

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# bait for the tiger

by . . . Lee Chaytor

**This was a new kind of war in which strange weapons must be used against these aliens menacing the Earth.**

IN THE Pentagon there is an unmarked office, or rather, a suite of three small rooms, which is always kept locked. The lock is an unusual one—there are no keys for it. The very ordinary-looking doorknob is made to turn only when any one of three men impresses his fingers and thumb against its educated metal. These men are Abbot, Jones and Chester.

Abbot and Jones spend their working hours in the small reception room. Abbot records certain remarkable data on microfilm which he locks away in the second, vault-like chamber. Jones merely sits with his eyes on the outer door and his hand on a gun. For man, being human, can be bought or compelled. Jones has used the gun once . . . on his best friend. Not that he hesitated. His greatest fear—nightmare, rather—is that someday the gun will not be effective against what comes through the door.

The office is at the dead-end of a dogleg corridor. A charge of explosive strong enough to force it open would atomize the whole building.

The very existence of the office is known to only six people in the

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*Californian Lee Chaytor, in writing BAIT FOR THE TIGER, says she tried to give a rational explanation for the point raised by Lester del Rey in his widely discussed article, THE FLYING SAUCER MYTH, in the August FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, of why the aliens should hang around doing nothing for ten years.*

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United States: Abbot, Jones and Chester; the President of the United States, an Air Force General named Tudor and Kilgore, head of the F. B. I. Among these six, the office is known as Biep—which stands for Bureau for the Investigation of Extraterrestrial Phenomena. Officially, these six men are amongst the loudest scoffers at Unidentified Flying Objects. Unofficially, they are betting their lives and the safety and freedom of 175 million people that Artemus Chester can recognize and control any entity or group of entities which might come in out of space and make a landfall on Earth.

Tem Chester is an ordinary-looking man, slightly under average height, with receding brown hair and vague blue eyes. Like Abbot and Jones, he is attached to the Air Force as a civilian clerk-typist. He is, however, potentially the most important man on Earth—a one hundred per cent efficient telepath. He can read any mind, any time, and up to distances of a mile before selectivity becomes blurred. It was he who warned Jones that his friend was coming down the dog-leg passage, wearing a plastic glove on which Jones' fingerprints had been painstakingly etched. Chester felt rather badly about that. It was such a waste of loyalty and effort. The Embassy which had corrupted Jones' friend and prepared the glove hadn't any idea of the real business of the office—and wouldn't have been interested in it if they had

known. They thought it was a secret weapon file.

Chester also knew the moment the girl turned into the corridor and approached the office. She was accompanied by Kilgore. Chester scanned them, probing deep. At what he found in the girl's mind, he rose from his chair and hurried into the outer office.

Abbot and Jones looked up sharply.

"Kilgore's coming—he's got something at last!"

Jones crouched and trained his gun at the door.

"No, no! She's friendly, and she's stumbled onto something important. Let 'em in."

Abbot opened the door while Jones kept his gun ready. Mark Kilgore showed a beautiful big woman into the room ahead of him and Abbot snapped the door shut.

"Are we clean?" asked Kilgore.

Chester closed his eyes and made a mental sweep of the building and environs. He opened his eyes. "All clear. Nothing but the enlisted personnel doing the usual work and thinking about food and women. How animal can the human male get?"

"Let's not go into that." Kilgore glanced at the girl. "Mrs. Norton, this is Mr. Chester, Mr. Jones, Mr. Abbot—"

As they bowed and smiled meaningless phrases, Steve Abbot was thinking, *what a woman! Didn't know they grew 'em that big. And then, she's like a ripe peach, sweet*

*but not cloying . . .* WHOA, *Abbot! This is a married woman!*

Kilgore was talking: "Mrs. Norton is Phil's wife. She has a definite lead that may tie in with those two deaths."

Chester was suddenly angry. "We've wasted a lot of time because you kept me boxed up here. I told you you should have let me travel! What good can I do sitting here? Did you think They would come to visit Washington like tourists? Now it looks as though They've landed, maybe established some kind of base out in that empty country. No telling how we're going to get rid of Them. If you'd let me go into that district—"

Kilgore glared back at him. "Sure! Let you go in and end up like Nunn and Norton!"

Abbot caught the flash of anguish on the girl's face. "We've got no evidence anything's happened to Norton," he said quietly.

The girl looked from Chester to Kilgore. "You already knew about Ore Valley?"

Chester frowned at her, then his expression cleared. "No—your first name's Valentine, isn't it? Pretty.—You told me."

Kilgore said impatiently, "Mr. Chester is a telepath. He reads minds. Saves time." He was keyed up at the prospect of definite action. "But just for the records, will you go over there to Mr. Abbot's desk and tell him the whole story, just as you told it to me? Then Mr. Chester and I will want to see you in

his office." He hustled the smaller man into the next room.

Steve Abbot stood up and held a chair for the girl. He was a lean, sinewy six feet. His gray eyes were friendly behind horn-rimmed glasses. The girl thought he looked more like a college pole-vaulter than an F. B. I. agent. His speech was easy and quiet as he showed her the hand mike and explained the technique of the recording device.

He lifted the mike to his own lips and, pressing the switch, spoke the date and hour. "Mrs. Valentine Norton reporting to BIEP: Subject is auburn haired, brown eyes, height about six feet . . . ?" he hazarded.

The girl nodded.

"Weight?"

"One forty," supplied Val, smiling for the first time in days. "Age, twenty-five. Occupation, dancer; employed at a night club called the Gold Umbrella. As a kid, I studied for the ballet, but I grew too big. Now I do a sort of cleaned-up muscle dance." She noticed his puzzled look. "It's billed as 'Valti, an Oriental Specialty.' With a snake. Cobber's the real ham in the act. He's just a robot cobra, with his action patterns built in—but try telling him. He thinks he's the star.— That what you wanted?"

"Thanks," grinned Steve. He recounted the facts into the mike, then handed it to her. "Now, just take it slowly. Mention everything that comes into your mind in con-

nection with your—with Phil Norton. We never know what apparently unimportant detail Tem Chester might find helpful."

Val Norton drew a deep breath and clamped her fingers tightly around the mike. She kept her eyes on it as she talked, avoiding Steve's intent gaze.

"Phil and I were married in Mexico three months ago. I didn't know he was an F. B. I. agent at that time. He caught my act at the Club one night, came again, asked me to dinner . . ." She moistened her lips. "One night, driving me home, he suggested that we get married. We flew to Mexico in a friend's plane the next night, after my last show, and were married in a little village church at dawn. Phil told the priest we'd have the civil ceremony later. He's very persuasive."

Steve wondered how he'd persuaded the Immigration boys to overlook an unauthorized flight; then decided Norton had probably not bothered to notify them.

"We each kept our own apartments and met when we could," the girl went on. "A month ago I asked him when we'd get the American license, and then he told me about his work. That he was in secret service and was waiting to be sent on a very dangerous mission. So of course there mustn't be any publicity, the kind reporters might dream up if they got hold of the fact that he'd married a night club dancer. It might even cost him his

job." She met Steve's eyes defiantly. "Understand, I'm not complaining. We were terribly happy. Phil enjoyed making mysterious phone calls to me, using private code words, arranging secret meetings. He was like a boy—"

"Juvenile delinquent type," thought Steve sourly. Keeping this nice girl dangling for no good reason. Phil Norton would like it better that way, the good-looking heel. His enormous appetite for intrigue and double-dealing made him a daring and skilful, if not too reliable, agent. And his private life, Steve reminded himself sternly, is no concern of mine. The girl was speaking into the mike again.

"Last Thursday, he phoned me that he had his orders. He picked me up after the show and told me he was leaving on a mission so dangerous that he might not return. I was . . . upset. I begged him to send me some kind of messages so I'd know he was all right. He agreed to call me on the phone every evening and give me his destination for the next night—"

"That was a breach of regulations," said Steve. "Inexcusable on a job as important as this one."

The girl looked at him. "It was all my fault. I—I cried." Her full, sweet lips trembled.

Steve swallowed what he wanted to say. "Go ahead."

"I didn't hear from him for two days. Then Saturday night there was a call from a little village called Hermit, Wyoming. Phil joked about

it; said it had a population of ten hermits, all grouchy. But I found it on the map. Phil said he expected to reach Ore Valley by the next night, and be back on the main highway the following night, at Rawlins. I haven't heard from him since."

Steve switched off the mike. "I see why Tem's so excited. This may be the break we've been waiting for. You see, it pin-points the trouble spot, and ties in with some other information we've got."

"You don't know where Phil is then?"

Steve shook his head. "We have not heard from him since he left Los Angeles. That's not unusual," he hurried to add. "An agent often makes no report till he returns, especially if he's on a delicate mission. Too much chance of tipping off the subject."

"When I coaxed him to keep in touch with me, I jinxed him."

"Your husband's a grown man and a trained agent. He knew exactly the risks he was taking. He—"

Jones got up suddenly and went to the door. Someone was knocking loudly. Abbot signed the girl to silence and opened the door, revealing a grinning official messenger.

"What's with you guys—you hiding out? Took me all day to locate you. Why don't you put up a sign?" He tossed a small parcel at Steve, who caught it deftly. Sketching a salute, he went off down the hall, whistling.

"Find out who told him where

we were," began Steve, but Chester appeared in the inner doorway behind him. "I noticed him asking for us several times and guided him here," he said. "Only our agents know where we are. That may be from Norton."

He opened the package. A roll of tape in a tin container fell out. Chester noted the code letters. "It's Norton's report. Put it on the player, Steve."

The message began abruptly. "N-317 from Hermit, Wyoming. People very tense and unfriendly. Population about ten. Two families moving out as I drove in. When I tried to find out what was wrong, got evasive or hostile answers. Prices up about five hundred per cent; residents making a final killing before abandoning, is my guess. I taped some conversations while subjects unaware . . ." Here followed several voices, speaking just a few words each: ". . . no, the mines haven't played out, but competition with Ore Valley's too tough. Most of us figure to get out pretty soon . . . those guys are squeezing out all the small operators . . . my wife doesn't like the climate; says it gives her asthma . . . country's gone sour. I'm movin' on . . . we want proper schools for our kids. . . . Say, mister, you got a buttinski license? . . . YOU WITH THE CENSUS BUREAU?"

Chester studied the wrapper. "Mailed from Hermit, postmarked Monday. Probably dropped it in the post office Sunday morning before

he left for Ore Valley." He looked elated. "That gives us a real lead. Somewhere between Hermit and Ore Valley. Come in now," and he beckoned Val and Steve into his private office. Kilgore was pacing up and down, a cigar clenched in his teeth. "Norton came through with a tape that confirms what I found in Mrs. Norton's mind. He's disappeared between Hermit and Ore Valley. What's there?"

"I checked the whole state when we got those other reports. Ore Valley's a fair-sized company town; been a slow but steady producer for years. It's locally owned, and you know company towns. Closed corporation. My guess is the landings, if any, are in the wild country between Hermit and Ore Valley."

"I'm flying over the whole area as soon as you can get me a private plane," announced Chester. "I'll pick Them up if They're there."

"Have you forgotten what happened to the other plane?" growled Kilgore.

Val rose. "I guess you didn't need me after all, now you have the tape from Phil. I'll just run along." She glanced at Steve Abbot. "Could you let me know, if—when you hear again?"

Chester frowned at her. "Nonsense! Sit down. I'll want to use you. And don't get all emotional, for goodness' sake. We need clear heads for this work!" He glared at her.

Val looked at him and an irrepressible smile twitched at her lips.

"I'll do my best," she promised. "I'm anxious to help."

"You have, you have," he snapped. "Even with this report of Norton's, I wouldn't have moved for another week. Agents don't have to report if doing so might jeopardize their disguise. We'd have had no reason to think Norton was in danger. Your coming to Mr. Kilgore has saved us days of waiting and quite possibly saved your husband's life—if we can get in there fast enough.

"Now there are certain things I'll have to tell you, because I have a use for you—"

"Just a minute—Sir," interrupted Steve. "You can't draft an untrained woman into—"

"Please, Mr. Abbot," Val protested. "There's nothing in this world I want, so much as to get in and help."

Chester was staring intently at Steve. The big fellow turned a slow red. Chester raised his eyebrows. "That way, eh? See it doesn't impair your efficiency." He peered at Val with his pale blue eyes, then nodded satisfaction. "You aren't afraid of personal danger. Your feeling for Norton has overcome natural caution. I feel you would strike boldly. And of course, all females are unpredictable. A decided advantage if we have to deal with extraterrestrials. Do you wish to undertake the assignment?"

"Yes." Val was resolved to show no emotion before this strange little telepath. Tem Chester leaned back

in his chair and set his fingers into a precise steeple.

"First: to brief you on significant data. About three months ago, a tourist was chased by a green light on a seldom-used private road in central Wyoming. A temporary barrier had been erected where this road joined the transcontinental highway, with a sign,

### **DANGEROUS**

#### ***Drive at own risk Ore Valley Mining Company***

affixed to it. The wife, who wrote poetry, thought the scenery looked romantic on the company road and insisted that they drive that way.

"By early evening they were both regretting the choice. There had been no gas stations or lunch rooms, in fact, no sign of human habitation, and the road was badly pot-holed. They were getting hungry and a little worried. Just at dusk, during the time when the sky goes from pale yellow to clear green, the man glanced away from the road to see if he could locate even a shepherd's or a miner's cabin. Instead, he saw a big green light drifting down toward a flat-topped hill to the left of the road. He called his wife's attention to it. They decided it must be a flare from a plane in trouble. As she bent across him to look, the green flare hesitated, then rose and swept over toward them.

"Our man knew that flares don't act like that, even with updrafts and freak air currents. And it was big

—bigger than any flare he'd ever seen. But there was something worse. He felt panicky suddenly; as though the thing was conscious of his presence and meant him no good with that swift approach—like a watch-dog making for an intruder with silent ferocity. The feeling was so strong that he turned the car around as fast as he could, and shot off the way he'd come, not daring to take his eyes from the shadowy road to find out if the thing was still following.

"All this time his wife hadn't said a word. This bothered him, being so unlike her, but he had all he could do to keep the car on the road, which was full of pot-holes and cracks. He hit sixty anyway, he was that scared of the thing which was approaching. In a minute he heard a kind of strangled cry from his wife. He flashed a glance her way. To his horror, the green flare was just outside the window, and his wife's body was bathed in the weird green light. A violent lurch brought his eyes back to the road. When he could look again, the green flare was gone. His wife was slumped down, hands over her face. He slowed and spoke her name. She huddled close to him, body shaking. He switched on the lights, slowed down and looked behind. Nothing but the empty dark hills, remote against the wide sky. He began to feel like a fool for shying off from a flare. He tried to joke about it with his wife—but she wasn't having any. She kept



trembling and huddling close to him.

"Now, here's where we got our first break. Normally, he'd never have mentioned the incident to anyone: Showed him up as a weak sister. But his wife was so upset he got worried, and asked a few carefully casual questions of a gas station proprietor when they got back on the main highway. That was our second break. The station owner had seen a plane come flying out of the hills from that direction just a week before. It crashed among the sagebrush near the highway. He recognized it as a small commercial job which was trying to establish a new freight route to the mines in the northern part of the state. He knew Randall, the pilot, by reputation as a steady, competent flier. He took out across the rough country with his repair jeep, and found the wreck within a few moments of the crash.

"The plane was scattered around like the contents of a woman's spilled handbag. About twenty feet from the engine lay the pilot, so badly smashed that even a layman could tell he'd never survive a trip out to the hospital. But he was still alive, and he managed to mutter three words before he died: "Green flare . . . rammed . . ."

"Our tourist decided this warranted investigation. But he didn't want to be mixed up in anything that'd get him laughed at, so he made careful notes of both experiences and put off reporting what

had happened. Till a month ago. His wife died. She was the sensitive type. He believed she'd seen something more than just a green flare that night. He didn't know; she'd refused to discuss it with him. But the doctor was puzzled over the deterioration of her organs.

"The husband thought about it, and the more he thought, the angrier he got. So he wrote a letter to the Editor of a Science Fiction magazine which had been running a series of articles on Unidentified Flying Objects. He enclosed the notes he had made. The Editor turned the letter over to the Air Force and they had sense enough to see that Mr. Kilgore got it. His first idea was to discount it as the vaporings of an hysterical woman and the rambling of a dying pilot. There hadn't been a single previous report of a sighting anywhere near that area."

"Mr. Chester read my mind and decided differently," put in Kilgore. "He reminded me that mother birds deliberately show themselves *away* from the nest. We'd investigated the scene of multiple sightings and found nothing; perhaps this remote, ostensibly barren region would yield what we were looking for. Mr. Chester advised me to send an agent into the area."

"We briefed a good man—our best agent—two weeks ago and sent him in as a traveling salesman. He reported from a motel in Rawlins. He was going to canvass the whole area."

"What has he reported?" asked Val.

"That's the reason we sent Norton in. We haven't heard from Nunn since."

Steve unlocked the door of the small apartment, then went in ahead of Val. He locked the door before turning on the lights. "This is Mr. Kilgore's apartment. He asked me to bring you here for the briefing. He doesn't want you seen in the Pentagon again, or near any government agency."

"That figures," said Val, looking around for a comfortable chair. "I'll be more useful if I'm not pegged as an agent."

Steve frowned down at her. "I don't like this. Tem's got no right to involve you—"

The big brown eyes met his. "I am involved, remember? I'm Phil's wife. And if some freak from space has done him in, I want to know it."

Steve turned away abruptly and walked to a window, where he peered out between the dust-stiff drapes. Below, in the street, a few vague figures drifted past under the street lights. Then a red Jaguar pulled up in front of the entrance. Two men got out.

"Here's Tem with Mr. Kilgore."

No one spoke until Chester and Kilgore were in the apartment. Chester was in high spirits, rubbing his small dry hands together and beaming at Val with his pale eyes. Kilgore savaged a cigar, a worried

frown on his face, as he watched the little telepath.

"I found Them! A whole nest of Them in the town of Ore Valley. Most interesting thought patterns—definitely alien minds. Seem to be two kinds of them. The dominant type is very arrogant, a sort of master class. "The others," he hesitated, an expression of distaste on his features, "sullen, almost sub-human. A strange emanation."

"Were the Master Class—human?" asked Steve.

"I think so. Their minds functioned in logical patterns. I'd say they knew wrong from right, in a twisted, self-centered sort of way."

"Were you observed?" Steve wanted to know.

Kilgore grunted. "Of course he was. All the way in from the airport, he whitened what hair I've got left, telling me his adventures."

"We flew once over the town, very high. Two greenish objects arced up to intercept us. I probed and found each was manned by one of the non-human entities. I entered the consciousness of one—" again a grimace of distaste—"and convinced him my plane was a guided missile, unmanned, out of control and due to crash. He sheered off while I was convincing the other. When my plane went out of sight behind the hills, we went upstairs, cut the engines and drifted back across the town. We did that till I had all the information I wanted—"

"You coasted over the town sev-

eral times after they'd sighted you?" gasped Val.

"It was night," shrugged Chester, but Steve could see he was pleased at the girl's admiration. "I probed one of the superior minds. They're very—smug." He rubbed his hands. "Interesting. Been here a long time, apparently. Got the whole town. Running it with the help of a few wretched enslaved humans, management and top technical men of the company that used to own Ore Valley. They carry on about the way the humans did, filling outstanding commitments but making no new ones. Since the ownership was local, there's no Eastern tie-up to cause embarrassment.

"The sub-humans, known as Lengs, are the servants of the Master race, but not of their race, apparently. Perhaps not even from the same planet. The man I probed had a very deeply-buried fear of the Lengs. I stimulated it. Divide and conquer." He beamed at his audience.

"Sure he didn't realize you were probing?" worried Kilgore. "I'd hate to tip them off just before we send Mrs. Norton in."

"Not Smith. That's what the leader calls himself. He's sure he's the ultimate flowering of intelligence, strength and beauty in the universe. Terribly conceited bunch. The whole race think of themselves as The Masters. There aren't many of them on Earth, but they've been here for years, apparently. And I got a flash of a thought about other

similar colonies of The Masters scattered around the globe."

"So we're already invaded, in spite of all our elaborate precautions to prevent it," said Kilgore grimly.

"I don't believe there's been much harm done. They're systematically robbing the earth of minerals and something else I couldn't understand, and I'm afraid," he hesitated and frowned, "there's something about a virus they've let loose. But I'll know more about that later, when I get Mrs. Norton in there. In the meantime, there's one bright spot. Smith is home-sick. For women. It seems they aren't permitted to bring their own females, and any Master who deliberately seeks out a contact with one of ours is punished by a death so horrible that Smith shied off from the thought of it. Which gives us our chance." He looked at Val approvingly.

Steve stood up. "No."

Nobody paid any attention to him. Kilgore and Val herself had eyes only for Chester, who continued,

"I'm going to pin something on Val so she's demonstrably on the run. Some crime that strikes so deeply at the roots of human decency that every human's hand will automatically be against her. Then we're going to let her run and chase her toward Ore Valley. I think Smith is in a mood to give her sanctuary when he sees her."

"How will he know she's sup-

posed to be a criminal on the run?"

"They've got radio and television. And Smith's lonesome."

"I think that's the wildest rotten scheme I ever heard of—" began Steve hotly.

Val interrupted, eyes on Chester. "If he's not—human, will this Smith be interested in me?"

"We got a break there. Like so many human males, he was rather preoccupied with images of the opposite sex at the time I was probing. Apparently the women of the Master Race aren't too much different from our own, with one or two exceptions. They're golden skinned, and the smallest of 'em are about six feet tall. Smith and the men are big golden giants, very handsome—they've bred out the ugly and weaklings ages ago . . ."

"Pity they bothered sneaking in, then," said Kilgore drily. "They could have appeared on television and won the world that way."

Tem Chester was staring at Val. "While the males are completely hairless, the females have a sort of golden stubble on their heads, which is naturally short or kept close-cut, I'm not sure which. Smith was purring over the thought of rubbing his palms on a plushy, one-inch brush of thick fair hair."

"Can do," said Val briskly.

Steve got up and walked to the window. Kilgore raised his eyebrows, then shrugged and took a fresh cigar.

"There are several minor differences—superficial things," Chester

was telling the girl. "The women paint their ears and eyes, but not their mouths. They wear jeweled metal sheaths on their fingers. If they're like their men, they're arrogant, cruel. I got a thought from Smith that they rule their slaves through fear of extreme punishments freely applied. They call it discipline. Smith seemed to find the thought of something he knew as the light-whip, very reassuring."

"Nice people," commented Val. "When do I visit them?"

"I've got to give you some hypno-training first. And plant a booster in your skull—"

"Booster?" Kilgore asked, frowning.

"I'll want to be in constant mental touch with her while she's in Ore Valley. Flying around above them in an airplane isn't practical. I thought I'd establish a base unobtrusively, a few miles away, and listen in. So of course I'll need some sort of device to amplify her brain impulses."

"Is there such a surgical technique?"

"Probably not. But you can get the best surgeon available and I'll tell him what I want done."

Kilgore objected before Steve could speak. "I don't think we can risk such an operation on Mrs. Norton. We'll have to chance some kind of mechanical device she can put on her head—an ornamental head-band or something."

Chester grimaced with annoyance. "Quite impractical! They'd be

sure to spot it and take it away from her. They seem to have an excellent system for detecting machines. If we had time, we might experiment to discover if drugs would increase the strength of her brain impulse. But we have no time," he fretted.

Val offered a suggestion hesitantly. "There's Cobber. He's a mechanical device, but he's part of my act and easily explained. They might not think to look for a second reason for my wanting him near me . . ."

Chester scanned her mind and his face gradually lightened. "Excellent! I'm sure Mr. Kilgore's electronic wizards can build some sort of amplifying circuit into your robot snake by the time I'm ready for you to leave. I do have to find a crime for you. Something particularly nasty—"

The phone rang, sharply, three times. Chester took the call. The others listened with increasing apprehension. There was an agitated squawking from the receiver. Then Chester said

"Which one? . . . Alive? . . . Oh, dying. Well, try to keep him alive until I get there. I may be able to read something from what's left of his mind." He replaced the receiver. "They've found one of our agents."

Val was staring at him white-faced, fingers clenched on the arm of the chair. As he remained silent, thinking, Steve burst out, "Well, tell her! Is it Norton?"

Chester roused himself. "Nor-

ton? No, it's Nunn. Police picked him up last night in a ditch outside Chicago. At first they thought he was just a hobo, rotten with disease and alky. Then something about his clothing and the things he was saying, roused their suspicion and they decided he was the victim of a gang outrage. They took his prints and sent them here. He was identified a few minutes ago."

"Chicago?" frowned Kilgore. "What would he be doing there?"

"Trying to get back here, maybe," suggested Steve. "Was he injured?"

"They say his condition is peculiar," admitted Chester. "Extremely advanced degeneration of organs, some broken bones, festered flesh wounds, complete exhaustion. . . . Let's go to him at once. I must probe him before he dies."

Kilgore was already on the phone, arranging for a flight to Chicago by jet. On the way out of the building, they picked up Jones, who had been unobtrusively guarding the entrance. Chester was wrapped in thought, and the others didn't find anything to say on the way to the airport.

Nunn was a twitching, shuddering wreck. Whatever inner strength, whatever terrible urgency, had got him this far, now at last had deserted him. Looking down at the hospital bed, Kilgore swore raggedly. "If They did this to him—!"

Chester, perched on a stool near the head of the bed, was scanning

the brain of the dying man. He glanced up with annoyance. "I wish you'd go away. Your angry thoughts distract me. This man has priceless information locked in his brain and there isn't much time left to collect it."

With a glance of pure dislike, Kilgore left the room and joined Val, Steve and Jones in the corridor.

"Nunn got away from Them all right," Kilgore told them. "And there's no doubt They interrogated him. He keeps living it over, cringing and crying. Something about the 'whips.'"

"Can we get the President's permission to drop a bomb on Them?" asked Jones. Val looked at him in surprise. It was the first time she had heard him speak, and his voice surprised her—soft and gentle where she had expected a deep-voiced rasp. Jones was a small dark compact man, with hair that grew low on his forehead and narrowed dark eyes. His lips were narrow, too, and close-set. Val decided it was the hardest face she had ever seen, but there was nothing vicious in it—just a controlled, disciplined strength.

Kilgore was considering Jones' suggestion. "I think I'd go along with that. But we've got to consult Chester. See what he finds out from Nunn."

Jones stayed outside the door, guarding Chester as always; the rest found chairs in a bleak waiting room. It was a long wait. Nunn had

been a powerful man. Dawn was a sickly gray at the windows when Chester appeared at the doorway, Jones at his shoulder. Chester's face was pale—even his dark-rimmed eyes seemed drained of color. He stood staring vacantly at them as though he saw something beyond their anxious faces. Kilgore broke the silence.

"He's dead?"

Chester focused on him. "Thank God," he said. Val put her face in her hands. Steve could guess the fear that was torturing her. Phil Norton was in the power of the creatures who had destroyed Nunn. He got up and prowled restlessly. Tem Chester drew a shuddering sigh.

"We've got a lot of work to do. Let's get back to Washington."

"His people?" faltered Val.

"He had none," Kilgore said. "I've made the arrangements."

Coming out onto the street they were lashed by a cold rain, wind-driven off the lake. The skies were leaden. Val shivered and moved unconsciously closer to Steve in the big official car. "Isn't there a hell in Dante's Inferno that's cold?" she whispered.

Surprisingly, it was Jones who answered. "The seventh—lowest—" and he quoted, soft-voiced: "'Although by reason of the bitter cold . . . every trace of feeling had gone away entirely from my face. . . . It seemed to me that I could feel . . . blasts of icy wind . . . from the great bat-like wings . . .'"

No one spoke of Nunn until they were back in Chester's apartment. Jones came in and sat near the door, gun in hand. Steve looked at Val's exhausted face and went into the kitchenette, where he proceeded very competently to make breakfast. Val opened her eyes wide at the table he spread for them: scrambled eggs, crisp bacon, muffins oozing butter, cups of fragrant coffee.

The others seemed to take it all for granted, but as they ate, Val's gaze kept returning to Steve. It wasn't so much the cooking, although it was as good a breakfast as she had ever eaten. What surprised her was the fact that he had made it with so little fuss or fanfare. Phil accepted—and expected—fulsome admiration on those rare occasions when he offered to make the coffee.

She discovered Tem Chester's quizzical gaze on her. "He's good with children and old people, too," he advised her. The others looked up, uncomprehending. Tem relented and called them to the business at hand.

"I got a lot from Nunn," he began. "The Masters use the Leng's animal sensitivity to warn them of ground or air approach. Nunn felt he'd been spotted when he drove into town. Not that there was any disturbance; place seemed like any small town drowsing through a lazy Spring afternoon, but he felt eyes watching him from every curtained window and shadowy doorway.

"He went into a cafe and was served by a golden giant of a man in immaculate white trousers and shirt. The food was very poor. That was the last he remembers until he woke up in a dark cell. It was cold and damp. He was chained to a stone floor. Nunn didn't know how long they left him there but when a light finally came, it hurt his eyes. A golden giant, could be the twin of the one in the cafe, came into the cell, attended by two hairy, dark-skinned creatures. The next bit was—rugged. His conscious memory shied away from it. I had to probe . . ."

Chester glanced at Val. "They wanted information. Nunn didn't think he had given anything away; believes he stuck to the traveling salesman story. One queer thing—He thought he heard another man—"

"Phil?" breathed Val.

Kilgore shook his head. "Nunn didn't know Norton. Most of my special agents are unknown to each other and to the regular staff. Then no one can betray the rest. So he wouldn't have recognized your husband."

"From what I read in Nunn's mind, I'm sure it wasn't Phil Norton he overheard." Chester frowned. "Nunn had been there quite awhile. They'd been using a whip of green light on him, some sort of nerve shock apparently—agonizing pain. He couldn't be too sure of what he was hearing or seeing. But he thought he heard a man

talking and laughing with his captors."

"Laughing?" asked Val, with a little thrill of horror.

"Nunn registered a carefree human laugh. My own idea is that it might have been one of the poor devils they've enslaved, one of the townspeople or technicians, perhaps, tortured past the limits of reason laughing insanely. The Masters seem to be a sadistic race who enjoy inflicting suffering."

"Jones suggests H-bombing them," offered Kilgore. "I'll put the proposal before the President if you agree."

"Before or after Phil Norton's brought out?" asked Steve.

There was a moment's silence. Then Chester shrugged. "There are other considerations. Blasting Ore Valley isn't going to help us find out how many other settlements there are, or where they're located. If there are more of them in North America, we have to know. Then there's that virus—how's it disseminated—what's the cure? And I'd like a closer look at those disc-shaped machines they've got. Be interesting to know what makes 'em so much faster than our stuff." He turned to Kilgore. "I'll prepare a report for the President. You can take it to him at once, while I get Mrs. Norton ready. If he—or any of you—can think of a better plan . . ." He waited, glancing from one grim face to another. Steve was grave and full of pity as his eyes rested on Val; the girl was

white-faced with strain and weariness, her magnificent body slumped in a chair; Jones, darkly non-committal; Kilgore, angry yet frustrated by the logic of Chester's plan. No one had a suggestion to offer, so Chester went on:

"You may have wondered how Nunn got away. He had help . . . from inside. After one particularly prolonged session with his questioners, Nunn blanked out. When he came to, he heard someone moving near him. He tried to hold himself still to listen. Whoever was making that stealthy approach seemed to be inching closer along the floor. Nunn wondered what new sort of horror the Masters had devised. Then there was a sighing groan—in that place of darkness one didn't advertise even his pain, lest the Masters' attention be attracted—and hands began to work at one of the metal cuffs on Nunn's wrists. There was a rasp of metal against metal, dreadfully loud, an agonizing pressure, and the cuff scraped off.

"Nunn and his unseen friend huddled together in the darkness, hardly daring to breathe. Desperately Nunn tried to control the ceaseless trembling of his limbs lest the remaining chains rattle and alert their captors. After a long moment the rescuer inched across Nunn's body and began to work on the other cuff. Nunn would not have believed a human body could be so frail, so light."

"Was it human?" asked Val.



"Oh, yes! As he worked, the man breathed his story against Nunn's ear. He was the former office manager of the Ore Valley Company. The Masters had written his parents back East that he had been burned to death in a fire. They even shipped a charred body back. They kept him to advise as to answering letters, both business and the little trickle of personal mail which came in. He had the freedom of the cells. They had to keep him sane so he could help them, so they didn't torture him. They only removed his legs so he couldn't run away."

Val got up and walked away from the table. She tried to light a cigarette with fingers that shook. A big steady hand brought a lighter up to meet her cigarette. "Want to go and rest awhile now?" asked Steve.

Val pulled smoke deep into her lungs. "I'm all right." She returned to her place at the table, which Kilgore was now silently clearing. She met Chester's enquiring, pale blue stare. "You make it come alive."

Chester nodded, accepting that as a tribute. He went on: "The manager got Nunn's feet loose and whispered for him to follow. They crawled in the dark through rough stone passages. Several times they heard quick, pattering footsteps, and made themselves small against the wall. But no one discovered them, and eventually Nunn's guide led him to a place that reeked

evilily. It was the sewer—the only unguarded way out. Nunn made it somehow, and after a nightmare trip, found himself in a little river, more like a creek, where he splashed and floated and at dawn was far from Ore Valley.

"He stole rides on trucks at night. No one would have picked him up in his condition, and he was too afraid of the Masters to show himself. He made it to Chicago before he collapsed." Chester frowned at Val. "Are you still willing to go in?"

Val stubbed out her cigarette and gave him a steady smile. "Phil's in there. And you're going to see I have a good disguise. If things get too rough, you can always drop that bomb."

Steve started to object, thought better of it and went into the kitchenette. Kilgore set up the recorder and Chester began speaking into it. Jones sat by the door, drinking coffee. Val watched them for a moment, then wandered into the kitchenette. Steve was stacking the dishes. Val got out the dishpan and began to wash them. Steve found a towel and dried, his big hands deft with the wet china. They worked in a comfortable silence. It was an odd little domestic interlude, contrasting strangely with the dark and urgent business they were engaged in. It was a curiously satisfying experience. Val realized with surprise that she and Phil Norton had never done dishes in this relaxed intimacy—in fact, had not

shared any domestic chores. They had had so short a time together, and that so broken. . . . To her horror she felt a tear sliding down her cheek. She brushed it away hastily, hoping Steve hadn't seen it. Chester called him, and with a little shrug and a smile he shook out the towel and hung it carefully before he went into the living room. By the time Val had things tidy in the kitchen, Steve and Kilgore were sealing up the tape in a metal case. Placing this carefully in an inside pocket, Kilgore left for the emergency interview with the President.

"And now," said Chester, "we'll get you ready to visit Ore Valley. First: your crime. I've decided what it's to be. We're lucky Nunn made it to Chicago."

Val had an unpleasant premonition. Chester, reading her mind, nodded. "Nunn would be glad to know his body was being used to trap the Masters. Now, this is the plan: You took up with a traveling salesman, robbed and murdered him. Most foully. The police will believe that you are criminally insane, a sadist. I'll see that the newspapers get lurid details—an Oriental dancer whose familiar is a venomous snake, strange jungle rites—they'll eat it up. I hope you have lots of pictures of yourself in costume."

"Cobber's not a venomous—" began Val. It was easier if she concentrated on details and didn't let the full implications of the scheme sink in.

"I know it's a robot. So does everyone who's worked with you. But by the time I'm finished, everyone will swear it was a deadly reptile. The public likes it better that way. Makes you more frightening and loathesome. You will be," proclaimed Chester smugly, "the most hated person since Jack the Ripper and the Baron de Sade. You will have to be careful you aren't torn to pieces before you reach Ore Valley."

"I'll try to avoid that," promised Val, with a twisted smile.

"I had intended to hypno-condition you to believe that you really had murdered Nunn," said Chester, "but I see two objections. If I do it without changing your attitude toward the taking of human life, the burden of guilt might prove too terrible and your mind retreat from reality. I need you in perfect mental balance if I'm to receive accurate reports when I scan you. However, if I change your attitude so the thought of taking life doesn't disturb you, you might end up by joining forces with Smith and the Masters." He sighed. "You'll just have to pretend. I'm sorry. The hypno-conditioning would have been a protection for you in case Smith gets suspicious."

Val remembered the description of the stone-floored cells and the chains, and her flesh crawled. Jones spoke up softly. "Are you giving her a cyanide capsule?"

Chester pursed his lips. "She's no good to us, dead."

Steve growled something wordless. Chester said testily, "Don't forget I'm going to be based just beyond their range of detection. I'll go in and rescue her if necessary."

"How?" asked Steve.

"I'll tell them we'll drop a bomb on the whole town if she isn't released. Then we'll move troops in and take them prisoner."

"Why risk Val at all then? Why can't we move in right away?"

"And give them time to blow up their ships—or escape in them? I must have some idea of their weapons and the number and location of their settlements," replied Chester, too patiently. "I want to be able to hit them all at once, so one can't warn the others. After Val sends me what I want, you can deliver the ultimatum. Satisfied?"

Steve wasn't. But since Val had not voiced any objections, he was ashamed to say more. So I can't help fussing like a broody hen, he thought angrily. The woman wants to rescue her man. She's got more of what it takes than I've got. I'd better shut up and start thinking how to make this crazy deal safer for her.

It was nearly four in the afternoon before Chester had transferred all the necessary data to Val's mind. It was a meticulous briefing: every tiny hint which he had picked from the mind of Smith was faithfully transferred to Val's, even when neither of them quite understood the full implications. For instance,

there was an almost reverential attitude toward the color green in Smith's mind; whenever he thought of himself or any other Master, the costume was white or silver. Then there was a quickly-suppressed image of a woman in filmy orange draperies. Color seemed to have special meaning for the Master race.

At length Chester confessed himself satisfied. "I've set a strong mental link between us. I'll have no difficulty contacting your mind now, especially with an amplifier built into your robot snake."

"But Cobber's in Los Angeles!" groaned Val.

"Not now. I'm expecting it to be delivered here within the next hour. I phoned for it yesterday. An agent's flying it out. Now, you know what to buy. Go out and get a wardrobe." He handed her a wallet. "There ought to be enough there. Be back by six o'clock."

The agent from Los Angeles arrived with Cobber in a padded box. He was followed within a few minutes by the electronics expert of the Bureau, who purred over the complicated insides of the big silvery-green reptile. He put it through its paces. The six-foot robot slithered and reared and struck in a sensuously-writhing series of movements. Steve stood frowning at it, divided between revulsion and admiration. "It'll never do," he said.

Chester and Martin, the electronics man, glared at him.

"It's too friendly-looking," he amplified.

The cobra did have an amazing suggestion of a fatuous smirk, and long, glitter-tipped eyelashes had been fixed around its jet-black eyes. These fluttered coyly at the end of the cycle of movement, presumably when acknowledging applause. The others admitted the effect was amusing rather than frightening.

Very gently Martin disconnected the extravagant lashes, and a row of superimposed pink sequins which gave the suggestion of a smile. They ran Cobber through his cycle again. This time, Steve felt only revulsion.

"I think you've got it," said Chester. "It's all snake, now. I want you to add a power-boost like the one you put inside the eyeglass frames on that Dolman case. The operative has to broadcast over a two or three mile radius."

Martin put Cobber on the dining room table and set happily to work. When he had finished, Chester offered him a cigar, and lit it for him with a flame that moved rhythmically. In two minutes Martin had forgotten what he had done and was on his way home, convinced that he'd delivered a two-way communicator to Mr. Kilgore's bodyguard.

Val returned at half-past six. Over one arm she carried a white polo coat. From a white suitcase she took a cloth-of-silver gown, a short white silk tennis dress, grecian-draped over one shoulder, and a white Italian silk suit.

"They called this an understated suit," she apologized. "That doesn't refer to the price tag. I'm afraid I spent every cent you gave me, Mr. Chester."

Steve was eyeing the garments with interest. "You're planning to make an unobtrusive getaway in these?"

"They're just bait for Smith. Show us your getaway clothes," invited Chester. He was admiring the soft texture of the silk.

Val shook her head. "I've been thinking. If I were the kind of woman who'd kill a man that way, I wouldn't creep or hide or disguise myself. I'd feel superior to ordinary law-abiding timid humans. I might be on the run, but I wouldn't skulk."

"I'll guarantee our dullest agent would pick you up in less than twenty-four hours in that outfit," said Steve, holding up the tennis dress. "Isn't this like the one that caused the rumble at Wimbledon? Wow!"

Chester frowned. "Pictures of you will be on all the wires. You won't be easy to miss if you wear these."

"I've been thinking about that, too," said Val earnestly. "Say I hire a car, a real showy one, and ask enough questions so they'll remember me, later. Then you give me twenty-four hours start before you discover the body. I'll run the car into a river or off a cliff or something, steal another car and head for Ore Valley. That should con-

fuse things for awhile and yet leave a trail clear enough to find."

Steve shook his head in mock alarm. "The criminal mind at work! I almost hate to ask this, but have you ever stolen a car?"

Wide-eyed, the girl shook her head.

"It's not as easy as it looks in the movies," he advised her. "Anyway, I have a better idea. Don't steal the second car. Too many local law enforcement agents on the lookout for stolen vehicles. They'd pick you up before you got out of the state. I'd suggest you buy a car before you ditch the first one."

"Using what for money?"

"Mr. Kilgore'll give you enough for expenses and a down-payment on a new car. He's got a fund for emergencies. And why not buy a trailer while you're at it? That way, you wouldn't have to stop at motels and restaurants."

"Too hard to handle at high speeds," objected Jones. "We don't want her to end up in a ditch. But the idea's good. If she took blankets and water and food in the car, she could camp along the way."

"We can hold up the pursuit for quite a while, searching for your body after the first car's discovered," went on Steve. "The crucial time, as I see it, is that first twenty-four hours while you are in the hired car. They'll have the license number and the description—and you won't be hard to identify."

Val shrugged. "I'll have to make time, then. Drive the whole twenty-

four hours. How far will that take me?"

Steve got out maps and they pored over them together, the red head close to the sandy one. Jones watched them from his post by the door. Finally Steve looked up from his figuring. "I'd say Des Moines or Sioux City. That's averaging thirty-five miles an hour for nearly nine hundred miles."

"But I can hit sixty-five or seventy," protested Val.

"You've got to stop to eat and gas up," put in Jones. "And you can't hit any seventy through towns."

"All right, say you can make Sioux City," muttered Steve. "That's on the Missouri River. Must be lots of bluffs you could run a car over, near the town. Let's find a spot," and he began to leaf through a detail map. By the time they had the place chosen, Kilgore was back from his conference with the President.

"He wants us to go ahead. He'll have three jet bombers and several vertijets ready with crews on twenty-four hour alert. He agrees with Chester that it is of utmost importance to know the strength and position of the enemy, and especially what they use to power their flying saucers. But he urges that no unreasonable risk be taken with Mrs. Norton's safety." He glanced around at them. "Are you ready?"

Chester explained about the car to be rented and abandoned. From an envelope Kilgore took a thick

packet of bills and gave them to Val. "From the President's emergency fund. We'll fly you to Chicago this evening. I'll give you the name of a cheap hotel where there aren't any questions asked. Then during the night Nunn's body will be brought up to your room and the stage set. You go out early in the morning, rent your car, show them your California license and be sure you give your stage name. We want to be able to 'trace' you quickly. Don't mention the hotel where you're staying; tell them you've been touring by train and decided you wanted to see more of the country. Tell them you're going South; that'll confuse the issue for awhile. Then get going.

"We'll see that the hotel discovers the body within twenty-four hours. We'll help the local authorities—I can arrange for us to be called in. Your name will be plastered all over the front pages. That'll alert the car rental agency. There should be a good description of you and the car by the evening editions."

"We figured she'd get to Sioux City within twenty-four hours, ditch the car and go on in the new one."

"I wish she didn't have to buy a car," worried Kilgore. "Has it occurred to you that we *must* lose her before she gets within guessing distance of Ore Valley? We want to pave the way for a good reception for Mrs. Norton, but we must not alarm the aliens. If we are

breathing down her neck, they might consider her presence an embarrassment to them, and—take steps. I'd rather we let it be thought she died in the river."

"You're right," Chester injected impatiently. "Jones and I will pick her up after she ditches the rented car. We'll let her 'steal' our car and we won't report it till she's safely hidden—"

"Or not at all," added Kilgore.

Jones was staring at Chester. "You haven't got a car."

"Get one tomorrow. In a woman's name. Get one of the F. B. I. stenographers to buy it for you—that little blue-eyed one who always perks up when you go past."

Jones shot him a startled glance. "I didn't—"

"Of course you didn't. You're always looking for prospective murderers of me. Very proper of you. But she's been watching you for rather different reasons, and she'd be glad to do you a favor. Has some sense, too. She'll keep her mouth shut. Name's Doyle."

Kilgore sighed. "Well, that settles it. Chester, Jones, head for Sioux City tomorrow morning and be waiting for Mrs. Norton at agreed contact point."

Chester turned to Steve. "No use trying to keep the office running with me and Jones away. Want a vacation, Abbot? Or would you rather come along to help?" He smiled knowingly. Steve could have smacked him.

"We'll need someone to handle

things at this end," objected Kilgore. "I do have a few other things to attend to myself, you know."

"This is the most important thing any of us could be working on. I want you yourself to handle things here. I may need those bombers at a moment's notice, or other things only you could requisition for me quickly."

Kilgore grunted. "I suppose you're going to be playing cloak and dagger all over Wyoming?" His sarcasm barely hid the real anxiety underlying.

"I've got to establish hidden headquarters in the area, close enough to receive Valentine's thoughts. Steve can be liaison—get a room at the nearest motel, locate the telephone office, hire a car locally. He can tell them he's going prospecting, hunting butterflies, anything to give him an excuse to come out to us daily with supplies. Besides, I may need him to deliver an ultimatum," he concluded with the knowing smile.

Val had finished repacking her suitcase. Now she shook out her thick mane of lovely red hair and held up a pair of sharp scissors. "Somebody'll have to cut this for me. Mr. Chester wants it one inch all over."

Chester waved to Steve. The big man got up, approached Val, took the scissors as though they were a deadly weapon. He was very conscious of the other men watching him. He grasped a handful of the warm, sweet-smelling, shining stuff.

Then he looked at Chester. "You're not going to cut *this* off?"

"No. You are," corrected Chester.

"The Rape of the Lock," suggested Jones, and quoted, grinning:

*"Say, what strange motive, Goddess! could compel  
A well-bred Lord 't assault a  
gentle Belle?"*

"So you read poetry," gritted Steve, snipping away grimly.

Suiting Pope's lines to Steve's actions, Jones drawled gently:

*" . . . The Baron then extends  
The little engine on his fingers'  
ends;  
The meeting points the sacred  
hair dissever  
From the fair head, for ever and  
for ever!"*

"You want to do this?" Steve's face was dark red, as he glowered at Jones.

"Watch it, Barber! Mr. Chester said they painted their ears, not mutilated them!"

Steve moved around the girl till his back was to Jones and went on cutting. After a few moments a gleaming pile lay on a towel on the table. Steve placed the scissors carefully beside it. He didn't look at Val's face. "I'm—sorry."

Val shrugged. "It'll grow again." She looked oddly provocative with the short velvety brush of red over her well-shaped skull. "I'll hide this under a turban, then I'll be ready to leave." She wound a dark

green scarf around her head. She picked up Cobber's box. Kilgore took the suitcase. "Meet you in Sioux City," she said with a little smile. The door closed quietly.

Three days later. Noon.

Val stood just inside the closed flap of a camouflaged tent. Chester peered up at her anxiously.

"You know what you're to do?"

"Move in on the town—demand to see the management—move in on the management," Val said cheerfully.

Steve snarled, "This is crazy. Like throwing a kitten into a cageful of lions."

"I've handled stagemanagers. I even cooled off a psycho with a bread knife who thought he had a call to rid the world of Jezebel—which was me."

Steve rounded on Chester. "You probed those Things. You know what you're sending her into—!"

"She loves Phil Norton. If she doesn't make this effort to get him out, something inside her will wither. She'll be no use to herself or anybody else."

Steve caught Val's shoulders and glared into the brown eyes which were level with his own. "If you're in danger—holler! Send out a mental blast that'll make Chester's head split! You hear me?"

"I'll holler," said Val meekly.

Steve glared at her a moment longer, then stamped out of the tent. Val and Chester followed. Jones was standing outside the tent,

gun in hand as usual. He followed Val and Chester to the big cream convertible. Chester shook hands formally and hurried back to the tent to test the short wave to Washington that Steve was setting up.

Jones helped Val into the car. He had taken off his coat and the straps of his shoulder holster crossed an immaculate white shirt. His dark hair hung over his forehead. He held out a small, blued-metal gun. "Keep this on you," he said quietly.

"Where?" asked Val.

He looked her over helplessly, touched his shoulder holster, shook his head. "Garter?"

"I'll find a place," promised Val. "And—thank you."

"It's got six shots in it. You know how to use it?"

When she shook her head, he showed her, painstakingly. As she put the gun in her purse, he asked, not looking at her, "Is Mr. Chester right when he says you have to do this?"

Val nodded slowly. "He—knows what's in my mind."

Jones said, "Don't feel bad. He scans all of us, knows all our secrets, but they don't touch him in here." He tapped his chest. "And he doesn't pass judgment. It's all academic with Mr. Chester—"

"I don't mind at all," Val reassured him. "I'm not ashamed of my thoughts."

The narrow black gaze moved over her face slowly, like a caress.



"She walks in beauty, like the night—" he whispered,—"A heart whose love is innocent." He walked away toward the tent.

Val stared after his small, compact figure till it disappeared inside the tent. Then she started the car and drove slowly across the sandy earth to the private road of the Ore Valley Mining Company.

The hard black shadows of afternoon had melted into the blue and gray and purple haze of dusk when the big cream convertible drew off the road, just under the edge of the final hill. Beyond lay Ore Valley, the golden Masters, cruel and beautiful, the alien Lengs—and Phil. The tall woman sat very still, listening to the nameless small rustlings of that desolate, brush-covered land. No birds sang. She had not seen a prairie dog since she left the main highway, but several times lizards and snakes had slipped off the road as the car flashed by. After a long moment she dropped her hands from the wheel, took the robot snake from his box and draped his topaz and emerald length over her shoulders and the mechanism, triggered by the warmth of her body, set the jeweled evil head to weaving nervously. Then she reached out mentally for Artemus Chester.

"I'm just ready to go over the hill into Ore Valley," she thought at him. "I've seen no one since I entered the private road, but I have a feeling I'm being observed. No

green flares in sight. No U. F. O. I'll keep Cobber on my shoulders as long as I can . . . Wish me luck!"

As she leaned forward to switch on the ignition, she caught a hint of movement at the edge of her vision. Continuing deliberately to start the engine, she glanced sideways, searching the shadowy brush. Yes, surely that was a crouching figure peering at her. She put the car slowly into motion, and drove slowly over the hill. Below her in a wide, flat valley, ringed with hills and thrusting buttes, sprawled the little town—village, rather—of Ore Valley. The road, which was in disrepair, hairpinned down the hill. Val got the impression that the few lights, winking here and there among the lonely little rows of company houses, had been turned on just as she came into the valley—for her special benefit, as it were.

She was about halfway down the hill when a luminous green globe shot overhead and down toward the town. She braked to watch it. It seemed to have come from the point where she had noticed the crouching figure. "Hurrying home to get a reception ready," she thought, and released the brakes. When she could take her eyes from the broken, twisting road, she caught glimpses of the small town set so incongruously among the barren hills: the few rows of tiny grayish houses with neglected yards and broken picket fences; an oasis of green which probably indicated a park-

like town square, and the looming bulk of a white building beyond the park. It was the only large structure in the place and seemed to dominate the town. Val decided to make for that building—if she were allowed to get so far. She realized suddenly that Phil was probably a prisoner in a stone cell somewhere under one of the buildings . . . warm-fleshed, laughing Phil with the conspiratorial smile that set the blood tingling in her veins. . . .

Firmly she put aside such thoughts. Not that she minded Chester reading them. Val wasn't ashamed of her feeling for Phil. It was only that, if Phil were to be rescued, she mustn't dull her perceptions of Ore Valley with emotion.

Now she was down off the hill and approaching the town. The road led past some warehouses, closed, a huge covered truck and some raised storage tanks. Val thought at Chester: "I'd feel something was screwy here even without knowing about our friends. I have not seen a living thing, not even a dog or a cat. And I don't hear any of the usual noises. It could be a ghost town, only it's too tidy. Unless ghosts are good housekeepers—?" She caught herself up. Emotion suppressed one way tended to erupt in another. Chester had told her to look about her carefully, note every detail which might be of help to him, vocalize her impressions mentally so he could get

a complete picture. So now she thought at him: I feel as though I were going onto an empty stage before a very critical audience. I can see no one, but I know they're there. I think I've got stage fright."

In a surge of nervous excitement, Val sounded the horn. It echoed oddly among the silent buildings. And then she was out onto the street which led around the little public park, a square faced with a few small stores, a darkened movie theater, a cafe or two, and facing her across the tops of the trees, the white building she had seen from the hill. It looked like a hotel.

As though her blowing of the horn had been a signal, the lights began to come on in some of the stores. It could have been the usual time for lighting up; somehow, Val doubted that. And she caught her first sight of people—two jeans-clad figures who came out of a cafe and got into an old car. As she drove past them on her way around the square toward the hotel, she tried to make out their features in the gloom. All she got, in the light reflected from the cafe beyond them, was a shadowy impression of swarthy skins and dark hair. Well, why not? Miners were traditionally grimy of skin. Or was that the kind of mining they did in Ore Valley?

Val turned to go along the north side of the square. Another car was sliding along in front of her, nearly at the next corner. She wondered where it had come from. Had it

been parked just beyond the corner, spying? Her nerves jerked and her muscles tightened sickeningly as a green glare lit up the sky in front of the white building. Then she was at the corner and turning, and the white building loomed above her . . . and the green glare was a sign prosaically stating HOTEL in letters several feet high.

Val drove up and parked beyond the hotel entrance. She sounded the horn again, waited, and when no bell-boy emerged to take her suitcase, she put Cobber back in his box, took it over her arm and went into the hotel.

The first thing she noticed was that the hotel smelled wrong. She'd stopped overnight in plenty of small-town hotels when she had her act on the road. They smelled of stale cooking, beer, tarnished brass and old cloth, cigars and cheap perfume. This one wasn't stale or sour or dirty, just wrong. Inhuman. There was the usual assortment of dusty potted plants, the imitation marble floor, the sagging leather furniture, the limp scatter rugs. It was almost too typical, like a stage set. And it was empty.

Val walked over to the long wooden counter and was startled to see a swarthy youth slouching on his elbows, peering at her from behind a rack of dusty post cards.

"I'd like a room," she said.

"Lost your way?" asked the clerk with a toothy grin. His small black eyes were flat and lustreless. His skin glistened with an oily film.

"A room with bath and supper," Val repeated coldly.

"Grill's closed. All rooms reserved." The clerk's speech was singsong, slurred. His insolence was no greater than she had often met in similar situations, but Val felt her skin crawling. Was this one of the Lengs, sub-human servants of the Master race? She put Cobber's box on the desk and got a five dollar bill from her purse. No telling who was observing her. Whatever happened, she must keep her own behavior normal and above suspicion. She pushed the money across the desk.

"I'm sure you could manage to find a room somewhere—"

With dismay she noted the increasing arrogance in the clerk's manner. He took the bill, looked at it, then flicked it back with a grayish-yellow, horny fingernail. "Grill closed. All rooms reserved," he repeated, and his manner was an insult.

Val took her courage in her hands—literally. She picked up the small guest register, closed it and threw it into his face. Then in a voice of controlled fury she said, "Get me a room!"

Whatever he might have answered, she never knew, for a buzzer sounded below desk level. His snarl gradually slackened as he listened. Then he bent his shoulders ingratiatingly and said, "Will sign book, yes? Then room." He picked up the guest register from the floor, opened it and handed it to her. The ink

was dried in the desk pen, but she used one from her own purse. As she signed, she was aware that his long nails were rasping across the welt the book had made on his cheek.

He closed the book without looking at it, took a key from the rack and gave it to her. "Maybe food later."

"My suitcase?" asked Val.

He shrugged, grinning with a mirthless show of yellowed teeth. "Everybody at circus," he jerked a thumb at a faded poster on the wall.

It was useless to argue. Val went out and got her suitcase from the car. She left the car closed but not locked in case someone wanted to check on her license, and returned through the lobby. The stooping clerk was still there, and his eyes followed her as she walked across the lobby and up the stairs. Cobber's box and her purse and key in one hand, the suitcase in the other, she mounted the wooden stairway as quickly as she could, conscious every moment of that hard black stare.

In the first floor corridor the alien smell was strong. It had a chemical bite. All the doors were closed, no light showed under any of them. The long dingy hall was lit by a single bulb above the head of the staircase and a red fire-escape globe at the far end. Val put down her suitcase and looked at the key. The numeral was thirteen. With a performer's ingrained superstition, Val's heart sank at the sight of the unlucky number. Then she looked

at the door nearest her. It was number one. Was room thirteen the last one down that long narrow hallway, near the ominous red light? Val picked up her suitcase and walked down the hall.

Thirteen was the last room, its door lurid in the light from the red globe. Inside, however, it was ordinary enough. The floor looked fairly clean and the bed comfortable. Val turned back the cover and appraised the sheets. They were clean and smelled heavily of the chemical. Val locked the door and unpacked her clothing quickly. She found herself stopping often to listen. Once she even went to the door and pressed her ear against it. Then she checked the lock, put the snake-amplifier on and thought over her impressions of the town and the hotel. When she was sure Tem Chester had had a chance to pick her mind clean of detail, she put Cobber away and took a hurried shower, unwilling to be caught at it—by whom? She didn't know. After all, the door was locked.

As she showered, she thought about Phil. Was he somewhere beneath this building, in a wet black crypt? How best could she help him? Her impulse was to take the small deadly gun Jones had given her at the field camp, ignore Chester's instructions, and go down into the cellars at once, looking for Phil, blasting into red death anyone who tried to halt her. . . . Val switched on the cold water and let its icy blast clear away the emotional

thinking. Such action as she had imagined would be completely out of the character which Chester had so painstakingly established for her. A vicious, sadistic killer would certainly not try to release one of the prisoners *about whom she knew nothing*. . . .

The shock of remembering that was as salutary as the icy water. She must be careful not to betray the whole plan by revealing knowledge she wasn't supposed to have. As she dressed, she knew she must follow Chester's advice. Phil's rescue would have to wait until she was accepted as a guest by Smith and had some freedom of movement. Quickly she slipped into the white suit and dark green pumps. With indelible lipstick she outlined the ridges of her ears, covering the lobe with delicate color. The short red-gold fuzz made a nimbus of light around her head, but she covered it with the dark green jersey, turban-wise. Then she draped Cobber over her shoulders and sauntered down into the lobby, a magnificent woman superbly dressed, too striking to remain unnoticed even without the weird neck-piece she flaunted.

The lobby was deserted. She went out to the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Her car was gone. She looked up and down the empty street. The only light came from the hotel sign. The hotel itself apparently took up only one end of the building. The rest was divided into offices for the Ore Valley Mining Company, a

company store and a post office—all closed and dark.

Val shrugged and listened for the night sounds of the town. Almost at once she became aware of a strange hoarse shouting at a distance. It had almost the sound of chanting. The voices were deep and ragged. There was a momentary lull in the chant; then the night was split by a shriek which rose and rose into a shrill of agony. . . . Val clapped her hands over her ears. Above the trees pulsed a green glow. The screaming stopped as two balls of green flame shot into the sky in a widening v.

Val's hands dropped to her sides. At her shoulder a familiar slurred voice said, "My people catch spy. Fix good. You go see?"

Val shook her head. "Get me food."

"Good food at cafe, across square," the clerk said. "You go through park?"

Val looked across the street at the narrow pathway which led through the park to the lighted area at the far side. Many of the trees were dead; all of them were draped in grayish clinging strands like the filament from giant spiders. Surely it was too far north for Spanish moss? Her mind tried to fit the alien appearance into a familiar pattern. Between the shrouded trees the green light from the opposite side of the square cast a sickly glow. Against it, Val noticed one, then several dark shapes moving through the trees toward her.

She was conscious of the clerk

breathing heavily at her shoulder, like an overeager dog on the trail of something. She had a strong feeling that if she showed the slightest trace of fear, the hulking creature would be on her shoulders like a beast of prey. Val stood taller and turned her graceful dancer's body to face him.

"Get my car," she snapped.

"Boss—Mr. Smith—said put in company garage. Not safe on street at night."

As if to underline his remark, the dark forms coming across the park drew closer, a skulking wolf-pack closing in. They hovered at the very edge of the shrouded wood, silent, menacing. With an effort of will Val directed her gaze away from them and locked it on the black inhuman eyes of the clerk. He shifted nervously, as a dog will when you stare at it.

"Take me to this Mr. Smith at once. I demand to see him."

She had been able to get around the provision or law or taboo or whatever it was, that kept the Masters from seeking out human females. Chester should be pleased. She strode into the lobby after the clerk, who scuttled on ahead, grinning over his shoulder. "Want to see Boss. Very good. Follow Leng."

At the head of the stairs he held open a heavy, unmarked door. Val went through into a small hallway. The door closed behind her with a disconcerting thud. A yellow light grew and filled the hall with almost a tangible vapor, a diffused bright-

ness. With it was the acrid odor Val had noticed in the lobby and the bedroom. She stood very still, one hand seeking Cobber's scales for reassurance. This was the moment Chester had been waiting for—the first direct contact with the Commander of the Invasion Forces. With Phil's captor, prodded her heart. She shook her head. There must be no emotion. She was Chester's eyes and ears, his spy in the enemy camp. Her perceptions must be sharp, uncluttered by personal fears or hopes. Smith's brain emanations must be amplified, too, she remembered, and surreptitiously turned up the volume disk under Cobber's hooded, vicious head.

A panel slid aside in the wall facing her, and a clear high-pitched, arrogant voice rang out. "You have asked to be brought to me. What do you want?"

Val stepped forward into a large room filled with the golden light-haze.

On a raised circular platform sat a shining golden figure, buddha-like. He was a giant, smooth-muscled and magnificently built, his well shaped head completely hairless. The handsome features were set in a scornful impassivity. Had it not been for his amber, heavy-lidded eyes, slit-pupilled like a cat's, Val might have thought him a larger than life golden statue of some forgotten deity. But the eyes burned hotly on her and the chiselled golden lips opened as Smith, indicating the guest register, warned

her, "Don't bother to lie to me. I know you are Valentine Edmonds, known as Valti, the dancer."

There was neither mercy nor humankindness in the face that confronted her. Centuries of inbreeding, the exaltation of pride and cruelty, had gone into the forming of those perfect, inhuman features. Val knew she must take a strong line or go under. But it wasn't a new battle to the girl. She'd fought cruelty and treachery and lust many times before, in her effort to establish herself as a dancer.

"How do you know my name?" she challenged coldly.

"The police of this country are broadcasting it, with your description and an account of your recent activities." His English was flawless, unaccented. His lips parted in a sneering smile. "You seem to have offended their sensibilities. I am surprised you got this far."

Val came closer as he spoke. There was a sudden stirring at the base of the platform. A Leng larger than any she had seen glared up at her with flat black eyes. Around his neck was a wide golden collar. A harness of metal and leather, ornamented with jewels, adorned the hairy body. Val experienced a vague disturbing feeling that she had seen that flat black gaze and the shock of unruly dark hair somewhere before. However, she ignored the Leng's threatening movement and came closer to the golden giant.

"So you know who I am and why I am running away from these

fools. Do you intend to turn me over to the police?"

"I haven't decided what to do with you. When your arrival was observed, some of my—associates felt you represented a possible danger, that the police might pursue you here. However, the latest telecast announced that you had drowned in the Missouri river."

"I thought company towns had their own guard system. What are you afraid of?"

Smith looked at her sharply but didn't pursue the subject. Instead, he indicated Cobber's sinuous form. "Isn't that rather an odd ornament for a woman?"

Val shrugged her shoulders. "Cobber's my trademark, like Charlie McCarthy for Bergen. I never let him out of my sight."

"Let me see it," Smith extended a narrow golden hand.

Val ignored it, shaking her head with a slow smile. "No one ever handles him but me."

Smith's hand flicked ever so slightly and the crouching Leng began to rise. Val pretended not to notice the gesture, continuing calmly, "He's a robot with circuits set to perform with me when I dance. Careless handling could disorganize his mechanism. It would be too bad to spoil my dance—don't you think?" She swayed her body, a mere sketch of movement, infinitely provocative.

Smith leaned slightly toward her. "I'd have to see you dance, before I could answer that." His gesture

arrested the Leng in mid-movement. The creature sank back to the floor, baring his fangs and snarling at Val. The girl lifted one thin-pencil-led eyebrow.

"Your pet isn't as manageable as mine."

"You aren't afraid of Lengs?"

"Why should I be? I have one of my own—" Val paused, shaken. Where had that lie come from? Then before her memory rose the image of Jones, that small dark hairy literate man, as he had stood before her pressing the gun into her reluctant hands. The flat, narrow-lidded black eyes, the shaggy hair dark over the low forehead—that was why the Lengs had seemed familiar! *Forgive me, Jones*, she pleaded silently. *The very thought of you is strength to me!* Smith hadn't missed her start of apprehension. He misinterpreted it. "If you have a Leng, you've no cause to fear admitting it to me!" His curious eyes were on her, probing eagerly. "Who are you? Where were you born?"

"I don't know," Val answered honestly. "I was left on the steps of an orphanage in Los Angeles and adopted by a family who brought me up as their daughter."

"Take off that scarf!" commanded Smith. Val removed the turban. Smith leaned forward, amber eyes widening as he saw the red-gold stubble and the painted ears. He addressed Val in a clipped singsong language. When he had finished, Val said coldly,

"I speak only English."

Smith rose in one lithe movement and stepped down from the dais. "The first colony established on Earth by the Masters, after years of surveillance of the planet and the taking of specimens to study the language and customs, was in a desert near the western sea-coast of this continent. That colony was lost—we never found out what happened to them. The next group to arrive found nothing but a few broken walls and a wrecked globe. It was then that Planning Control decided to take over small, established but isolated communities and impersonate their inhabitants. Such a procedure, naturally, would necessitate a much slower progress; our two-year estimate had to be revised to a ten-year plan of conquest.

"But this is all beside the point. You, your hair, your size, even your painted ears—you might be one of us. Perhaps a child of that first, lost group—" He stood in front of her, the strange eyes smoky, nostrils flaring. Tentatively he placed his golden hands on her shoulders. She looked up at him, meeting his searching scrutiny boldly. He turned her head slightly with cold, strong fingers. "What is your ear paint saying? I do not recognize the pattern."

Val's chin tingled under the cold pressure of his fingers. "I don't know why I paint my ears. Just a gimmick to make me different. Other women don't—"

"Our women do!" whispered



Smith. His hands slipped down her shoulders and pressed her body against his in an embrace which was not like anything she had ever experienced. It awoke such a flaming response in her that she cried out and pushed him from her.

"I do not please you?" Golden, arrogant, male, he towered above her.

"Remember Phil! This is your chance to save him," shouted a tiny voice deep inside her mind. "Don't antagonize this man. Play for time." Was it her own common sense speaking—or Chester? Val drew a steadying breath and resettled Cobber on her shoulders. She smiled provocatively.

"You are—overwhelming," she acknowledged truthfully. "But you must remember that I have lived my life not knowing of—your people—"

"Our people," insisted Smith. "You came to us when your life was in danger. Perhaps buried deep in your consciousness is a race-memory of the Seven Colonies. Such things are for the Mentators. We of the Landing Teams know little of these matters."

"But why should I head for this Colony?" ventured Val, hoping to keep him on the subject so Chester might pick up pertinent information.

Smith shrugged wide golden shoulders. "Possibly because it was the closest to you. The Andean and Canadian colonies would require border-crossing formalities. The

other three bases, of course, are too far—" Noting her intent gaze, he hesitated, the habit of ten years of secrecy very strong.

Val smiled, stretching lazily with a trained grace which made every movement attractive. "I'm glad it was your colony," she said.

He didn't offer to touch her again, but his smoky amber eyes were avid on her face and body. "It's been so long," he said. "But you are right to draw back. Quick mindless matings are for animals like the Leng. For the Masters, the rites of Krydome. We would not disgrace a culture which has flourished for twice ten thousand years!"

"I have forgotten—if I ever knew," whispered Val, hoping he would continue to talk so Chester could learn more about the enemy he had to meet.

"I will instruct you. Perhaps there will be a recall, as when you painted your ears, not remembering that it was the way of our women. And you have become a dancer among these Earthmen; perhaps the racial memory of the Three Ritual Dances refused to be lost. It will be interesting for us to discover how much you can bring back. But first we must have a feast and you shall meet the others. Then you may dance before us—but for me alone!" His voice hardened. "I am the Ryn, the Master of these Masters. Look not with invitation upon any of my companions."

"Perhaps the others won't accept me," said Val. "They may vote to

kill me or send me to the pits." She had to know about the underground prison. It might even be possible to make a tour of it. If the Masters were sadists, what more likely than that Smith would offer to show her his victims? But the golden giant was frowning.

"Vote? You have been corrupted by your associations. Ryn's word is law, save for the Code of Behavior. If I choose you, who would dare question? No. They will look upon you with desire and wait for the Day of Reversion."

Val didn't like the sound of that, nor of the laugh that accompanied it, but she reminded herself that within the next twenty-four hours at most, she would have found Phil and Chester would have some way to get them out. Bemused by these conflicting emotions, she became aware of Smith's hand on her hair, his palm gently moving back and forth against the velvety stubble. The look on his face shocked her—the beautiful features were twisted into a mask of passionate desire. She stepped smoothly back as though she had not noticed his hand, then dropped her head over palm-touching hands in an Oriental gesture of respect.

"May I go, Smith? If there's going to be a feast and dancing, I'd better get ready." She didn't raise her head, giving him time to recover from the passion which had possessed him. After a moment his voice came, heavy with restraint.

"You have leave to go, Valti.

I shall appoint a Leng to guard you until your own Leng finds you. But do not call me Smith. I would hear my own name from your lips before we part . . . Samith Rhu."

"Samith Rhu," said Val obediently. When she glanced up he had gone, and his servant with him. The panel behind her opened, revealing a small Leng in a golden collar. He led the way back to room thirteen, and would have followed her into the room, had she not pointed to the floor outside the door. He crouched obediently, black eyes on her face.

Closing and locking the door, Val leaned against it, hands to her face, shivering uncontrollably in the dark. Gradually she became aware of two sounds. The first and clearest was a minor, eerie wailing, like a dozen coyotes muted by distance and the walls of the building. The other sound was closer. Someone was breathing within the room. Val froze. Then very carefully she lowered her hands from her face, turned her head to locate the source of the sound.

"Don't shoot," whispered Steve Abbot. "I'm too weak to defend myself."

Mingled with a rush of relief, Val felt an irrational anger at Steve's flippancy. He was whispering again:

"Chester had a bright idea. He gimmicked up a parachute to look like one of their green globes, and had me dropped from a glider. We figured they wouldn't notice one

more green globe tonight—the air's full of them." So lightly he dismissed landing in the heart of alien territory. "I hit dirt back on the hill. It took me this long to get to the hotel and up the fire escape. Chester told me you were in room thirteen. I just came right in and made myself at home." Val moved toward him in the darkness, clutching at him with hands that trembled in spite of her. His arms went around her, steady and reassuring. "Chester's tickled pink," he whispered in her ear. "You're coming through clear as a bell and so's Smith. There seems to be something big going on—a gathering of the clans—and all isn't sweetness and light. Leng are getting out of hand, for one thing—not only here, but in some of the other colonies. But the big deal seems to be," and his voice held very steady, "that a very large force of the Masters are due to arrive within a short time."

"Invasion!" breathed the girl.

"Looks like it. So you see how valuable you are, right here in the heart of the enemy camp."

Steve was talking to give her a chance to pull herself together, Val realized. She pushed gently out of his arms, crept across to listen at the hall door. There was no sound. Was the Leng there, separated from her by the thin wood, listening, sensing the presence of Steve within the room? Had he already gone to warn Samith? Val guided Steve inside the bathroom and closed the door.

"There's a Leng on guard outside in the hall." She switched on the light. "Samith Rhu—that's Smith—is putting on a dinner for his pals and I'm the floor show. I've got to get ready. You can look the other way."

"I'm good at hooking up and zippers. Had two older sisters," whispered Steve, grinning. In the light, Val noticed that one side of his face was scraped raw and his coverall was ripped from wrist to shoulder. "Clumsy landing," he answered her worried look. "I sloped when I should have slipped."

It wasn't very funny, but Val found herself convulsed with laughter which had to be kept silent. Shaking, she motioned him back into a corner and then went out of the bathroom and turned on the bedroom light. On the bed her suitcase lay open. She took out the silver gown and the brief wisps of nylon that went under it. She hurried into them and stood regarding herself in the bureau mirror. Quickly she cleansed her face and neck with cream, removing all make-up and the thin line of eyebrows she had drawn. She covered all exposed skin areas with the dark foundation she used in her act. Then with hands that trembled, she painted her eyes. She had just picked up a lipstick to do her ears when there was a scratching at the door. The tube dropped from her fingers.

"Who—what is it?"

"Will Mistress come? Feast is ready and Ryn commands." It was

the voice of the room clerk, speaking with a new show of deference.

"Just a few minutes." Val held her voice steady.

"Ryn does not like wait," warned the clerk. The two within the room heard him exchange a few gutturals with the Leng outside the door, then there was silence. Steve had entered the bedroom at the first sound of voices. Now he slid a silenced gun back into his jacket and retrieved the lipstick from the floor. He took Val's chin in his hands, studied her ears and began carefully to outline them. Val stood very still, conscious of the warmth of his fingers. After a moment, he stood back, regarded the effect critically and nodded approval. Val slipped chiming bangles on her wrists and bent to clasp the strings of little silver bells around her ankles. Steve took them from her, knelt and adjusted them with big warm hands. He looked up as she was settling the cobra around her shoulders.

"You're—terrific," he whispered. She looked like some heathen priestess, except for the wide brown eyes that clung to his, frightened yet steady. "Have you got Jones' gun?"

She nodded. "Taped above my knee. What does Chester want me to do?"

"Just carry on as you planned. He's got the whole Air Force alerted. There's a bomber at a field just fifteen minutes from here, as the jets fly. He still wants to know

all you can find out about the other alien bases and the power source for the globes, but the main thing now is the invasion. Get Smith talking and thinking about that if you can. Have you found out anything about Phil?"

Val shook her head miserably.

"I'll snoop around a little while you're reveling with the Master Race," Steve whispered. "If I can find Norton, I'll try to get him up to the roof. In any case, I'll come back here and wait for you. We can figure something out."

"I thought I'd get Smith to show me the prisoners," said Val. "If I can locate Phil, I could go back later, after the party—"

Steve shook his head. "You concentrate on Golden Boy. That's the job only you can do. Leave Phil to me. I promise you I will not leave without him." He smiled suddenly. "It's my job to get both of you off in a vertijet before the fun starts."

"While you stay behind to cover the retreat," thought Val. "Oh, Phil, be grateful! We're on a good team!"

Again the scratching on the door, this time peremptory. "Master says come!"

Steve took Val in his arms and set his lips gently on her pale ones. "This is from Phil," he whispered. "Good luck, brave heart!"

Val motioned him back into the bathroom. Taking an orange and gold sari from the suitcase, she veiled herself from head to instep.

Then she opened the door and went out.

The room to which the Leng conducted Val may once have been the hotel dining-room. It was filled with the golden vapor, and walls, ceiling and floor were covered with a shining yellow mirrorlike metal. The effect was to make the twenty Masters who sat on raised platforms, look like a vast company. They were robed in brief white kilts, and heavily jeweled, except for Samith Rhu, who wore a silver kilt and no ornament but an ornate dagger.

Val did not hesitate at the door. She strode proudly across the gleaming floor to stand in front of Samith Rhu. Every gesture would be scrutinized by twenty pairs of hostile eyes, she knew; every word would be weighed. While she was posturing before these impassive aliens, Steve would be creeping through the dank corridors below in search of Phil. Val flung up her arms in a gesture of infinite grace. The sari floated to the floor behind her.

There was a hiss of breath indrawn by the watching Masters. Val sank in languorous obeisance before Samith Rhu.

The high arrogant voice rang out. "Is she not worthy? Look upon her, cousins, and my honored guest. Look upon the chosen of Samith Rhu!"

"You know the penalty for taking an Earthwoman," challenged a

cold-voiced giant on Samith's right hand. The Ryn frowned.

"You are my honored guest and cousin, Ryn Drogu. Look again. Do you call her Earthwoman, with that stature and that hair and ear-paint?"

"She is not golden of skin like our women. And the hair and ear-paint could be copied."

"Copied from whom? Has one of our women ever been on this accursed planet within your knowledge?" demanded Samith Rhu. "Have we even so much as a single picture to comfort our exile? How then can they copy something they could not possibly know of?" He glared at the visiting Ryn. If Drogu were not his superior, the Leader of the whole Preparatory Force, he would have. . . .

Ryn Drogu was regarding him between classically narrowed lids. "Does the woman speak The Tongue, or does she grunt and mutter like the Lengs and Earthmen? If she is one of us, let her tell us how she got here. I myself would apply for the Reversion."

There was a murmur of agreement and appreciation. Samith Rhu glared. "She is a remnant of the Lost Colony. Some one of the first comers must have mated with an Earthwoman. When the child was delivered, perchance the Scanners discovered the flouting of the Code of Behavior and the Colony was destroyed, save for the infant which was rescued by passing Earthmen—"

Ryn Drogu shook his head scornfully. "This is a fantasy worthy of a Fourth Era Talespinner. But had it the authority of a pronouncement of Krydo—on whom be The Light—still it would not make this female a true Krydomena. She is not worthy to be thy Chosen. Since you did not seek her out, no blame attaches to you—yet."

"She is a pollution of the Pure Blood," muttered one of the other Masters. "I say, Kill her!"

Samith Rhu's sleek golden head swerved around, snake-like, the light gliding its slanted planes. Glad of a chance to vent the anger he could not release against Drogu, he shrilled, "Who challenges a decision of his Ryn?"

There was a sudden silence. The objector stirred uneasily on his platform. "The exile has been long," he ventured. "Now we are so close to the appointed time. . . . I fear for the success of our venture on this planet."

"The ships come when the planet completes another seven of its days. Our installations are made, the landing sites are prepared, the gas is ready for release into the atmosphere. What harm can a single female, whether mutant or earthling, do us now? If I wish to keep her to lighten the tedium of the final hours before the conquest, who is to say no?" He glared from one to the other. No one spoke. Smugly he turned to Drogu. "Shall the woman dance for us tonight, Cousin?"

Ryn Drogu nodded approvingly, his eyes on the girl.

From consort back to the chorus in one easy step, thought Val wryly. That was a quick recovery on Samith's part. He gets to eat his cheese cake and have it too. Oh, well, I probably wouldn't have enjoyed being a Ryness. But as the white-gloved, kilted Lengs began to serve the feast on golden platters, she found herself shivering. Whatever protection Samith's interest in her might have afforded her, was wiped out now. She hoped Chester had got all the details on the invasion.

The Masters were eating now, calling back and forth with high-pitched jests from dais to dais. Samith Rhu beckoned her to sit beside him on his platform. "You have my permission to eat." With a pair of slender, jeweled sticks, one hooked, one razor-edged, he cut her portions from a smoking roast and offered them on little boats of pastry. Though it was many hours since she had eaten, she found herself unable to swallow more than a few bites. Samith questioned her.

"I seldom eat before I dance," she explained. "Perhaps after—"

He looked at her possessively. "Better eat now. You will be too much occupied later."

Maybe more—and differently—than you think, Buster, the girl thought; and smiling, ate a compote of strangely-spiced fruit. A group of Lengs were beating upon small

drums and striking silver tubes in a hypnotic rhythm. The high-pitched arrogant voices of the Masters rang out as they drained the golden goblets brought in by gloved Lengs. Samith Rhu drank deeply of his but did not offer it to Val.

There fell a lull in the voices, one of those quiet moments which occurs in any gathering; and into the momentary stillness sounded faintly an eerie wailing. Ryn Drogu frowned. "Your Lengs are noisy."

"The imminence of the conquest excites them," shrugged Samith. "They need another blood-spectacle—or some discipline." He addressed his personal servant, crouched at the base of the dais. "What folly possesses your people?"

"The presence of the female troubles them, Master," growled the Leng. "They think of own women and the young, left long ago so far across the gulf of space—"

"Tell them to be silent, or we shall give them something else to think of. Have they so soon forgotten the whips?"

Val held out her hands. "What is it?" asked Samith.

"Let us have all the prisoners up from the pits. Then when I have danced, let us kill all of them, so men and Lengs will know the power of the Masters."

If I can get them up here, she thought, they'll have more chance than spreadeagled in the cells. And I'll get Phil away, somehow. . . .

The Masters were applauding her suggestion. Samith Rhu nodded.

"The renegade Earthman can handle any message which may come through in the little time before our ships arrive." He clapped his hands. "Bring up all prisoners!"

Val knew she would have to keep an impassive face when the prisoners arrived, no matter how Phil looked. The slightest show of pity or protest would wreck her carefully developed masquerade. She stroked Cobber and set him weaving to distract her own attention as much as Samith Rhu's. The Master was bending toward her.

"Now you must dance for us, Valti. What is the ritual?"

"I will do a dance of Death," said Val, slowly. "When the captives are here and ranged before us, let the lights be dimmed so nothing will distract my lord from watching me." *And the prisoners may have a better chance to start something or to get away in the darkness.*

The Ryn laughed thickly and ran his palm in a furtive caress over the red-gold stubble. "I promise you my full attention."

Moving across the shining floor with a show of confidence she did not feel, Val stood before the Leng musicians. Every pair of flat black eyes was rivetted on her. Slowly, with infinite grace, she began to move, marking the rhythm with hands and feet and gently swaying body. The drums and shining tubes followed the beat. As she postured and swayed, Val watched the entrance. Her mind scrabbled among a dozen plans to rescue Phil, but

when the Leng guards appeared with two of the Masters, herding the prisoners into the room, she had no idea how she was to help them.

She swept along beside them, searching for the beloved face. It was a pitiful company that straggled over to lean against the wall, or sag to the floor. Matted hair and beards, stained rags of clothing, signs of torment and neglect marked every haggard prisoner. Most of the men stared dully ahead, or hung their heads fearfully against the light; a few glared hatred and defiance from red-rimmed eyes. The last to come in was an odd little group of three. A burly miner and a Leng supported the legless figure of the former mine manager between them.

Val swung out into the room at a faster tempo, sick with dismay. *Phil was not among the prisoners.* Was he too weak to move, lying alone in the dark? No, for the manager had been brought up. Phil would have been, too. Then he must be already dead. She paused in front of Samith, inclined her head and waited.

"Yes?"

"This is a sorry lot to celebrate the Feast of the Masters. Are there no more?"

"The rest are dead. Earthmen are weaklings. If your blood hunger demands more, I will give you Lengs—"

The Master nearest to Samith leaned forward. "The native who

offered to serve us may have lured some of his fellows into the valley."

Samith turned to his Leng. "See if the Renegade has any prisoners the woman could use." He explained to Val, "An Earthman is getting us information we need. You may not have him yet, but he may have captured others you may have. He brought a prospector in for the Leng last night."

Val remembered the terrible screaming across the plaza and was sickened. She shook her head. "These will be enough," she said, heavy at heart. With Phil gone, all that was left was to try to free the captives. Chester would be reading her mind. Bring on your bomber, she thought, desolately.

The Masters were bending toward her with interest. "How do you plan to sacrifice your victims?" asked Drogu.

"By the knife, as I dance," Val pointed to the elaborate dagger in Samith's belt. "If my lord pleases?"

Samith grinned with pleasure as he handed her the gleaming blade.

"Do not hurry with the death stroke," called Drogu, greedily.

"Have no fear," boasted Samith.

"This is the woman for whom the Earthmen search, she who kills as our priestesses do, making an art of agony."

The Masters chorused approbation as Val accepted the knife. She held it in both hands above her head, undulating her body, increasing the tempo of her movements with rapid beats of her bare feet.



The drummers picked up the faster beat as Val advanced on the straggling line of prisoners. She went down the line in front of them, touching each man on the breast with the needle point of the knife. Most of them, broken by pain and the horror of years of solitary confinement, cowered away. But one white-haired man stared straight ahead, murmuring in a steady monotone which didn't falter as the cold metal rested over his heart. Next in line was the burly miner who had helped bring in the manager. As she came close to him, he spat at her. The Leng guards jerked him back savagely, but Val motioned them to release his arms. She came closer, lifted the knife and pricked his upper lip so blood flowed over his mouth and into his beard. She touched her finger in the blood.

"Death to the Enemy," she said clearly, her eyes holding his. Then with his blood she painted on his chest the old symbol of the resistance, the Cross of Lorraine, upside down, so his downward glance would give him the correct perspective. His eyes had automatically followed her moving finger. Now they flashed up, red-rimmed and wild, to scan her face. He frowned, started to speak. She took Cobber's head in one hand, leaned forward, and smeared it in the drip of blood from his lip. As she did so, she whispered, stiff-lipped, "Make a break when I stab Smith!"

Until she said the words, she

hadn't had a conscious plan of action. To stab Samith Rhu—that should be as good a diversion as any! With Phil lost to her, she should try to make as much trouble for the Masters as possible. Not daring to wait to see whether he had understood, she whirled into the center of the room, thrust the knife between her skin and her brassiere strap, and activated Cobber's mechanism. Beating a new, languorous rhythm, Val went into her dance.

The Masters watched avidly. Val was good. Blasé nightclub audiences had sat up, forgetting their drinks and their furtive philandering, enthralled in the sinuous patterns woven by the woman's body and the snake's. Only the sultry beat of the drums and the nerve-tingling chimes sounded in the mirrored room as Val and her reflections postured and swayed. Cobber writhed around her body, his gleaming folds accenting her supple curves. The drums beat faster, the silver tubes clanged—

There was a commotion at the door. Three Lengs wrestled with someone, spilling into the room in a tangle of arms and legs and dark, hairy bodies. The Ryn rose to his feet, light reflecting coldly from the beautiful golden planes of his skull. "What is the meaning of—"

Val stiffened and stopped dancing as the tangle sorted and she recognized the battered figure who was being dragged to his feet. *Jones!*

"Kill the intruder! Use the whips!" cried out several of the Masters. A few of them drew out squat, ugly-looking tubes from their belts and looked to Samith Rhu for permission to use them. But the Ryn was looking at Val, smiling oddly.

"Release him. Let him come forward," he said. "In a way, he is one of us."

Jones shook off his captors and came to stand beside Val. The girl's heart sank. Jones was the renegade, the Earthman who had sold out his world and his fellowmen! She tried to estimate the extent of the damage. Jones had been one of the inner circle, in Chester's complete confidence. He knew everything which had been planned against the Masters. This was disaster! How could the telepath have been so deceived? Val stared at Jones, heart-sick. His dark face was unreadable. One of the Lengs thrust forward, jabbering at the Ryn. Samith Rhu listened intently, his amber eyes going from Val to Jones. The Leng ended by tearing Jones' shirt open. There was a heavy golden chain around his neck.

"Kang says this man was found among the Lengs, urging them to rise against the Masters. He claims he is the Leng of this woman—" interpreted Samith Rhu.

"That cannot be!" protested Drogu. "She is no Krydomena. How can she have a Leng?"

"There are perhaps more things in the universe than you or I have

knowledge of, my cousin," said Samith, smoothly. He was obviously enjoying the other's discomfiture. "Perhaps we decided too hastily that she was not one of us. But no matter—" he cut off the other's beginning objections. "Be he Leng or not, he has spoken treason against us, and there is only one punishment for that."

Drogu sank back on his dais, somewhat appeased. "You are right. What difference does it make what ghul-bodies this accursed planet spawns, in the likeness of our race or the Lengs, when within seven days there will be none alive on Earth but the Masters—"

Jones twisted toward the huddle of Leng servants, guards and musicians. "See?" he shouted. "Our fate is decided! We are as good as dead! Will you strike now, or let them kill us at their leisure?"

The Lengs surged forward, clutching musical instruments, heavy metal serving platters or whatever could be used as a weapon. The burly miner came forward in a wary rush, his big hands flexing. Behind him the earth men straggled, some cautiously, even fearfully, yet all determined to be in the fight. Not one tried to escape through the doorway behind them. The manager, pulling himself along with his arms, was crying with sheer frustration.

Jones cast one glance of agonized indecision toward Val. When he saw her moving forward, knife in hand, he grinned briefly and turned

his attention to Samith Rhu. The attack had been so sudden that the Masters had hardly had time to raise themselves from their cross-legged position on their dais-platforms; even as Val advanced on Samith Rhu, she noticed them pulling the squat nerve-whip tubes from their belts. But it had been a ritual feast, and very few of the Masters had come armed. Samith's eyes were incredulous on Val's beautiful stern face. He wasn't sure, for a moment, whether she was coming to range herself beside him, or to attack. By the time he decided, it was too late for flight. He bent to pick up a heavy crystal and gold goblet—and then Jones was ahead of Val in a flash and had his fingers around the giant's throat.

Somebody tore the knife from Val's hand. When she saw it was one of the prisoners, she snatched up a long narrow tray and swung it around her head like a baseball bat, clearing away three Masters who were converging on Jones and Samith Rhu. Her tray struck Ryn Drogu a glancing blow and he went down. Then, from somewhere above, came a thunder of sound, a human voice amplified almost beyond understanding. Battered by the incredible din, the struggling units froze and listened, perforce.

"—called Master Race, you are trapped," bellowed the voice. "Ten vertijets form a lattice above Ore Valley. Armored trucks command the road. A bomber is now on its way. You have ten minutes to sur-

render or die. You have ten minutes to surrender or die! Lengs, arise against the cruel Masters who have so long enslaved you. We of Earth will give you freedom and friendship. So-called Master Race, you are trapped—"

The tight-locked combatants within the banquet room went at each other as though they had never stopped to listen. They fought with a silent vicious ferocity which appalled Val. No one heeded the warning of the bomb. Neither Master, Leng, nor Earthman asked or gave quarter. Here and there a nerve-whip sparkled green, and a wail of agony rose, but for the most part it was a battle of fists and clawing nails and tearing teeth. The monster voice boomed on overhead, but no one listened.

Then Jones, bloody from a dozen scratches, shot from the press and seized Val's arm. "Get out of here! Up to the roof," he gasped. "Chester's got a pick-up waiting for you."

"Steve's looking for Phil. We've got to warn him—"

"He'll get out." Jones was urging her toward the door.

"I'm not going without you." Val planted her feet stubbornly and swatted a fleeing Master with the tray.

"The boys seem to be keeping each other busy," Jones said grimly. "I think we might slip away." He went ahead of her, clearing a path to the door with battering fists and elbows and feet. The tide of battle had washed over to the far

side of the huge room, where the few living Masters were making a last stand against a snarling ring of Lengs. Just as they reached the doorway Steve appeared, holding a goodlooking man by one arm.

"Phil!" squealed Val and threw herself into his arms. "Oh, Phil!"

Jones raised his eyebrows. Steve said, not looking at anyone in particular, "I found him—locked in a room."

Val turned a radiant face from Steve to her husband. "How can we ever thank you? —Darling, we thought you were dead. Samith Rhu said—"

"What is this? What're you doing here, dressed like this?"

"Let's talk about it some other time," urged Steve. "There's a bomb due—" He took Val's arm and tried to guide her through the doorway.

"Suppose you take your filthy paws off my wife," said Phil. "I'm not sure what this's all about—" he came a little further into the room, his handsome face set in a resentful frown.

A hoarse voice shouted: "*It's him! It's the collaborator!*"

They turned. The manager, carried by the miner and another prisoner, was coming toward them.

"What—?" began Val. Phil was staring at the blood-stained, battered trio, his face a mask of fear.

"Keep them off me! I did what I had to—I had to stay alive, didn't I?" He broke and raced along the hall. The manager and his carriers

shouldered past Val and the agents and pounded after him. Val stared after them, her face rigid and pale with dawning comprehension. Steve said, "I'll help him. I'll explain—"

"Explain what?" whispered Val. "That he loved his own skin more than his country?"

"You mustn't be too hard on him," said Steve awkwardly. They were moving down the hall the way the others had gone. Holding the gun Val had forgotten to use, Jones was covering the retreat, as Steve hurried Val along. "Men break under torment—"

"Phil hadn't been tortured. He must have made a deal with the Masters as soon as they caught him."

"Maybe he had some kind of a plan. Phil was a great one for plans." Steve peered ahead anxiously. Somewhere something was burning, and outside, yells mingled with the boom of the loudspeaker. They were approaching the lobby. As they came through the arch, they almost ran into the prisoner who had been with the manager and the miner.

"Dirty rat hid in a room upstairs," growled the man. "The Boss and Gregg are still lookin' for him. I'm gettin' out."

"Tell everybody to clear out. The army's dropping a big one any minute." Steve threw the last words over his shoulder as he led Val up the stairs. In a few seconds they were clambering out onto the fire escape and up to the roof. The

hooded lights of a helijet glowed before them.

"What kept you guys?" grumbled the pilot, hauling Val up beside him. "Dawn's about to break."

Jones slid in beside Val and started to close the door.

"Where's Steve?" gasped Val. "You're leaving him—!" She tried to get out. Jones blocked the way.

"Look, Val. We're doing a job. My orders were to go in, stir up trouble, and get you out. Steve was to try to rescue Phil. He's gone to find him. We do what the man tells us and hope we come out alive. Now sit down and let's get started or so help me, I'll cut you down to my size."

Val took a good look at his face and sat down meekly. Jones glared at her for a minute, slid out to the roof and said quietly, "Take her up." He slammed the door and darted back across the roof to the fire escape.

Val bit her lip. Love dies hard. Yet to deliberately sacrifice two men like Steve and Jones to save a man who had betrayed his kind—"Can we wait—just for a minute?" she asked humbly.

The young pilot shrugged. "Oh, sure, we've got lots of time. Maybe a whole minute."

Val sniffed. The pilot said, "He wasn't supposed to go back. Is Steve your man?"

"They both are," said Val, and tears flowed down her face. The pilot gunned his jets uncomfortably. Then he froze, staring at the edge

of the roof. Two shadows erupted and raced across the roof. The pilot hit the controls before they got through the door. Val and Steve hauled Jones inside by the seat of his pants as the ship swung thrashing up into the air.

"Get clear fast," roared Steve.

"I thought I'd just hang around and get vaporized," retorted the pilot sourly. "What kept you?" He threw the jet forward, rising just enough to clear the first low hill, then dropping down into the little valley beyond. "Hold everything!"

Behind them, in Ore Valley, the fire ball flowered blindingly. They were protected from the main blast, but the little ship rocked and jolted violently as the pilot swung across the desert, practically clipping the low-growing sage. Then they were around a thrusting butte, and the bomb was just a cloudy glow in the sky behind.

"I went back for Phil," Steve said.

"Why?" asked Val, dully.

"Chester wanted to talk to him."

"Couldn't you find him?"

Steve didn't meet her eyes.

Nobody said anything until they set down on a level stretch of desert near the gray and tan camouflaged tents. Warily they made their way to the largest tent to report to Chester. Seated at a table with an Army Colonel and an Air Force General, Chester barely glanced up at them as they entered. He was speaking into a hand mike.

"—that's it, Mr. President. The Ore Valley landing's completely wiped out. The Masters and Lengs were so busy killing each other they ignored our ultimatum. Yes, there were a few human prisoners left alive, but they didn't want to be rescued. They had some scores to settle. Mrs. Norton's husband?" Chester peered up at Val. "I'm afraid he died with the other prisoners, Sir. . . . Yes, I'll convey your regrets to her. Abbot and Jones got her out—with the help of an Air Force pilot.

"I've just had a report from the Canadians. They went into action fast and surrounded that ghost town in British Columbia where the Masters had dug in. Told them to surrender or be vaporized. The Lengs didn't rise against the Masters. The whole bunch surrendered except the leader, who committed suicide. . . .

"We lost eleven men at the abandoned coal mining town in Pennsylvania. The Masters retreated into the old mine shaft; when our men followed, they blew the shaft.

"Yes, Sir, there were four other colonies spotted around the world. I read their locations in Smith's mind while he was boasting to Mrs. Norton. There's one in a Soviet Labor camp, one in Tibet in a lamasery, one in the Sahara at an oasis and one in the Andes. You'll have to go through channels, I guess. The locations are on their way to you by jet. The Invasion is set to take place next Sunday . . ."

There was a long pause as the voice at the other end spoke. Then Chester said, "Thank you, Sir. I'll tell them. I agree we must keep this very quiet until the other four settlements are under control. We captured five of their craft and the Canadians got a number of prisoners. I'll probe them for the principles involved in building and operating the craft—which, by the way, are disc-shaped, domed out above and below, but which look like full spheres when in flight because they are circled with a globe of green light. That spider-web fallout is an amazing thing—it's the end-product of their fuel system. They actually use the filament obtained from giant spiders—had a whole colony of 'em producing in the central plaza—and they take radioactive dust and coat the strands and then run them through a matter-displacement relix at the speed of light— Yes, Sir. I'll write it all out for the scientists. Thank *you*, Sir. I'll make a full report after I've talked to Mrs. Norton."

He sat back in the camp chair, his blue eyes blinking behind the thick lenses. "The President thinks you deserve a medal," he observed drily. The Army and Air Force officers got up and went out. They could smell a singe-off.

"What for?" asked Steve.

"The Lengs and the prisoners took over," added Jones, "while we were beating a masterly retreat."

Chester glared at them. "Masterly? You almost didn't make it, you

master minds! You were so busy being heroes for Val—”

“You have no right to speak to them that way,” raged Val. “They were just doing as they were told—!”

“Mrs. Norton.” Chester held up his hand. “They are both angry at me because they didn’t get a chance to fight aliens and so become heroes in your eyes. I will not embarrass you by announcing the causes for your emotional reactions. Instead of allowing yourselves to be swayed by emotion, you should be giving thanks that due to my foresight and your grudging obedience, you accomplished what had to be done without getting killed or injured. In a couple of hundred years, military strategy will consist in accomplishing the desired end with little or no loss of life. I am a Forerunner, much ahead of my time, but I have demonstrated the basic principles for the armed services in this project. Whether any of you are mature and civilized enough to benefit by the demonstration is a moot point. However: we have their ships, a good number of prisoners, and enough information to immobilize their other bases and ward off or destroy their invasion forces. And all at a cost of fewer than fifteen men. It is I who should receive the President’s medal.” He stared speculatively at Val. “I wonder if my mental qualities are actually capable of being passed along?”

“You are not running our pri-

vate lives yet,” snapped Steve, angrily.

“You haven’t got any—yet. There’s still the Invasion to be dealt with. I’ll have to take some Masters to the Andes base—that’s their headquarters—and figure out their system of communication so I can dicker with the Invasion fleet if the President wishes to handle it that way. Or we could just sabotage their guidance beams and landing grids. It’s taken them ten years to set this invasion up. A crushing defeat will probably keep them off our necks for good. I’ll need both of you with me. But not Valentine. You two might just fall off a ledge or something, showing her how brave you are.”

“After that, I’m putting in for a transfer,” gritted Steve. “Sir.”

Chester smiled patronizingly. “I’m afraid I shan’t be able to spare you. Palomar reports a suspicious object heading toward Sol from the outer edge of the galaxy. It is needle-shaped, incredibly long, and emitting infra-red waves in a definite pattern. As soon as we clear up the Master invasion, we’ll get right onto reconnaissance. We’ll take one of the Master’s discs out to scout the new arrival. Come with me now. I’m going to scan the captured Masters and learn how to run their craft and I’ll want you to know how.”

Val looked at Steve and Jones. They were dirty and exhausted, splattered with their own and the enemy’s blood. Yet they would go

right out again, doing their loyal, unromantic best to carry out the schemes of the little telepath. There was also a personal problem between them. Val didn't have to be telepathic to sense the existence of a rivalry between the three men for her attention.

Chester stood up and walked over to Steve and Jones, and Val caught the look which passed be-

tween them, strong and reassuring as a handclasp. Val realized that, given the right kind of men, a triangle can bind rather than disrupt.

Jones managed a grin as he fingered the golden collar he hadn't had time to remove. "Hope the Master race in the next bunch is short and hairy. I'm a little tired of being the subhuman in this threesome."