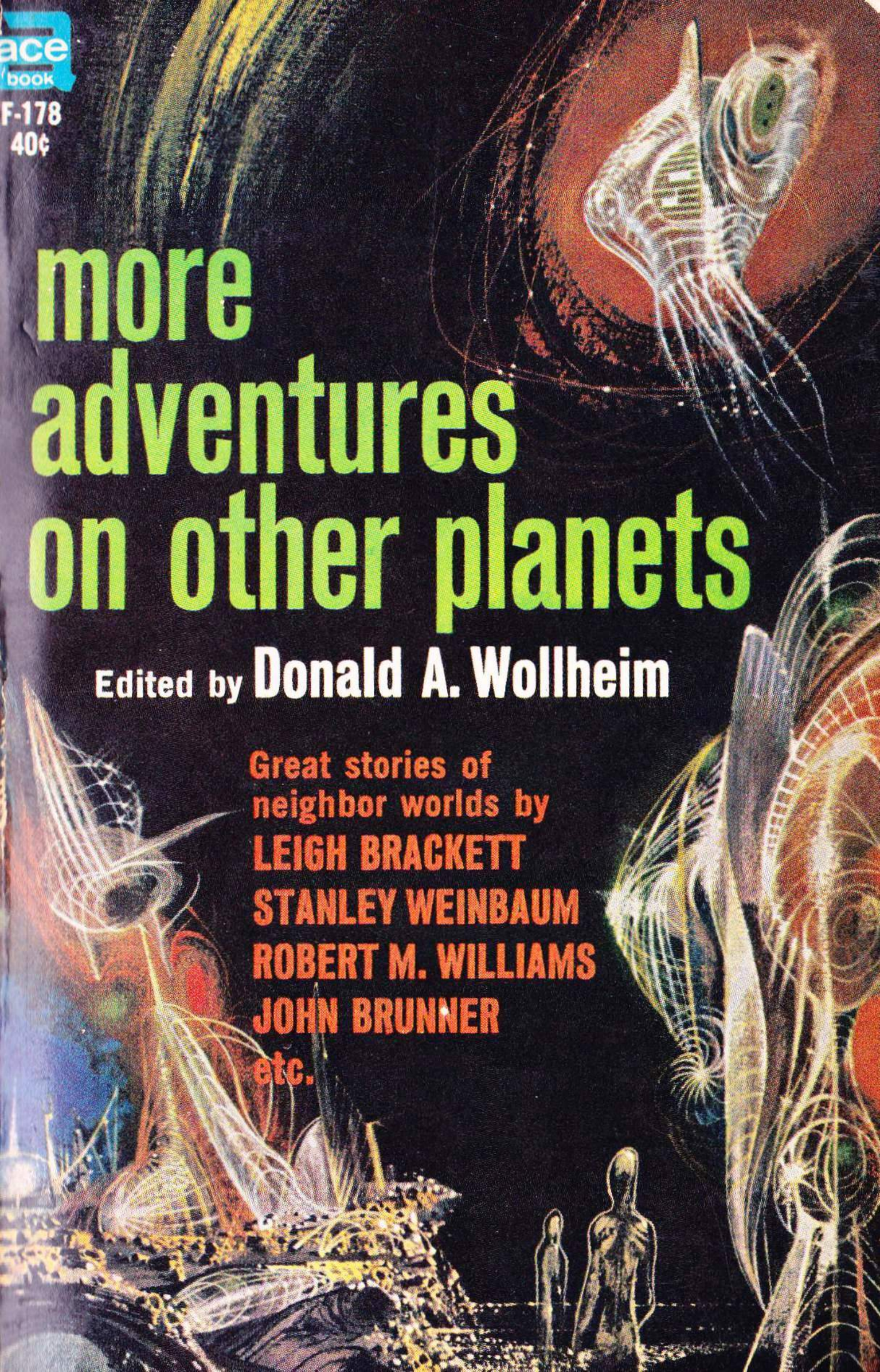
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THROUGH OUTER SPACE

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And out there among the stars, beyond our little System, there's Poul Anderson holding a cosmic tiger by the starry tail.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, probably one of the best known names in the science-fiction field, is professionally the editor of Ace Books. But he is also one of the leading anthologists of fantasy fiction with a string of books to his credit. As a writer, he is the author of a number of best-selling juvenile novels including the *Mike Mars, Astronaut* series published by Doubleday, and such oft-reprinted books as *The Secret of the Ninth Planet,* published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston. He has had short stories published in most of the leading s-f magazines, and books of his have been translated into many languages including German, Spanish, Japanese, Italian, French, Dutch, Swedish, etc.

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THE HIDDEN PLANET (D-354)
ADVENTURES ON OTHER PLANETS (D-490)
MORE MACABRE (D-508)

MORE ADVENTURES ON OTHER PLANETS

Edited by
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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INTRODUCTION

When the era of space flight began, with the launching of Sputnik I, people said that it would mean the end of science-fiction because now interplanetary travel had left the realm of speculation and entered the daily newspapers as part of the facts of life. Indeed, for a time it almost seemed as if these dire predictions were true, as the headlines about earth satellites coincided with a slump in the science-fiction periodicals.

However, by now we have come to know that these predictions were quite premature. We are in the early days of space travel, but we have a long distance to go. Step by step, the way must be worked out and many disappointments mark the path. So, between the first space-lifting rocket and the day that men shall set foot on other worlds there still lies a time stretch that will only spark and build up the imaginative appetite for the wonders that are to reward all this endeavor.

Even the landing of the first astronauts on the moon, on Mars, on Venus, will only increase that appetite, for if history is any guide (and what other guide do we have?) the first journey of Columbus merely detonated a couple of centuries of adventurous exploration and discovery. Science-fiction about interplanetary discovery is going to be with us for a long time, we think. And it is in anticipation of this, that, following the success of an earlier anthology, ADVENTURES ON OTHER PLANETS, that this new collection is called MORE ADVENTURES ON OTHER PLANETS.

—*Donald A. Wollheim*

✦ ✦ ✦

More than three-quarters of a century ago, a planet was discovered that was even closer to the sun than Mercury. Its discoverers, respected astronomers, named it Vulcan and witnessed its transits across the fiery orb of Sol. Now this world is lost, if ever it existed, and it will not be found today in the charts of the solar system. Leigh Brackett, spinner of cosmic marvels, weaves a tale of the rediscovery of Vulcan, explaining its elusiveness, and using it as a canvas to paint a vivid picture of life upon the sun itself.

CHILD OF THE SUN

by 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-dimentional 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 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 Space-guard 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 gravitional 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 searchbeam, 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 footlong stalks, with fanged jaws agape and muscles straining.

Falken grabbed for his blaster. The quick motion overbalanced 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 a 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 telepathetically 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?"

Savege 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 magnificance 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 any more."

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 ring 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 Falked 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.

✦ ✦ ✦

The smallest world in the solar system, tiny Mercury is certain to be among the first worlds mankind will explore. Talk has already been heard around today's spaceflight centers of a robotic Ranger rocket to head for the little sunlit planet in the next decade. But whether Mercury will ever prove safe for man to go in person, only the imagination must consider—for the problems are great and Robert Silverberg makes full use of them in this authentic presentation.

SUNRISE ON MERCURY

by Robert Silverberg

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

NINE MILLION miles to the sunward of Mercury, with the *Leverrier* swinging into the series of spirals that would bring it down on the Solar System's smallest world, Second Astrogator Lon Curtis decided to end his life.

Curtis had been lounging in a webform cradle waiting for the landing to be effected; his job in the operation was over, at least until the *Leverrier's* landing-jacks touched Mercury's blistered surface. The ship's efficient sodium-coolant system negated the efforts of the swollen sun visible through the rear screen. For Curtis and his seven shipmates, no problems

presented themselves; they had only to wait while the autopilot brought the ship down for Man's second landing on Mercury.

Flight Commander Harry Ross was sitting near Curtis when he noticed the sudden momentary stiffening of the astrogator's jaws. Curtis abruptly reached for the control nozzle. From the spinnerets that had spun the webfoam, came a quick green burst of dissolving fluorochrene; the cradle vanished. Curtis stood up.

"Going somewhere?" Ross asked.

Curtis' voice was harsh. "Just—taking a walk."

Ross returned his attention to his microbook for a moment as Curtis walked away. There was the ratchety sound of a bulkhead dog being manipulated, and Ross felt a momentary chill as the cooler air of the superrefrigerated reactor-compartment drifted in.

He punched a stud, turning the page. Then—

What the hell is he doing in the reactor compartment?

The autopilot would be controlling the fuel flow, handling it down to the milligram, in a way no human system could. The reactor was primed for the landing, the fuel was stoked, the compartment was dogged shut. No one—least of all a Second Astrogator—had any business going back there.

Ross had the foam cradle dissolved in an instant, and was on his feet in another. He dashed down the companionway and through the open bulkhead door into the coolness of the reactor compartment.

Curtis was standing by the converter door, toying with the release-tripper. As Ross approached, he saw the astrogator get the door open and put one foot to the chute that led downship to the nuclear pile.

"Curtis, you idiot! Get away from there! You'll kill us all!"

The astrogator turned, looked blankly at Ross for an instant, and drew up his other foot. Ross leaped.

He caught Curtis' booted foot in his hands and, despite

a barrage of kicks from the astrogator's free boot, managed to drag Curtis off the chute. The astrogator tugged and pulled, attempting to break free. Ross saw the man's pale cheeks quivering; Curtis had cracked, but thoroughly.

Grunting, Ross yanked Curtis away from the yawning reactor chute and slammed the door shut. He dragged him out into the main section again, and slapped him, hard.

"Why'd you want to do that? Don't you know what your mass would do to the ship if it got into the converter? You know the fuel intake's been calibrated already; a hundred eighty extra pounds and we'd arc right into the sun. What's wrong with you, Curtis?"

The astrogator fixed unshaking, unexpressive eyes on Ross. "I want to die," he said simply. "Why couldn't you let me die?"

He wanted to die. Ross shrugged, feeling a cold tremor run down his back. There was no guarding against this disease.

Just as acqualungers beneath the sea's surface suffered from *l'ivresse des grandes profondeurs*—rapture of the deeps—and knew no cure for the strange, depth-induced drunkenness that induced them to remove their breathing-tubes fifty fathoms below, so did spacemen run the risk of this nameless malady, this inexplicable urge to self-destruction.

It struck anywhere. A repairman wielding a torch on a recalcitrant strut of an orbiting wheel might abruptly rip open his face mask and drink vacuum; a radioman rigging an antenna on the skin of his ship might suddenly cut his line, fire his directional-piston, and send himself drifting away sunward. Or a Second Astrogator might decide to climb into the converter.

Psych Officer Spangler appeared, an expression of concern fixed on his smooth pink face. "Trouble?"

Ross nodded. "Curtis. Tried to jump into the fuelchute. He's got it, Doc."

Scowling, Spangler rubbed his cheek, then said: "They always pick the best times, dammit. It's swell having a psycho on a Mercury run."

"That's the way it is," Ross said wearily. "Better put him in statis till we get home. I'd hate to have him running loose looking for different ways of doing himself in.

"Why can't you let me die?" Curtis asked. His face was bleak. "Why'd you have to stop me?"

"Because, you lunatic, you'd have killed all the rest of us by your fool dive into the converter. Go walk out the airlock if you want to die—but don't take us with you."

Spangler glared warningly at him. "Harry—"

"Okay," Ross said. "Take him away."

The psychman led Curtis within. The astrogator would be given a tranquilizing injection, and locked in an insoluble webfoam jacket for the rest of the journey. There was a chance he could be restored to sanity, once they returned to Earth, but Ross knew that the astrogator would make a beeline for the nearest method of suicide the moment he was let loose in space.

Brooding, Ross turned away. A man spends his boyhood dreaming about space, he thought, spends four years at the Academy and two more making dummy runs. Then he finally gets up where it counts, and he cracks up. Curtis was an astrolgation machine, not a normal human being; and he had just disqualified himself permanently from the only job he knew how to do.

Ross shivered, feeling chill despite the bloated bulk of the sun filling the rear screen. It could happen to anyone . . . even him. He thought of Curtis, lying in a foam cradle somewhere in the back of the ship, blackly thinking over and over again *I want to die,* while Doc Spangler muttered soothing things at him. A human being was really a frail form of life, Ross reflected.

Death seemed to hang over the ship; the gloomy aura of Curtis' suicide-wish polluted the atmosphere.

Ross shook his head and punched down savagely on the signal to prepare for deceleration. The unspinning globe that was Mercury bobbed up ahead. He spotted it through the front screen.

They were approaching the tiny planet middle-on. He could see the neat division now: the brightness of Sunside, the unapproachable inferno where zinc ran in rivers, and the icy blackness of Darkside, dull with its unlit plains of frozen CO^2.

Down the heart of the planet ran the Twilight Belt, that narrow area of not-cold and not-heat where Sunside and Darkside met to provide a thin band of barely-tolerable territory, a ring nine thousand miles in circumference and ten or twenty miles wide.

The *Leverrier* plunged downward. "Downward" was actually a misnomer—space has no ups or downs—but it was the simplest way for Ross to visualize the approach. He allowed his jangled nerves to calm. The ship was in the hands of the autopilot; the orbit was precomputed and the analog banks in the drive were happily following the taped program, bringing the ship to rest smack in the middle of—

My God!

Ross went cold from head to toe. The precomputed tape had been fed to the analog banks—had been prepared by—had been the work of—

Curtis.

A suicidal madman had worked out the *Leverrier's* landing program.

Ross' hands began to shake. How easy it would have been, he thought, for death-bent Curtis to work out an orbit that would plant the *Leverrier* in a smoking river of molten lead—or in the mortuary chill of Darkside.

His false security vanished. There was no trusting the automatic pilot; they'd have to risk a manual landing.

Ross jabbed down on the communicator button. "I want Brainerd," he said hoarsely.

The First Astrogator appeared a few seconds later, peering in curiously. "What goes, Captain?"

"We've just carted your assistant Curtis off to the pokey. He tried to jump into the converter."

"He—?"

Ross nodded. "Attempted suicide; I nabbed him in time. But in view of the circumstances, I think we'd better discard the tape you had him prepare and bring the ship down manually, yes?"

The First Astrogator moistened his lips. "Maybe that's a good idea," he said.

"Damn right it is," Ross said, glowering.

As the ship touched down, Ross thought, *Mercury is two hells in one.*

It was the cold, icebound kingdom of Dante's deepest pit—and it was also the brimstone empire of another conception. The two met, fire and frost, each hemisphere its own kind of hell.

He lifted his head and flicked a quick glance at the instrument panel above his deceleration cradle. The dials all checked: weight placement was proper, stability 100%, external temperature a manageable 108F., indicating they had made their landing a little to the sunward of the Twilight Belt's exact middle. It had been a sound landing.

He snapped on the communicator. "Brainerd?"

"All OK, Captain."

"How was the landing? You used manual, didn't you?"

"I had to," the astrogator said. "I ran a quick check on Curtis' tape and it was all cockeyed. We'd have grazed

Mercury's orbit by a whisker and kept going—straight for the sun. Nice?"

"Sweet," Ross said. "But don't be too hard on the kid; it's not his fault he went psycho. Good landing, anyway. We seem to be pretty close to the center of the Twilight Belt, give or take a mile or two."

He broke the contact and unwebbed himself. "We're here," he announced over the shipwide circuit. "All hands to fore double pronto."

The men got there quickly enough—Brainerd first, then Doc Spangler, followed by Accumulator Tech Krinsky and the three crewmen. Ross waited until the entire group had assembled.

They were looking around curiously for Curtis, all but Brainerd and Spangler. Crisply, Ross said, "Astrogator Curtis won't be with us. He's aft in the psycho bin; luckily, we can shift without him on this tour."

He waited till the implications of that statement had sunk in. The men adjusted to it well, he thought, judging from the swiftness with which the horror faded from their faces.

"All right," he said. "Schedule calls for us to spend a maximum of thirty-two hours on Mercury before departure. Brainerd, how does that check with our location?"

The astrogator frowned and made some mental calculations. "Current position is a trifle to the sunward edge of the Twilight Belt; but as I figure it, the sun won't be high enough to put the Fahrenheit much above 120 for at least a week. Our suits can handle that sort of temperature with ease."

"Good. Llewellyn, you and Falbridge break out the radar inflaters and get the tower set up as far to the east as you can go without roasting. Take the crawler, but be sure to keep an eye on the thermometer. We've only got one heat-suit and that's for Krinsky."

Llewellyn, a thin, sunken-eyed spaceman, shifted uneasily., "How far to the east do you suggest, sir?"

"The Twilight Belt covers about a quarter of Mercury's surface," Ross said. "You've got a strip 47 degrees wide to move around in—but I don't suggest you go much more than twenty-five miles or so. It starts getting hot after that, and keeps going up."

"Yes, sir."

Ross turned to Krinsky. The Accumulator Tech was the key man of the expedition; it was his job to check the readings on the pair of Solar Accumulators that had been left here by the first expedition. He was to measure the amount of stress created by solar energies here, so close to the source of radiation, study force-lines operating in the strange magnetic field of the little world, and re-prime the Accumulators for further testing at a later date.

Krinsky was a tall, powerfully-built man, the sort of man who could stand up to the crushing weight of a heat-suit almost cheerfully. The heat-suit was necessary for prolonged work in the Sunside zone, where the Accumulators were—and even a giant like Krinsky could stand the strain only for a few hours at a time.

"When Llewellyn and Falbridge have the radar tower set up, Krinsky, get into your heat-suit and be ready to move. As soon as we've got the Accumulator Station located, Cominic will drive you as far east as possible and drop you off. The rest is up to you. We'll be telemetering your readings, but we'd like to have you back alive."

"Yes, sir."

"That's about it," Ross said. "Let's get rolling."

Ross' own job was purely administrative—and, as the men of his crew moved busily about their allotted tasks, he realized unhappily that he himself was condemned to temporary idleness. His function was that of overseer; like the conductor of a symphony orchestra, he played no instrument

himself, and was on hand mostly to keep the group moving in harmony toward the finish.

Now, he had only to wait.

Llewellyn and Falbridge departed, riding the segmented, thermo-resistant crawler carried in the belly of the *Leverrier.* Their job was simple: they were to erect the inflatable plastic radar tower far to sunward. The tower that had been left by the first expedition had long since librated into a Sunside zone and been liquefied; the plastic base and parabola, covered with a light reflective surface of aluminum, could hardly withstand the searing heat of Sunside.

Out there, it got up to 700° when the sun was at its closest; the eccentricities of Mercury's orbit accounted for considerable Sunside temperature variations; but the thermometer never showed lower than 300° on Sunside, even during aphelion. On Darkside, there was little variation; temperature hung down near absolute zero, and frozen drifts of heavy gases covered the surface of the land.

From where he stood, Ross could see neither Sunside nor Darkside. The Twilight Belt was nearly a thousand miles broad, and as the planet dipped in its orbit the sun would first slide above the horizon, then dip back. For a twenty-mile strip through the heart of the Belt, the heat of Sunside and the cold of Darkside cancelled out into a fairly stable temperate climate; for five hundred miles on either side, the Twilight Belt gradually tricked toward the areas of cold and raging heat.

It was a strange and forbidding planet. Humans could endure it only for short times; the sort of life that *would* be able to exist permanently on Mercury was beyond his conception. Standing outside the *Leverrier* in his spacesuit, Ross nudged the chin control that lowered a pane of optical glass. He peered first toward Darkside, where he thought he saw a thin line of encroaching black—only illusion, he knew—and then toward Sunside.

In the distance, Lewellyn and Falbridge were erecting the spidery parabola that was the radar tower. He could see the clumsy shape outlined against the sky now—and behind it? A faint line of brightness rimming the bordering peaks? Illusion also, he knew. Brainerd had calculated that the sun's radiance would not be visible here for a week. And in a week's time they'd be back on Earth.

He turned to Krinsky. "The tower's nearly up. They'll be back with the crawler any minute. You'd better get ready to make your trip."

Krinsky nodded. "I'll suit up, sir."

As the technician swung up the handholds and into the ship, Ross' thoughts turned to Curtis. The young astrogator had prattled of seeing Mercury, all the way out—and now that they were actually here, Curtis lay in a web of foam deep within the ship, moodily demanding the right to die.

Krinsky returned, now wearing the insulating bulk of the heat-suit over his standard rebreathing outfit. He looked like a small tank rather than a man. "Is the crawler approaching, sir?"

"I'll take a look."

Ross adjusted the lensplate in his mask and narrowed his eyes. It seemed to him that the temperature had risen somewhat. Another illusion, he thought, as he squinted into the distance.

His eyes picked out the radar tower far off toward Sunside. His mouth sagged open.

"Something the matter sir?"

"I'll say!" Ross squeezed his eyes tight shut and looked again. And—yes—the newly erected radar tower was drooping soggily, and beginning to melt. He saw two tiny figures racing madly over the flat, pumice-covered ground to the silvery oblong that was the crawler. And—impossibly—the first glow of an unmistakeable brightness was beginning to shimmer on the mountains behind the tower.

The sun was rising—a week ahead of schedule!

Ross gasped and ran back into the ship, followed by the lumbering Krinsky. In the airlock, mechanical hands descended to help him out of his spacesuit; he signalled to Krinsky to remain in the heat-suit, and dashed through the main cabin.

"Brainerd! Brainerd! Where in hell are you?"

The senior astrogator appeared, looking puzzled. "Yes, Captain?"

"Look out the screen," Ross said in a strangled voice. "Look at the radar tower!"

"It's—*melting*," Brainerd said astonished. "But that's—that's—"

"I know. It's impossible." Ross glanced at the instrument panel. External temperature had risen to 112—a jump of four degrees. And as he watched it clicked up to 114.

It would take a heat of at least 500° to melt the radar tower that way. Ross squinted at the screen, and saw the crawler come swinging dizzily toward them: Llewellyn and Falbridge were still alive, then—though they probably had had a good cooking out there. The temperature outside the ship was up to 116. It would probably be near 200 by the time the two men returned.

Angrily, Ross faced the astrogator. "I thought you were bringing us down in the safety strip," he snapped. "Check your figures again and find out where the hell we *really* are. Then work out a blasting orbit. That's the *sun* coming up over those hills."

"I know," Brainerd said.

The temperature reached 120. The ships's cooling system would be able to keep things under control and comfortable until about 250; beyond that, there was danger of an overload. The crawler continued to draw near; it was probably hellish in that little landcar, he thought.

His mind weighted alternatives. If the external temperature went much over 250, he would run the risk of wrecking the ship's cooling system by waiting for the two in the crawler to arrive. He decided he'd give them until it hit 275 to get back and then clear out. It was foolish to try to save two lives at a cost of five. External temperature had hit 130. Its rate of increase was jumping rapidly.

The ship's crew knew what was going on now. Without direct orders from Ross, they were readying the *Leverrier* for an emergency blastoff.

The crawler inched forward. The two men weren't much more than ten miles away now; and at an average speed of forty miles an hour they'd be back within fifteen minutes. Outside it was 133. Long fingers of shimmering sunlight stretched toward them from the horizon.

Brainerd looked up from his calculations. "I can't work it. The damned figures don't come out."

"Huh?"

"I'm computing our location—and I can't do the arithmetic. My head's all foggy."

What the hell, Ross thought. This was when a captain earned his pay. "Get out of the way," he snapped. "Let me do it."

He sat down at the desk and started figuring. He saw Brainerd's hasty notations scratched out everywhere. It was as if the astrogator had totally forgotten how to do his job.

Let's see, now. If we're—

His pencil flew over the pad—but as he worked he saw that it was all wrong. His mind felt bleary, strange; he couldn't seem to handle the computations. Looking up, he said, "Tell Krinsky to get down there and be ready to help those men out of the crawler when it gets here. They're probably half-cooked."

Temperature 146. He looked back at the pad. Damn; it shouldn't be that hard to do simple trig, he thought.

Doc Spangler appeared. "I cut Curtis free," he announced. "He isn't safe during take off in that cradle."

From within came a steady mutter. "Just let me die . . . just let me die . . ."

"Tell him he's likely to have his wish," Ross murmured. "If I can't work out a blastoff orbit we'll all roast here."

"How come *you're* doing it? What's the matter with Brainerd?"

"Choked up. Couldn't do the figures. And come to think of it, I feel pretty funny myself."

Fingers of fog seemed to wrap around his mind. He glanced at the dial. Termperature 152 outside. That gave the boys in the crawler 123 degrees to get back here . . . or was it 321? He was confused utterly bewildered.

Doc Spangler looked strange too. The psych officer was frowning curiously. "I feel very lethargic suddenly," Spangler declared. "I know I really should get back to Curtis, but—"

The madman was keeping up a steady babble inside. The part of Ross' mind that could still think clearly realized that if left unattended Curtis was capable of almost anything.

Temperature 158. The crawler seemed nearer. On the horizon, the radar tower was becoming a crazy shambles.

There was a shriek. "It's Curtis!" Ross yelled, his mind returning to awareness hurriedly, and peeled out from behind the desk. He ran aft, followed by Spangler, but it was too late.

Curtis lay on the floor in a bloody puddle. He had found a pair of shears somewhere.

Spangler bent. "He's dead."

"Of course. He's dead." Ross echoed. His brain felt totally clear now; at the moment of Curtis' death, the fog had lifted. Leaving Spangler to attend to the body, he returned to the desk and glanced at the computation.

With icy clarity he determined their location. They had come down better than three hundred miles to sunward of

where they thought they had been. The instruments hadn't lied—but someone's eyes had. The orbit Brainerd that had so solemnly assured him was a "safe" one was actually almost as deadly as the one Curtis had computed.

He looked outside. The crawler was almost there; temperature was 167. There was plenty of time. They would make it with a few minutes to spare, thanks to the warning they had received from the melting radar tower.

But why had it happened? There was no answer to that.

Gigantic in his heat-suit, Krinsky brought Llewellyn and Falbridge aboard. They peeled out of their spacesuits and wobbled unsteadily, then collapsed. They looked like a pair of just-boiled lobsters.

"Heat prostration," Ross said. "Krinsky, get them into takeoff cradles. Dominic, you in your suit yet?"

The spaceman appeared at the airlock entrance and nodded.

"Good. Get down there and drive the crawler into the hold. We can't afford to leave it here. Double-quick, and then we'll blast off. Brainerd, that new orbit ready?"

"Yes, sir."

The thermometer grazed 200. The cooling system was beginning to suffer—but its agonies were to be shortlived. Within minutes, the *Leverrier* had lifted from Mercury's surface—minutes ahead of the relentless advance of the sun—and swung into a temporary planet-circling orbit.

As they hung there, virtually catching their breaths, just one question rose in Ross' mind: *why?* Why did Brainerd's orbit bring them down in a danger zone instead of the safety strip? Why had both Brainerd and Ross been unable to compute a blasting-pattern, the simplest of elementary astrogation techniques? And why had Spangler's wits utterly failed him—just long enough to let the unhappy Curtis kill himself?

Ross could see the same question reflected on everyone's face: *why?*

He felt an itchy feeling at the base of his skull. And suddenly, an image forced its way across his mind in answer.

It was a great pool of molten zinc, lying shimmering between two jagged crests somewhere on Sunside. It had been there thousands of years; it would be there thousands, perhaps millions of years from now.

Its surface quivered. The sun's brightness upon the pool was intolerable even to the mind's eye.

Radiation beat down on the zinc pool—the sun's radiation, hard and unending, and then a new radiation, an electromagnetic emanation with it a meaningful commutation:

I want to die.

The pool of zinc stirred fretfully with sudden impulses of helpfulness.

The vision passed as quickly as it came. Stunned, Ross looked up hesitantly. The expression on the six faces surrounding him told him what he wanted to know.

"You felt it too," he said.

Spangler nodded, then Krinsky and the rest of them.

"Yes," Krinsky said. "What the devil was it?"

Brainerd turned to Spangler. "Are we all nuts, Doc?"

The psych officer shrugged. "Mass hallucination . . . collective hypnosis . . .

"No, Doc." Ross leaned forward. "You know it as well as I do. That thing was real; it's down there, out on Sunside."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that wasn't any hallucination we had. That's *life* —or as close to it as Mercury can come." Ross' hands shook; he forced them to subside. "We've stumbled over something very big," he said.

Spangler stirred uneasily. "Harry—"

"No, I'm not out of my head! Don't you see—that thing down there, whatever it is, is sensitive to our thoughts! It

picked up Curtis' godawful caterwauling the way a radar set grabs electromagnetic waves. His were the strongest thoughts coming through; so it acted on them and did its damnedest to help Curtis' wish come true."

"You mean by fogging our minds, and deluding us into thinking we were in safe territory, when actually we were right near sunrise territory?"

But why would it go to all that trouble?" Krinsky objected. "If it wanted to help poor Curtis kill himself, why didn't it just fix it so we came down right *in* Sunside? We'd cook a lot quicker that way."

Ross shook his head. "It knew that the rest of us *didn't* want to die. The thing down there must be a multi-valued thinker. It took the conflicting emanations of Curtis and the rest of us, and fixed things so that he'd die, and we wouldn't." He shivered. "Once Curtis was out of the way, it acted to help the surviving crewmembers get off to safety. If you'll remember, we all thought and moved a lot quicker the instant Curtis was dead."

"Damned if that's not so," Spangler said. "But—"

"What I want to know is, do we go back down?" Krinsky asked. "If that thing is what you say it is, I'm not so sure I want to go within reach of it again. Who knows what it might make us do *this* time?"

"It wants to help us," Ross said stubbornly. "It's not hostile. You're not afraid, are you? I was counting on you to go out and scout for it in the heat-suit."

"Not me!" Krinsky said hasily.

Ross scowled. "But this is the first intelligent life-form we've hit in the Solar System yet. We can't simply run away and hide!" To Brainerd he said, "Set up an orbit that'll take us back down again—and this time put us down where we won't melt."

"I can't do it, sir," Brainerd said flatly. "I believe the

safety of the crew will be best served by returning to Earth at once."

Facing the group of them, Ross glanced quickly from one to the next. There was fear evident on the faces of all of them. He knew what each of them was thinking: *I don't want to go back to Mercury.*

Six of them; one of him. And the helpful thing below.

They had outnumbered Curtis seven to one—but unmixed death-wish. Ross knew he could never generate enough strength of thought to counteract the fear-ridden thoughts of the other six.

This is mutiny, he thought, but somehow he did not care to speak the thought aloud. Here was a case where a superior officer might legitimately be removed from command for the common good, and he knew it.

The creature below was ready to offer its services. But, multi-valued as it might be, there was still only one spaceship, and one of the two parties—either he or the rest of them—would have to be denied its wishes.

Yes, he thought, the pool had contrived to satisfy both the man who wished to die and those who wished to stay alive. Now, six wanted to return—but could the voice of the seventh be ignored? *You're not being fair to me,* Ross thought, direction his angry outburst toward the planet below. *I want to see you. I want to study you. Don't let them drag me back to Earth.*

When the *Leverrier* returned to Earth, a week later, the six survitors of the Second Mercury Expedition could all describe in detail how a fierce death-wish had overtaken Second Astrogator Curtis and caused his suicide. But not one of them could recall what had happened to Flight Commander Ross, or why the heat-suit had been left behind on Mercury.

✦ ✦ ✦

Venus is already the target of Earthly space vehicles. It surely will be the first of Earth's neighbors today's astronauts will visit. But is it a world of eternal rain and misery, or a world of burning desert and heat? John Brunner takes us to Venus, second planet from the sun, and tells a narrative of humanity's problems on the first world mankind may colonize.

BY THE NAME OF MAN

by John Brunner

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

IT WAS raining.

Lattimer turned over on his back and wished for a yielding plastifoam mattress instead of this coarse hard mat of packed leaves. But he had wished for that every morning for three years and it wasn't getting him one.

For a few minutes he lay and listened to the steady beat of the rain thundering across the roof. The clock on the wall was an importation from Earth, and kept Greenwich time, but he had grown used to the mental gymnastics of compensation and preferred it to the complex self-adjusting models that they used at the port. His subconscious calculated that it lacked fifteen minutes of rising time, give or take a minute.

He turned over and buried his face in the pillow. Somehow the fifteen minutes went in a flash, and there came a soft tapping at the door.

He threw the blanket aside and stood up, rubbing his eyes. After pulling on a robe, he went to answer.

The native bowed ceremoniously, and a light, dulled by the heavy veil of overcast, gleamed on his rain-slicked fur. It wasn't really fur, of course—it only served to trap his body oils and keep his sensitive skin dry in the unceasing wetness. Even after three years, Lattimer had to wait until the native straightened before he could recognize him and make the formal acknowledgment.

"Is it a good day?" he asked.

"It is a good day," said the native. His head came up and Lattimer identified him as Ris. He folded his forelimb webs back against the bone, revealing the basket of food he had protected under them. "I bring the offering. Is it well?"

"It is well," said Lattimer. It was, this time. His mouth watered at the sight of the paplet and broomak the basket held.

The native lowered it to the floor inside the entrance and retreated, bowing again. Lattimer waited for him to retire properly—it was unseemly for Ris to see him take the basket up—but he appeared strangely hesitant. Risking—as he always had to do—being found wrong, he said, "The audience today will be when the shadow of the time-tree reaches the fifth mark."

Ris bowed again, but still did not turn and leave. This implied trouble of some kind, thought Lattimer. He cast around in his mind for a possible explanation, but was forced to give it up. He said, "Ris may speak that which he wishes."

Ris's webs spread and re-folded in a gesture of nervousness. It was rare for the freedom of speech to be given except in full audience—but it was a signal honour, all the same.

He said, "May it please you, there is the question of the human in the forest."

Lattimer froze into startled immobility. This was impossible! There wasn't another man within two hundred miles, except the maintence crew across the ridge, and they did not venture alone from their own colony. He kept his face carefully mask-like while he answered with an affected air of boredom. "What of him?"

"He has remained in one place by himself for a day and part of a day—so long as it would take the time-tree's shadow to reach from the first to the fourth mark. We cannot understand his words, and he will not leave his place."

God almighty, thought Lattimer—and the concept brought a wry smile to his eyes, though it got no further—a man out alone in the forest. Where the hell did he come from? More important—what was he doing?

Aloud, he said, "You have brought him offerings?"

"Assuredly. Even such as we have brought to you."

He wouldn't starve, then. "There is no need to do more," he added aloud, his mind working furiously. He didn't dare disrupt the standard cycle of an audience day. First there was the audience itself, and he had gathered prior word that there was a long case to hear. Then he had told Chief Miglaun that he wished to survey the new plantings of curra and paplet in the paddies to the west of the village. Then there was the fact that this made the fourth rain in three days, and the levee surrounding those fields was none too strong. He couldn't get away before nightfall, in all likelihood, and the natives wouldn't stir out into the forest once it was dark.

But equally, he couldn't leave a man out there. Maybe, if the stranger was carrying a radio pack, he could contact him, but as far as locating him went, it would be chancy homing in the forest on a weak signal. The static build-up would be

partially released by this rain, but the prospect was far from good.

Well, if the worst came to the worst, he reasoned, he could postpone the inspection of the fields on the grounds that his brother wished to confer with him.

"I thank you, Ris," he said. "Your concern for my brother is well-meant, though of course needless. Perhaps I shall visit him this day."

Seal-black, moving with the sinuous grace of a seal, Ris retreated down the hill towards the village. Lattimer closed the door and stood leaning against it. Now what in hell was he in for? Wasn't it bad enough just being here and running the place—?

He picked up the basket and transferred its contents to the food-cupboard. Absently, he selected the best of the paplets and dropped it in the cleaner to be readier for his breakfast. Then he put on his best breeches and slicker, and a pair of thigh boots—the mud would be somewhere around knee-level after this rain. He combed his beard, wishing that someone would invent an everlasting razor-blade, or better yet, a depilatory which didn't make his face sore, and trimmed off a few untidy wisps of hair behind his ears. All this time his mind was working over the problem of who the stranger might be.

In the middle of breakfast he got up from his chair and tried the locator on his radio. The rain had only discharged part of the static from the overcast, and sighting was bad, but he got some sort of blip from a spot almost five miles off in the forest—on a rough line to the spaceport and not far from the pegging-ground where he'd split the last jume. It was very faint, but it looked sufficiently like the emanation from a tired personal beacon to make him sure of his estimate.

That was bad. There was nothing on the communicating band—only the continuous weather call from the port, dimmed by the mountains. Either the stranger hadn't got a

talkie, or he was tired of trying to get an answer—or he was afraid of getting an answer.

If his last guess was right, he was headed for a whole load of trouble.

He glanced at the clock and saw with a start that he was already a minute late for audience. He shut off the locator and made for the door, only to stop, face about and come back hastily for his blaster. It would never do to attend an audience without his power-symbol. And it was a measure of his agitation that he had forgotten.

The audience was held in the centre of the village near the time-tree which had been one of his first jobs when he arrivd. He had got tired of having no standard of time by which to arrange his meetings with the natives, though they weren't worried by it. So he had installed a tree and put rings around it, designing them carefully so that the faint, dim shadow cast by the big bright blur that was the sun would intersect them at easily identifiable times. It was a chancy, fallible system but it was rare for the sun to be so blotted out by the overcast that it was quite impossible for a shadow to be detected. And it had the great point of complete non-mechanism in its favor.

He arrived, walking slowly as soon as he came in sight, to find the elders of the village already assembled. Ris, he noticed, was receiving glances of envy from his neighbors. He must have spread the word that he had been granted free speech with Lattimer at rising time.

Lattimer hid his smile and took his place on a small dais before the council square with the slow dignity befitting a man. He said, "Let Chief Miglaun stand forth."

In the front row of squatting natives, the chief slid forward lithely. He said, "May it please you, we have two disputes among us."

"I will hear them," nodded Lattimer. He frowned with the effort of concentration. It was a difficult task keeping his

mind on the petty squabbles of these people when there was a man loose in the forest. It was not what the natives might do that worried him—it was what the man might do. He could upset quite a lot of things, not least himself.

The first case proved easily resolvable. He had in fact settled an identical dispute some months before, but the natives had not yet reached the stage of judging by precedent. For them, life was still one long today.

When the parties had stated their claims in the matter of the disputed land-trade, he gave judgment without hesitation.

The second case was the one he had expected for some weeks. One of the chief's egg-sibs was involved, which made it inevitable that it would in time be passed out of the tribal jurisdiction to the court of final appeal—that was himself. Nonetheless, the chief had put up a steady fight to have it resolved in favor of his sib, and Lattimer thought he detected a slight air of displeasure in the attitude of the elders. He gave himself up to the tangles of the law with almost heartfelt relief. The necessity for passing judgment meant that he had no chance to make up his mind about the stranger—yet.

Have to do something about old Miglaun, he reflected. It's bad for tribal discipline to find fault with their chief, but if he tries to drag in nepotism I'll have to depose him.

The case dragged on. The rain lightened and let up. The shadow, faint though it was, of the time-tree reached the sixth and final mark and began to drift back. While he listened to the evidence, Lattimer made his decision. This was going to be tough on Miglaun, but it was his own fault. He had got himself the chieftaincy by a bit of sharp practice in the first place, and the flurry of electing a new one would give Lattimer a respite from the proposed tour of inspection. That meant he could slip out into the forest, taking a couple of non-partisans—say Ris and Flaokh, the two Awakeners, who could not meddle in politics because of their religious

office. They would be able to put him in touch with the stranger easily enough.

He stood up from his chair. Instantly the natives stopped their wrangling and looked at him expectantly.

He mustered an expression of disdain and contempt. "You will find a new chief," he said shortly. "Chief Miglaun has tried to sway my judgment from the path of justice with fair words on behalf of his egg-sib, thinking that I will pay more heed to his sayings than to those of a common member of the clan. Be it known that this is not so. In my ears have the words of an honest commoner more weight than those of a partial chief. This case may be re-stated when Miglaun no longer has the garb of chieftaincy to color his evidence. I have spoken."

A wonderful idea in theory, thought Lattimer wryly. He wished it could be more genuinely applied. Then he looked tensely around the circle of elders to see if his words had met with approval. They would be carried out regardless, of course—he had "spoken"—but it was as well to keep the goodwill of the elders. With a faint stirring of relief he noticed that they all relaxed together. That was what they wanted, then.

He added. "The audience is adjourned until there is a new chief. Ris!"

The senior Awakener shuffled forward through the crowd.

"I desire that you and Flaokh, whom I have debarred from chieftaincy in view of your high office in my service, shall accompany me now that I go to confer with my brother in the forest. Is it well?"

"It is well," said Ris, his webs furling and unfurling as if he was trying to convey his surprise and delight simultaneously.

It took Lattimer only a few minutes to check that the blip he had caught on the locator was still in the same place, and to make sure that the drizzle of the rain had not damped

the magazine of his blaster. His best clothes would have to do for this trip—the election of the chief might go through smoothly for once, one never knew, and he might have to re-commence the audience at short notice.

Then there came a hesitant tapping at the door again, and he opened it and went out to find Ris and Flaokh waiting on the stoep. He said, "Is it well?"

"It is well," the Awakeners replied in chorus.

"Then come with me."

He set a brisk but not undignified pace with which the natives had little trouble in keeping up. The path they were to take led them past the fields he had intended to survey, and he noted with a slight frown that the levee was not doing so well as he had hoped. The incessant rain had pulped the tough bark of the stanchions into softness, and that meant a new working party out here tomorrow. He couldn't spare them today, of course. In some ways it was a pity at times like this that he had insisted on all adult members of the tribe attending audiences and elections and taking part in tribal affairs, but it would set a useful precedent at later stages of their development.

Beside him, the two natives kept silence, except for the splashing of their feet in the wet earth. He hoped devoutly that he wouldn't have to ask them for guidance—the ability of one man to talk to another across miles of country was one of the deepest-rooted of their articles of faith. Unfortunately, since the stranger either had no talkie or was using none, he had to rely on the only too fallible locator trace.

After a while he condescended to relax a little, and said. "Whom do the people say shall be the next chief?"

Ris, flapping his webs, answered. "It will be most likely Chinsel. People remember the commendation you gave him for his planning of the paddies. It was even as you said: his work was of a standard that would not have shamed a man."

Lattimer considered. It was good to find that they were coming to recognize administrative ability, and it was quite true that Chinsel had shown a remarkable intuitive grasp of engineering requirements in his design for the levee. Of course, it had had to be strengthened three times in as many months, but that was to be expected, and certainly it was praiseworthy to succeed as well as that with no more than hints by way of guidance from Lattimer.

Ris appeared to think he had been over-bold in comparing Chinsel to a man, even in view of his privileged position. He fell behind slightly, and allowed Flaokh to come up beside Lattimer. The party continued in silence.

In the light gravity the man had the advantage of making fast time where the ground was firm, but where it had melted into mud the natives made that up, and they took barely an hour to reach the spot at which the blip had shown. Lattimer mentally crossed his fingers. If the man had moved, he would have a *lot* of difficulty explaining why he could not find him.

They crossed the pegging-ground where the monstrous carcass of the last jume to come marauding through this part of the country lay stretched out on its wooden frame. Beneath it the little pottery jars which caught the valuable secretions from its five major glands were almost full, and he made a mental note to have them collected. The natives' metabolism had not yet come under serious study, and the existence of a natural source of antibiotics for them was not to be overlooked. The forty-foot bulk of the monster had shrunk slightly, but it would take another month for its flesh to become soft enough for the natives to carve it up and bury it.

They skirted the body. On the far side of the clearing a faint trail showed between the trees, and Lattimer followed it optimistically. As it turned out, he was correct in his choice. Only a few yards further on three baskets of offerings

lay untouched at the mouth of a friendly-palm, whose matted leaves formed a sort of vegetable cavern ten feet deep.

The natives drew back in awe and hesitation. Lattimer told them to come forward and not to be afraid. He raised his voice and called in the native language, "Come forth, brother!"

There was a cautious stirring at the mouth of the palm, and a man looked out from between the leaves. At the sight of the natives he drew back, cursing.

"Is the human angry?" demanded Ris anxiously. "Have we offended him? We have brought him only such gifts as you have accepted."

Lattimer motioned him to silence. "I shall now speak to him in the human tongue," he said quietly. "I shall find the reason for my brother's displeasure."

Brother, he thought. Egg-sib was the only translation of its exact meaning—but somehow, though he accepted the precise semantic equivalent mentally when thinking of the monosexual natives, he still clung to the human aspect when he referred to another man.

The two natives shied at mention of the holy language, and scuttered to the edge of the clearing. "*Allo!*" said Lattimer in International. "Kis é tu? O é amik!"

Again the face appeared. It was dirty. It bore a ten-day-old beard that was matted and untidy. Its eyes were tired and inflamed. Lattimer was profoundly glad that Ris and Glaokh had never seen any down-and-outs from whom they might have drawn conclusions about this specimen of man.

He saw Lattimer, and instantly a blaster was poking through the gap in the foliage. The natives saw the power-symbol and rejoiced aloud, keeningly.

"Ne tir!" said Lattimer sharply. "Keské tu fas, ne tir!" He searched the other's face for some sign of understanding. Apparently he didn't speak International, though it was the

safest bet. He tried English, and repeated, "Don't shoot! Whatever you do, don't shoot!"

"So you do talk human," said the stranger sullenly. He lowered the blaster and stepped to the mouth of the cavern. Lattimer looked him up and down.

"You've had a rough time of it," he said evenly. "What was the trouble?"

The stranger appeared to be considering. Then he holstered the blaster reluctantly. His clothes were badly torn—Lattimer guessed he had stumbled into a zareba bush somewhere—and his arms and legs were marked with its scratches. He said, "What are those things? Pets?"

Lattimer hid his surprise. "They're my Awakeners," he said. "A couple of senior officials from my village. It's only five miles back that way. I can offer you food and clothes and a bath. And something for those scratches of yours."

The other did not appear to have heard the last part of the statement. He was gazing incredulously at the natives. At length he laughed briefly. "Senior officials, you call them! They look like a couple of performing seals to me."

"They do, don't they?" agreed Lattimer. "By the way, my name's Lattimer. I'm a Resident, as you must have guessed."

"Can't see anyone dropping in on this place for more than a quick look-see," said the other. "Name's—Tomson. Jim Tomson."

Lattimer failed to comment on the hesitation. "You can't stay here," he said reasonably. "I'm afraid it'll be some time before the next car from the port looks in on my place, but I can let you have a guide to the foot of the ridge, if you like, and the next Resident along will see you through the rest of the way. How come you're here, anyway?"

Tomson hesitated again. "Came with a group of prospectors," he said finally. "I mislaid the rest of the party. I expect there'll be a search out for me."

"I suppose so," said Lattimer calmly. He turned and made for the narrow path back through the forest. After a pause, Tomson fell into step with him.

He said nothing until they reached the pegging-ground. Then the sight of the monstrous carcase of the jume made him catch his breath, and he asked with an edge of fear on his voice, "Is that thing—dangerous?"

"It was," said Lattimer. He gave quick directions to Ris to pick up the jars beneath the frame and replace them with new ones.

"Are there—many of those things?" Tomson added.

"Not around here. That was the first we'd had in nearly four months," said Lattimer casually. "They're a bit of a problem further south. They're so mindless they don't object to a blaster and tough enough to take any kind of a bullet without noticing. The natives catch them in dead-falls and starve them to death—they have a faster metabolism than most creatures on the planet. Takes about three days to finish them."

With commendable sense, Flaokh had thrown the stale offerings out of one of the baskets nearby and packed the jars full of jume secretion in soft moss. He announced their readiness to Lattimer, and the party set out again. Tomson cast awed glances over his shoulder as they left the pegging-ground.

"I was lucky I didn't meet one of those things while I was out here," he ventured. "Or I wouldn't have lasted long." He tried a chuckle which died on him.

Lattimer turned an unsmiling face to him. "It's nothing to joke about," he said soberly. "A jume is very careless about the way it kills people. It tends to break them up and leave them to die. Human beings interfere with its digestion."

Tomson turned his eyes firmly to the trail ahead.

They left Ris and Flaokh at the village, and continued up towards the Residency, which stood on the only piece of

fairly high ground within miles. It was common to find such a spot chosen—perhaps the natives subconsciously assumed when building them that the men from beyond the sky wanted to be as near home as possible. Here Lattimer fetched out his first-aid kit, swabbed the scratches on Tomson's arms and legs with surgical spirit, and spread them with a tissue regenerant.

He realized as he returned the kit to the cupboard that the long walk had made him uncommonly hungry. He asked the other curiously, "How did you manage for food?"

"I had my emergency pack," said Tomson. He gestured at it, lying across a chair along with the little personal radio beacon which had guided Lattimer to his refuge.

"But that can't have lasted you long." Lattimer was taking paplets, broomak and chirrits from the food store. "Why didn't you take the offerings the natives brought? Or didn't you see them?"

"Offerings?" Tomson stared. Then he gestured at the fruits Lattimer had set out on the table. "You mean you eat this stuff? Is is safe?"

Lattimer needed absolutely no more confirmation of his suspicions. Any prospector who turned himself loose on the country without learning the local vegetation was doomed to a very short career. Ergo, Tomson was no prospector. He kept his face carefully calm as he said, "Certainly. They taste quite good, too."

Apprehensively, Tomson helped himself to a chirrit. When he bit it, he grimaced at the sharp flavor, but after a few mouthfuls he nodded in appreciation.

He ate as if he was half-starved.

Across the table, Lattimer kept up a careful front, trying not to let it appear that he was watching the other. Not a prospector . . . That made it a better than even chance that Tomson—or whatever his real name was—was running away from someone.

After a while, the latter finished his food and glanced around. "Got a drink?" he asked.

"Surely," said Lattimer. He reached for the faucet of the rain-purifier. "That's one thing we're never short of."

"Ach, I didn't mean water," said Tomson. "A real drink."

Lattimer twisted back in his chair. "No," he answered politely. "No alcohol. The bacteria here don't ferment in the same way as terrestrial ones."

Tomson pulled a wry face. "Well, guess I'll have to take your word for it. No tobacco either, I suppose."

"Won't grow and won't keep. Only wet-belt stuff will take to the climate. I don't use it, anyway."

"Pity." Tomson tilted back his chair and nodded out of the window at the village. "What is this place, anyway?"

"My village," said Lattimer without a trace of conceit. "I told you—I'm a Resident."

"Government agent?" said Tomson. There was something about the way he said it. Something—deliberately casual.

"In a way," Lattimer told him, shrugging. "I have a charter, but I don't tangle with the Service boys. Too much red tape. I'm here to keep the natives respectful."

He phrased it with care. Maybe Tomson would take it the wrong way.

He did. "Then all these animals—they're what they call Venusians? he said. "This village—they built it?"

Lattimer nodded.

"I thought they were savages," Tomson went on. "It doesn't look too bad from what I saw of it. Do you have a lot of trouble keeping them in line?"

"I haven't up to now," said Lattimer pointedly.

Tomson missed the point. He looked the Resident over with narrow eyes, as if assessing his toughness. He seemed to form a favorable opinion—favorable as far as Lattimer was concerned.

"How long before this car from the port which you mentioned?" he inquired.

"Going on two years," said Lattimer quietly. "I'm due for relief in twenty-two months from now."

He rose and began to throw paplet hulls into the dispenser. "Of course, as I said, I can arrange for guides to get you back to port."

Tomson shuddered elaborately. "If you don't mind," he said, "I'd rather not face that forest again just yet."

"As you like," said Lattimer. "I'd be glad to some human company." He stressed the last word but one very slightly. "But if you plan to stay long, you'll have to learn the native language."

"Don't these seals talk English?"

Lattimer looked at him levelly. "They're forbidden to learn any human language," he said. "They might overhear things."

Tomson grinned lopsidedly. "I get," he said softly. "It might make them less respectful."

"Exactly," answered Lattimer. Heaven above, what had he done to deserve this?

There was a quiet knock at the door. Tomson started and tensed himself as Lattimer went to open. He found Flaokh waiting.

"Do you wish to continue your audience today?" the junior Awakener inquired politely, "or do you wish to confer further with your egg-sib?"

Lattimer checked the time. "I shall be present in the village when the shadow passes the third mark," he said. "As a mark of your respect, my brother"—same word, but he would never reconcile himself to the meaning of egg-sib in a human connection—"has announced that he will also be present."

Flaokh withdrew with the appropriate ceremony, and Lattimer turned to his involuntary visitor. "We'll have to go

down to the village," he said. "I adjourned an audience this morning and told them to elect a new chief—the last one was trying to use his position to get favors for his relatives. It'll mean you coming with me, of course. They thought you were displeased when you didn't take their offerings in the forest, so you'll have to present youself and show them you mean no harm."

Tomson stared unashamedly. Then he guffawed. "Sort of token of goodwill?" he asked. "All right—you know the ropes. Keep 'em happy at all costs, sort of thing."

"Not that exactly," said Lattimer. "By the way, I shall address you as—" he gave the native word for egg-sib. "To them, all men are as brothers. They haven't got a word for 'brother,' of course—they're hermaphroditic, like snails—but that is the nearest equivalent. It means 'born of the same egg'."

Tomson laughed again. "I'd have hated to share an egg with anybody. All right. I'll look wise if you talk to me—is that the idea?"

"That's the idea," said Lattimer, forcing a smile.

For the next few days he refrained carefully from using the communication band of the radio. Tomson might have taken it the wrong way. If the port knew of the latter's presence on Venus, it was ten to one that they had assumed him dead in the forest.

Fortunately, of course, for the first few weeks at any rate, until he felt sure of himself, Tomson would remain on his best behavior, and Lattimer managed to make the best of that time. What he would do when the other man started to make a nuisance of himself, he didn't know and hardly cared to think about. The risk of making an open break with him was too great to be contemplated. But he was walking a most horrible dangerous tight-rope.

It isn't easy for a man to be a god.

In the hope of putting off the inevitable, Lattimer took Tomson out and showed him his achievements—the drainage system, the levees around the paddy fields, the native pottery and housing designs. But Tomson remained steadily uninterested. He was content to let time go by in the life of comfort and relaxation which the constant care of the natives provided for him.

Almost three months went by before Lattimer's nerves began to tremble under the strain, and he broached the subject of the other's departure. At the first and second delicate mentions of it, Tomson brushed it aside, but at the third Lattimer was a little clumsy.

It was almost nightfall, and the rain had started again. After three years its drumming meant little to Lattimer, except to make him worried as always for the strength of the levees, but it still had a grating effect on Tomson. He snapped at Lattimer harshly, and then seemed to read a second meaning into the Resident's words.

He sat down slowly at the table. "You know," he said softly.

It was no good bandying words by this time. "Yes, I know," said Lattimer levelly. "You're no prospector, Jim. You're on the run from someone—at a guess, you stowed away on a Venus ship because Earth was considerably too hot for you. I've known it since you came here."

Tomson stared unblinkingly at him. "Why didn't you turn me in?" he said.

"And risk having you start a fight with me—or with the Service when they came to pick you up? Do you think I'm that crazy?"

"Spell it out," said Tomson coldly. "It's beginning to make a pattern—a mighty dirty pattern at that. You're scared of these black inhuman savages, aren't you? Why?"

Tiredly—he had had another long and complex case to solve at audience, and Chinsel was proving as difficult a

chief as Miglaun had been—tiredly Lattimer said, "No, I'm not afraid of them. I'm afraid of myself."

"Obviously," sneered Tomson. "I've been here three months now, and I've seen that these natives are getting to think they're very smart. *Very* smart. They'll be setting up to rival men next. You're coddling them, when what they need is someone to take a strong line with them—teach them who is master. You even let them argue with you—I've heard you do it!"

Lattimer folded his hands to stop them trembling. "They are smart," he said with an effort. "They figure their ideas out for themselves. They understand things like soil preservation and rotation of crops. Given another thirty to fifty years, and they'll be at the fertilizer level. They can work stone, they have fire—metal-working is only a few steps away. They're smart, all right."

"All the more reason to keep them down," said Tomson. "I know what I'd do if I were in your position. I'd keep them respectful, all right."

"Not for long," said Lattimer. He thought of other ways of solving the problem, but there remained only one that might work—and an appeal to a man like this would probably be wasted. Still, he had to try.

"You'd have learnt this tomorrow or the next day," he said. "It's worship day."

"What does that mean?" demanded Tomson.

"You and I are gods," said Lattimer soberly.

Tomson suddenly began to grin. "You mean that?" he said incredulously. "These creatures think we're gods? Well, isn't that just too sweet?"

"It's no joke," said Lattimer shortly. "It sure as hell is no joke at all. Have you ever tried to be infallible? To be just, merciful, humane, on top of giving advice on every kind of subject from civil engineering to agrobiology? It isn't easy."

Tomson wasn't listening. He was grinning widely as if he

had just been struck by a wonderful idea. "Well, isn't that just perfect?" he said. "Boy, what a set-up! I'm a god!"

Lattimer looked at him calmly. "Yes. Up to now you've behaved more or less like one, too—at any rate you've been polite and careful. Keep it that way. We're the only driving force in these people's lives. Their only motive for good behavior is to please the supernatural beings who came on wings of fire from beyond the sky. We can't afford to be wrong, Jim—or we'd lose Venus."

"Lose Venus? To a bunch of performing seals?"

Lattimer nodded. "We depend on them—for food, for a labor supply. We need their co-operation. If once we fail from the role they've assigned to us, we can expect organized opposition."

Tomson hefted his blaster. "What can they do against human weapons?" he demanded. "We've got everything they haven't."

"You've seen a jume," answered Lattimer. "The natives have known how to deal with creatures bigger, faster and more dangerous than men for centuries. We, on the other hand, lost the whole of two expeditions through the jumes."

Tomson cut him short. "This is idiotic!" he declared. "I know what I'd do if I had a lot of savages calling me a god. I'd get some profit out of it. You're more a slave than a master."

"Not at all," said Lattimer. "I'm simply having to live and act like a human being instead of an animal for the first time in my life. I'm having to keep my temper—to observe all the virtues—"

"Including chastity," said Tomson sourly. "Or doesn't it worry you?"

Lattimer half rose, his face murderous. As he fought to control himself, Tomson gestured significantly with his blaster. "I've—already killed a man," he said quietly "They can't do any more to me for killing two."

The Resident sank back into his seat. "Your threats don't bother me," he said. "I'm going to give you a choice. I'm prepared to keep you here until I'm relieved—what you do then is up to you. You haven't done me any wrong—yet. And, as I told you, I don't much like to tangle with the Service. They're one of my major liabilities in this job—they have a point of view too much like yours. But if you do one single thing to make this tribe distrust human beings—if you try to make capital for yourself out of your position—I'll either burn you down or turn you in."

He stared at the other man. "Is that fair enough?"

Tomson laughed and nodded.

It rained all that night and went on the next day. It was the longest single rain he could remember in three years and the natives weren't interested enough in the past to recall a precedent. It was bad for the levees that held back the swamp-water from the reclaimed paddies, and those were spreading by degrees. He went out the following morning on a tour of inspection with Chinsel, and discussed strengthening them again. The rain welled wetly down his neck, and added to his miseries, but fortunately Chinsel was more co-operative than usual today, since his own reputation was largely founded on the building of the levees.

On his return to the village, Lattimer held a full audience and announced the postponement of worship day. He implied carefully that the gods were being kind to their people and thinking of their safety before their homage. The gesture was met with appreciative web-spreadings.

Instead of the ceremony, then, the following day—which was mercifully dry again—was passed by the adult members of the clan in packing tough young saplings and interwoven reed hurdles into the sodden earth of the dams to reinforce them. When night fell, Lattimer carried out a final survey and decided, regretfully, that it would have to do. He

hoped that the rain would hold off long enough for the drainage system to clear the water down to a safe level.

But it set in again.

He was soaked and uncomfortable when he got back to the Residency, but the worry for the villagers' safety had displaced Tomson from his mind.

Now, though, he had to find the man engaged in trying to teach one of the younglings to fetch a stick. He sat in the partial shelter of the overhang of the stoep and tossed the piece of wood out into the muddy court. Obediently, but not understanding the reason for the action, the child was bringing it back to him.

Lattimer paused in the concealment of a slump of trees some way from the house. Tomson did it again. He cuffed the child when it did not run fast enough for his amusement. The poor beast was patently dropping with weariness.

Lattimer summed up the situation narrow-eyed. Then he drew his blaster. "I'll burn you where you stand if you make a move," he called in English. Then to the child he added, "Go home."

It scampered off as fast as its tired legs would carry it.

When it was out of sight, Lattimer walked slowly up to Tomson where he waited on the stoep. He kept his blaster aligned on the other's belly. When he came within speaking distance, he said, "What was the idea of that, Tomson?"

"I got bored," said Tomson softly. "So what?"

Lattimer reversed his blaster and hit Tomson in the face, twice with the rubber of the butt. The other staggered back, cursing, his hands clutching his cheeks.

"I warned you," said Lattimer. "That was for the beating you gave the kid. I'm going to turn you in."

Tomson mastered his pain and surprise. He dropped his hands again. "Seals have pups, not kids," he said. "So you think you're going to turn me in. You wouldn't leave your faithful followers on worship day, would you?"

"I'm not going," said Lattimer. "I'll call the Service."

"Well, isn't that interesting?" said Tomson. He backed before the muzzle of the weapon and went through the open door. He seemed strangely unconcerned at the threat.

As soon as Lattimer came inside, he realized where the other's confidence lay. The radio was scattered in shreds across the floor.

He lowered the blaster. "All right, Tomson," he said. "You've won one point. I should have blasted you earlier. You can think yourself lucky that I daren't start a fight where the natives can see you, or I'd give you the biggest beating you ever had. But worship day is tomorrow, and it's quite true that I can't leave now. However, I'm better off than you. You can't leave at all. You can't face the forest—especially not when another jume has been reported from the foot of the ridge." He added this lie with a perfectly straight face.

"But the day after worship day," he finished, "you will be back at the port and ready to be psyched. Clear?"

Tomson grinned insultingly. "As mud," he said blandly. "You're a bloody good liar, Lattimer."

"I'm not lying," said Lattimer, holstering his blaster. "By the day after tomorrow at latest, you will be ready for psyching."

He said it with a calm certainty that took the bluster out of Tomson's attitude and left him sullenly undecided.

They could not avoid each other in the narrow confines of the Residency. But avoidance was no part of Lattimer's plan. He kept Tomson carefully in sight for the remainder of the evening, and when the other had bunked down for the night he stealthily filched his blaster and stored the few remaining charges in his own ammunition belt, which he wore for the rest of the night. Now that the other had shown himself completely unreliable, there was no doubt left in his mind as to what he would have to do.

But it was a long time before he fell asleep.

Sharply, at rising time, Ris and Flaokh came together—worship day awakening was an honor not to be partitioned. He tried fiercely to conceal the tiredness consequent on his lack of sleep, and as he concentrated on acknowledging their greeting in the formal manner, he became aware that the rain was pelting down anew, and that the early chants of worship day were keening up from the village. The native music was odd to human ears, but he had learned to detect the sombre grandeur of the ritual songs. Besides, ritual was the only occasion on which the entire tribe sang together.

Across the room, Tomson opened his eyes.

"You'd better get up," said Lattimer. "There isn't much time before the ceremony opens."

"You want me to come out and sit in the rain with a lot of seals staring at me?" said Tomson scornfully. "No, thank you! I'm staying right here."

He listened. "God, what a foul row!" he added. "What is it?"

"That's the morning hymn," said Lattimer. "I told you to get up!"

Tomson tutted gently. "It'd look awfully strange if you brought me down at the point of a gun, wouldn't it?" he said. "Have fun!"

"All right," said Lattimer calmly. He took a coil of the natives' tough fibre rope from a hook on the wall. "If you aren't coming now, I'll have to make sure you don't come at all." With a swift motion he twitched the light blanket from Tomson's body, and as the other sat up with a startled cry, he struck him on the temple with the butt of his blaster.

He bound and gagged the unconscious man with scientific thoroughness, leaving himself barely time to dress before the Awakeners returned to usher him down to the council square. He would be hungry before the day was out, not having had time to eat his breakfast, but his own discomfort weighed lightly against the risk of leaving Tomson free. He

managed to shield the unconscious body from the view of the natives when he let himself out to prevent them noticing him and wondering.

He took his place on the dais as for an audience without making any mention of Tomson's failure to appear. Let them reflect that the ways of gods were not those of themselves, he thought grimly. The ceremony began.

It was complex and high symbolic, with the interminable ritual of the primitive. And always, there was the keening sound of the natives singing, singing . . .

The service wound on its slow way, each member of the clan making his personal devotion to the living god, and the rain thundered across the ground. Lattimer noticed anxious glances being exchanged between Chinsel and the elders, and the latter redoubled the volume of the song. This was without a doubt the biggest rain on record. He composed himself and went on trying to be a god, while his stomach growled in hunger and the water soaked into his clothes.

The ritual was barely halfway through—Chinsel had just risen to make formal acknowledgment of the tribe's debt to man—when he heard a sound which he had been subconsciously fearing he would hear ever since he took his place that morning. It filled him with sick horror.

He turned to see what he knew must be there. Tomson. And drunk.

The first-aid kit, thought Lattimer desperately. He remembered where I kept it. There was surgical spirit in the kit. He must have taken that!

The other man weaved an unsteady path down the track from the Residency, waving his uncharged blaster. He was shouting in the native tongue, the accent bad, but the meaning of his words unmistakable. "Stop this row! Stop it! You're driving me mad!"

Lattimer rose to his feet. The song died spasmodically away, while the elders looked for some proof that this was

no more than a bad dream—that their gods had not failed them.

Lattimer wondered frantically how he was going to solve this one. In a few seconds, Tomson had undone three years' careful patient work; the clan would have to be wiped out to prevent the rumors spreading. How Tomson had managed to work free worried him, but he forced himself to disregard that while there was still a chance to answer the major question. But the Service would not come now—

He was reaching slowly for his blaster to burn the drunkard down, when in the near-silence left by the cessation of the song he made out a sound which he could never have believed he would be glad to hear. It was a lurching, grinding, splashing sound, distinguished from the noise of the rain by its sheer volume.

The levees had broken!

Above its noise he shouted, "My brother has come to warn us that the village is in danger! Stop the worship! The homage of my people is not to be placed above their safety!"

He confirmed the words by leaping from the dais and running towards Tomson. His blaster stuck in its sodden holster, but he wrenched it free. "All right!" he said softly, barely to be heard above the rush of water. "I've got you out of this one, Tomson—but that was your very last chance." He brought the weapon up under the other's chin, hoping that the blow would pass unnoticed by the crowd behind him, and Tomson folded tidily at the knees and waist.

"Ris! Floakh!" shouted Lattimer.

The two Awakeners came running.

"My brother ran so fast to warn us of the levee breaking that he can go no further," he improvised hasily. "Take him to the Residency and place him on my bed. Then let all the clan gather there. The village will probably be destroyed."

He turned and watched the black figures rushing from the square to salvage a few precious belongings before the levee

wall finally crumbled and drowned the whole low ground of the village.

It took barely ten minutes for the flood to finish its work.

Lattimer stood at the door looking out over the already subsiding waters. Three years' work—gone in a day, he thought. All the carefully reclaimed paddies of paplet, all the curra and most of the chirrits—all the houses except the Residency, and that lives only because it is a temple and is built on high ground. Another symbol in the complex of human deity; the temple becomes the sanctuary in time of trouble.

Beside him the natives watched the disaster. Some of them moaned quietly, but most of them sat in silence.

He turned at a slight noise and found Tomson sitting up. "What happened?" the man asked hoarsely.

Lattimer crossed the room to him, shoving the assembled natives aside. "You did your damnedest to wreck all I've managed to do here," he answered in English. "You tried to destroy what the natives looked to us for. If the floods hadn't stepped in, you and I would be dead."

Tomson tried his sneering grin again. His face was stiff, but his self-confidence made it half-successful. "You're a pretty smart guy, aren't you?" he said. "But it's still more than eighteen months before your relief calls for you, and I've still got my chance to have some fun out of being a god."

Lattimer shook his head. "I warned you," he said, "but you didn't believe me. You're going to be psyched, as I said."

There was a roar from outside, and the natives scrambled hastily to their feet to bow to the occupants of a mud-sled which came skidding and sliding across the sodden soil at the edge of the forest and approached the door of the Residency. They wore the familiar uniform of the Service.

Tomson, stark terror gleaming in his eyes, stammered, "How did you call them?"

"You smashed the radio," said Lattimer. "I couldn't tell them I postponed worship day. I couldn't tell them whether the worship day service was correct, or whether the natives had started to suspect. If they ever do that, we shall strike. We may not be omnipotent or omniscient, but to the natives we must appear to be both. Goodbye, Jim."

For the third time he hit the other man inconspicuously to keep him quiet, and turned to face the lieutenant in command of the visiting party.

"My people" said Lattimer, "the time has come for me to go from among you."

He looked around. Chinsel, in the front rank of the elders, was glowing with pride as one whose work in designing levees has been commended twice in his life by a man.

For a few seconds Lattimer was silent, remembering. Ris was not there—nor was the former chief, Miglaun. The flood had taken its toll, as had the years. But the new paplet paddies were bigger than the old ones; the new levees were stronger, the village more numerous.

"But another has come who was with you before. He it was who warned you of the levee breaking in the time of the Greatest Rain. You knew me as Lattimer; you will know him as Tomson, my brother. Do for him as you have done for me. I have spoken."

He turned to the man who sat beside him on the dais as the song of welcome went up from the assembled tribe. He spoke almost under his breath.

"Good luck, Jim. But you won't really need it, I don't think. Did they tell you my story?"

Tomson nodded. "That's why I asked to come back here," he said. "They offered me a village further south a month ago, but I said I'd hold on."

Lattimer smiled reminiscently. "Psyching is quite a technique," he said. "I killed a woman once—I must have been

more primitive than these people here. But psyching isn't enough by itself, unless you get the chance to show it's worked. This job gives you that chance. There's no other task which makes a man pay so much attention as trying to be perfect. And nothing makes a man mend his habits faster than having someone look up to him. You won't have any trouble from these people here—they're a good bunch. But watch yourself—that's the danger."

They shook hands. Then Lattimer turned and went across the fields to the waiting mud-sled, and Tomson spoke his first words of command to the people whose god he was.

Not a god, really. No. But a very much better man.

✦ ✦ ✦

Mars, almost waterless, mainly desert, old even in the astronomical sense, may prove to be as ancient as any civilization could become. Is there or was there ever a Martian culture? Does it exist today or did it vanish a million million years ago to leave only enigmatic relics for the first Terrestrial visitors to ponder? It should take a truly mystically inspired mind to penetrate the vanished dreams of such an archaic world, and among all the writers of science-fiction perhaps that of Robert Moore could best do justice to this vision.

THE RED DEATH OF MARS

by Robert Moore Williams

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

I

SPARKS AVERY, on vigil beside his radio equipment, saw the three men coming. He didn't need to look twice to know that something was wrong. Rising, he opened the controls that manipulated the outer door of the lock.

From the stern of the ship came a rattle of pots and pans as Shorty Adams, the dour cook, prepared the evening meal.

Angus McIlrath, far-wandering son of Scotland, came for-

ward from his engine room. Momentarily, as he opened the door, the muted hiss of the uranium fission engines sounded.

"What is it, lad?" McIlrath asked.

Sparks pointed to the three men. They were nearer now. Coming across the sandy square, the dust splashed around their feet and hung in an eddying cloud behind them, dust that had never known rain.

McIlrath squinted through the double glass of the port, shielding his old eyes against the thin sun glare of Mars. "I don't like their faces, lad."

Sparks did not answer. Heavy boots clumped in the lock. The outer door clanged. Air hissed softly. The inner door opened.

Martin Frome, tall and thin, came first. His blue-gray eyes rested for an instant on the radio man. He said nothing. Behind him came James Sutter, swinging his long arms like a waddling ape. And last came Vincent Orsatti, blinking weak eyes behind thick-lensed spectacles.

"Is everything all right in the ship?" Frome asked.

"Right, sir," Sparks answered.

"You kept close watch from the ports, as I directed?"

"Yes."

"You observed nothing unusual, no movement of any kind?"

"Nothing."

Frome turned to McIlrath. "Are the engines ready?"

"The engines," said McIlrath evenly, "are always ready."

"Keep them that way," said Frome flatly.

McIlrath touched his cap with two fingers. "Aye, captain."

Frome turned to the two men who had entered with him. "Sutter, prepare for immediate transmission by radio to our main base a short archaeological report on the city itself."

The archaeologist, already pulling off his heavy garments, clumped across the room to a table.

"Orsatti," Frome said, "you will oblige me greatly if you

will tackle a report on this." He opened the knapsack that he carried, took an object from it which he laid on a table.

"Gladly, Captain," Orsatti answered. "Oh. On *that?*"

There was startled inquiry in Orsatti's voice. Sparks leaned forward to look at the object Frome had laid on the table. A gleam of brilliant ruby lanced out from it. "What is it?" he asked.

"We don't know," Frome answered. "They're scattered everywhere, all over the city. In one place we found them piled three feet high against a door, like a load of coal dumped from a truck. They look like jewels, but they aren't that."

It did look like a jewel, like a ruby as big as a man's fist. It was round and its surface was a mass of facets from which reddish beams of reflected light winked.

"But, captain," Orsatti protested. "My speciality is biochemistry. I am also a metallurgist, of sorts, but this doesn't fall within either of my fields."

"Describe it as best you can," Frome said gruffly. "While I prepare a report on the fate of our first expedition to this triply-cursed city of Torms."

"You found them?" Sparks interrupted quickly.

"We located their ship from the air, before we landed."

"I know that. But the men—"

Frome's lips knifed into a straight line. "We found the men, too."

"Oh," Sparks answered. For a second he stared at the captain, his face working. Then he turned on his heel and walked over and eased his lithe body into the chair in front of the radio transmitter. McIlrath looked at him sadly, but said nothing.

Orsatti's report was finished first. He handed the single sheet to the radio man. Sparks read:

The jewellike objects which we have discovered here in Torms seem to be unique. So far as my personal knowledge goes, they have never been reported elsewhere on Mars.

We picked them up all over the city. Apparently the first expedition discovered them, for we found several in their ship, one under the commander's bunk, others near the vessel.

They appear either singly or in groups that may run as high as several hundreds. In one place we found thousands of them piled, as Captain Frome described it, "like coal in front of a basement door."

It is doubtful that they belonged to the unknown inhabitants of this city. A more likely hypothesis is that they have been brought here after the inhabitants died.

In appearance they much resemble gigantic jewels, and at first glance, they seem to have been carved into definite facets. A more careful examination, however, discloses that the facets are natural, and apparently result from the crystalline structure of these strange objects.

Another unique characteristic is their fragility. Sutter dropped one of them. It shattered into fragments so minute as to be almost invisible, and then, to add to our uncertainty about these crystals, the fragments rapidly dissolved into a thin red gas which seemed to have a tendency to flow together.

We have as yet not been able to suggest an adequate explanation for the origin of these crystals or to determine what they really are.—Signed, VINCENT ORSATTI, biochemist with the rescue expedition to Torms.

Sparks snapped a series of switches. A transformer hummed. Radio tubes warmed. He spoke into the microphone. "Rescue ship *Kepler* calling Main Base. Rescue ship *Kepler* calling Main Base."

"Go ahead, rescue ship," the loudspeaker answered.

By the time he had finished the first message, Sutter had completed his report. Sparks started reading the archaeologist's account into the microphone.

"Unquestionably this is the most important archaeological discovery made since the first ship landed on Mars eleven years ago. It is not necessary for me to recount here the explorations made since that date.

"You recall the eagerness with which the first exploratory efforts were carried out, the hurried, frantic search for intelligent life on Mars. There was never any question that life had existed here. Dust had almost filled the canals, dust covered the sites, but the canals and the sites proved that a race of remarkable scientific achievement had developed on this planet. You recall how our eagerness faded into wonder as the reports of the exploring parties came in. They found cities—with sand drifting down the streets. The condition of the cities indicated that they had been abandoned in a manner which suggested that the inhabitants had slowly fled before an advancing enemy. We found tools scattered everywhere, ornaments, the strange scroll books covered with indecipherable hieroglyphics. But we never found the race that had created these things. We found their bones, dry in the sand. But we never found them. Nor did we find the enemy before which they had fled.

"Nor are there any inhabitants here in this city of Torms. But there is something here that I regard as very significant.

"Here everything is in perfect order. The books are neatly stacked in the shelves, the contents of the few houses we entered are in place, and the tools and engines of the race that built this city are packed in the equivalent

of cosmoline, a heavy grease that protects them from rusting.

"Everything here is in perfect order—as if the owners planned to return at some future day.

"A secret is hidden here, a secret that may account for the disappearance of the race that once inhabited Mars. This city is newer than any of the others we have found. It was abandoned last. The clue to the fate of the life on this planet is here.

"Upon the desirability of determining the fate of this people, of solving the vast mystery that shrouds this planet, I need not comment.

"I therefore recommend that a most careful investigation be made here.

"Signed—JAMES SUTTER."

Sparks took a deep breath. "End of the second report," he said.

"It sounds interesting," the speaker said. "But have you got any dope on what happened to the first expedition?"

"It will be along in a minute," Sparks answered.

"All right, don't snap my head off," the speaker grated. The operator's voice trailed into suddenly embarrassed silence. "Avery, I'm sorry. I—just forgot."

"Skip it," the radio man said gruffly. "I'm not asking for any sympathy." He looked up. Captain Frome, his face looking as if it had been chiseled from granite, stood beside him.

"Transmit this," Frome said. He laid his hand on the radio operator's shoulder, his fingers dug into the flesh.

Sparks didn't feel them. He read the message. "O. K.," he said, "that's what I wanted to know."

Frome's voice was suspiciously husky. "Lad, I'm sorry."

"You can skip that, too," Sparks answered. Frome walked away. The operator's voice droned into the microphone, repeating the message Frome had given him.

"October 16, 2347.—When the radio signals of the first expedition to Torms ceased coming through, we were sent to ascertain if the expedition was in trouble. This is a report of what we found.

"We sighted the ship from the air. It was resting in one of the squares peculiar to Martian cities. We landed as near to it as we could, in a nearby square, and immediately Orsatti, Sutter and myself walked to the ship, leaving Avery, our radio operator, McIlrath, our engineer, and Adams, our cook, to guard our own vessel.

"I regret to inform you that we found the three members of the first expedition dead.

"We were unable to determine the cause of death. There were no wounds on their bodies, but the expression on their faces indicated that they had died in agony. Commander Richard Avery was in his bunk. His legs and arms, stiffened in death, were drawn up in a position that hinted he had been aroused from slumber and had tried to defend himself. However this is merely an impression. No evidence substantiates it. Samuel Funk, the archaeologist, was at the radio transmitter. The impression I received was that he died trying to call for help. The radio set was dead because of power failure, which is utterly incredible, for the power that fed the set was drawn directly from the uranium fission driving engines, which had ceased to operate. In my personal experience this is the first and only time an uranium fission engine has failed to function. I can suggest no reason for this failure. However the engines are dead. We tested them.

"John Orms, language expert who was attempting to decipher the Martian language, was found at some distance from the ship. His tracks in the sand indicated he had fled from the vessel. The same agony was on his face.

"In an effort to determine if the ship had been attacked, we examined the sand near it. No footprints, other than

those made by the three men, were found.

"We buried them in the sand of the square in which their ship had landed.

"We will make a complete investigation. It is essential that we know not only what caused their deaths, but what stopped the engines of their ship. Also we will attempt to solve the mystery of this city, as indicated by James Sutter, our archaeologist. Signed—MARTIN FROME, captain of the rescue ship *Kepler.*"

Sparks' steady voice faltered. He swallowed. Then he spoke again. "This is the end of the transmission at this time." He snapped off the transmitter.

There was silence in the ship. Sparks looked at the radio equipment, saying nothing. He raised his head when a voice spoke.

"Ye're a haard man, Martin Frome." It was Angus McIlrath. In moments of stress the burr of his far-distant homeland appeared in his voice.

"You need not remind me of that fact, Angus," Frome answered.

"Skip it, Angus," said Sparks bluntly.

"But 'twas yer own faither, lad, that they buried there. The least they could have done was to tell ye as soon as they returned—what they had found—instead of making ye wait and learn it from the messages." He turned to Frome. "I say it again, Ye're a haard man."

"This is a hard planet, Angus, and it is a hard trail we travel getting here. It is no place for weakness of any kind—"

"Aye, but—"

"I said to forget it, Angus," Sparks interrupted. "My father was a hard man, too. If he had not been, he would not have been what he was—the first human to set foot on Mars. I know very well what he was called. 'Old find-a-way-or-make-one Avery.' 'Old damn the risk; we're going through.' When-

ever anything went wrong—and everything must have gone wrong on that first trip—he had a saying, 'For every evil, nature provides a cure. But she doesn't hand you that cure on a silver platter. You've got to find it yourself, or die.' He hated any show of sentiment, any weakness of any kind. Captain Frome told me my father was dead in exactly the way he would have wished the news to reach me. As to his death, he died as he would have wished, fighting the unknown. He is buried where he would have wished to be—in the sand of Mars."

Silence followed the radio operator's outburst, the awkward silence of men who want to show their sympathy and can't find the words.

"I was on that first trip with him," said McIlrath. "I learned to know him. Ye're his own true son."

"Sorry," Sparks answered. "I didn't mean to blow off steam that way. He wouldn't have liked it. But he was always sort of a god to me, and"—his lips tightened—"something killed him."

The central door opened. The cook stood there. "Come and get it," he said, "or I'll throw it away."

"Come on," said Sparks bitterly. "Let's go eat."

When they left the room the jewel was lying on the table where Orsatti had been examining it.

When they returned it was gone.

They searched the ship for it. They didn't find it. They didn't even find a tiny opening in the inner hull down near the floor, a hole that looked as if a rivet might have dropped out of it. The hole was no larger than a lead pencil, which was probably why they missed it. There was another tiny opening in the outer shell of the ship.

The jewel was gone.

"Gentlemen," said Captain Frome "tonight we will take turns standing guard."

II

BUT NOTHING happened that night. No intruder tried to gain entrance to the ship. The wind of Mars, blowing the dry dust of the red planet, whimpered softly around the vessel. There was no other sound.

But what happened the next day made them forget, temporarily at least, all about the jewel that had disappeared so mysteriously.

Early in the morning Sutter and Orsatti went out to continue their investigation of the city. Frome remained in the ship, writing up a complete report. McIlrath, under orders from Frome, had gone to the vessel of the first expedition, to examine the engines. He had returned dourly shaking his head. The engines were dead. He had reported to Frome that he was unable to determine the cause of the failure, and muttering had gone back to his own engine room.

Sparks, on lookout duty at the port, saw the man coming. It was Sutter. He was running.

"We've found them!" Sutter gasped as he came through the inner door of the lock. "The inhabitants of Mars. In a cavern under the city. You remember that door where all the jewels were piled? We shoveled them out of the way and opened it. The Martians are down below. Frozen sleep," he gasped in explanation.

"Then they're alive?" Frome snapped.

"No. Not yet. But they can be awakened, I think. Orsatti says they can and he ought to know. He's down there now." The archaeologist was so excited he could not speak coherently.

Sparks knew what this find meant to Sutter. It meant a lot to all of them. One of the big reasons why men had been so anxious to blaze a trail across space to Mars had been to meet

the inhabitants of the planet. Photographs taken in 1939 had showed conclusively that the canals of Mars were artificial. Therefore there was life on the sister world across the void.

But when they reached the planet, they hadn't found the men of Mars. Instead they had found desolation and dust and sand. And death. Deserted cities.

If Sutter was right, this was the big moment in the history of the exploration of Mars. Even the arrival of the first spaceship from Earth was not as important as this discovery. His heart leaped at the thought. The long lost inhabitants of Mars had been found!

Frome began jerking on heavy clothing. "Get into your clothes, lad," he barked, "and call Angus. He came here with the first ship and he deserves to be present when we awaken one of these Martians."

Sparks, diving toward the engine room, realized that Frome had given no reason for taking him along. He had said that Angus deserved to be present. The old engineer did. He had suffered all the privations of the pioneer explorers of this planet. He had earned a chance to be present at the historic moment when one of the men of Mars was awakened.

But Sparks knew why Frome was taking him. He hadn't earned his chance. Someone else, who couldn't be present, had earned it for him.

He was only a youth, barely past twenty. Only his superb knowledge of radio equipment had got him a place with the Martian explorers. His father had not opposed his coming. Nor had he helped his son secure the appointment. He had said, "The fact that I am commander of the men exploring Mars, will made no difference so far as you are concerned. You will suffer every hardship that anyone else suffers, you will take every risk. You will eat the same food, sleep in the same hard bunks, drink the same synthesized water, and stand strictly on your own feet. You will ask no favors and you will obey orders implicitly, no matter what they are."

Richard Avery had been a hard man. But he had been a man.

Only Shorty Adams was left to guard the ship. Frome gave him strict orders to be on the lookout.

Sutter led them at a dog trot across the silent, deserted city to a low building that had only one door. Ruby crystals were scattered all around the door where he and Orsatti had shoved them out of the way. Sutter dived into the dark opening and as the others followed, Sparks saw how heavy that door was. It was at least a foot thick and the other surface was heavily pitted by rust.

Orsatti waited for them down below. "They're here all right," he said. "Each of these cells has a Martian in it. They're in frozen sleep, too. No doubt about it."

The chamber was not large. It had been carved out of solid rock and it had perhaps five hundred coffinlike cells in it. Each receptacle was fitted with a glass top.

"I waited for your permission to open one of these receptacles, Captain Frome," Orsatti continued. "Pending your arrival, I took the liberty of removing the seals from one of the caskets. It's ready to open. Shall I go ahead?"

Frome hesitated. He peered through the glass top, studied the creature that lay within.

"Are you certain these people are really in frozen sleep?" he asked.

"Positive of it. Feel the temperature down here. It's perfect for frozen sleep. That's why this city was in perfect order, the tools put away in grease, the houses closed and locked. These people expected to return to their city when they awakened."

"Well," said Frome slowly, "you may— What's that, Angus?"

McIlrath had stood apart from the others. He had taken a flashlight and poked carefully around the cavern, nosing

down the aisles between the receptacles like a wary old hound scenting the presence of danger. Now he spoke.

"I'm thinking that these people had a reason for putting themselves into suspended animation. They didn't come down here and hide away in this gloomy hole for no cause. I don't know what their reason was, but it could have been the last desperate expedient of a race fleeing from some deadly and implacable enemy. If this is true, we had best consider well our action in awakening them."

A little stir of uneasiness ran through the group. Orsatti blinked owlishly. Sutter protested inarticulately.

"Have you seen anything that you might consider an enemy strong enough to force the Martians to resort to frozen sleep to escape it?" Frome questioned.

"I have not that."

"But perhaps their food supply gave out," Sutter protested. "The water supply has been dwindling on this planet for ages. Perhaps a protracted period of drought left them with no choice except frozen sleep or starvation. They chose suspended animation hoping that when they awakened, climatic conditions would be better. Perhaps they had alternate cycles of drought and meager rainfall. This was the way they escaped the drought."

The old Scot shook his head. "Ye may be right. Perhaps these Martians fled from drought. But I remember we came here to rescue three men. We found them dead. One of them had fled from their ship. What he fled from we do not know. But we do know that this race was also fleeing from something."

Again the little stir of uneasiness came. Was the old Scot sensing something that he could not put into words?

Sutter was an archaeologist. He had spent years digging into the ruins of Mars. He would not be balked now. "This is superstitious nonsense!"

"It may be that," McIlrath answered. "I think I knew the

three men who died here fairly well. There was little superstition in them. And I know very well indeed that uranium fission engines are not superstitious. But both the men and the engines are dead. You cannot account for that by superstition."

Sutter and Orsatti turned to Frome and began to plead with him to permit the opening of one of the receptacles.

Frome considered his decision. "The whole purpose of our exploration of this planet has been to discover the Martians. Having found them, if we fail to awaken them, our purpose is defeated. Therefore you may open one of the receptacles."

Sutter and Orsatti wasted no time. Frome turned to McIlrath. "I'm sorry, Angus. If you had had a definite reason, we would have waited."

"Aye, captain," McIlrath answered.

Sparks Avery watched. He had taken no part in the conversation. Now, in spite of the dry, frigid air, globules of sweat began to form on his forehead. He brushed them away. Now and again his eyes strayed to the heavy pistol that hung at Frome's hip. Frome had opened the flap and loosened the pistol in its holster.

There was a jewel on the floor near the end of the ramp that led downward. It glittered evilly in the sunlight that was beginning to shine into the cavern.

It seemed to the radio operator that only minutes passed before Orsatti had opened the receptacle. Very gently he and Sutter lifted out its occupant.

They laid him on the floor, this man of Mars. The men from Earth clustered about him. He was not quite five feet tall, had a huge chest, and long splindly arms. He was clad in a soft leather garment and around his waist was a metal belt from which a pouch and a short dagger hung.

"In minutes, he will awaken," Orsatti whispered.

The others were silent. Sparks caught the suppressed ten-

sion of that moment. He had been on Mars less than six months, but he had absorbed from his father the lure of the red planet, the vast mystery of it. Now the mystery would be solved. Now Mars would have a voice. Now the red deserts would give up their secrets, now the deserted cities would reveal what had happened in them.

The Martian stirred. A little finger moved, an arm twisted. His chest heaved. The soft sigh of air through long unused vocal chords echoed through the cavern.

"He's awakening," Sutter whispered. "Heavens! What will he say? What will he do? What will he think? How amazed he will be to see us, strangers from another world, bending over him!"

As they watched, the chest movement of the Martian became more regular. The panting heaves that had marked his first gasping efforts for air smoothed into an even rhythm. Spasmodic twitching fluttered his throat.

"Look!" the archaeologist's tense voice rang out. "His eyes are opening."

They were brown, an agate-brown. They were filmed and out of focus.

"Easy, old fellow," Sutter whispered. "Here. I'll help you sit up." He slipped an arm under the Martian's shoulder.

The Martian glanced at Sutter, and looked away. The film was gone from his eyes. They were in focus now.

Sparks caught his breath. What he had seen was incredible.

The Martian had only glanced at Sutter. Then he looked away. His eyes went to the faces of the others. But he only glanced at them, too, glanced casually at them, as if they were of no importance.

Awakening from the sleep of ages, finding himself the captive of a race that obviously did not belong to Mars, he found them not worthy of a second glance.

What was wrong? Couldn't the Martian see yet? Was he blind?

Or, no matter how important were these giants who were bending over, was there something that was more important?

The Martian had large, pointed ears, which he could move at will. He twitched them backward, like a cat listening for a sound behind him. He absolutely ignored the Earthmen. His ears flipped forward, toward the open doorway through which the sun was shining. He listened. There was no sound. He moved his head from side to side, his ears questing for some sound in the cold dry air, his eyes alert for movement.

Sparks found himself listening, too. He heard nothing. But the Martian seemed to hear something. His ears were flipped forward, with the intentness of a cat that has heard the growl of a dangerous dog. But he was no longer listening. He was looking. He saw something. The agate-brown eyes were fixed with terrible intentness on an object near the doorway.

Fear crept over his face, a horror and a terror that was akin to madness. He jerked himself free from Sutter's arms. The archaeologist tried to hold him. He wrenched himself free. His hand darted to the dagger at his belt.

It rose evilly upward—and sank in the Martian's throat!

He screeched. The screech died in a gurgle. He fell forward on his face, and a cloud of dry dust puffed from under his dead body.

In the shocked, stunned silence Sutter hoarsely gasped. "We scared him. He saw us, and committed suicide."

"No!" Sparks jerked out. "He saw us all right, but we didn't scare him. He didn't pay any attention to us. There's the thing that scared him!"

He pointed toward the doorway where the ruby jewel glinted in the sunlight. "That's what he saw. That thing. It scared him so badly that he committed suicide." He started to approach the jewel.

"Drop it!" McIlrath's voice rang out. "Don't touch that thing."

Sparks leaped away.

"The lad's right," Angus continued. "I was watching. The Martian paid us no heed. It was yon jewel that scared him."

"But that's preposterous!" Sutter protested. "That jewel is harmless. We'll open another receptacle, revive another Martian."

"We'll do nothing of the kind," Frome snapped. "Preposterous or not, this demands a full investigation. When the first Martian we find commits suicide as soon as we awaken him, I'm going to know why he did it before we awaken another one. Sutter, you and Orsatti pick up his body. We'll take it to the ship, make a complete report to our main base, and ask that a large expedition be sent here. Angus, you lead the way. Sparks, you follow him. I'll bring up the rear."

He jerked the pistol from its holster. The click as he slipped a cartridge into the chamber was loud in the silent vault. Overruling Sutter's objections, he ordered them from the vault. They obeyed him. As he walked up the incline, he picked up the jewel and swiftly thrust it into his knapsak. He closed the door of the cavern as they left.

In the minds of each of them was a single question: Why did the Martian commit suicide? Why had that jewel scared him so badly? Was death, silent and invisible, here in this haunted city? Had the Martians fled from death?

When they reached the ship they found that death was there ahead of them. They found Shorty Adams curled up under the water cooler in his own galley.

He was dead.

III

SPARKS FOUND him, and called the others. Frome got there first. His examination of the body was swift, but thorough. "This happened almost as soon as we left the ship. There is no wound on his body, no sign to show the cause of death.

But his face is stamped with the same agony that was on the faces of the first three."

Methodically he began to search the galley. From an open bin he pulled another jewel.

Frome's face seemed to freeze. He was still wearing the heavy gloves that are standard equipment in the open of Mars. Handling the jewel gingerly, he raised it up to the level of his eyes, squinted at it. Shaking his head, he said, "I can't tell whether it is the same one we brought into the ship last night."

"Do you think, while we were at dinner, Adams slipped into the other room and stole it?" Sutter asked.

"That is not true," said McIlrath flatly.

"How do you know it isn't. It could be true."

"I knew Adams," the old Scot said. "He was no thief."

"But how did it get out of the ship, or where was it hidden? Are you suggesting it moved of its own accord?" Sutter persister.

"Enough," Frome interrupted decisively. "Something killed him. I am not prepared to say this jewel was responsible for his death. I'm not prepared to say it wasn't. But I am saying this: We're going to our main base immediately, where complete laboratory facilities are available, and we're going to find out what these damned things really are. Angus, prepare your engines for an immediate take-off. Sparks," he barked, "warm up your transmitter and make contact with our main base immediately. Report that we are coming in. Get moving."

Sparks was already racing toward the bow of the ship. As he slid into the seat before the transmitter, he saw, out of the corner of his eyes, the body of the dead Martian where Sutter and Orsatti had dropped it when they entered the ship. The dagger was still sticking from his throat.

The sight sent a touch of eerie chill up his spine. If he had needed anything to remind him that some incredible

form of death lurked very near, the sight of the dagger protruding from the Martian provided it.

He snapped the switches, reached automatically for the microphone. When no transformer hum came he snapped the switches again. He was still working with them when Frome entered the room.

"I regret to report," he said, "that our transmitter is dead. The power seems to have failed."

Frome stopped in midstride. He would have halted like that if somebody had suddenly pulled a gun on him. "What's that?"

As Sparks repeated the words, Sutter and Orsatti entered the room.

"But the power for our radio transmitter is drawn from our main engines," Frome whispered. Then he spun on his heel, brushed past Orsatti and Sutter, and was gone.

"What's going on?" Orsatti asked bewilderedly.

"I have a hunch I know," Sparks answered. He pounded after the captain. When he reached the engine room he needed only a glance to see that his worst fear had come true.

"But the engines can't be dead," Frome was saying vehemently. "They *can't* be. It's impossible for uranium fission engines to fail."

"I know it's impossible," the old engineer replied stubbornly, "but I'm telling you it's happened anyhow."

Captain Frome faced the tense little group. "Gentlemen," he said, "I need not remind you that we are face to face with death. Night is coming. We are without power to move the ship or to operate our radio apparatus. There are hundreds of miles of dry, deadly deserts surrounding this city, deserts which we could not hope to cross on foot. We have food and water for two weeks. Unquestionably, when our main base cannot raise us by radio, they will send a rescue

ship, but it will be a week before a rescue expedition can reach us. If we are to be numbered among the living when it arrives, the price we will pay for our lives is constant vigilance. Pistols will be issued to all of you. Keep them ready at all times."

He paused and looked at the engineer. "Angus, you and Sparks will make every effort to determine the cause of our engine failure and to correct it. Sutter, you will do me a great favor if you will take charge of the galley. Orsatti, I would like you to help me."

"Certainly. What are we to do?"

"We are going to find out what these damned things really are," Frome answered. He pointed to the two jewels. The biochemist paled.

Working on the engines, it was obvious that the old engineer was trying to conceal his fears. To all questions he returned the same answer, a perturbed shake of the head. "I dinna know, lad. It is as if the uranium has lost its power to explode."

"But it hasn't been touched. The seals are in place. If anyone had tampered with it, he would have left marks behind him."

"I know that, lad. And I am remembering that there were no marks on the bodies of the dead men, either."

"But what could have done it?"

"I dinna know, lad. But we must remember this is Mars. There are strange things here on this planet, things that no man can guess. The Martian committed suicide. That was strange. And those ruby jewels are very strange."

"But why were our engines stopped? Were we deliberately marooned here?"

"We cannot begin to guess at motivations," McIlrath replied uneasily. "This is not Earth. The creatures of this planet

may have entirely different reasons for their acts than we have."

Then the first shot came. *Bang,* The second one came right behind it.

Somebody was using a gun. His first shot had missed. But he had taken dead aim to make certain the second one did not miss.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Three more shots followed closely on the heels of the second. Whoever was using the gun had missed with the second shot. Now he was emptying the weapon at a charging enemy.

"It's in the main control room," Sparks said. "Come on."

Yanking his pistol from its holster, he raced down the corridor. McIlrath came right behind him. They almost ran over Sutter as he came out of the galley, a gun in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other. The archaeologist brought up the rear.

Sparks kicked open the door.

Orsatti lay on the floor. Sparks did not need to see the sick agony on his face to know Orsati was probably dead or dying.

Frome was alive. He stood stiffly erect, his feet wide apart, taking aim with his pistol. Flame lanced from the muzzle and the sharp thunder of the shot smashed through the room.

He yanked the trigger again and the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. With a single motion of his arm he threw the weapon at the thing coming at him.

The sight paralyzed the radio operator. What he saw—was impossible! The thing that moved toward Frome was a two-foot ball of reddish gas. A globe of swirling gas, lit with a baleful red brilliance. The thing glittered with microscopic pinpoints of light. It made a sound as it moved, a high-pitched note like the whine of a distant motor generator.

There were two of the gas balls. One of them was darting toward Frome. The other was down on the floor, on Orsatti's

body, and the whine coming from it held a gloating note, like a ghoul feeding.

Everything happened in split seconds. The gas ball streaked toward Frome. A thundering explosion smashed Sparks' eardrums. He saw a pistol poked past him and he knew that McIlrath was firing over his shoulder. He jerked up his own gun and the two pistols spat a salvo.

The gas ball flinched as the bullets hit it, wavered and dodged.

"That's the medicine," Sparks shouted. "Hot lead." He fired again.

Before the third shot had left his gun, he knew the weapon was useless. The gas ball flinched as the slugs hit it, but they passed through it unimpeded. It struck Frome on the chest, clung to him like a leech. His hands jerked up to tear it away, but as it touched him his whole body seemed to be paralyzed, and his arms fell limply. A look of startled agony writhed over his face. His eyes popped open in sudden horror. He screamed and slumped to the floor.

As he fell, he saw the radio operator standing the the doorway.

"Close that door," he gasped. "Barricade yourself behind it."

Sparks did not move to obey him.

"Save yourselves," the weak words came. "Never mind us. We're done for." The voice found strength in some hidden sources and Captain Frome rasped out his final command. "That's an order. Obey it."

He was the captain. His authority was final.

"Obey it, hell!" Sparks snarled. He leaped into the room, McIlrath and Sutter right behind him.

What happened next was always afterward a blur in Sparks' mind. As a boy he had fought bumblebees in the meadows of Earth. This was something like fighting bumblebees, except that this bee was deadly. Slapping, slugging at the reddish mass of gas on Frome's chest, they tried to tear

it loose. To touch it sent jarring needles of pain up their arms. Their hand smashed through it. It swirled and reformed.

But when the fight was over, Captain Frome was on one side of the door and a reddish mass of gas was singing angrily on the other.

And Sparks was turning back to the door. When he came out the second time, he had Orsatti's body in his arms. He had enough strength left to lay the biochemist down. Then his legs buckled under him and he collapsed.

IV

WHEN HE recovered consciousness the old engineer was dribbling whiskey into his mouth. He tried to sit up but McIlrath pushed him back.

"Lie still, lad, until ye get your strength back."

"But those gas balls."

"Lie still and I'll tell you what we've decided about them."

"But where are they?"

"Forward in the control room whining to each other. Captain Frome thinks he has found out what they are."

"Captain Frome? How is he?"

"Weak as a kitten, but we think he'll live. He says the gas balls came from the ruby jewels, that while he and Orsatti were working with the crystals they suddenly turned to gas right before their eyes—"

"But that's impossible."

The old Scot shook his head. "Captain Frome says the gas balls and the crystals are two different forms of the same life species. He thinks they are similar to the cocoon and the butterfly that we know back on Earth. The crystal is the

cocoon stage. The ball of gas is the butterfly stage. He says he thinks they live on radiant energy, and that they attack our engines and us for the same reason."

"But—" Sparks choked off his protest. Frome was a thoroughly capable physicist. And he was not given to idle statements. If he made a statement, he had a good reason to back it up. "What connection is there between our engines and us?"

"There is this connection, lad. The source of power in our engines is the radioactivity of the uranium atom. The source of the energy that keeps the human heart beating is the element potassium, which is slightly radioactive. If you removed the uranium from our engines, they won't generate power. If you remove the potassium from our bodies, our heart stops beating."

"But the uranium was not removed from our engines, and the bodies of the dead men show no marks of any kind. How was the potassium removed without leaving a mark?"

"It is not the uranium or the potassium that is removed. Captain Frome says these gas balls live on the radioactive emanations, the alpha beta, and gamma rays, discharged by these elements, leaving them inert. Just as a leech sucks blood, they suck the radioactive discharges. Are you feeling better now, lad?"

Sparks sat up. A wave of dizziness sent his head spinning, but he forced himself to his feet and walked over to where Captain Frome lay on the floor. Frome's eyes were closed and he was breathing in slow, gasping sobs.

Sutter was bening over Frome. "His heart is barely beating," the archaeologist said. "Those damned things almost sucked the life out of him."

Sparks said nothing. He walked to the nearest port and looked out. Swift dusk was falling over Mars. Sharp shadows were creeping over the city. Blobs of darkness were huddling behind the buildings. Night was coming over this city where

for centuries red death had patiently waited for the last of the Martians to awaken.

The men of Mars had not taken refuge in frozen sleep to escape a drought cycle. They had fled from a deadly enemy. The Martian had committed suicide when he saw that jewel glittering the sunlight at the entrance to the cavern. He had known what it was. He had preferred to die by his own hand rather than face a more agonizing death.

A movement in the shadows caught his eye. He looked again, to make certain he had not been mistaken. Then he saw what it was—a ball of red gas drifting along a foot or so above the sand. It came out of the shadow and moved directly toward the ship.

Another dead butterfly had emerged, another cocoon had burst.

But they were safe. The stout steel hull of the ship would protect them until a rescue expedition could arrive. They had plenty of food and water. Even if a thousand cocoons released their drifting death, they could not get through the walls of the ship.

Someone breathed heavily behind him. Turning, Sparks saw Angus looking out over his shoulder. The old engineer squinted at the drifting ball of gas. "Another one? I was afraid there would be others. Those two behind that door in the control room have been squealing as if they were calling to others of their kind."

"Do you think they can call others?"

"I dinna know, lad. Back on Earth the moths do it and I doubt if yon red devil came here because of idly curiosity."

The radio operator followed the red monstrosity as it drifted out of sight. He shivered, and said, "Well, we're safe here."

"About that, I dinna know either," McIlrath answered, shaking his head.

It was not so much what he said but the way he said it that sent a sudden chill to the radio operator's heart. But Angus refused to answer his questions. Instead the engineer led him down the corridor to the control room. The door was still blocked. It was a stout sheet of aluminum alloy.

Putty had been plastered around the cracks.

"While you were still unconscious," McIlrath explained, "those devils began to ooze through the cracks between the edges of the door and the facing. We stopped them up with a bit of putty, but—"

"But what!" Sparks exploded. "You surely don't think they can come through that door?"

"I think they can't, lad," the old Scot answered, "but I remember that door the Martians built to seal their cavern. It was at least a foot thick. But the outer surface was pitted with holes that were almost six inches deep, as if something had tried to eat its way through the barrier, and had failed. It wasn't rust, either, for in this cursed dry desert metal will scarcely rust. So something else must have eaten those holes in that door, and the only thing that could have done—"

He broke off to stare in slowly mounting horror at the door they were facing. At the same instant Sparks saw what was happening.

A tiny smudge had appeared on the gray surface. It looked a little like a drop of acid. It was about the size of a dime, and it was growing in size. As it grew it turned distinctly reddish.

"They are eating their way through the door!" Sparks whispered. He started to slap at the reddish spot but McIlrath knocked his hand away. The engineer seized a wad of putty from the floor and slapped it over the spot. It ceased growing. On the other side of the door an angry whine sounded. "Damn you," he grunted. "That stops you this time."

"Yes, but for how long?" Sparks whispered.

McIlrath didn't answer.

Sutter came running through the corridor. "I just wanted to tell you," he panted. "There are a lot of those things outside. They're doing something to the glass in the portholes, and—"

They didn't wait for him to finish but raced back to the stern of the ship. A glance showed that the archaeologist was right. Dozens of blobs of glistening gas floated over the ship. A few were clamped over the glass of the ports. Under the action of some acid they secreted, it was flaking away.

Nobody said anything, but each knew that doom was coming toward them. Slowly but surely the glass in the ports would be disintegrated. If they closed the ports with metal, the monstrosities would eat through the metal. There was no place in the ship that promised safety, with the possible exception of the cook's galley, which was in the heart of the ship and protected by metal barriers on all side. In time even those barriers would fall.

"There's got to be some way to whip those devils," Sparks grated.

Sutter was twitching as if he had the palsy.

Only the old engineer was calm and he spread his hands in a hopeless gesture. "Yes, lad, there probably is. But guns didn't work—"

"Sparks," a weak voice whispered. The radio operator jerked around to see who was calling him. He saw Captain Frome. The captain had spoken. "What's happening?"

The radio man told him. Frome sighed. "I wish I could suggest something. But I can't. Too weak even to think. So I'm turning everything over to you, lad—"

"To me!"

"Yes. I ought to put you under arrest . . . for disobeying me . . . when I told you to save yourself. Instead I'm putting you in charge . . . of the remnants of this expedition. I'm not doing this just because you showed initiative and dar-

ing . . . when you saved my life . . . but because you're old 'Find-a-way-or-make-one' Avery's son. He never let anything stop him. And you're his son. You'll get us out of this mess . . . if anybody can."

The radio man's mind was reeling. Captain Frome was telling him that he was the boss. "But what about McIlrath and Sutter? Will they—"

"I think they will. But let them answer for themselves."

Sutter nodded nervously. "I don't care what's done as long as we get out of here alive."

McIlrath said simply. "I followed your father, lad. You're his own true son. I will not hesitate to follow you."

The surge of exultation that leaped up in Sparks was drowned in the recognition of his new responsibility. Before, he had been taking orders. Now he was giving them. He well knew that Frome had had another reason for designating him as action captain. Sutter and McIlrath were both too old to respond quickly in an emergency. He was young, his reactions timed to split seconds. And if they were to escape alive, they had to have a leader who could react instantly.

He stood up. "We'll carry Captain Frome into the galley. It's the best protected spot in the ship. We'll take all our emergency equipment in there. We'll plug the porthole with putty. And after that—" But he didn't finish the sentence. He knew the metal walls of the galley would yield in time.

After they had carried everything to the galley, Sparks came back to the stern. McIlrath followed him. "What are ye planning to do, lad?" he asked quietly.

"What makes you think I'm planning anything?" Sparks answered sharply.

"Ye've got the same quiet ferocity in your eyes that your father had. When he was planning something dangerous, and didn't intend to tell anybody about it, he looked just exactly like you do now."

"Yeah?" Sparks rasped. "Well, I am planning something, but you can't stop me. You heard what Frome said. I'm in charge now."

The engineer's eyes did not falter. "Ye needn't remind me of that, lad. I'm not trying to stop you. But if I know what it is you're doing, I might be able to help you."

"Oh!" the radio man answered. "I *am* planning something. I didn't tell you because I was afraid you might kick about it—think it was too dangerous. But it's the only way I can see for us to have even a chance to get out of here alive."

"And what is that, lad?" McIlrath asked quietly.

"You remember my father had a saying," Sparks answered. " 'For every evil, nature provides a virtue. For every poison there's an antidote. For every disease, there's a cure—somewhere—' There is something that will whip these gas balls, something that will destroy them. They've got a weakness, somewhere!"

"I also remember the rest of that saying. Nature provides a way to cure everything that goes wrong. *But she doesn't hand you that cure on a silver platter. You've got to find it yourself!* I don't doubt there's a way to whip these red devils, but, lad, how are we going to find it in the few hours we've got left?" The old engineer's face was wrinkled into a frown of pleading perplexity.

"By going to the only possible source of information, the Martians themselves. They fought these damned things for centuries. If anybody knows what to do to lick 'em, the Martians do," Sparks answered.

"But they fought and lost," McIlrath protested. "They hid away in a hole. If they had known how to whip their enemy, they would have done it."

The radio man's youthful face clouded. "I've thought of that," he said desperately. "But maybe they ran out of ammunition to fight with. The fact that they put their city in order shows they expected these damned radium suckers

to be gone when they awakened. Anyhow, they're our only hope. We can either take a chance that they will know how to whip these devils, or we can sit here and die waiting. I'm damned if I'm going to sit here and wait for one of those things to suck the life out of me. I'm going after one of those Martians. And this one," he finished grimly, "won't commit suicide before we get a chance to talk to him."

"But, lad—"

"But, helll" Sparks snarled. "I'm going."

He thought the engineer meant to protest his going because he would have to run the gantlet of the growing numbers of gas balls outside. But McIlrath had no such intention. The old Scot knew very well that death lurked outside, but the threat of death had never stopped Richard Avery. Nor would it stop his son. It wouldn't stop McIlrath either. Very calmly he insisted on going along.

"Hell, no," Sparks rasped. Then his voice softened. "I mean, Angus, you had better stay here and help me through the emergency lock when I come back."

"Aye, lad," McIlrath answered. "I'll be waiting for you."

Sparks waited until deep darkness had fallen. Then he slipped through the emergency lock.

V

A GLOBE of witchfire floated outside the lock. Sparks eyed it. All over his body he felt his skin writhe. What if one of those things caught him? He knew the answer to that. His heart would stop beating, just as Orsatti's heart had stopped, just as—

He watched the gas ball. It floated away toward the stern of the ship. He slipped to the sand and dropped on his face, crawling up against the hull. A thin whine sounded as another of the creatures passed. Or perhaps it was the same

one. Perhaps it had sensed his presence and had returned. He held his breath. Death went on by.

He waited until everything was clear and then dashed across the sand. Panting for breath in the thin, dry air, he reached the shelter of the buildings—and saw a luminosity coming toward him.

He dived headfirst into the sand. Dust rose in choking clouds. The gas ball passed. He lay still, fighting for breath. The dust irritated his nostrils. He began to worm his way forward.

Two hours later he was back at the ship, a bound-and-gagged Martian over his shoulder. He took one look at the vessel, and his heart sank. It was surrounded by hundreds of balls of fire mist. Swirling over the hull, squirming against the ports, eating their way through to the food that lay inside. Hundreds of them. And others were coming.

Had they already penetrated the hull?

He lay down flat on his face and began to worm his way across the open space, the Martian still over his shoulder. The Martian had seen the gas balls. He was whimpering like a badly frightened child.

Would he reach the ship? Or would they see him and dart at him in a swarming cloud? He was now only ten feet from the flier. A quick dash would take him to the lock. He took a deep breath, and lifted himself for the dash.

Then it happened. A gas ball, passing over him, suddenly whined angrily, and looped back toward him, hovering over him like a buzzard investigating carrion. Other luminosities, attracted by the action of the first one, came swirling downward.

They had discovered him.

It was the end. He didn't have a chance in a million. The gas balls were darting at him from all directions. He leaped to his feet, tried to race toward the emergency lock, knowing he couldn't make it.

He tripped and fell. Everything went black. Acid seemed to bite at his nose. He couldn't see. Dimly he wondered—did death come like this, a sudden rushing blackness? He felt no pain.

Something touched him. He screamed. A sharp voice said, "This way, lad."

Sparks gulped in thankfulness. McIlrath! He knew now what had happened. The engineer had been watching from the lock, a smoke projector ready. That rushing wave of blackness was smoke. Smoke! He could hear the gass balls whining as they groped through it. McIlrath guided him to the lock. The outer door clanged shut behind them.

In all his life Sparks had never been so miserable. When he had succeeded in returning to the ship with the Martian, he had thought they now had a chance to live. Instead he had learned that they were doomed. Doomed!

Two hours had passed since he returned. They were all in the cramped galley. Death was eating at the walls around them, death that now was only minutes off.

"I tried to tell you when you left, lad." McIlrath said softly, "but you thought I was trying to keep you from going, and wouldn't listen."

"I know," Sparks nodded glumly, "but hell, I didn't think about this. All I could think was that maybe the Martians knew some way to fight these devils."

"I know, lad," McIlrath answered. "Don't be feeling bad about it. 'Twas a brave thing that ye did. And maybe they do know some way—"

"Yeah," Sparks answered gloomily. "Maybe they do."

He glanced across the galley at the Martian. He was alive all right. Scared half to death but alive. He was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, his arms and legs bound. His bright, fear-filled eyes darted restlessly over the room. Occasionally he said something in a high, singsong tone of

voice. He knew what was eating through the walls of the ship, and he might know something to do about it. Every time he spoke he might be telling them how to whip the radium suckers.

The trouble was—they couldn't understand what he said.

The men of Earth and the men of Mars had met, under desperate circumstances with the future of the planet depending on them, and they couldn't understand each other. The languages were different. John Orms, language expert, had spent eleven years trying to crack the written Martian language, and had failed.

In time, now that they had found a Martian, they would be able to understand each other. But there wasn't time.

Seconds ticked away into nothingness. A red blot appeared on the wall of the galley. McIlrath slapped a wad of putty over it, and looked down at the diminishing supply. There was very little putty left.

Sutter twitched nervously. McIlrath calmly sat down. Sparks glowered at the Martian. To have safety so near, and yet so far away. It was maddening!

Frome, lying on the floor, tried to sit up and fell back. "Could I," he whispered, "have a drink of water?"

They had plenty of water. Sparks drew a cupful from the cooler. The eyes of the Martian followed him as he lifted Frome to a sitting position. The captain drank. "Any luck, lad?" he said weakly.

"No," Sparks answered, "but we're not finished yet. There's some way to lick these damned things and I know it." He rose to his feet. He was lying to himself, trying to lie to them. They were finished. And when the rescue expedition came after them, as it certainly would, it would be finished too. The bones of men would lie with the bones of Martians in the dry deserts, in the dust of the deserted cities. The exploration of the planet, so bravely begun, might well end here. The labor of the men who had fought space to reach

Mars, the daring of the pioneers who had braved the deserts, would have resulted only in death.

Then Sutter screamed, an inarticulate screech, the yell of a man who has seen death coming, and knows he cannot stop it.

A red dot, the size of the end of a lead pencil, had appeared on the outer wall. It began to grow in size.

Slowly the archaeologist slumped to the floor. He had fainted. The pressure had got too much for him. They let him die. Death would come easier if he did not know it was coming.

The red dot grew. The galley was silent. In the silence men breathed heavily.

The Martian screeched. Another red dot had appeared on the wall.

"Damn you, shut up!" Sparks rasped. "We're in the same boat—"

He broke off to stare at the Martian. A sudden savage hope sent his heart pounding.

The Martian seemed to be having a fit. He was twisting and turning and trying to free himself from his bonds. His eyes were darting continuously from the two men to another object in the room. He looked like a dog trying to warn his master that a grizzly bear is lurking on the trail ahead. And like a dog he could only tell what he knew by howling and begging with his eyes.

"He's trying to tell us something," Sparks whispered tensely. He leaped across the galley and cut the ropes that bound the native. The Martian struggled to his feet. He leaped across the room toward—Sparks caught his breath—the water cooler. He drew a cupful of the liquid, turned and splashed it across the red dots growing on the wall.

Something hissed like an angry snake. Hissed and drew away. The dots stopped growing.

"Water," Sparks gulped. "The one thing this damned planet has always needed and never had. Water! Those damned gas balls have evolved in a desert. They can't stand water; it kills them. Sutter was right. The Martians went into frozen sleep because their water supply had given out. The answer was right under our eyes all the time. The very dust that choked us should have told us what to do."

He was screaming now. "There's always a cure for every evil. But you've got to find that cure. And we've found it. Take that, damn you! And that."

He was splashing water on the walls, wetting them down. McIlrath and the Martian were helping him. The putty began to slip and fall away. Luminosities tried to surge through the holes. When water struck them, they sizzled like a skillet full of hot grease, burst into steam, and steaming died.

Two Earthmen and a Martian fought side by side, and they used as a weapon the one thing of which Mars for centuries had never had enough—water.

When the rescue ship came knifing down out of the sky, the surprised captain found four weary, happy Earthmen to greet him. Two of them supported the man he recognized as captain of this ill-fated expedition. But when he came to greet Frome, it was Sparks who stepped forward, and gravely saluted.

"Avery, sir, acting captain of the rescue ship *Kepler*, reporting."

The puzzled captain acknowledged his salute. They told him what had happened. "I get that," he said. "You did a swell job. But," he gestured toward the other group. "Who are these?"

"The men of Mars," Sparks announced. "We've found them."

They had awakened the Martians from their frozen sleep. They stood in a large group apart from the Earthmen.

"But what's the matter with them?" the captain asked. "What are they acting like that for?"

The Martians were waving their hands in the air, turning somersaults, twisting and contorting their bodies.

"They're trying to tell you how happy they are to see you," Sparks answered. "They haven't learned how to talk to us yet—but they sure know how to make signs."

✦ ✦ ✦

Beyond Mars, out where the giant planets whirl, life, if it exists, must be different. Here the worlds are many many times the size of Earth, composed of poisonous gases, with mighty winds and strange fluctuations of gravity and density. Stanley G. Weinbaum, pioneer depicter of space life, whose conceptions have left an indelible stamp on science-fiction, displays one of those giant worlds—the great Uranus, out beyond Saturn, the first new planet ever to be discovered by astronomy and possibly still one of the most enigmatic.

THE PLANET OF DOUBT

by Stanley G. Weinbaum

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

HAMILTON HAMMOND started nervously as the voice of Cullen, the expedition's chemist, sounded nervously from his station aft. "I see something!" he called.

Ham bent over the floor port, staring into the eternal green-gray fog that blankets Uranus. He glanced hastily at the dial of the electric plumb; fifty-five feet, it said with an air of positiveness, but that was a lie, for it had registered that same figure for a hundred and sixty miles of creeping descent. The fog itself reflected the beam.

The barometer showed 86.2 cm. That too was an unreliable guide, but better than the plumb, for the intrepid Young, four decades earlier in 2060, had noted an atmospheric pressure of 86 in his romantic dash from Titan to the cloudy planet's southern pole. But the *Gaea* was dropping now at the opposite pole, forty-five thousand miles from Young's landing, and no one knew what vast hollows or peaks might render his figures utterly useless.

"I see nothing," Ham muttered.

"Nor I," said Patricia Hammond, his wife—or more officially, biologist of the Smithsonian's *Gaea* expedition. "Or—yes! Something moved!" She peered closer. "Up! Up!" she screamed. "Put up!"

Harbord was a good astrogator. He asked no questions, nor even took his glance from the controls. He simply slapped the throttle; the underjets roared in crescendo, and the upward thrust pressed all of them hard against the floor.

Barely in time. A vast gray wave of water rushed smoothly below the port, so close that its crest was carved by the blast, and spray clouded the glass.

"Whew!" whistled Ham. "That was close. Too close. If we'd touched that it would have cracked our jets for sure. They're white-hot."

"Ocean!" Patricia said disgustedly. "Young reported land."

"Yeah, forty-five thousand miles away. For all we know this sea is broader than the whole surface of the Earth."

She considered this frowning. "Do you suppose," she asked, "that this fog goes right down to the surface everywhere?"

"Young says so."

"But on Venus the clouds form only at the junction of the upper winds and the underwind."

"Yes, but Venus is closer to the Sun. The heat here is evenly distributed, because the Sun accounts for practically none of it. Most of the surface heat seeps through from with-

in, as it does on Saturn and Jupiter, only since Uranus is smaller, it's also cooler. It's cool enough to have a solid crust instead of being molten like the larger planets, but it's considerably colder than the Venusian twilight zone."

"But," she objected, "Titan is as cold as a dozen Nova Zemblas, yet it's one perpetual hurricane."

He grinned. "Trying to trip me? It isn't absolute temperature that causes wind—its differences in temperature between one place and another. Titan has one side warmed by Saturn, but here the warmth is even or practically even, all around the planet, since it comes from within."

He glanced suddenly at Harbord. "What are we waiting for?" he asked.

"For you," grunted the astrogator. "You're in command now. I command until we sight the surface, and we've just done that."

"By golly, that's right!" exclaimed Ham in a satisfied voice. On his last expedition, that to the night side of Venus, he had been technically under Patricia's orders, and the reversal pleased him. "And now," he said severely, "if the biologist will kindly step aside—"

Patricia sniffed. "So you can pilot us, I suppose. I'll bet you haven't a single idea."

"But I have." He turned to Harbord. "Southeast," he ordered, and the afterjets added their voices to the roar of the others. "Put up to thirty thousand meters," he continued, "we might run into mountains."

The *Gaea,* named for the ancient goddess of Earth, who was wife to the god Uranus, plunged through the infinity of mist away from the planet's pole. In one respect that pole is unique among the Sun's family, for Uranus revolves, not like Jupiter or Saturn or Mars or the Earth, in the manner of a spinning top, but more with the motion of a rolling ball. Its poles are in the plane of its orbit, so that at one point its

southern pole faces the Sun, while forty-two years later, halfway around the vast orbit, the opposite pole is Sunward.

Four decades earlier Young had touched at the southern pole; it would be another forty years before that pole again saw noon.

"The trouble with women," grumbled Harbord, "is that they ask too many questions."

Patricia spun on him. "Schopenhauer!" she hissed. "You ought to be grateful that Patrick Burlingame's daughter is lending her aid to a Yankee expedition!"

"Yeah? Why Schopenhauer?"

"He was a woman-hater, wasn't he? Like you!"

"Then he was a greater philosopher than I thought," grunted Harbord.

"Anyway," she retorted acidly, "a couple of million dollars is a lot of money to pay for a square mile of foggy desert. You won't hog this planet the way you tried to hog Venus."

She was referring, of course, to the Council of Berne's decision of 2059, that the simple fact of an explorer's landing on a planet did not give his nation possession of the entire planet, but only of the portion actually explored. On fog-wrapped Uranus that portion would be small indeed.

"Never mind," put in Ham. "No other nation will argue if America claims the whole fog-ball, because no other nation has a base near enough to get here."

That was true. By virtue of its possession of Saturn's only habitable moon, Titan, the United States was the only nation that could send an exploratory rocket to Uranus. A direct flight from Earth is out of the question, since the nearest approach to the two planets is 1,700,000,000. The flight is made in two jumps; first to Titan, then to Uranus.

But this condition limits the frequency of the visits enormously, for though Saturn and Earth are in conjunction at intervals of a little over a year, Uranus and Saturn are in conjunction only once in about forty years. Only at these

times is it possible to reach the vast, mysterious, fog-shrouded planet.

So inconceivably remote is Uranus that the distance to its neighbor, Saturn, is actually greater than the total distance from Saturn to Jupiter, from Jupiter to the asteroids, from these to Mars, and from Mars to the Earth. It is a wild, alien, mystery-cloaked planet with only icy Neptune and Pluto between it and the interstellar void.

Patricia whirled on Ham. "You!" she snapped. "Southeast, eh! Why southeast? Just a guess, isn't it? Truthfully, isn't it?"

"Nope," he grinned. "I have my reasons. I'm trying to save whatever time I can, because our stay here is limited if we don't want to be marooned for forty years until the next conjunction."

"But why southeast?"

"I'll tell you. Did you ever look at a globe of the Earth, Pat? Then maybe you've noticed that all continents, all large islands, and all important penisulas are narrowed to points toward the south. In other words, the northern hemisphere is more favorable for land formation, and as a matter of fact, by far the greater part of the Earth's land is north of the equator.

"The Artic Ocean is nearly surrounded by a ring of land, but the Antarctic's wide open. And that same thing is true of Mars, assuming that the dark, swampy plains are old ocean beds, and also true of the frozen oceans on the night side of Venus.

"So I assume that if all planets had a common origin, and all of them solidified under the same conditions, Uranus must have the same sort of land distribution. What Young found was the land that corresponds to our Antarctica; what I'm looking for is the land that ought to surround this north polar sea."

"Ought to, but maybe doesn't," retorted Pat. "Anyway why southeast instead of due south?"

"Because that direction describes a spiral and lessens the chance of our striking some strait or channel between lands. With a visibility of about fifty feet, it wouldn't take a very wide channel to make us think we were over ocean.

"Even your English Thames would look like the Pacific in this sort of fog, if we happened to come down more than half a hundred feet from either bank."

"And I suppose your American Mississippi would look like Noah's flood," said the girl, and fell to gazing at the gray waste of fog that swirled endlessly past the ports.

Somewhat less than an hour later the *Gaea* was again descending gingerly and hesitantly. At 85 cm. of air pressure Ham had the rocket slowed almost to a complete stop, and thereafter it dropped on the cushioning blast of the underjets at a speed of inches per minute.

When the barometer read 85.8 cm., Cullen's voice sounded from the stern, where the port was less obscured by the jets themselves. "Something below!" he called.

There was something. The fog seemed definitely darker, and features or markings of some sort were visible. As the ship settled slowly, Ham watched intently, and at last snapped out the order to land. The *Gaea* dropped, with a faint jar, to a resting place on a bare, gray graveled plain domed with a hemisphere of mist that shut off vision as definitely as a wall.

There was something wild and alien about the limited scene before them. As the blast died, all of them stared silently into the leaden-hued vapors and Cullen came wordlessly in to join them. In the sudden silence that followed the cutting of the blast, the utter strangeness of the world outside was thrust upon them.

Venus, where Pat had been born, was a queer enough world with its narrow habitable twilight zone, its life-teem-

ing Hotlands, and its mysterious dark side, but it was twin sister to the Earth.

Mars, the desert planet with its great decadent civilization, was yet stronger, but not utterly alien. Out on the moons of Jupiter were outlandish creatures of bizarre little worlds, and on cold Titan, that circled Saturn, were fantastic beings born to that wild and frigid satellite.

But Uranus was a major planet, no more than half-brother to the little inner worlds and less than cousin to the tiny satellites. It was mysterious, unrelated, alien; no one had ever set foot on a major planet save the daring Young and his men forty years before.

He had explored, out of all the millions of square miles of surface, just one square kilometer forty-five thousand miles away from where they stood. All the rest was mystery, and the thought was enough to subdue even the irrepressible Patricia.

But not for long. "Well," she observed finally, "it looks just like London to me. Same sort of weather we had last time we were there. I think I'll step outside and look for Piccadilly."

"You won't go out yet," snapped Ham. "I want an atmospheric test first."

"For what? Young and his men breathed this air. I suppose you're going to say that that was forty-five thousand miles away, but even a biologist knows that the law of diffusion of gases would keep a planet from having one sort of air at one pole and another at the opposite. If the air was safe there, it is here."

"Yeah?" asked Ham. "Diffusion's all right, but did it ever occur to you that this fog-ball gets most of its heat from inside? That means high volcanic activity, and it might mean an eruption of poisonous gases somewhere near here. I'm having Cullen make a test."

Patricia subsided, watching the silent and efficient Cullen

as he drew a sample of Uranian air into an ampule. After a moment she flexed her knees and asked, "Why is the gravitation so weak here? Uranus is fifty-four times as large as the Earth and fifteen times as massive, yet I don't feel any heavier here than at home." Home to Pat, of course, was the little frontier town of Venoble, in the Venusian Cool Country.

"That's the answer," said Ham. "Fifty-four times the size of the Earth or Venus, but only fifteen times as heavy. That means its density is much smaller—to be exact .27. Figures out to about nine-tenths the surface gravitation of the Earth, but it feels to me almost equal. We'll check a kilogram weight on the spring balance after a while and get an accurate figure on its mass."

"Safe to breathe?"

"Perfectly. Argon's an inert gas, and a substance can't possibly be poisonous unless it can react chemically in the body."

Pat sniffed. "See? It was safe all the time. I'm going outside."

"You'll wait for me," he growled. "Every time I've indulged that reckless disposition of yours you've got into trouble." He checked the thermometer beyond the port, nine degrees centigrade—the temperature of late autumn back home. "There's the cause of this perpetual fog," he observed. "The surface is always warmer than the air."

Pat was already pulling a jacket over her shoulders. Ham followed suit, and fell to twisting the handle of the air lock. There was a subdued hissing as the slightly denser Uranian air forced its way in and he turned to speak to Harbord, who was lighting a pipe in great satisfaction—and indulgence strictly forbidden in space, but harmless now that an air supply was assured.

"Keep an eye on us, will you?" Ham said. "Watch us

through the port, just in case something happens and we need help."

"We?" grunted Harbord. "Your wife's out of sight already."

With a muttered imprecation, Ham spun around. It was true. The outer door of the air lock was open, and a lazy wisp of fog drifted in, scarcely moving in the utterly stagnant Uranian air.

"The crazy little— Here! Give me that!" He seized a belt with twin holsters, holding a standard automatic as well as a terribly destructive flame pistol. He whipped it around him, seized another bundle, and plunged into the eternal mists of Uranus.

It was exactly as if he stood under an inverted bowl of dull silver. A weird, greenish, half twilight filtered down, but his whole world consisted of the metal ship at his back and a fifty-foot semicircle before him. And Pat—Pat was nowhere visible.

He shouted her name. "Pat!" The sound muffled by the cold dampness of the fog sounded queerly soft to his ears. He bellowed again at the top of his voice, and then swore violently from sheer relief as a thin, hushed reply drifted back out of the grayness.

In a moment she appeared, swinging a zigzag, ropy, greenish-gray organism.

"Look!" she called triumphantly. "Here's the first specimen of Uranian plant life. Loosely organized, reproduced by partition, and—what the devil is the matter?"

"Matter! Don't you know you might have been lost? How did you expect to get back here?"

"Compass," she retorted coolly.

"How do you know it works? We may be right on the magnetic pole, if Uranus has one."

She glanced at her wrist. "Come to think of it, it doesn't work. The needle's swinging free."

"Yes, and you went out unarmed besides. Of all the fool tricks!"

"Young reported no animal life, didn't he? And—wait a minute. I know what you're going to say. 'Forty-five thousand miles away!' "

He glared. "Hereafter," he growled, "you're under orders. You don't go out except in company, and roped together." He drew a length of heavy silken cord from his pocket, and snapped one end to her belt, and the other to his own.

"Oh, don't be so timid! I feel like a puppy on a leash."

"I have to be timid," he responded grimly, "when I'm dealing with a reckless, improvident, careless imp like you."

He disregarded her sniff of disapproval, and set about unwrapping the bundle he had brought. He produced an American flag, and proceeded to dip a depression in the gravel, planted the staff in it and said formally, "I take possession of this land in the name of the United States of America."

"All fifty feet of it?" murmured Patricia, but softly, for, after all, despite her flippant manner, she was loyal to the country of her husband. She fell silent, and the two of them stared at the flag.

It was a strange echo from a pleasant little planet nearly two billion miles away; it meant people and friends and civilization—things remote and almost unreal as they stood here on the soil of this vast, lonely, mysterious planet.

Ham roused from his thoughts. "So!" he said. "Now we'll have a look around."

Young had indicated the technique of exploration on this world where the explorer faced difficulties all but insurmountable.

Ham snapped the end of a fine steel wire to a catch beside the air lock. On a spool at his waist was a thousand foot length of it, to serve as an infallible guide back through the obscurity—the only practical means in a region where sound

was muffled and even radio waves were shielded almost as completely as by a grounded metal dome. The wire played the part not only of guide but of messenger, since a tug on it rang a bell within the rocket.

Ham waved at Harbord, visibly puffing his pipe behind the port, and they set out. To the limit of their permitted time, Uranus would have to be explored in thousand-foot circles, moving the rocket each time the details of the area were recorded. A colossal task. It was likely, he remarked to Pat, that the vast planet would never be completely explored, especially with the forty-year interval that must pass between visits.

"And especially," she amended, "if they send timorous little better-be-safe-than-sorry explorers like you."

"At least," he retorted, "I expect to return to tell what I've explored even if it's only a myriare, like Young's achievement."

"But don't you see," she rejoined impatiently, "that wherever we go, just beyond our vision there may be something marvelous? We take little thousand-foot samples of the country, and each time we might be missing something that may be the whole significance of this planet. What we're doing is like marking off a few hundred-foot circles on the Earth; how much chance is there of finding part of a city, or a house, or even a human being in our circle?"

"Perfectly true, Pat, but what can we do about it?"

"We could at least sacrifice a few precautions and cover a little more territory."

"But we won't. I happen to care about your safety."

"Oh!" she said irritably, turning away. "You're—" Her words were muffled as she ranged out to the full length of the silken cord that bound her to him. She was completely invisible, but occasional jerks and tugs as they tried to move at cross-purposes were evidence enough that they were still joined.

Ham walked slowly forward, examining the pebbled, lifeless terrain where now and then a pool of condensed moisture showed dull, and very occasionally, he came upon one of the zigzag weeds like the one Pat had dropped near the rocket. Apparently rain was unknown on windless Uranus, and the surface moisture followed an endless cycle of condensation in the cool air and evaporation on the warm ground.

Ham came to a spot where boiling mud seemed to be welling up from below, and steamy plumes whirled up to lose themselves in the fog—evidence of the vast internal heat that warmed the planet. He stood staring at it, and suddenly a violent jerk on the cord nearly toppled him backward.

He spun around. Patricia materialized abruptly out of the fog, one hand clutching a ropy plant. She dropped it as she saw him, and suddenly she was clinging frantically to him.

"Ham!" she gasped. "Let's go back! I'm scared!"

"Scared? Of what?" He knew her character; she was valiant to the point of recklessness against any danger she could understand, but let there be a hint of mystery in an occurrence, and her active imagination painted horrors beyond her ability to face.

"I don't know!" she panted. "I—I saw things!"

"Where?"

"In the fog! Everywhere!"

Ham disengaged his arms and dropped his hands to the butts of the weapons in his belt. "What sort of things?" he asked.

"Horrible things! Nightmarish things!"

He shook her gently. "Who's timid now?" he asked, but kindly. The query had the effect he sought; she gripped herself and calmed.

"I'm not frightened!" she snapped. "I was startled. I saw—" She paled again.

"Saw what?"

"I don't know. Shapes in the mist. Great moving things

with faces. Gargoyles—devils—nightmares!" She shuddered, then calmed once more.

"I was bending over a little pool out there, examining a biopod, and everything was quiet—sort of deadly quiet. And then a shadow passed in the pool—a reflection of something over me—and I looked up and saw nothing. But then I began to see the fog shapes—horrible shapes—all around me. And I screamed, and then realized you couldn't hear a scream, so I jerked the rope. And then I guess I just closed my eyes and rushed through them to you." She shivered against him.

"All around you?" he asked sharply. "Do you mean between you and me?"

She nodded. "Everywhere."

Ham laughed shortly. "You've had a day dream, Pat. The rope isn't long enough for anything to pass between us without coming so close to one of us that he could see it clearly, and I saw nothing—absolutely nothing."

"Well, I saw something," she insisted, "and it wasn't imaginary. Do you think I'm just a nervous child afraid of strange places? Why I was born on an alien planet!" At his indulgent grin she flared in indignation. "All right! Let's both of us stand here perfectly quiet; perhaps they'll come back again; then we'll see what you think of them."

He nodded agreement, and they stood silently under the translucent dome of mist. There was nothing, nothing but a deep and endless grayness, and an infinite silence, but a silence not like any Ham had ever experienced in his life. For on Venus—even in the sultriest part of the Hotlands—there is always the rustle of teeming life, and the eternal moaning of the underwind, while on Earth no day or night is ever quite silent.

There is always somewhere the sighing of leaves or the rustle of grass or the murmur of water or the voices of insects, or even in the driest desert, the whisper of sand as it

warms or cools. But not here; here was such utter stillness that the girl's breathing beside him was an actual relief; it was a silence utter enough to hear.

He did hear it—or was it simply his own blood pulsing in his ears? A formless throbbing, an infinitely faint rustling, a vague whispering. He frowned in the concentration of listening, and Patricia quivered against him.

"There!" she hissed. "There!"

He peered into the gray dimness. Nothing at all—or was there something? A shadow—but what here could cause a shadow, here in the sunless region of fog? A condensation of mist, that was all. But it moved; mist can't move without the thrust of wind, and here there was no wind.

He strained his eyes in an effort to pierce the obscurity. He saw—or he imagined it—a vast, looming figure, or a dozen figures. They were all around; one passed silently overhead, and numberless others weaved and swayed just beyond the range of vision. There were murmurings and susurrations, sounds like breathing and whispering, patters and rustles. The fog shapes were weirdly unstable, looming from little patches of darkness into towering shadows, disipating and forming like figures of smoke.

"Good Lord!" gasped Ham. "What can—"

He tried to focus his gaze on one individual in the shadowy throng. It was difficult; they all seemed to shift, to merge, advance, recede, or simply materialize and fade out. But one surprising phenomenon suddenly caught his attention, and for a moment stunned him into rigidity. He saw faces!

Not exactly human faces. They were more such appearances as Patricia had described—the faces of gargoyles or devils, leering, grimacing, grinning in lunatic mirth or seeming to weep in mockery of sorrow. One couldn't see them clearly enough for anything but fleeting impressions—so vague and instantaneous that they had the qualities of an

illusion, if only because their conformation, though not human, imitated the human. It was beyond the bounds of reason to suppose that Uranus harbored a race of humans, or even humanlike beings.

Beside him Patricia whimpered, "Let's go back, Ham. Please let's go back."

"Listen," he said, "those things are illusory, at least in part."

"How do you know?"

"Because they're anthropomorphic. There can't be any creatures here with nearly human faces. Our own minds are adding details that don't exist, just as every time you see a cloud or a crack in the ceiling you try to make a face out of it. All we're seeing is denser spots in the mist."

"I wish I thought you were sure of that," she quavered.

He wasn't at all sure, but he reaffirmed it. "Of course I am. I'll tell you an easy way to prove it, too. We'll turn the infra-red camera on them and that'll bring out enough detail to judge by."

"I'd be afraid to look at the plates," said the girl, shivering as she peered apprehensively at the vague horrors in the fog. "Suppose—suppose they do show faces. What will you say then?"

"I'll say that it's a queer and unexpected coincidence that Uranian life—if they are forms of life—has developed along somewhat the same lines as terrestrial—at least in outward form."

"And you'll be wrong," she murmured. "A thing like this is beyond coincidence." She trembled against him. "Do you know what I think? Ham, do you suppose it's possible that science has gone all wrong, and that Uranus is Hell? And that those are the damned?"

He laughed, but even his laugh sounded hollow, muffled by the smothering fog. "That's the maddest idea that even

your wild imagination has ever produced, Pat. I tell you they're—"

A scream from the girl interrupted him. They had been standing huddled together, staring at divergent angles into the dome of mist, and he spun around now to gaze in the direction she faced.

For a moment his vision was blinded by the shift, and he blinked frantically in an effort to focus his eyes. Then he saw what had startled her. It was a vast, dusky shadow that seemed to originate somewhere near the surface, but was springing upward and curving over them as if it actually climbed a veritable dome of mist, like a dim river of darkness flowing upward.

Despite his derision of Patricia's fear-born imaginings, his nerves were taut. It was a purely automatic gesture that brought his weapon to his hand, and it was pure impulse that sent a bullet flaming into the mist. There was a curiously muffled report from the shot—a single full echo—and then utter silence.

Utter silence. The rustles and murmurings were gone—and so were the fog-shapes. Blinking into the mist, they saw only the sullen grayness of the eternal cloud itself, and they heard no sound but their own tense breathing and the faint after-ring of their eardrums from the concussion.

"They're gone!" the girl gasped.

"Sure. Just what I said. Illusions!"

"Illusions don't run away from gunshots," retorted Patricia, her courage revived instantly with the vanishing of the fog shapes. "They're real. I'm not nearly as afraid of real things as of—well, of things I can't understand."

"Do you understand these?" he rejoined. "And as for illusions not running away from gunshots, I say they might. Suppose these appearances were due to a sort of self-hypnosis, or even merely to the eye strain of staring through this

fog. Don't you think a shot would startle us out of the proper mental state, so that we'd no longer see them?"

"Maybe," she said doubtfully. "Anyway, I'm not scared any more. Whatever they are, I guess they're harmless."

She turned her attention to the puddle of mud before them, in which a few curious feathery growths swayed to the bubbling of the surface. "Cryptogamoid," she said, stooping over them. "Probably the only sort of plant that can exist on Uranus, since there's no sign of bees, or other pollen carriers."

Ham grunted, peering into the dismal gray mist. Suddenly both of them were startled into sudden alertness by the sound of the bell on the drum that held the guide wire. One ring, a warning from the *Gaea!*

Pat sprang erect. Ham tugged the wire in instant reply, and muttered, "We'd better go back. Harbord and Cullen must have seen something. It's probably the same sort of things we saw, but we'd better go back."

They began to retrace their steps, the thousand feet of wire humming softly as it wound back on the spring drum at Ham's waist. Other than that and the crunch of their steps on the gravel, there was silence, and the fog was merely a featureless dome of faintly greenish grayness. They had progressed perhaps two hundred yards when it changed.

Patricia saw the fog shapes first. "They're back!" she hissed in his ear, with no sound of fear in her voice now.

He saw them, too. Now they were no longer surrounding the two of them, but were rushing past from the direction of the *Gaea* in two parallel streams, or perhaps dividing into two streams just beyond the point of visibility. He and Pat were moving down an alley walled by a continuous double line of rushing shadows.

They huddled closer to each other and bored on through the fog. They were no more than a hundred and fifty feet from the rocket now. And then, with a suddenness that

brought them to a sharp halt, something more solid than fog, more solid than fog shapes, loomed darkly straight before them.

It—whatever it was—was approaching. It was visible now as a dark circle at the level of the ground, perhaps six feet in diameter, upright and broadside on. It was moving as fast as a man walks, and it materialized rapidly into a distinct solidity.

Ham and Pat stared fascinated. The thing was featureless —just a dull black circle and a tubular body that stretched off into the fog. Or not quite featureless. Now they could perceive an organ that projected from the center of the circle —a loose, quivering member like a large pancake on a finger-thick stem, whose edges quivered and cupped toward them, as if to catch sounds or scent. The creature was blind.

Yet it possessed some sense that could register distant objects. Thirty feet from them the stalked disc cupped deeply in their direction, the creature swerved slightly, and rushed silently toward the pair!

Ham was ready. His automatic roared its muffled blast, and roared again. The attacker seemed to telescope in upon itself and rolled aside, and behind it appeared a creature identical in all respects—the same featureless black circle, the same quivering disc. But a high, piercing whine of pain slipped like a sharp knife through the fog.

This was a danger Patricia could understand. There was no fear about her now; she had faced too many outlandish creatures on the Hotlands frontiers of Venus, or in the mysterious wilds of the Mountains of Eternity.

She snatched her companion's flame pistol from its holster and stood with the weapon ready to vomit its single blast of destruction. She knew that it represented a last resort, not to be used until other means had failed, so she simply held it, and tugged on the wire to the *Gaea*. Three pulls, and then again three, would summon aid from Cullen and Harbord.

The second creature—or was it another segment of the same animal?—came charging forward. Ham sent two more bullets into the blank, faceless front of it, and again that keening note of pain sounded. The monster swerved and collapsed, and another black circle was rushing toward them. His shot failed to drop this one, but the creature veered.

Suddenly the thing was roaring past them, black and huge as a railroad train. It was a segmented being; it was composed of dozens of eight-foot links, like a train of miniature cars, three pairs of legs to a section.

But it ran like a single creature, with ripples of motion flowing back along its countless legs in exactly the way a centipede runs. Ham had a flashing glimpse of the manner in which the segments were joined by finger-thick ropes of flesh.

He sent three bullets into the middle of a passing section. It was a bad mistake; the segment spouted black liquid and rolled out of line, but the one behind it suddenly turned its stalked member toward the two defenders and came rushing at them. And off in the fog the first section was circling back. They had two to face now instead of one.

Ham had three cartridges left in the clip. He grimly fired one shot full at the quivering disc of flesh that cupped toward him, saw the monster collapse, and sent another bullet into the segment that followed. The thing—or things—seemed to extend indefinitely into the fog.

Beside him he heard the roar of the flame pistol. Pat had waited until the other monster was nearly upon her, so that her single blast might do as much damage as possible.

Ham stole time for a momentary glance at the result; the terrified discharge had simply incinerated a dozen segments, and one solitary survivor was crawling away into the fog.

"Good girl!" he muttered and sent his last bullet into the onrushing monstrosity. It dropped, and behind it, driving inexorably on, came the follower. He flung his empty weapon

at the fleshy disc, saw it bound off the black skin and waited, thrusting Pat behind him.

There was a great roaring light. A flame pistol. Dim in the fog were the figures of Harbord and Cullen, tracing their way along the wire, and before him were writhing segments of the blasted monster.

What remained of the creature had had enough punishment, apparently, for it veered to the left and went thundering away into the mist, now no more than ten segments long. And all around the group, just beyond visibility, the fog shapes gestured and grimaced and gibbered, and then they too vanished.

Not a word was spoke as the four traced the wire to the door of the *Gaea*. Once within, Patricia let out a low whistle of relief as she pulled off her dripping jacket.

"Well," she breathed. "That was a thrill."

"A thrill!" snorted Ham. "Say, you can have this whole soggy planet for all of me. And I've a mind to limit you to the ship too. This is no place for a thoughtless imp like you; you draw trouble the way honey draws flies."

"As if I had anything to do with it!" she retorted. "All right, order me to stay aboard if you think it'll do any good."

He grunted and turned to Harbord. "Thanks," he said. "That was close until you two showed up. And by the way, what was the warning for? The fog shapes?"

"Do you mean that Mardi Gras parade that's been going by?" asked Harbord. "Or was it a spiritualist convention? No; we weren't sure they were real. It was for the thing you did get tangled up with; it came humping by here in your direction."

"It or they?" corrected Ham.

"Did you see more'n one of them?"

"I *made* more than one of them. I cut it in half, and both halves went for us. Pat took care of one with the flame pistol,

but all my bullets seemed to do was knock off pieces." He frowned. "Do you understand the thing, Pat?"

"Better than you do," she retorted sharply. His threat to restrain her to the ship still rankled. "This would be a fine expedition without a biologist, wouldn't it?"

"That's the reason I'm being careful about you," he grinned. "I'm afraid I would be without a biologist. But what's your idea concerning that series of detachable worms out there?"

"Just that. It's a multiple animal. Did you ever hear of Henri Fabre?"

"Not that I remember."

"Well, he was a great French naturalist of about two centuries ago. Among other things, he studied some interesting little insects called processionary caterpillars, who spin themselves a cozy nest of silk and march out of it every night to feed."

"Well?"

"Just listen a moment," said the girl. "They march out single file, every caterpillar touching its head to the tail of the one preceding it. They're blind, you see; so each one trusts the one ahead. The first one's the leader; he picks the route, leads them to the proper tree, and there the column breaks up for feeding. And at sunrise, they form again into little columns, which join again into the big procession, and back they go to their nest."

"I still don't see—"

"You will. Now, whichever caterpillar is in front is the leader. If you take a stick and break the column at any point, the one behind the gap becomes the leader for his followers, and leads them back to the cobweb just as efficiently as the original leader. And if you segregate any one caterpillar, he finds his own way, being leader and column in one."

"I begin to see," muttered Ham.

"Yes. That thing—or those things—are something like the

processionary caterpillars. They're blind; in fact, eyes would have much less value on Uranus than on the Earth, and perhaps no Uranian creatures developed eyes—unless the fog shapes possess them. But I think these creatures are a long way ahead of processionaries, because the caterpillars establish their contact along a thread of silk, but these fellows, apparently, do it through actual nerve ganglia."

"Eh?" queried Ham.

"Of course. Didn't you notice how they were joined? That flat organ in front—each one had it slapped like a sucking disc against the one before him—was always placed in identically the same position. And when you shot one out of the middle of the file, I saw the pulpy lump it had covered on the one it followed. And besides—" She paused.

"Besides what?"

"Well, didn't it strike you as strange that the whole line cooperated so well? Their legs moved in a sort of rhythm, like the legs of a single creature, like the legs of a myriapod—a centipede.

"I don't think habit or training or discipline could ever account for the way that file of creatures acted, rushing and stopping and veering and circling, all in perfect unison. The whole line must have been under the direct neutral control of the leader—hearing and smelling what he heard and smelled, even, perhaps, responding to his desires, hating with him and finally fearing with him!"

"Damned if I don't think you're right!" exclaimed Ham. "The whole bunch of them acted like one animal!"

"Until you carelessly created two by breaking the line," corrected the girl. "You see—"

"I made another leader!" finished Ham excitedly. "The one behind the break in the file became a second leader, able to act independently." He frowned, "Say, do you suppose those things accumulate their intelligence when they

join? Does each one add his reasoning power—if any—to the dominating brain of the leader?"

"I doubt it," said the girl. "If that were true, they would be able to build up a colossal intellect just by adding more sections. No matter how stupid each individual might be, they'd only have to click together enough of them to create a godlike intelligence.

"If anything like that existed here, or ever had existed, they wouldn't be rushing around weaponless and savage. There'd be some sort of civilization, wouldn't there? But," she added, "they might pool their experience. The leader might have all the individual memories at his disposal, which wouldn't add a darn thing to his reasoning powers."

"Sounds plausible," agreed Ham. "Now as to the fog shapes. Have you figured out anything about them?"

She shuddered. "Not much," she confessed. "I think there's a relationship between them and these others, though."

"Why?"

"Because they came streaming by us just before the attack. They might simply have been running away from the multiple creature, but in that case they ought to have scattered. They didn't; they came rushing by in two distinct streams, and not only that, but all during the fight they were flickering and shimmering in the background. Didn't you notice that?"

"My attention was occupied," replied Ham dryly. "But what about it?"

"Well, did you ever hear of the indicator albirostris—the honey-guide?"

"It sounds vaguely familiar."

"It's an African bird of the cuckoo family, and it guides human beings to the wild bee colonies. Then the man gets the honey and the bird gets the grubs." She paused. "I think," she concluded, "that the fog shapes played honey-

guide to the others. I think they led the creatures to us either because your shot angered them, or because they wanted the leavings after the others were through with us, or because they're just plain destructive. Anyway, that's my guess."

"If they're real," added Ham. "We'll have to turn the infra-red camera on the next group or herd or swarm or flock, or whatever you call their gatherings. I still think they're mostly illusory."

She shuddered. "I hope you're right," she murmured.

"Bah!" said Harbord suddenly. "Women don't belong in places like this. Too timid."

"Yeah?" retorted Ham, now fully prepared to defend Patricia. "She was cool enough to notice details during that fracas out there."

"But afraid of shadows!" grumbled Harbord.

However, they weren't shadows. Some hours later Cullen reported that the fog around the *Gaea* was full of shifting, skittering shapes, and he trundled the long-wave camera from port to port.

Handicapped by the argon-laden air with its absorption spectrum that filtered out long rays, the infra-red plates were nevertheless more sensitive than the human eye, though perhaps less responsive to detail. But a photographic plate is not amenable to suggestion; it never colors what it sees by the tint of past experience; it records coldly and unemotionally the exact pattern of the light rays that strike it.

When Cullen was ready to develop his plates, Patricia was still asleep, tired out by the hectic first day on the planet, but Ham came out drowsily to watch the results.

These might have been less than she feared, but they were more than Ham expected. He squinted through a negative toward the light, then took a sheaf of prints from Cullen, frowning down at them.

"Humph!" he muttered. The prints showed something

beyond doubt, but something not much more definite than the unaided eye had seen. Indubitably the fog shapes were real, but it was equally certain that they weren't anthropomorphic.

The demoniac faces, the leering visages, the sardonic countenances, were decidedly absent to the eye of the camera; to that extent the beings they had seen were illusions, whose features had been superimposed by their own minds on the shadows in the fog. But only to that extent, for behind the illusion lay something unmistakably real. Yet what physical forms could achieve that flickering and shifting and change of shape and size that they had observed?

"Don't let Pat see these unless she asks to," he said thoughtfully. "And I think I'll confine her to the ship for the present. Judging from the couple of acres we've seen so far, this place isn't the friendliest sort of locality."

But he figured without the girl on both counts. When fifteen hours later, he moved the rocket a mile south and prepared for another circuit in the fog, she met his order with a storm of protest.

"What's this expedition for?" she demanded. "The most important thing on a planet is the life it supports, and that's a biologist's business, isn't it?"

She turned indignant eyes on Ham. "Why do you think the Institute chose me for this job? Just to sit idly in the rocket while a couple of incompetents look around—a chemist and an engineer who don't know an epiphyte from a hemipteron?"

"Well, we could bring in specimens," muttered Ham miserably.

That brought a renewed storm. "Listen to me!" she snapped. "If you want the truth, I'm not here because of you. You're here because of me! They could have found a hundred engineers and chemists and astrogators, but how many good extraterrestrial biologists? Darn few!"

Ham had no ready reply, for it was quite true. Despite her youth, Patricia, born on Venus and educated in Paris, was admittedly preeminent in her field. Nor, in all fairness to the backers of the expedition, could he handicap her in her work. After all, not even the government-financed Smithsonian could afford to spend somewhat over two million dollars without getting fair return for its money.

Sending a rocket out into the depths where Uranus plowed its lonely orbit was a project so expensive that in simple justice the expedition had to do its utmost, especially since forty long years would elapse before there would be another opportunity to visit the doubtful planet. So he sighed and yielded.

"That shows a faint glimmering of intelligence," said Patricia. "Do you think I'm afraid of some animated links of sausages? I won't make the mistake of cutting them in the middle. And as for those funny-faced shadows, you said yourself that they were illusions, and—by the way, where are the pictures you were going to take of them? Did they show anything?"

Cullen hesitated, then at Ham's resigned nod, he passed her the sheaf of prints. At the first glance she frowned suddenly.

"They're real!" she said, and then bent over them with so intent an expression that Ham wondered what she could read from so vague and shadowy a record. He saw, or fancied he saw, a queer gleam of satisfaction in her eyes, and felt a sensation of relief that at least she wasn't upset by the discovery.

"What d'you make of them?" he asked curiously.

She smiled and made no answer.

Apparently Ham's fears concerning Patricia were ill-founded on all counts. The days passed uneventually; Cullen analysed and filed his samples, and took innumerable tests of the

greenish Uranian atmosphere; Ham checked and rechecked his standard weights, and in spare moments examined the reaction motor on which the *Gaea* and their lives depended; and Patricia collected and classified her specimens without the least untoward incident.

Harbord, of course, had nothing to do until the rocket plunged once more into the vastness of space, so he served as cook and general utility man—an easy enough task consisting largely of opening cans and disposing of the debris.

Four times the *Gaea* soared aloft, picked her way through the eternal mists to a new station, and settled down while Ham and Patricia explored another thousand-foot circle. And somewhere in the grayness above, forever invisible, Saturn swung into conjunction, passed the slower-moving Uranus, and began to recede. Time was growing short; every hour meant additional distance to cover on the return.

On the fifth shift of position, Harbord announced the limit of their stay. "Not more than fifty hours more," he warned, "unless you have an inclination to spend the next forty years here."

"Well, it's not much worse than London," observed Ham, pulling on his outdoor clothing. "Come on, Pat. This'll be our last look at the pleasant Uranian landscape."

She followed him into the gray open, waiting while he clicked his guide wire to the rocket, and the silken rope to her belt. "I'd like to get one more look at our chain-gang friends," she complained. "I have an idea, and I'd like to investigate it."

"And I hope you don't," he grunted. "One look was plenty for me."

The *Gaea* disappeared in the eternal mist. Around them the fog shapes flickered and grimaced as they had done ever since that first appearance, but neither of them paid any attention now. Familiarity had removed any trace of fear.

This was a region of small stony hillrocks, and Patricia

ranged back and forth at the full length of the rope, culling, examining, discarding or preserving the rare Uranian flora. Most of the time she was beyond sight or sound, but the cord that joined them gave evidence of her safety.

Ham tugged imaptiently. "Like leading a puppy past a row of trees," he growled as she appeared. "Wire's end!" he called. "We'll circle back."

"But there's something beyond!" she cried. By virtue of the rope she could range an additional fifty feet into the obscurity. "There's something growing just out of reach there —something new! I want to see it."

"Hell, you can't. It's out of reach and that's that. We can lengthen the wire a little and come back for it."

"Oh, it's just a few feet." She turned away. "I'll release the rope, take a look, and come back."

"You won't!" he roared. "Pat! Come here!"

He tugged mightily on the rope. A faint exclamation of disgust drifted out of the dimness, and then, suddenly, the rope came free in his hands. She had freed herself!

"Pat!" he bellowed. "Come back! Come back, I say!"

A smothered reply sounded, all but inaudible. Then there was utter silence. He shouted again. The all-enveloping fog muffled his voice in his own ears. He waited a moment, then repeated his call. Nothing; no sound but the rustle of the fog shapes.

He was in a desperate quandry. After another pause he fired his revolver into the air; all ten shots at brief intervals. He waited, then fired another clip without response from the passive, leaden-hued fog. He swore bitterly at the girl's fool-hardiness, at his own helplessness, and at the grimacing fog shapes.

He had to do something. Go back to the *Gaea* and set Harbord and Cullen searching. That wasted precious time; every moment Patricia might be wandering blindly away. He muttered a phrase that might have been either an im-

precation or a prayer, pulled a pencil and piece of paper from his pocket, and scrawled a message: "Pat lost. Bring additional spool and attach to wire. Circle for me. Will try to stay within two-thousand-foot radius."

He clipped the paper to the wire's end, weighted it with a stone, and then tugged three times to summon the two from the *Gaea*. Then he deliberately released himself and plunged unguided into the fog.

He never knew how far or how long he walked. The fog shapes gibbered and mocked him, the condensation gathered on his face and dripped from his nose and chin, the fog pressed in about him. He shouted, he fired his automatic, he whistled, hoping that the shriller sounds might carry, he zigzagged back and forth across his route. Surely, he thought, Pat had sense enough not to wander. Surely a girl trained in the Hotlands of Venus knew that the proper procedure when lost was to remain still, lest one stray still farther from safety.

Ham himself was utterly lost now. He had no faintest conception of where the *Gaea* lay, nor in what direction was the guiding wire. Now and again he thought he spied the silver filament of safety, but each time it was only the glint of water or the dull sparkle of stone. He moved under an inverted bowl of fog that blocked off vision on every hand.

In the end it was the very weakness of the lost that saved him. After hours on hopeless plunging through the mist, he tripped—actually tripped—over the wire. He had circled.

Cullen and Harbord loomed suddenly beside him, joined by a silken rope. He gasped, "Have you—have you—"

"No," said Harbord gloomily, his lined visage looking bleak and worn. "But we will. We will."

"Say," said Cullen, "why don't you go aboard and rest up? You look about in, and we can carry on for you."

"No," said Ham grimly.

Harbord was unexpectedly gentle. "Don't worry," he said.

"She's a sensible sort. She'll stay put until we find her. She can't have wandered a full thousand feet beyond the wire's end."

"Unless," responded Ham miserably, "she was driven—or carried."

"We'll find her," repeated Harbord.

But ten hours later, after they had completely circled the *Gaea* at a dozen different distances, it became obvious that Patricia was not within the circumference described by their two-thousand-foot wire. Fifty times during the intolerable circuit Ham had fought against the impulse to free himself of the wire to probe just a little farther into the tantalizing fog.

She might be sitting despondently just beyond sight and earshot, or she might be lying injured within an easy stone's throw of the circle, and they'd never know it. Yet to release himself from the one guide that marked their base was little better than suicide and somewhat more than sheer insanity.

When they reached the stake that Cullen had driven to mark their starting point, Ham paused. "Back to the ship," he ordered grimly. "We'll move her four thousand feet in this direction and circle again. Pat can't have wandered a mile from the point I lost her."

"We'll find her," reiterated Harbord.

But they didn't find her. After a futile, exhausting search, Ham ordered the *Gaea* to a point at which their wirebound circle was tangent to the two circles already explored, and grimly began again.

Thirty-one hours had passed since the girl had disappeared, and the three were nearing exhaustion. It was Cullen who yielded first, and groped his way wearily back to the ship. When the other two returned to move to a new base, they found him sleeping fully clothed beside a half-drained cup of coffee.

The hours dropped slowly into eternity. Saturn was pulling steadily ahead of the misty planet, bound placidly for their

next meeting forty years in the future. Harbord said not a word concerning the passing of time; it was Ham who broached the subject.

"Look here," he said as the *Gaea* slanted down to a new position. "Time's short. I don't want you two marooned here, and if we don't find Pat in this area, I want you and Cullen to leave. Do you understand?"

"I understand English," said Harbord, "but not that sort."

"There's no reason for you two to stay. I'm staying. I'll take our portion of food and all the arms and ammunition, and I'll stay."

"Bah!" growled Harbord, "What's forty years?" He had turned sixty.

"I'm ordering you to leave," said Ham quietly.

"You don't command once we're clear of the surface," grunted the other. "We're staying. We'll find her."

But it began to seem utterly hopeless. Cullen awoke and joined them as they emerged into the infinite fog, and they took their places at six hundred and fifty foot intervals along the wire. Ham took the outermost position and they began their endless plodding through the mists.

He was close to the breaking point. For forty hours he had neither slept nor eaten, save for a hurried gulp of coffee and a bite of chocolate when they moved the *Gaea.* The fog shapes were beginning to take the weirdest conformations in his tired eyes, and they seemed to loom ever closer, and to grin more malevolently.

So it was that he had to blink and squint and peer very closely when, a quarter way around the circuit, he saw something a little denser than the fog shapes in the gloom.

He jerked the wire once to halt Harbord and Cullen, and stared fixedly. There was a sound, too—a faint, steady thrumming quite different from the eerie rustles of the fog shapes. He started sharply as he heard still another sound, indescribable, muffled, but certainly a physical sound. He

jerked the wire three times; that would summon his companions.

They came, and he pointed out the dusky mass. "We can reach it," he suggested, "if we tie a couple of our ropes together. Two should be plenty."

They moved cautiously into the mist. Something—something was stirring there. They crept quietly on, fifty feet, sixty. And suddenly Ham realized that he saw a chain of the multiple creatures—a vast chain, apparently, for it was still passing before them. In utter despondency he stopped, staring hopelessly ahead; then, very slowly, he turned back toward the wire.

A sound—a sharp sound—froze him. It sounded like a cough!

He whirled back. Regardless of the dangerous file close before him, he shouted, "Pat! Pat!"

The sublimity of relief! A thin little voice quavered beyond the line. "Ham! Oh, Ham!"

"Are—you—are you safe?"

"Y-Yes."

He was at the very side of the passing file. Beyond, pale as the mist itself, was Patricia, no more than ten feet away.

"Thank God!" he muttered. "Pat, when this chain passes, run straight here. Don't move a single step aside—not a single step!"

"Passes?" she quavered. "Oh, it won't pass. It isn't a file. It's a circle!"

"A circle!" Comprehension dawned. "A circle! Then how —how can we get you out? We can't break it or—" He paused. Now the queer parade was leaderless, helpless, but once it were broken at any point, it would turn into a fierce and bloodthirsty thing—and it might attack the girl. "Lord!" he gasped.

Harbord and Cullen were beside him. "Here!" he snapped.

He seized the remaining rope. "I'm going across. Stand close."

He crawled to the shoulders of the two. From that height it might be possible to leap the creatures. It had to be possible.

He made it, though it left Cullen and Harbord groaning from the thrust of his hundred and eighty pounds, Uranus weight. He spent only a moment holding Patricia to him; the menace of those circling monsters was too imminent.

He flung an end of the rope to the two beyond the circle. "Can you swing across if we hold it high enough, Pat?" The girl seemed on the verge of exhaustion.

"Of course," she murmured.

He helped her lock elbows and knees around the rope. Slowly, painfully, she inched her way in the manner of a South American tree sloth. Ham had one terrible instant of fear as she wavered directly over the file, but she made it, dropping weakly into Harbord's arms beyond.

Then she cried out, "Ham! How can you get across?"

"Vault 'em!" he flashed.

He spent no time in reflection. He gathered all the strength remaining in his body, drew back for a short run, and actually cleared the six-foot barrier of deadliness, his knuckles just touching a black, blubbery back.

Patricia struggled to her feet, clinging to him. He held her a moment, then said huskily, "Lord! If we hadn't found you—"

"But you did!" she whispered. Suddenly she began to laugh hysterically, the sound broken by choking coughts. "Only what kept you? I expected you sooner!" She stared wildly at the circling file. "I short-circuited them!" she cried. "I—short—circuited—their brains!"

She collapsed against him. Without a word he lifted her and followed Harbord and Cullen back along the wire to

the *Gaea.* Behind him, revolving endlessly, was the circle of doomed creatures.

Uranus was a banded green globe behind the flare of the afterjets, and Saturn a brilliant blue star to the left of a tiny, very fierce sun. Patricia, her cough already improved in the conditioned air of the *Gaea,* lay passively in a pivot chair and smiled at Ham.

"You see," she said, "after I cast off the rope—Wait! Don't lecture me again about that!—I stepped just the merest few paces into the fog, and then, after all, the plants I had seen turned out to be the same old zigzag ones I named Cryptogami Urani, so I started back and you were gone."

"Gone! I hadn't moved."

"You were gone," she repeated imperturbably. "I just walked a short distance and then shouted, but the shouts just sort of muffled out. And then I heard a couple of shots in another direction, and started that way—and suddenly the chain gang came plunging out of the fog!"

"What'd you do?"

"What could I do? They were too close for me to draw my gun, so I ran. They're fast, but so am I, and I kept ahead until I began to lose breath. Then I discovered that by sharp dodging I could keep away—they don't turn very quickly—and I managed for a few minutes, although that blinding fog kept me in danger of tripping. And then I had an inspiration!"

"You needed one!" he muttered.

She ignored him. "Do you remember when I mentioned Fabre and his studies of the pine processionary caterpillars? Well, one of his experiments was to lead the procession around the edge of a big garden vase and close the circle! He did away with the leader, and do you know what happened?"

"I can guess."

"You're right. Lacking leadership, the circle just kept revolving for hours, days, I don't know how long, until at last some caterpillar dropped from exhaustion, and a new leader was created by the gap. And suddenly that experiment occurred to me, and I set about duplicating it. I dodged back toward the rear end of my procession, with the front end following me!"

"I see!" muttered Ham.

"Yes. I intended to close the circle and dodge outside, but something went wrong. I caught up with the rear all right, but I was just about worn out and I stumbled or something, and the next thing I remember was lying on the ground with the feet of the things pounding by my face. And I was inside the circle!"

"You probably fainted from exhaustion."

"I never faint," said Patricia with dignity.

"You did when I got you out."

"That," she retorted, "was simply a case of going to sleep after about forty hours of staying awake without food. Fainting, or syncope, is quite different, being due to an undersupply of blood to the brain—"

"All right," cut in Ham. "If fainting needs a brain, obviously you couldn't faint. Go on."

"Well," she resumed placidly, "there I was. I could have shot a break in the circle, of course, but that would have brought an attack, and besides, I hadn't the least idea where the *Gaea* was. So I sat there, and I sat a week or ten days or a month—"

"Forty hours."

"And the fog shapes kept rustling over the file of sausage creatures, and they kept flickering and rustling and whispering until I thought I'd go mad. It was terrible—even knowing what they were, it was terrible!"

"Knowing what— Do you know what they are?"

"I figured out one good guess. In fact, I had suspicion as soon as I saw Cullen's infra-red photographs."

"Then what the devil are they?"

"Well, you see I had a good chance to examine the chain things at close range, and they're not perfect creatures."

"I'll say they're not!"

"I mean they're not fully developed. In fact, they're larvae. And I think the fog shapes are what they grow up to be. That's why the fog shapes led the things to us. Don't you see? The chain creatures are their children. It's like caterpillar and moth!"

"Well, that's possible, of course, but what about the weird faces of the fog shapes and their ability to change size?"

"They don't change size. See here—the light on that part of Uranus comes from directly overhead, doesn't it? Well, any shadows are thrown straight down, then; that's obvious. So what we saw—all that flickering, shifting crew of gargoyles—were just the shadows of floating things, flying things, projected on the fog. That's why the fog shapes grew and shrank and changed shape; they were just shadows following some winged creature that moved up and down and around. Do you see?"

"It sounds plausible. We'll report it that way, and in eighty years, when the north pole of Uranus gets around to the sunlight again, somebody can run up and check the theory. Maybe Harbord'll pilot them. Eh, Harbord? Think you'd be willing to visit the place again in eighty years?"

"Not with a woman aboard," grunted the astrogator.

✦ ✦ ✦

After the complete exploration of the Solar System, what? Inevitably, first colonization, then expansion to explore and colonize the planets of other stars. This is a task that will cover thousands of years of humanity's busy future, but to round out this collection here is an adventure from that greater time: the time of a Terran Empire spanning the stars. It's Poul Anderson with a novelette of that space empire's crack troubleshooter, Flandry, whose exploits he chronicled in such well-liked Ace novels as "Earthman, Go Home!" and "Mayday Orbit."

TIGER BY THE TAIL

by Poul Anderson

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

CAPTAIN FLANDRY OPENED his eyes and saw a metal ceiling. Simultaneously, he grew aware of the thrum and quiver which meant he was aboard a spaceship running on ultra-drive.

He sat up with a violence that sent the dregs of alcohol swirling through his head. He'd gone to sleep in a room somewhere in the stews of Catawrayannis, with no prospect or intention of leaving the city for an indefinite time—let alone the planet! Now—

The chilling realization came that he was not aboard a human ship. Humanoid, yes, from the size and design of things, but no vessel ever built within the borders of the Empire, and no foreign make that he knew of.

Even from looking at this one small cabin, he could tell. There were bunks, into one of which he had fitted pretty well, but the sheets and blankets weren't of plastic weave. They seemed—he looked more closely—the sheets seemed to be of some vegetable fiber, the blankets of long bluish-gray hair. There were a couple of chairs and a table in the middle of the room, wooden, and they must have seen better days, for they were elaborately handcarved, and in an intricate interwoven design new to Flandry—and planetary artforms were a hobby of his. The way and manner in which the metal plating had been laid was another indication, and—

He sat down again, buried his whirling head in his hands, and tried to think. There was a thumping in his head and a vile taste in his mouth which liquor didn't ordinarily leave—at least not the stuff he'd been drinking—and now that he remembered, he'd gotten sleepy much earlier than one would have expected when the girl was so good-looking—

Drugged—oh, no! *Tell me I'm not as stupid as a stereofilm hero! Anything but that!*

But who'd have thought it, who'd have looked for it? Certainly the people and beings on whom he'd been trying to get a lead would never try anything like that. Besides, none of them had been around, he was sure of it. He'd simply been out building part of the elaborate structure of demimonde acquaintances and information which would eventually, by exceedingly indirect routes, lead him to those he was seeking. He'd simply been out having a good time—*quite* a good time, in fact—and—

And now someone from outside the Empire had him. And now what?

He got up, a little unsteadily, and looked around for his clothes. No sign of them. And he'd paid three hundred credits for that outfit, too. He stamped savagely over to the door. It didn't have a photocell attachment; he jerked it open and found himself looking down the muzzle of a blaster.

It was of different design from any he knew, but it was quite unmistakable. Captain Flandry sighed, relaxed his taut muscles, and looked more closely at the guard who held it.

He was humanoid to a high degree, perhaps somewhat stockier than Terrestrial average—and come to think of it, the artificial gravity was a little higher than one gee—and with very white skin, long tawny hair and beard, and oblique violet eyes. His ears were pointed and two small horns grew above his heavy eyebrow ridges, but otherwise he was man-like enough. With civilized clothes and a hooded cloak he could easily pass himself off for human.

Not in the getup he wore, of course, which consisted of a kilt and tunic, shining berylium-copper cuirass and helmet, buskins over bare legs, and a murderous looking dirk. As well as a couple of scalps hanging at his belt.

He gestured the prisoner back, and blew a long hollow blast on a horn slung at his side. The wild echoes chased each other down the long corridor, hooting and howling with a primitive clamor that tingled faintly along Captain Flandry's spine.

He thought slowly, while he waited: No intercom, apparently not even speaking tubes laid the whole length of the ship. And household articles of wood and animal and vegetable fibres, and that archaic costume there—They were barbarians, all right. But no tribe that he knew about.

That wasn't too surprising, since the Terrestrial Empire and the half-dozen other civilized states in the known Galaxy ruled over several thousands of intelligent races and had

some contact with nobody knew how many thousands more. Many of the others were, of course, still planet-bound, but quite a few tribes along the Imperial borders had mastered a lot of human technology without changing their fundamental outlook on things. Which is what comes of hiring barbarian mercenaries.

The peripheral tribes were still raiders, menaces to the border planets and merely nuisances to the Empire as a whole. Periodically they were bought off, or played off against each other—or the Empire might even send a punitive expedition out. But if one day a strong barbarian race under a strong leader should form a reliable coalition—then *vae victis!*

A party of Flandry's captors, apparently officers, guardsmen, and a few slaves, came down the corridor. Their leader was tall and powerfully built, with a cold arrogance in his pale-blue eyes that did not hide a calculating intelligence. There was a golden coronet about his head, and the robes that swirled around his big body were rainbow-gorgeous. Flandry recognized some items as having been manufactured within the Empire. Looted, probably.

They came to a halt before him and the leader looked him up and down with a deliberately insulting gaze. To be thus surveyed in the nude could have been badly disconcerting, but Flandry was immune to embarrassment and his answering stare was bland.

The leader spoke at last, in strongly accented but fluent Anglic: "You may as well accept the fact that you are a prisoner, Captain Flandry."

They'd have gone through his pockets, of course. He asked levelly, "Just to satisfy my own curiosity, was that girl in your pay?"

"Of course. I assure you that the Scothani are not

the brainless barbarians of popular Terrestrial superstition, though—" a bleak smile—"it is useful to be thought so."

"The Scothani? I don't believe I've had the pleasure—"

"You have probably not heard of us, though we have had some contact with the Empire. We have found it convenient to remain in obscurity, as far as Terra is concerned, until the time is ripe. But—what do you think caused the Alarri to invade you, fifteen years ago?"

Flandry thought back. He had been a boy then, but he had, of course, avidly followed the news accounts of the terrible fleets that swept in over the marches and attacked Vega itself. Only the hardest fighting at the Battle of Mirzan had broken the Alarri. Yet it turned out that they'd been fleeing still another tribe, a wild and mighty race who had invaded their own system with fire and ruin. It was a common enough occurrence in the turbulent barbarian stars; this one incident had come to the Empire's notice only because the refugees had tried to conquer it in turn. A political upheaval within the Terrestrial domain had prevented closer investigation before the matter had been all but forgotten.

"So you were driving the Alarri before you?" asked Flandry with as close an approximation to the right note of polite interest as he could manage in his present condition.

"Aye. And others. The Scothani have quite a little empire now, out there in the wilderness of the Galaxy. But, since we were never originally contacted by Terrestrials, we have, as I say, remained little known to them."

So—the Scothani had learned their technology from some other race, possibly other barbarians. It was a familiar pattern, Flandry could trace it out in his mind. Spaceships landed on the primitive world, the initial awe of the natives gave way to the realization that the skymen weren't so different after all—they could be killed like anyone else; traders, students, laborers, mercenary warriors visited the more advanced worlds, brought back knowledge of their science

and technology; factories were built, machines produced, and some tribal king used the new power to impose his rule on all his planet; and then, to unite his restless subjects, he had to turn their faces outward, promise plunder and glory if they followed him out to the stars—

Only the Scothani had carried it farther than most. And lying as far from the Imperial border as they did, they could build up a terrible power without the complacent, politics-ridden Empire being more than dimly aware of the fact—until the day when—

Vae victis!

"Let us have a clear understanding," said the barbarian chief. "You are a prisoner on a warship already light years from Llynathawr, well into the Imperial marches and bound for Scotha itself. You have no chance of rescue, and mercy depends entirely on your own conduct. Adjust it accordingly."

"May I ask why you picked me up?" Flandry's tone was mild.

"You are of noble blood, and a high-ranking officer in the Imperial intelligence service, You may be worth something as a hostage. But primarily we want information."

"But I—"

"I know." The reply was disgusted. "You're very typical of your miserable kind. I've studied the Empire and its decadence long enough to know that. You're just another worthless younger son, given a high-paying sinecure so you can wear a fancy uniform and play soldier. You don't amount to anything."

Flandry let an angry flush go up his cheek. "Look here—"

"It's perfectly obvious," said the barbarian. "You come to Llynathawr to track down certain dangerous conspirators. So you register yourself in the biggest hotel in Catawrayannis as Captain Dominic Flandry of the Imperial Intelligence Service, you strut around in your expensive uniform dropping

dark hints about your leads and your activities—and these consist of drinking and gambling and wenching the whole night and sleeping the whole day!" A cold humor gleamed in the blue eyes. "Unless it is your intention that the Empire's enemies shall laugh themselves to death at the spectacle."

"If that's so," began Flandry thinly, "then why—"

"You will know something. You can't help picking up a lot of miscellaneous information in your circles, no matter how hard you try not to. Certainly you know specific things about the organization and activities of your own corps which we would find useful information. We'll squeeze all you know out of you! Then there will be other services you can perform, people within the Empire you can contact, documents you can translate for us, perhaps various liaisons you can make—eventually, you may even earn your freedom." The barbarian lifted one big fist. "And in case you wish to hold anything back, remember that the torturers of Scotha know their trade."

"You needn't make melodramatic threats," said Flandry sullenly.

The fist shot out, and Flandry fell to the floor with darkness whirling and roaring through his head. He crawled to hands and knees, blood dripping from his face, and vaguely he heard the voice: "From here on, little man, you are to address me as befits a slave speaking to a crown prince of Scotha."

The Terrestrial staggered to his feet. For a moment his fists clenched. The prince smiled grimly and knocked him down again. Looking up, Flandry saw brawny hands resting on blaster butts—not a chance, not a chance.

Besides, the prince was hardly a sadist. Such brutality was the normal order among the barbarians—and come to think of it, slaves within the Empire could be treated similarly.

And there was the problem of staying alive—

"Yes, sir," he mumbled.

The prince turned on his heel and walked away.

They gave him back his clothes, though someone had stripped the gold braid and the medals away. Flandry looked at the soiled, ripped garments and sighed. Tailor-made—!

He surveyed himself in the mirror as he washed and shaved. The face that looked back was wide across the cheekbones, straight-nosed and square-jawed, with carefully waved reddish-brown hair and a mustache trimmed with equal attention. Probably too handsome, he reflected, wiping the blood from under his nose, but he'd been young when he had the plasticosmetician work on him. Maybe when he got out of this mess he should have the face made over to a slightly more rugged patern to fit his years. He was in his thirties now, after all—getting to be a big boy, Dominic.

The fundamental bone structure of head and face was his own, however, and so were the eyes—large and bright, with a hint of obliquity, the iris of that curious gray which can seem any color, blue or green or black or gold. And the trim, medium-tall body was genuine too. He hated exercises, but went through a dutiful daily ritual since he needed sinews and coordination for his work—and, too, a man in condition was something to look at among the usually flabby nobles of Terra; he'd found his figure no end of help in making his home leaves pleasant.

Well, can't stand here admiring yourself all day, old fellow. He slipped blouse, pants, and jacket over his silkite undergarments, pulled on the sheening boots, tilted his officer's cap at an angle of well-gauged rakishness, and walked out to meet his new owners.

The Scothani weren't such bad fellows, he soon learned. They were big brawling lusty barbarians, out for adventure and loot and fame as warriors; they had courage and loyalty and a wild streak of sentiment that he liked. But they could also fly into deadly rages, they were casually cruel to anyone that stood in their way, and Flandry acquired a not too high

respect for their brains. It would have helped if they'd washed oftener, too.

This warship was one of a dozen which Cerdic, the crown prince, had taken out on a plundering cruse. They'd sacked a good many towns, even some on nominally Imperial planets, and on the way back had sent down a man in a lifeboat to contact Cerdic's agents on Llynathawr, which was notoriously the listening post of this sector of the Empire. In learning that there was something going on which a special agent from Terra had been investigating, Cerdic had ordered him picked up. And that was that.

Now they were homeward bound, their holds stuffed with loot and their heads stuffed with plans for further inroads. It might not have meant much, but—well—Cerdic and his father Penda didn't seem to be just ordinary barbarian chiefs, nor Scothania an ordinary barbarian nation.

Could it be that somewhere out there among the many stars someone had finally organized a might that could break the Empire? Could the Long Night really be at hand?

Flandry shoved the thought aside. He had too much to do right now. Even his own job at Llynathawr, important as it was, could and would be handled by someone else—though not, he thought a little sadly, with the Flandry touch—and his own immediate worry was here and now. He had to find out the extent of power and ambition of the Scothani; he had to learn their plans and get the information to Terra, and somehow spike them even a little. After that there might be time to save his own hide.

Cerdic had him brought to the captain's cabin. The place was a typical barbarian chief's den, with the heads of wild beasts on the walls and their hides on the floors, old shields and swords hung up in places of honor, a magnificent golden vase stolen from some planet of artists shining in a corner. But there were incongruous modern touches, a microprint reader

and many bookrolls from the Empire, astrographic tables and computer, a vodograph. The prince sat in a massive carven chair, a silkite robe flung carelessly over his broad shoulders. He nodded with a certain affability.

"Your first task will be to learn Scothanian," he said without preliminary. "As yet almost none of our people, even nobles, speak Anglic, and there are many who will want to talk to you."

"Yes, sir," said Flandry. It was what he would most have desired.

"You had better also start organizing all you know so you can present it coherently," said the prince. "And I, who have lived in the Empire, will be able to check enough of your statements to tell whether you are likely speaking the truth." He smiled mirthlessly. "If there is reason to suspect you are lying, you will be put to the torture. And one of our Sensitives will then get at the truth."

So they had Sensitives, too. Telepaths who could tell whether a being was lying when pain had sufficiently disorganized his mind were as bad as the Empire's hypnoprobes.

"I'll tell the truth, sir," he said.

"I suppose so. If you cooperate, you'll find us not an ungrateful people. There will be more wealth than was ever dreamed of when we go into the Empire. There will also be considerable power for such humans as are our liaison with their race."

"Sir," began Flandry, in a tone of weak self-righteousness, "I couldn't think of—"

"Oh, yes, you could," said Cerdic glumly. "I know you humans. I traveled incognito throughout your whole Empire, I was on Terra itself. I posed as one of you, or when convenient as just another of the subject races. I *know* the Empire—its utter decadence, its self-seeking politicians and pleasure-loving mobs, corruption and intrigue everywhere you

go, collapse of morals and duty-sense, decline of art into craft and science into stagnancy—you were a great race once you humans, you were the first to aspire to the stars and we owe you something for that, I suppose. But you're not the race you once were."

The viewpoint was biased, but enough truth lay in it to make Flandry wince. Cerdic went on, his voice rising: "There is a new power growing out beyond your borders, young peoples with the strength and courage and hopefulness of youth, and they'll sweep the rotten fragments of the Empire before them and build something new and better."

Only, thought Flandry, *only first comes the Long Night, darkness and death and the end of civilization, the howling peoples in the ruins of our temples and a myriad petty tyrants holding their dreary courts in the shards of the Empire. To say nothing of the decline of good music and good cuisine, taste in clothes and taste in women and conversation as a fine art.*

"We've one thing you've lost," said Cerdic, "and I think ultimately that will be the deciding factor. Honestly. Flandry, the Scothani are a race of honest warriors."

"No doubt, sir," said Flandry.

"Oh, we have our evil characters, but they are few and the custom of private challenges soon eliminates them," said Cerdic. "And even their evil is an open and clean thing, greed or lawlessness or something like that; it isn't the bribery and conspiracy and betrayal of your rotten politicians. And most of us live by our code. It wouldn't occur to a true Scothani to do a dishonorable thing, to break an oath or desert a comrade or lie on his word of honor. Our women aren't running loose making eyes at every man they come across; they're kept properly at home till time for marriage and then they know their place as mothers and houseguiders. Our boys are raised to respect the gods and the king, to fight, and to speak truth. Death is a little thing, Flandry, it comes

to everyone in his time and he cannot stay it, but honor lives forever.

"We don't corrupt ourselves. We keep honor at home and root out disgrace with death and torture. We live our code. And that is really why we will win."

Battleships help, thought Flandry. And then, looking into the cold bright eyes: *He's a fanatic. But a hell of a smart one. And that kind makes the most dangerous enemy.*

Aloud he asked, humbly: "Isn't any stratagem a lie, sir? Your own disguised travels within the Empire—"

"Naturally, certain maneuvers are necessary," said the prince stiffly. "Nor does it matter what one does with regard to alien races. Especially when they have as little honor as Terrestrials."

The good old race-superiority complex, too. Oh, well.

"I tell you this," said Cerdic earnestly, "in the hope that you may think it over and see our cause is just and be with us. We will need many foreigners, especially humans, for liaison and intelligence and other services. You may still accomplish something in a hitherto wasted life."

"I'll think about it, sir," said Flandry.

"Then go."

Flandry got.

The ship was a good three weeks en route to Scotha. It took Flandry about two of them to acquire an excellent working knowledge of the language, but he preferred to simulate difficulty and complained that he got lost when talk was too rapid. It was surprising how much odd information you picked up when you were thought not to understand what was being said. Not anything of great military significance, of course, but general background, stray bits of personal history, attitudes and beliefs—it all went into the neat filing system which was Flandry's memory, to be corre-

lated with whatever else he knew or learned into an astonishingly complete picture.

The Scothani themselves were quite friendly, eager to hear about the fabulous Imperial civilization and to brag of their own wonderful past and future exploits. Since there was obviously nothing he could do, Flandry was under the loosest guard and had virtually the freedom of the ship. He slept and messed with the warriors, swapped bawdy songs and dirty jokes, joined their rough-and-tumble wrestling matches to win surprised respect for his skill, and even became the close friend and confidant of some of the younger males.

The race was addicted to gambling. Flandry learned their games, taught them some of the Empire's, and before the trip's end had won back his stolen finery plus several other outfits and a pleasantly jingling purse. It was—well—he almost hated to take his winnings from these overgrown babies. It just never occurred to them that dice and cards could be made to do tricks.

The picture grew. The barbarian tribes of Scotha were firmly united under the leadership of the Frithian kings, had been for several generations. Theoretically it was an absolute monarchy, though actually all classes except the slaves were free. They had conquered at least a hundred systems outright, contenting themselves with exacting tribute and levies from most of these, and dominated all others within reach. Under Penda's leadership, a dozen similar, smaller barbarian states had already formed a coalition with the avowed purpose of invading the Empire, capturing Terra, destroying the Imperial military forces, and making themselves masters. Few of them thought beyond the plunder to be had, though apparently some of them, like Cerdic, dreamed of maintaining and extending the Imperial domain under their own rule.

They had a formidable fleet—Flandry couldn't find out

its exact size—and its organization and technology seemed far superior to that of most barbarian forces. They had a great industry, mostly slavemanned with the Scothan overlords supervising. They had shrewd leaders, who would wait till one of the Empire's recurring political crises had reduced its fighting strength, and who were extremely well informed about their enemy. It looked—bad!

Especially since they couldn't wait too long. Despite the unequalled prosperity created by industry, tribute, and piracy, all Scotha was straining at the leash, nobles and warriors in the whole coalition foaming to be at the Empire's throat; a whole Galactic sector had been seized by the same savage dream. When they came roaring in—well, you never could tell. The Empire's fighting strength was undoubtedly greater, but could it be mobilized in time? Wouldn't Penda get gleeful help from two or three rival imperia? Couldn't a gang of utterly fearless fanatics plow through the mass of self-seeking officers and indifferent mercenaries that made up most of the Imperial power today?

Might not the Long Night really be at hand?

Scotha was not unlike Terra—a little larger, a little farther from its sun, the seas made turbulent by three small close moons. Flandry had a chance to observe it telescopically—the ship didn't have magniscreens—and as they swept in, he saw the mighty disc roll grandly against the Galactic star-blaze and studied the continents with more care than he showed.

The planet was still relatively thinly populated, with great forests and plains standing empty, archaic cities and villages huddling about the steep-walled castles of the nobles. Most of its industry was on other worlds, though the huge military bases were all on Scotha and its moons. There couldn't be more than a billion Scothani all told, estimated Flandry, probably less, and many of them would live elsewhere as

overlords of the interstellar domain. Which didn't make them less formidable. The witless hordes of humankind were more hindrance than help to the Empire.

Cedric's fleet broke up, the captains bound for their estates. He took his own vessel to the capital, Iuthagaar, and brought it down in the great yards. After the usual pomp and ceremony of homecoming, he sent for Flandry.

"What is your attitude toward us now?" he asked.

"You are a very likeable people, sir," said the Terrestrial, "and it is as you say—you are a strong and honest race."

"Then you have decided to help us actively?" The voice was cold.

"I really have little choice, sir," shrugged Flandry. "I'll be a prisoner in any case, unless I get to the point of being trusted. The only way to achieve that is to give you my willing assistance."

"And what of your own nation?"

"A man must stay alive, sir. These are turbulent times."

Contempt curled Cerdic's lip. "Somehow I thought better of you," he said. "But you're a human. You could only be expected to betray your oaths for your own gain."

Surprise shook Flandry's voice. "Wasn't this what you wanted, sir?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. Now come along. But not too close—you make me feel a little sick."

They went up to the great gray castle which lifted its windy spires over the city, and presently Flandry found himself granted an audience with the King of Scothania.

It was a huge and dimlit hall, hung with the banners and shields of old wars and chill despite the fires that blazed along its length. Penda sat at one end, wrapped in furs against the cold, his big body dwarfed by the dragon-carved throne. He had his eldest son's stern manner and bleak eyes, without the prince's bitter intensity—a strong man, thought

Flandry, hard and ruthless and able—but perhaps not too bright.

Cerdic had mounted to a seat on his father's right. The queen stood on his left, shivering a little in the damp draft, and down either wall reached a row of guardsmen. The fire shimmered on their breastplates and helmets and halberds; they seemed figures of legend, but Flandry noticed that each warrior carried a blaster too.

There were others in evidence, several of the younger sons of Penda, grizzled generals and councillors, nobles come for a visit. A few of the latter were of non-Scothan race and did not seem to be meeting exceptional politeness. Then there were the hangers-on, bards and dancers and the rest, and slaves scurrying about. Except for its size—and its menace—it was a typical barbarian court.

Flandry bowed the knee as required, but thereafter stood erect and met the king's eye. His position was anomalous, officially Cerdic's captured slave, actually—well, what could he become in time?

Penda asked a few of the more obvious questions, then said slowly: "You will confer with General Nartheof here, head of our intelligence section, and tell him what you know. You may also make suggestions if you like, but remember that false intentions will soon be discovered and punished."

"I will be honest, your majesty."

"Is any Terrestrial honest?" snapped Cerdic.

"I am," said Flandry cheerfully. "As long as I'm paid, I serve faithfully. Since I'm no longer in the Empire's pay, I must perforce look about for a new master."

"I doubt you can be much use," said Penda.

"I think I can, your majesty," answered Flandry boldly. "Even in little things. For instance, this admirably decorated hall is so cold one must wear furs within it, and still the hands

are numb. I could easily show a few technicians how to install a radiant heating unit that would make it like summer in here."

Penda lifted his busy brows. Cerdic fairly snarled: "A Terrestrial trick, that. Shall we become as soft and luxurious as the Imperials, we who hunt vorgari on ski?"

Flandry's eyes, flitting around the room, caught dissatisfied expressions on many faces. Inside, he grinned. The prince's austere ideals weren't very popular with these noble savages. If they only had the nerve to—

It was the queen who spoke. Her soft voice was timid: "Sire, is there any harm in being warm? I—I am always cold these days."

Flandry gave her an appreciative look. He'd already picked up the background of Queen Gunli. She was young, Penda's third wife, and she came from more southerly Scothan lands than Iuthagaar; her folk were somewhat more civilized then the dominant Frithians. She was certainly a knockout, with that dark rippling hair and those huge violet eyes in her pert face. And that figure too—there was a suppressed liveliness in her; he wondered if she had ever cursed the fate that gave her noble blood and thus a political marriage.

For just an instant their eyes crossed.

"Be still," said Cerdic.

Gunli's hand fell lightly on Penda's. The king flushed. "Speak not to your queen thus, Cerdic—" he said. "In truth this Imperial trick is but a better form of fire, which no one calls unmanly. We will let the Terrestrial make one."

Flandry bowed his most ironical bow. Cocking an eye at the queen, he caught a twinkle. She knew.

Nartheof made a great show of blustering honesty, but there was a shrewd brain behind the hard little eyes that glittered in his hairy face. He leaned back and folded his hands behind his head and gave Flandry a quizzical stare.

"If it is as you say—" he began.

"It is," said the Terrestrial.

"Quite probably. Your statements so far check with what we already know, and we can soon verify much of the rest. If, then, you speak truth, the Imperial organization is fantastically good." He smiled. "As it should be—it conquered the stars, in the old days. But it's no better than the beings who man it, and everyone knows how venial and cowardly the Imperials are today."

Flandry said nothing, but he remembered the gallantry of the Sirian units at Garrapoli and the dogged courage of the Valatian Legion and—well, why go on? The haughty Scothani just didn't seem able to realize that a state as absolutely decadent as they imagined the Empire to be wouldn't have endured long enough to be their own enemy.

"We'll have to reorganize everything," said Nartheof. "I don't care whether what you say is true or not, it makes good sense. Our whole setup is outmoded. It's ridiculous, for instance, to give commands according to nobility and blind courage instead of proven intelligence."

"And you assume that the best enlisted man will make the best officer," said Flandry. "It doesn't necessarily follow. A strong and hardy warrior may expect more of his men than they can give. You can't all be supermen."

"Another good point. And we should eliminate swordplay as a requirement; swords are useless today. And we have to train mathematicians to compute trajectories and everything else." Nartheof grimaced. "I hate to think what would have happened if we'd invaded three years ago, as many hotheads wanted to do. We would have inflicted great damage, but that's all."

"You should wait at least another ten or twenty years and really get prepared."

"Can't. The great nobles wouldn't stand for it. Who wants to be duke of a planet when he could be viceroy of a sector?

But we have a year or two yet." Nartheof scowled. "I can get my own service whipped into shape, with your help and advice. I have most of the bright lads. But as for some of the other forces—gods, the dunderheads they have in commandl I've argued myself hoarse with Nornagast, to no use. The fool just isn't able to see that a space fleet the size of ours must have a special coordinating division equipped with semantic calculators and—The worst of it is, he's a cousin to the king, he ranks me. Not much I can do."

"An accident could happen to Nornagast," murmured Flandry.

"Eh?" Nartheof gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said Flandry lightly. "But just for argument's sake, suppose—well, suppose some good swordsman should pick a qurrel with Nornagast. I don't doubt he has many enemies. If he should unfortunately be killed in the duel, you might be able to get to his majesty immediately after, before anyone else, and persuade him to appoint a more reasonable successor. Of course, you'd have to know in advance that there'd be a duel."

"Of all the treacherous, underhanded—!"

"I haven't done anything but speculate," said Flandry mildly. "However, I might remind you of your own remarks. It's hardly fair that a fool should have command and honor and riches instead of better men who simply happen to be of lower degree. Nor, as you yourself said, is it good for Scothania as a whole."

"I won't hear of any such Terrestrial vileness."

"Of course not. I was just—well, speculating. I can't help it. All Terrestrials have dirty minds. But we did conquer the stars once."

"A man might go far, if only—no!" Nartheof shook himself. "A warrior doesn't bury his hands in muck."

"No. But he might use a pitchfork. Tools don't mind dirt. The man who wields them doesn't even have to know the

details—But let's get back to business." Flandry relaxed even more lazily. "Here's a nice little bit of information which only highly placed Imperials know. The Empire has a lot of arsenals and munitions dumps which are guarded by nothing but secrecy. The Emperor doesn't dare trust certain units to guard such sources of power, and he can't spare enough reliable legions to watch them all. So obscure, uninhabited planets are used." Nartheof's eyes were utterly intent now. "I know of only one, but it's a good prospect. An uninhabited, barren system not many parsecs inside the border, the second planet honeycombed with underground works that are crammed with spaceships, atomic bombs, fuel—power enough to wreck a world. A small, swift fleet could get there, take most of the stores, and destroy the rest before the nearest garrison could ever arrive in defense."

"Is that—*true?*"

You can easily find out. If I'm lying. it'll cost you that small unit, that's all—and I assure you I've no desire to be tortured to death."

"Holy gods!" Nartheof quivered. "I've got to tell Cerdic now, right away—"

"You could. Or you might simply go there yourself without telling anyone. If Cerdic knows, he'll be the one to lead the raid. If you went, you'd get the honor—and the power—"

"Cerdic would—not like it."

"Too late then. He could hardly challenge you for so bold and successful a stroke."

"And he is getting too proud of himself—he could stand a little taking down." Nartheof chuckled, a deep vibration in his shaggy breast. "Aye, by Valtam's beard, I'll do it! Give me the figures now—"

Presently the general looked up from the papers and gave Flandry a puzzled stare. "If this is the case, and I believe it is," he said slowly, "it'll be a first-rate catastrophe for the Empire. Why are you with us, human?"

"Maybe I've decided I like your cause a little better," shrugged Flandry. "Maybe I simply want to make the best of my own situation. We Terrestrials are adaptable beasts. But I have enemies here, Nartheof, and I expect to make a few more. I'll need a powerful friend."

"You have one," promised the barbarian. "You're much too useful to me to be killed. And—and—damn it, human, somehow I can't help liking you."

The dice rattled down onto the table and came to a halt. Prince Torric swore good-naturedly and shoved the pile of coins toward Flandry. "I just can't win," he laughed. "You have the gods with you, human."

For a slave, I'm not doing so badly, thought Flandry. *In fact, I'm getting rich.* "Fortune favors the weak, highness," he smiled. "The strong don't need luck."

"To Theudagaar with titles," said the young warrior. He was drunk; wine flushed his open face and spread in puddles on the table before him. "We're too good friends by now, Dominic. Ever since you got my affairs in order—"

"I have a head for figures, and of course Terrestrial education helps—Torric. But you need money."

"There'll be enough for all when we hold the Empire. I'll have a whole system to rule, you know."

Flandry pretended surprise. "Only a system? After all, a son of King Penda—"

"Cerdic's doing," Torric scowled blackly. "The dirty avagar persuaded Father that only one—himself, of course—should succeed to the throne. He said no kingdom ever lasted when the sons divided power equally."

"It seems very unfair. And how does he know he's the best?"

"He's the oldest. That's what counts. And he's conceited enough to be sure of it." Torric gulped another beakerful.

"The Empire has a better arrangement. Succession is by ability alone, among many in a whole group of families."

"Well—the old ways—what can I do?"

"That's hardly warrior's talk, Torric. Admitting defeat so soon—I thought better of you!"

"But what to *do*—?"

"There are ways. Cerdic's power, like that of all chiefs rests on his many supporters and his own household troops. He isn't well liked. It wouldn't be hard to get many of his friends to give allegiance elsewhere."

"But—treachery—would you make a brotherslayer of me?"

"Who said anything about killing? Just—dislodging, let us say. He could always have a system or two to rule, just as he meant to give you."

"But—look, I don't know anything about your sneaking Terrestrial ways. I suppose you mean to dish—disaffect his allies, promise them more than he gives . . . What's the word—bribery?—I don't know a thing about it, Dominic. I couldn't do it."

"You wouldn't have to do it," murmured Flandry. "I could help. What's a man for, if not to help his friends?"

Earl Morgaar, who held the conquered Zanthudian planets in fief, was a noble of power and influence beyond his station. He was also notoriously greedy.

He said to Captain Flandry: "Terrestrial, your suggestions about farming out tax-gathering have more than doubled my income. But now the natives are rising in revolt against me, murdering my troops wherever they get a chance and burning their farms rather than pay the levies. What do they do about that in the Empire?"

"Surely, sir, you could crush the rebels with little effort," said Flandry.

"Oh, aye, but dead men don't pay tribute either. Isn't there a better way? My whole domain is falling into chaos."

"Several ways, sir." Flandry sketched a few of them—puppet native committees, propaganda shifting the blame onto some scapegoat, and the rest of it. He did not add that these methods work only when skillfully administered.

"It is well," rumbled the earl at last. His hard gaze searched Flandry's impassively smiling face. "You've made yourself useful to many a Scothanian leader since coming here, haven't you? There's that matter of Nartheof—he's a great man now because he captured that Imperial arsenal. And there are others. But it seems much of this gain is at the expense of other Scothani, rather than of the Empire. I still wonder about Nornagast's death—"

"History shows that the prospect of great gain always stirs up internal strife, sir," said Flandry. "It behooves the strong warrior to seize a dominant share of power for himself and so reunite his people against their common enemy. Thus did the early Terrestrial emperors end the civil wars and become the rulers of the then accessible universe."

"Ummm—yes. Gain—power—wealth—aye, some good warrior—"

"Since we are alone, sir," said Flandry, "Perhaps I may remark that Scotha itself has seen many changes of dynasty."

"Yes—of course, I took an oath to the king. But suppose, just suppose the best interests of Scothania were served by a newer and stronger family—"

They were into details of the matter within an hour. Flandry suggested that Prince Kortan would be a valuable ally—but beware of Torric, who had ambitions of his own—

There was a great feast given at the winter solstice. The town and the palace blazed with light and shouted with music and drunken laughter. Warriors and nobles swirled their finest robes about them and boasted of the ruin they would wreak in the Empire. It was to be noted that the

number of alcoholic quarrels leading to bloodshed was unusually high this year, especially among the upper classes.

There were enough dark corners, though. Flandry stood in one, a niche leading to a great open window, and looked over the glittering town lights to the huge white hills that lay silent beyond, under the hurtling moons. Above were the stars, bright with the frosty twinkle of winter; they seemed so near that one could reach a hand up and pluck them from the sky. A cold breeze wandered in from outside. Flandry wrapped his cloak more tightly about him.

A light footfall sounded on the floor. He looked about and saw Gunli the queen. Her tall young form was vague in the shadow, but a shaft of moonlight lit her face with an unearthly radiance. She might have been a lovely girl of Terra, save for the little horns and—well—

These people aren't really human. They look human, but no people of Terra were ever so—simple-minded! Then with an inward grin: *But you don't expect a talent for intrigue in women, Terrestrial or Scothan. So the females of this particular species are quite human enough for anyone's taste.*

The cynical mirth faded into an indefinable sadness. He—damn it, he liked Gunli. They had laughed together often in the last few months, and she was honest and warm-hearted and—well, no matter, no matter.

"Why are you here all alone, Dominic?" she asked. Her voice was very quiet, and her eyes seemed huge in the cold pale moonlight.

"It would hardly be prudent for me to join the party," he answered wryly. "I'd cause too many fights. Half of them out there hate my insides."

"And the other half can't do without you," she smiled. "Well, I'm as glad as not to be there myself. These Frithians are savages. At home—" She looked out the window and there were suddenly tears glittering in her eyes.

"Don't weep, Gunli," said Flandry softly. "Not tonight. This is always new hope in a new year."

"I can't forget the old years," she said with a bitterness that shocked him.

Understanding came. He asked quietly: "There was someone else, wasn't there?"

"Aye. A young knight. But he was of low degree, so they married me off to Penda, who is old and chill. And Jomana was killed in one of Cerdic's raids—" She turned her head to look at him, and a pathetic attempt at a smile quivered on her lips. "It isn't Jomana, Dominic. He was very dear to me, but even the deepest wounds heal with time. But I think of all the other young men, and their sweethearts—"

"It's what the men want themselves."

"But not what the women want. Not to wait and wait and wait till the ships come back, never knowing whether there will only be his shield aboard. Not to rock her baby in her arms and know that in a few years he will be a stiffened corpse on the shores of some unknown planet. Not—well—" She straightened her slim shoulders. "Little I can do about it."

"You are a very brave and lovely woman, Gunli," said Flandry. "Your kind has changed history ere this." And he sang softly a verse he had made in the Scothan bardic form:

"So I see you standing,
sorrowful in darkness.
But the moonlight's broken
by your eyes tear-shining—
moonlight in the maiden's
magic net of tresses.
Gods gave many gifts, but,
Gunli, yours was the greatest."

Suddenly she was in his arms . . .

Sviffash of Sithafar was angry. He paced up and down the secret chamber, his tail lashing about his bowed legs, his

fanged jaws snapping on the accented Scothanian words that poured out.

"Like a craieex they treat me!" he hissed. "I, king of a planet and an intelligent species, must bow before the dirty barbarian Penda. Our ships have the worst positions in the fighting line and the last chance at loot. The swaggering Scothani on Sithafar treat my people as if they were conquered peasants, not warrior allies. It is not to be endured!"

Flandry remained respectfully silent. He had carefully nursed the reptile king's smoldering resentment along ever since the being had come to Iuthagaar for conference, but he wanted Sviffash to think it was all his own idea.

"By the Dark God, if I had a chance I think I'd go over to the Terran side!" exploded Sviffash. "You say they treat their subjects decently?"

"Aye, we've learned it doesn't pay to be prejudiced about race, your majesty. In fact, many nonhumans hold Terrestrial citizenship. And of course a vassal of the Empire remains free within his own domain, except in certain matters of trade and military force where we must have uniformity. And he has the immeasurable power and wealth of the Empire behind and with him."

"My own nobles would follow gladly enough," said Sviffash. "They'd sooner loot Scothanian than Terrestrial planets, if they didn't fear Penda's revenge."

"Many other of Scotha's allies feel likewise, your majesty. And still more would join an uprising just for the sake of the readily available plunder, if only they were sure the revolt would succeed. It is a matter of getting them all together and agreeing—"

"And you have contacts everywhere, Terrestrial. You're like a spinner weaving its web. Of course, if you're caught I shall certainly insist I never had anything to do with you."

"Of course, your majesty."

"But if it works—hah!" The lidless black eyes glittered

and a forked tongue flickered out between the horny lips. "Hah, the sack of Scotha!"

"No, your majesty. It is necessary that Scotha be spared. There will be enough wealth to be had on her province planets."

"Why?" The question was cold, emotionless.

"Because you see, your majesty, we will have Scothan allies who will cooperate only on that condition. Some of the power-seeking nobles . . . and then there is a southern nationalist movement which wishes separation from the Frithian north . . . and I may say that it has the secret leadership of the queen herself . . ."

Flandry's eyes were as chill as his voice: "It will do you no good to kill me, Duke Asdagaar. I have left all the evidence with a reliable person who, if I do not return alive, or if I am killed later, will take it directly to the king and the people."

The Scothan's hands clenched white about the arms of his chair. Impotent rage shivered in his voice: "You devil! You crawling worm!"

"Name-calling is rather silly coming from one of your history," said Flandry. "A parricide, a betrayer of comrades, a breaker of oaths, a mocker of the gods—I have all the evidence, Duke Asdagaar. Some of it is on paper, some is nothing but the names of scattered witnesses and accomplices each of whom knows a little of your career. And a man without honor, on Scotha, is better dead. In fact, he soon will be."

"But how did you learn—?" Hopelessness was coming into the duke's tone; he was beginning to tremble a little.

"I have my ways. For instance, I learned quite a bit by cultivating the acquaintance of your slaves and servants. You high-born forget that the lower classes have eyes and ears, and that they talk among themselves."

"Well—" The words were almost strangled. "What do you want?"

"Help for certain others. You have powerful forces at your disposal—"

Spring winds blew softly through the garden and stirred the trees to rustling. There was a deep smell of green life about them; a bird was singing somewhere in the twilight, and the ancient promise of summer stirred in the blood.

Flandry tried to relax in the fragrant evening, but he was too tense—his nerves were drawn into quivering wires and he had grown thin and hollow-eyed. So too had Gunli, but it seemed only to heighten her loveliness; it had more than a hint of the utterly alien and remote now.

"Well, the spaceship is off," said the man. His voice was weary. "Aethagir shouldn't have any trouble getting to Ifri, and he's a clever lad—he'll find a way to deliver my letter to Admiral Walton." He scowled, and a nervous tic began over his left eye. "But the timing is so desperately close. If our forces strike too soon, or too late, it can be ruinous."

"I don't worry about that, Dominic," said Gunli. "You know how to arrange these things."

"I've never handled an empire before, my beautiful. The next several days will be touch and go. And that's why I want you to leave Scotha now. Take a ship and some trusty guards and go to Alagan or Gimli or some other out-of-the-way planet." He smiled with one corner of his mouth. "It would be a bitter victory if you died in it, Gunli."

Her voice was haunted. "I should die. I've betrayed my lord—I am dishonored—"

"You've saved your people—your own southerners, and ultimately all Scotha."

"But the broken oaths—" She began to weep, quietly and hopelessly.

"An oath is only a means to an end. Don't let the means override the end."

"An oath *is* an oath. But Dominic—it was a choice of standing by Penda or by—you—"

He comforted her as well as he could. And he reflected grimly that he had never before felt himself so thoroughly a skunk.

The battle in space was, to the naked eye, hardly visible—brief flashes of radiation among the swarming stars, occasionally the dark form of a ship slipping by and occulting a wisp of the Milky Way. But Admiral Walton smiled with cold satisfaction at the totality of reports given him by the semantic integrator.

"We're mopping them up," he said. "Our task force has twice their strength, and they're disorganized and demoralized anyway."

"Whom are we fighting?" wondered Chang, the executive officer.

"Don't know for sure. They've split into so many factions you can never tell who it is. But from Flandry's report, I'd say it was—what was that outlandish name now?—Duke Markagrav's fleet. He holds this sector, and is a royalist. But it might be Kelry, who's also anti-Terrestrial—but at war with Markagrav and in revolt against the king."

"Suns and comets and little green asteroids!" breathed Chang. "This Scothanian hegemony seems just to have disintegrated. Chaos! Everybody at war with everybody else, and hell take the hindmost! How'd he do it?"

"I don't know." Walton grinned. "But Flandry's the Empire's ace secret service officer. He works miracles before breakfast. Why, before these barbarians snatched him he was handling the Llynathawr trouble all by himself. And you know how he was doing it? He went there with everything but a big brass band, did a perfect imitation of a

political appointee using the case as an excuse to do some high-powered roistering, and worked his way up toward the conspirators through the underworld characters he met in the course of it. They never dreamed he was any kind of danger—as we found out after a whole squad of men had worked for six months to crack the case of his disappearance."

"Then the Scothanians have been holding the equivalent of a whole army—and didn't know it!"

"That's right," nodded Walton. "The biggest mistake they ever made was to kidnap Captain Flandry. They should have played safe and kept some nice harmless cobras for pets!"

Iuthagaar was burning. Mobs rioted in the streets and howled with fear and rage and the madness of catastrophe. The remnants of Penda's army had abandoned the town and were fleeing northward before the advancing southern rebels. They would be harried by Torric's guerillas, who in turn were the fragments of a force smashed by Earl Morgaar after Penda was slain by Kortan's assassins. Morgaar himself was dead and his rebels broken by Nartheof—the earl's own band had been riddled by corruption and greed and had fallen apart before the royalists' counterblow.

But Nartheof was dead too, at the hands of Nornagast's vengeful relatives. His own seizure of supreme power and attempt at reorganization had created little but confusion, which grew worse when he was gone. Now the royalists were a beaten force somewhere out in space, savagely attacked by their erstwhile allies, driven off the revolting conquered planets, and swept away before the remorselessly advancing Terrestrial fleet.

The Scothanian empire had fallen into a hundred shards, snapping at each other and trying desperately to retrieve their own with no thought for the whole. Lost in an incomprehensibly complex network of intrigue and betrayal, the great leaders fell, or pulled out of the mess and made hasty

peace with Terra. War and anarchy flamed between the stars—but limited war, a petty struggle really. The resources and organization for real war and its attendant destruction just weren't there any more.

A few guards still held the almost-deserted palace, waiting for the Terrestrials to come and end the strife. There was nothing they could do but wait.

Captain Flandry stood at a window and looked over the city. He felt no great elation. Nor was he safe yet. Cerdic was loose somewhere on the planet, and Cerdic had undoubtedly guessed who was responsible.

Gunli came to the human. She was very pale. She hadn't expected Penda's death and it had hurt her. But there was nothing to do now but go through with the business.

"Who would have thought it?" she whispered. "Who would have dreamed we would ever come to this? That mighty Scotha would lie at the conqueror's feet?"

"I would," said Flandry tonelessly "Such jerry-built empires as yours never last. Barbarians just don't have the talent and the knowledge to run them. Being only out for plunder, they don't really build.

"Of course, Scotha was especially susceptible to this kind of sabotage. Your much-vaunted honesty was your own undoing. By carefully avoiding any hint of dishonorable actions, you became completely ignorant of the techniques and the preventive measures. Your honor was never more than a latent ability for dishonor. All I had to do, essentially, was to point out to your key men the rewards of betrayal. If they'd been really honest, I'd have died at the first suggestion. Instead—they grabbed at the chance. So it was easy to set them against each other until no one knew whom he could trust—" He smiled humorlessly. "Not many Scothani objected to bribery or murder or treachery when it was shown to be to their advantage. I assure you, most Terrestrials would have thought further, been able to see beyond their

own noses and realized the ultimate disaster it would bring."

"Still—honor is honor, and I have lost mine and so have all my people." Gunli looked at him with a strange light in her eyes. "Dominic, disgrace can only be wiped out in blood."

He felt a sudden tightening of his nerves and muscles, an awareness of something deadly rising before him. "What do you mean?"

She had lifted the blaster from his holster and skipped out of reach before he could move. "No—stay there!" Her voice was shrill. "Dominic, you are a cunning man. But are you a brave one?"

He stood still before the menace of the weapon. "I think—" He groped for words. No, she wasn't crazy. But she wasn't really human, and she had the barbarian's fanatical code in her as well. Easy, easy—or death would spit at him—"I think I took a few chances, Gunli."

"Aye. But you never fought. You haven't stood up man to man and battled as a warrior should." Pain racked her thin lovely face. She was breathing hard now. "It's for you as well as him, Dominic. He has to have his chance to avenge his father—himself—fallen Scotha—and you have to have a chance too. If you can win, then you are the stronger and have the right—"

Might makes right. It was, after all, the one unbreakable law of Scotha. The old trial by combat, here on a foreign planet many light-years from green Terra—

Cerdic came in. He had a sword in either hand, and there was a savage glee in his bloodshot eyes.

"I let him in, Dominic," said Gunli. She was crying now. "I had to. Penda was my lord—but kill him, kill him!"

With a convulsive movement, she threw the blaster out the window. Cerdic gave her an inquiring look. Her voice was almost inaudible: "I might not be able to stand it. I might shoot you, Cerdic."

"Thanks!" He ripped the word out, savagely. "I'll deal with you later, traitress. Meanwhile—" A terrible laughter bubbled in his throat— "I'll carve your—friend—into many small pieces. Because who, among the so-civilized Terrestrials, can handle a sword?"

Gunli seemed to collapse. "O gods, O almighty gods—I didn't think of that—"

Suddenly she flung herself on Cerdic, tooth and nail and horns, snatching at his dagger. "Get him, Dominic!" she screamed. *"Get him!"*

The prince swept one brawny arm out. There was a dull smack and Gunli fell heavily to the floor.

"Now," grinned Cerdic, "choose your weapon!"

Flandry came forward and took one of the slender broadwords. Oddly, he was thinking mostly about the queen, huddled there on the floor. Poor kid, poor kid, she'd been under a greater strain than flesh and nerves were meant to bear. But give her a chance and she'd be all right.

Cerdic's eyes were almost dreamy now. He smiled as he crossed blades. "This will make up for a lot," he said. "Before you die, Terrestrial, you will no longer be a man—"

Steel rang in the great hall. Flandry parried the murderous slash and raked the prince's cheek. Cerdic roared and plunged at him, his blade weaving a net of death before him. Flandry skipped back, sword ringing on sword, shoulders against the wall.

They stood for an instant, straining blade against blade, sweat rivering off them, and bit by bit the Scothan's greater strength bent Flandry's arm aside. Suddenly the Terrestrial let go, striking out almost in the same moment, and the prince's steel hissed by his face.

He ran back and Cerdic rushed him again. The Scothan was wide open for the simplest stop thrust, but Flandry didn't want to kill him. They closed once more, blades clashing, and the human waited for his chance.

It came, an awkward move, and then one supremely skillful twist—Cerdic's sword went spinning out of his hand and across the room and the prince stood disarmed with Flandry's point at his throat.

For a moment he gaped in utter stupefaction. Flandry laughed harshly and said: "My dear friend, you forget that deliberate archaism is one characteristic of a decadent society. There's hardly a noble in the Empire who hasn't studied *scientific* fencing."

Defeat was heavy in the prince's defiant voice: "Kill me, then. Be done with it."

"There's been too much killing, and you can be too useful." Flandry threw his own weapon aside and cocked his fists. "But there's one thing I've wanted to do for a long, long time."

Despite the Scothan's powerful but clumsy defense, Flandry proceeded to beat the living hell out of him.

"We've saved Scotha, all Scotha," said Flandry. "Think, girl. What would have happened if you'd gone on into the Empire? Even if you'd won—and that was always doubtful, for Terra is mightier than you thought—you'd only have fallen into civil war. You just didn't have the capacity to run an empire—as witness the fact that your own allies and conquests turned on you the first chance they got. You'd have fought each other over the spoils, greater powers would have moved in, Scotha would have been ripe for sacking—eventually you'd have gone down into Galactic oblivion. The present conflict was really quite small—it took far fewer lives than even a successful invasion of the Empire would have done. And now Terra will bring the peace you longed for, Gunli."

"Aye," she whispered. "Aye, we deserve to be conquered."

"But you aren't," he said. "The southerners hold Scotha now, and Terra will recognize them as the legal government—

with you the queen, Gunli. You'll be another vassal state of the Empire, yes, but with all your freedoms except the liberty to rob and kill other races. And trade with the rest of the Empire will bring you a greater and more enduring prosperity than war ever would.

"I suppose that the Empire is decadent. But there's no reason why it can't someday have a renaissance. When the vigorous new peoples such as yours are guided by the ancient wisdom of Terra, the Galaxy may see its greatest glory."

She smiled at him. It was still a wan smile, but something of her old spirit was returning to her. "I don't think the Empire is so far gone, Dominic," she said. "Not when it has men like you." She took his hands. "And what will you be doing now?"

He met her eyes, and there was a sudden loneliness within him. She—was very beautiful—

But it could never work out. Best to leave now, before a bright memory grew tarnished with the day-to-day clashing of personalities utterly foreign to each other. She would forget him in time, find someone else, and he—well—"I have my work," he said.

They looked up to the bright sky. Far above them, the first of the descending Imperial ships glittered in the sunlight like a falling star.

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