



Nine Rarities, Ray Bradbury

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Don't Get Technatal

Futura Fantasia (1939)

For several moments Stern had eyed his typewriter ominously, contemplating whether he should utter the unutterable. Finally:

"Damn!" he roared, "I can't write any more! Look, look at that!" He tore the sheet out of the rollers and crumpled it in his fist. "If I'd known it would be this way," he said, "I wouldn't have voted for it! Technocracy is ruining everything!"

Bella Stern, preoccupied with her knitting, glanced up in horror. "What a temper," she exclaimed, "Can't you keep your voice down?" She fussed with her work. "There now," she cried, "you made me drop a stitch!"

"I want to be a writer!" Samuel Stern lamented, turning with grim eyes to his wife. "And the Technate has spoiled my fun."

"The way you talk, Samuel," said his wife, "I actually believe you want to go back to that barbarism prevalent in the DARK THIRTIES!"

"It sounds like one damned good idea!" he said, "At least I'd have something decent, or indecent, to write about!"

"What can you mean?" she asked, tilting her head back and thinking, "Why can't you write? There are just oodles of things I can think of that are readable."

Something like a tear rolled down Samuel's cheek, "No more gangsters, no more bank robberies, no more holdups, no more good, old-fashioned burglaries, no more vice gangs!" He voice grew lachrymose as he proceeded down an infinite line of 'no mores'. "No more sadness," he almost sobbed. "Everybody's happy, contented. No more strife and hard work. Oh, for the days when a gangland massacre was headline scoop for me!"

"Tush!" sniffed Bella, "Have you been drinking again, Samuel?"

He hiccoughed gently.

"I thought so," she said,

"I had to do something," he declared, "I'm going nuts for want of a plot."

Bella Stern laid her knitting aside and walked to the balcony, looked meditatively down into the yawning canyon of the New York street fifty stories below. She turned back to Sam with a reminiscent smile, "Why not write a love story?"

"WHAT!" Stern shot out of his chair like a hooked eel.

"Why, yes," she concluded, "A nice love story would be very enjoyable."

"LOVE!" Stern's voice was thick with sarcasm, "Why we don't even have decent love these days. A man can't marry a woman for her money, and vice-versa. Everyone under Technocracy gets the same amount of credit. No more Reno, no more alimony, no more breach of promise, or law suits! Everything is cut and dried. The days of society weddings and coming out parties are gone—cause everyone is equal. I can't write political criticisms about graft in the government, about slums and terrible living conditions, about poor starving mothers and their babies. Everything is okay—okay—okay—" his voice sobbed off into silence.

"Which should make you very happy," countered his wife.

"Which makes me very sick," growled Samuel Stern. "Look, Bell, all my life I wanted to be a writer. Okay. I'm writing for the pulp magazines for a coupla years, Right? Okay. Then I'm writing sea stories, gangsters, political views, first class bump-offs, I'm happy...

I'm in my element, then—bingo! in comes Technocracy, makes everyone happy—bumpo! out goes me! I just can't stand writing the stuff the people read today. Everything is science and education." He ruffled his thick black hair with his fingers and glared,

"You should be joyful that the population is at work doing what they want to do," Bella beamed.

Sam continued muttering to himself. "They took all the sex magazines off the market first thing, all of the gangster, murder and detective publications. They been educating the children and moving model citizens out of them."

"Which is as it should be," finished Bella.

"Do you realize," he blazed, whipping his finger at her, "that for two years there hasn't been more than dozen murders in the city? Not one suicide or gang war—or—"

"Heavens!" sighed Bella, "Don't be prehistoric, Sam. There hasn't been anything really criminal for twenty years now. This is 1975 you know." She came over and patted him gently on the shoulder, "Why don't you write something science-fictional?"

"I don't like science," he spat,

"Then your only alternative is love," she declared firmly.

He formed the despicable word with his lips, then: "No, I want something now and different," He got up and strode to the window. In the penthouse below he saw half a dozen robots moving about speedily, working. His face lit up suddenly, like that of a tiger spying his prey, "Jumping Jigwheels!" he cried. "Why didn't I think of it before? Robots! I'll write a love story about two robots."

Bella squelched him. "Be sensible," she said.

"It might happen some day," he argued, "Just think. Love oiled, welded, built of metal, wired for sound!" He laughed triumphantly, but it was a low laugh, a strange little sound. Bella expected him to beat his chest next. "Robots fall in love at first sight," he announced, "and blow an audio tube!"

Bella smiled tolerantly. "You're such a child, Sam. I sometimes wonder I married you."

Stern sank down, burning slowly, a crimson flush rising in his face.

Only half a dozen murders in two years, he thought. No more politics, no more to write about. He had to have a story, just had to have one. He'd go crazy if something didn't happen soon. His brain was clicking furiously. A calliope of thought was tooting in his subconscious. He had to have a story. He turned and looked at his wife, Bella, who stood watching the air traffic go by the window, bending over the sill, looking down into the street fifty floors below..... .

.....and then he reached slowly and quietly for his atomic gun.

The Pendulum

Futura Fantasia (1939)

Up and down, back and forth, up and down. First the quick flite skyward, gradually slowing, reaching the pinnacle of the curve, poising a moment, then flashing earthward again, faster and faster at a nauseating speed, reaching the bottom and hurtling aloft on the opposite side. Up and down. Back and forth. Up and down.

How long it had continued this way Layeville didn't know. It might have been millions of years he'd spent sitting, here in the massive glass pendulum watching the world tip one way and another, up and down, dizzily before his eyes until they ached. Since first they had locked him in the pendulum's round glass head and set it swinging it had never stopped or changed. Continuous, monotonous movements over and above the ground. So huge was this pendulum that it shadowed one hundred feet or more with every majestic sweep of its gleaming shape, dangling from the metal intestines of the shining machine overhead. It took three or four seconds for it to traverse the one hundred feet one way, three or four seconds to come back.

THE PRISONER OF TIME! That's what they called him now! Now, fettered to the very machine he had planned and constructed. A pris—on—er—of—time! A—pris — on — er—of—Time!

With every swing of the pendulum it echoed in his thoughts. For ever like this until he went insane. He tried to focus his eyes on the arching hotness of the earth as it swept past beneath him.

They had laughed at him a few days before. Or was it a week? A month? A year? He didn't know. This ceaseless pitching had filled him with an aching confusion. They had laughed at him when he said, some time before all this, he could bridge time gaps and travel into futurity. He had designed a huge machine to warp space, invited thirty of the world's most gifted scientists to help him finish his colossal attempt to scratch the future wall of time.

The hour of the accident spun back to him now thru misted memory. The display of the time machine to the public. The exact moment when he stood on the platform with the thirty scientists and pulled the main switch! The scientists, all of them, blasted into ashes from wild electrical flames! Before the eyes of two million witnesses who had come to the laboratory or were tuned in by television at home! He had slain the world's greatest scientists!

He recalled the moment of shocked horror that followed. Something radically wrong had happened to the machine. He, Layeville, the inventor of the machine, had staggered backward, his clothes flaming and eating up about him. No time for explanations. Then he had collapsed in the blackness of pain and numbing defeat.

Swept to a hasty trial, Layeville faced jeering throngs calling out for his death. "Destroy the Time Machine!" they cried. "And destroy this MURDERER with it!"

Murderer! And he had tried to help humanity. This was his reward.

One man had leaped onto the tribunal platform at the trial, crying, "No! Don't destroy the machine! I have a better plan! A revenge for this—this man!" His finger pointed at Layeville where the inventor sat unshaven and haggard, his eyes failure glazed. "We shall rebuild his machine, take his precious metals, and put up a monument to his slaughtering! We'll put him on exhibition for life within his executioning device." The crowd roared approval like thunder shaking the tribunal hall.

Then, pushing hands, days in prison, months. Finally, led forth into the hot sunshine, he was carried in a small rocket car to the center of the city. The shock of what he saw brought him back to reality.

THEY had rebuilt his machine into a towering timepiece with a pendulum. He stumbled forward, urged on by thrusting hands, listening to the roar of thousands of voices damning him. Into the transparent pendulum head they pushed him and clamped it tight with weldings.

Then they set the pendulum swinging and stood back. Slowly, very slowly, it rocked back and forth, increasing in speed. Layeville had pounded futilely at the glass, screaming. The faces became blurred, were only tearing pink blobs before him.

On and on like this—for how long?

He hadn't minded it so much at first, that first nite. He couldn't sleep, but it was not uncomfortable. The lites of the city were comets with tails that pelted from right to left like foaming fireworks. But as the nite wore on he felt a gnawing in his stomach, that grew worse. He got very sick and vomited. The next day he couldn't eat anything.

They never stopped the pendulum, not once. Instead of letting him eat quietly, they slid the food down the stem of the pendulum in a special tube, in little round parcels that plunked at his feet. The first time he attempted eating he was unsuccessful, it wouldn't stay down. In desperation he hammered against the cold glass with his fists until they bled, crying hoarsely, but he heard nothing but his own weak, fear-wracked words muffled in his ears.

After some time had elapsed he got so that he could eat, even sleep while traveling back and forth this way. They allowed him small glass loops on the floor and leather thongs with which he tied himself down at nite and slept a soundless slumber without sliding.

People came to look at him. He accustomed his eyes to the swift flite and followed their curiosity-etched faces, first close by in the middle, then far away to the right, middle again, and to the left.

He saw the faces gaping, speaking soundless words, laughing and pointing at the prisoner of time traveling forever nowhere. But after awhile the town people vanished and it was only tourists who came and read the sign that said: THIS IS THE PRISONER OF TIME - JOHN LAYEVILLE WHO KILLED THIRTY OF THE WORLDS FINEST SCIENTISTS! The school children, on the electrical moving sidewalk stopped to stare in childish awe. THE PRISONER OF TIME!

Often he thot of that title. God, but it was ironic, that he should invent a time machine and have it converted into a clock, and that he, in its pendulum, would mete out the years—traveling with time.

He couldn't remember how long it had been. The days and nites ran together in his memory. His unshaven cheeks had developed a short beard and then ceased growing. How long a time? How long?

Once a day they sent down a tube after ate and vacuumed up the cell, disposing of any wastes. Once in a great while they sent him a book, but that was all.

The robots took care of him now. Evidently the humans thot it a waste of time to bother over their prisoner. The robots brot the food, cleaned the pendulum cell, oiled the machinery, worked tirelessly from dawn until the sun crimsoned westward. At this rate it could keep on for centuries.

But one day as Layeville stared at the city and its people in the blur of ascent and descent, he perceived a swarming darkness that expanded in the heavens. The city rocket ships that crossed the sky on pillars of scarlet flame darted helplessly, frightenedly for shelter.

The people ran like water splashed on tiles, screaming soundlessly.

Alien creatures fluttered down, great gelatinous masses of black that sucked out the life of all. They clustered thickly over everything, glistened momentarily upon the pendulum and its body above, over the whirling wheels and roaring bowels of the metal creature once a Time Machine. An hour later they dwindled away over the horizon and never came back. The city was dead.

Up and down, Layeville went on his journey to nowhere, in his prison, a strange smile etched on his lips. In a week or more, he knew, he would be the only man alive on earth.

Elation flamed within him. This was his victory! Where the other men had planned the pendulum as a prison it had been an asylum against annihilation now!

Day after day the robots still came, worked, unabated by the visitation of the black horde. They came every week, brot food, tinkered, checked, oiled, cleaned. Up and down, back and forth—THE PENDULUM!

.....a thousand years must have passed before the sky again showed life over the dead Earth. A silvery bullet of space dropped from the clouds, steaming, and hovered over the dead city where now only a few solitary robots performed their tasks. In the gathering dusk the lites of the metropolis glimmered on. Other automatons appeared on the rampways like spiders on twisting webs, scurrying about, checking, oiling, working in their crisp mechanical manner.

And the creatures in the alien projectile found the time mechanism, the pendulum swinging up and down, back and forth, up and down. The robots still cared for it, oiled it, tinkering.

A thousand years this pendulum had swung. Made of glass the round disk at the bottom was, but now when food was lowered by the robots through the tube it lay untouched. Later, when the vacuum tube came down and cleaned out the cell it took that very food with it.

Back and forth—up and down.

The visitors saw something inside the pendulum. Pressed closely to the glass side of the cell was the face of a whitened skull—a skeleton visage that stared out over the city with empty socket and an enigmatical smile wreathing its lipless teeth.

Back and forth—up and down.

The strangers from the void stopped the pendulum in its course, ceased its swinging and cracked open the glass cell, exposing the skeleton to view. And in the gleaming light of the stars the skull face continued its weird grinning as if it knew that it had conquered something. Had conquered time.

The Prisoner of Time, Layeville, had indeed travelled along the centuries.

And the journey was at an end.

The Flight of the Good Ship Clarissa

Futura Fantasia (1940)

The space rocket Clarissa was nine days out from Venus. The members of the crew were also out for nine days. They were hunters, fearless expeditionists who bagged game in Venusian jungles. At the start of our story they are busy bagging their pants, not to forget their eyes.

A sort of lull has fallen over the ship (Note: a lull is a time warp that frequently attacks rockets and seduces its members into a siesta) It was during this lull that Anthony Quelch sat sprawled at his typewriter looking as baggy as a bag of unripe grapefruit, ANTHONY QUELCH, the

Cosmic Clamor Boy, with a face like turned linoleum on the third term, busy writing a book: "Fascism is Communism with a shave" for which he would receive 367 rubles, 10 pazinkas and incarceration in a cinema showing *Gone With The Wind*.

The boys upstairs were throwing a party in the control room. They had been throwing the same party so long the party looked like a worn out first edition of a trapeze artist. There is doubt in our mind as to whether they were trying to break the party up or just do the morning mopping and break the lease simultaneously. Arms, legs and heads littered the deck, The boys, it seems, threw a party at the drop of a chin, Sort of a space cataclysm with rules and little regulation— kind of an atomic convulsion in the front parlor.

The neighbors never complained. The neighbors were 450 million miles away. And the boys were tighter than a catsup bottle at lunch-time. The last time the captain had looked up the hatch and called to his kiddies in a gentle voice, "HELL!" the kiddies had thrown snowballs at him.

The captain had vanished. Clever way they make these space bombs nowadays. A few minutes previous the boys had been tearing up old Amazings and throwing them at one another, but now they contented themselves with tearing up just the editors. Palmer was torn in half and he sat in a corner arguing with himself about rejecting a story for an hour before someone put him through an orange juice machine killing him. (Orange juice sorry, now?)

And then they landed on Venus. How in heck they got back their so quick is a wonder of science, but there they were. "Come on, girls!" cried Quelch, "put on your shin guards, get out there and dig ditches for good old W.P.A and the Rover Boys Academy, earth branch 27!"

Out into the staggering rain-they dashed. Five minutes later they came back in, gasping, reeling. They had forgotten their corsets! The Venusians closed in like a million land-lords. "Charge, men!" cried Quelch, running the other way. And then - BATTLE! "What a fight, folks," cried Quelch, "Twenty thousand earth men against two

Venusians! We're outnumbered, but we'll fight!" BLOOSH! "Correction—ten thousand men fighting!" KERBLOM! "One hundred men from earth left!" BOOM! "This is the last man speaking, folks! 'What a fight, I ain't had so much fun since—' Help, someone just clipped my corset strings!" BWOM! "Someone just clipped me!"

The field was silent. The ship lay gleaming in the pink light of dawn that was just blooming over the mountains like a pale flower.

The two Venusians stood weeping over the bodies of the Earthlings like onion peelers or two women in a bargain basement. One Venusian looked at the other Venusian, and in a high-pitched, hoarse, sad voice said: "Aye, aye, aye—THIS—HIT SHOODEN HEPPEN TO A DOG — NOT A DOIDY LEEDLE DOG!" And dawn came peacefully, like beer barrels, rolling.

I, Rocket

Amazing Stories (1944)

A thing of steel and alloy—a rocket ship. Yet it claimed respect and gave a great enduring loyalty.

AT THE rate things are coming and going it'll take a few hundred years to break me down into rust and corrosion. Maybe longer. In the meantime I'll have many days and nights to think it all over. You can't stop atoms from revolving and humming their life-orbits inside metal. That's how metal lives its own special life. That's how metal thinks.

Where I lie is a barren, pebbled plateau, touched here and there with pale weedy growths, a few hunched trees coming up out of planetoid rock.

There's a wind comes over the plateau every morning. There's rain comes in the twilight, and silence comes down even closer in the night. That's my whole life now, lying here with my jets twisted and my fore-plates bashed.

Somehow I feel I haven't fulfilled my destiny in toto. A rocket ship isn't built to lie on a hard gray plateau in the wind and rain—alone. After those trips through space it's almost too much to believe, that the rest of my clays will be wasted here—

But while I'm rusting and wondering, I can think it all over. How I came to be here, how I came to be built....

I've taken them all in their time, the crew; seen them wounded, crushed by centrifuge, or shattered by space-bombs; and once or twice I've had my rear-jets pounded off in a double-fisted foray: there's hardly a plate in my hull hasn't been welded again and again, not a chronometer in my control console hasn't been blasted and replaced.

But the hardest thing of all was replacing the men inside me. The little guys who ran around with greasy faces, yelling and fighting for air, and getting their guts frozen to their peritoneum every time I swung into an unexpected arc during the days when free gravity was experimental.

The little guys were hard to find, harder to replace after a particularly violent thrust between worlds. I loved the little guys, the little guys loved me. They kept me shining like a nickel moon, nursed me, petted me, and beat me when I deserved it.

From the very first I wanted to be of some help in the wild excursions from Earth to Deimos-Phobos coordinate Bases, the war moons held by Earth to strike against the Martians.

My birth-period, and the Base where I was integrated, skeleton, skin and innards, went through the usual birth-pains. It is a dim portion in my memory, but when the final hull was melted to me, the last

rungway and console fitted to my hulk, the awareness was there. A metal awareness. The free electrical atom flow of metal come aware.

I could think and could tell nobody that I thought.

I was a war rocket. Fore and aft they placed their space-artillery nozzles, and weighted me with scarlet ammunition. I began to feel my purpose, expectantly, perhaps a bit impatiently.

I wasn't really alive yet. I was like a child half out of the womb, but not yet breathing or making any sound or making any movement. I was waiting for the slap on the back to give me strength and directed purpose.

"Hurry it up, hurry it up! Skip!" directed the munitions-lieutenant, standing by my opened air-locks that day so many years ago. Sunlight baked my metal as men hustled in and out with small rubber-tired trucks bearing the tetron space explosives. "We've got a war to meet!" cried the lieutenant.

The men hurried.

There was some fancy bit of business about a christening going on simultaneously with this scurrying about in my cargo cubicles. Some mayor from some city crashed a bottle of foaming liquor on my prow. A few reporters flicked their cameras and a small crowd put up their hands, waved them a fraction and put them down again, as if they realized how stupid it really was, wasting that fine champagne.

IT WAS then and there I saw the captain, Metal bless him, for the first time. He came running across the field. The Master of my Fate, the Captain of my Soul. I liked him right off. He was short and whipped out of wrinkled hard brown leather, with green, implacable diamond eyes set in that hard leather, and a slit of white uneven teeth to show to anybody who disobeyed. He stomped into the airlock and set his

clipping boots down and I knew I had my master. Small tight knuckle bones and wrists told that, and the way he made fists and the quick, smooth manner in which he cracked out the orders of the day:

"Snap it!" he said. "Get rid of that damned mayor out there! Clear apron! Seal the locks, clamp ports and we'll push the hell out of here!"

Yes, I liked him. His name was Lamb; ironic for a man lacking lamblike qualities. Captain Lamb, who threw his voice around inside me and made me like the steel edge to it. It was a voice like silk-covered brass knucks. It flowed like water, but burned like acid.

They rapped me tight. They expelled the mayor and his splintered champagne bottle, which by now seemed childish. Sirens shouted across the base apron. The crew did things to my alimentary canal. Twenty-seven of them.

Captain Lamb shouted.

That was the slap on the back that brought me my first breath, my first sound, my first movement. Lamb pounded me into living.

I threw out wings of fire and powder and air. The captain was yelling, snuggled in his crash-hammock, zippered up to his sharp chin; men were swaying, sweating in all their suspensory control hammocks. Quite suddenly I wasn't just metal lying in the sun any more. I was the damnedest biggest bird that ever sang into the sky. Maybe my voice wasn't anything but thunder, but it was still singing to me. I sang loud and I sang long.

This was the first time I had been outside the hangar and the base to see the world.

I was surprised to find that it was round.

ADOLESCENCE is to man his days from thirteen to eighteen when overnight his viewpoints are radically reformed, so it was with my first plunge into space. Life was thrown at me in one solid piece. All of the life I would ever know was given to me without apprenticeship, suckling or consideration. I had growing pains. There were stresses, forces attacking me from all sides simultaneously, feelings, impressions I had never considered possible. The solid understandable gravity of Earth was suddenly taken away and the competition of space gravities each tried their luck with me.

The moon, and after the moon a thousand dark meteors crashing by, silent. Tides of space itself, indescribable, and the urge of stars and planets. And then a thing called momentum when my jets were cut and I moved without breathing or trying to move.

Captain Lamb sat in the control room, cracking his knuckles. "She's a good ship. A fine ship. We'll pound the holy marrow out of those Martians."

The young man by the name of Conrad sat beside the captain at the duo-control. "We'd better," he said anxiously. "There's a girl waiting in York Port for us to come back."

The captain scowled. "Both of you? You and Hillary?"

Conrad laughed. "The two of us. Both on the same war-rocket, going to the fray. At least I can keep my eye on that drunkard this way. I'll know he's not down in York Port scudding along on my acceleration. . . "

Captain Lamb usually said all his words quick, fast, like lines of mercury. "Space is a funny place to talk about love. Funny place to talk about anything. It's like laughing out loud in a big cathedral, or trying to make a waltz out of a hymn."

"Lo, the sentimentalist," remarked Conrad.

Lamb jerked. He scowled at himself, "Lo, the damned fool," he said, and got up to measure the control room with his little strides.

They were part of me. Lamb, Conrad and the crew. Like blood pulsing in the arteries of a warm body, like leucocytes and bacteria and the fluid that sustains them—air—locomoting through my chambers into my heart, my driving engines, feeding my livened appetites, never knowing that they were only units of energy like corpuscles giving a greater mass—myself—nourishment, life, and drive.

Like any body—there were microbes. Destroying elements. Disease, as well as the sentinel leucocytes.

We had one job to do. I knew of this. To fend off the ever increasing attacks against earth's Phobos-Deimos citadels. I felt tension spreading, growing as each day went by. There was too much cigarette smoking, lip biting, swearing among the crew-members. Big things lay ahead.

THE microbes within my body were in a small dosage; but virulent because they moved free, unchecked, unsuspected. Their names were Anton Larian and Leigh Belloc. I refer to them as bacteria simply because, like microscopic forms in a large body, their function was to poison and destroy me. And the best way to render me inactive would be the destruction of part of my red-blood. That meant Captain Lamb. Or part of his technical war-staff. Larian and Belloc planned for their poisoning, quietly, carefully.

Self-preservation is an eternal, all-encompassing thing. You find it in metal as you find it in amoebas; you find it in metal as you find it in men. My body would be attacked. From outside I feared nothing. From inside I was uncertain. Coming from an unexpected quarter that attack might kill me so very soon after my birth. I didn't approve of the idea.

I went through space toward Mars. I couldn't speak.

I could only feel voice-vibrations throughout my length. The voices of Hillary and Conrad arguing about their woman named Alice in York Port, and the captain snapping at the heels of his crew when we hit the asteroid-skirt, and then the subtle undercurrent of poison stirring in the midst of this— Larian and Belloc—their voices touched my hull:

"You're familiar with the plan, Belloc; I don't want you turning silly at the crisis."

"I know what to do. Don't worry. What the hell."

"All right, I'm just explaining. Now—as far as killing Captain Lamb, that's out. We're only two against twenty-four others. I want to be alive to collect that money we're guaranteed, for this—work."

"Logically, then—the engines...."

"I'm in favor of it, if you are. This is a war-rocket; spare parts, excess cargo, all that's eliminated for speed. Timebombs should work miracles with the main jet-engines. And when it happens we can be out and away in space in plenty of time?"

"When?"

"During the next shift of crew relief. There's a certain amount of inescapable confusion then. Half the crew's too tired to worry, the other half is just turning out, groggy."

"Sounds okay. Huh. It seems a damn shame though, in a way."

"What?"

"Nice new rocket, never tested before. Revolutionary design. I never enjoyed working on engines before, until I got my station with this jalopy. She's sweet. Those engines—sweet as the guts of a flower. And it all goes to hell before it has a chance to prove itself."

"You'll get paid for it. What else do you want?"

"Yeah, I'll get paid, won't I? Yeah."

"Shut up, then. Come on."

The routine circulation of crew-blood through the arteries of the ship took Larian and Belloc below to their stations in the fuel and engine cubicles. The poison was in my heart, waiting.

What went on inside my metal is not to be described. There are no similes, comparatives for the hard, imprisoned, frustrated vibrations that surge through tongueless durasteel. The rest of the blood in me was still good, still untouched and untainted and tireless.

"Captain." A salute.

"Belloc." Lamb returned the salute. "Larian."

"Captain."

"Going below?" said the captain. "Yes, sir."

"I'll be down in—" Lamb eyed his wrist watch. "Make it thirty minutes. We'll check the auxiliaries together, Belloc."

"Right, sir."

"Go on down, then."

Belloc and Larian descended.

LAMB walked quickly into the computation cube and struck up a rapid word exchange with young Ayres. Ayres, who looked like he was barely out of blushing and floppy hair and semantics school, and still not

shaving as often as the others. His pink face glowed when the captain was around. They got on like grandfather and grandson.

They probed charts together. When they finished, Lamb walked off the yardage in the computation room, scowling, examining his boots. Ayres computed.

Lamb paused, looked out the visual-port concernedly. After a moment he said, "When I was a very little kid I stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and I thought I'd seen everything there was to see—" A pause, "And now I've got my first captaincy, and—" he patted the hull of my body quietly "—a fine first rate lady of a ship." Quick, to Ayres: "What are you, Ayres?"

Startled, Ayres blinked. "Me, sir?"

The captain stood with his strong, small back to Ayres, inspecting the stars as if they were a celestial regiment under his personal say-so. "Yes. I mean religion," he explained.

"Oh." Ayres pulled his right earlobe with finger and thumb, musing. "I was a first class agnostic. Graduated, or should I say demoted? From an Atheist academy."

The captain kept looking at the stars. "You use the word 'was,' Ayres. You emphasize that word."

Ayres half-smiled. "Sure. I mean— yes, sir. But this is my first trip, sir, so that changes things."

"Does it?"

"Yes it does, sir."

The captain rocked casually on his heels. "How's that, Ayres?"

"You know the tale as well as I, sir. It's an old tale. And a good one, I might add. To put it one way: 'A Baptist is an atheist who took a trip to the Moon.' "

"That holds true for Methodists, Episcopalians and Holy Rollers, doesn't it?"

"It does, sir."

The captain made a noise that sounded like laughter. "We're all the same. Every damned one of us, Ayres. Hard-shelled God-fighters, good and true, when we're home in Brooklyn and Waushawkee. Take away land and gravity, though, and we're babes, undiapered and crying in a long dark night. Hell, there's not a man rocketing today who isn't religious, Ayres!"

"Are you religious, Captain?"

Lamb closed his mouth, looked out the port straight ahead. He raised one small-boned hand, spreading it in a measured movement. "It's always the same, Ayres. The first trip converts us. The very first trip. All you have to do is stand here for fifteen minutes or half an hour looking at space, feeling how insignificant you are flying around like a gnat in the middle of it, looking at those damned wonderful stars, and first thing you know you're down on your knees, crying your eyes out, with a hot stomach, a wild head and a humble attitude forever after."

Lamb pulled back from himself suddenly, snapped around, stalked to a down-ladder, grabbed a rung and glared at Ayres. "And so," he pointed out, "you'll notice that I never look at the stars too long! I've a ship to run—no time for it. And in case you believe all I tell you—go to hell! I should demerit you for questioning a superior!"

Lamb dropped down the rungs like a weight.

AYRES sat there a moment, trying to compute. After a while he looked up at the star-port. His eyes dilated very dark and wide. He stood up. He walked across the computation room and stood there, staring out. He looked like he was listening to music. His lips moved.

"What did the Cap say? Stand here fifteen minutes or half an hour? Why, hell—" He bent his knees until they touched the deck. "I got the Cap's time beat all hollow!"

Good blood. Good leucocyte. Good Ayres.

Mars come up ahead, the first really intense gravity I had felt since leaving earth and moon behind. It came up like a ruddy drop of dried blood on the void. Mass is the sexual drive of space, and gravity the intensified yearning of that mass, the gravitic libido of one tremendous body for the love, the following of any and all smaller bodies who transgress its void boundaries. I have heard the simple men within me speak of a planet as one speaks of a queen bee. The ultimate gravity toward which all smaller gravities and bodies yearn. Merciless harlot, mating with all, leading all on to destruction. Queen bee followed by the swarms. And now I was part of a swarm, the first of many yet to follow, answering the urge of one gravity, refusing another.

But still the poison was in me. And no way possible for Captain Lamb's crew to know of it. Time ticked on my console-chronometers and swung by, imperceptibly majestic in the moves of stars.

Captain Lamb went down to the engine rooms, examined my heart and my auxiliaries. Bitingly, he commented and instructed, interspersing that with vituperative barks. Then he hopped up the rungs to the galley for something to eat.

Belloc and Larian stayed below. "First now, Belloc, you checked the life-boats?"

"I did. Number Three boat's ready. I fixed it an hour ago."

"Good. Now...."

The Slop put out a bowl of soup for Captain Lamb. Lamb pursed his lips to a spoon of it, and smacked them in appreciation. "Slop?"

"Yes, sir?" Slop wiped greasy hands on a large towel.

"Did you invent the gravity soup-bowl and gravity spoon?"

Slop looked at his feet. "I did, sir."

"An admirable invention, Slop. I recall the day when all rocket liquids were swilled by suction from a nipples bottle. Made me feel like a god-damned baby doing it."

Slop chuckled deep, as he returned to cleaning the mess-plates. "Ship gravity wasn't strong enough to hold soup down, so I thunk up the gravity spoon in my spare time. It helped."

The captain ate in silence. After a moment he said, "I must be getting old, Slop. I think I'm sick."

"Captain!"

Lamb waved his spoon, irritated. "Oh, nothing as bad as all that. I mean I'm getting soft-headed. Today, I feel—how should I put it? Dammit to hell, it's hard finding words. Why did you come along on this war-rocket, Slop?"

Slop twisted his towel tight. "I had a little job to do with some Martians who killed my parents three years ago."

"Yes," said the captain.

Belloc and Larian were down below.

Slop looked at his chief. At the tight little brown face that could have been thirty-five as easily as forty or fifty.

Lamb glared up at him, quick. Slop gulped. "Pardon me."

"Uh?"

"I was just wondering. . .?"

"About. . . ?"

Belloc. Larian. Belloc down below. Larian climbing rungs, on his way to get the time-bombs. Mars looming ahead. Time getting shorter, shorter.

In a dozen parts of my body things were going on at an oblivious, unsuspecting norm. Computators, gunners, engineers, pilots performed their duties as Lamb and Slop talked casual talk in the galley. While Larian muscled it up the rungs toward his secreted time-explosives.

Slop said, "About why you became captain on a war-rocket, yourself, sir?"

"Me?" Lamb snorted, filled his mouth half a dozen times before answering very slowly. "Five years ago I was in a Blue Canal liquor dive on Mars. I met a Martian girl there. . ."

"Oh, yes. . ."

"Yes, nothing, you biscuit-burner! Damn but she was sweet. With a temper like a very fine cat-animal, and morals to match. Hair like glossy black spider-silk, eyes like that deep cold blue canal water. I wanted to bring her back to Earth with me. The war came, I was recalled and—"

"And someday," finished Slop, "when you've helped get the war over, you'll go looking for her. And being at Deimos-Phobos Base, maybe you can sneak down and kidnap her sometime."

Lamb ate awhile, making motions. "Pretty childish, isn't it?"

"No, I guess it's all right if she's still waiting."

"She is—if I know Yrela, she is." Ayres in Computation.

Mars off in space, blood-red and growing.

Lamb in the galley.

Hillary and Conrad in control room One!

And down below, where all of my power grew and expanded and burst out into space, I felt the vibration of Belloc. And coming up the ladder to the supply room—Larian.

Larian passed through the galley. "Sir."

Lamb nodded without looking up from his meal.

Larian proceeded up to Computation, passed through Computation, whistling, and lingered in Supply AC.

Space vibrated with my message.

MY GUNS were being trimmed, oiled and ready. Ammunition passed up long powered tracks from Locker Five to Blister Fourteen. Scarlet ammunition. Men sweated and showed their teeth and swore. Belloc waited down below, his face twitching its nerves, in the engine room. The captain ate his meal. I drove through space, Ayres computed. Belloc waited. Captain, eating. Space. Larian. Time-bombs. Captain. Belloc. Guns. Waiting. Waiting. Driving.

The metal of my structure was sickened, stressing, striving inward, trying to shout, trying to tell all that I knew in my positive-negative poles, in my sub-atomic awareness, in my neutronic vibrations.

But the blood of my body moved with a mind of its own, pulsing from chamber to chamber in their sweating, greasy togs, with their waiting, tightened faces. Pulsing nervously. Pulsing, pulsing, pulsing, not knowing that soon poison might spread through every and all of my compartments.

And there was a girl named Alice waiting in York Port. And the memory of two parents dead. And on Mars a cool-eyed Martian dancing girl, still dancing, perhaps, with silver bells on her thumbs, tinkling. Mars was close. I made an angry jolt and swerve in space. I leaped with metal frustration!

Around and around and around went my cogger, the flashing, glinting muscles of my soul's heart. Oil surged through my metal veins. And Belloc was down below, smoking one cigarette after another.

I thought about Ayres, about Captain Lamb and the way he barked, about Ayres and the way he kneeled and felt what he had to feel. About Hillary and Conrad thinking about a woman's lips. About The Slop troubling to invent a gravity soup plate.

I thought about Belloc waiting.

And Mars getting near. And about the war I had never seen but always heard about. I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to get there with Lamb and Hillary and The Slop!

The Slop took away the plate the captain had cleansed with his spoon.
"More?"

Lamb shook his head. "No. just a hunk of fruit now. An apple or something." He wiped his small mouth with the back of his hand.

"Okay," said The Slop.

At that moment there was a hiss, an explosion.

Somebody screamed, somewhere.

I knew who it was and where it was.

The captain didn't. "Dammit to hell!" he barked, and was out of the galley in three bounds. Slop dropped a soup kettle, following.

WARNING bells clamored through me. Ayres, in Computation, grinding out a parabolic problem, jerked his young, pink face and fear came into it instantly. He arose and tried walking toward the drop-rungs, but he couldn't do it. He didn't have legs for the job.

Conrad scuttled down the rungs, yelling. He vanished toward the engine room; the floor ate him up.

Hillary grabbed the ship-controls and froze to them, listening and waiting. He said one word. "Alice—"

Slop and the captain got there first in Section C.

"Cut that feed valve!" yelled Lamb. The Slop grasped a valve-wheel glinting on the wall in chubby fingers, twisted it, grunting.

The loud, gushing noise stopped. Steam-clouds billowed in my heart, wrapping Captain Lamb and The Slop tight and coughing. Conrad fell the rest of the way down the ladder into my heart, and the steam began to clear away as my vacuum ventilators began humming.

When the steam cleared they saw Belloc.

The Slop said, "Gahh. That's bad. That's very bad."

Conrad said, "How'd it happen? Looks like he died quick."

Lamb's leather-brown face scowled. "Quick is the word. That oil-tube burst, caught him like a steel whip across the bridge of his nose. If that hadn't killed him, scalding oil would have." Crumpled there, Belloc said not a word to anybody. He just bled where the oil pipe had caught him on the nose and cheek and plunged on back into his subconscious. That was all there was to him now.

Captain Lamb cursed. Conrad rubbed his cheek with the trembling flat of his hand. "I checked those oil-lines this morning. They were okay. I don't see—"

Footsteps on the rungs. Larian came down, feet first, quick, and turned to face them. "What happened...?" He looked as if somebody had kicked him in the stomach when he saw Belloc lying there. His face sucked bone-white, staring. His jaw dropped down and he said, empty, "You—killed him. You—found out what we were going to do—and you killed him..."

The Slop's voice was blank. "What?"

"You killed him," repeated Larian. He began to laugh. He opened his mouth and let the laughter come out in the steam-laden room. He darted about suddenly and leaped up the rungs. "I'll show you!"

"Stop him!" said Lamb.

Conrad scuttled up at Larian's heels. Larian stopped and kicked. Conrad fell, heavy, roaring. Larian vanished. Conrad got up, yelling, and pursued. Captain Lamb watched him go, not doing anything himself, just watching. He just listened to the fading feet on the rungs, going up and up.

The deck and hull quivered under Lamb's feet.

Somebody shouted.

Conrad cried, from far off, "Watch it!"

There was a thumping noise.

Five minutes later Conrad came down the ladder lugging a time-bomb. "It's a good thing that oil-pipe burst, Cap. I found this in Supply AC. That's where Larian was hiding it. Him and Belloc—"

"What about Larian?"

"He tried to escape through an emergency life-boat air-lock. He opened the inner door, slammed it, and a moment later when I opened that same inner door, I almost got killed the same way—"

"Killed?"

"Yeah. The damned fool must have opened the outer door while he was still standing in the middle of the air-lock. Space suction yanked him right outside. He's gone for good."

The Slop swallowed thickly. "That's funny, he'd do that. He knew how those air-locks work, how dangerous they are. Must've been some mistake, an accident, or something..."

"Yeah," said Captain Lamb. "Yeah."

They held Belloc's funeral a few hours later. They thrust him overboard, following Larian into space.

My body was cleansed. The organic poison was eliminated.

Mars was very close now. Red. Bright red.

In another six hours we would be engaged in conflict.

I HAD my taste of war. We drove down, Captain Lamb and his men inside me, and I put out my arms for the first time, and I closed fingers of power around Martian ships and tore them apart, fifteen of them—who tried to prevent our landing at Deimos-Phobos Base. I received only minor damage to my section F. Plates.

Scarlet ammunition went across space, born out of myself. Child out of metal and exploding with blazing force, wounding the stratas of emptiness in the void. I exhilarated in my new found arms of strength. I screamed with it. I talked rocket talk to the stars. I shook Deimos Base with my ambitious drive. I dissected Martian ships with quick calm strokes of my ray-arms, and spunky little Cap Lamb guided my vitals, swearing at the top of his lungs!

I had come into my own. I was fully grown, fully matured. War and more war, plunging on for month after month.

And young Ayres collapsed upon the computation deck one day, just like he was going to say a prayer, with a shard of shrapnel webbed in his lungs, blood dropping from his parted lips instead of a prayer. It reminded me of that day when first he had kneeled there and whispered, "Hell, I got the captain's time beat all hollow!"

Ayres died.

They killed Conrad, too. And it was Hillary who took the news back to York Port to the girl they had both loved.

After fourteen months we headed home. We landed in York Port, recruited men to fill our vacancies, and shot out again. We knocked holes in vacuum. We got what we wanted out of war, and then, quite suddenly one day space was silent. The Martians retreated, Captain Lamb shrugged his fine-boned little shoulders and commanded his men down to the computation room:

"Well, men, it's all over. The war's over. This is your last trip in this damned nice little war-rocket. You'll have your release as soon as we take gravity in York Port. Any of you want to stay on—this ship is being converted into cargo-freighting. You'll have good berths."

The crew muttered, shifting their feet, blinking their eyes. Cap said: "It's been good. I won't deny it. I had a fine crew and a sweet ship. We worked hard, we did what we had to do. And now it's all over and we have peace. Peace."

The way he said that word it meant something.

"Know what that means?" said Lamb. "It means getting drunk again, as often as you like; it means living on earth again, forgetting how religious you ever were out in space, how you were converted the first trip out. It means forgetting how non-gravity feels on your guts. It means a lot. It means losing friends, and the hard good times brawling at Phobos-Deimos Base.

"It means leaving this rocket." The men were silent.

"I want to thank you. You, Hillary. And you, Slop. And you, Ayres, for signing on after your brother died. And you, Thompson, and McDonald and Priory. And that's about all. Stand by to land!"

WE LANDED without fanfare.

The crew packed their duffles and left ship. Cap lingered behind awhile, walking through me with his short, brisk strides. He swore under his breath, twisted his small brown face. After awhile he walked away, too.

I wasn't a war-rocket anymore. They crammed me with cargo and shipped me back and forth to Mars and Venus for the next five years. Five long years of nothing but spider-silk, hemp and mineral-ore, a skeleton crew and a quiet voyage with nothing happening. Five years.

I had a new captain, a new, strange crew, and a strange peaceful routine going and coming across the stars.

Nothing important happened until July 17th, 2243.

That was the day I cracked up on this wild pebbled little planetoid where the wind whined and the rain poured and the silence was too damned silent.

The crew was crushed to death inside me, and I just lay here in the hot sun and the cold night wind, waiting for rescue that never seemed to come.

My life blood was gone, dead, crushed, killed. A rocket thinks in itself, but it lives through its crew and its captain. I had been living on borrowed time since Captain Lamb went away and never came back.

I lay here, thinking about it all. Glorious months of war, savage force and power of it. The wild insanity of it. I waited. I realized how out of place I was here, how helpless, like a gigantic metal child, an idiot who needs control, who needs pulsing human life blood.

Until very early one morning after the rain I saw a silver speck on the sky. It came down fast—a one-man Patrol inspector, used for darting about in the asteroid belt.

The ship came down, landing about one hundred yards away from my silent hulk. A small man climbed out of it.

He came walking up the pebbled hill very slowly, almost like a blind man.

He stood at my air-lock door. I heard him say, "Hello—"

AND I knew who it was. Standing there, not looking much older than when first he had clipped aboard me, little and lean and made of copper wire and brown leather.

Captain Lamb.

After all these years. Dressed in a black patrol uniform. An inspector of asteroids. No cargo job for him. A dangerous one instead. Inspector.

His lips moved.

"I heard you were lost four months ago," he said to me, quiet-like. "I asked for an appointment to Inspector. I thought—I thought I'd like to hunt for you myself. Just—just for old time's sake." His wiry neck muscles stood out, and tightened. He made his little hands into fists.

He opened my air-lock, laughing quietly, and walked inside me with his quick, short strides. It felt good to have him touch me again, to hear his clipped voice ring against my hull again. He climbed the rungs to my control room and stood there, swaying, remembering all the old times we had fought together.

"Ayres!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Hillary!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Slop!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Conrad!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Where in hell is everybody? Where in hell is everybody?" raged Lamb, staring about the control room. "Where in the God-blamed hell—!"

Silence. He quit yelling for people who couldn't answer him, who would never answer him again, and he sat down in the control chair and talked to me. He told me what he'd been doing all these years. Hard work, long hours, good pay.

"But it's not like it used to be," he told me. "Not by a stretched length. I think though—I think there'll be another war soon. Yes, I do." He nodded briskly. "And how'd you like to be in on it, huh? You can, you know."

I said nothing. My beams stretched and whined in the hot sun. That was all. I waited.

"Things are turning bad on Venus.

Colonials revolting. You're old-fashioned, but you're proud and tall, and a fighter. You can fight again."

He didn't stay much longer, except to tell me what would happen. "I have to go back to Earth, get a rescue crew and try to lift you under your own power next week. And so help me God, I'll be captain of you again and we'll beat the bloody marrow out of those Venerians!"

He walked back through my compartments, climbed down into my heart. The galley. The computation. The Slop, Ayres. Larian. Belloc. Memories. And he walked out of the airlock with eyes that were anything but dry. He patted my hull.

"After all, now—I guess you were the only thing I ever really loved..."

He went away into the sky, then. And so I'm lying here for a few more days, waiting with a stirring of my old anticipation and wonder and excitement. I've been dead a while. And Cap has showed up again to

slap me back to life. Next week he'll be here with the repair crew and I'll sail home to Earth and they'll go over me from seam to seam, from dorsal to ventral.

And someday soon Cap Lamb'll stomp into my air-lock, cry, "Rap her tight!" and we'll be off to war again! Off to war! Living and breathing and moving again. Captain Lamb and I and maybe Hillary and Slop if we can find them after all this time. Next week. In the meantime I can think.

I've often wondered about that blue-eyed Martian dancing girl with the silver bells on her fingers.

I guess I could read it in Captain Lamb's eyes, how that turned out.

I wish I could ask him.

But at least I won't have to lie here forever. I'll be moving on—next week!

Undersea Guardians

Amazing Stories (1944)

All of us have a purpose in life; among us are those whose duty is to act as guardians for those who have a mission to perform.

THE ocean slept quietly. There was little movement in its deep green silence. Along the floor of a watery valley some bright flecks of orange color swam: tiny arrow-shaped fish. A shark prowled by, gaping its mouth. An octopus reached up lazily with a tentacle, wiggled it at nothing, and settled back dark and quiet.

Fish swam in and around the rusting, torn hulk of a submerged cargo ship, in and out of gaping holes and ripped ports. The legend on the prow said: USS Atlantic.

It was quite soundless. The water formed around the ship like green gelatin.

And then Conda came, with his recruits.

They were swimming like dream-motes through the wide dark-watered valleys of the ocean; Conda at the head of the school with his red shock of hair flurried upright in a current, and his red bush beard trailed down over the massive rib of his chest. He put out his great arms, clutched water, pulled back, and his long body shot ahead.

The others imitated Conda, and it was very quietly done. The ripple of white arms, cupped hands, the glimmer of quick moving feet, was like the movement of motion pictures from which the sound-track has been cut. Just deep water silence and the mute moves of Conda and his swarm.

Alita came close at his kicking heels. She swam with her sea-green eyes wide-fixed and her dark hair spilling back over her naked body. Her mouth twisted with some sort of agony to which she could give no words.

Alita felt someone moving at her side. Another, smaller, woman, very thin in her nakedness, with gray hair and a shriveled husk of face that held nothing but weariness. She swam too, and would keep on swimming.

And then there was Helene, flashing by over their heads like an instantaneous charge of lightning. Helene with her hot angry eyes and her long platinum hair and her strange laughter.

"How much longer, Conda?" The old woman's thought reached through the waters, touching the brains of them all as they swam.

"An hour. Perhaps only forty minutes!" came Conda's blunt retort. It had the depth of fathoms in it; dark like the tides in the sunken water lands.

"Watch out!" somebody cried.

Down through the green waters overhead something tumbled. A shadow crossed the ocean surface, quick, like a gigantic sea-gull.

"Depth-charge!" shouted Conda. "Get away from it!"

Like so many frightened fish the twenty of them scattered instantly, with a flurry of legs, a spreading of arms, a diving of heads.

THE depth-charge ripped water into gouts and shreds, spread terrific vibrations down to kick the sandy bottom, up to ram the surface like a geyser!

Alita screamed to herself as she sank, stunned, to the sea-floor, a queer strange pain going through her limbs. If only this were over, if only the real death came. If only it were over.

A shivering went through her. Quite suddenly the water was icy cold, and she was alone in the green emptiness. So very alone. Alone, staring at a dark ring on her left hand.

"Richard, I want to see you again so very much. Oh, Richard, if we could only be together."

"Daughter." The gentle thought husked at her as the old woman glided up, white hair misting around her wrinkled face. "Don't. Don't think. Come along. There's work. Work to be done. Much of it. Work for you and me and the ships on the surface, and for—for Richard."

Alita didn't move. "I don't want to swim. I'd rather just sit here on the sand and... wait."

"You know you can't do that." The old woman touched her. "You'd be all the unhappier. You have a reason to swim or you wouldn't be swimming. Come along. We're almost there!"

The effects of the depth-charge, dropped from a low-flying airplane, had dispersed. Mud-streaks boiled up fogging the water, and there were a million air bubbles dancing toward the outer world like laughing diamonds. Alita let the old woman take her hand and tug her up from the sand floor. Together they progressed toward Conda, who was the nucleus of a growing congregation.

"Submarine!" somebody thought, in a tense whisper. "Over that crop of coral ahead. That's why the airplane dropped the depth-charge!"

"What kind of submarine?" someone else asked.

"German," said Conda grimly. His red beard wavered in the water and his red-rimmed eyes stared out with iron fury. Helene flicked by them all, swiftly, laughing. "A German submarine lying on the bottom, sleeping quietly— waiting for the convoy!"

Their minds swirled at the words of Conda, like so many warm-cold currents intermixing with fear and apprehension.

"And the convoy will pass this spot in how long?"

"Half an hour at most, now."

"Then there isn't much time, is there?"

"Not much."

"Isn't it dangerous for us to be near it? What if the airplane returns with more depth-charges?"

Conda growled. "This is the limit to the plane range. That plane won't be back. He's out of bombs and out of gas. It's our job now. And what of it? You afraid?"

Silence.

THE ring of faces looked to Conda for the plan, Alita among them; fourteen men, six women. Men with beards grown out four, five months; hair long and unshorn about their ears. Pallid watery faces with determined bone under the skin, set jaws and tightened fists. All gathered like fragments of some oceanic nightmare. The pallid undead, breathing water, and thinking mute thoughts about the stormy night when the USS Atlantic had been torpedoed and sent to the bottom, with all of them trapped, screaming, inside her.

"We never had our chance," said Conda, grimly, "to get where we were going to do what we had to do. But we'll go on doing it until the war's over because that's all that's worth while doing. I don't know how we live or what makes us live except the will to fight, the will to vengeance, wanting to win—not wanting to lie on the coral shelves like so much meat for the sharks—"

Alita listened and shuddered. Why was she still alive and swimming forty fathoms under?

And then she knew. It was like sudden flame in her. She lived because she loved Richard Jameson. She lived simply because his ship might pass this way some day soon again, like it had three weeks ago, returning from England. And she might see him leaning on the rail, smoking his pipe and trying to smile, still alive.

She lived for that. She lived to keep him safe on every trip. Like the others, she had a purpose, a hot, constricting, unquenchable purpose to prevent more victims from coming down to join her in the same

nightmare fashion as the USS Atlantic. She guessed that explained everything. There was good reason for her still to be moving, and somehow God had motivated them all in the green sea-weed plateaus and gullies.

"Now," came Conda's heavy thought, "we've this German submarine to consider. We have to knock it out of action completely. We can't have it lying here when the convoy comes. Alita—

Alita jerked. She came out of her thoughts, and her pale lips moved. "Yes?"

"You know what to do, Alita? And... Helene?"

Helene drifted down dreamily, laughing in answer, and opening white fingers to clench them tight.

"It's up to you, Alita and Helene. The rest of us will deploy around the submarine. Jones, you and Merrith try to jam the torpedo openings somehow. Acton, you work on the induction valves. Simpson, see what you can do to the guns on deck; and Haines, you and the other men try your damndest with the periscope and conning tower."

"Yes, sir."

"Good enough, sir."

"If we do it, this'll be the sixth sub for us—"

"If we do it," said Conda.

"Alita'll do it for us, won't you, Alita?"

"What? Oh, yes. Yes! I'll do it." She tried to smile.

"All right then." Conda swung about. "Spread out and go in toward the submarine under a smoke-screen. Deploy!"

SILENTLY the congregation split into twos and threes and swam toward the coral shelf, around it, then sank to the bottom, scooped up great handfuls of mud and darkened the water with it. Alita followed, cold, tired, unhappy.

The submarine squatted on the bottom like a metal shark, dark and wary and not making a sound. Sea-weed waved drowsy fronds around it, and several curious blue-fish eyed it and fluttered past. Sunshine slanted down through water, touching the gray bulk, making it look prehistoric, primeval.

A veil of mud sprang up as the cordon of Conda's people closed in around the U-boat. Through this veil their pasty white bodies twisted, naked and quick.

Alita's heart spasmed its cold grave-flesh inside her. It beat salt water through her arteries, it beat agony through her veins. There, just a few feet from her through the mud-veil, lay an iron-womb, and inside it grown-up children stirred, living. And out here in the cold deeps nothing lived but the fish.

Conda and Alita and the others didn't count.

The submarine, a metal womb, nurturing those men, keeping the choking, hungry waters from them. What a difference a few inches of metal made between pink flesh and her own white flesh, between living and not living, between laughing and crying. All of that air inside the submarine. What would it be like to gasp it in again, like the old days just a few scant weeks ago. What would it be like to suck it in and mouth it out with talked words on it? To talk again!

Alita grimaced. She kicked her legs. Plunging to the U-boat, she beat her fists against it, screaming, "Let me in! Let me in! I'm out here and I want to live! I want to live! Let me in!"

"Alita!" The old woman's voice cried in her mind. A shadow drew across her lined face, softening it. "No, no, my child, do not think of it! Think only of what must be done!"

Alita's handsome face was ugly with torture.

"Just one breath! Just one song!"

"Time shortens, Alita. And the convoy comes! The submarine must be smashed—now!"

"Yes," said Alita wearily. "Yes. I must think of Richard—if he should happen to be in this next convoy—"

Her dark hair surged in her face. She brushed it back with white fingers and stopped thinking about living again. It was needless torture.

She heard Helene's laughter from somewhere. It made her shiver. She saw Helene's nude body flash by above her like a silver fish, magnificent and graceful as a wind-borne thistle. Her laughter swam with her.

"Open the U-boat up! Open it up and let them out and I'll make love to a German boy!"

THERE were lights in the submarine. Dim lights. Alita pressed her pale face against the port and stared into a crew's quarters. Two German men lay on small bunks, looking at the iron ceiling, doing nothing. After a while one puckered his lips, whistled, and rolled out of the bunk to disappear through a small iron door. Alita nodded. This was the way she wanted it. The other man was very young and very nervous, his eyes were erratic in a tired face, and his hair was corn-yellow and clipped tight to his head. He twisted his hands together, again and again, and a muscle in his cheek kept jerking.

Light and life, a matter of inches away. Alita felt the cold press of the ocean all around her, the beckoning urge of the cold swells. Oh, just to be inside, living and talking like them. . .

She raised her tiny fist, the one with Richard's thick ring on it, from Annapolis, and struck at the port. She struck four times.

No effect.

She tried again, and knew that Helene would be doing the same on the opposite side of the sub.

The Annapolis ring clicked against thick port glass.

Jerking, the German lad pulled his head up half an inch and stared at the port, and looked away again, went back to twisting his fingers and wetting his lips with his tongue.

"I'm out here!" Alita struck again and again. "Listen to me! Listen! I'm out here!"

The German sat up so violently he cracked his head against metal. Holding his forehead with one hand he slipped out of the bunk and stepped to the port.

He squinted out, cupping hands over eyes to see better.

Alita smiled. She didn't feel like smiling, but she smiled. Sunlight sprang down upon her dark smoke-spirals of hair dancing on the water. Sunlight stroked her naked white body. She beckoned with her hands, laughing.

For one unbelieving, stricken instant, it was as if hands strangled the German lad. His eyes grew out from his face like unhealthy gray things. His mouth stopped retching and froze. Something crumbled inside him. It seemed to be the one last thing to strike his mind once and for all insane.

One moment there, the next he was gone. Alita watched him fling himself back from the port, screaming words she couldn't hear. Her heart pounded. He fought to the door, staggering out. She swam to the next port in time to see him shout into the midst of a sweating trio of mechanics. He stopped, swayed, swallowed, pointed back to the bunk room, and while the others turned to stare in the designated direction, the young German ran on, his mouth wide, to the entrance rungs of the conning tower.

Alita knew what he was yelling. She spoke little German; she heard nothing; but faintly the waves of his mind impinged on hers, a screaming insanity: "God! Oh God! She's outside. And she is swimming! And alive!"

THE sub captain saw him coming.

He dragged out a revolver and fired, point-blank. The shot missed and the two grappled.

"God! Oh God! I can't stand it longer! Months of sleeping under the sea! Let me out of this god-damned nightmare! Let me out!"

"Stop! Stop it, Schmidt! Stop!" The captain fell under a blow. The younger man wrested the gun from him, shot him three times. Then he jumped up the rungs to the conning tower, and twisted at mechanisms.

Alita warned the others. "Be ready! One is coming out! He's coming out! He's opening the inner door!" Instantly, breathlessly, passionately, Helene's voice rang: "To hell with the inner door! It's the outer door we want open!"

"God in heaven, let me out! I can't stay below!"

"Stop him!"

The crew scrambled. Ringing down, the inner door peeled open. Three Germanic faces betrayed the biting fear in their bellies. They grabbed instruments and threw them at Schmidt's vanishing legs jumping up the rungs!

Conda's voice clashed like a thrust gong in the deep sunlit waters. "Ready, everyone? If he gets the outer door open, we must force in to stop the others from ever closing it!"

Helene laughed her knifing laughter. "I'm ready!"

The submarine stirred and rolled to a strange gurgling sound. Young Schmidt was babbling and crying. To Alita, he was now out of sight. The other men were pouring pistol shots up into the conning tower where he'd vanished, to no effect. They climbed after him, shouting.

A gout of water hammered down, crushed them!

"It's open!" Helene exulted. "It's open! The outer seal is free!"

"Don't let them slam it again!" roared Conda. White bodies shot by, flashing green in the sunlight. Thoughts darkened, veiling like unsettled mud.

Inside the machine-room, the crew staggered in a sloshing, belching nightmare of thrusting water. There was churning and thrashing and shaking like the interior of a gigantic washing machine. Two or three crew-men struggled up the rungs to the inner lock and beat at the closing mechanism.

"I'm inside!" Helene's voice was high, excited. "I've got him—the German boy! Oh, this is a new kind of love, this is!"

There was a terrific mental scream from the German, and then silence. A moment later his dangling legs appeared half in, half out the lock as the door started to seal! Now it couldn't seal. Yanking desperately, the crew beneath tried to free him of the lock, but Helene laughed dimly

and said, "Oh, no, I've got him and I'm keeping him here where he'll do the most good! He's mine. Very much mine. You can't have him back!"

Water thundered, spewed. The Germans floundered. Schmidt's limbs kicked wildly, with no life, in the steadily descending torrent. Something happened to release him. The lock rapped open and he fell face down into the rising waters.

Something came with him. Something white and quick and naked. Helene.

ALITA watched in a numbed sort of feeling that was too weary to be horror.

She watched until there were three Germans left, swimming about, keeping their heads over water, yelling to God to save them. And Helene was in among them, invisible and stroking and moving quickly. Her white hands flickered up, grasped one officer by the shoulders and pulled him steadily under.

"This is a different kind of love! Make love to me! Make love! Don't you like my cold lips?"

Alita swam off, shuddering, away from the fury and yelling and corruption. The submarine was dying, shaking its prehistoric bulk with metal agony. In another moment it would be drowned and the job done. Silence would come down again and sunlight would strike on the dead, quiet U-boat and another attack would be successful.

Sobbing, Alita swam up toward the sun in the green silence. It was late afternoon, and the water became warmer as she neared the surface. Late afternoon. Back in Forest Hills they'd be playing tennis now on the hot courts, drinking cool cocktails, talking about dancing tonight at the Indigo Club. Back in Forest Hills they'd be deciding what formal to wear tonight to that dance, what show to see. Oh, that was so long ago in

the sanity of living, in the time before torpedoes crushed the hull of the USS Atlantic and took her down.

Richard, where are you now? Will you be here in a few minutes, Richard, with the convoy? Will you be thinking of us and the day we kissed goodbye in New York at the harbor, when I was on my way to nursing service in London? Will you remember how we kissed and held tight, and how you never saw me again?

I saw you, Richard. Three weeks ago. When you passed by on Destroyer 242, oblivious to me floating a few feet under the water!

If only we could be together. But I wouldn't want you to be like this, white and sodden and not alive. I want to keep you from all this, darling. And I shall. That's why I stay moving, I guess. Because I know I can help keep you living. We just killed a submarine, Richard. It won't have a chance to harm you. You'll have a chance to go to Britain, to do the things we wanted to do together.

There was a gentle movement in the water, and the old woman was at her side.

Alita's white shoulders jerked. "It —it was awful."

The old woman looked at the sun caught in the liquid. "It always is— this kind of death. It always has been —always will be as long as men are at war. We had to do it. We didn't take lives, we saved lives — hundreds of them."

Alita closed her eyes and opened them again. "I've been wondering about us. Why is it that just you and I and Conda and Helene and a few others survived the sinking. Why didn't some of the hundreds of others join us? What are we?"

The old woman moved her feet slowly, rippling currents.

"We're Guardians, that's what you'd call us. A thousand people drowned when the USS Atlantic went down, but twenty of us came out, half-dead, because we have somebody to guard. You have a lover on the convoy routes. I have four sons in the Navy. The others have similar obligations. Conda has sons too. And Helene—well, her lover was drowned inside the USS Atlantic and never came half-alive like us, so she's vindictive, motivated by a great vengeance. She can't ever really be killed.

"We all have a stake in the convoys that cross and recross the ocean. We're not the only ones. Maybe there are thousands of others who cannot and will not rest between here and England, breaking seams in German cargo boats, darkening Nazi periscopes and frightening German crewmen, sinking their gun-boats when the chance comes.

"But we're all the same. Our love for our husbands and sons and daughters and fathers makes us go on when we should be meat for fish, makes us go on being Guardians of the Convoy, gives us the ability to swim faster than any human ever swam while living, as fast as any fish ever swam. Invisible guardians nobody'll ever know about or appreciate. Our urge to do our bit was so great we wouldn't let dying put us out of action. . .

"I'm so tired, though," said Alita. "So very tired."

"When the war is over—we'll rest. In the meanwhile—"

"The convoy is coming!"

IT WAS Conda's deep, voice of authority. Used to giving captain's orders for years aboard the USS Atlantic, he appeared below them now, about a hundred yards away, striving up in the watered sunlight, his red hair aflame around his big-nosed, thick-lipped face. His beard was like so many living tentacles, writhing.

The convoy!

The Guardians stopped whatever they were doing and hung suspended like insects in some green primordial amber, listening to the deeps.

From far, far off it came: the voice of the convoy. First a dim note, a lazy drifting of sound, like trumpets blown into eternity and lost in the wind. A dim vibration of propellers beating water, a bulking of much weight on the sun-sparkled Atlantic tides.

The convoy!

Destroyers, cruisers, corvettes, and cargo ships. The great bulking convoy!

Richard! Richard! Are you with them?

Alita breathed water in her nostrils, down her throat, in her lungs. She hung like a pearl against a green velvet gown that rose and fell under the breathing of the sea.

Richard!

The echo of ships became more than a suggestion. The water began to hum and dance and tremble with the advancing armada. Bearing munitions and food and planes, bearing hopes and prayers and people, the convoy churned for England.

Richard Jameson!

The ships would come by like so many heavy blue shadows over their heads and pass on and be lost soon in the night-time, and tomorrow there would be another and another stream of them.

Alita would swim with them for a way. Until she was tired of swimming, perhaps, and then she'd drop down, come floating back here to this spot on a deep water tide she knew and utilized for the purpose.

Now, excitedly, she shot upward.

She went as near to the surface as she could, hearing Conda's thunder-voice giving commands:

"Spread out! One of you to each major ship! Report any hostile activity to me instantly! We'll trail with them until after sunset! Spread!"

The others obeyed, rising to position, ready. Not near enough to the surface so the sun could get at their flesh.

They waited. The hammer-hammer churn-churn of ships folded and grew upon itself. The sea brimmed with its bellow going down to kick the sand and striking up in reflected quivers of sound. Hammer-hammer-churn!

Richard Jameson!

Alita dared raise her head above water. The sun hit her like a dull hammer. Her eyes flicked, searching, and as she sank down again she cried, "Richard. It's his ship. The first destroyer. I recognize the number. He's here again!"

"Alita, please," cautioned the old woman. "Control yourself. My boy, too. He's on one of the cargo ships. I know its propeller voice well. I recognize the sound. One of my boys is here, near me. And it feels so very good."

The whole score of them swam to meet the convoy. Only Helene stayed behind. Swimming around and around the German U-boat, swimming swiftly and laughing her strange high laughter that wasn't sane.

Alita felt something like elation rising in her. It was good, just to be this close to Richard, even if she couldn't speak or show herself or kiss him ever again. She'd watch him every time he came by this way. Perhaps she'd swim all night, now, and part of the next day, until she couldn't

keep up with him any longer, and then she'd whisper goodbye and let him sail on alone.

THE destroyer cut close to her. She saw its number on the prow in the sun. And the sea sprang aside as the destroyer cut it like a glittering knife.

There was a moment of exhilaration, and then Conda shouted it deep and loud and excited:

"SUBMARINE!"

"Submarine coming from north, cutting across convoy! German!"

Richard!

Alita's body twisted fearfully as she heard the under-water vibration that meant a submarine was coming in toward them, fast. A dark long shadow pulsed underwater.

There was nothing you could do to stop a moving submarine, unless you were lucky. You could try stopping it by jamming its propellers, but there wasn't time for that.

Conda yelled, "Close in on the sub! Try to stop it somehow! Block the periscope. Do anything!"

But the German U-boat gnashed in like a mercurial monster. In three breaths it was lined up with the convoy, unseen, and squaring off to release its torpedoes.

Down below, like some dim-moving fantasy, Helene swam in eccentric circles, but as the sub shadow trailed over her she snapped her face up, her hot eyes pulled wide and she launched herself with terrific energy up at it, her face blazing with fury!

The ships of the convoy moved on, all unaware of the poisoned waters they churned. Their great valvular hearts pounding, their screws thrashing a wild water song.

"Conda, do something! Conda!" Alita shivered as her mind thrust the thoughts out at the red-bearded giant. Conda moved like a magnificent shark up toward the propellers of the U-boat, swift and angry.

Squirting, bubbling, jolting, the sub expelled a child of force, a streamlined torpedo that kicked out of its metal womb, trailed by a second, launched with terrific impetus—at the destroyer.

Alita kicked with her feet. She grasped at the veils of water with helpless fingers, blew all the water from her lungs in a stifled scream.

Things happened swiftly. She had to swim at incredible speed just to keep pace with submarine and convoy. And —spinning a bubbled trail of web—the torpedoes coursed at the destroyer as Alita swam her frantic way.

"It missed! Both torps missed!" someone cried; it sounded like the old woman.

Oh, Richard, Richard, don't you know the sub is near you. Don't let it bring you down to... this, Richard! Drop the depth charges! Drop them now!

Nothing.

Conda clung to the conning tower of the U-boat, cursing with elemental rage, striving uselessly.

Two more torpedoes issued from the mouths of the sub and went surging on their trajectories. Maybe—

"Missed again!"

Alita was gaining. Gaining. Getting closer to the destroyer. If only she could leap from the waters, shouting. If only she were something else but this dead white flesh. ...

Another torpedo. The last one, probably, in the sub.

It was going to hit!

Alita knew that before she'd taken three strokes more. She swam exactly alongside the destroyer now, the submarine was many, many yards ahead when it let loose its last explosive. She saw it come, shining like some new kind of fish, and she knew the range was correct this time.

In an instant she knew what there was to be done. In an instant she knew the whole purpose and destiny of her swimming and being only half-dead. It meant the end of swimming forever, now, the end of thinking about Richard and never having him for herself ever again. It meant—

She kicked her heels in the face of water, stroked ahead clean, quick. The torpedo came directly at her with its blunt, ugly nose.

Alita coasted, spread her arms wide, waited to embrace it, take it to her breast like a long-lost lover.

She shouted it in her mind:

"Helene! Helene! From now on— from now on—take care of Richard for me! Watch over him for me!

Take care of Richard—!"

"Submarine off starboard!"

"Ready depth-charges!"

"Torpedo traces! Four of them! Missed us!"

"Here comes another one! They've got our range this time, Jameson! Watch it!"

To the men on the bridge it was the last moment before hell. Richard Jameson stood there with his teeth clenched, yelling, "Hard over!" but it was no use; that torp was coming on, not caring, not looking where it was going. It would hit them amidship! Jameson's face went white all over and he breathed something under his breath and clutched the rail.

The torpedo never reached the destroyer.

It exploded about one hundred feet from the destroyer's hull. Jameson fell to the deck, swearing. He waited. He staggered up moments later, helped by his junior officer.

"That was a close one, sir!"

"What happened?"

"That torp had our range, sir. But they must have put a faulty mechanism in her. She exploded short of her goal. Struck a submerged log or something." Jameson stood there with salt spraying his face. "I thought I saw something just before the explosion. It looked like a... log. Yeah. That was it. A log."

"Lucky for us, eh, sir?"

"Yeah. Damn lucky."

"Depth-charge! Toss 'em!"

Depth-charges were dropped. Moments later a subwater explosion tore up the water. Oil bubbled up to color the waves, with bits of wreckage mixed in it.

"We got the sub," someone said.

"Yeah. And the sub almost got us!"

The destroyer ran in the wave channels, in the free wind, under a darkening sky.

"Full speed ahead!"

The ocean slept quiet as the convoy moved on in the twilight. There was little movement in its deep green silence. Except for some things that may have been a swarm of silver fish gathered below, just under the waters where the convoy had passed; pale things, stirring, flashing a flash of white, and swimming off silently, strangely, into the deep green soundlessness of the undersea valleys....

The ocean slept again.

Final Victim

Amazing Stories (1946)

Hunting a criminal is tough enough, but it's even tougher when it's on a bit of Hell's own rock in the void of space

THE space-suited figure scrambled frantically over the edge of the ragged asteroid cliff, and lay panting from the exertion of the long climb upward. The pale face beneath the helmet was drawn in a tight grimace as it stared at the tiny Patrol ship on the plain below. No access to it now! He was trapped.

The young man rose to his feet, stared down the steep ravine he had just traversed. He saw the plodding figure of the Patrolman coming up

toward him. There was a frightening relentlessness about that figure. He caught a dull glint of metal and knew the Patrolman had drawn his atom-blast.

"If only I hadn't lost my gun, down there!" And then he laughed bitterly, for he knew he never would have used it. He stepped out in plain sight, threw his hands up in the universal gesture of surrender. His mind was awry with bitter thoughts. He had never killed anyone in all his life! But the Patrol thought he had, and that's what counted now. He was glad it was all over. He would surrender, go back and face trial though the evidence was all against him.

Now the Patrolman's bulging, space-suited figure loomed up before him just ten yards away. He raised his hands still higher to make sure the other saw them.

The Patrolman saw them all right. His lips parted in a wide grin beneath his Crystyte plate. He lifted his big hand, full of dull metal, and took careful aim at the young man limned against the cobalt heaven.

There was something strange, and wrong, in the big Patrolman's grin. The youth waved frantically with his hands and screamed terrified words that only echoed inside his helmet until his eardrums rang. This was crazy! This couldn't happen! It was never in the Patrol's code to kill men in cold blood....

His thoughts abruptly ceased. His helmet plate shattered inward and his face was a mask of red. He screamed, but it ended in a gurgling moan, as he tried with futile fingers to tear out the slug that was chewing at his brain. He sank to his knees, toppled over the cliff and did a crazy jerking dance as his gravity plates pulled him to the rock eighty feet below.

Jim Skeel, Patrolman, still grinned.

"Number fourteen," said he, and holstered his gun.

Jim Skeel stalked triumphantly down to the base of the cliff. He exulted with all six-feet-four of his big sun-parched body. He felt the palms of his hands a little sweaty as he clenched and unclenched them, and a curious tremor came over him as he viewed the body lying there. The familiar pounding of blood was in his temples again, a hot, fierce pounding,

FOR a long moment he closed his eyes tight and pressed hard fists against his temples and stood there trembling. But the fierce remembrance would not go away, as he knew it would not. Again the scene was with him that had haunted him through the years. Once again the flash of electro-guns tore through his tortured brain, and he saw defenseless men all about him dying and he heard their screams as they died....

He stood quite still until his trembling stopped and that feeling went away. Then with his toe he nudged the young man's body so that it rolled over, and the pale leprous sunlight licked at the blood-masked features. "Pretty good shot," Skeel grunted. He bent and searched the body, retrieving all identification cards.

A sudden dark shadow swept over the scene. Skeel looked up, startled. Then he knew what it was. Utter night had come without any warning, as it always did on these slowly rotating asteroids. Toward the caverns and crannies at the base of the cliff he glimpsed vague horrid things, pale and wriggling, with sensitive amoeboid tentacles where eyes should have been. He heard strange sibilances from these asteroid creatures who hated light but loved the dark and loved blood, which they got too seldom.

Skeel arose hastily and hurried to his Patrol cruiser a short distance away. He looked back but once, and glimpsed scores of the vague nightmare shapes swarming over a prone human form there in the cliff shadow.

CHAPTER II

ARRIVING at the Federation Patrol headquarters on Ceres Base, Skeel eased his solo cruiser into the glassite dome with an expert hand. None of the men spoke to him. They tried not even to look at him. But if Jim Skeel noticed this he gave no indication. He sauntered over to the door marked "Commander" and entered without knocking.

Commander Anders looked up from his desk. At sight of Skeel his leathery jaw tightened a little. A look of distaste flashed into his steel gray eyes.

"Reporting, sir," said Skeel. He carefully, a little too carefully, spread out the identification cards he had taken from the fugitive's pockets.

Anders rose slowly to his feet. His knuckles were white as he placed his fists on the desk and leaned tautly forward.

"You didn't capture the man?" Anders' voice was a monotone, as though he had asked that question more than once.

"Sorry, sir. He's dead."

"Dead." There was not much of surprise in Anders' voice. Then the voice and the gray eyes became simultaneously harder. "Did you kill him?"

"Kill him, sir?" Skeel's eyebrows arched. "No, sir. I had to chase him clear to Asteroid 78 in the Lanisar Group, and there he—he fell off a cliff. I only had time to get his identification cards and get away, before the night creatures came swarming out. Sorry."

Anders kicked his chair back against the wall and came surging around the desk. He was white-faced. "Sorry! You're not sorry, Skeel! In God's name, how do you have the ghastly nerve to come back here each and every time? How can you face me—no, more than that, how can you face your conscience? I wonder what goes on inside that riveted skull,

behind that paper-mache expression of yours!" He paused and drew a breath. "What makes you kill, Skeel? How many does this make — eleven? Twelve?"

Skeel sighed, and spread his hands in an exaggerated gesture. "You always were a long winded louse, sir. There are Miller's papers. And I didn't kill him. He fell off a cliff. Is that all, sir?"

"No! That's not all!" Anders came even closer, and glared up at Skeel who towered above him. "You've been in the Patrol a long time, Skeel. Luckily, or I should say unluckily, your previous good record and your seniority permits you to get away with this—until we prove something. Some day you'll slip and we will prove it. I pray that day'll come soon!"

SKEEL'S own eyes, which had been amused, now took on a hard glint. He spoke and his voice was different.

"Since you bring up the subject of my seniority, let me remind you that it would permit me to take your place here if I so chose. I do not so choose—yet. As to the other thing you imagine about me, I could tell you a story, sir. A story that—" He stopped abruptly as the fierce rush of blood came to his throbbing temples again.

"Yes, man, go on! You were about to tell me why you kill." Anders waited. "Weren't you!"

"No, sir." Skeel's voice was a whisper now, but controlled.

"I know you must have some sort of hellish reason. But whatever the reason, it's an insult to everything you learned in the Federation Patrol! All right, Skeel, I'll tell you something about young Miller, your latest victim. He was innocent, do you hear? Innocent! The evidence against him was purely circumstantial, but now he has been cleared! I just got the news an hour ago!"

"You got the news—here? How?"

"Never mind how. It's authentic!" Skeel didn't move a muscle. His face became a little paler and his eyes widened momentarily. Then his face was an impassive mask again.

"You see, Skeel?" Anders was livid with suppressed fury now. "Any normal man would squirm at the news I just told you! Any decent man would blow his brains out at the thought of the ghastly thing he'd done! But not you, Skeel. No, not you, because you're neither a decent nor a normal man any longer! You've allowed this thing to get hold of you until it's a fetish, it's warped your brain and now it's become a sadistic pleasure... this killing... Anders choked and couldn't go on.

"Is that all, sir?"

"That sure as hell is all! Isn't it enough? Get out of here! Get your filthy face out of my sight before I smash it to pulp."

Skeel's lips became a tight slash across his square featured face. He turned on his heel and strode stiffly out.

WITH an effort Anders stifled the rising anger in him. He strode across the room to the opposite door. It was slightly ajar. He flung it open.

The girl sitting in the next room looked up, but seemed to stare through Anders rather than at him. Her slender uniformed figure was unbending as crystal, her knuckles white as she gripped the arms of the chair. Her eyes, an unbelievable blue, were now misted with the shock of horror. She didn't bother to brush back the lock of taffy-toned hair that had fallen down against the pallor of her cheek.

Anders spoke.

"You heard, Miss Miller?" he said quietly.

Her breath caught in her throat and it took her some seconds to speak. When she did her voice was terrible in its tonelessness.

"Yes, I heard... quite enough, Commander. Thanks."

"I'm truly sorry you had to learn about it this way! But I wanted you to see the man who killed your brother. You wouldn't have believed me otherwise."

"I—still find it a little hard to-believe—and to understand." She rose very slowly and stood facing him. There was a world of contempt in her voice. "The Patrol never kills! That's what we've learned to believe. That's become a motto on three planets. The Patrol, the noble Patrol, guardians of the spaceways! What mockery! Why was my brother killed, Commander? Why is such a monster as this man Skeel allowed—"

"Miss Miller, please. I know it's hard for you, or any outsider to understand, but you must try. Skeel was once one of the best men we had. His reputation was clean as flame, and on the records it still is. Very few men stand above him in seniority, and in the Patrol that's what counts, because —"

"That's what counts, is it? I came here to Ceres from Mars, bringing my brother's release papers, only to learn that you'd sent this Skeel out after him; all the time knowing—"

Anders sighed, and spread his hands helplessly. "I see you still don't understand. But please believe me, if I'd known your brother was innocent I wouldn't have allowed Skeel to accept this assignment; no, not even if I'd have to ray him down and face court-martial for it! It was Skeel's mission if he wanted it. It was his prerogative to accept or refuse the assignment, and he never refuses them. And Miss Miller, I hope this will mean something to you: there's hardly a man in the Patrol who doesn't suspect Skeel for what he is, and hate him for it; but I doubt if any of 'em, given the chance, would obliterate him in cold

blood. You see the code is ingrained deeply in these men. As yet there's no proof that Skeel is a killer."

"You speak glibly of proof," the girl echoed mockingly. "Why don't you get proof?"

"I'm going to! Personally. A frame-up is the only way. But it'll be hard, because the man always works alone."

"Yes, and then there is always the code against you. Well, Commander, I have no such code to hamper me and I am going to avenge my brother!" Nadia Miller's face, ordinarily lovely, was not lovely now. "I have a plan. I could use your help, but with or without your help I am going through with it. All I want is to get this man Skeel back out to those rocks—alone."

Anders smiled tolerantly. "That would be a dangerous thing, especially for a girl. Skeel's a deadly killer, an expert shot. And you'd be on your own, the Patrol couldn't sanction any such plan."

"Naturally, Commander. Will you listen to me for five minutes? I'll tell you how to get this man out of the Patrol before he kills other people whose only crime was a momentary mental disturbance." Her face clouded with pain as she thought of her brother.

Anders listened as she unfolded her plan. When he spoke again there was less of doubt in his voice and a respectful admiration in his eyes.

"Miss Miller, I like your plan and I agree to it for one reason only. It has an advantage over anything I could attempt. Skeel suspects me now, and will see to it that any future assignment he accepts is fool-proof; but your idea might turn that very caution against him."

"I hope so. And you needn't worry about me. I know most of those big rocks in the asteroid belt well enough."

"All right. At least I can set the stage for you, and I wish I could do more." Anders looked at her with a sudden new interest, admiring the firm line of her chin, the trimness of her space uniform, the hard bold blueness of her eyes which he imagined could easily be soft on less drastic occasions than this. With an effort he brought his mind back to the immediate problem. "It will be at least a week from now. Ceres is no place for you, but since you're here I suggest you go over to Ceres City, the mining town on the other side of our little planet. I'll keep in touch with you and let you know just when to pick up your solo cruiser. Okay? Goodbye for now—and good luck!"

FOR three days Anders haunted the helio tower, doggedly flashing signals in the direction of Ganymede, currently the nearest of Jupiter's satellites. Their entire plan would depend on how soon the Ganymede Base received these signals. Sometimes atmospheric conditions weren't right and it took days to get a message through.

He was lucky. On the third day he received the answering flash that told him his signal had been picked up. Quickly he checked the orbital positions of both planets, then sighted the huge silvery screens carefully and locked them into place. Manipulating the shields with expert fingers, Anders began his message.

HELLO GANYMEDE. CERES

BASE SENDING. ANSWER!

Minutes later it came:

CONDITIONS OKAY. GANYMEDE BASE SENDING. GO AHEAD CERES.

Anders' fingers were lightning fast as he operated the rows of levers controlling the solar shields. He tried to be terse, for there was no time to waste and it took minutes for a message to cross such vast reaches of space.

MOST IMPORTANT. WANT ANY AVAILABLE NEWS ON THE LONELY ONE. HIS LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS PRESENT POSITION AND ACTIVITIES.

ANDERS.

Anders' fingers were lightning fast as operated the rows of levers controlling exertion. Usually it took a two-man crew to manipulate those shields. He smoked a cigarette as he awaited the answer.

Minutes later it came, transmitted into little electric flashes on the screen above his head. WHAT GOES ON? THAT PIRATE IS OUR MEAT SO HANDS OFF. ESCAPED OUR TRAP TWO WEEKS AGO BUT IS NOW BELIEVED OPERATING FROM SECRET CALLISTO BASE. HE'S OURS! SPURLIN.

Anders leaped for the levers and threw the following message:

THREE DAYS FROM NOW FLASH NEWS HERE THAT THE LONELY ONE IS HEADED BELTWARD. MUST SOUND AUTHENTIC BUT DO NOT TRANSMIT TO EARTH HEADQUARTERS. PERSONAL FAVOR. EXPLAIN LATER.

The answer read:

OKAY ANDERS YOU'LL GET YOUR MESSAGE BUT I HOPE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND I'LL WANT THAT EXPLANATION. DID I EVER TELL YOU THE ONE ABOUT—

The little flashes on the screen continued, but Anders didn't stay to watch. He descended the tower stairs and found Lohss, the regular helio man, over in the barracks.

"Okay," he told Lohss. He had explained to him that he was merely making a routine check-up on the equipment. When the message about the Lonely One came he wanted it to be a distinct surprise to every man here.

IT WAS. It came three and a half days later. Lohss shoved excitedly into Anders' little office, waving one of the official helio pads.

"Here's something I thought you ought to see right away, Commander."

Anders read the message:

ATTENTION CERES BASE! MARS-BOUND FREIGHTER FROM GANYMEDE MINES RAMMED AND LOOTED. HANDIWORK OF THE LONELY ONE. HE IS HEADING TOWARD THE ASTEROIDS. SOLID BLACK ONE-MAN CRUISER AS USUAL. FULL ARMAMENT. GET BUSY AND GOOD LUCK!

Anders smiled to himself and was grateful to Spurlin over on Ganymede for coming through so nicely.

Soon Ceres Base was ringing with the news. Every man there had dreamed of being some day sent on the Lonely One mission. To bring in that famous pirate would be a feather in anyone's cap, and would mean immediate promotion. Consequently it was with mumblings of displeasure that the men saw Jim Skeel stalk arrogantly into Commander Anders' office.

"Good morning, sir. You sent for me?"

"I did, Skeel. I guess you've heard the news about the Lonely One. Want to make a try for him? Just the job for you." The tinge of contempt in Anders' voice didn't go unnoticed.

Nor did the little hint of cunning that he couldn't keep out of his eyes. Skeel said:

"You never were anxious to send me out before, Commander. This couldn't be some plan of yours to get rid of me?" He smiled a little but there was no humor in it.

"It doesn't matter this time, Skeel. There's a dead or alive warrant on the Lonely One. But I don't mind telling you this is the chance I've been waiting for! You're a killer and so is the Lonely One. I'll be praying that he gets you first, so the Patrol will be rid of scum like you."

Skeel's eyes narrowed. "When do I leave?"

"Soon's you can get your cruiser ready. You're sure you want to handle this alone? You can select a crew, up to six men."

Skeel laughed aloud. "Do you think any of 'em would ride with me? Don't worry, Anders, I'll bring back the Lonely One—alive."

"You needn't pretend with me any more, Skeel."

"Very well, sir. Goodbye."

"Goodbye—but not good luck." Anders ignored the proffered hand. Skeel stiffened, then turned and strode for the door, exiting quickly.

Anders sank back in his chair, procured a cigarette and lit it thoughtfully. Now the doubts were beginning to crowd in. Nadia Miller had been overwrought and full of revenge. Suppose she did know the asteroids as well as she knew her own library? Skeel did, too, and he was ruthless and cunning. Suppose she did have the fastest cruiser this side of Mars? Skeel was the best solo spaceman in the Patrol.

Anders viciously ground out the burning end of his cigarette. He thought of Nadia Miller's tense but pretty face again, her trim figure and bright hair and hard blue eyes that he wanted to see soft. If anything happened to that girl—

But there was nothing he could do now. Nothing, except face an agony of waiting.

CHAPTER III

JIM SKEEL leaped to his controls, as the Visipanel came to life with a tiny gash of flame that tore a hole in the blackness of space. That would be the Lonely One again! Feverishly he changed his course in a sharp parabola toward the rocket blasts far ahead.

He would keep that ship within range this time! Reaching to the V-panel, he twisted the magnifying dial. The blackness swam and expanded. The tiny orange rocket blasts seemed to leap backward at him. He had to look closely to distinguish the outline of the ship, but then he grunted with satisfaction. It was the solid black solo cruiser, all right. It bore absolutely no insignia, strictly against the Space Code.

Skeel grinned through his weariness. For more than twenty hours he had played hide and seek with that elusive black cruiser. He could never quite get within beam range, and sometimes he lost it out of his V-panel altogether.

Once it had led him straight into the Kennison Group of asteroids, a vast expanse of treacherous rocks with wild, eccentric orbits. This was sheer suicide for cruisers as tiny as theirs, minus the repulsion plates to shunt the rock masses from them. Skeel, in a cold sweat of horror, had finally given up the chase. He had laboriously circled the entire Kennison Group, and now—

Now he had picked up the Lonely One again! He couldn't deny a thrill of admiration as he realized the black ship must have threaded its way entirely through the Kennison Group! Well, he would not lose it again. It was still out of beam range but he should be able to keep it centered in his V-panel.

Skeel threw over the lever feeding his tubes full blast. He exulted at the new fierce surge of power as his ship leaped ahead. But this time the Lonely One didn't try to outrace him! The black ship came nearer and nearer. Skeel's eyes narrowed. The pirate was supposed to have a much

faster ship than his! Could this be some trick? He twisted the magnifying dial again, bringing his quarry more sharply into focus.

Then Skeel laughed aloud, laughed exultantly as he saw the reason for the other's lack of speed. The black cruiser was limping along on but four rocket tubes! Two other tubes, on the starboard side, were smashed and mangled hopelessly. Apparently the pirate hadn't come through that asteroid swarm unscathed after all!

THIS was the break for which Skeel had been waiting. Calmly now with deadly precision he sighted his forward electro-gun control. His fingers leaped to the distance gauge and set the charge to its fullest power. He heard the increasing whine of the coils. Still his gaze was riveted on the V-panel dial, watching the rapidly diminishing distance. Two hundred miles. One hundred. Fifty. There! Electrobeams were deadly at that distance. He glanced at the sights, saw they were perfect... and depressed the forward electro-button.

A crackling, radiant blue beam lashed from the prow of his craft and seemed to uncoil across the miles of space. Simultaneously a little bubble of color leaped backward from the pirate cruiser. Swift as light it came, expanding into a huge sphere of crimson. Skeel's electro-beam struck the sphere. It burst in a coruscating riot of writhing sparks that leaped back along the beam, devouring it hungrily.

Skeel's hand darted out to shut off the power. It was too late. The electro-gun coils burst from their housing in a shower of incandescent wire and metal, as a strong smell of ozone pervaded the ship. Skeel cursed in pain, clapping a hand to his arm where a white-hot strand of wire had struck.

"So that's that!" he gritted fiercely. "Not close enough yet to use the Tynyte bombs." There was nothing to do now but continue the chase, and Skeel saw that it wouldn't last long. Indirectly ahead was a bright dot of sunlight which must have been an asteroid of considerable size.

The pirate ship was veering, limping toward it on crippled rockets. Skeel followed, closing in fast. He was sure of his quarry now! When it came to close combat on these big rocks, he was a past master.

The rock loomed up. It was a big one all right, nearly twenty miles in diameter with dangerous plateaus and ugly serrated cliffs reaching up. The pirate seemed in pell-mell panic now. The black ship swung in perilously near, made one complete circuit of the rock and landed on a tiny plateau with a shallow sweep that must have sheared part of the under-hull away! Skeel brought his own cruiser down with ease, several hundred yards distant.

Even as he was adjusting his helmet and gravity plates, he glimpsed a space-suited figure leaping away from the black ship. Skeel exited quickly, snatched out his electro-pistol and took careful aim. He fired.

The distance was a little too great. The beam hacked down, cutting a shallow path in the rock immediately behind the running figure. The figure looked back but didn't stop running. Skeel grunted and went leaping after it in long swinging strides. He was very casual and confident now. This was all so familiar....

Familiar? It was too darned familiar! Skeel stopped and shielded his eyes against the surface glare of sunlight. He stared at the low line of cliffs toward which the figure was running. A strange, insistent hammering seemed to pound away at Skeel's brain. And then, with a little thrill he knew! This was the same asteroid where he had chased his last quarry, in circumstances very similar to this! Those might be the very cliffs where he had killed young—what was his name? Didn't matter now.

Skeel leaped forward again. For a moment he kept the figure in sight, then it seemed to dissolve in the sunlight and disappear. That puzzled him, until he came very close and saw a little cave mouth in the bosom of the cliff. It was there his quarry had fled. Skeel chuckled deep in his throat. He loosened the gun in his belt. Swell! It was as good as over

now. Whenever he got this close to the victim he stuck with it to the finish.

SKEEL stood just within the darkened cave, listening, pistol clutching in his corded hand. A narrow passage seemed to lead slightly downward. Far along it he saw a dim light glow that was not sunlight.

He made his way carefully toward that phenomenon. Soon the sides of the rocky cave were sprinkled with little flat creatures about the size of a silver dollar. They were miniature beacons, exuding light through their tenuous, transparent surfaces! Yet it wasn't phosphorescence Skeel stopped to examine one of them. It was more like actual sunlight, but there was no heat. He touched one of them gingerly, the light immediately went out and it became the same gray color of the stone to which it clung.

Skeel plunged on. Soon the walls became thick with the blazing things. But as he ran by, the vibration of his leaden shoes seemed to frighten them. They blinked off, huge patches of them, remaining gray and quiescent 'til he had passed. Then they came on again. As a result he was running in a constant little patch of darkness, with light ahead and light behind, but always darkness where the reverberation of his pounding feet frightened the button-lichen things.

The tunnel turned and twisted, and several other large ones branched from it. There was no further sight of his quarry. Skeel moved more slowly now. He clicked on his helmet radio but heard no sound of receding feet. Nevertheless he knew his quarry had passed this way not many minutes before, because a few of the light-creatures ahead of him were blinking on again laggardly. Grim-lipped now, a weapon in hand, Skeel pressed on a little more slowly and watched and listened.

He stopped in a dim little grotto where three tunnel mouths gaped. He hesitated, then chose the tunnel to the left and proceeded along it with infinite caution. Still there was no sign his quarry had come this way.

Skeel suddenly realized he had acted with foolhardy recklessness. This might be a trap! He started to turn back. "Stand right where you are!"

THE words rasped through his helmet phones and echoed in his ears. Something jabbed into his ribs with a viciousness that made him grunt.

Skeel slowly raised his arms but the voice rasped again:

"Don't raise your hands! Drop them to your side. Slowly! That's it. Now drop your gun."

Skeel did so. The figure behind him swooped and picked it up.

"Now you can turn around."

Skeel did that too, then expressed himself in three thunderous words. "Blazes! A female!"

"Sure. But don't let it give you ideas." She stepped back a pace keeping the two pistols carefully centered on him.

"A trick!" bellowed Skeel. "This is Anders' work, I might have known it!"

"No. It's my work." Her voice was soft in the phones and her smile beneath the helmet was hardly a smile; it showed teeth, but they were no more gleaming than the ice-hard gleam in her blue eyes. "My work," she repeated. "And now that you know I'm not the Lonely One, I shall tell you who I really am. The name's Nadia Miller."

She saw the dawn of realization in his eyes.

"Miller," she said again slowly, savoring the word. "My brother was Arnold Miller—the man you killed."

"Look here, Miss Miller, I'm afraid you've got this figured out wrong. I knew your brother, sure. I was after him. But I didn't kill him, he fell off—"

"He fell off a cliff. I don't doubt it, after you got through with him." She gestured imperatively with the gun in her right hand. "All right, walk ahead of me. Move!"

Skeel shrugged and obeyed, watching the clusters of light-creatures blink off at the reverberation of their steps. For five minutes they continued in silence, in their continuous little patch of darkness. They made several turns as the tunnel angled sharply.

Finally Skeel said: "Where are you taking me?"

"Out to your Patrol cruiser. There you'll sign a written confession or I'll kill you. I almost hope you'll refuse to sign it."

"We won't get out of here at this rate! I'm afraid you made a wrong turn to the left back there."

"I don't think so. Just keep moving, because if I bump into you one of these pistols might go off."

SKEEL cursed but kept moving, because she sounded as though she meant it.

"That was a neat trick of yours," he said, "coming clear through that rogue group of asteroids."

"I thought so. Of course, I hoped you'd follow me and never come out of there."

"Kind of a risky chance to take, wasn't it?"

"It was worth it—even if it didn't work out."

"I don't think this'll work out either. We're going in the wrong direction, back into the cliff instead of out."

"Just keep moving."

They walked on.

She called a stop at the next intersection, where a much narrower passage came into theirs at a sharp angle. She hesitated, looking around.

"I told you," Skeel chuckled.

"You're lost. You made two wrong turns, but luckily for us I noticed them. Want me to go back and show you?"

"No! Keep moving straight ahead." She didn't sound very confident.

This time Skeel didn't move. "Listen," he said grimly. "Do you realize it'll soon be night out there? Maybe it's come already!"

"Well?"

"Well!" he repeated in amazement, whirling to face her in the dim light. "Do you mean to say you aren't familiar with a night on an asteroid? Especially a lone one this big?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when night comes on these big rocks, strange things come out to greet it; creatures that stir and scramble out of the crevices, tentacular things that hate the sunlight but come out in the dark and are plenty dangerous! Usually the dark side of an asteroid is thick with 'em. This is one such asteroid. I've been here before."

"You can't frighten me." But her little gasp belied the words. "Anyway, I've made up my mind. We'll wait until morning."

Now he laughed. "Morning? That'll be ten hours from now. This planet has a very slow axial rotation. Know how much oxygen we have left in these tanks? About four hours' worth. We haven't time to stand here talking. I'm going to try to make it back out to the cruiser. You can do as you please."

Ignoring the weapons in her hands, Skeel strode past her. She hesitated a split second, then followed. She knew he was right about the oxygen, but wondered how much of the rest he was making up, trying to trick her. Anyway, so long as she still had the weapons....

SKEEL had been right. He made several turns and the route led gradually upward. She felt foolish for not having thought of that herself. Presently Skeel called:

"There we are!"

Peering past him, she glimpsed a little circle of light that was the cave entrance. Skeel raced forward. She quickly followed. The entrance loomed before them, but they stopped abruptly. Between them and the outside surface was a dark stretch of tunnel. Beyond it they could plainly see the wide rocky terrain, and the bluish-silver glint of the Patrol cruiser resting in pale sunlight. But night had already come. The ebon shadow of the cliff was creeping slowly out, swallowing up everything. It had almost reached the cruiser.

"It's too late," Skeel groaned. "We're stuck here now!"

She suddenly knew there was no trickery in this. "There's still time! Run for it!"

"No!... Mechanically Skeel's hand darted out to stop her. But already she was past him, hurrying down the last part of the tunnel.

Skeel followed slowly, knowing she wouldn't go far. His sharp eyes had glimpsed something she had not yet seen; shapeless, writhing masses surging toward them in the darkness. He was right behind her when she screamed. Several tenacular things had reared up to claw blindly at her face-plate. She screamed, staggered backward into Skeel and half raised her hand holding an electro-pistol. But before she could fire, her legs seemed turned into rubber and she fainted in a heap at Skeel's feet.

"Thought so," Skeel grunted. "You can only go so far on raw nerve, then it lets you down." He dragged her back several yards into the artificial light. Her hands still held tightly to the pistols. Skeel smiled grimly, reached slowly down and took both weapons.

SHE swam up out of a sea of darkness.

A blaze of light hurt her eyes. Sitting up, she saw she was still in the cave, at a place where the button-light creatures were thickest.

A short distance away at the edge of the darkness Skeel was crouched, peering. Presently he came back to her.

"Hello, Miller. I was just taking a survey of our little pets out there. The place is lousy with 'em but don't worry, they won't come too near this light." She got to her feet hurriedly and eyed the two weapons in his belt. "I might have known you'd take advantage—"

"What do you expect? I can't afford to be running around on an asteroid with an armed woman at my heels."

She looked past him into the darkness. "Doesn't look as if we're going to do any more running."

"That's right, lady, it doesn't. We're in a pretty bad spot." He drew one of the pistols. "So you may as well have this." He tossed it to her and she caught it deftly.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "Now how do you know I won't kill you with it? That's what I came out here to do, you know."

"Uh-huh, but you won't. Know why? The vibration of that beam would turn out every light in this cave, and the night things would come rushing in."

She nodded, knowing he was perfectly right. "Stalemate, is it? Okay, Jim Skeel. But if we never get out of here I shall kill you at the very last moment. I'll never let those night beasts deprive me of the pleasure."

Skeel grinned. She was getting her nerve back again! The more he saw of this girl the more he liked her. He liked the determined curve of her orchid-pale chin, the tight slash of her lips and the courage that gleamed behind a false hardness in her eyes. He shrugged. "Four more hours of oxygen. I suggest you regulate the flow to two-thirds and breathe shallowly. That'll give you a few hours more," he spoke quietly.

"No. If I can't find a way out of here in four hours— Well, I won't sit here and wait for the end. I'm going to explore. Coming?"

"I guess so," Skeel agreed. "Not that I think we'll find another exit, for we won't. But walking helps me to think, and I know there must be a way out of this!"

CHAPTER IV

THEY walked side by side in silence, entered joining tunnels and adjacent caves but were careful to remember the way back. Everywhere the walls were lighted by the button-creatures but

nowhere was there an entrance to the outside. Not that it would do them any good. They both realized that now. The night horrors would be out there everywhere, waiting for new victims.

"You said walking helped you to think,' 'she said dully. "Are you thinking?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

He stopped, turned suddenly to face her. She was startled by a new perplexed look on his face.

"I've been thinking things over from the beginning," Skeel said gruffly "You say you came out here to kill me. You've had plenty of chance."

"But I didn't, and you can't understand it. There is a code, after all. I understand now what Commander Anders meant." She spoke softly, almost to herself. They walked in silence for a minute then she added as an afterthought:

"You had your chance, too. Back there when I fainted—"

"Do you think," Skeel almost snarled, "I'd fire an electro-beam here in the caves, where these light-creatures mean our very lives?"

"There are other ways" She looked steadily at him. "You might have opened all my oxygen tanks."

"Didn't think of it." He turned his face away abruptly. "Quit bothering me, I'm still trying to think."

"You can think later," she was insistent. "Tell me one thing, Skeel. What made you turn killer? You once had the best record in the Patrol!"

"I'm still the best man in the Patrol!"

"No you're not, Skeel."

"Damn you, I—" He stopped.

Then in a voice scarcely audible: "I have a reason. I've never told my story to anyone."

"You almost told Anders. I was in his office that day."

"Anders is a fool!"

"I'd like you to tell me." There was a way she said it, a certain tone in her voice that hinted of feeling. Perhaps even, of understanding.

HE was suddenly speaking, pouring out his story in a fierce rush, of words as if he wanted to finish before that awful throbbing pain came again.

"It was in the early days when the Mars mines were opening. Lawless, bloody days. The Patrol received news that a freighter was being looted just a few hours from Earth. We got out there fast—too fast. Sixteen of us. The pirates hadn't yet left the drifting hulk. We walked into an ambush and there was nothing to do but give up without a struggle. They removed our weapons, then without warning began burning us down with electros. I dropped and played dead, while all about me my friends were really dying! It was all over in seconds, but I can still hear their dying screams and the hiss of the electros.

"I think something snapped inside of me. I was in a mental hospital for days. When I came out I swore a terrible oath. I swore to avenge my fifteen friends, to the last man! Any criminal would serve the purpose. There was a bitter hatred in me for all of them. I guess you know the rest. Since then I've always worked alone, and I've never given any

criminal quarter. I've killed, yes. Fourteen times. I've almost reached my goal!"

He stopped, and her eyes were steadily upon him. "But will that be the end, Jim Skeel?"

He didn't answer.

"I remember something Anders said that day—"

"I remember it too!" he whispered. "God knows I remember, and it's haunted me ever since. He said any normal man would squirm at the thing I'd done! Your brother, Miss Miller— he was innocent—but God help me, I feel no remorse! For the very first time, this thing frightens me!"

He expected her to answer—to say something, anything — but she was silent. For a long time Skeel sat motionless on the floor of the cave, fists pressed hard against his temples.

Nadia glanced up at the little dial above her eyes, inside the oxygen helmet. "Less than three hours now," she announced.

Skeel rose to his feet. "Come on," he said calmly. "I know the way out now."

"Out of these caves, do you mean?" Again her eyes were upon him steadily, those blue eyes that held something less than a crystal hardness now.

Skeel looked away. "Yes," he said. "Yes, that's what I mean."

THEY WALKED back to the cave entrance where the darkness surged in. But Skeel stopped just short of it. Approaching the cave wall, he touched one of the button-creatures. Instantly its light went out.

Slowly, gingerly he detached it from the wall. It was rather gelatinous, he noticed, but was equipped with tiny, barely discernible sucker-cups.

Holding the grayish thing in his hand, Skeel approached Nadia and reached out toward her space-suited figure. She shrank back with a little shudder of loathing.

"Hold still!" Skeel demanded. "It's not going to hurt you, and it may save your life!"

He placed it on her shoulder where it remained quiescent for about ten seconds. Then it changed into a little disk of light again, like a miniature beacon.

"You see, it works! I should have thought of this before. Walk around! Your natural stride."

Nadia walked. At her second step the thing blinked off. She waited until it came on again, then carefully tip-toed around the cave. This time the creature's light stayed on.

Skeel nodded. "This isn't going to be fun, but it's the only way! We've got to plaster each other with those things until we become walking pillars of light! Then we'll tip-toe out through the darkness, through those slinking nightmare things until we reach my cruiser. It'll be an ordeal, agony. Think you can do it, Miller?"

She nodded, suppressing a shudder at the thought of those gelatinous blobs covering her body.

"All right," Skeel said. "You go to work on me first. Place them on my arms, shoulders and torso. But cover every inch! The more light we have, the easier we'll get through those beasts out there."

She went to work, biting her lip every time she touched one of the light-creatures; but before she was through, she had overcome her

repugnance. Skeel was soon bathed in a brilliant white halo from the waist up.

"I think I know the secret of these things," Skeel said as he busied himself decorating her. They must come out onto the surface when the sun is there. They store up enough light energy to last them through the dark period. Somehow they assimilate the heat energy. This is cold light." As a finishing touch he placed some of the things in a little crown of light around her helmet.

"Now for the real test," he pronounced grimly. "We'll walk side by side. Don't get nervous, Miller, and above all walk slowly, on tip-toe. If these things go out, it's our finish!"

Like figures in a slow-motion film they moved across the cave toward the outer darkness.

IMMEDIATELY they knew it was going to be a nightmare of agony. The wall of night seemed to flutter before them and then recede. Receding with the darkness, too, were half-seen grayish shapes close to the ground. But behind and all around them the darkness closed in again. The night creatures closed in too, staying just beyond the little circle of light.

Their tentacles were long and sensitive and reached in close to the ground where the light hardly shone. One of them whipped against Skeel's ankles, and he felt the strength of it. He heard Nadia gasp and knew the same thing had happened to her. But they didn't stop in their slow, tip-toeing stride.

"Steady!" he warned. "Once we get outside maybe they won't be so thick."

In a few minutes that seemed like hours, they were outside and could see the glint of stars against a cobalt sky. They paused to rest. Their

eyes were becoming used to the dark and they could see hordes of the grayish night things surging in toward them.

"Afraid I was wrong," Skeel murmured. "They're worse out here."

"Just so they keep their distance," Nadia shuddered. "If they come any closer, I—I might get panicky and run for it."

"You'd never make it," he warned. They moved on, careful step by step, pushing the darkness back. They made nearly half the distance before their tired muscles forced them to rest again. The surging shapes seemed to be getting bolder. Skeel could feel them all around his feet now. He had to fight the impulse to run, to kick out at them, anything to keep them away. Instead, he bent slowly, reaching out with his blazing arms. The shapes retreated momentarily.

"Afraid we'd better not rest any more," he said. "Come on, we'll try to make it to the cruiser this time." They could see the dark, looming shape of it perhaps a hundred yards away. It seemed like a hundred miles.

Once his left arm bumped into her. Every light-creature on that side blinked off. In about ten seconds they came on again, as he held his arm motionless. He moved a little away, turned his head and looked at her. She was staring straight ahead. He saw her profile beneath the little halo of light around her helmet; that light enhanced every taut little muscle in her face, and Skeel suddenly realized her face was never meant to be drawn up into such a tight, grim mask. She was going along on raw nerve again. Skeel swore softly beneath his breath, marveling at her.

Strange, too, how swiftly and clearly he could think in all this nightmare slowness and blackness. He had never seen things so clearly before. Never—

His mind came back abruptly as something whipped around his ankles. His feet seemed caught in a net of lashing, spiked tentacles! Slowly,

with some effort, he managed to disentangle himself. He took another step forward. His foot came down on something soft and squirmy which lashed up at him. He took a hasty step backward, lost his footing and fell prone in utter darkness as every light-button on him blinked out.

FOR a single horrified instant Nadia stood there, despite the tentacles moving around her own feet.

"Keep going!" Skeel grated from the darkness where he lay. "You can make it now, don't mind me!"

But she didn't move, except to lean far over in Skeel's direction. Slowly she lowered herself, so that her entire light-glowing body almost covered his. All the buttons on her right arm blinked out as her hand touched the ground with a slight jar. She prayed that the pounding of her heart wouldn't cause the others to go out! Tensely she propped herself there, scarcely breathing, watching the dim lashing horrors. A dozen tentacles seemed to come from one central body. At the end of each tentacle was a bulbous thing with wiry, waving antennae, and below the antennae were gaping slashes that opened and closed and might have been lips.

With sickening horror she saw some of the bulbous things pounding at Skeel's face-plate. Others tore at his fabricoid suit. Slowly she shifted her weight, brought her left arm around and moved it toward them. The things retreated from the light slowly. Seconds later Skeel's own light-buttons began flashing on, and he rose gingerly to his feet.

Nadia saw that his face was white. For a moment he stood quite still and stared at her. "That does it," he muttered, but she didn't know what he meant. Carefully now she forged her way ahead. Skeel moved too, ever more slowly, staying always behind her.

The cruiser was scarcely fifty feet ahead, and she had almost reached it. It was now or never, Skeel knew. She would gain the cruiser and blast back to Ceres Base. He had told her his story, confessed to being a killer—the killer of fourteen men! She would take that story back to Ceres Base and they would believe her. There was only one thing to do.

Her voice came to him just then. "Hurry! I think you can run and make it now!"

"No, there's not any hurry. Not now, Miller."

She must have detected some strange note in his voice. She looked back just as he was drawing the electro from his belt. Carefully he raised his arm in a straight line.

Skeel saw the sudden startled look on her white face, he saw her mouth open, but she did not have time to speak.

"I guess this is it, Miller! Number fifteen!" He pulled the trigger and the electro hissed its flame.

THE men at Ceres Base stood in excited little groups near the dome air-lock. Every eye was on the gigantic V-panel that reflected the tiny speck far out in space that was curving in toward them. A solo cruiser, yes—but which one? The black one the girl had used? Or would this be Skeel returning from another of his murderous missions? Every man there knew about the plot by now.

Anders stood there now, his face a picture of conflicting emotions. A thousand times he had blamed himself for allowing Nadia Miller to go out on that crazy mission! He had lived through a thousand agonies of waiting.

The dot grew larger in the Visipanel and resolved at last into the bluish-silver cruiser of the Space Patrol. Anders' face went suddenly white,

then a fever of fury burned through him. If this was Skeel— If Nadia didn't come back—

Minutes later the blue and silver cruiser neared the dome. The lock automatically opened. It swept gracefully in, and powerful magniplates brought it to rest. A figure climbed wearily out and walked toward the men.

"Nadia!" Anders cried, and leaped forward eagerly to help her out of the space suit. "Are you all right? What about Skeel?"

She smiled at him. "Jim Skeel won't come back." Quickly she related the story of the caves and the light-button creatures and their perilous path through the night beasts toward the cruiser.

"Skeel was a changed man in those final minutes," she explained. "He must have known what he was going to do—what he had to do. It was all so deliberate. I had almost reached the cruiser, not realizing he was so far behind me. I turned just in time to see him raise the weapon. He called, 'Number fifteen!' Then he fired."

"Fired at you?" Anders was puzzled.

"No. I thought he meant to. But the beam didn't come within twenty feet of me. He merely fired at random, and instantly all the light-things on him went out. Then I—I could see those horrible night beasts rushing in—from all sides—waves of them—" She buried her face in her hands, trying to shut out the memory.

"The electro-beam," Anders said musingly. "Yes, that would do it. You fire one of those pistols, especially full power, and it sends a slight electric shock all through you. But Skeel knew that! Why did he do it? If it was to save you, now, I might understand; but you say you had already gained the ship—"

"To save me?" Nadia murmured. "No. I think it was to save himself."

Anders still looked a little puzzled. "But what about your brother? Did Skeel confess anything?"

She looked up and her eyes were shining, but she was not crying. Within her was only a vast, singing quiet too deep for tears.

"My brother, Commander? When you enter that case into the records you might say—you may say, Commander, that my brother was killed when he fell off a cliff."

The End

Defense Mech

Planet Stories (1946)

Halloway stared down at Earth, and his brain tore loose and screamed, Man, man, how'd you get in a mess like this, 1st a rocket a million miles past the moon, shooting for Mars and danger and terror and maybe death.

OH, MY GOD, do you realize how far from Earth we are? Do you really think about it? It's enough to scare the guts from a man. Hold me up. Do something. Give me sedatives or hold my hand or run call mama. A million cold miles up. See all the flickering stars? Look at my hands tremble. Feel my heart whirling like a hot pinwheel!

The captain comes toward me, a stunned expression on his small, tight face. He takes my arm, looking into my eyes. Hello, captain. I'm sick, if that's what you want to know. I've a right to be scared—just look at all that space! Standing here a moment ago, I stared down at Earth so round and cloud-covered and asleep on a mat of stars, and my brain tore loose and screamed, man, man, how'd you get in a mess like this,

in a rocket a million miles past the moon, shooting for Mars with a crew of fourteen others! I can hardly stand up, my knees, my hands, my heart, are shaking apart. Hold me up, sir.

What are hysterics like? The captain unprongs the inter-deck audio and speaks swiftly, scowling, into it. I hope he's phoning the psychiatrist. I need something. Oh, dammit, dammit!

The psychiatrist descends the ladder in immaculate salt-white uniform and walks toward me in a dream. Hello, doctor. You're the one for me. Please, sir, turn this damned rocket around and fly back to New York. I'll go crazy with all this space and distance!

The psychiatrist and the captain's voices murmur and blend, with here and there an emphasis, a toss of head, a gesture:

"Young Halloway here's on a fear-jag, doctor. Can you help him?"

"I'll try. Good man, Halloway is. Imagine you'll need him and his muscles when we land."

"With the crew as small as it is, every man's worth his weight in uranium. He's got to be cured."

The psychiatrist shakes his head.

"Might have to squirt him full of drugs to keep him quiet the rest of the expedition."

The captain explodes, saying that is impossible. Blood drums in my head. The doctor moves closer, smelling clean, sharp and white.

"Please, understand, captain, this man is definitely psychotic about going home. His talk is almost a reversion to childhood. I can't refuse his demands, and his fear seems too deeply based for reasoning. However, I think I've an idea. Halloway?" Yes, sir? Help me, doctor. I want to go home. I want to see popcorn exploding into a buttered

avalanche inside a glass cube, I want to roller skate, I want to climb into the old cool wet ice-wagon and go chikk-chikk-chikk on the ice with a sharp pick, I want to take long sweating hikes in the country, see big brick buildings and bright-faced people, fight the old gang, anything but this—awful!

The psychiatrist rubs his chin.

"All right, son. You can go back to Earth, now, tonight."

Again the captain explodes.

"You can't tell him that. We're landing on Mars today!"

The psychiatrist pats down the captain patiently.

"Please, captain. Well, Halloway, back to New York for you. How does it sound?"

"I'm not not so scared now. We're going down on the moving ladder and here is the psychiatrist's cubicle.

He's pouring lights into my eyes. They revolve like stars on a disc. Lots of strange machines around, attachments to my head, my ears, Sleepy, Oh, so sleepy. Like under warm water. Being pushed around. Laved. Washed. Quiet. Oh, gosh. Sleepy.

"—listen to me, Halloway—"

Sleepy. Doctor's talking. Very soft, like feathers. Soft, soft.

"—you're going to land on earth. No matter what they tell you, you're landing on Earth... no matter what happens you'll be on Earth... everything you see and do will be like on earth... remember that... remember that... you won't be afraid because you'll be on Earth... remember that... over and over... you'll land on Earth in an hour... home... home again... no matter what anyone says...."

Oh, yes, sir, home again. Sleepy. Home again. Drifting, sleeping, oh thank you, sir, thank you from the bottom of my drowsy, sleepy soul. Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Sleepy. Drifting.

I'M AWAKE!

Hey, everybody, come look! Here comes Earth! Right at us, like a green moss ball off a bat! Coming at us on a curve!

"Check stations! Mars landing!"

"Get into bulgers! Test atmosphere!"

Get into your what did he say?

"Your baseball uniform, Halloway. Your baseball uniform."

Yes, sir. My baseball uniform. Where'd I put it? Over here. Head into, legs into, feet into it. There. Ha, this is great! Pitch her in here, old boy, old boy! Smack! Yow!

Yes, sir, it's over in that metal locker. I'll take it out. Head, arms, legs into it— I'm dressed. Baseball uniform. Ha! This is great! Pitch 'er in here, ole boy, ole boy! Smack! Yow!

"Adjust bulger helmets, check oxygen." What?

"Put on your catcher's mask, Halloway."

Oh. The mask slides down over my face. Like that. The captain comes rushing up, eyes hot green and angry.

"Doctor, what's this infernal nonsense?"

"You wanted Halloway able to do his work, didn't you, captain?"

"Yes, but what in hell've you done to him?"

Strange. As they talk, I hear their words flow over my head like a wave dashed on a sea-stone, but the words drain off, leaving no imprint. As soon as some words invade my head, something eats and digests them and I think the words are something else entirely.

The psychiatrist nods at me.

"I couldn't change his basic desire. Given time, yes, a period of months, I could have. But you need him now. So, against all the known ethics of my profession, which say one must never lie to a patient, I've followed along in his own thought channel. I didn't dare frustrate him. He wanted to go home, so I let him. I've given him a fantasy. I've set up a protective defense mechanism in his mind that refuses to believe certain realities, that evaluates all things from its own desire for security and home. His mind will automatically bloc any thought or image that endangers that security."

The captain stares wildly.

"Then, then Halloway's insane!"

"Would you have him mad with fear, or able to work on Mars hindered by only a slight 'tetched' condition? Coddle him and he'll do fine. Just remember, we're landing on Earth, not Mars."

"Earth, Mars, you'll have me raving next!"

The doctor and the captain certainly talk weirdly. Who cares? Here comes Earth! Green, expanding like a moist cabbage underfoot!

"Mars landing! Air-lock opened! Use bulger oxygen."

Here we go, gang! Last one out is a pink chimpanzee!

"Halloway, come back, you damn fool! You'll kill yourself!"

Feel the good sweet Earth! Home again! Praise the Lord! Let's dance, sing off-key, laugh! Ha! Oh, boy!

In the door of the house stands the captain, his face red and wrinkled, waving his fists.

"Halloway, come back! Look behind you, you fool!"

I whirl about and cry out, happily. Shep! Shep, old dog! He comes running to meet me, long fur shining amber in the sunshine. Barking. Shep, I haven't seen you in years. Good old pooch. Come 'ere, Shep. Let me pet you.

The captain shrieks:

"Don't pet it! It looks like a carnivorous Martian worm. Man, the jaws on that thing! Halloway, use your knife!"

Shep snarls and shows his teeth. Shep, what's wrong? That's no way to greet me. Come on, Shep. Hey! I pull back my fingers as his swift jaws snap. Shep circles me, swiftly. You haven't rabies, have you? Shep? He darts in, snatches my ankle with strong, locking white teeth! Lord, Shep, you're crazy! I can't let this go on. And you used to be such a fine, beautiful dog. Remember all the hikes we took into the lazy corn country, by the red barns and deep wells? Shep clenches tight my ankle. I'll give him one more chance. Shep, let go! Where did this long knife come from in my hand, like magic? Sorry to do this, Shep, but—there!

Shep screams, thrashing, screams again. My arm pumps up and down, my gloves are freckled with blood-flakes.

Don't scream, Shep. I said I was sorry, didn't I?

"Get out there, you men, and bury that beast immediately."

I glare at the captain. Don't talk that way about Shep.

The captain stares at my ankle.

"Sorry, Halloway. I meant, bury that 'dog,' you men. Give him full honors. You were lucky, son, another second and those knife-teeth'd bored through your ankle-cuff metal."

I don't know what he means. I'm wearing sneakers, sir.

"Oh, yeah, so you are. Yeah. Well, I'm sorry, Halloway. I know how you must feel about—Shep. He was a fine dog."

I think about it a moment and my eyes fill up, wet.

THERE'LL be a picnic and a hike; the captain says. Three hours now the boys have carried luggage from the metal house. The way they talk, this'll be some picnic. Some seem afraid, but who worries about copperheads and water-moccasins and crawfish? Not me. No, sir. Not me.

Gus Bartz, sweating beside me on some apparatus, squints at me.

"What's eatin' you, Halloway?"

I smile. Me? Nothing. Why?

"You and that act with that Martian worm."

What're you talking about? What worm?

The captain interrupts, nervously.

"Bartz, lay off Halloway. The doctor'll explain why. Ask him."

Bartz goes away, scratching his head.

The captain pats my shoulder.

"You're our strong-arm man, Halloway. You've got muscles from working on the rocket engines. So keep alert today, eh, on your hike to look over the territory? Keep your—b.b. gun—ready."

Beavers, do you think, sir?

The captain swallows, hard and blinks. "Unh—oh, beavers, yeah, beavers. Sure. Beavers! Maybe. Mountain lions and Indians, too, I hear. Never can tell. Be careful."

Mountain lions and Indians in New York in this day and age? Aw, sir.

"Let it go. Keep alert, anyhow. Smoke?" I don't smoke, sir. A strong mind in a healthy body, you know the old rule.

"The old rule. Oh, yes. The old rule. Only joking. I don't want a smoke anyway. Like hell."

What was that last, sir?

"Nothing, Halloway, carry on, carry on."

I help the others work, now. Are we taking the yellow streetcar to the edge of town, Gus?

"We're using propulsion belts, skimming low over the dead seas."

How's that again, Gus?

"I said, we're takin' the yellow streetcar to the end of the line, yeah."

We're ready. Everyone's packed, spreading out. We're going in groups of four. Down Main Street past the pie factory, over the bridge, through

the tunnel, past the circus grounds and we'll rendezvous, says the captain, at a place he points to on a queer, disjointed map.

Whoosh! We're off! I forgot to pay my fare.

"That's okay, I paid it"

Thanks, captain. We're really traveling. The cypresses and the maples flash by. Kaawhoom! I wouldn't admit this to anyone but you, sir, but momentarily, there,

I didn't see this street-car. Suddenly we moved in empty space, nothing supporting us, and I didn't see any car. But now I see it, sir.

The captain gazes at me as at a nine-day miracle.

"You do, eh?"

Yes, sir. I clutch upward. Here's the strap. I'm holding it.

"You look pretty funny sliding through the air with your hand up like that, Halloway."

How's that, sir?

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Why are the others laughing at me, sir?

"Nothing, son, nothing. Just happy, that's all."

Ding Ding. Ding Ding. Canal Street and Washington. Ding Ding. Whoosh. This is real traveling. Funny, though, the captain and his men keep moving, changing seats, never stay seated. It's a long street-car. I'm way in back now. They're up front.

By the large brown house on the next corner stands a popcorn wagon, yellow and red and blue. I can taste the popcorn in my mind. It's been a long time since I've eaten some... if I ask the captain's permission to stop and buy a bag, he'll refuse. I'll just sneak off the car at the next stop. I can get back on the next car and catch up with the gang later.

HOW do you stop this car? My fingers fumble with my baseball outfit, doing something I don't want to know about. The car is stopping! Why's that. Popcorn is more important.

I'm off the car, walking. Here's the popcorn machine with a man behind it, fussing with little silver metal knobs.

"—muurr—lokk—loc—cor—iz—"

Tony! Tony, bambino! What are you doing here?

"Click."

It can't be, but it is. Tony, who died ten long years ago, when I was a freckled kid! Alive and selling popcorn again. Oh, Tony, it's good to see you. His black moustache's so waxed, so shining, his dark hair like burnt oily shavings, his dark shining happy eyes, his smiling red cheeks! He shimmers in my eyes like in a cold rain. Tony! Let me shake your hand! Gimme a bag of popcorn, senior!

"Click-click-click—sput-click—reeeeee-eeeeeeee—"

The captain didn't see you, Tony, you were hidden so well, only I saw you. Just a moment while I search for my nickel.

"Reeeeeee."

Whew, I'm dizzy. It's very hot. My heads spins like a leaf on a storm wind. Let me hold onto your wagon, Tony, quick, I'm shivering and I've got sharp needle head pains...

"Reeeeeeeee."

I'm running a temperature. I feel as if I have a torch hung flaming in my head.

Hotter. Pardon me for criticizing you, Tony, but I think it's your popper turned up too high. Your face looks afraid, contorted, and your hands move so rapidly, why? Can't you shut it off? I'm hot. Everything melts. My knees sag.

Warmer still. He'd better turn that thing off, I can't take any more. I can't find my nickel anyhow. Please, snap it off, Tony, I'm sick. My uniform glows orange. I'll take fire!

Here, I'll turn it off for you, Tony.

You hit me!

Stop hitting me, stop clicking those knobs! It's hot, I tell you. Stop, or I'll— Tony. Where are you? Gone.

Where did that purple flame shoot from? That loud blast, what was it? The flame seemed to stream from my hand, out of my scout flashlight. Purple flame—eating! I smell a sharp bitter odor.

Like hamburger fried overlong.

I feel better now. Cool as winter. But— Like a fly buzzing in my ears, a voice comes, faint, far off.

"Halloway, damn it, Halloway, where are you?"

Captain! It's his voice, sizzling. I don't see you, sir!

"Halloway, we're on the dead sea bottom near an ancient Martian city and—oh, never mind, dammit, if you hear me, press your boyscout badge and yell!"

I press the badge intensely, sweating. Hey, captain!

"Halloway! Glory. You're not dead. Where are you?"

I stopped for popcorn, sir. I can't see you. How do I hear you?

"It's an echo. Let it go. If you're okay, grab the next streetcar."

That's very opportune. Because here comes a big red streetcar now, around the corner of the drug store.

"What!"

Yes, sir, and it's chock full of people. I'll climb aboard.

"Wait a minute! Hold on! Murder! What kind of people, dammit?"

It's the West Side gang. Sure. The whole bunch of tough kids.

"West side gang, hell, those are Martians, get the hell outa there! Transfer to another car—take the subway! Take the elevated!"

Too late. The car's stopped. I'll have to get on. The conductor looks impatient.

"Impatient," he says. "You'll be massacred !"

Oh, oh. Everybody's climbing from the streetcar, looking angry at me. Kelly and Grogan and Tompkins and the others. I guess there'll be a fight.

The captain's voice stabs my ears, but I don't see him anywhere:

"Use your r-gun, your blaster, your blaster. Hell, use your slingshot, or throw spitballs, or whatever the devil you imagine you got holstered there, but use it! Come on, men, about face and back!"

I'm outnumbered. I bet they'll gang me and give me the bumps, the bumps, the bumps. I bet they'll truss me to a maple tree, maple tree, maple tree and tickle me. I bet they'll ink-tattoo their initials on my forehead. Mother won't like this.

The captain's voice opens up louder, driving nearer:

"And Poppa ain't happy! Get outa there, Halloway!"

They're hitting me, sir! We're battling! "Keep it up, Halloway!"

I knocked one down, sir, with an uppercut. I'm knocking another down now. Here goes a third! Someone's grabbed my ankle. I'll kick him! There! I'm stumbling, falling! Lights in my eyes, purple ones, big purple lightning bolts sizzling the air! Three of them vanished, just like that! I think they fell down a manhole.

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt them bad.

They stole my flashlight.

"Get it back, Halloway! We're coming. Get your flash and use it!" That's silly. "Silly," he says. "Silly. Silly."

I GOT my flashlight back, broken, no good. We're wrestling. There are so many of them, I'm weak. They're climbing all over me, hitting. It's not fair, I'm falling down, kicking, screaming!

"Up speed, men, full power!"

They're binding me up. I can't move. They're rushing me into the street-car now. Now I won't be able to go on that hike. And I planned on it so hard, too.

"Here we are, Halloway! Blast 'em, men! Oh, my Lord, look at the horrible faces on those creatures! Guh!"

Watch out, captain! They'll get you, too, and the others! Ahh! Somebody struck me on the back of my head. Darkness. Dark. Dark.

Rockabye baby on the tree-top... when the wind blows...

"Okay, Halloway, any time. Just any old time you want to come to."

Dark. A voice talking. Dark as a whale's insides. Ouch, my head. I'm flat on my back, I can feel rocks under me.

"Good morning, dear Mr. Halloway." That you, captain, over in that dark corner ?

"It ain't the president of the United States!"

Where is this cave?

"Suppose you tell us, you got us into this mess with your eternally blasted popcorn ! Why'd you get off the streetcar ?" Did the West Side gang truss us up like this, captain?

"West Side gang, goh! Those faces, those inhuman, weird, unsavory and horrible faces. All loose-fleshed and—gangrenous. Aliens, the whole rotting clutch of 'em."

What a funny way to talk.

"Listen, you parboiled idiot, in about an hour we're going to be fried, gutted, iced, killed, slaughtered, murdered, we will be, ipso facto, dead. Your 'friends' are whipping up a little blood-letting jamboree. Can't I

shove it through your thick skull, we're on Mars, about to be sliced and hammered by a lousy bunch of Martians!"

"Captain, sir?"

"Yes, Berman?"

"The cave door is opening, sir. I think the Martians are ready to have at us again, sir. Some sort of test or other, no doubt."

"Let go a me, you one-eyed monster! I'm coming, don't push!"

We're outside the cave. They're cutting our bonds. See, captain, they aren't hurting us, after all. Here's the brick alley. There's Mrs. Haight's underwear waving on the clothes-line. See all the people from the beer hall—what're they waiting for?

"To see us die."

"Captain, what's wrong with Halloway, he's acting queer—"

"At least he's better off than us. He can't see these creatures' faces and bodies. It's enough to turn a man's stomach. This must be their amphitheatre. That looks like an obstacle course. I gather from their sign lingo that if we make it through the obstacles, we're free. Footnote: nobody's ever gotten through alive yet. Seems they want you to go first, Berman. Good luck, boy."

"So long, captain. So long, Gus. So long, Halloway."

Berman's running down-alley with an easy, long-muscled stride. I hear him yelling high and clear, even though he's getting far away.

Here comes an automobile!

Berman! Ahh! It hit him! He's fallen!

Berman, get up, get up!

"Stay here, Halloway, it's not your turn yet."

My turn? What do you mean? Someone's gotta help Berman.

"Halloway, come back! Oh, man, I don't want to see this!"

LIFT up my legs, put them down, breathe out, breathe in, swing arms, swing legs, chew my tongue, blink my eyes, Berman, here I come, gee, things are crazy-funny, here comes an ice-wagon trundling along, its coming right at me! I can't see to get around it, it's coming so fast, I'll jump inside it, jump, jump, cool, ice, ice-pick, chikk-chikk-chikk, I hear the captain screaming off a million hot miles gone, chikk-chikk-chikk around the ice perimeter, the ice wagon is thundering, rioting, jouncing, shaking, rolling on big rusty iron wheels, smelling of sour ammonia, bouncing on a corduroy dirt and brick alley-road, the rear end of it seems to be snapping shut with many ice-prongs, I feel intense pain in my left leg, chikk-chikk-chikk-chikk! piece of ice, cold square, cold cube, a shuddering and convulsing, a temblor, the wagon wheels stop rolling, I jump down and run away from the wrecked wagon, did the wagon roll over Berman, I hope not, a fence here, I'll jump over it, another popcorn machine, very warm, very hot, all flame and red fire and burning metal knobs...

Oops, I didn't mean to strike the popcorn man down, hello, Berman, what're you doing in my arms, how'd you get here, did I pick you up, and why? an obstacle race at the high-school? you're heavy, I'm tired, dogs nipping at my heels, how far am I supposed to carry you? I hear the captain screaming me on, for why, for why? Here comes the big bad truant officer with a club in his hand to take me back to school, he looks mean and broad...

I kicked the truant officer's shins and kicked him in the face... Mama won't like that... yes, mommy... no mommy... that's unfair... that's not

ethical fighting... something went squish... hmm... let's forget about it, shall we?

Breathing hard. Here comes the gang after me, all the rough, bristly Irishmen and scarred Norwegians and stubborn Italians... hit, kick, wrestle... here comes a swift car, fast, fast! I hope I can duck, with you, Berman... here comes another car from the opposite way!... if I work things right... uh... stop screaming, Berman!

The cars crashed into each other.

The cars still roll, tumbling, like two animals tearing at each other's throats.

Not far to go now, Berman, to the end of the alley. Just ahead. I'll sleep for forty years when this is over... where'd I get this flashlight in my hand? From one of those guys I knocked down? from the popcorn man? I'll poke it in front of me... people run away... maybe they don't like its light in their eyes... The end of the alley! There's the green valley and my house, and there's Mom and Pop waiting! Hey, let's sing, let's dance, we're going home!

"Halloway, you so-and-so, you did it!"

Dark. Sleep. Wake up slow. Listen.

"—and Halloway ran down that amphitheatre nonchalant as a high-school kid jumping hurdles. A big saffron Martian beast with a mouth so damn big it looked like the rear end of a delivery truck, lunged forward square at Halloway—"

"What'd Halloway do?"

"Halloway jumped right inside the monster's mouth—right inside!"

"What happened then?"

"The animal looked dumbfounded. It tried to spit out. Then, to top it all, what did Halloway do, I ask you, I ask you, what did he do? He drew forth his boy-scout blade and went chikk-chikk-chikk all around the bloody interior, pretending like he's holed up in an ice-wagon, chipping himself off pieces of ice."

"No?"

"On my honor! The monster, after taking a bit of this chikk-chikk-chikk business, leaped around, cavorting, floundering, rocking, tossing, and then, with a spout of blood, out popped Halloway, grinning like a kid, and on he ran, dodging spears and pretending they were pebbles, leaping a line of crouched warriors and saying they're a picket fence. Then he lifted Berman and trotted with him until he met a three hundred pound Martian wrestler. Halloway supposed that it was the truant officer and promptly kicked him in the face. Then he knocked down another guy working furiously at the buttons of a paralysis machine which looked, to Halloway, like a pop-corn wagon! After which two gigantic black Martian leopards attacked, resembling to him nothing more than two very bad drivers in dark automobiles. Halloway sidestepped. The two 'cars' crashed and tore each other apart, fighting. Halloway pumped on, shooting people with his 'flashlight' which he retrieved from the 'popcorn' man. Pointing the flash at people, he was amazed when they vanished and—oh, oh, Halloway's waking up, I saw his eyelids flicker. Quiet, everyone. Halloway, you awake?"

Yeah. I been listening to you talk for five minutes. I still don't understand. Nothing happened at all. How long I been asleep?

"Two days. Nothing happened, eh? Nothing, except you got the Martians kowtowing, that's all, brother. You're spectacular performance impressed people. The enemy suddenly decided that if one earth-man could do what you did, what would happen if a million more came?"

Everybody keeps on with this joking, this lying about Mars. Stop it. Where am I?

"Aboard the rocket, about to take off." Leave Earth? No, no, I don't want to leave Earth, good green Earth! Let go! I'm afraid! Let go of me! Stop the ship!

"Halloway, this is Mars—we're going back to Earth."

Liars, all of you! I don't want to go to Mars, I want to stay here, on Earth!

"Holy cow, here we go again. Hold him down, Gus. Hey, doctor, on the double! Come help Halloway change his mind back, willya!"

Liars! You can't do this! Liars! Liars!

Lorelei of the Red Mist

Planet Stories (1946)

He died—and then awakened in a new body. He found himself on a world of bizarre loveliness, a powerful, rich man. He took pleasure in his turn of good luck... until he discovered that his new body was hated by all on this strange planet, that his soul was owned by Rann, devil-goddess of Falga, who was using him for her own gain.

The Company dicks were good. They were plenty good. Hugh Starke began to think maybe this time he wasn't going to get away with it.

His small stringy body hunched over the control bank, nursing the last ounce of power out of the Kallman. The hot night sky of Venus fled past the ports in tattered veils of indigo. Starke wasn't sure where he was any more. Venus was a frontier planet, and still mostly a big X, except to the Venusians—who weren't sending out any maps. He did know that he was getting dangerously close to the Mountains of White Cloud. The backbone of the planet, towering far into the stratosphere,

magnetic trap, with God knew what beyond. Maybe even God wasn't sure.

But it looked like over the mountains or out. Death under the guns of the Terro-Venus Mines, Incorporated, Special Police, or back to the Luna cell blocks for life as a habitual felon.

Starke decided he would go over.

Whatever happened, he'd pulled off the biggest lone-wolf caper in history. The T-V Mines payroll ship, for close to a million credits. He cuddled the metal strongbox between his feet and grinned. It would be a long time before anybody equaled that.

His mass indicators began to jitter. Vaguely, a dim purple shadow in the sky ahead, the Mountains of White Cloud, stood like a wall against him. Starke checked the positions of the pursuing ships. There was no way through them. He said flatly, "All right, damn you," and sent the Kallman angling up into the thick blue sky.

He had no very clear memories after that. Crazy magnetic vagaries, always a hazard on Venus, made his instruments useless. He flew by the seat of his pants and he got over, and the T-V men didn't. He was free, with a million credits in his kick.

Far below in the virgin darkness he saw a sullen crimson smear on the night, as though someone had rubbed it with a bloody thumb. The Kallman dipped toward it. The control bank flickered with blue flame, the jet timers blew, and then there was just the screaming of air against the falling hull.

Hugh Starke sat still and waited...

He knew, before he opened his eyes, that he was dying. He didn't feel any pain; he didn't feel anything, but he knew just the same. Part of him was cut loose. He was still there, but not attached anymore.

He raised his eyelids. There was a ceiling. It was a long way off. It was black stone veined with smoky reds and ambers. He had never seen it before.

His head was tilted toward the right. He let his gaze move down that way. There were dim tapestries, more of the black stone, and three tall archways giving onto a balcony. Beyond the balcony was a sky veiled and clouded with red mist. Under the mist, spreading away from a murky line of cliffs, was an ocean. It wasn't water and it didn't have any waves on it, but there was nothing else to call it. It burned, deep down inside itself, breathing up the red fog. Little angry bursts of flame coiled up under the flat surface, sending circles of sparks flaring out like ripples from a dropped stone.

He closed his eyes and frowned and moved his head restively. There was the texture of fur against his skin. Through the cracks of his eyelids he saw that he lay on a high bed piled with silks and soft tanned pelts. His body was covered. He was rather glad he couldn't see it. It didn't matter because he wouldn't be using it any more anyway, and it hadn't been such a hell of a body to begin with. But he was used to it, and he didn't want to see it now, the way he knew it would have to look.

He looked along over the foot of the bed, and he saw the woman.

She sat watching him from a massive carved chair softened with a single huge white pelt like a drift of snow. She smiled, and let him look. A pulse began to beat under his jaw, very feebly.

She was tall and sleek and insolently curved. She wore a sort of tabard of pale grey spider-silk, held to her body by a jeweled girdle, but it was just a nice piece of ornamentation. Her face was narrow, finely cut, secret, faintly amused. Her lips, her eyes, and her flowing silken hair were all the same pale cool shade of aquamarine.

Her skin was white, with no hint of rose. Her shoulders, her forearms, the long flat curve of her thighs, the pale-green tips of her breasts, were dusted with tiny particles that glistened like powdered diamond.

She sparkled softly like a fairy thing against the snowy fur, a creature of foam and moonlight and clear shallow water. Her eyes never left his, and they were not human, but he knew that they would have done things to him if he had had any feeling below the neck.

He started to speak. He had no strength to move his tongue. The woman leaned forward, and as though her movement were a signal four men rose from the tapestried shadows by the wall. They were like her. Their eyes were pale and strange like hers.

She said, in liquid High Venusian, "You're dying, in this body. But you will not die. You will sleep now, and wake in a strange body, in a strange place. Don't be afraid. My mind will be with yours, I'll guide you, don't be afraid. I can't explain now, there isn't time, but don't be afraid."

He drew back his thin lips baring his teeth in what might have been a smile. If it was, it was wolfish and bitter, like his face.

The woman's eyes began to pour coolness into his skull. They were like two little rivers running through the channels of his own eyes, spreading in silver-green quiet across the tortured surface of his brain. His brain relaxed. It lay floating on the water, and then the twin streams became one broad, flowing stream, and his mind, or ego, the thing that was intimately himself, vanished along it.

It took him a long, long time to regain consciousness. He felt as though he'd been shaken until pieces of him were scattered all over inside. Also, he had an instinctive premonition that the minute he woke up he would be sorry he had. He took it easy, putting himself together.

He remembered his name, Hugh Starke. He remembered the mining asteroid where he was born. He remembered the Luna cell blocks where he had once come near dying. There wasn't much to choose between them. He remembered his face decorating half the bulletin boards between Mercury and The Belt. He remembered hearing about himself over the telecasts, stuff to frighten babies with, and he thought

of himself committing his first crime—a stunted scrawny kid of eighteen swinging a spanner on a grown man who was trying to steal his food.

The rest of it came fast, then. The T-V Mines job, the getaway that didn't get, the Mountains of White Cloud. The crash...

The woman.

That did it. His brain leaped shatteringly. Light, feeling, a naked sense of reality swept over him. He lay perfectly still with his eyes shut, and his mind clawed at the picture of the shining woman with sea green hair and the sound of her voice saying, You will not die, you will wake in a strange body, don't be afraid...

He was afraid. His skin pricked and ran cold with it. His stomach knotted with it. His skin, his stomach, and yet somehow they didn't feel just right, like a new coat that hasn't shaped to you... He opened his eyes, a cautious crack...

He saw a body sprawled on its side in dirty straw. The body belonged to him, because he could feel the straw pricking it, and the itch of little things that crawled and ate and crawled again.

It was a powerful body, rangy and flat-muscled, much bigger than his old one. It had obviously not been starved the first twenty-some years of its life. It was stark naked. Weather and violence had written history on it, wealed white marks on leathery bronze, but nothing seemed to be missing. There was black hair on its chest and thighs and forearms, and its hands were lean and sinewy for killing.

It was a human body. That was something. There were so many other things it might have been that his racial snobbery wouldn't call human. Like the nameless shimmering creature who smiled with strange pale lips.

Starke shut his eyes again.

He lay, the intangible self that was Hugh Starke, bellied down in the darkness of the alien shell, quiet, indrawn, waiting. Panic crept up on its soft black paws. It walked around the crouching ego and sniffed and patted and nuzzled, whining, and then struck with its raking claws. After a while it went away, empty.

The lips that were now Starke's lips twitched in a thin, cruel smile. He had done six months once in the Luna solitary crypts. If a man could do that, and come out sane and on his two feet, he could stand anything. Even this.

It came to him then, rather deflatingly, that the woman and her four companions had probably softened the shock by hypnotic suggestion. His subconscious understood and accepted the change. It was only his conscious mind that was superficially scared to death.

Hugh Starke cursed the woman with great thoroughness, in seven languages and some odd dialects. He became healthily enraged that any dame should play around with him like that. Then he thought, What the hell, I'm alive. And it looks like I got the best of the trade-in!

He opened his eyes again, secretly, on his new world.

He lay at one end of a square stone hall, good sized, with two straight lines of pillars cut from some dark Venusian wood. There were long crude benches and tables. Fires had been burning on round brick hearths spaced between the pillars. They were embers now. The smoke climbed up, tarnishing the gold and bronze of shields hung on the walls and pediments, dulling the blades of longswords, the spears, the tapestries and hides and trophies.

It was very quiet in the hall. Somewhere outside of it there was fighting going on. Heavy, vicious fighting. The noise of it didn't touch the silence, except to make it deeper.

There were two men besides Starke in the hall.

They were close to him, on a low dais. One of them sat in a carved high seat, not moving, his big scarred hands flat on the table in front of him. The other crouched on the floor by his feet. His head was bent forward so that his mop of lint-white hair hid his face and the harp between his thighs. He was a little man, a swamp-edger from his albino coloring. Starke looked back at the man in the chair.

The man spoke harshly. "Why doesn't she send word?"

The harp gave out a sudden bitter chord. That was all.

Starke hardly noticed. His whole attention was drawn to the speaker. His heart began to pound. His muscles coiled and lay ready. There was a bitter taste in his mouth. He recognized it. It was hate.

He had never seen the man before, but his hands twitched with the urge to kill.

He was big, nearly seven feet, and muscled like a draft horse. But his body, naked above a gold-bossed leather kilt, was lithe and quick as a greyhound in spite of its weight. His face was square, strong-boned, weathered, and still young. It was a face that had laughed a lot once, and liked wine and pretty girls. It had forgotten those things now, except maybe the wine. It was drawn and cruel with pain, a look as of something in a cage. Starke had seen that look before, in the Luna blocks. There was a thick white scar across the man's forehead. Under it his blue eyes were sunken and dark behind half-closed lids. The man was blind.

Outside, in the distance, men screamed and died.

Starke had been increasingly aware of a soreness and stricture around his neck. He raised a hand, careful not to rustle the straw. His fingers found a long tangled beard, felt under it, and touched a band of metal.

Starke's new body wore a collar, like a vicious dog.

There was a chain attached to the collar. Starke couldn't find any fastening. The business had been welded on for keeps. His body didn't seem to have liked it much. The neck was galled and chafed.

The blood began to crawl up hot into Starke's head. He'd worn chains before. He didn't like them. Especially around the neck.

A door opened suddenly at the far end of the hall. Fog and red daylight spilled in across the black stone floor. A man came in. He was big, half naked, blond, and bloody. His long blade trailed harshly on the flags. His chest was laid open to the bone and he held the wound together with his free hand.

"Word from Beudag," he said. "They've driven us back into the city, but so far we're holding the Gate."

No one spoke. The little man nodded his white head. The man with the slashed chest turned and went out again, closing the door.

A peculiar change came over Starke at the mention of the name Beudag. He had never heard it before, but it hung in his mind like a spear point, barbed with strange emotion. He couldn't identify the feeling, but it brushed the blind man aside. The hot simple hatred cooled. Starke relaxed in a sort of icy quiet, deceptively calm as a sleeping cobra. He didn't question this. He waited, for Beudag.

The blind man struck his hands down suddenly on the table and stood up. "Romna," he said, "give me my sword."

The little man looked at him. He had milk-blue eyes and a face like a friendly bulldog. He said, "Don't be a fool, Faolan."

Faolan said softly, "Damn you. Give me my sword."

Men were dying outside the hall, and not dying silently. Faolan's skin was greasy with sweat. He made a sudden, darting grab toward Romna.

Romna dodged him. There were tears in his pale eyes. He said brutally, "You'd only be in the way. Sit down."

"I can find the point," Faolan said, "to fall on it."

Romna's voice went up to a harsh scream. "Shut up. Shut up and sit down."

Faolan caught the edge of the table and bent over it. He shivered and closed his eyes, and the tears ran out hot under the lids. The bard turned away, and his harp cried out like a woman.

Faolan drew a long sighing breath. He straightened slowly, came round the carved high seat, and walked steadily toward Starke.

"You're very quiet, Conan," he said. "What's the matter? You ought to be happy, Conan. You ought to laugh and rattle your chain. You're going to get what you wanted. Are you sad because you haven't a mind any more, to understand that with?"

He stopped and felt with one sandaled foot across the straw until he touched Starke's thigh. Starke lay motionless.

"Conan," said the blind man gently, pressing Starke's belly with his foot. "Conan the dog, the betrayer, the butcher, the knife in the back. Remember what you did at Falga, Conan? No, you don't remember now. I've been a little rough with you, and you don't remember any more. But I remember, Conan. As long as I live in darkness, I'll remember."

Romna stroked the harp strings and they wept, savage tears for strong men dead of treachery. Low music, distant but not soft. Faolan began to tremble, a shallow animal twitching of the muscles. The flesh of his face was drawn, iron shaping under the hammer. Quite suddenly he went down on his knees. His hands struck Starke's shoulders, slid inward to the throat, and locked there.

Outside, the sound of fighting had died away.

Starke moved, very quickly. As though he had seen it and knew it was there, his hand swept out and gathered in the slack of the heavy chain and swung it.

It started out to be a killing blow. Starke wanted with all his heart to beat Faolan's brains out. But at the last second he pulled it, slapping the big man with exquisite judgment across the back of the head. Faolan grunted and fell sideways, and by that time Romna had come up. He had dropped his harp and drawn a knife. His eyes were startled.

Starke sprang up. He backed off, swinging the slack of the chain warningly. His new body moved magnificently. Outside everything was fine, but inside his psycho-neural setup had exploded into civil war. He was furious with himself for not having killed Faolan. He was furious with himself for losing control enough to want to kill a man without reason. He hated Faolan. He did not hate Faolan because he didn't know him well enough. Starke's trained, calculating unemotional brain was at grips with a tidal wave of baseless emotion.

He hadn't realized it was baseless until his mental monitor, conditioned through years of bitter control, had stopped him from killing. Now he remembered the woman's voice saying, My mind will be with yours, I'll guide you....

Catspaw, huh? Just a hired hand, paid off with a new body in return for two lives. Yeah, two. This Beudag, whoever he was. Starke knew now what that cold alien emotion had been leading up to.

"Hold it," said Starke hoarsely. "Hold everything. Catspaw! You green-eyed she-devil! You picked the wrong guy this time."

Just for a fleeting instant he saw her again, leaning forward with her hair like running water across the soft foam-sparkle of her shoulders.

Her sea-pale eyes were full of mocking laughter, and a direct, provocative admiration. Starke heard her quite plainly:

"You may not have any choice, Hugh Starke. They know Conan, even if you don't. Besides, it's of no great importance. The end will be the same for them—it's just a matter of time. You can save your new body or not, as you wish." She smiled. "I'd like it if you did. It's a good body. I knew it, before Conan's mind broke and left it empty."

A sudden thought came to Starke. "My box, the million credits."

"Come and get them." She was gone. Starke's mind was clear, with no alien will tramping around in it. Faolan crouched on the floor, holding his head. He said:

"Who spoke?"

Romna the bard stood staring. His lips moved, but no sound came out.

Starke said, "I spoke. Me, Hugh Starke. I'm not Conan, and I never heard of Falga, and I'll brain the first guy that comes near me."

Faolan stayed motionless, his face blank, his breath sobbing in his throat. Romna began to curse, very softly, not as though he were thinking about it. Starke watched them.

Down the hall the doors burst open. The heavy reddish mist coiled in with the daylight across the flags, and with them a press of bodies hot from battle, bringing a smell of blood.

Starke felt the heart contract in the hairy breast of the body named Conan, watching the single figure that led the pack.

Romna called out, "Beudag!"

She was tall. She was built and muscled like a lioness, and she walked with a flat-hipped arrogance, and her hair was like coiled flame. Her

eyes were blue, hot and bright, as Faolan's might have been once. She looked like Faolan. She was dressed like him, in a leather kilt and sandals, her magnificent body bare above the waist. She carried a longsword slung across her back, the hilt standing above the left shoulder. She had been using it. Her skin was smeared with blood and grime. There was a long cut on her thigh and another across her flat belly, and bitter weariness lay on her like a burden in spite of her denial of it.

"We've stopped them, Faolan," she said. "They can't breach the Gate, and we can hold Crom Dhu as long as we have food. And the sea feeds us." She laughed, but there was a hollow sound to it. "Gods, I'm tired!"

She halted then, below the dais. Her flame-blue gaze swept across Faolan, across Romna, and rose to meet Hugh Starke's, and stayed there.

The pulse began to beat under Starke's jaw again, and this time his body was strong, and the pulse was like a drum throbbing.

Romna said, "His mind has come back." There was a long, hard silence. No one in the hall moved. Then the men back of Beudag, big brawny kilted warriors, began to close in on the dais, talking in low snarling undertones that rose toward a mob howl. Faolan rose up and faced them, and bellowed them to quiet.

"He's mine to take! Let him alone." Beudag sprang up onto the dais, one beautiful flowing movement. "It isn't possible," she said. "His mind broke under torture. He's been a drooling idiot with barely the sense to feed himself. And now, suddenly, you say he's normal again?"

Starke said, "You know I'm normal. You can see it in my eyes."

"Yes."

He didn't like the way she said that. "Listen, my name is Hugh Starke. I'm an Earthman. This isn't Conan's brain come back. This is a new deal.

I got shoved into his body. What it did before I got it I don't know, and I'm not responsible."

Faolan said, "He doesn't remember Falga. He doesn't remember the longships at the bottom of the sea." Faolan laughed.

Romna said quietly, "He didn't kill you, though. He could have, easily. Would Conan have spared you?"

Beudag said, "Yes, if he had a better plan. Conan's mind was like a snake. It crawled in the dark, and you never knew where it was going to strike."

Starke began to tell them how it happened, the chain swinging idly in his hand. While he was talking he saw a face reflected in a polished shield hung on a pillar. Mostly it was just a tangled black mass of hair, mounted on a frame of long, harsh, jutting bone. The mouth was sensuous, with a dark sort of laughter on it. The eyes were yellow. The cruel, brilliant yellow of a killer hawk.

Starke realized with a shock that the face belonged to him.

"A woman with pale green hair," said Beudag softly. "Rann," said Faolan, and Romna's harp made a sound like a high-priest's curse.

"Her people have that power," Romna said. "They can think a man's soul into a spider, and step on it."

"They have many powers. Maybe Rann followed Conan's mind, wherever it went, and told it what to say, and brought it back again."

"Listen," said Starke angrily. "I didn't ask..."

Suddenly, without warning, Romna drew Beudag's sword and threw it at Starke.

Starke dodged it. He looked at Romna with ugly yellow eyes. "That's fine. Chain me up so I can't fight and kill me from a distance." He did not pick up the sword. He'd never used one. The chain felt better, not being too different from a heavy belt or a length of cable, or the other chains he'd swung on occasion.

Romna said, "Is that Conan?"

Faolan snarled, "What happened?"

"Romna threw my sword at Conan. He dodged it, and left it on the ground." Beudag's eyes were narrowed. "Conan could catch a flying sword by the hilt, and he was the best fighter on the Red Sea, barring you, Faolan."

"He's trying to trick us. Rann guides him."

"The hell with Rann!" Starke clashed his chain. "She wants me to kill the both of you, I still don't know why. All right. I could have killed Faolan, easy. But I'm not a killer. I never put down anyone except to save my own neck. So I didn't kill him in spite of Rann. And I don't want any part of you, or Rann either. All I want is to get the hell out of here!"

Beudag said, "His accent isn't Conan's. And the look in his eyes is different, too." Her voice had an odd note in it. Romna glanced at her. He fingered a few rippling chords on his harp, and said:

"There's one way you could tell for sure."

A sullen flush began to burn on Beudag's cheekbones. Romna slid unobtrusively out of reach. His eyes danced with malicious laughter.

Beudag smiled, the smile of an angry cat, all teeth and no humor. Suddenly she walked toward Starke, her head erect, her hands swinging loose and empty at her sides. Starke tensed warily, but the blood leaped pleasantly in his borrowed veins.

Beudag kissed him.

Starke dropped the chain. He had something better to do with his hands.

After a while he raised his head for breath, and she stepped back, and whispered wonderingly,

"It isn't Conan."

THE hall had been cleared. Starke had washed and shaved himself. His new face wasn't bad. Not bad at all. In fact, it was pretty damn good. And it wasn't known around the System. It was a face that could own a million credits and no questions asked. It was a face that could have a lot of fun on a million credits.

All he had to figure out now was a way to save the neck the face was mounted on, and get his million credits back from that beautiful she-devil named Rann.

He was still chained, but the straw had been cleaned up and he wore a leather kilt and a pair of sandals. Faolan sat in his high seat nursing a flagon of wine. Beudag sprawled wearily on a fur rug beside him. Romna sat cross-legged, his eyes veiled sleepily, stroking soft wandering music out of his harp. He looked fey. Starke knew his swamp-edgers. He wasn't surprised.

"This man is telling the truth," Romna said. "But there's another mind touching his. Rann's, I think. Don't trust him."

Faolan growled, "I couldn't trust a god in Conan's body"

Starke said, "What's the setup? All the fighting out there, and this Rann dame trying to plant a killer on the inside. And what happened at

Falga? I never heard of this whole damn ocean, let alone a place called Falga."

The bard swept his hand across the strings. "I'll tell you, Hugh Starke. And maybe you won't want to stay in that body any longer."

Starke grinned. He glanced at Beudag. She was watching him with a queer intensity from under lowered lids. Starke's grin changed. He began to sweat. Get rid of this body, hell! It was really a body. His own stringy little carcass had never felt like this.

The bard said, "In the beginning, in the Red Sea, was a race of people having still their fins and scales. They were amphibious, but after a while part of this race wanted to remain entirely on land. There was a quarrel, and a battle, and some of the people left the sea forever. They settled along the shore. They lost their fins and most of their scales. They had great mental powers and they loved ruling. They subjugated the human peoples and kept them almost in slavery. They hated their brothers who still lived in the sea, and their brothers hated them.

"After a time a third people came to the Red Sea. They were rovers from the North. They raided and reaved and wore no man's collar. They made a settlement on Crom Dhu, the Black Rock, and built longships, and took toll of the coastal towns.

"But the slave people didn't want to fight against the rovers. They wanted to fight with them and destroy the sea-folk. The rovers were human, and blood calls to blood. And the rovers liked to rule, too, and this is a rich country. Also, the time had come in their tribal development when they were ready to change from nomadic warriors to builders in their own country.

"So the rovers, and the sea-folk, and the slave-people who were caught between the two of them, began their struggle for the land."

The bard's fingers thrummed against the strings so that they beat like angry hearts. Starke saw that Beudag was still watching him, weighing every change of expression on his face. Romna went on:

"There was a woman named Rann, who had green hair and great beauty, and ruled the sea-folk. There was a man called Faolan of the Ships, and his sister Beudag, which means Dagger-in-the-Sheath, and they two ruled the outland rovers. And there was the man called Conan."

The harp crashed out like a sword-blade striking.

"Conan was a great fighter and a great lover. He was next under Faolan of the Ships, and Beudag loved him, and they were plighted. Then Conan was taken prisoner by the sea-folk during a skirmish, and Rann saw him—and Conan saw Rann."

Hugh Starke had a fleeting memory of Rann's face smiling, and her low voice saying, It's a good body. I knew it, before...

Beudag's eyes were two stones of blue vitriol under her narrow lids.

"Conan stayed a long time at Falga with Rann of the Red Sea. Then he came back to Crom Dhu, and said that he had escaped, and had discovered a way to take the longships into the harbor of Falga, at the back of Rann's fleet; and from there it would be easy to take the city, and Rann with it. And Conan and Beudag were married."

Starke's yellow hawk eyes slid over Beudag, sprawled like a long lioness in power and beauty. A muscle began to twitch under his cheekbone. Beudag flushed, a slow deep color. Her gaze did not waver.

"So the longships went out from Crom Dhu, across the Red Sea. And Conan led them into a trap at Falga, and more than half of them were sunk. Conan thought his ship was free, that he had Rann and all she'd promised him, but Faolan saw what had happened and went after him.

They fought, and Conan laid his sword across Faolan's brow and blinded him; but Conan lost the fight. Beudag brought them home.

"Conan was chained naked in the market place. The people were careful not to kill him. From time to time other things were done to him. After a while his mind broke, and Faolan had him chained here in the hall, where he could hear him babble and play with his chain. It made darkness easier to bear.

"But since Falga, things have gone badly from Crom Dhu. Too many men were lost, too many ships. Now Rann's people have us bottled up here. They can't break in, we can't break out. And so we stay, until..." The harp cried out a bitter question, and was still.

After a minute or two Starke said slowly, "Yeah, I get it. Stalemate for both of you. And Rann figured if I could kill off the leaders, your people might give up." He began to curse. "What a lousy, dirty, sneaking trick! And who told her she could use me..." He paused. After all, he'd be dead now. After all, a new body, and a cool million credits. Ah, the hell with Rann. He hadn't asked her to do it. And he was nobody's hired killer. Where did she get off, sneaking around his mind, trying to make him do things he didn't even know about? Especially to someone like Beudag.

Still, Rann herself was nobody's crud.

And just where was Hugh Starke supposed to cut in on this deal? Cut was right. Probably with a longsword, right through the belly. Swell spot he was in, and a good three strikes on him already.

He was beginning to wish he'd never seen the T-V Mines payroll ship, because then he might never have seen the Mountains of White Cloud.

He said, because everybody seemed to be waiting for him to say something, "Usually when there's a deadlock like this, somebody calls in a third party. Isn't there somebody you can yell for?"

Faolan shook his rough red head. "The slave people might rise, but they haven't arms and they're not used to fighting. They'd only get massacred, and it wouldn't help us any."

"What about those other—uh—people that live in the sea? And just what is that sea, anyhow? Some radiation from it wrecked my ship and got me into this bloody mess."

Beudag said lazily, "I don't know what it is. The seas our forefathers sailed on were water, but this is different. It will float a ship, if you know how to build the hull—very thin of a white metal we mine from the foothills. But when you swim in it, it's like being in a cloud of bubbles. It tingles, and the farther down you go in it the stranger it gets, dark and full of fire. I stay down for hours sometimes, hunting the beasts that live there."

Starke said, "For hours? You have diving suits, then. What are they?"

She shook her head, laughing. "Why weigh yourself down that way? There's no trouble to breathe in this ocean."

"For cripesake," said Starke. "Well I'll be damned. Must be a heavy gas, then, radioactive, surface tension under atmospheric pressure, enough to float a light hull, and high oxygen content without any dangerous mixture. Well, well. Okay, why doesn't somebody go down and see if the sea-people will help? They don't like Rann's branch of the family, you said."

"They don't like us, either," said Faolan. "We stay out of the southern part of the sea. They wreck our ships, sometimes." His bitter mouth twisted in a smile. "Did you want to go to them for help?"

Starke didn't quite like the way Faolan sounded. "It was just a suggestion," he said.

Beudag rose, stretching, wincing as the stiffened wounds pulled her flesh. "Come on, Faolan. Let's sleep."

He rose and laid his hand on her shoulder. Romna's harpstrings breathed a subtle little mockery of sound. The bard's eyes were veiled and sleepy. Beudag did not look at Starke, called Conan.

Starke said, "What about me?"

"You stay chained," said Faolan. "There's plenty of time to think. As long as we have food—and the sea feeds us."

He followed Beudag, through a curtained entrance to the left. Romna got up, slowly, slinging the harp over one white shoulder. He stood looking steadily into Starke's eyes in the dying light of the fires.

"I don't know," he murmured.

Starke waited, not speaking. His face was without expression.

"Conan we knew. Starke we don't know. Perhaps it would have been better if Conan had come back." He ran his thumb absently over the hilt of the knife in his girdle. "I don't know. Perhaps it would have been better for all of us if I'd cut your throat before Beudag came in."

Starke's mouth twitched. It was not exactly a smile.

"You see," said the bard seriously, "to you, from outside, none of this is important, except as it touches you. But we live in this little world. We die in it. To us, it's important."

The knife was in his hand now. It leaped up glittering into the dregs of the firelight, and fell, and leaped again.

"You fight for yourself, Hugh Starke. Rann also fights through you. I don't know."

Starke's gaze did not waver.

Romna shrugged and put away the knife. "It is written of the gods," he said, sighing. "I hope they haven't done a bad job of the writing."

He went out. Starke began to shiver slightly. It was completely quiet in the hall. He examined his collar, the rivets, every separate link of the chain, the staple to which it was fixed. Then he sat down on the fur rug provided for him in place of the straw. He put his face in his hands and cursed, steadily, for several minutes, and then struck his fists down hard on the floor. After that he lay down and was quiet. He thought Rann would speak to him. She did not.

The silent black hours that walked across his heart were worse than any he had spent in the Luna crypts.

She came soft-shod, bearing a candle. Beudag, the Dagger-in-the-Sheath. Starke was not asleep. He rose and stood waiting. She set the candle on the table and came, not quite to him, and stopped. She wore a length of thin white cloth twisted loosely at the waist and dropping to her ankles. Her body rose out of it straight and lovely, touched mystically with shadows in the little wavering light.

"Who are you?" she whispered. "What are you?"

"A man. Not Conan. Maybe not Hugh Starke any more. Just a man."

"I loved the man called Conan, until..." She caught her breath, and moved closer. She put her hand on Starke's arm. The touch went through him like white fire. The warm clean healthy fragrance of her tasted sweet in his throat. Her eyes searched his.

"If Rann has such great powers, couldn't it be that Conan was forced to do what he did? Couldn't it be that Rann took his mind and molded it her way, perhaps without his knowing it?"

"It could be."

"Conan was hot-tempered and quarrelsome, but he..."

Starke said slowly, "I don't think you could have loved him if he hadn't been straight."

Her hand lay still on his forearm. She stood looking at him, and then her hand began to tremble, and in a moment she was crying, making no noise about it. Starke drew her gently to him. His eyes blazed yellowly in the candlelight.

"Woman's tears," she said impatiently, after a bit. She tried to draw away. "I've been fighting too long, and losing, and I'm tired."

He let her step back, not far. "Do all the women of Crom Dhu fight like men?"

"If they want to. There have always been shield-maidens. And since Falga, I would have had to fight anyway, to keep from thinking." She touched the collar on Starke's neck. "And from seeing."

He thought of Conan in the market square, and Conan shaking his chain and gibbering in Faolan's hall, and Beudag watching it. Starke's fingers tightened. He slid his palms upward along the smooth muscles of her arms, across the straight, broad planes of her shoulders, onto her neck, the proud strength of it pulsing under his hands. Her hair fell loose. He could feel the redness of it burning him.

She whispered, "You don't love me."

"No."

"You're an honest man, Hugh Starke."

"You want me to kiss you."

"Yes."

"You're an honest woman, Beudag."

Her lips were hungry, passionate, touched with the bitterness of tears. After a while Starke blew out the candle...

"I could love you, Beudag."

"Not the way I mean."

"The way you mean. I've never said that to any woman before. But you're not like any woman before. And—I'm a different man."

"Strange—so strange. Conan, and yet not Conan."

"I could love you, Beudag—if I lived."

Harpstrings gave a thrumming sigh in the darkness, the faintest whisper of sound. Beudag started, sighed, and rose from the fur rug. In a minute she had found flint and steel and got the candle lighted. Romna the bard stood in the curtained doorway, watching them.

Presently he said, "You're going to let him go."

Beudag said, "Yes."

Romna nodded. He did not seem surprised. He walked across the dais, laying his harp on the table, and went into another room. He came back almost at once with a hacksaw.

"Bend your neck," he said to Starke.

The metal of the collar was soft. When it was cut through Starke got his fingers under it and bent the ends outward, without trouble. His old body could never have done that. His old body could never have done a lot of things. He figured Rann hadn't cheated him. Not much.

He got up, looking at Beudag. Beudag's head was dropped forward, her face veiled behind shining hair.

"There's only one possible way out of Crom Dhu," she said. There was no emotion in her voice. "There's a passage leading down through the rock to a secret harbor, just large enough to moor a skiff or two. Perhaps, with the night and the fog, you can slip through Rann's blockade. Or you can go aboard one of her ships, for Falga." She picked up the candle. "I'll take you down."

"Wait," Starke said. "What about you?"

She glanced at him, surprised. "I'll stay, of course."

He looked into her eyes. "It's going to be hard to know each other that way."

"You can't stay here, Hugh Starke. The people would tear you to pieces the moment you went into the street. They may even storm the hall, to take you. Look here." She set the candle down and led him to a narrow window, drawing back the hide that covered it.

Starke saw narrow twisting streets dropping steeply toward the sullen sea. The longships were broken and sunk in the harbor. Out beyond, riding lights flickering in the red fog, were other ships. Rann's ships.

"Over there," said Beudag, "is the mainland. Crom Dhu is connected to it by a tongue of rock. The sea-folk hold the land beyond it, but we can hold the rock bridge as long as we live. We have enough water, enough food from the sea. But there's no soil nor game on Crom Dhu. We'll be naked after a while, without leather or flax, and we'll have scurvy without grain and fruit. We're beaten, unless the gods send us a miracle. And we're beaten because of what was done at Falga. You can see how the people feel."

Starke looked at the dark streets and the silent houses leaning on each other's shoulders, and the mocking lights out in the fog. "Yeah," he said. "I can see."

"Besides, there's Faolan. I don't know whether he believes your story. I don't know whether it would matter."

Starke nodded. "But you won't come with me?"

She turned away sharply and picked up the candle again. "Are you coming, Romna?"

The bard nodded. He slung his harp over his shoulder. Beudag held back the curtain of a small doorway far to the side. Starke went through it and Romna followed, and Beudag went ahead with the candle. No one spoke.

They went along a narrow passage, past store rooms and armories. They paused once while Starke chose a knife, and Romna whispered: "Wait!" He listened intently. Starke and Beudag strained their ears along with him. There was no sound. Romna shrugged. "I thought I heard sandals scraping stone," he said. They went on.

The passage lay behind a wooden door. It led downward steeply through the rock, a single narrow way without side galleries or branches. In some places there were winding steps. It ended, finally, in a flat ledge low to the surface of the cove, which was a small cavern closed in with the black rock. Beudag set the candle down.

There were two little skiffs built of some light metal moored to rings in the ledge. Two long sweeps leaned against the cave wall. They were of a different metal, oddly varned. Beudag laid one across the thwarts of the nearest boat. Then she turned to Starke. Romna hung back in the shadows by the tunnel mouth.

Beudag said quietly, "Goodbye, man without a name."

"It has to be goodbye?"

"I'm leader now, in Faolan's place. Besides, these are my people." Her fingers tightened on his wrists. "If you could..." Her eyes held a brief

blaze of hope, then she dropped her head and said, "I keep forgetting you're not one of us. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Beudag."

Starke put his arms around her. He found her mouth, almost cruelly. Her arms were tight about him, her eyes half closed and dreaming. Starke's hands slipped upward, toward her throat, and locked on it.

She bent back, her body like a steel bow. Her eyes got fire in them, looking into Starke's but only for a moment. His fingers pressed expertly on the nerve centers. Beudag's head fell forward limply, and then Romna was on Starke's back and his knife was pricking Starke's throat.

Starke caught his wrist and turned the blade away. Blood ran onto his chest, but the cut was not into the artery. He threw himself backward onto the stone. Romna couldn't get clear in time. The breath went out of him in a rushing gasp. He didn't let go of the knife. Starke rolled over. The little man didn't have a chance with him. He was tough and quick, but Starke's sheer size smothered him. Starke could remember when Romna would not have seemed small to him. He hit the bard's jaw with his fist. Romna's head cracked hard against the stone. He let go of the knife. He seemed to be through fighting. Starke got up. He was sweating, breathing heavily, not because of his exertion. His mouth was glistening and eager, like a dog's. His muscles twitched, his belly was hot and knotted with excitement. His yellow eyes had a strange look.

He went back to Beudag.

She lay on the black rock, on her back. Candlelight ran pale gold across her brown skin, skirting the sharp strong hollows between her breasts and under the arching rim of her rib-case. Starke knelt, across her body, his weight pressed down against her harsh breathing. He stared at her. Sweat stood out on his face. He took her throat between his hands again.

He watched the blood grow dark in her cheeks. He watched the veins coil on her forehead. He watched the redness blacken in her lips. She fought a little, very vaguely, like someone moving in a dream. Starke breathed hoarsely, animal-like through an open mouth.

Then, gradually his body became rigid. His hands froze, not releasing pressure, but not adding any. His yellow eyes widened. It was as though he were trying to see Beudag's face and it was hidden in dense clouds.

Back of him, back in the tunnel, was the soft, faint whisper of sandals on uneven rock. Sandals, walking slowly. Starke did not hear. Beudag's face glimmered deep in a heavy mist below him, a blasphemy of a face, distorted, blackened.

Starke's hands began to open.

They opened slowly. Muscles stood like coiled ropes in his arms and shoulders, as though he moved them against heavy weights. His lips peeled back from his teeth. He bent his neck, and sweat dropped from his face and glittered on Beudag's breast.

Starke was now barely touching Beudag's neck. She began to breathe again, painfully.

Starke began to laugh. It was not nice laughter. "Rann," he whispered. "Rann, you she-devil." He half fell away from Beudag and stood up, holding himself against the wall. He was shaking violently. "I wouldn't use your hate for killing, so you tried to use my passion." He cursed her in a flat sibilant whisper. He had never in his profane life really cursed anyone before.

He heard an echo of laughter dancing in his brain.

Starke turned. Faolan of the Ships stood in the tunnel mouth. His head was bent, listening, his blind dark eyes fixed on Starke as though he saw him.

Faolan said softly "I hear you, Starke. I hear the others breathing, but they don't speak."

"They're all right. I didn't mean to do..."

Faolan smiled. He stepped out on the narrow ledge. He knew where he was going, and his smile was not pleasant.

"I heard your steps in the passage beyond my room. I knew Beudag was leading you, and where, and why. I would have been here sooner, but it's a slow way in the dark."

The candle lay in his path. He felt the heat of it close to his leg, and stopped and felt for it, and ground it out. It was dark, then. Very dark, except for a faint smudgy glow from the scrap of ocean that lay along the cave floor.

"It doesn't matter," Faolan said, "as long as I came in time."

Starke shifted his weight warily. "Faolan..."

"I wanted you alone. On this night of all nights I wanted you alone. Beudag fights in my place now, Conan. My manhood needs proving."

Starke strained his eyes in the gloom, measuring the ledge, measuring the place where the skiff was moored. He didn't want to fight Faolan. In Faolan's place he would have felt the same. Starke understood perfectly. He didn't hate Faolan, he didn't want to kill him, and he was afraid of Rann's power over him when his emotions got control. You couldn't keep a determined man from killing you and still be uninvolved emotionally. Starke would be damned if he'd kill anyone to suit Rann.

He moved, silently, trying to slip past Faolan on the outside and get into the skiff. Faolan gave no sign of hearing him. Starke did not breathe. His sandals came down lighter than snowflakes. Faolan did not swerve. He would pass Starke with a foot to spare. They came abreast.

Faolan's hand shot out and caught in Starke's long black hair. The blind man laughed softly and closed in.

Starke swung one from the floor. Do it the quickest way and get clear. But Faolan was fast. He came in so swiftly that Starke's fist jarred harmlessly along his ribs. He was bigger than Starke, and heavier, and the darkness didn't bother him.

Starke bared his teeth. Do it quick, brother, and clear out! Or that green-eyed she-cat... Faolan's brute bulk weighed him down. Faolan's arm crushed his neck. Faolan's fist was knocking his guts loose. Starke got moving.

He'd fought in a lot of places. He'd learned from stokers and tramps, Martian Low-Canalers, red-eyed Nahali in the running gutters of Lhi. He didn't use his knife. He used his knees and feet and elbows and his hands, fist and flat. It was a good fight. Faolan was a good fighter, but Starke knew more tricks.

One more, Starke thought. One more and he's out. He drew back for it, and his heel struck Romna, lying on the rock. He staggered, and Faolan caught him with a clean swinging blow. Starke fell backward against the cave wall. His head cracked the rock. Light flooded crimson across his brain and then paled and grew cooler, a wash of clear silver-green like water. He sank under it...

He was tired, desperately tired. His head ached. He wanted to rest, but he could feel that he was sitting up; doing something that had to be done. He opened his eyes.

He sat in the stern of a skiff. The long sweep was laid into its crutch, held like a tiller bar against his body. The blade of the sweep trailed astern in the red sea, and where the metal touched there was a spurt of silver fire and a swirling of brilliant motes. The skiff moved rapidly through the sullen fog, through a mist of blood in the hot Venusian night.

Beudag crouched in the bow, facing Starke. She was bound securely with strips of the white cloth she had worn. Bruises showed dark on her throat. She was watching Starke with the intent, unwinking, perfectly expressionless gaze of a tigress.

Starke looked away, down at himself. There was blood on his kilt, a brown smear of it across his chest. It was not his blood. He drew the knife slowly out of its sheath. The blade was dull and crusted, still a little wet.

Starke looked at Beudag. His lips were stiff, swollen. He moistened them and said hoarsely, "What happened?"

She shook her head, slowly, not speaking. Her eyes did not waver.

A black, cold rage took hold of Starke and shook him. Rann! He rose and went forward, letting the sweep go where it would. He began to untie Beudag's wrists.

A shape swam toward them out of the red mist. A long ship with two heavy sweeps bursting fire astern and a slender figurehead shaped like a woman. A woman with hair and eyes of aquamarine. It came alongside the skiff.

A rope ladder snaked down. Men lined the low rail. Slender men with skin that glistened white like powdered snow, and hair the color of distant shallows. One of them said, "Come aboard, Hugh Starke."

Starke went back to the sweep. It bit into the sea, sending the skiff in a swift arc away from Rann's ship.

Grapnels flew, hooking the skiff at thwart and gunwale. Bows appeared in the hands of the men, wicked curving things with barbed metal shafts on the string. The man said again, politely, "Come aboard."

Hugh Starke finished untying Beudag. He didn't speak. There seemed to be nothing to say. He stood back while she climbed the ladder and then

followed. The skiff was cast loose. The long ship veered away, gathering speed.

Starke said, "Where are we going?"

The man smiled. "To Falga."

Starke nodded. He went below with Beudag into a cabin with soft couches covered with spider-silk and panels of dark wood beautifully painted, dim fantastic scenes from the past of Rann's people. They sat opposite each other. They still did not speak.

THEY raised Falga in the opal dawn—a citadel of basalt cliffs rising sheer from the burning sea, with a long arm holding a harbor full of ships. There were green fields inland, and beyond, cloaked in the eternal mists of Venus, the Mountains of White Clouds lifted spaceward. Starke wished that he had never seen the Mountains of White Cloud. Then, looking at his hands, lean and strong on his long thighs, he wasn't so sure. He thought of Rann waiting for him. Anger, excitement, a confused violence of emotion set him pacing nervously.

Beudag sat quietly, withdrawn, waiting.

The long ship threaded the crowded moorings and slid into place alongside a stone quay. Men rushed to make fast. They were human men, as Starke judged humans, like Beudag and himself. They had the shimmering silver hair and fair skin of the plateau peoples, the fine-cut faces and straight bodies. They wore leather collars with metal tags and they went naked like beasts, and they were gaunt and bowed with labor. Here and there a man with pale blue-green hair and resplendent harness stood godlike above the swarming masses.

Starke and Beudag went ashore. They might have been prisoners or honored guests, surrounded by their escort from the ship. Streets ran back from the harbor, twisting and climbing crazily up the cliffs. Houses

climbed on each other's backs. It had begun to rain, the heavy steaming downpour of Venus, and the moist heat brought out the choking stench of people, too many people.

They climbed, ankle deep in water sweeping down the streets that were half stairway. Thin naked children peered out of the houses, out of narrow alleys. Twice they passed through market squares where women with the blank faces of defeat drew back from stalls of coarse food to let the party through.

There was something wrong. After a while Starke realized it was the silence. In all that horde of humanity no one laughed, or sang, or shouted. Even the children never spoke above a whisper. Starke began to feel a little sick. Their eyes had a look in them...

He glanced at Beudag, and away again.

The waterfront streets ended in a sheer basalt face honeycombed with galleries. Starke's party entered them, still climbing. They passed level after level of huge caverns, open to the sea. There was the same crowding, the same stench, the same silence. Eyes glinted in the half-light, bare feet moved furtively on stone. Somewhere a baby cried thinly, and was hushed at once.

They came out on the cliff top, into the clean high air. There was a city here. Broad streets, lined with trees, low rambling villas of the black rock set in walled gardens, drowned in brilliant vines and giant ferns and flowers. Naked men and women worked in the gardens, or hauled carts of rubbish through the alleys, or hurried on errands, slipping furtively across the main streets where they intersected the mews.

The party turned away from the sea, heading toward an ebon palace that sat like a crown above the city. The steaming rain beat on Starke's bare body, and up here you could get the smell of the rain, even through the heavy perfume of the flowers. You could smell Venus in the rain—musky and primitive and savagely alive, a fecund giantess with

passion flowers in her outstretched hands. Starke set his feet down like a panther and his eyes burned a smoky amber.

They entered the palace of Rann....

She received them in the same apartment where Starke had come to after the crash. Through a broad archway he could see the high bed where his old body had lain before the life went out of it. The red sea steamed under the rain outside, the rusty fog coiling languidly through the open arches of the gallery. Rann watched them lazily from a raised couch set massively into the wall. Her long sparkling legs sprawled arrogantly across the black spider-silk draperies. This time her tabard was a pale yellow. Her eyes were still the color of shoal-water, still amused, still secret, still dangerous.

Starke said, "So you made me do it after all."

"And you're angry." She laughed, her teeth showing white and pointed as bone needles. Her gaze held Starke's. There was nothing casual about it. Starke's hawk eyes turned molten yellow, like hot gold, and did not waver.

Beudag stood like a bronze spear, her forearms crossed beneath her bare sharp breasts. Two of Rann's palace guards stood behind her.

Starke began to walk toward Rann.

She watched him come. She let him get close enough to reach out and touch her, and then she said slyly, "It's a good body, isn't it?"

Starke looked at her for a moment. Then he laughed. He threw back his head and roared, and struck the great corded muscles of his belly with his fist. Presently he looked straight into Rann's eyes and said:

"I know you."

She nodded. "We know each other. Sit down, Hugh Starke." She swung her long legs over to make room, half erect now, looking at Beudag. Starke sat down. He did not look at Beudag.

Rann said, "Will your people surrender now?"

Beudag did not move, not even her eyelids. "If Faolan is dead—yes."

"And if he's not?"

Beudag stiffened. Starke did too.

"Then," said Beudag quietly, "They'll wait."

"Until he is?"

"Or until they must surrender."

Rann nodded. To the guards she said, "See that this woman is well fed and well treated."

Beudag and her escort had turned to go when Starke said, "Wait." The guards looked at Rann, who nodded, and glanced quizzically at Starke. Starke said:

"Is Faolan dead?"

Rann hesitated. Then she smiled. "No. You have the most damnably tough mind, Starke. You struck deep, but not deep enough. He may still die, but... No, he's not dead." She turned to Beudag and said with easy mockery, "You needn't hold anger against Starke. I'm the one who should be angry." Her eyes came back to Starke. They didn't look angry.

Starke said, "There's something else. Conan—the Conan that used to be, before Falga."

"Beudag's Conan."

"Yeah. Why did he betray his people?"

Rann studied him. Her strange pale lips curved, her sharp white teeth glistening wickedly with barbed humor. Then she turned to Beudag. Beudag was still standing like a carved image, but her smooth muscles were ridged with tension, and her eyes were not the eyes of an image.

"Conan or Starke," said Rann, "she's still Beudag, isn't she? All right, I'll tell you. Conan betrayed his people because I put it into his mind to do it. He fought me. He made a good fight of it. But he wasn't quite as tough as you are, Starke."

There was a silence. For the first time since entering the room, Hugh Starke looked at Beudag. After a moment she sighed and lifted her chin, and smiled, a deep, faint smile. The guards walked out beside her, but she was more erect and lighter of step than either of them.

"Well," said Rann, when they were gone, "and what about you, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan."

"Have I any choice?"

"I always keep my bargains."

"Then give me my dough and let me clear the hell out of here."

"Sure that's what you want?"

"That's what I want."

"You could stay a while, you know."

"With you?"

Rann lifted her frosty-white shoulders. "I'm not promising half my kingdom, or even part of it. But you might be amused."

"I got no sense of humor."

"Don't you even want to see what happens to Crom Dhu?"

"And Beudag."

"And Beudag," He stopped, then fixed Rann with uncompromising yellow eyes. "No. Not Beudag. What are you going to do to her?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that."

"I say again, nothing. Whatever is done, her own people will do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that little Dagger-in-the-Sheath will be rested, cared for, and fattened, for a few days. Then I shall take her aboard my own ship and join the fleet before Crom Dhu. Beudag will be made quite comfortable at the masthead, where her people can see her plainly. She will stay there until the Rock surrenders. It depends on her own people how long she stays. She'll be given water. Not much, but enough."

Starke stared at her. He stared at her a long time. Then he spat deliberately on the floor and said in a perfectly flat voice: "How soon can I get out of here?"

Rann laughed, a small casual chuckle. "Humans," she said, "are so damned queer. I don't think I'll ever understand them." She reached out and struck a gong that stood in a carved frame beside the couch. The soft deep shimmering note had a sad quality of nostalgia. Rann lay back against the silken cushions and sighed.

"Goodbye, Hugh Starke."

A pause. Then, regretfully: "Goodbye—Conan!"

THEY had made good time along the rim of the Red Sea. One of Rann's galleys had taken them to the edge of the Southern Ocean and left them on a narrow shingle beach under the cliffs. From there they had climbed to the rimrock and gone on foot—Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan and four of Rann's arrogant shining men. They were supposed to be guide and escort. They were courteous, and they kept pace uncomplainingly though Starke marched as though the devil were pricking his heels. But they were armed, and Starke was not.

Sometimes, very faintly, Starke was aware of Rann's mind touching his with the velvet delicacy of a cat's paw. Sometimes he started out of his sleep with her image sharp in his mind, her lips touched with the mocking, secret smile. He didn't like that. He didn't like it at all.

But he liked even less the picture that stayed with him waking or sleeping. The picture he wouldn't look at. The picture of a tall women with hair like loose fire on her neck, walking on light proud feet between her guards.

She'll be given water, Rann said. Not much, but enough.

Starke gripped the solid squareness of the box that held his million credits and set the miles reeling backward from under his sandals.

On the fifth night one of Rann's men spoke quietly across the campfire. "Tomorrow," he said, "we'll reach the pass."

Starke got up and went away by himself, to the edge of the rimrock that fell sheer to the burning sea. He sat down. The red fog wrapped him like a mist of blood. He thought of the blood on Beudag's breast the first time he saw her. He thought of the blood on his knife, crusted and dried. He thought of the blood poured rank and smoking into the

gutters of Crom Dhu. The fog has to be red, he thought. Of all the goddam colors in the universe, it has to be red. Red like Beudag's hair.

He held out his hands and looked at them, because he could still feel the silken warmth of that hair against his skin. There was nothing there now but the old white scars of another man's battles.

He set his fists against his temples and wished for his old body back again—the little stunted abortion that had clawed and scratched its way to survival through sheer force of mind. A most damnably tough mind, Rann had said. Yeah. It had had to be tough. But a mind was a mind. It didn't have emotions. It just figured out something coldly and then went ahead and never questioned, and it controlled the body utterly, because the body was only the worthless machinery that carried the mind around. Worthless. Yeah. The few women he'd ever looked at had told him that—and he hadn't even minded much. The old body hadn't given him any trouble.

He was having trouble now.

Starke got up and walked.

Tomorrow we reach the pass.

Tomorrow we go away from the Red Sea. There are nine planets and the whole damn Belt. There are women on all of them. All shapes, colors, and sizes, human, semi-human, and God knows what. With a million credits a guy could buy half of them, and with Conan's body he could buy the rest. What's a woman, anyway? Only a...

Water. She'll be given water. Not much, but enough.

Conan reached out and took hold of a spire of rock, and his muscles stood out like knotted ropes. "Oh God," he whispered, "what's the matter with me?"

"Love."

It wasn't God who answered. It was Rann. He saw her plainly in his mind, heard her voice like a silver bell.

"Conan was a man, Hugh Starke. He was whole, body and heart and brain. He knew how to love, and with him it wasn't women, but one woman—and her name was Beudag. I broke him, but it wasn't easy. I can't break you."

Starke stood for a long, long time. He did not move, except that he trembled. Then he took from his belt the box containing his million credits and threw it out as far as he could over the cliff edge. The red mist swallowed it up. He did not hear it strike the surface of the sea. Perhaps in that sea there was no splashing. He did not wait to find out.

He turned back along the rimrock, toward a place where he remembered a cleft, or chimney, leading down. And the four shining men who wore Rann's harness came silently out of the heavy luminous night and ringed him in. Their sword-points caught sharp red glimmers from the sky.

Starke had nothing on him but a kilt and sandals, and a cloak of tight-woven spider-silk that shed the rain.

"Rann sent you?" he said.

The men nodded.

"To kill me?"

Again they nodded. The blood drained out of Starke's face, leaving it grey and stony under the bronze. His hand went to his throat, over the gold fastening of his cloak.

The four men closed in like dancers.

Starke loosed his cloak and swung it like a whip across their faces. It confused them for a second, for a heartbeat—no more, but long enough. Starke left two of them to tangle their blades in the heavy fabric and leaped aside. A sharp edge slipped and turned along his ribs, and then he had reached in low and caught a man around the ankles, and used the thrashing body for a flail.

The body was strangely light, as though the bones in it were no more than rigid membrane, like a fish.

If he had stayed to fight, they would have finished him in seconds. They were fighting men, and quick. But Starke didn't stay. He gained his moment's grace and used it. They were hard on his heels, their points all but pricking his back as he ran, but he made it. Along the rimrock, out along a narrow tongue that jutted over the sea, and then outward, far outward, into red fog and dim fire that rolled around his plummeting body.

Oh God, he thought, if I guessed wrong and there is a beach...

The breath tore out of his lungs. His ears cracked, went dead. He held his arms out beyond his head, the thumbs locked together, his neck braced forward against the terrific upward push. He struck the surface of the sea.

There was no splash.

Dim coiling fire that drifted with infinite laziness around him, caressing his body with slow, tingling sparks. A feeling of lightness, as though his flesh had become one with the drifting fire. A sense of suffocation that had no basis in fact and gave way gradually to a strange exhilaration. There was no shock of impact, no crushing pressure. Merely a cushioning softness, like dropping into a bed of compressed air. Starke felt himself turning end over end, pinwheel fashion, and then that stopped, so that he sank quietly and without haste to the bottom.

Or rather, into the crystalline upper reaches of what seemed to be a forest.

He could see it spreading away along the downward-sloping floor of the ocean, into the vague red shadows of distance. Slender fantastic trunks upholding a maze of delicate shining branches, without leaves or fruit. They were like trees exquisitely molded from ice, transparent, holding the lambent shifting fire of the strange sea. Starke didn't think they were, or ever had been, alive. More like coral, he thought, or some vagary of mineral deposit. Beautiful, though. Like something you'd see in a dream. Beautiful, silent, and somehow deadly.

He couldn't explain that feeling of deadliness. Nothing moved in the red drifts between the trunks. It was nothing about the trees themselves. It was just something he sensed.

He began to move among the upper branches, following the downward drop of the slope.

He found that he could swim quite easily. Or perhaps it was more like flying. The dense gas buoyed him up, almost balancing the weight of his body, so that it was easy to swoop along, catching a crystal branch and using it as a lever to throw himself forward to the next one.

He went deeper and deeper into the heart of the forbidden Southern Ocean. Nothing stirred. The fairy forest stretched limitless ahead. And Starke was afraid.

Rann came into his mind abruptly. Her face, clearly outlined, was full of mockery.

"I'm going to watch you die, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan. But before you die, I'll show you something. Look."

Her face dimmed, and in its place was Crom Dhu rising bleak into the red fog, the longships broken and sunk in the harbor, and Rann's fleet around it in a shining circle.

One ship in particular. The flagship. The vision in Starke's mind rushed toward it, narrowed down to the masthead platform. To the woman who stood there, naked, erect, her body lashed tight with thin cruel cords.

A woman with red hair blowing in the slow wind, and blue eyes that looked straight ahead like a falcon's, at Crom Dhu.

Beudag.

Rann's laughter ran across the picture and blurred it like a ripple of ice-cold water.

"You'd have done better," she said, "to take the clean steel when I offered it to you."

She was gone, and Starke's mind was as empty and cold as the mind of a corpse. He found that he was standing still, clinging to a branch, his face upturned as though by some blind instinct, his sight blurred.

He had never cried before in all his life, nor prayed.

There was no such thing as time, down there in the smoky shadows of the sea bottom. It might have been minutes or hours later than Hugh Starke discovered he was being hunted.

There were three of them, slipping easily among the shining branches. They were pale golden, almost phosphorescent, about the size of large hounds. Their eyes were huge, jewel-like in their slim sharp faces. They possessed four members that might have been legs and arms, retracted now against their narrowing bodies. Golden membranes spread wing-like from head to flank, and they moved like wings, balancing expertly the thrust of the flat, powerful tails.

They could have closed in on him easily, but they didn't seem to be in any hurry. Starke had sense enough not to wear himself out trying to

get away. He kept on going, watching them. He discovered that the crystal branches could be broken, and he selected himself one with a sharp forked tip, shoving it swordwise under his belt. He didn't suppose it would do much good, but it made him feel better.

He wondered why the things didn't jump him and get it over with. They looked hungry enough, the way they were showing him their teeth. But they kept about the same distance away, in a sort of crescent formation, and every so often the ones on the outside would make a tentative dart at him, then fall back as he swerved away. It wasn't like being hunted so much as...

Starke's eyes narrowed. He began suddenly to feel much more afraid than he had before, and he wouldn't have believed that possible.

The things weren't hunting him at all. They were herding him.

There was nothing he could do about it. He tried stopping, and they swooped in and snapped at him, working expertly together so that while he was trying to stab one of them with his clumsy weapon, the others were worrying his heels like sheepdogs at a recalcitrant weather.

Starke, like the weather, bowed to the inevitable and went where he was driven. The golden hounds showed their teeth in animal laughter and sniffed hungrily at the thread of blood he left behind him in the slow red coils of fire.

After a while he heard the music.

It seemed to be some sort of a harp, with a strange quality of vibration in the notes. It wasn't like anything he'd ever heard before. Perhaps the gas of which the sea was composed was an extraordinarily good conductor of sound, with a property of diffusion that made the music seem to come from everywhere at once—softly at first, like something touched upon in a dream, and then, as he drew closer to the source, swelling into a racing, rippling flood of melody that wrapped itself around his nerves with a demoniac shiver of ecstasy.

The golden hounds began to fret with excitement, spreading their shining wings, driving him impatiently faster through the crystal branches.

Starke could feel the vibration growing in him—the very fibers of his muscles shuddering in sympathy with the unearthly harp. He guessed there was a lot of the music he couldn't hear. Too high, too low for his ears to register. But he could feel it.

He began to go faster, not because of the hounds, but because he wanted to. The deep quivering in his flesh excited him. He began to breathe harder, partly because of increased exertion, and some chemical quality of the mixture he breathed made him slightly drunk.

The thrumming harp-song stroked and stung him, waking a deeper, darker music, and suddenly he saw Beudag clearly—half-veiled and mystic in the candlelight at Faolan's dun; smooth curving bronze, her hair loose fire about her throat. A great stab of agony went through him. He called her name, once, and the harp-sound swept it up and away, and then suddenly there was no music any more, and no forest, and nothing but cold embers in Starke's heart.

He could see everything quite clearly in the time it took him to float from the top of the last tree to the floor of the plain. He had no idea how long a time that was. It didn't matter. It was one of those moments when time doesn't have any meaning.

The rim of the forest fell away in a long curve that melted glistening into the spark-shot sea. From it the plain stretched out, a level glassy floor of black obsidian, the spew of some long-dead volcano. Or was it dead? It seemed to Starke that the light here was redder, more vital, as though he were close to the source from which it sprang.

As he looked farther over the plain, the light seemed to coalesce into a shimmering curtain that wavered like the heat veils that dance along the Mercurian Twilight Belt at high noon. For one brief instant he

glimpsed a picture on the curtain—a city, black, shining, fantastically turreted, the gigantic reflection of a Titan's dream. Then it was gone, and the immediate menace of the foreground took all of Starke's attention.

He saw the flock, herded by more of the golden hounds. And he saw the shepherd, with the harp held silent between his hands.

The flock moved slightly, phosphorescently.

One hundred, two hundred silent, limply floating warriors drifting down the red dimness. In pairs, singly, or in pallid clusters they came. The golden hounds winged silently, leisurely around them, channeling them in tides that sluiced toward the fantastic ebon city.

The shepherd stood, a crop of obsidian, turning his shark-pale face. His sharp, aquamarine eyes found Starke. His silvery hand leapt beckoning over harp-threads, striking them a blow. Reverberations ran out, seized Starke, shook him. He dropped his crystal dagger.

Hot screens of fire exploded in his eyes, bubbles whirled and danced in his eardrums. He lost all muscular control. His dark head fell forward against the thick blackness of hair on his chest; his golden eyes dissolved into weak, inane yellow, and his mouth loosened. He wanted to fight, but it was useless. This shepherd was one of the sea-people he had come to see, and one way or another he would see him.

Dark blood filled his aching eyes. He felt himself led, nudged, forced first this way, then that. A golden hound slipped by, gave him a pressure which rolled him over into a current of sea-blood. It ran down past where the shepherd stood with only a harp for a weapon.

Starke wondered dimly whether these other warriors in the flock, drifting, were dead or alive like himself. He had another surprise coming.

They were all Rann's men. Men of Falga. Silver men with burning green hair. Rann's men. One of them, a huge warrior colored like powdered salt, wandered aimlessly by on another tide, his green eyes dull. He looked dead.

What business had the sea-people with the dead warriors of Falga? Why the hounds and the shepherd's harp? Questions eddied like lifted silt in Starke's tired, hanging head. Eddied and settled flat.

Starke joined the pilgrimage.

The hounds were deft flickering of wings ushered him into the midst of the flock. Bodies brushed against him. Cold bodies. He wanted to cry out. The cords of his neck constricted. In his mind the cry went forward:

"Are you alive, men of Falga?"

No answer; but the drift of scarred, pale bodies. The eyes in them knew nothing. They had forgotten Falga. They had forgotten Rann for whom they had lifted blade. Their tongues lolling in mouths asked nothing but sleep. They were getting it.

A hundred, two hundred strong they made a strange human river slipping toward the gigantic city wall. Starke-called-Conan and his bitter enemies going together. From the corners of his eyes, Starke saw the shepherd move. The shepherd was like Rann and her people who had years ago abandoned the sea to live on land. The shepherd seemed colder, more fish-like, though. There were small translucent webs between the thin fingers and spanning the long-toed feet. Thin, scar-like gills in the shadow of his tapered chin, lifted and sealed in the current, eating, taking sustenance from the blood-colored sea.

The harp spoke and the golden hounds obeyed. The harp spoke and the bodies twisted uneasily, as in a troubled sleep. A triple chord of it came straight at Starke. His fingers clenched.

"—and the dead shall walk again—"

Another ironic ripple of music.

"—and Rann's men will rise again, this time against her—"

Starke had time to feel a brief, bewildered shivering, before the current hurled him forward. Clamoring drunkenly, witlessly, all about him, the dead, muscleless warriors of Falga tried to crush past him, all of them at once...

Long ago some vast sea Titan had dreamed of avenues struck from black stone. Each stone the size of three men tall. There had been a dream of walls going up and up until they dissolved into scarlet mist. There had been another dream of sea-gardens in which fish hung like erotic flowers, on tendrils of sensitive film-tissue. Whole beds of fish clung to garden base, like colonies of flowers aglow with sunlight. And on occasion a black amoebic presence filtered by, playing the gardener, weeding out an amber flower here, an amethystine bloom there.

And the sea Titan had dreamed of endless balustrades and battlements, of windowless turrets where creatures swayed like radium-skinned phantoms, carrying their green plumes of hair in their lifted palms, and looked down with curious, insolent eyes from on high. Women with shimmering bodies like some incredible coral harvested and kept high over these black stone streets, each in its archway.

Starke was alone. Falga's warriors had gone off along a dim subterranean vent, vanished. Now the faint beckoning of harp and the golden hounds behind him turned him down a passage that opened out into a large circular stone room, one end of which opened out into a hall. Around the ebon ceiling, slender schools of fish swam. It was their bright effulgence that gave light to the room. They had been there, breeding, eating, dying, a thousand years, giving light to the place, and they would be there, breeding and dying, a thousand more.

The harp faded until it was only a murmur.

Starke found his feet. Strength returned to him. He was able to see the man in the center of the room well. Too well.

The man hung in the fire tide. Chains of wrought bronze held his thin fleshless ankles so he couldn't escape. His body desired it. It floated up.

It had been dead a long time. It was gaseous with decomposition and it wanted to rise to the surface of the Red Sea. The chains prevented this. Its arms weaved like white scarves before a sunken white face. Black hair trembled on end.

He was one of Faolan's men. One of the Rovers. One of those who had gone down at Falga because of Conan.

His name was Geil.

Starke remembered.

The part of him that was Conan remembered the name.

The dead lips moved.

"Conan. What luck is this! Conan. I make you welcome."

The words were cruel, the lips around them loose and dead. It seemed to Starke an anger and embittered wrath lay deep in those hollow eyes. The lips twitched again.

"I went down at Falga for you and Rann, Conan. Remember?"

Part of Starke remembered and twisted in agony.

"We're all here, Conan. All of us. Clev and Mannt and Bron and Aesur. Remember Aesur, who could shape metal over his spine, prying it with his fingers? Aesur is here, big as a sea-monster, waiting in a niche, cold and loose as string. The sea-shepherds collected us. Collected us for a purpose of irony. Look!"

The boneless fingers hung out, as in a wind, pointing.

Starke turned slowly, and his heart pounded an uneven, shattering drum beat. His jaw clinched and his eyes blurred. That part of him that was Conan cried out. Conan was so much of him and he so much of Conan it was impossible for a cleavage. They'd grown together like pearl material around sand-specule, layer on layer. Starke cried out.

In the hall which this circular room overlooked, stood a thousand men.

In lines of fifty across, shoulder to shoulder, the men of Crom Dhu stared unseeingly up at Starke. Here and there a face became shockingly familiar. Old memory cried their names.

"Bron! Clev! Mannt! Aesur!"

The collected decomposition of their bodily fluids raised them, drifted them above the flaggings. Each of them was chained, like Geil.

Geil whispered. "We have made a union with the men of Falga!"

Starke pulled back.

"Falga!"

"In death, all men are equals." He took his time with it. He was in no hurry. Dead bodies under-sea are never in a hurry. They sort of bump and drift and bide their time. "The dead serve those who give them a semblance of life. Tomorrow we march against Crom Dhu."

"You're crazy! Crom Dhu is your home! It's the place of Beudag and Faolan—"

"And—" interrupted the hanging corpse, quietly, "Conan? Eh?" He laughed. A crystal dribble of bubbles ran up from the slack mouth. "Especially Conan. Conan who sank us at Falga..."

Starke moved swiftly. Nobody stopped him. He had the corpse's short blade in an instant. Geil's chest made a cold, silent sheath for it. The blade went like a fork through butter.

Coldly, without noticing this, Geil's voice spoke out:

"Stab me, cut me. You can't kill me any deader. Make sections of me. Play butcher. A flank, a hand, a heart! And while you're at it, I'll tell you the plan."

Snarling, Starke seized the blade out again. With blind violence he gave sharp blow after blow at the body, cursing bitterly, and the body took each blow, rocking in the red tide a little, and said with a matter-of-fact-tone:

"We'll march out of the sea to Crom Dhu's gates. Romna and the others, looking down, recognizing us, will have the gates thrown wide to welcome us." The head tilted lazily, the lips peeled wide and folded down languidly over the words. "Think of the elation, Conan! The moment when Bron and Mannt and Aesur and I and yourself, yes, even yourself, Conan, return to Crom Dhu!"

Starke saw it, vividly. Saw it like a tapestry woven for him. He stood back, gasping for breath, his nostrils flaring, seeing what his blade had done to Geil's body, and seeing the great stone gates of Crom Dhu crashing open. The deliberation. The happiness, the elation to Faolan and Romna to see old friends returned. Old Rovers, long thought dead. Alive again, come to help! It made a picture!

With great deliberation, Starke struck flat across before him.

Geil's head, severed from its lazy body, began, with infinite tiredness, to float toward the ceiling. As it traveled upward, now facing, now bobbling the back of its skull toward Starke, it finished its nightmare speaking:

"And then, once inside the gates, what then, Conan? Can you guess? Can you guess what we'll do, Conan?"

Starke stared at nothingness, the sword trembling in his fist. From far away he heard Geil's voice:

"—we will kill Faolan in his hall. He will die with surprised lips. Romna's harp will lie in his disemboweled stomach. His heart with its last pulsing will sound the strings. And as for Beudag—"

Starke tried to push the thoughts away, raging and helpless. Geil's body was no longer anything to look at. He had done all he could to it. Starke's face was bleached white and scraped down to the insane bone of it, "You'd kill your own people!"

Geil's separated head lingered at the ceiling, light-fish illuminating its ghastly features. "Our people? But we have no people! We're another race now. The dead. We do the biddings of the sea-shepherds."

Starke looked out into the hall, then he looked at circular wall.

"Okay," he said, without tone in his voice. "Come out. Wherever you're hiding and using this voice-throwing act. Come on out and talk straight."

In answer, an entire section of ebon stones fell back on silent hinge work. Starke saw a long slender black marble table. Six people sat behind it in carven midnight thrones.

They were all men. Naked except for film-like garments about their loins. They looked at Starke with no particular hatred or curiosity. One of them cradled a harp. It was the shepherd who'd drawn Starke through the gate. Amusedly, his webbed fingers lay on the strings, now and then bringing out a clear sound from one of the two hundred strands.

The shepherd stopped Starke's rush forward with a cry of that harp!

The blade in his hand was red hot. He dropped it.

The shepherd put a hand on the sword. "And then? And then we will march Rann's dead warriors all the way to Falga. There, Rann's people, seeing the warriors, will be overjoyed, hysterical to find their friends and relatives returned. They, too, will fling wide Falga's defenses. And death will walk in, disguised as resurrection."

Starke nodded, slowly, wiping his hand across his cheek. "Back on Earth we call that psychology. Good psychology. But will it fool Rann?"

"Rann will be with her ships at Crom Dhu. While she's gone, the innocent population will let in their lost warriors gladly." The shepherd had amused green eyes. He looked like a youth of some seventeen years. Deceptively young. If Starke guessed right, the youth was nearer to two centuries old. That's how you lived and looked when you were under the Red Sea. Something about the emanations of it kept part of you young.

Starke lidded his yellow hawk's eyes thoughtfully. "You've got all aces. You'll win. But what's Crom Dhu to you? Why not just Rann? She's one of you; you hate her more than you do the Rovers. Her ancestors came up on land; you never got over hating them for that—"

The shepherd shrugged. "Toward Crom Dhu we have little actual hatred. Except that they are by nature land-men, even if they do rove by boat, and pillagers. One day they might try their luck on the sunken devices of this city."

Starke put a hand out. "We're fighting Rann, too. Don't forget, we're on your side!"

"Whereas we are on no one's," retorted the green-haired youth, "Except our own. Welcome to the army which will attack Crom Dhu."

"Me! By the gods, over my dead body!"

"That," said the youth, amusedly, "is what we intend. We've worked many years, you see, to perfect the plan. We're not much good out on land. We needed bodies that could do the work for us. So, every time Faolan lost a ship or Rann lost a ship, we were there, with our golden hounds, waiting. Collecting. Saving. Waiting until we had enough of each side's warriors. They'll do the fighting for us. Oh, not for long, of course. The Source energy will give them a semblance of life, a momentary electrical ability to walk and combat, but once out of water they'll last only half an hour. But that should be time enough once the gates of Crom Dhu and Falga are open."

Starke said, "Rann will find some way around you. Get her first. Attack Crom Dhu the following day."

The youth deliberated. "You're stalling. But there's sense in it. Rann is most important. We'll get Falga first, then. You'll have a bit of time in which to raise false hopes."

Starke began to get sick again. The room swam.

Very quietly, very easily, Rann came into his mind again. He felt her glide in like the merest touch of a sea fern weaving in a tide pool.

He closed his mind down, but not before she snatched at a shred of thought. Her aquamarine eyes reflected desire and inquiry.

"Hugh Starke, you're with the sea people?"

Her voice was soft. He shook his head.

"Tell me, Hugh Starke. How are you plotting against Falga?"

He said nothing. He thought nothing. He shut his eyes.

Her fingernails glittered, raking at his mind. "Tell me!"

His thoughts rolled tightly into a metal sphere which nothing could dent.

Rann laughed unpleasantly and leaned forward until she filled every dark horizon of his skull with her shimmering body. "All right. I gave you Conan's body. Now I'll take it away."

She struck him a combined blow of her eyes, her writhing lips, her bone-sharp teeth. "Go back to your old body, go back to your old body, Hugh Starke," she hissed. "Go back! Leave Conan to his idiocy. Go back to your old body!"

Fear had him. He fell down upon his face, quivering and jerking. You could fight a man with a sword. But how could you fight this thing in your brain? He began to suck sobbing breaths through his lips. He was screaming. He could not hear himself. Her voice rushed in from the dim outer red universe, destroying him.

"Hugh Starke! Go back to your old body!"

His old body was—dead!

And she was sending him back into it.

Part of him shot endwise through red fog.

He lay on a mountain plateau overlooking the harbor of Falga.

Red fog coiled and snaked around him. Flame birds dived eerily down at his staring, blind eyes.

His old body held him.

Putrefaction stuffed his nostrils. The flesh sagged and slipped greasily on his loosened structure. He felt small again and ugly. Flame birds nibbled, picking, choosing between his ribs. Pain gorged him. Cold, blackness, nothingness filled him. Back in his old body. Forever.

He didn't want that.

The plateau, the red fog vanished. The flame birds, too.

He lay once more on the floor of the sea shepherds, struggling.

"That was just a start," Rann told him. "Next time, I'll leave you up there on the plateau in that body. Now, will you tell the plans of the sea people? And go on living in Conan? He's yours, if you tell." She smirked. "You don't want to be dead."

Starke tried to reason it out. Any way he turned was the wrong way. He grunted out a breath. "If I tell, you'll still kill Beudag."

"Her life in exchange for what you know, Hugh Starke."

Her answer was too swift. It had the sound of treachery. Starke did not believe. He would die. That would solve it. Then, at least, Rann would die when the sea people carried out their strategy. That much revenge, at least, damn it.

Then he got the idea.

He coughed out a laugh, raised his weak head to look at the startled sea shepherd. His little dialogue with Rann had taken about ten seconds, actually, but it had seemed a century. The sea shepherd stepped forward.

Starke tried to get to his feet. "Got—got a proposition for you. You with the harp. Rann's inside me. Now. Unless you guarantee Crom Dhu and Beudag's safety, I'll tell her some things she might want to be in on!"

The sea shepherd drew a knife.

Starke shook his head, coldly. "Put it away. Even if you get me I'll give the whole damned strategy to Rann."

The shepherd dropped his hand. He was no fool.

Rann tore at Starke's brain. "Tell me! Tell me their plan!"

He felt like a guy in a revolving door. Starke got the sea men in focus. He saw that they were afraid now, doubtful and nervous. "I'll be dead in a minute," said Starke. "Promise me the safety of Crom Dhu and I'll die without telling Rann a thing."

The sea shepherd hesitated, then raised his palm upward. "I promise," he said. "Crom Dhu will go untouched."

Starke sighed. He let his head fall forward until it hit the floor. Then he rolled over, put his hands over his eyes. "It's a deal. Go give Rann hell for me, will you, boys? Give her hell!"

As he drifted into mind darkness, Rann waited for him. Feebly, he told her, "Okay, duchess. You'd kill me even if I'd told you the idea. I'm ready. Try your god-awfullest to shove me back into that stinking body of mine. I'll fight you all the way there!"

Rann screamed. It was a pretty frustrated scream. Then the pains began. She did a lot of work on his mind in the next minute.

That part of him that was Conan held on like a clam holding to its precious contents.

The odor of putrid flesh returned. The blood mist returned. The flame birds fell down at him in spirals of sparks and blistering smoke, to winnow his naked ribs.

Starke spoke one last word before the blackness took him.

"Beudag."

HE never expected to awaken again.

He awoke just the same.

There was red sea all around him. He lay on a kind of stone bed, and the young sea shepherd sat beside him, looking down at him, smiling delicately.

Starke did not dare move for a while. He was afraid his head might fall off and whirl away like a big fish, using its ears as propellers. "Lord," he muttered, barely turning his head.

The sea creature stirred. "You won. You fought Rann, and won."

Starke groaned. "I feel like something passed through a wild-cat's intestines. She's gone. Rann's gone." He laughed. "That makes me sad. Somebody cheer me up. Rann's gone." He felt of his big, flat-muscled body. "She was bluffing. Trying to decide to drive me batty. She knew she couldn't really tuck me back into that carcass, but she didn't want me to know. It was like a baby's nightmare before it's born. Or maybe you haven't got a memory like me." He rolled over, stretching. "She won't ever get in my head again. I've locked the gate and swallowed the key." His eyes dilated. "What's your name?"

"Linnl," said the man with the harp. "You didn't tell Rann our strategy?"

"What do you think?"

Linnl smiled sincerely. "I think I like you, man of Crom Dhu. I think I like your hatred for Rann. I think I like the way you handled the entire matter, wanted to kill Rann and save Crom Dhu, and being so willing to die to accomplish either."

"That's a lot of thinking. Yeah, and what about that promise you made?"

"It will be kept."

Starke gave him a hand. "Linnl, you're okay. If I ever get back to Earth, so help me, I'll never bait a hook again and drop it in the sea." It was lost to Linnl. Starke forgot it, and went on, laughing. There was an edge of hysteria to it. Relief. You got booted around for days, people milled in and out of your mind like it was a bargain basement counter, pawing over the treads and convolutions, yelling and fighting; the woman you loved was starved on a ship masthead, and as a climax a lady with green eyes tried to make you a filling for an accident-mangled body. And now you had an ally.

And you couldn't believe it.

He laughed in little starts and stops, his eyes shut.

"Will you let me take care of Rann when the time comes?"

His fingers groped hungrily upward, closed on an imaginary figure of her, pressed, tightened, choked.

Linnl said, "She's yours. I'd like the pleasure, but you have as much if not more of a revenge to take. Come along. We start now. You've been asleep for one entire period."

Starke let himself down gingerly. He didn't want to break a leg off. He felt if someone touched him he might disintegrate.

He managed to let the tide handle him, do all the work. He swam carefully after Linnl down three passageways where an occasional silver inhabitant of the city slid by.

Drifting below them in a vast square hall, each gravitating but imprisoned by leg-shackles, the warriors of Falga looked up with pale cold eyes at Starke and Linnl. Occasional discharges of light-fish from interstices in the walls passed luminous, fleeting glows over the warriors. The light-fish flirted briefly in a long shining rope that tied

knots around the dead faces and as quickly untied them. Then the light-fish pulsed away and the red color of the sea took over.

Bathed in wine, thought Starke, without humor. He leaned forward.

"Men of Falga!"

Linnl plucked a series of harp-threads.

"Aye." A deep suggestion of sound issued from a thousand dead lips.

"We go to sack Rann's citadel!"

"Rann!" came the muffled thunder of voices.

At the sound of another tune, the golden hounds appeared. They touched the chains. The men of Falga, released, danced through the red sea substance.

Siphoned into a valve mouth, they were drawn out into a great volcanic courtyard. Starke went close after. He stared down into a black ravine, at the bottom of which was a blazing caldera.

This was the Source Life of the Red Sea. Here it had begun a millennium ago. Here the savage cyclones of sparks and fire energy belched up, shaking titanic black garden walls, causing currents and whirlpools that threatened to suck you forward and shoot you violently up to the surface, in cannulas of force, thrust, in capillaries of ignited mist, in chutes of color that threatened to cremate but only exhilarated you, gave you a seething rebirth!

He braced his legs and fought the suction. An unbelievable sinew of fire sprang up from out the ravine, crackling and roaring.

The men of Falga did not fight the attraction.

They moved forward in their silence and hung over the incandescence.

The vitality of the Source grew upward in them. It seemed to touch their sandaled toes first, and then by a process of shining osmosis, climb up the limbs, into the loins, into the vitals, delineating their strong bone structure as mercury delineates the glass thermometer with a rise of temperature. The bones flickered like carved polished ivory through the momentarily film-like flesh. The ribs of a thousand men expanded like silvered spider legs, clenched, then expanded again. Their spines straightened, their shoulders flattened back. Their eyes, the last to take the fire, now were ignited and glowed like candles in refurbished sepulchers. The chins snapped up, the entire outer skins of their bodies broke into silver brilliance.

Swimming through the storm of energy like nightmare figments, entering cold, they reached the far side of the ravine resembling smelted metal from blast furnaces. When they brushed into one another, purple sparks sizzled, jumped from head to head, from hand to hand.

Linnl touched Starke's arm. "You're next."

"No thank you."

"Afraid?" laughed the harp-shepherd. "You're tired. It will give you new life. You're next."

Starke hesitated only a moment. Then he let the tide drift him rapidly out. He was afraid. Damned afraid. A belch of fire caught him as he arrived in the core of the ravine. He was wrapped in layers of ecstasy. Beudag pressed against him. It was her consuming hair that netted him and branded him. It was her warmth that crept up his body into his chest and into his head. Somebody yelled somewhere in animal delight and unbearable passion. Somebody danced and threw out his hands and crushed that solar warmth deeper into his huge body. Somebody felt all tiredness, oldness flumed away, a whole new feeling of warmth and strength inserted.

That somebody was Starke.

Waiting on the other side of the ravine were a thousand men of Falga. What sounded like a thousand harps began playing now, and as Starke reached the other side, the harps began marching, and the warriors marched with them. They were still dead, but you would never know it. There were no minds inside those bodies. The bodies were being activated from outside. But you would never know it.

They left the city behind. In embering ranks, the soldier-fighters were led by golden hounds and distant harps to a place where a huge intra-coastal tide swept by.

They got on the tide for a free ride. Linnl beside him, using his harp, Starke felt himself sucked down through a deep where strange monsters sprawled. They looked at Starke with hungry eyes. But the harp wall swept them back.

Starke glanced about at the men. They don't know what they're doing, he thought. Going home to kill their parents and their children, to set the flame to Falga, and they don't know it. Their alive-but-dead faces tilted up, always upward, as though visions of Rann's citadel were there.

Rann. Starke let the wrath simmer in him. He let it cool. Then it was cold. Rann hadn't bothered him now for hours. Was there a chance she'd read his thought in the midst of that fighting nightmare? Did she know this plan for Falga? Was that an explanation for her silence now?

He sent his mind ahead, subtly. Rann Rann. The only answer was the move of silver bodies through the fiery deeps.

Just before dawn they broke surface of the sea.

Falga drowsed in the red-smeared fog silence. Its slave streets were empty and dew-covered. High up, the first light was bathing Rann's gardens and setting her citadel aglow.

Linnl lay in the shallows beside Starke. They both were smiling half-cruel smiles. They had waited long for this.

Linnl nodded. "This is the day of the carnival. Fruit, wine and love will be offered the returned soldiers of Rann. In the streets there'll be dancing."

Far over to the right lay a rise of mountain. At its blunt peak—Starke stared at it intently—rested a body of a little, scrawny Earthman, with flame-birds clustered on it. He'd climb that mountain later. When it was over and there was time.

"What are you searching for?" asked Linnl.

Starke's voice was distant. "Someone I used to know."

Filing out on the stone quays, their rustling sandals eroded by time, the men stood clean and bright. Starke paced, a caged animal, at their center, so his dark body would pass unnoticed.

They were seen.

The cliff guard looked down over the dirty slave dwellings, from their arrow galleries, and set up a cry. Hands waved, pointed frosty white in the dawn. More guards loped down the ramps and galleries, meeting, joining others and coming on.

Linnl, in the sea by the quay, suggested a theme on the harp. The other harps took it up. The shuddering music lifted from the water and with a gentle firmness, set the dead feet marching down the quays, upward through the narrow, stifling alleys of the slaves, to meet the guard.

Slave people peered out at them tiredly from their choked quarters. The passing of warriors was old to them, of no significance.

These warriors carried no weapons. Starke didn't like that part of it. A length of chain even, he wanted. But this emptiness of the hands. His teeth ached from too long a time of clenching his jaws tight. The muscles of his arms were feverish and nervous.

At the edge of the slave community, at the cliff base, the guard confronted them. Running down off the galleries, swords naked, they ran to intercept what they took to be an enemy.

The guards stopped in blank confusion.

A little laugh escaped Starke's lips. It was a dream. With fog over, under and in between its parts. It wasn't real to the guard, who couldn't believe it. It wasn't real to these dead men either, who were walking around. He felt alone. He was the only live one. He didn't like walking with dead men.

The captain of the guard came down warily, his green eyes suspicious. The suspicion faded. His face fell apart. He had lain on his fur pelts for months thinking of his son who had died to defend Falga.

Now his son stood before him. Alive.

The captain forgot he was captain. He forgot everything. His sandals scraped over stones. You could hear the air go out of his lungs and come back in a numbed prayer.

"My son! In Rann's name. They said you were slain by Faolan's men one hundred darkneses ago. My son!"

A harp tinkled somewhere.

The son stepped forward, smiling.

They embraced. The son said nothing. He couldn't speak.

This was the signal for the others. The whole guard, shocked and surprised, put away their swords and sought out old friends, brothers, fathers, uncles, sons!

They moved up the galleries, the guard and the returned warriors, Starke in their midst. Threading up the cliff, through passage after passage, all talking at once. Or so it seemed. The guards did the talking. None of the dead warriors replied. They only seemed to. Starke heard the music strong and clear everywhere.

They reached the green gardens atop the cliff. By this time the entire city was awake. Women came running, bare-breasted and sobbing, and throwing themselves forward into the ranks of their lovers. Flowers showered over them.

"So this is war," muttered Starke, uneasily.

They stopped in the center of the great gardens. The crowd milled happily, not yet aware of the strange silence from their men. They were too happy to notice.

"Now," cried Starke to himself. "Now's the time. Now!"

As if in answer, a wild skirling of harps out of the sky.

The crowd stopped laughing only when the returned warriors of Falga swept forward, their hands lifted and groping before them...

The crying in the streets was like a far siren wailing. Metal made a harsh clangor that was sheathed in silence at the same moment metal found flesh to lie in. A vicious pantomime was concluded in the green moist gardens.

Starke watched from Rann's empty citadel. Fog plumes strolled by the archways and a thick rain fell. It came like a blood squall and washed the garden below until you could not tell rain from blood.

The returned warriors had gotten their swords by now. First they killed those nearest them in the celebration. Then they took the weapons from the victims. It was very simple and very unpleasant.

The slaves had joined battle now. Swarming up from the slave town, plucking up fallen daggers and short swords, they circled the gardens, happening upon the arrogant shining warriors of Rann who had so far escaped the quiet, deadly killing of the alive-but-dead men.

Dead father killed startled, alive son. Dead brother garroted unbelieving brother. Carnival indeed in Falga.

An old man waited alone. Starke saw him. The old man had a weapon, but refused to use it. A young warrior of Falga, harped on by Linnl's harp, walked quietly up to the old man. The old man cried out. His mouth formed words. "Son! What is this?" He flung down his blade and made to plead with his boy.

The son stabbed him with silent efficiency, and without a glance at the body, walked onward to find another.

Starke turned away, sick and cold.

A thousand such scenes were being finished.

He set fire to the black spider-silk tapestries. They whispered and talked with flame. The stone echoed his feet as he searched room after room. Rann had gone, probably last night. That meant that Crom Dhu was on the verge of falling. Was Faolan dead? Had the people of Crom Dhu, seeing Beudag's suffering, given in? Falga's harbor was completely devoid of ships, except for small fishing skiffs.

The fog waited him when he returned to the garden. Rain found his face.

The citadel of Rann was fire-encrusted and smoke-shrouded as he looked up at it.

A silence lay in the garden. The fight was over.

The men of Falga, still shining with Source-Life, hung their blades from uncomprehending fingers, the light beginning to leave their green eyes. Their skin looked dirty and dull.

Starke wasted no time getting down the galleries, through the slave quarter, and to the quays again.

Linnl awaited him, gently petting the obedient harp.

"It's over. The slaves will own what's left. They'll be our allies, since we've freed them."

Starke didn't hear. He was squinting off over the Red Sea.

Linnl understood. He plucked two tones from the harp, which pronounced the two words uppermost in Starke's thought.

"Crom Dhu."

"If we're not too late." Starke leaned forward. "If Faolan lives. If Beudag still stands at the masthead."

Like a blind man he walked straight ahead, until he fell into the sea.

IT WAS not quite a million miles to Crom Dhu. It only seemed that far.

A sweep of tide picked them up just off shore from Falga and siphoned them rapidly, through deeps along coastal latitudes, through crystal forests. He cursed every mile of the way.

He cursed the time it took to pause at the Titan's city to gather fresh men. To gather Clev and Mannt and Aesur and Bron. Impatiently,

Starke watched the whole drama of the Source-Fire and the bodies again. This time it was the bodies of Crom Dhu men, hung like beasts on slow-turned spits, their limbs and vitals soaking through and through, their skins taking bronze color, their eyes holding flint-sparks. And then the harps wove a garment around each, and the garment moved the men instead of the men the garment.

In the tidal basilica now, Starke twisted. Coursing behind him were the new bodies of Clev and Aesur! The current elevated them, poked them through obsidian needle-eyes like spider-silk threads.

There was good irony in this. Crom Dhu's men, fallen at Falga under Conan's treachery, returned now under Conan to exonerate that treachery.

Suddenly they were in Crom Dhu's outer basin. Shadows swept over them. The long dark falling shadows of Falga's longboats lying in that harbor. Shadows like black culling-nets let down. The school of men cleaved the shadow nets. The tide ceased here, eddied and distilled them.

Starke glared up at the immense silver bottom of a Falgian ship. He felt his face stiffen and his throat tighten. Then, flexing knees, he rammed upward; night air broke dark red around his head.

The harbor held flare torches on the rims of long ships. On the neck of land that led from Crom Dhu to the mainland the continuing battle sounded. Faint cries and clashing made their way through the fog veils. They sounded like echoes of past dreams.

Linnl let Starke have the leash. Starke felt something pressed into his fist. A coil of slender green woven reeds, a rope with hooked weights on the end of it. He knew how to use it without asking. But he wished for a knife now, even though he realized carrying a knife in the sea was all but impossible if you wanted to move fast.

He saw the sleek naked figurehead of Rann's best ship a hundred yards away, a floating silhouette, and its torches hanging fire like Beudag's hair.

He swam toward it, breathing quietly. When at last the silvered figurehead with the mocking green eyes and the flag of shoal-shallow hair hung over him, he felt the cool white ship metal kiss his fingers.

The smell of torch-smoke lingered. A rise of faint shouts from the land told of another rush upon the Gate. Behind him—a ripple. Then—a thousand ripples.

The resurrected men of Crom Dhu rose in dents and stirrings of sparkling wine. They stared at Crom Dhu and maybe they knew what it was and maybe they didn't. For one moment, Starke felt apprehension. Suppose Linnl was playing a game. Suppose, once these men had won the battle, they went on into Crom Dhu to rupture Romna's harp and make Faolan the blinder? He shook the thought away. That would have to be handled in time. On either side of him Clev and Mannt appeared. They looked at Crom Dhu, their lips shut. Maybe they saw Faolan's eyrie and heard a harp that was more than these harps that sang them to blade and plunder—Romna's instrument telling bard-tales of the rovers and the coastal wars and the old, living days. Their eyes looked and looked at Crom Dhu, but saw nothing.

The sea shepherds appeared now, the followers of Linnl, each with his harp; and the harp music began, high. So high you couldn't hear it. It wove a tension on the air.

Silently, with a grim certainty, the dead-but-not-dead gathered in a bronze circle about Rann's ship. The very silence of their encirclement made your skin crawl and sweat break cold on your cheeks.

A dozen ropes went raveling, looping over the ship side. They caught, held, grapnelled, hooked.

Starke had thrown his, felt it bite and hold. Now he scrambled swiftly, cursing, up its length, kicking and slipping at the silver hull.

He reached the top.

Beudag was there.

Half over the low rail he hesitated, just looking at her.

Torchlight limned her, shadowed her. She was still erect; her head was tired and her eyes closed, her face thinned and less brown, but she was still alive. She was coming out of a deep stupor now, at the whistle of ropes and the grate of metal hooks on the deck.

She saw Starke and her lips parted. She did not look away from him. His breath came out of him, choking.

It almost cost him his life, his standing there, looking at her.

A guard, with flesh like new snow, shafted his bow from the turret and let it loose. A chain lay on deck. Thankfully, Starke took it.

Clev came over the rail beside Starke. His chest took the arrow. The shaft burst half through and stopped, held. Clev kept going after the man who had shot it. He caught up with him.

Beudag cried out. "Behind you, Conan!"

Conan! In her excitement, she gave the old name.

Conan he was. Whirling, he confronted a wiry little fellow, chained him brutally across the face, seized the man's falling sword, used it on him. Then he walked in, got the man's jaw, unbalanced him over into the sea.

The ship was awake now. Most of the men had been down below, resting from the battles. Now they came pouring up, in a silver spate.

Their yelling was in strange contrast to the calm silence of Crom Dhu's men. Starke found himself busy.

Conan had been a healthy animal, with great recuperative powers. Now his muscles responded to every trick asked of them. Starke leaped cleanly across the deck, watching for Rann, but she was nowhere to be seen. He engaged two blades, dispatched one of them. More ropes raveled high and snaked him. Every ship in the harbor was exploding with violence. More men swarmed over the rail behind Starke, silently.

Above the shouting, Beudag's voice came, at sight of the fighting men. "Clev! Mannt! Aesur!"

Starke was a god; anything he wanted he could have. A man's head? He could have it. It meant acting the guillotine with knife and wrist and lunged body. Like—this! His eyes were smoking amber and there were deep lines of grim pleasure tugging at his lips. An enemy cannot fight without hands. One man, facing Starke, suddenly displayed violent stumps before his face, not believing them.

Are you watching, Faolan? cried Starke inside himself, delivering blows. Look here, Faolan! God, no, you're blind. Listen then! Hear the ring of steel on steel. Does the smell of hot blood and hot bodies reach you? Oh, if you could see this tonight, Faolan. Falga would be forgotten. This is Conan, out of idiocy, with a guy named Starke wearing him and telling him where to go!

It was not safe on deck. Starke hadn't particularly noticed before, but the warriors of Crom Dhu didn't care whom they attacked now. They were beginning to do surgery to one another. They excised one another's shoulders, severed limbs in blind instantaneous obedience. This was no place for Beudag and himself.

He cut her free of the masthead, drew her quickly to the rail.

Beudag was laughing. She could do nothing but laugh. Her eyes were shocked. She saw dead men alive again, lashing out with weapons; she

had been starved and made to stand night and day, and now she could only laugh.

Starke shook her.

She did not stop laughing.

"Beudag! You're all right. You're free."

She stared at nothing. "I'll—I'll be all right in a minute."

He had to ward off a blow from one of his own men. He parried the thrust, then got in and pushed the man off the deck, over into the sea. That was the only thing to do. You couldn't kill them.

Beudag stared down at the tumbling body.

"Where's Rann?" Starke's yellow eyes narrowed, searching.

"She was here." Beudag trembled.

Rann looked out of her eyes. Out of the tired numbness of Beudag, an echo of Rann. Rann was nearby, and this was her doing.

Instinctively, Starke raised his eyes.

Rann appeared at the masthead, like a flurry of snow. Her green-tipped breasts were rising and falling with emotion. Pure hatred lay in her eyes. Starke licked his lips and readied his sword.

Rann snapped a glance at Beudag. Stooping, as in a dream, Beudag picked up a dagger and held it to her own breast.

Starke froze.

Rann nodded, with satisfaction. "Well, Starke? How will it be? Will you come at me and have Beudag die? Or will you let me go free?"

Starke's palms felt sweaty and greasy. "There's no place for you to go. Falga's taken. I can't guarantee your freedom. If you want to go over the side, into the sea, that's your chance. You might make shore and your own men."

"Swimming? With the sea-beasts waiting?" She accented the beasts heavily. She was one of the sea-people. They, Linnl and his men, were sea-beasts. "No, Hugh Starke. I'll take a skiff. Put Beudag at the rail where I can watch her all the way. Guarantee my passage to shore and my own men there, and Beudag lives."

Starke waved his sword. "Get going."

He didn't want to let her go. He had other plans, good plans for her. He shouted the deal down at Linnl. Linnl nodded back, with much reluctance.

Rann, in a small silver skiff, headed toward land. She handled the boat and looked back at Beudag all the while. She passed through the sea-beasts and touched the shore. She lifted her hand and brought it smashing down.

Whirling, Starke swung his fist against Beudag's jaw. Her hand was already striking the blade into her breast. Her head flopped back. His fist carried through. She fell. The blade clattered. He kicked it overboard. Then he lifted Beudag. She was warm and good to hold. The blade had only pricked her breast. A small rivulet of blood ran.

On the shore, Rann vanished upward on the rocks, hurrying to find her men.

In the harbor the harp music paused. The ships were taken. Their crews lay filling the decks. Crom Dhu's men stopped fighting as quickly as they'd started. Some of the bright shining had dulled from the bronze of their arms and bare torsos. The ships began to sink.

Linnl swam below, looking up at Starke. Starke looked back at him and nodded at the beach. "Swell. Now, let's go get that she-devil," he said.

FAOLAN waited on his great stone balcony, overlooking Crom Dhu. Behind him the fires blazed high and their eating sound of flame on wood filled the pillared gloom with sound and furious light.

Faolan leaned against the rim, his chest swathed in bandage and healing ointment, his blind eyes flickering, looking down again and again with a fixed intensity, his head tilted to listen.

Romna stood beside him, filled and refilled the cup that Faolan emptied into his thirsty mouth, and told him what happened. Told of the men pouring out of the sea, and Rann appearing on the rocky shore. Sometimes Faolan leaned to one side, weakly, toward Romna's words. Sometimes he twisted to hear the thing itself, the thing that happened down beyond the Gate of besieged Crom Dhu.

Romna's harp lay untouched. He didn't play it. He didn't need to. From below, a great echoing of harps, more liquid than his, like a waterfall drenched the city, making the fog sob down red tears.

"Are those harps?" cried Faolan.

"Yes, harps!"

"What was that?" Faolan listened, breathing harshly, clutching for support.

"A skirmish," said Romna.

"Who won?"

"We won."

"And that?" Faolan's blind eyes tried to see until they watered.

"The enemy falling back from the Gate!"

"And that sound, and that sound?" Faolan went on and on, feverishly, turning this way and that, the lines of his face agonized and attentive to each eddy and current and change of tide. The rhythm of swords through fog and body was a complicated music whose themes he must recognize. "Another fell! I heard him cry. And another of Rann's men!"

"Yes," said Romna.

"But why do our warriors fight so quietly? I've heard nothing from their lips. So quiet."

Romna scowled. "Quiet. Yes—quiet."

"And where did they come from? All our men are in the city?"

"Aye." Romna shifted. He hesitated, squinting. He rubbed his bulldog jaw. "Except those that died at—Falga."

Faolan stood there a moment. Then he rapped his empty cup.

"More wine, bard. More wine."

He turned to the battle again.

"Oh, gods, if I could see it, if I could only see it!"

Below, a ringing crash. A silence. A shouting, a pouring of noise.

"The Gate!" Faolan was stricken with fear. "We've lost! My sword!"

"Stay, Faolan!" Romna laughed. Then he sighed. It was a sigh that did not believe. "In the name of ten thousand mighty gods. Would that I were blind now, or could see better."

Faolan's hand caught, held him. "What is it? Tell!"

"Clev! And Tlan! And Conan! And Bron! And Mannt! Standing in the gate, like wine visions! Swords in their hands!"

Faolan's hand relaxed, then tightened. "Speak their names again, and speak them slowly. And tell the truth." His skin shivered like that of a nervous animal. "You said—Clev? Mannt? Bron?"

"And Tlan! And Conan! Back from Falga. They've opened the Gate and the battle's won. It's over, Faolan. Crom Dhu will sleep tonight."

Faolan let him go. A sob broke from his lips. "I will get drunk. Drunker than ever in my life. Gloriously drunk. Gods, but if I could have seen it. Been in it. Tell me again of it, Romna..."

Faolan sat in the great hall, on his carved high-seat, waiting.

The pad of sandals on stone outside, the jangle of chains.

A door flung wide, red fog sluiced in, and in the sluice, people walking. Faolan started up. "Clev? Mannt? Aesur?"

Starke came forward into the firelight. He pressed his right hand to the open mouth of wound on his thigh. "No, Faolan. Myself and two others."

"Beudag?"

"Yes." And Beudag came wearily to him.

Faolan stared. "Who's the other? It walks light. It's a woman."

Starke nodded. "Rann."

Faolan rose carefully from his seat. He thought the name over. He took a short sword from a place beside the high seat. He stepped down. He walked toward Starke. "You brought Rann alive to me?"

Starke pulled the chain that bound Rann. She ran forward in little steps, her white face down, her eyes slitted with animal fury.

"Faolan's blind," said Starke. "I let you live for one damned good reason, Rann. Okay, go ahead."

Faolan stopped walking, curious. He waited.

Rann did nothing.

Starke took her hand and wrenched it behind her back. "I said 'go ahead.' Maybe you didn't hear me."

"I will," she gasped, in pain.

Starke released her. "Tell me what happens, Faolan."

Rann gazed steadily at Faolan's tall figure there in the light.

Faolan suddenly threw his hands to his eyes and choked.

Beudag cried out, seized his arm.

"I can see!" Faolan staggered, as if jolted. "I can see!" First he shouted it, and then he whispered it. "I can see."

Starke's eyes blurred. He whispered to Rann, tightly. "Make him see it, Rann, or you die now. Make him see it!" To Faolan: "What do you see?"

Faolan was bewildered; he swayed. He put out his hands to shape the vision. "I—I see Crom Dhu. It's a good sight. I see the ships of Rann. Sinking!" He laughed a broken laugh. "I—see the fight beyond the gate!"

Silence swam in the room, over their heads.

Faolan's voice went alone, and hypnotized, into that silence.

He put out his big fists, shook them, opened them. "I see Mannt, and Aesur and Clev! Fighting as they always fought. I see Conan as he was. I see Beudag wielding steel again, on the shore! I see the enemy killed! I see men pouring out of the sea with brown skins and dark hair. Men I knew a long darkness ago. Men that roved the sea with me. I see Rann captured!" He began to sob with it, his lungs filling and releasing it, sucking on it, blowing it out. Tears ran down from his vacant, blazing eyes. "I see Crom Dhu as it was and is and shall be! I see, I see, I see!"

Starke felt the chill on the back of his neck.

"I see Rann captured and held, and her men dead around her on the land before the Gate. I see the Gate thrown open—" Faolan halted. He looked at Starke. "Where are Clev and Mannt? Where is Bron and Aesur?"

Starke let the fires burn on the hearths a long moment. Then he replied.

"They went back into the sea, Faolan."

Faolan's fingers fell empty. "Yes," he said, heavily. "They had to go back, didn't they? They couldn't stay, could they? Not even for one night of food on the table, and wine in the mouth, and women in the deep warm furs before the hearth. Not even for one toast." He turned. "A drink, Romna. A drink for everyone."

Romna gave him a full cup. He dropped it, fell down to his knees, clawed at his breast. "My heart!"

"Rann, you sea-devil!"

Starke held her instantly by the throat. He put pressure on the small raging pulses on either side of her snow-white neck. "Let him go, Rann!" More pressure. "Let him go!" Faolan grunted. Starke held her until her white face was dirty and strange with death.

It seemed like an hour later when he released her. She fell softly and did not move. She wouldn't move again.

Starke turned slowly to look at Faolan.

"You saw, didn't you, Faolan?" he said.

Faolan nodded blindly, weakly. He roused himself from the floor, groping. "I saw. For a moment, I saw everything. And Gods! but it made good seeing! Here, Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan, gave this other side of me something to lean on."

BEUDAG and Starke climbed the mountain above Falga the next day. Starke went ahead a little way, and with his coming the flame birds scattered, glittering away.

He dug the shallow grave and did what had to be done with the body he found there, and then when the grave was covered with thick grey stones he went back for Beudag. They stood together over it. He had never expected to stand over a part of himself, but here he was, and Beudag's hand gripped his.

He looked suddenly a million years old standing there. He thought of Earth and the Belt and Jupiter, of the joy streets in the Jekkara Low Canals of Mars. He thought of space and the ships going through it, and himself inside them. He thought of the million credits he had taken in that last job. He laughed ironically...

"Tomorrow, I'll have the sea creatures hunt for a little metal box full of credits." He nodded solemnly at the grave. "He wanted that. Or at least

he thought he did. He killed himself getting it. So if the sea-people find it, I'll send it up here to the mountain and bury it down under the rocks in his fingers. I guess that's the best place."

Beudag drew him away. They walked down the mountain toward Falga's harbor where a ship waited them. Walking, Starke lifted his face. Beudag was with him, and the sails of the ship were rising to take the wind, and the Red Sea waited for them to travel it. What lay on its far side was something for Beudag and Faolan-of-the-Ships and Romna and Hugh-Starke-Called-Conan to discover. He felt damned good about it. He walked on steadily, holding Beudag near.

And on the mountain, as the ship sailed, the flame birds soared down fitfully and frustratedly to beat at the stone mound, ceased, and mourning shrilly, flew away.

Jonah of the Jove-Run

Planet Stories (Spring, 1948)

Nibley stood in the changing shadows and sounds of Marsport, watching the great supply ship TERRA being entered and left by a number of officials and mechanics. Something had happened. Something was wrong. There were a lot of hard faces and not much talk. There was a bit of swearing and everybody looked up at the night sky of Mars, waiting.

But nobody came to Nibley for his opinion or his help. He stood there, a very old man, with a slack-gummed face and eyes like the little bubbly stalks of crayfish looking up at you from a clear creek. He stood there fully neglected. He stood there and talked to himself.

"They don't want me, or need me," he said. "Machines are better, nowadays. Why should they want an old man like me with a taste for Martian liquor? They shouldn't! A machine isn't old and foolish, and doesn't get drunk!"

Way out over the dead sea bottoms, Nibley sensed something moving. Part of himself was suddenly awake and sensitive. His small sharp eye moved in his withered face. Something inside of his small skull reacted and he shivered. He knew. He knew that what these men were watching and waiting for would never come.

Nibley edged up to one of the astrogators from the TERRA. He touched him on the shoulder. "Say," he said. "I'm busy," said the astrogator. "I know," said Nibley, "but if you're waiting for that small repair rocket to come through with the extra auxiliary asteroid computator on it, you're wasting your time"

"Like hell," said the astrogator, glaring at the old man. "That repair rocket's got to come through, and quick; we need it. It'll get here."

"No, it won't," said Nibley, sadly, and shook his head and dosed his eyes. "It just crashed, a second ago, out on the dead sea bottom. I — felt — it crash. I sensed it going down. It'll never come through."

"Go away, old man," said the astrogator. "I don't want to hear that kind of talk. It'll come through. Sure, sure, it has to come through." The astrogator turned away and looked at the sky, smoking a cigarette.

"I know it as a fact," said Nibley, but the young astrogator wouldn't listen. He didn't want to hear the truth. The truth was not a pleasant thing. Nibley went on, to himself. "I know it for a fact, just like I was always able to know the course- of meteors with my mind, or the orbits or parabolas of asteroids. I tell you—"

The men stood around waiting and smoking. They didn't know yet about the crash out there. Nibley felt a great sorrow rise in himself for

them. That ship meant a great deal to them and now it had crashed. Perhaps their lives had crashed with it.

A loud speaker on the outer area of the landing tarmac opened out with a voice: "Attention, crew of the Terra. The repair ship just radioed in a report that it has been fired upon from somewhere over the dead seas. It crashed a minute ago."

The report was so sudden and quiet and matter-of-fact that the standing smoking men did not for a moment understand it.

Then, each in his own way, they reacted to it. Some of them ran for the radio building to verify the report. Others sat down and put their hands over their faces. Still more of them stood staring at the sky as if staring might put the repair ship back together again and get it here safe and intact. Instinctively, at last, all of them looked up at the sky.

Jupiter was there, with its coterie of moons, bright and far away. Part of their lives lived on Jupiter. Most of them had children and wives there and certain duties to perform to insure the longevity of said children and wives. Now, with the speaking of a few words over a loudspeaker, the distance to Jupiter was suddenly an immense impossibility.

The captain of the Rocket Terra walked across the field slowly. He stopped several times to try and light a cigarette, but the night wind blew it out. He stood in the rocket shadow and looked up at Jupiter and swore quietly, again and again and finally threw down his cigarette and heeled it with his shoe.

Nibley walked up and stood beside the captain.

"Captain Kroll..."

Kroll turned. "Oh, hello, Grandpa—"

"Tough luck."

"Yeah. Yeah. I guess that's what you'd call it. Tough luck."

"You're going to take off anyway, Captain?"

"Sure," said Kroll quietly, looking at the sky. "Sure."

"How's the protective computator on board your ship?"

"Not so hot. Bad, in fact. It might conk out before we get half way through the asteroids."

"That's not good," said Nibley.

"It's lousy. I feel sick. I need a drink. I wish I was dead. I wish we'd never started this damned business of being damned pioneers. My family's up there!" He jerked his hand half way to Jupiter, violently. He settled down and tried to light another cigarette. No go. He threw it down after the other.

"Can't get through the asteroids without an asteroid computator to protect you, without that old radar set-up, captain," said Nibley, blinking wetly. He shuffled his small feet around in the red dust.

"We had an auxiliary computator on that repair ship coming from Earth," said Kroll, standing there. "And it had to crash."

"The Martians shoot it down, you think?"

"Sure. They don't like us going up to Jupiter. They got claims there, too. They'd like to see our colony die out. Best way to kill a colony is starve the colony. Starve the people. That means my family and lots of families. Then when you starve out the families the Martians can step in and take over, damn their filthy souls!"

Kroll fell silent. Nibley shifted around. He walked around in front of Kroll so Kroll would see him. "Captain ?"

Kroll didn't even look at him.

Nibley said, "Maybe I can help."

"You?"

"You heard about me, captain! You heard about me."

"What about you?"

"You can't wait a month for another auxiliary computator to come through from Earth. You got to push off tonight, to Jupiter, to get to your family and the colony and all that, captain, sure!" Nibley was hasty, he sort of fidgeted around, his voice high, and excited. "An' if your only computator conks out in the middle of the asteroids, well, you know what that means. Bang! No more ship! No more you. No more colony on Jupiter! Now, you know about me, my ability, you know, you heard."

Kroll was cool and quiet and far away. "I heard about you, old man. I heard lots. They say you got a funny brain and do things machines can't do. I don't know. I don't like the idea."

"But you got to like the idea, captain. I'm the only one can help you now!"

"I don't trust you. I heard about your drinking that time and wrecking that ship. I remember that."

"But I'm not drinking now. See. Smell my breath, go ahead! You see?"

Kroll stood there. He looked at the ship and he looked at the sky and then at Nibley. Finally he sighed. "Old man, I'm leaving right now. I

might just as well take you along as leave you. You might do some good. What can I lose?"

"Not a damned thing, Captain, and you won't be sorry," cried Nibley.

"Step lively, then!"

They went to the Rocket, Kroll running, Nibley hobbling along after.

Trembling excitedly, Nibley stumbled into the Rocket. Everything had a hot mist over it. First time on a rocket in— ten years, by god. Good. Good to be aboard again. He smelled it. It smelled fine. It felt fine. Oh, it was very fine indeed. First time since that trouble he got into off the planet Venus...he brushed that thought away. That was over and past.

He followed Kroll up through the ship to a small room in the prow.

Men ran up and down the rungs. Men who had families out there on Jupiter and were willing to go through the asteroids with a faulty radar set-up to reach those families and bring them the necessary cargo of machinery and food they needed to go on.

Out of a warm mist, old Nibley heard himself being introduced to a third man in the small room.

"Douglas, this is Nibley, our auxiliary computing machine."

"A poor time for joking, Captain."

"It's no joke," cried Nibley. "Here I am."

Douglas eyed Nibley with a very cold and exact eye. "No," he said. "No. I can't use him. I'm computant-mechanic."

"And I'm captain," said Kroll. Douglas looked at Kroll. "We'll shove through to Jupiter with just our leaky set or radar computators; that's

the way it'll have to be. If we're wrecked halfway, well, we're wrecked. But I'll be damned if I go along with a decrepit son-of-a-witch-doctor!"

Nibley's eyes watered. He sucked in on himself. There was a pain round his heart and he was suddenly chilled.

Kroll started to speak, but a gong rattled and banged and a voice shouted, "Stations! Gunners up! Hammocks! Takeoff!"

"Takeoff!"

"Stay here!" Kroll snapped it at the old man. He leaped away and down the rungs of the ladder, leaving Nibley alone in the broad shadow of the bitter-eyed Douglas. Douglas looked him up and down in surly contempt. "So you know arcs, parabolas and orbits as good as my machines, do you?"

Nibley nodded, angry now that Kroll was gone:

"Machines," shrilled Nibley. "Can't do everything! They ain't got no intuition. Can't understand sabotage and hatreds and arguments. Or people. Machines're too damn slow!"

Douglas lidded his eyes. "You—you're faster?"

"I'm faster," said Nibley.

Douglas flicked his cigarette toward a wall-disposal slot.

"Predict that orbit!"

Nibley's eyes jerked. "Gonna miss it!" The cigarette lay smouldering on the deck.

Douglas scowled at the cigarette. Nibley made wheezy laughter. He minced to his shock-hammock, zipped into it. "Not bad, not bad, eh?"

The ship rumbled.

Angrily, Douglas snatched up the cigarette, carried it to his own hammock, rolled in, zipped the zipper, then, deliberately, he flicked the cigarette once more. It flew. "Another miss," predicted Nibley. Douglas was still glaring at the floored cigarette when the Rocket burst gravity and shot up into space toward the asteroids.

Mars dwindled into the sun. Asteroids swept silently down the star-tracks, all metal, all invisible, shifting and shifting to harry the Rocket—

Nibley sprawled by the great thick visiport feeling the computators giving him competition under the floor in the level below, predicting meteors and correcting the Terra's course accordingly.

Douglas stood behind Nibley, stiff and quiet. Since he was computant-mechanic, Nibley was his charge. He was to protect Nibley from harm. Kroll had said so. Douglas didn't like it at all.

Nibley was feeling fine. It was like the old days. It was good. He laughed. He waved at nothing outside the port. "Hi, there!" he called. "Meteor," he explained in an aside to Douglas. "You see it?"

"Lives at stake and you sit there playing."

"Nope. Not playin'. Just warmin' up. I can see 'em beatin' like hell all up and down the line, son. God's truth."

"Kroll's a damned fool," said Douglas. "Sure, you had a few lucky breaks in the old days before they built a good computator. A few lucky breaks and you lived off them. Your day's done."

"I'm still good."

"How about the time you swilled a quart of rot-gut and almost killed a cargo of civilian tourists? I heard about that. All I have to say is one word and your ears'd twitch. Whiskey."

At the word, saliva ran alarmingly in Nibley's mouth. He swallowed guiltily.

Douglas, snorting, turned and started from the room. Nibley grabbed a monkey-wrench on impulse, heaved it. The wrench hit the wall and fell down. Nibley wheezed, "Wrench got an orbit like everything. Fair bit of computation if did. One point over and I'd have flanked that crumb!"

There was silence now, as he hobbled back and sat wearily to stare into the stars. He felt all of the ship's men around him. Vague warm electrical stirrings of fear, hope, dismay, exhaustion. All their orbits coming into a parallel trajectory now. All living in the same path with him. And the asteroids smashed down with an increasing swiftness. In a very few hours the main body of missiles would be encountered.

Now, as he stared into space he felt a dark orbit coming into conjunction with his own. It was an unpleasant orbit. One that touched him with fear. It drew closer. It was dark. It was very close now.

A moment later a tall man in a black uniform climbed the rungs from below and stood looking at Nibley.

"I'm Bruno," he said. He was a nervous fellow, and kept looking around, looking around, at the walls, the deck, at Nibley. "I'm food specialist on board. How come you're up here? Come down to mess later. Join me in a game of Martian chess."

Nibley said, "I'd beat the hell out of you. Wouldn't pay. It's against orders for me to be down below, anyways."

"How come?"

"Never you never mind. Got things to do up here. I notice things. I'm chartin' a special course in a special way. Even Captain Kroll don't know every reason why I'm makin' this trip. Got my own personal reasons. I see 'em comin' and goin', and I got their orbits picked neat and dandy. Meteors, planets and men. Why, let me tell you—"

Bruno tensed somewhat forward. His face was a little too invested. Nibley didn't like the feel of the man. He was off-trajectory. He — smelled — funny. He felt funny.

Nibley shut up. "Nice day," he said.

"Go ahead," said Bruno. "You were saying?"

Douglas stepped up the rungs. Bruno cut it short, saluted Douglas, and left.

Douglas watched him go, coldly.

"What'd Bruno want?" he asked of the old man. "Captain's orders, you're to see nobody."

Nibley's wrinkles made a smile. "Watch that guy Bruno. I got his orbit fixed all round and arced. I see him goin' now, and I see him reachin' aphelion and I see him comin' back."

Douglas pulled his lip. "You think Bruno might be working for the Martian industrial clique? If I thought he had anything to do with stopping us from getting to the Jovian colony—"

"He'll be back," said Nibley. "Just before we reach the heavy Asteroid Belt. Wait and see."

The ship swerved. The computators had just dodged a meteor. Douglas smiled. That griped Nibley. The machines were stealing his feathers. Nibley paused and closed his eyes.

"Here come two more meteors! I beat the machine this time!"

They waited. The ship swerved, twice. "Damn it," said Douglas.

Two hours passed. "It got lonely upstairs," said Nibley apologetically.

Captain Kroll glanced nervously up from the mess-table where he and twelve other men sat. Williams, Simpson, Haines, Bruno, McClure, Leiber, and the rest. All were eating, but not hungry. They all looked a little sick. The ship was swerving again and again, steadily, steadily, back and forth. In a short interval the Heavy Belt would be touched. Then there would be real sickness.

"Okay," said Kroll to Nibley. "You can eat with us, this once. And only this once, remember that."

Nibley ate like a starved weasel. Bruno looked over at him again and again and finally asked, "How about that chess game?" ,

"Nope. I always win. Don't want to brag but I was the best outfielder playing baseball when I was at school. Never struck out at bat, neither. Damn good." Bruno cut a piece of meat. "What's your business now, Gramps?"

"Findin' out where things is goin'," evaded Nibley.

Kroll snapped his gaze at Nibley. The old man hurried on, "Why, I know where the whole blamed universe is headin'." Everybody looked up from their eating. "But you wouldn't believe me if I told you," laughed the old man.

Somebody whistled. Others chuckled. Kroll relaxed. Bruno scowled. Nibley continued, "It's a feelin'. You can't describe stars to a blind man, or God to anybody. Why, hell's bells, lads, if I wanted I could write a

formula on paper and if you worked it out in your mind you'd drop dead of symbol poison."

Again laughter. A bit of wine was poured all around as a bracer for the hours ahead. Nibley eyed the forbidden stuff and got up. "Well, I got to go."

"Have some wine," said Bruno.

"No, thanks," said Nibley.

"Go ahead, have some," said Bruno.

"I don't like it," said Nibley, wetting his lips.

"That's a laugh," said Bruno, eyeing him.

"I got to go upstairs. Nice to have ate with you boys. See you later, after we get through the Swarms—"

Faces became wooden at the mention of the approaching Belt. Fingers tightened against the table edge. Nibley spidered back up the rungs to his little room alone.

An hour later, Nibley was drunk as a chromium-plated pirate.

He kept it a secret. He hid the wine-bottle in his shock hammock, groggily. Stroke of luck. Oh yes, oh yes, a stroke, a stroke of luck, yes, yes, yes, finding that lovely fine wonderful wine in the storage cabinet near the visiport. Why, yes! And since he'd been thirsty for so long, so long, so long. Well? Gurgle, gurgle!

Nibley was drunk.

He swayed before the visiport, drunken-ly deciding the trajectories of a thousand invisible nothings. Then he began to argue with himself, drowsily, as he always argued when wine-webs were being spun

through his skull by red, drowsy spiders. His heart beat dully. His little sharp eyes flickered with sudden flights of anger.

"You're some liar, Mr. Nibley," he told himself. "You point at meteors, but who's to prove you right or wrong, right or wrong, eh? You sit up here and wait and wait and wait. Those machines down below spoil it. You never have a chance to prove your ability! No! The captain won't use you! He won't need you! None of those men believe in you. Think you're a liar. Laugh at you. Yes, laugh. Yes, they call you an old, old liar!"

Nibley's thin nostrils quivered. His thin wrinkled face was crimsoned and wild. He staggered to his feet, got hold of his favorite monkey-wrench and waved it slowly back and forth.

For a moment his heart almost stopped in him. In panic he clutched at his chest, pushing, pulling, pumping at his heart to keep it running. The wine. The excitement. He dropped the wrench. "No, not yet!" he looked down at his chest, wildly tearing at it. "Not just yet, oh please!" he cried. "Not until I show them!"

His heart went on beating, drunkenly, slowly.

He bent, retrieved the wrench and laughed numbly. "I'll show 'em," he cried, weaving across the deck. "Show them how good I am. Eliminate competition! I'll run the ship myself!"

He climbed slowly down the rungs to destroy the machines.

It made a lot of noise.

Nibley heard a shout. "Get him!" His hand went down again, again. There was a scream of whistles, a jarring of flung metal, a minor explosion. His hand went down again, the wrench in it. He felt himself cursing and pounding away. Something shattered. Men ran toward him. This was the computer! He hit upon it once more. Yes! Then he was

caught up like an empty sack, smashed in the face by someone's fist, thrown to the deck. "Cut acceleration!" a voice cried far away. The ship slowed. Somebody kicked Nibley in the face. Blackness. Dark. Around and around down into darkness...

When he opened his eyes again people were talking:

"We're turning back."

"The hell we are. Kroll says we'll go on, anyway."

"That's suicide! We can't hit that Asteroid Belt without radar."

Nibley looked up from the floor. Kroll was there, over him, looking down at the old man. "I might have known," he said, over and over again. He wavered in Nibley's sobering vision.

The ship hung motionless, silent.

Through the ports, Nibley saw they were based on the sunward side of a large planetoid, waiting, shielded from most of the asteroid particles.

"I'm sorry," said Nibley.

"He's sorry." Kroll swore. "The very man we bring along as relief computator sabotages our machine! Hell!"

Bruno was in the room. Nibley saw Bruno's eyes dilate at Kroll's exclamation. Bruno knew now.

Nibley tried to get up. "We'll get through the Swarm, anyway. I'll take you through. That's why I broke that blasted contraption. I don't like competition. I can clear a path through them asteroids big enough to lug Luna through on Track Five!"

"Who gave you the wine?"

"I found it, I just found it, that's all." The crew hated him with their eyes. He felt their hatred like so many meteors coming in and striking at him. They hated his shriveled, wrinkled old man guts. They stood around and waited for Kroll to let them kick him apart with their boots.

Kroll walked around the old man in a circle. "You think I'd. chance you getting us through the Belt!" He snorted. "What if we got half through and you got potted again!" He stopped, with his back to Nibley. He was thinking. He kept looking over his shoulder at the old man. "I can't trust you." He looked out the port at the stars, at where Jupiter shone in space. "And yet—" He looked at the men. "Do you want to turn back?"

Nobody moved. They didn't have to answer. They didn't want to go back. They wanted to go ahead.

"We'll keep on going, then," said Kroll. Bruno spoke. "We crew-members should have some say. I say go back. We can't make it. We're just wasting our lives."

Kroll glanced at him, coolly. "You seem to be alone." He went back to the port. He rocked on his heels. "It was no accident Nibley got that wine. Somebody planted it, knowing Nibley's weakness. Somebody who was paid off by the Martian Industrials to keep this ship from going through. This was a clever set-up. The machines were smashed in such a way as to throw suspicion directly on an innocent, well, almost innocent, party. Nibley was just a tool. I'd like to know who handled that tool—"

Nibley got up, the wrench in his gnarled hand. "I'll tell you who planted that wine. I been thinking and now—"

Darkness. A short-circuit. Feet running on the metal deck. A shout. A thread of fire across the darkness. Then a whistling as something flew, hit. Someone grunted.

The lights came on again. Nibley was at the light control.

On the floor, gun in hand, eyes beginning to numb, lay Bruno. He lifted the gun, fired it. The bullet hit Nibley in the stomach.

Nibley grabbed at the pain. Kroll kicked at Bruno's head. Bruno's head snapped back. He lay quietly.

The blood pulsed out between Nibley's fingers. He watched it with interest, grinning with pain. "I knew his orbit," he whispered, sitting down cross-legged on the deck. "When the lights went out I chose my own orbit back to the light switch. I knew where Bruno'd be in the dark. Havin' a wrench handy I let fly, choosin' my arc, naturally. Guess he's got a hard skull, though..."

They carried Nibley to a bunk. Douglas stood over him, dimly, growing older every second. Nibley squinted up. All the men tightened in upon it. Nibley felt their dismay, their dread, their worry, their nervous anger.

Finally, Kroll exhaled. Turn the ship around," he said. "Go back to Mars." The crew stood with their limp hands at their sides. They were tired. They didn't want to live any more. They just stood with their feet on the deck. Then, one by one, they began to walk away like so many cold, dead men.

"Hold on," cried Nibley, weakening. "I ain't through yet. I got two orbits to fix. I got one to lay out for this ship to Jupiter. And I got to finish out my own separate secret personal orbit. You ain't turnin' back nowhere!"

Kroll grimaced. "Might as well realize it, Grandpa. It takes seven hours to get through the Swarms, and you haven't another two hours in you."

The old man laughed. "Think I don't know that ? Hell! Who's supposed to know all these things, me or you?"

"You, Pop."

"Well, then, dammit—bring me a bulger!"

"Now, look—"

"You heard me, by God—a bulger!"

"Why?"

"You ever hear of a thing called triangulation? Well, maybe I won't live long enough to go with you, but, by all the sizes and shapes of behemoths—this ship is jumpin' through to Jupiter!"

Kroll looked at him. There was a breathing silence, a heart beating silence in the ship. Kroll sucked in his breath, hesitated, then smiled a grey smile.

"You heard him, Douglas. Get him a bulger."

"And get a stretcher! And tote this ninety pounds of bone out on the biggest asteroid around here! Got that ?"

"You heard him, Haines! A stretcher! Stand by for maneuvering!" Kroll sat down by the old man. "What's it all about, Pop? You're—sober?"

"Clear as a bell!"

"What're you going to do?"

"Redeem myself of my sins, by George! Now get your ugly face away so I can think! And tell them bucks to hurry!" Kroll bellowed and men rushed. They brought a space-suit, inserted the ninety pounds of shrill and wheeze and weakness into it—the doctor had finished with his probings and fixings—buckled, zipped and welded him into it. All the while they worked, Nibley talked.

"Remember when I was a kid. Stood up to that there plate poundin' out baseballs North, South and six ways from Sundays." He chuckled. "Used to hit 'em, and predict which window in what house they'd break!" Wheezy laughter. "One day I said to my Dad, 'Hey, Dad, a meteor just fell on Simpson's Garage over in Jonesville.' 'Jonesville is six miles from here', said my father, shakin' his finger at me. 'You quit your lyin', Nibley boy, or I'll trot you to the woodshed!' "

"Save your strength," said Kroll. "That's all right," said Nibley. "You know the funny thing was always that I lied like hell and everybody said I lied like hell, but come to find out, later, I wasn't lyin' at all, it was the truth. I just sensed things."

The ship maneuvered down on a windless, empty planetoid. Nibley was carried on a stretcher out onto alien rock.

"Lay me down right here. Prop up my head so I can see Jupiter and the whole damned Asteroid Belt. Be sure my headphones are tuned neat. There. Now, give me a piece of paper."

Nibley scribbled a long weak snake of writing on paper, folded it.

"When Bruno comes to, give him this. Maybe he'll believe me when he reads it. Personal. Don't pry into it yourself."

The old man sank back, feeling pain drilling through his stomach, and a kind of sad happiness. Somebody was singing somewhere, he didn't know where. Maybe it was only the stars moving on the sky.

"Well," he said, clearly. "Guess this is it, children. Now get the hell aboard, leave me alone to think. This is going to be the biggest, hardest, damnedest job of computatin' I ever latched onto! There'll be orbits and cross orbits, big balls of fire and little bitty specules, and, by God, I'll chart 'em all! I'll chart a hundred thousand of the damned monsters and their offspring, you just wait and see! Get aboard! I'll tell you what to do from there on." Douglas looked doubtful.

Nibley caught the look. "What ever happens," he cried. "Will be worth it, won't it? It's better than turnin' back to Mars, ain't it? Well, ain't it?"

"It's better," said Douglas. They shook hands.

"Now all of you, get!"

Nibley watched the ship fire away and his eyes saw it and the Asteroid Swarm and that brilliant point of light that was massive Jupiter. He could almost feel the hunger and want and waiting up there in that star flame.

He looked out into space and his eyes widened and space came in, opened out like a flower, and already, natural as water flowing, Nibley's mind, tired as it was, began to shiver out calculations. He started talking.

"Captain? Take the ship straight out now. You hear?"

"Fine," answered the captain.

"Look at your dials."

"Looking."

"If number seven reads 132:87, okay. Keep 'er there. If she varies a point, counteract it on Dial Twenty to 56.90. Keep her hard over for seventy thousand miles, all that is clear so far. Then, after that, a sharp veer in number two direction, over a thousand miles. There's a big sweep of meteors coming in on that other path for you to dodge. Let me see, let me see—" He figured. "Keep your speed at a constant of one hundred thousand miles. At that rate—check your clocks and watches—in exactly an hour you'll hit the second part of the Big Belt. Then switch to a course roughly five thousand miles over to number 3 direction, veer again five minutes on the dot later and—"

"Can you see all those asteroids, Nibley. Are you sure?"

"Sure. Lots of 'em. Every single one going every which way! Keep straight ahead until two hours from now, after that last direction of mine—then slide off at an angle toward Jupiter, slow down to ninety thousand for ten minutes, then up to a hundred ten thousand for fifteen minutes. After that, one hundred fifty thousand all the way!"

Flame poured out of the rocket jets. It moved swiftly away, growing small and distant.

"Give me a read on dial 67!"

"Four"

"Make it six! And set your automatic pilot to 61 and 14 and 35. Now—everything's okay. Keep your chronometer reading this way—seven, nine, twelve. There'll be a few tight scrapes, but you'll hit Jupiter square on in 24 hours, if you jump your speed to 700,000 six hours from now and hold it that way."

"Square on it is, Mr. Nibley."

Nibley just lay there a moment. His voice was easy and not so high and shrill any more. "And on the way back to Mars, later, don't try to find me. I'm going out in the dark on this metal rock. Nothing but dark for me. Back to perihelion and sun for you. Know—know where I'm going?"

"Where?"

"Centaurus!" Nibley laughed. "So help me God I am. No lie!"

He watched the ship going out, then, and he felt the compact, collected trajectories of all the men in it. It was a good feeling to know that he was guiding them. Like in the old days...

Douglas' voice broke in again.

"Hey, Pop. Pop, you still there?"

A little silence. Nibley felt blood pulsing down inside his suit. "Yep." he said.

"We just gave Bruno your little note to read. Whatever it was, when he finished reading it, he went insane."

Nibley said, quiet-like. "Burn that there paper. Don't let anybody else read it."

A pause. "It's burnt. What was it?"

"Don't be inquisitive," snapped the old man. "Maybe" I proved to Bruno that he didn't really exist. To hell with it!"

The rocket reached its constant speed. Douglas radioed back: "All's well. Sweet calculating, Pop. I'll tell the Rocket Officials back at Marsport. They'll be glad to know about you. Sweet, sweet calculating. Thanks. How goes it? I said— how goes it? Hey, Pop! Pop?"

Nibley raised a trembling hand and waved it at nothing. The ship was gone. He couldn't even see the jet-wash now, he could only feel that hard metal movement out there among the stars, going on and on through a course he had set for it. He couldn't speak. There was just emotion in him. He had finally, by God, heard a compliment from a mechanic of radar-computators!

He waved his hand at nothing. He watched nothing moving on and on into the crossed orbits of other invisible nothings. The silence was now complete.

He put his hand down. Now he had only to chart that one last personal orbit. The one he had wanted to finish only in space and not grounded back on Mars.

It didn't take lightning calculation to set it out for certain.

Life and death were the parabolic ends to his trajectory. The long life, first swinging in from darkness, arcing to the inevitable perihelion, and now moving back out, out and away—

Into the soft, encompassing dark.

"By God," he thought weakly, quietly. "Right up to the last, my reputation's good. Never fluked a calculation yet, and I never will..."

He didn't.

The end