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh, my Lord!" Everything hit him at once then. There wasn't much in him but his stomach, and that was tied down. But it tried hard to come up. Presently the spasms stopped, and then Lundy heard the knocking.

It wasn't very loud. It had a slow, easy rhythm, as though the knocker had a lot of time and didn't care when he got in. It came from the airlock panel. Lundy got up. Slowly, cold as a toad's belly and as white. His lips drew back from his teeth and stayed there, frozen.

The knocking kept on. A sleepy kind of sound. The guy outside could afford to wait. Sometime that locked door was going to open, and he could wait. He wasn't in a hurry. He would never be in a hurry.

Lundy looked all around the cabin. He didn't speak. He looked sideways out of the port. There was water out there. The black sea-water of Venus; clear and black, like deep night.

There was level sand spreading away from the ship. The silver light came up out of it. Some kind of phosphorescence, as bright as moonlight and faintly tinged with green.

Black sea-water. Silver sand. The guy kept on knocking at the door. Slow and easy. Patient. One--two. One--two. Just off beat with Lundy's heart. Lundy went to the inner cabin, walking steadily. He looked around carefully and then went back. He stopped by the lock panel.

"Okay, Jackie," he said. "In a minute. In a minute, boy." Then he turned and went very fast to the port locker and got a quart bottle out of its shock cradle, and raised it. It took both hands. After a while he dropped the bottle and stood still, not looking at anything, until he stopped shaking. Then he pulled his vac-suit down off its hook and climbed into it. His face was grey and quite blank. He took all the oxygen cylinders he could carry, emergency rations, and all the Benzedrine in the medicine kit. He put the limit dose of the stimulant down on top of the brandy before he locked his helmet. He didn't bother with the needle gun. He took the two Service blasters--his own, and Smith's. The gentle knocking didn't stop.

He stood for a moment looking at the open safe and the black cloth dropped beside it. Something cruel came into his face. A tightness, a twitching and setting of the muscles, and a terrible look of patience. Being under water wouldn't bother a Thing from outer space. He reached up and lifted the net of tight-woven metal-mesh down off its hook and fastened it on his belt. Then he walked over and opened the airlock door. Black water swirled in around his weighted boots, and then the door opened wide and Jackie Smith came in.

He'd been waiting in the flooded lock-chamber. Kicking his boots against the inner door, easy, with the slow breathing of the sea. Now the water pushed his feet down and held him upright from behind, so he could walk in and stand looking at Lundy. A big blond man with green eyes, and white bandages strapped under his open black tunic, looking at Lundy. Not long. Only for a second. But long enough.

Lundy stopped himself after the third scream. He had to, because he knew if he screamed again he'd never stop. By that time the black water had pushed Jackie Smith away, over to the opposite wall, and covered his face.

"Oh, Lord!" whispered Lundy. "Oh, Lord, what did he see before he drowned?" No one answered. The black water pushed at Lundy, rising high around him, trying to take him over to Jackie Smith. Lundy's mouth began to twitch. He shut his teeth on his lower lip, holding it, holding his throat. He began to run, clumsily, fighting the water, and then he stopped that, too. He walked, not looking behind him, out into the flooded lock. The door slid shut behind him, automatically.

He walked out across the firm green-silver sand, swallowing the blood that ran in his mouth and choked him.

He didn't hurry. He was going to be walking for a long, long time. From the position of the ship when it fell he ought to be able to make it to the coast--unless it had been working on him so the figures on the dials hadn't been there at all.

He checked his direction, adjusted the pressure-control in his vac-suit, and plodded on in the eerie undersea moonlight. It wasn't hard going. If he didn't hit a deep somewhere, or meet something too big to handle, or furnish a meal for some species of hungry Venus-weed,

he ought to live to face up to the Old Man at H.Q. and tell him two men were dead, the ship lost, and the job messed to hell and gone.

It was beautiful down there. Like the dream-worlds you see when you're doped or delirious. The phosphorescence rose up into the black water and danced there in wavering whorls of cold fire. Fish, queer gaudy little things with jeweled eyes, flicked past Lundy in darts of sudden color, and there were great stands of weed like young forests, spangling the dark water and the phosphorescence glow with huge burning spots of blue and purple and green and silver.

Flowers. Lundy got too close to some of them once. They reached out and opened round mouths full of spines and sucked at him hungrily. The fish gave them a wide berth. After that, so did Lundy.

He hadn't been walking more than half an hour when he hit the road. It was a perfectly good road, running straight across the sand. Here and there it was cracked, with some of the huge square blocks pushed up or tipped aside, but it was still a good road, going somewhere.

Lundy stood looking at it with cold prickles running up and down his spine. He'd heard about things like this. Nobody knew an awful lot about Venus yet. It was a young, tough, be-damned-to-you planet, and it was apt to give the snoopy scientific guys a good swift boot in their store teeth. But even a young planet has a long past, and stories get around. Legends, songs, folk tale. It was pretty well accepted that a lot of Venus that was under water now hadn't been once, and vice versa. The old girl had her little whimsies while doing the preliminary mock-up of her permanent face. So once upon a time this road had crossed a plain under a hot pearl-grey sky, going somewhere. Taking caravans from the seacoast, probably. Bales of spices and spider-silk and casks of vakhi from the Nahali canebrakes, and silver-haired slavegirls from the high lands of the Cloud People, going along under

sultry green liha-trees to be sold.

Now it crossed a plain of glowing sand under still black water. The only trees that shadowed it were tall weeds with brilliant, hungry flowers, and the only creatures that followed it were little fish with jeweled eyes. But it was still there, still ready, still going somewhere.

It was headed the same way Lundy was. It must have made a bend somewhere and turned to meet him. Lundy licked cold sweat off his lips and stepped out on it.

He stepped slow and careful, like a man coming alone down the aisle of an empty church.

He walked on the road for a long time. The weeds crowded in thicker along its edges. It seemed to run right through a dense forest of them that spread away as far as Lundy could see on either side. He was glad of the road. It was wide, and if he stayed in the middle of it the flowers couldn't reach him. It got darker outside, because of the weeds covering the sand. Whatever made the phosphorescence didn't like being crowded that way, and pretty soon it was so dark that Lundy had to switch on the light in the top of his helmet. In the edges of the beam he could see the weed fronds moving lazily with the slow breathing of the sea.

The flowers were brighter here. They hung like lamps in the black water, burning with a light that seemed to come out of themselves. Sullen reds and angry yellows, and coldly vicious blues.

Lundy didn't like them.

The weeds grew in thicker and closer. They bulged out their roots, in over the stone edges. The flowers opened their bright hungry mouths and yearned at Lundy, reaching.

Reaching. Not quite touching. Not yet.

He was tired. The brandy and the Benzedrine began to die in him. He changed his oxygen cylinder. That helped, but not much. He took more dope, but he was afraid to go heavy on it lest he drive his heart too hard. His legs turned numb.

He hadn't slept for a long time. Tracking Farrell hadn't been any breeze, and taking him--and It--had been plain and fancy hell. Lundy was only human. He was tired. Bushed. Cooked. Beat to the socks.

He sat down and rested a while, turning off his light to save the battery. The flowers watched him, glowing in the dark. He closed his eyes, but he could still feel them, watching and waiting.

After a minute or two he got up and went on.

The weeds grew thicker, and taller, and heavier with flowers. More Benzedrine, and damn the heart. The helmet light cut a cold white tunnel through the blackness. He followed it, walking faster. Weed fronds met and interlaced high above him, closing him in. Flowers bent inward, downward. Their petals almost brushed him. Fleshy petals, hungry and alive. He started to run, over the wheel-ruts and the worn hollows of the road that still went somewhere, under the black sea.

Lundy ran clumsily for a long time between the dark and pressing walls. The flowers got closer. They got close enough to catch his vac-suit, like hands grasping and slipping and grasping again. He began using the blaster. He burned off a lot of them that way. They didn't like it. They began swaying in from their roots and down from the laced ceiling over his head. They hurt. They were angry. Lundy ran, sobbing without tears. The road did him in. It crossed him up, suddenly,

without warning. It ran along smoothly under the tunnel of weeds, and then it was a broken, jumbled mass of huge stone blocks, tipped up and thrown around like something a giant's kid got tired of playing with.

And the weeds had found places to stand in between them. Lundy tripped and fell, cracking his head against the back of his helmet. For a moment all he could see was bright light flashing. Then that stopped, and he realized he must have jarred a connection loose somewhere because his own light was out.

He began to crawl over a great tilted block. The flowers burned bright in the darkness. Bright and close. Very close. Lundy opened his mouth. Nothing came out but a hoarse animal whimper. He was still holding a blaster. He fired it off a couple of times, and then he was on top of the block, lying flat on his belly.

He knew it was the end of the line, because he couldn't move any more. The bright flowers came down through the dark. Lundy lay watching them. His face was quite blank. His dark eyes held a stubborn hatred, but nothing else. He watched the flowers fasten on his vac-suit and start working. Then, from up ahead, through the dark close tunnel of the weeds, he saw the light. It flared out suddenly, like lightning. A sheet of hot, bright gold cracking out like a whipped banner, lighting the end of the road. Lighting the city, and the little procession coming out of it. Lundy didn't believe any of it. He was half dead already, with his mind floating free of his body and beginning to be wrapped up in dark clouds. He watched what he saw incuriously.

The golden light died down, and then flared out twice more, rhythmically. The road ran smooth again beyond the end of the tunnel, straight across a narrow plain. Beyond that, the city rose.

Lundy couldn't see much of it, because of the weeds. But it seemed

to be a big city. There was a wall around it, of green marble veined with dusky rose, the edges worn round by centuries of water. There were broad gates of pure untarnished gold, standing open on golden pintles. Beyond them was a vast square paved in cloud-grey quartz, and the buildings rose around it like the castles Lundy remembered from Earth and his childhood, when there were clouds of a certain kind at sunset.

That's what the whole place looked like, under the flaring golden light. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset. Remote, dreaming in beauty, with the black water drawn across it like a veil—something never destroyed because it never existed.

The creatures who came from between the golden gates and down the road were like tiny wisps of those clouds, torn free by some cold wandering breeze and driven away from the light.

They came drifting toward Lundy. They didn't seem to be moving fast, but they must have been because quite suddenly they were among the weeds. There were a lot of them; maybe forty or fifty. They seemed to be between three and four feet tall, and they were all the same sad, blue-grey, twilight color. Lundy couldn't see what they were. They were vaguely man-shaped, and vaguely finny, and something that was more than vaguely something else, only he couldn't place it.

He was suddenly beyond caring. The dull black curtain around his mind got a hole in it, and fear came shrieking through it. He could feel the working and pulling of his vac-suit where the flowers were chewing on it as though it were his own skin.

He could feel sweat running cold on his body. In a minute that would be sea water running, and then...

Lundy began to fight. His lips peeled back off his teeth, but he didn't make any noise except his heavy breathing. He fought the flowers, partly with the blaster, partly with brute strength. No science, no thought. Just the last blind struggle of an animal that didn't want to die. The flowers held him. They smothered him, crushed him down, wrapped him in lovely burning petals of destruction. He seared a lot of them, but there were always more. Lundy didn't fight long.

He lay on his back, knees drawn up a little toward a rigid, knotted belly, blind with sweat, his heart kicking him like a logger's boot. Cold, tense--waiting.

And then the flowers went away.

They didn't want to. They let go reluctantly, drawing back and snarling like cats robbed of a fat mouse, making small hungry feints at him. But they went. Lundy came nearer fanning off for keeps than he ever had. Reaction wrung him out like a wet bar-rag. His heart quit beating; his body jerked like something on a string.

Then, through a mist that might have been sweat, or tears, on the edge of the Hereafter, he saw the little blue-grey people looking down at him. They hovered in a cloud above him, holding place with membranes as fluttering and delicate as bird-calls on a windy day. The membranes ran between arm-and leg-members, both of which had thin flat swimming-webs. There were suckers on the legs, about where the heels would have been if they'd had feet. Their bodies were slender and supple, and definitely feminine without having any of the usual human characteristics. They were beautiful. They weren't like anything Lundy had even seen before, or even dreamed about, but they were beautiful.

They had faces. Queer little pixie things without noses. Their noses were round and tiny and rather sweet, but their eyes were their

dominant feature. Huge round golden eyes with pupils of deep brown. Soft eyes, gentle, inquiring, it made Lundy feel like crying, and so scared it made him mad. The flowers kept weaving around hopefully. When one got too close to Lundy, one of the little people would slap it gently, the way you would a pet dog, and shoo it away.

"Do you live?"

III

Lundy wasn't surprised by the telepathic voice. Thought-communication was commoner than speech and a lot simpler in many places on the inhabited worlds. Special gave its men a thorough training in it.

"I live, thanks to you."

There was something in the quality of the brain he touched that puzzled him. It was like nothing he'd ever met before.

He got to his feet, not very steadily. "You came just in time. How did you know I was here?"

"Your fear-thoughts carried to us. We know what it is to be afraid. So we came."

"There's nothing I can say but 'Thank you!'"

"But of course we helped! Why not? You needn't thank us." Lundy looked at the flowers burning sullenly in the gloom. "How is it you can boss them around? Why don't they..."

"But they're not cannibals! Not like--The Others." There was pure cold dread in that last thought.

"Cannibals." Lundy looked up at the cloud of dainty blue-grey woman-things. His skin got cold and a size too small for him.

Their soft golden eyes smiled down at him. "We're different from you, yes. Just as we're different from the fish. What is your thought? Bright things growing--weed--yes, they're kin to us."

Kin, thought Lundy. Yeah. About like we are to the animals. Plants. Living plants were no novelty on Venus. Why not plants with thinking minds? Plants that carried their roots along with them, and watched you with sad soft eyes.

"Let's get out of here," said Lundy.

They went down along the dark tunnel and out onto the road, and the flowers yearned like hungry dogs after Lundy but didn't touch him. He started out across the narrow plain, with the plant-women drifting cloudlike around him. Seaweed. Little bits of kelp that could talk to you. It made Lundy feel queer. The city made him feel queer, too. It was dark when he first saw it from the plain, with only the moonlight glow of the sand to touch it. It was a big city, stretching away behind its barrier wall. Big and silent and very old, waiting there at the end of its road.

It was curiously more real in the dim light. Lundy lost trace of the water for a moment. It was like walking toward a sleeping city in the moonlight, feeling the secretive, faintly hostile strength of it laired and leashed, until dawn

Only there would never be a dawn for this city. Never, any more. Lundy wanted suddenly to run away.

"Don't be afraid. We live there. It's safe." Lundy shook his head irritably. Quite suddenly the brilliant light flared out again, three

regular flashes. It seemed to come from somewhere to the right, out of a range of undersea mountains. Lundy felt a faint trembling of the sand. A volcanic fissure, probably, opened when the sand sank. The golden light changed the city again. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset—a place where you could set your boots down on a dream.

When he went in through the gates he was awed, but not afraid. And then, while he stood in the square looking up at the great dim buildings, the thought came drifting down to him out of the cloud of little woman-things.

"It was safe. It was happy—before She came." After a long moment Lundy said, "She?"

"We haven't seen her. But our mates have. She came a little while ago and walked through the streets, and all our mates left us to follow her. They say she's beautiful beyond any of us, and..."

"And her eyes are hidden, and they have to see them. They have to look into her eyes or go crazy, so they follow her."

The sad little blue-grey cloud stirred in the dark water. Golden eyes looked down at him.

"How did you know? Do you follow her, too?" Lundy took a deep, slow breath. The palms of his hands were wet. "Yes. Yes, I followed her, too."

"We feel your thought...." They came down close around him. Their delicate membranes fluttered like fairy wings. Their golden eyes were huge and soft and pleading.

"Can you help us? Can you bring our mates back safe? They've forgotten everything. If The Others should come..."

"The Others?"

Lundy's brain was drowned in stark and terrible fear. Pictures came through it. Vague gigantic dreams of nightmare...

"They come, riding the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy." The little woman-things were shaken suddenly like leaves in a gust of wind.

"We hide from them in the buildings. We can keep them out, away from our seed and the little new ones. But our mates have forgotten. If The Others come while they follow Her, outside and away from safety, they'll all be killed. We'll be left alone, and there'll be no more seed for us, and no more little new ones."

They pressed in close around him, touching him with their small blue-grey forefins.

"Can you help us? Oh, can you help us?"

Lundy closed his eyes. His mouth twitched and set. When he opened his eyes again they were hard as agates.

"I'll help you," he said, "or die trying." It was dark in the great square, with only the pale sand-glow seeping through the gates. For a moment the little blue-grey woman-creatures clung around him, not moving, except as the whole mass of them swayed slightly with the slow rhythm of the sea.

Then they burst away from him, outward, in a wild surge of hope--and Lundy stood with his mouth open, staring.

They weren't blue-grey any longer. They glowed suddenly, their wings and their dainty, supple bodies, a warm soft green that had a vibrant

pulse of life behind it. And they blossomed.

The long, slender, living petals must have been retracted, like the fronds of a touch-me-not, while they wore the sad blue-grey. Now they broke out like coronals of flame around their small heads.

Blue and scarlet and gold, poppy-red and violet and flame, silver-white and warm pink like a morning cloud, streaming in the black water. Streaming from small green bodies that rolled and rumbled high up against the dark, dreaming buildings like the butterflies that had danced there before the sunlight was lost forever.

Quite suddenly, then, they stopped. They drifted motionless in the water, and their colors dimmed. Lundy said, "Where are they?"

"Deep in the city, beyond our buildings here--in the streets where only the curious young ones ever go. Oh, bring them back! Please bring them back!" He left them hovering in the great dark square and went on into the city. He walked down broad paved streets channeled with wheel-ruts and hollowed by generations of sandaled feet. The great water-worn buildings lifted up on either side, lighted by the erratic glare of the distant fissure. The window-openings, typical of most Venusian architecture, were covered by grilles of marble and semi-precious stone, intricately hand-pierced like bits of jewelry. The great golden doors stood open on their uncorroded hinges. Through them Lundy could watch the life of the little plant-people being lived.

In some of the buildings the lower floor had been covered with sand. Plant-women hovered protectively over them, brushing the sand smooth where the water disturbed it. Lundy guessed that these were seed beds. In other places there were whole colonies of tiny flower-things still rooted in the sand; a pale spring haze of green in the dimness. They sat in placid rows, nodding their pastel baby coronals and playing solemnly with bits of bright weed and colored stones.

Here, too, the plant-women watched and guarded lovingly.

Several times Lundy saw groups of young plantlings, grown free of the sand, being taught to swim by the woman-creatures, tumbling in the black water like bright petals on a spring wind.

All the women were the same sad blue-grey, with their blossoms hidden. They'd stay that way, unless he, Lundy, could finish the job Special had sent him to do. The job he hadn't been quite big enough to handle up to now. Farrell, with the flesh flayed off his bones, and not feeling it because She was all he could think of. Jackie Smith, drowned in a flooded lock because She wanted to be free and he had helped her.

Was this Lundy guy so much bigger than Farrell and Smith, and all the other men who had gone crazy over Her? Big enough to catch The Vampire Lure in a net and keep it there, and not go nuts himself?

Lundy didn't feel that big. Not anywhere near that big. He was remembering things. The first time he'd had It in a net. The last few minutes before the wreck, when he'd heard Her crying for freedom from inside the safe. Jackie Smith's face when he walked in with the water from the flooded lock, and his, Lundy's, own question--Oh Lord, what did he see before he drowned?

The tight cold knot was back in Lundy's belly again, and this time it had spurs on.

He left the colony behind him, walking down empty streets lit by the rhythmic flaring of the volcanic fissure. There was damage here. Pavements cracked and twisted with the settling, towers shaken down, the carved stone jalousies split out of the windows. Whole walls had fallen in, in some places, and most of the golden doors were wrecked, jammed wide open or gone entirely. A dead city. So

dead and silent that you couldn't breathe with it, and so old it made you crawl inside.

A swell place to go mad in, following a dream.

After a long time Lundy saw them--the mates of the little seaweed women. A long, long trail of them like a flight of homing birds, winding between the dark and broken towers.

They looked like their women. A little bigger, a little coarser, with strong tough dark-green bodies and brilliant coronals. Their golden eyes were fixed on something Lundy couldn't see, and they looked like the eyes of Lucifer yearning at the gates of Heaven.

Lundy began to run against the water, cutting across a wide plaza to get under the head of the procession. He unhooked the net from his belt with hands that felt like a couple of dead fish.

Then he staggered suddenly, lost his footing, and went sprawling. It was as though somebody had pushed him with a strong hand. When he tried to get up it pushed him again, hard. The golden glare from the fissure was steadier now, and very bright.

The trail of little man-things bent suddenly in a long whipping bow, and Lundy knew what was the matter.

There was a current rising in the city. Rising like the hot white winds that used to howl in from the sea, carrying the rains.

"They ride the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy."

The Others. The Others, who were cannibals...

She led the bright trail of plant-men between the towers, and there

was a current rising in the streets.

Lundy got up. He balanced himself against the thrust of the current and ran, following the procession. It was clumsy work, with the water and his leaded boots. He tried to gauge where It--or She--was from the focus of the plant-men's eyes.

The hot light flared up brighter. The water pulled and shoved at him. He looked back once, but he couldn't see anything in the shadows between the towers. He was scared.

He shook the net out, and he was scared.

Funny that It--or She--didn't see him. Funny It didn't sense his mind, even though he tried to keep it closed. But he wasn't a very big object down there in the shadows under the walls, and creating an illusion for that many minds would be a strain on anything, even creature from outer space. He'd had the breaks once before, when he caught up with Farrell. He prayed to have them again.

He got them, for what good it did him. The current caught the procession and pulled it down close to Lundy. He watched their eyes. She was still leading them. She had a physical body even if you couldn't see it, and the current would pull it, no matter how tiny it was. He cast his net out, fast. It bellied out in the black water and came swooping back to his pull, and there was something in it. Something tiny and cylindrical and vicious. Something alive.

He drew the net tight, shivering and sweating with nervous excitement. And the plant-men attacked.

They swooped on him in a brilliant cloud. Their golden eyes burned. There was no sense in them. Their minds shrieked and clamored at him, a formless howl of rage--and fear, for Her.

They beat at him with their little green fins. Their coronals blazed, hot angry splashes of colored flame against the dark water. They wrenched at the net, tore at it, beating their membranes like wings against the rising current.

Lundy was a solid, muscular little guy. He snarled and fought for the net like a wolf over a yearling lamb. He lost it anyway. He fell on his face under a small mountain of churning man-things and lay gasping for the breath they knocked out of him, thankful for the vac-suit that saved him from being crushed flat.

He watched them take the net. They clustered around it in a globe like a swarm of bees, rolling around in the moving water. Their golden eyes had a terrible stricken look.

They couldn't open the net. Lundy had drawn it tight and fastened it, and they didn't have fingers. They stroked and pawed it with their fins, but they couldn't let Her out.

Lundy got up on his hands and knees. The current quickened. It roared down between the broken towers like a black wind and took the swarm of man-things with it, still clutching the net.

And then The Others came.

IV

Lundy saw them a long way off. For a moment he didn't believe it. He thought they must be shadows cast by the fitful glare of the fissure. He braced himself against a building and stood watching.

Stood watching, and then seeing as the rushing current brought them closer. He didn't move, except to lift his jaw a little trying to breathe. He simply stood, cold as a dead man's feet and just as numb. They

looked something like the giant rays he'd seen back on Earth, only they were plants. Great sleek bulbs of kelp with their leaves spread like wings to the current. Their long teardrop bodies ended in a flange like a fishtail that served as a rudder and they had tentacles for arms. They were colored a deep red-brown like dried blood. The golden flare of the fissure made their cold eyes gleam. It showed their round mouth-holes full of sharp hairspines, and the stinging deadly cups on the undersides of their huge tentacles.

Those arms were long enough and tough enough to pierce even the fabric of a vac-suit. Lundy didn't know whether they ate flesh or not, but it didn't matter. He wouldn't care, after he'd been slapped with one of those tentacles. The net with Her in it was getting away from him, and The Others were coming down on top of him. Even if he'd wanted to quit his job right then there wasn't any place to hide in these ruined, doorless buildings. Lundy shot his suit full of precious oxygen and added himself to the creatures riding that black current to hell.

It swept him like a bubble between the dead towers, but not fast enough. He wasn't very far ahead of the kelp-things. He tried to swim, to make himself go faster, but it was like racing an oared dinghy against a fleet of sixteen-meter sloops with everything set.

He could see the cluster of plant-men ahead of him. They hadn't changed position. They rolled and tumbled in the water, using a lot of the forward push to go around with, so that Lundy was able to overhaul them. But not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough.

The hell of it was he couldn't see anything to do if he got there. The net was way inside the globe. They weren't going to let him take it away. And if he did, what would it get anybody? They'd still follow Her, without sense enough to run away from the kelp-beasts.

Unless...

It hit Lundy all of a sudden. A hope, a solution. Hit him neatly as the leading kelp-thing climbed up on his heels and brought its leaf-wings in around him, hard.

Lundy let go an animal howl of fear and kicked wildly, shooting more air into his suit. He went up fast, and the wings grazed his boots but didn't quite catch him. Lundy rolled over and fed the thing a full charge out of his blaster, right through the eye.

It began to thrash and flounder like a shot bird. The ones coming right behind it got tangled up with it and then stopped to eat. Pretty soon there were a lot of them tumbling around it and fighting like a flock of gulls over a fish. Lundy swam furiously, cursing the clumsy suit.

There were a lot of the things that hadn't stopped, and the ones that had wouldn't stay long. Lundy kicked and strained and sweated. He was scared. He had the wind up so hard it was blowing his guts out, and it was like swimming in a nightmare, where you're tied.

The current seemed to move faster up where he was now. He gathered his thoughts into a tight beam and threw them into the heart of the cluster of plant-men, at the creature in the net.

I can free you. I'm the only one that can.

A voice answered him, inside his mind. The voice he had heard once before, back in the cabin of the wrecked flier. A voice as sweet and small as Pan-pipes calling on the Hills of Fay.

I know. My thought crossed yours... The elfin voice broke suddenly, almost on a gasp of pain. Very faintly, Lundy heard:

Heavy! Heavy! I am slow....

A longing for something beyond his experience stabbed Lundy like the cry of a frightened child. And then the globe of man-things burst apart as though a giant wind had struck them.

Lundy watched them wake up, out of their dream.

She had vanished, and now they didn't know why they were here or what they were doing. They had a heart-shaking memory of some beauty they couldn't touch, and that was all. They were lost, and frightened. Then they saw The Others.

It was as though someone had hit them a stunning blow with his fist. They hung motionless, swept along by the current, staring back with dazed golden eyes. Their brilliant petals curled inward and vanished, and the green of their bodies dulled almost to black.

The kelp-beasts spread their wings wide and rushed toward them like great dark birds. And up ahead, under the sullen golden glare, Lundy saw the distant buildings of the colony. Some of the doors were still open, with knots of tiny figures waiting beside them.

Lundy was still a little ahead of the kelp-things. He grabbed up the floating net and hooked it to his belt, and then steered himself clumsily toward a broken tower jutting up to his right.

He hurled a wild telepathic shout at the plant-men, trying to make them turn and run, telling them that he'd hold off The Others. They were too scared to hear him. He cursed them, almost crying. On the third try he got through and they came to life in a hurry, rushing away with all the speed they had. By that time Lundy was braced on his pinnacle of stone, and the kelp-beasts were right on top of him.

He got busy with both blasters. He burned down a lot of the things. Pretty soon the water all around him was full of thrashing bodies where the living had stopped to fight over the dead. But he couldn't get them all, and a few got by him.

Almost without turning his head he could see the huge red bird-shapes overhauling stragglers, wrapping them in broad wings, and then lying quiet in the rush of the current, feeding.

They kept the doors, open, those little woman-things. They waited until the last of their mates came home, and then slammed the golden panels on the blunt noses of the kelp-things. Not many of the little men were lost. Only a few small wives would hide their petals and wear their sad blue-grey. Lundy felt good about that.

It was nice he felt good about something, because Old Mr. Grim was climbing right up on Lundy's shoulders, showing his teeth. The kelp-beasts had finally found out who was hurting them. Also, now, Lundy was the only food in sight. They were ganging up for a rush, wheeling and sideslipping in the spate of black water. Lundy got two more, and then one blaster charge fizzled out, and right after it the other one became dull.

Lundy stood alone on his broken tower and watched death sweep in around him. And the sweet elfin voice spoke out of the net:

Let me free. Let me free!

Lundy set his jaw tight and did the only thing he could think of. He deflated his vac-suit and jumped, plunging down into the black depths of the ruined building.

The kelp-things folded their leaves back like the wings of a diving bird and came down after him, using their tails for power.

Fitful flares of light came through broken walls and window openings. Lundy went down a long way. He didn't have to bother about stairs. The quakes had knocked most of the floors out.

The kelp-things followed him. Their long sinuous bodies were maneuverable as a shark's, and they were fast.

And all the time the little voice cried in his mind, asking for freedom. Lundy hit bottom.

The walls were fairly solid down here, and it was dark, and the place was choked with rubble. Things got a little confused. Lundy's helmet light was shot, and he wouldn't have used it anyway because it would have guided the hunters.

He felt them, swirling and darting around him. He ran, to no place in particular. The broken stones tripped him. Three times great sinewy bodies brushed him, knocking him spinning, but they couldn't quite find him in the darkness, chiefly because they got in each other's way. Lundy fell through suddenly into a great hall, lying beside whatever room he had been in and a little below it. It was hardly damaged. Golden doors stood open to the water, and there was plenty of light.

Plenty of light for Lundy to see some more of the kelp-beasts poking hopeful faces in, and plenty of light for them to see Lundy. The elfin voice called, Let me out! Let me out!

Lundy didn't have breath enough left to curse. He turned and ran, and the kelp-beasts gave a lazy flirt of their tails and caught up with him in the first thirty feet. They almost laughed in his face. The only thing that saved Lundy was that when they opened their leaf-wings to take him they interfered with each other. It slowed them, just for a moment. Just long enough for Lundy to see the door.

A little door of black stone with no carving on it, standing half-open on a golden pivot, about ten feet away.

Lundy made for it. He dodged out from under one huge swooping wing, made a wild leap that almost tore him apart, and grabbed the edge of the door with his hands, doubling up and pulling.

A tentacle tip struck his feet. His lead boots hit the floor, and for a minute he thought his legs were broken. But the surge of water the blow made helped to carry him in through the narrow opening.

Half a dozen blunt red-brown heads tried to come through after him, and were stopped. Lundy was down on his hands and knees. He was trying to breathe, but somebody had put a heavy building on his chest. Also, it was getting hard to see anything.

He crawled over and put his shoulder against the door and pushed. It wouldn't budge. The building had settled and jammed the pivot for keeps. Even the butting kelp-things couldn't jar it.

But they kept on trying. Lundy crawled away. After a while some of the weight went off his chest and he could see better.

A shaft of fitful golden light shot in through a crack about ten feet above him. A small crack, not even big enough to let a baby in and out. It was the only opening other than the door.

The room was small, too. The stone walls were dead black, without ornament or carving, except on the rear wall.

There was a square block of jet there, about eight feet long by four wide, hollowed in a peculiar and unpleasantly suggestive fashion. Above it there was a single huge ruby set in the stone, burning red like a foretaste of hell fire.

Lundy had seen similar small chambers in old cities still on dry land. They were where men had gone to die for crimes against society and the gods. Lundy looked at the hungry monsters pushing at the immovable door and laughed. There was no particular humor in it. He fired his last shot, and sat down. The brutes might go away sometime, maybe. But unless they went within a very few minutes, it wasn't going to matter. Lundy's oxygen was getting low, and it was still a long way to the coast.

The voice from the net cried out, Let me free!

"The hell with you," said Lundy. He was tired. He was so tired he didn't care much whether he lived or died.

He made sure the net was fast to his belt, and tightly closed.

"If I live, you go back to Vhia with me. If I die--well, you won't be able to hurt anybody again. There'll be one less devil loose on Venus." Free! Free! Free! I must be free! This heavy weight...

"Sure. Free to lead guys like Farrell into going crazy, and leaving their wives and kids. Free to kill...." He looked with sultry eyes at the net.

"Jackie Smith was my pal. You think I'd let you go? You think anything you could do would make me let you go?"

Then he saw her.

Right through the net, as though the metal mesh was cellophane. She crouched there in his lap, a tiny thing less than two feet high, doubled over her knees. The curve of her back was something an angel had carved out of a whisp of warm, pearl-pink cloud.

Lundy broke into a trembling sweat. He shut his eyes. It didn't matter. He saw her. He couldn't help seeing her. He tried to fight his mind, but he was tired

....

Her hair hid most of her. It had black night in it, and moonbeams, and glints of fire like a humming-bird's breast. Hair you dream about. Hair you could smother yourself in, and die happy.

She raised her head slowly, letting the veil of warm darkness fall away from her. Her eyes were shadowed, hidden under thick lashes. She raised her hands to Lundy, like a child praying.

But she wasn't a child. She was a woman, naked as a pearl, and so lovely that Lundy sobbed with it, in shivering ecstasy.

"No," he said hoarsely. "No. No!" She held her arms up to be free, and didn't move.

Lundy tore the net loose from his belt and flung it on the altar block. He got up and went lurching to the door, but the kelp-things were still there, still hungry. He sat down again, in a corner as far away from both places as he could get, and took some Benzedrine.

It was the wrong thing to do. He'd about reached his limit. It made him lightheaded. He couldn't fight her, couldn't shut her out. She knelt on the altar with her hands stretched out to him, and a shaft of golden light falling on her like something in a church.

"Open your eyes!" he said. "Open your eyes and look at me." Let me free. Let me free!

Freedom Lundy didn't know anything about. The freedom of outer space, with the whole Milky Way to play in and nothing to hold you back. And with the longing, fear. A blind, stricken terror....

"No!" Lundy said.

Things got dark for Lundy. Presently he found himself at the altar block, fumbling at the net.

He wrenched away and went stumbling back to his corner. He was twitching all over like a frightened dog.

"Why do you want to do it? Why do you have to torture me--drive them crazy for something they can't have--kill them?"

Torture? Crazy? Kill? I don't understand. They worship me. It is pleasant to be worshiped.

"Pleasant?" Lundy was yelling aloud, and didn't know it. "Pleasant, damn you!

So you kill a good guy like Farrell, and drown Jackie Smith...." Kill? Wait--give me the thought again....

Something inside Lundy turned cold and still, holding its breath. He sent the thought again. Death. Cessation. Silence, and the dark. The tiny glowing figure on the black stone bent over its knees again, and it was sadder than a seabird's cry at sunset.

So will I be soon. So will all of us. Why did this planet take us out of space? The weight, the pressure breaks and crushes us, and we can't get free. In space there was no death, but now we die.... Lundy stood quite still. The blood beat like drums in his temples.

"You mean that all you creatures out of space are dying? That the--the madness will stop of itself?"

Soon. Very soon. There was no death in space! There was no pain! We didn't know about them. Everything here was new, to be tasted and played with. We didn't know....

"Hell!" said Lundy, and looked at the creatures beating at the crack of the stone door. He sat down.

You, too, will die.

Lundy raised his head slowly. His eyes had a terrible brightness.

"You like to be worshiped," he whispered. "Would you like to be worshiped after you die? Would you like to be remembered always as something good and beautiful--a goddess?"

That would be better than to be forgotten.

"Will you do what I ask of you, then? You can save my life, if you will. You can save the lives of a lot of those little flower-people. I'll see to it that everyone knows your true story. Now you're hated and feared, but after that you'll be loved."

Will you let me free of this net?

"If you promise to do what I ask?"

I would rather die at least free of this net. The tiny figure trembled and shook back the veil of dark hair. Hurry. Tell me....

"Lead these creatures away from the door. Lead all of them in the city away, to the fire in the mountain where they'll be destroyed." They will worship me. It is better than dying in a net. I promise. Lundy got up

and went to the altar. His feet were not steady. His hands were not steady, either, untying the net. Sweat ran in his eyes. She didn't have to keep her promise. She didn't have to....

The net fell away. She stood up on her tiny pink feet. Slowly, like a swirl of mist straightening in a little breeze. She threw her head back and smiled. Her mouth was red and sulky, her teeth whiter than new snow. Her lowered lids had faint blue shadows traced on them. She began to grow, in the golden shaft of light, like a pillar of cloud rising toward the sun. Lundy's heart stood still. The clear gleam of her skin, the line of her throat and her young breasts, the supple turn of her flank and thigh....

You worship me too.

Lundy stepped back, two lurching steps. "I worship you," he whispered. "Let me see your eyes."

She smiled and turned her head away. She stepped off the altar block, floating past him through the black water. A dream-thing, without weight or substance, and more desirable than all the women Lundy had seen in his life or his dreams. He followed her, staggering. He tried to catch her. "Open your eyes!

Please open your eyes!"

She floated on, through the crack of the stone door. The kelp-things didn't see her. All they saw was Lundy coming toward them.

"Open your eyes!"

She turned, then, just before Lundy had stepped out to death in the hall beyond. He stopped, and watched her raise her shadowed lids. He screamed, just once, and fell forward onto the black floor. He

never knew how long he lay there. It couldn't have been long in time, because he still had barely enough oxygen to make it to the coast when he came to. The kelp-beasts were gone.

But the time to Lundy was an eternity--an eternity he came out of with whitened hair and bitter lines around his mouth, and a sadness that never left his eyes.

He'd only had his dream a little while. A few brief moments, already shadowed by death. His mind was drugged and tired, and didn't feel things as deeply and clearly as it might. That was all that saved him.

But he knew what Jackie Smith saw before he drowned. He knew why men had died or gone mad forever, when they looked into the eyes of their dream, and by looking, destroyed it.

Because, behind those shadowed, perfect lids, there was--Nothing.

Purple Priestess of the Mad Moon

2031

In the observation bubble of the TSS Goddard Harvey Selden watched the tawny face of the planet grow. He could make out rose-red deserts where tiny sandstorms blew, and dark areas of vegetation like textured silk. Once or twice he caught the bright flash of water from one of the canals. He sat motionless, rapt and delighted. He had been afraid that this confrontation would offer very little to his emotions; he had since childhood witnessed innumerable identical approaches on the tri-di screen, which was almost the same as being there one's self. But the actuality had a flavor and imminence that he found immensely thrilling.

After all, an alien planet...

After all, Mars....

He was almost angry when he realized that Bentham had come into the bubble. Bentham was Third Officer and at his age this was an admission of failure. The reason for it, Selden thought, was stamped quite clearly on his face, and he felt sorry for Bentham as he felt sorry for anyone afflicted with alcoholism. Still, the man was friendly and he had seemed much impressed by Selden's knowledge of Mars. So Selden smiled and nodded.

"Quite a thrill." he said.

Bentham glanced at the onrushing planet. "It always is. You know anybody down there?"

"No. But after I check in with the Bureau..."

"When will you do that?"

"Tomorrow. I mean, counting from after we land, of course... a little confusing, isn't it, this time thing?" He knew they did three or four complete orbits on a descending spiral, which meant three or four days and nights. Bentham said, "But in the meantime, you don't know anybody." Selden shook his head.

"Well," said Bentham, "I'm having dinner with some Martian friends. Why don't you come along? You might find it interesting."

"Oh," said Selden eagerly, "that would be... But are you sure your friends won't mind? I mean, an unexpected guest dragged in at the last minute..."

"They won't mind," Bentham said. "I'll give them plenty of warning. Where are you staying?"

"The Kahora-Hilton."

"Of course," said Bentham. "I'll pick you up around seven." He smiled. "Kahora time."

He went out, leaving Selden with some lingering qualms of doubt. Bentham was perhaps not quite the person he would have chosen to introduce him to Martian society. Still, he was an officer and could be presumed to be a gentleman. And he had been on the Mars run for a long time. Of course he would have friends, and what an unlooked-for and wonderful chance this was to go actually into a Martian home and visit with a Martian family. He was ashamed of his momentary uneasiness, and was able to analyze it quite quickly as being based in his own sense of insecurity, which of course arose from being

faced with a totally unfamiliar environment. Once he had brought this negative attitude into the open it was easy to correct it. After a quarter of an hour of positive therapy he found himself hardly able to wait for the evening.

* * *

Kahora had grown in half a century. Originally, Selden knew, it had been founded as a Trade City under the infamous old Umbrella Treaty, so-called because it could be manipulated to cover anything, which had been concluded between the then World Government of Terra and the impoverished Martian Federation of City-States. At that time the city was housed under a single dome, climate-conditioned for the comfort of the outworld traders and politicians who frequented it and who were unused to the rigors of cold and thin-aired Mars. In addition to the climate, various other luxuries were installed in the Trade Cities, so that they had been compared with certain Biblical locales, and crimes of many different sorts, even murder, had been known to occur in them.

But all of that, or nearly all of that, was in the bad old days of laissez-faire, and now Kahora was the administrative capital of Mars, sheltered under a complex of eight shining domes. From the spaceport fifteen miles away, Selden saw the city as a pale shimmer of gossamer bubbles touched by the low sun. As the spaceport skimmer flew him across the intervening miles of red sand and dark green moss-grass, he saw the lights come on in the quick dusk and the buildings underneath the domes rose and took shape, clean and graceful and clothed in radiance. He thought that he had never seen anything so beautiful. From the landing stage inside one of the domes a silent battery-powered cab took him to his hotel along gracious streets, where the lights glowed and people of many races walked leisurely. The whole trip, from debarkation to hotel lobby, was

accomplished in completely air-conditioned comfort, and Selden was not sorry. The landscape looked awfully bleak, and one needed only to glance at it to know that it was damnably cold. Just before the skimmer entered the airlock it crossed the Kahora canal, and the water looked like black ice. He knew that he might have to cope with all this presently, but he was not in any hurry.

Selden's room was pleasantly homelike and the view of the city was superb. He showered and shaved, dressed in his best dark silk, and then sat for a while on his small balcony overlooking the Triangle with the Three Worlds represented at its apices. The air he breathed was warm and faintly scented. The city sounds that rose to him were pleasantly subdued. He began to run over in his mind the rules he had learned for proper behavior in a Martian house, the ceremonial phrases and gestures. He wondered whether Bentham's friends would speak High or Low Martian. Low, probably, since that was most commonly in use with outsiders. He hoped his accent was not too barbarous. On the whole he felt adequate. He leaned back in his comfortable chair and found himself looking at the sky.

There were two moons in it, racing high above the glow and distortion of the dome. And for some reason, although he knew perfectly well that Mars had two moons, this bit of alienage had a powerful effect on him. For the first time he realized, not merely with his intellect but with his heart and bowels, that he was on a strange world a long, long way from home.

He went down to the bar to wait for Bentham.

The man arrived in good time, freshly turned out in civilian silks and, Selden was glad to see, perfectly sober. He bought him a drink and then followed him into a cab, which bore them quietly from the central dome into one of the outer ones.

"The original one," Bentham said. "It's chiefly residential now. The buildings are older, but very comfortable." They were halted at a concourse waiting for a flow of cross traffic to pass and Bentham pointed at the dome roof. "Have you seen the moons? They're both in the sky now. That's the thing people seem to notice the most when they first land."

"Yes," Selden said. "I've seen them. It is... uh... striking."

"The one we call Deimos... that one there... the Martian name is Vashna, of course... that's the one that in certain phases was called the Mad Moon."

"Oh no," Selden said. "That was Phobos. Denderon." Bentham gave him a look and he reddened a bit. "I mean, I think it was." He knew damn well it was, but after all... "Of course you've been here many times, and I could be mistaken..."

Bentham shrugged. "Easy enough to settle it. We'll ask Mak."

"Who?"

"Firsa Mak. Our host."

"Oh," said Selden, "I wouldn't..." But the cab sped on then and Bentham was pointing out some other thing of interest and the subject passed.

Almost against the outer curve of the dome there was a building of pale gold and the cab stopped there. A few minutes later Selden was being introduced to Firsa Mak.

He had met Martians before, but only rarely and never in situ. He was a dark, small, lean, catlike man with the most astonishing yellow

eyes. The man wore the traditional white tunic of the Trade Cities, exotic and very graceful. A gold earring that Selden recognized as a priceless antique hung from his left earlobe. He was not at all like the rather round and soft Martians Selden had met on Terra. He flinched before those eyes and the carefully mustered words of greeting stuck in his throat. Then there was no need for them as Firsia Mak shook his hand and said, "Hello. Welcome to Mars, Come on in." A wiry brown hand propelled him in the most friendly fashion into a large low room with a glass wall that looked out through the dome at the moon-washed desert. The furniture was simple modern stuff and very comfortable, with here and there a bit of sculpture or a wall plaque as fine as, but no better than, the Martian handcrafts obtainable at the good specialty shops in N'York. On one of the couches a very long-legged Earthman sat drinking in a cloud of smoke. He was introduced as Altman. He had a face like old leather left too long in the sun, and he looked at Selden as from a great height and a far distance. Curled up beside him was a dark girl, or woman... Selden could not decide which because of the smoothness of her face and the too-great wisdom of her eyes, which were as yellow and unwinking as Firsia Mak's.

"My sister," Firsia Mak said. "Mrs. Altman. And this is Lella." He did not say exactly who Lella was, and Selden did not at the moment care. She had just come in from the kitchen bearing a tray of something or other, and she wore a costume that Selden had read about but never seen. A length of brilliant silk, something between red and burnt orange, was wrapped about her hips and caught at the waist by a broad girdle. Below the skirt her slim brown ankles showed, with anklets of tiny golden bells that chimed faintly as she walked. Above the skirt her body was bare and splendidly made. A necklace of gold plaques intricately pierced and hammered circled her throat, and more of the tiny bells hung from her ears. Her hair was long and deeply black and her eyes were green, with the most

enchanted tilt. She smiled at Selden, and moved away with her elfin music, and he stood stupidly staring after her, hardly aware that he had taken a glass of dark liquor from her proffered tray. Presently Selden was sitting on some cushions between the Altmans and Firs Mak, with Bentham opposite. Lella kept moving distractingly in and out, keeping their glasses filled with the peculiar smoky-tasting hellfire.

"Bentham tells me you're with the Bureau of Interworld Cultural Relations," Firs Mak said.

"Yes," said Selden. Altman was looking at him with that strange remote glare, making him feel acutely uncomfortable.

"Ah. And what is your particular field?"

"Handcrafts. Metalwork. Uh... the ancient type of thing, like that...." He indicated Lella's necklace, and she smiled.

"It is old," she said, and her voice was sweet as the chiming bells. "I would not even guess how old."

"The pierced pattern," Selden said, "is characteristic of the Seventeenth Dynasty of the Khalide Kings of Jekkara, which lasted for approximately two thousand years at the period when Jekkara was declining from her position as a maritime power. The sea was receding significantly then, say between fourteen and sixteen thousand years ago."

"So old?" Lella said, and fingered the necklace wonderingly.

"That depends," said Bentham. "Is it genuine, Lella, or is it a copy?" Lella dropped to her knees beside Selden. "You will say." They all waited. Selden began to sweat. He had studied hundreds of

necklaces, but never in situ. Suddenly he was not sure at all whether the damned thing was genuine, and he was just as suddenly positive that they did know and were needling him. The plaques rose and fell gently to the lift of Lella's breathing. A faint dry spicy fragrance reached his nostrils. He touched the gold, lifted one of the plaques and felt of it, warm from her flesh, and yearned for a nice uncomplicated textbook that had diagrams and illustrations and nothing more to take your mind off your subject. He was tempted to tell them to go to hell. They were just waiting for him to make a mistake. Then he got madder and bolder and he put his whole hand under the collar, lifting it away from her neck and testing the weight of it. It was worn thin and light as tissue paper and the undersurface was still pocked by the ancient hammer strokes in the particular fashion of the Khalide artificers. It was a terribly crude test, but his blood was up. He looked into the tilted green eyes and said authoritatively, "It's genuine."

"How wonderful that you know!" She caught his hand between hers and pressed it and laughed aloud with pleasure. "You have studied very long?"

"Very long." He felt good now. He hadn't let them get him down. The hellfire had worked its way up into his head, where it was buzzing gently, and Lella's attention was even more pleasantly intoxicating.

"What will you do now with this knowledge?" she asked.

"Well," he said, "as you know, so many of the ancient skills have been lost, and your people are looking for ways to expand their economy, so the Bureau is hoping to start a program to reeducate metalworkers in places like Jekkara and Valkis...."

Altman said in a remote and very quiet voice, "Oh good God Allbloodymighty." Selden said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," Altman said. "Nothing." Bentham turned to Firsia Mak. "By the way, Selden and I had a difference of opinion on the way here. He's probably right, but I said I'd ask you...." Selden said hastily, "Oh, let's forget it, Bentham." But Bentham was obtuse and insistent.

"The Mad Moon, Firsia Mak. I say Vashna, he says Denderon."

"Denderon, of course," said Firsia Mak, and looked at Selden. "So you know all about that, too."

"Oh," said Selden, embarrassed and annoyed with Bentham for bringing it up,

"please, we thoroughly understand that that was all a mistake." Altman leaned forward. "Mistake?"

"Certainly. The early accounts..." He looked at Firsia Mak and his sister and Lella and they all seemed to be waiting for him to go on, so he did, uncomfortably. "I mean, they resulted from distortions of folklore, misinterpretation of local customs, pure ignorance... in some cases, they were downright lies." He waved his hand deprecatingly. "We don't believe in the Rites of the Purple Priestess and all that nonsense. That is to say, we don't believe they ever occurred, really."

He hoped that would close the subject, but Bentham was determined to hang to it. "I've read eyewitness accounts, Selden."

"Fabrications. Traveler's tales. After all, the Earthmen who first came to Mars were strictly the piratical exploiter type and were hardly either qualified or reliable observers...."

"They don't need us anymore," said Altman softly, staring at Selden but not seeming to see him. "They don't need us at all." And he

muttered something about winged pigs and the gods of the marketplace. Selden had a sudden horrid certainty that Altman was himself one of those early piratical exploiters and that he had irreparably insulted him.

And then Firsia Mak said with honest curiosity, "Why is it that all you young Earthmen are so ready to cry down the things your own people have done?" Selden felt Altman's eyes upon him, but he was into this now and there was no backing down. He said with quiet dignity, "Because we feel that if our people have made mistakes we should be honest enough to admit them."

"A truly noble attitude," said Firsia Mak. "But about the Purple Priestess..."

"I assure you," said Selden hastily, "that old canard is long forgotten. The men who did the serious research, the anthropologists and sociologists who came after the... uh... the adventurers, were far better qualified to evaluate the data. They completely demolished the idea that the rites involved human sacrifice, and of course the monstrous Dark Lord the priestess was supposed to serve was merely the memory of an extremely ancient earth-god... mars-god, I should say, but you know what I mean, a primitive nature thing, like the sky or the wind."

Firsia Mak said gently, "But there was a rite..."

"Well, yes," said Selden, "undoubtedly. But the experts proved that it was purely vestigial, like... well, like our own children dancing around the Maypole."

"The Low Canallers," said Altman, "never danced around any Maypoles." He rose slowly and Selden watched him stretch higher and higher above him. He must have stood a good six inches over

six feet, and even from that height his eyes pierced Selden. "How many of your qualified observers went into the hills above Jekkara?"

Selden began to bristle a bit. The feeling that for some reason he was being baited grew stronger. "You must know that until very recently the Low Canal towns were closed to Earthman...."

"Except for a few adventurers."

"Who left highly dubious memoirs! And even yet you have to have a diplomatic passport involving miles of red tape, and you're allowed very little freedom of movement when you get there. But it is a beginning, and we hope, we hope very greatly, that we can persuade the Low Canallers to accept our friendship and assistance. It's a pity that their own secretiveness fostered such a bad image. For decades the only ideas we had of the Low Canal towns came from the lurid accounts of the early travelers, and the extremely biased--as we learned later--attitude of the City-States. We used to think of Jekkara and Valkis as, well, perfect sinks of iniquity...."

Altman was smiling at him. "But, my dear boy," he said, "they are. They are." Selden tried to disengage his hand from Lella's. He found that he could not, and it was about then that he began to be just the least little bit frightened.

"I don't understand," he said plaintively. "Did you get me here just to bait me? If you did, I don't think it's very... Bentham?" Bentham was at the door. The door now seemed to be much farther away than Selden remembered and there was a kind of mist between him and it so that Bentham's figure was indistinct. Nevertheless he saw it raise a hand and heard it say, "Goodbye." Then it was gone, and Selden, feeling infinitely forlorn, turned to look into Lella's eyes. "I don't understand," he said. "I don't understand." Her eyes were green and enormous and deep without limit. He felt himself topple and fall giddily into the

abyss, and then of course it was far too late to be afraid.

Hearing returned to him first, with the steady roar of jets, and then there was the bodily sensation of being borne through air that was shaken occasionally by large turbulences. He opened his eyes, in wild alarm. It was several minutes before he could see anything but a thick fog. The fog cleared gradually and he found himself staring at Lella's gold necklace and remembering with great clarity the information concerning it that he had rattled off so glibly and with such modest pride. A simple and obvious truth came to him.

"You're from Jekkara," he said, and only then did he realize that there was a gag in his mouth. Lella started and looked down at him.

"He's awake."

Firsa Mak rose and bent over Selden, examining the gag and a set of antique manacles that bound his wrists. Again Selden flinched from those fierce and brilliant eyes. Firsa Mak seemed to hesitate, on the verge of removing the gag, and Selden mustered his voice and courage to demand explanations. A buzzer sounded in the cabin, apparently a signal from the pilot, and at the same time the motion of the copter altered. Firsa Mak shook his head.

"Later, Selden. I have to leave you this way because I can't trust you, and all our lives are in danger, not just yours... though yours most of all." He leaned forward. "This is necessary, Selden. Believe me."

"Not necessary," Altman said, appearing stooped under the cabin ceiling.

"Vital. You'll understand that, later."

Lella said harshly, "I wonder if he will."

"If he doesn't," Altman said, "God help them all, because no one else can." Mrs. Altman came with a load of heavy cloaks. They had all changed their clothes since Selden had last seen them, except Lella, who had merely added an upper garment of native wool. Mrs. Altman now wore the Low Canal garb, and Firsak Mak had a crimson tunic held with a wide belt around his hips. Altman looked somehow incredibly right in the leather of a desert tribesman; he was too tall, Selden guessed, to pass for a Jekkaran. He wore the desert harness easily, as though he had worn it many times. They made Selden stand while they wrapped a cloak around him, and he saw that he had been stripped of his own clothing and dressed in a tunic of ochre-yellow, and where his limbs showed they had been stained dark. Then they strapped him into his seat again and waited while the copter slowed and dropped toward a landing. Selden sat rigid, numb with fear and shock, going over and over in his mind the steps by which he had come here and trying to make sense out of them. He could not. One thing was certain, Bentham had deliberately led him into a trap. But why? Why? Where were they taking him, what did they mean to do with him? He tried to do positive therapy but it was difficult to remember all the wisdom that had sounded so infinitely wise when he had heard it, and his eyes kept straying to the faces of Altman and Firsak Mak.

There was a quality about them both, something strange that he had never seen before. He tried to analyze what it was. Their flesh appeared to be harder and drier and tougher than normal, their muscles more fibrous and prominent, and there was something about the way they used and carried themselves that reminded him of the large carnivores he had seen in the zoo parks. There was, even more striking, an expression about the eyes and mouth, and Selden realized that these were violent men, men who could strike and tear and perhaps even kill. He was afraid of them. And at the same time he felt superior. He at least was above all that.

The sky had paled. Selden could see desert racing past below. They settled onto it with a great spuming of dust and sand. Altman and Firsia Mak between them half carried him out of the copter. Their strength was appalling. They moved away from the copter and the backwash of the rotors beat them as it took off. Selden was stricken by the thin air and bitter cold. His bones felt brittle and his lungs were full of knives. The others did not seem to mind. He pulled his cloak tight around him as well as he could with his bound hands, and felt his teeth chattering into the gag. Abruptly Lella reached out and pulled the hood completely down over his face. It had two eyeholes so that it could be used as a mask during sandstorms, but it stifled him and it smelled strangely. He had never felt so utterly miserable.

Dawn was turning the desert to a rusty red. A chain of time-eaten mountains, barren as the fossil vertebrae of some forgotten monster, curved across the northern horizon. Close at hand was a tumbled mass of rocky outcrops, carved to fantastic shapes by wind and sand. From among these rocks there came a caravan.

Selden heard the bells and the padding of broad splayed hooves. The beasts were familiar to him from pictures. Seen in their actual scaly reality, moving across the red sand in that wild daybreak with their burdens and their hooded riders, they were apparitions from some older and uglier time. They came close and stopped, hissing and stamping and rolling their cold bright eyes at Selden, not liking the smell of him in spite of the Martian clothing he wore. They did not seem to mind Altman. Perhaps he had lived with the Martians so long that there was no difference now.

Firsia Mak spoke briefly with the leader of the caravan. The meeting had obviously been arranged, for led animals were brought. The women mounted easily. Selden's stomach turned over at the idea of actually riding one of these creatures. Still, at the moment, he was

even more afraid of being left behind, so he made no protest when Firsia Mak and Altman heaved him up onto the saddle pad. One of them rode on each side of him, holding a lead rein. The caravan moved on again, northward toward the mountains. Within an hour Selden was suffering acutely from cold, thirst, and the unaccustomed exercise. By noon, when they halted to rest, he was almost unconscious. Altman and Firsia Mak helped him down and then carried him around into some rocks where they took the gag out and gave him water. The sun was high now, piercing the thin atmosphere like a burning lance. It scalded Selden's cheeks but at least he was warm, or almost warm. He wanted to stay where he was and die. Altman was quite brutal about it.

"You wanted to go to Jekkara," he said. "Well, you're going... just a little bit earlier than you planned, that's all. What the hell, boy, did you think it was all like Kahora?"

And he heaved Selden onto his mount again and they went on. In mid-afternoon the wind got up. It never really seemed to stop blowing, but in a tired sort of way, wandering across the sand, picking up a bit of dust and dropping it again, chafing the upthrust rocks a little deeper, stroking the ripple patterns into a different design. Now it seemed impatient with everything it had done and determined to wipe it out and start fresh. It gathered itself and rushed screaming across the land, and it seemed to Selden that the whole desert took up and went flying in a red and strangling cloud. The sun went out. He lost sight of Altman and Firsia Mak at either end of his reins. He hung in abject terror to his saddle pad, watching for the small segment of rein he could see to go slack, when he would know that he was irretrievably lost. Then as abruptly as it had risen the wind dropped and the sand resumed its quiet, eternal rolling.

A little while after that, in the long red light from the west, they dipped

down to a line of dark water strung glittering through the desolation, banded with strips of green along its sides. There was a smell of wetness and growing things, and an ancient bridge, and beyond the canal was a city, with the barren hills behind it.

Selden knew that he was looking at Jekkara. And he was struck with awe. Even at this late day few Earthmen had seen it. He stared through the eyeholes of his hood, seeing at first only the larger masses of rose-red rock, and then as the sun sank lower and the shadows shifted, making out the individual shapes of buildings that melted more and more gently into the parent rock the higher they were on the sloping cliffs. At one place he saw the ruins of a great walled castle that he knew had once housed those self-same Khalide Kings and lord knew how many dynasties before them in the days when this desert was the bottom of a blue sea, and there was a lighthouse still standing above the basin of a dry harbor halfway up the cliffs. He shivered, feeling the enormous weight of a history in which he and his had had no part whatever, and it came to him that he had perhaps been just the tiniest bit presumptuous in his desire to teach these people.

That feeling lasted him halfway across the bridge. By that time the western light had gone and the torches were flaring in the streets of Jekkara, shaken by the dry wind from the desert. His focus of interest shifted from the then to the now, and once more he shivered, but for a different reason. The upper town was dead. The lower town was not, and there was a quality to the sight and sound and smell of it that petrified him. Because it was exactly as the early adventurers in their dubious memoirs had described it. The caravan reached the broad square that fronted the canal, the beasts picking their way protestingly over the sunken, tilted paving stones. People came to meet them. Without his noticing it, Altman and Firsak had maneuvered Selden to the end of the line, and now he found himself

being detached and quietly led away up a narrow street between low stone buildings with deep doorways and small window-places, all their corners worn round and smooth as stream-bed rocks by time and the rubbing of countless hands and shoulders. There was something going on in the town, he thought, because he could hear the voices of many people from somewhere beyond, as though they were gathering in a central place. The air smelled of cold and dust, and unfamiliar spices, and less identifiable things.

Altman and Firsia Mak lifted Selden down and held him until his legs regained some feeling. Firsia Mak kept glancing at the sky. Altman leaned close to Selden and whispered, "Do exactly as we tell you, or you won't last the night."

"Nor will we," muttered Firsia Mak, and he tested Selden's gag and made sure his cowl was pulled down to hide his face. "It's almost time." They led Selden quickly along another winding street. This one was busy and populous. There were sounds and sweet pungent odors and strange-colored lights, and there were glimpses into wickedness of such fantastic array and imaginative genius that Selden's eyes bulged behind his cowl and he remembered his Seminars in Martian Culture with a species of hysteria. Then they came out into a broad square.

It was full of people, cloaked against the night wind and standing quietly, their dark faces still in the shaking light of the torches. They seemed to be watching the sky. Altman and Firsia Mak, with Selden held firmly between them, melted into the edges of the crowd. They waited. From time to time more people came from the surrounding streets, making no sound except for the soft slurring of sandaled feet and the faint elfin chiming of tiny bells beneath the cloaks of the women. Selden found himself watching the sky, though he did not understand why. The crowd seemed to grow more silent, to hold all

breath and stirring, and then suddenly over the eastern roofs came the swift moon Denderon, low and red.

The crowd said, "Ah-h-h," a long musical cry of pure despair that shook Selden's heart, and in the same moment harpers who had been concealed in the shadow of a time-worn portico struck their double-banked harps and the cry became a chant, half a lament and half a proud statement of undying hate. The crowd began to move, with the harpers leading and other men carrying torches to light the way. And Selden went with them, up into the hills behind Jekkara. It was a long cold way under the fleeting light of Denderon. Selden felt the dust of millennia grate and crunch beneath his sandals and the ghosts of cities passed him to the right and left, ruined walls and empty marketplaces and the broken quays where the ships of the Sea-Kings docked. The wild fierce music of the harps sustained and finally dazed him. The long chanting line of people strung out, moving steadily, and there was something odd about the measured rhythm of their pace. It was like a march to the gallows. The remnants of the works of man were left behind. The barren hills bulked against the stars, splashed with the feeble moonlight that now seemed to Selden to be inexpressibly evil. He wondered why he was no longer frightened. He thought perhaps he had reached the point of complete emotional exhaustion. At any rate he saw things clearly but with no personal involvement. Even when he saw that the harpers and the torch-bearers were passing into the mouth of a cavern he was not afraid.

The cavern was broad enough for the people to continue marching ten abreast. The harps were muffled now and the chanting took on a deep and hollow tone. Selden felt that he was going downward. A strange and rather terrible eagerness began to stir in him, and this he could not explain at all. The marchers seemed to feel it too, for the pace quickened just a little to the underlying of the harp strings. And

suddenly the rock walls vanished out of sight and they were in a vast cold space that was completely black beyond the pinprick glaring of the torches.

The chanting ceased. The people filed on both sides into a semicircle and stood still, with the harpers at the center and a little group of people in front of them, somehow alone and separate.

One of these people took off the concealing cloak and Selden saw that it was a woman dressed all in purple. For some obscure reason he was sure it was Lella, though the woman's face in the torchlight showed only the smooth gleaming of a silver mask, a very ancient thing with a subtle look of cruel compassion. She took in her hands a pale globed lamp and raised it, and the harpers struck their strings once. The other persons, six in number, laid aside their cloaks. They were three men and three women, all naked and smiling, and now the harps began a tune that was almost merry and the woman in purple swayed her body in time to it. The naked people began to dance, their eyes blank and joyous with some powerful drug, and she led them dancing into the darkness, and as she led them she sang, a long sweet fluting call.

The harps fell silent. Only the woman's voice sounded, and her lamp shone like a dim star, far away.

Beyond the lamp, an eye opened and looked and was aware. Selden saw the people, the priestess and the six dancing ones, limned momentarily against that orb as seven people might be limned against a risen moon. Then something in him gave way and he fell, clutching oblivion to him like a saving armor.

* * *

They spent the remainder of that night and the following day in Firs

Mak's house by the dark canal, and there were sounds of terrible revelry in the streets. Selden sat staring straight ahead, his body shaken by small periodic tremors.

"It isn't true," he said, again and again. "It isn't true."

"It may not be true," Altman said, "but it's a fact. And it's the facts that kill you. Do you understand now why we brought you?"

"You want me to tell the Bureau about... about that."

"The Bureau and anyone that will listen."

"But why me? Why not somebody really important, like one of the diplomats?"

"We tried that. Remember Loughlin Herbert?"

"But he died of a heart... Oh."

"When Bentham told us about you," Firsia Mak said, "you seemed young and strong enough to stand the shock. We've done all we can now, Selden. For years Altman and I have been trying..."

"They won't listen to us," Altman said. "They will not listen. And if they keep sending people in, nice well-meaning children and their meddling nannies, not knowing... I simply will not be responsible for the consequences." He looked down at Selden from his gaunt and weathered height. Firsia Mak said softly, "This is a burden. We have borne it, Selden. We even take pride in bearing it." He nodded toward the unseen hills. "That has the power of destruction. Jekkara certainly, and Valkis probably, and Barrakesh, and all the people who depend on this canal for their existence. It can destroy. We know. This is a Martian affair and most of us do not wish to have outsiders

brought into it. But Altman is my brother and I must have some care for his people, and I tell you that the Priestess prefers to choose her offerings from among strangers...."

Selden whispered, "How often?"

"Twice a year, when the Mad Moon rises. In between, it sleeps."

"It sleeps," said Altman. "But if it should be roused, and frightened, or made angry... For God's sake, Selden, tell them, so that at least they'll know what they're getting into."

Selden said wildly, "How can you live here, with that..." Firsia Mak looked at him, surprised that he should ask. "Why," he said,

"because we always have."

Selden stared, and thought, and did not sleep, and once he screamed when Lella came softly into the room.

On the second night they slipped out of Jekkara and went back across the desert to the place of rocks, where the copter was waiting. Only Altman returned with Selden. They sat silently in the cabin, and Selden thought, and from time to time he saw Altman watching him, and already in his eyes there was the understanding of defeat.

The glowing domes of Kahora swam out of the dusk, and Denderon was in the sky.

"You're not going to tell them," Altman said.

"I don't know," whispered Selden. "I don't know." Altman left him at the landing stage. Selden did not see him again. He took a cab to his hotel and went directly to his room and locked himself in. The familiar, normal surroundings aided a return to sanity. He was able to marshal

his thoughts more calmly.

If he believed that what he had seen was real, he would have to tell about it, even if no one would listen to him. Even if his superiors, his teachers, his sponsors, the men he venerated and whose approval he yearned for, should be shocked, and look at him with scorn, and shake their heads, and forever close their doors to him. Even if he should be condemned to the outer darkness inhabited by people like Altman and Firsia Mak. Even if. But if he did not believe that it was real, if he believed instead that it was illusion, hallucination induced by drugs and heaven knew what antique Martian chicanery... He had been drugged, that was certain. And Lella had practiced some sort of hypnotic technique upon him....

If he did not believe...

Oh God, how wonderful not to believe, to be free again, to be secure in the body of truth!

He thought, in the quiet and comforting confines of his room, and the longer he thought the more positive his thinking became, the more free of subjectivity, the deeper and calmer in understanding. By the morning he was wan and haggard but healed.

He went to the Bureau and told them that he had been taken ill immediately upon landing, which was why he had not reported. He also told them that he had had urgent word from home and would have to return there at once. They were very sorry to lose him, but most sympathetic, and they booked him onto the first available flight.

A few scars remained on Selden's psyche. He could not bear the sound of a harp nor the sight of a woman wearing purple. These phobias he could have put up with, but the nightmares were just too much. Back on Earth, he went at once to his analyst. He was quite

honest with him, and the analyst was able to show him exactly what had happened. The whole affair had been a sex fantasy induced by drugs, with the Priestess a mother-image. The Eye which had looked at him then and which still peered unwinking out of his recurring dreams was symbolic of the female generative principle, and the feeling of horror it aroused in him was due to the guilt complex he had because he was a latent homosexual. Selden was enormously comforted.

The analyst assured him that now that things were healthily out in the open, the secondary effects would fade away. And they might have done so except for the letter.

It arrived just six Martian months after his unfortunate dinner date with Bentham. It was not signed. It said, "Lella waits for you at moonrise." And it bore the sketch, very accurately and quite unmistakably done, of a single monstrous eye.

THE END