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"Hurry!" the professor panted. "If we fail, we'll drown like helpless sheep!"



COME TO VENUS—AND DIE!

By F. Willard Grey

**A beauty in distress usually finds plenty
of men ready to help her. But on Venus
you refused her quick or you kind of died!**

A GROWING roar of sound drew Greg Doyle's attention from the jet flier on which he was working. He pulled his head and shoulders out of the craft's opened engine section and peered upward over the vast expanse of the spaceport, his gray eyes narrowed in their habitual squint.

Appearing from the eternal cloud

blanket of Venus, a great space liner was dropping down on the thunderously flaming column of its jets. The ship was from Earth, Doyle saw. He lifted his square shoulders in a shrug of indifference, reminding himself that he had come to Venus to forget certain things on Earth.

But as he packed his tool kit he couldn't resist glancing at the passen-

gers who had emerged from the liner and were being jeeped past, on their way to Korremkaz, the Venusian capital, which lay just beyond the spaceport.

The people Doyle glimpsed were clean and well-dressed, obviously prosperous. People with responsibility, a goal in life. He looked at his wrinkled, sweat-soaked shirt and oil-stained flying pants, and bitterness deepened the lines of his angular, beard-stubbed face.

"A bum!" he muttered. "Financially and morally, a bum." Then he grinned wryly, thinking that few bums could boast of a string of engineering degrees after their names.

He stepped from the scaffold to one of the stubby projections that were the flier's retracted wings. From here he could reach into the open door of the cabin. He tossed the tool kit inside, gathered up his jacket and cap, and pushed the door shut. Then he swung to the ground, stretching cramped muscles in his back as he stood for a moment to survey the flier. The corners of his firm mouth quirked.

"Old tub!" The whisper held affection.

The jet flier quite clearly had seen better days. It was scratched, dented and discolored, but despite its slovenly, dissipated appearance it managed to retain a rakishly jaunty air, a quality that particularly appealed to Doyle. Most important, however, was the fact that the craft was still in excellent operating condition. That meant all the difference between independence and working at a job. If, Doyle thought, independence meant ferrying in supplies to isolated plantations in the uplands, acting as pilot on risky chartered flights, and occasionally indulging in a bit of smuggling and gun-running. He didn't intend to argue the point. It all brought

in plenty of money—money he never managed to keep very long.

Doyle was wheeling away the scaffold when he became suddenly aware of figures beside him.

"You are Gregory Doyle?" a strange, hissing voice asked, above the background noise of the spaceport.

DOYLE TURNED slowly, gray eyes narrowing in a squint as they always did at anything interesting or unexpected. He found himself looking at two Venusians, startlingly man-like in shape, with leathery, greenish-bronze skin. Both were of a pattern, massively hulking, their mouths hard and their protruberant eyes arrogant. They wore the usual kilts, but their harness and gleaming headpieces were those of minor officials—special police agents.

The Venusians had been little more than barbarians when the first Earthmen had arrived among them. In the distant past they had reached a high level of culture, but natural catastrophe as well as their own warlike natures had led to degeneration. The coming of men from Earth virtually had meant being presented with civilized knowledge and luxuries on a silver platter. To their credit, however, the Venusians had made incredible progress. Currently they were self-governing to a large extent, though Earthmen still held the reins in matters directly related to their colonization and exploitation of Venus.

It was no secret that the Venusians chafed at these last restraints, desiring the additional power and affluence which were being withheld from them. But on Earth it was almost unanimously admitted that the Venusians were not yet ready for complete autonomy. Their warlike traditions and habits were still dominant beneath their civilized veneer. For this

reason certain scientific knowledge was also being withheld from them—especially that regarding atomic energy and weapons. The blood-thirsty ferocity of Venusian attacks against the first human settlers had not been forgotten, and men were cautious about putting a nuclear club in Venusian hands.

Doyle's mind was working swiftly, a band of tension tight around his chest. Smuggling wasn't a serious crime—according to Venusian law, which mimicked that of Earth with often comical results—but had he slipped up somewhere? He knew he couldn't afford to pay a fine just then, and that meant going to jail. Venusians just loved to get Earthmen in jail. It gave them the chance to work off their pent-up inferior-race feelings.

Doyle asked quietly, "What do you want?"

THE VENUSIAN who had originally spoken had a purple scar on one muscular cheek. He was evidently the leader of the pair. His companion, a closer inspection showed, ran more to brute strength than intelligence.

Purple-scar was scowling. "I asked if you were Gregory Doyle."

"That happens to be my name."

"Then why did you not admit it at once?"

"My question was an admission."

"I do not like to be answered with questions!" Purple-scar snapped.

"So you don't like it," Doyle said. He met the other's angry stare calmly and fingered a yellow *okka* cigarette from the pack in the breast pocket of his shirt.

"Insolent *Kazko*, eh?" Purple-scar demanded, glancing at his companion. *Kazko* was a Venusian term applied to Earthmen in a derogatory sense.

Doyle shrugged. "It's your party. Either tell me what you want, or I'm

going to my hotel. I'm tired and can use some sleep."

"Not so fast, *Kazko*! You will be wise to answer my questions. Now, do you often hire out your flying craft to those who wish to go on special flights?"

"Quite often."

"To anyone who wishes to hire it?"

"That depends on what I'm supposed to do...where I'm supposed to fly."

"But for enough *guras* you will do anything, fly anywhere, eh?" Purple-scar asked slyly.

Doyle spread his hands. "I'm in business for profit, you know. Mind telling me what all this leads up to? You want to hire my ship?"

"Great Zut's claws!" the Venusian hissed. "I do not want to hire your ship, *Kazko*! I am here to tell you not to hire it out until further notice."

Doyle squinted. The cigarette became motionless half-way to his lips. Finally he said, "By whose orders?"

"The orders of persons who will cancel your flying permit if you do not obey."

"Persons in the Venusian government, in other words."

"Important ones," Purple-scar admitted. "You are under Venusian authority in this matter, *Kazko*, do not forget that. It should now be clear that you had better cooperate."

DOYLE DREW thoughtfully on his cigarette. He suspected that politics—the ham-handed and often bloody Venusian type—was involved. He didn't try to figure out how or why just then. What mattered most at the moment was that his means of livelihood was in danger of being cut off. Not permanently, but the phrase "until further notice" might mean the same thing.

"This order," he said at last. "It

applies to anyone who might want to hire my ship?"

The Venusian with the scar hesitated, his protuberant eyes lidding slyly. "Certain persons, *Kazko*."

"Only an Earth woman," the other Venusian abruptly put in. He grunted in pain as his partner jabbed an elbow into his side.

"Muzzag, you fool, didn't I tell you to keep your mouth shut?"

Muzzag's thick lips drooped sullenly. "Why talk and say nothing? Let us get this task over with."

"Zut curse you, be silent!"

Doyle smiled grimly. It seemed he wasn't supposed to have been told too much, merely given blanket orders. Muzzag had clumsily tipped the hand of his unknown superior.

Doyle said, "So an Earth woman is the only one I'm not supposed to hire my ship to?"

Purple-scar jerked his bulky shoulders in obvious fury. "An Earth woman, yes. A girl, to be exact. Young, pretty, according to Earth standards. Under no conditions are you to fly her anywhere. Do you understand, *Kazko*?"

Doyle shook his rumpled brown head. "To tell the truth, I don't."

PURPLE-SCAR thrust his scowling face close to Doyle's. He said with menacing deliberation, "But you understand that your permit can be cancelled? You understand that certain important persons could also see to it that something...unpleasant happened to you?"

Doyle blew smoke slowly from his nostrils. He said nothing.

Purple-scar straightened, his wide mouth twisted in a sneer. "You have been warned, *Kazko*. Conduct yourself accordingly." Turning, he shoved his companion roughly into motion, and they strode away with the arro-

gant swagger that was a mark of their profession.

Doyle watched them go, squinting. What did it all mean? An Earth girl seemed likely to hire his ship. Certain persons in the Venusian government wished to prevent it. Persons, it was evident, so highly placed in authority that they could issue orders through special police agents.

But what was this mysterious Earth girl's purpose? Why should important government officials want to oppose her? And above all, why should they take such a secretive means of doing so?

Doyle shook his head. It didn't make sense. Only one thing seemed clear: helping the girl would mean the loss of his flying permit—and worse, if Purple-Scar was to be taken seriously. Doyle didn't like the idea of losing his permit. He had worn himself a comfortable rut in this part of Venus, and starting over again somewhere else wouldn't be easy.

Besides, he told himself, no woman was worth the trouble. He had gone into exile to nurse the wounds one had inflicted—wounds that even yet hadn't quite healed.

He shrugged and started toward the spaceport exit. He was going to his hotel. He needed sleep. If the girl showed up, he'd inform her she could go to blazes.

DOYLE HAD just clutched Purple-scar by his harness, pulled him forward, and swung a crashing blow against the Venusian's jaw. His knuckles produced a flat, rapping sound. That was wrong, somehow. And what was worse, the rapping went on even after Purple-scar dropped with satisfying limpness.

Grappling with the problem, Doyle struggled up from sleep. He realized that someone was knocking at the door of his room.

He sat up on the bed, suddenly wide awake. "Who is it?" he called out.

"I...I want to speak to Gregory Doyle."

Doyle squinted into the darkness. That had been a girl's voice. Was it the girl he had been warned against?

"Just a minute," he called back. He swung out of bed and switched on a light. A quick glance at his watch showed he had been asleep several hours. It was early evening, according to the Venusian day.

Doyle dressed hurriedly, then unlocked the door and swung it open. He stared, a name rushing to his lips. But in the next instant he saw he had made a mistake. It wasn't the same girl—the girl he had come to Venus to forget. There was the same auburn hair, the same pert nose and creamy skin; but this was a different girl. The past was to stay buried after all.

Doyle got himself under control. "I'm Greg Doyle," he said. "Will you come in?"

The girl nodded hesitantly, and he stood aside as she went past him, into the room. She stood in the middle of the floor, stiff with unease, watching him. He gestured at the only chair, and she seated herself gingerly, her hands twisting at the small accessory case in her lap.

She seemed aware, Doyle thought, that visiting a strange man in his hotel room wasn't exactly the thing to do. He felt a grudging admiration for her. Whatever the purpose that drove her, it had taken a special brand of courage to come this far.

He saw that she was looking around the room, at the bare walls, the cheap furniture, the carelessly scattered clothing; at the table, with its overflowing ashtray, litter of newssheets, and half-empty bottle of *keth* liquor. He felt a surge of defiance. Just a cheap hotel room, kept none too neat,

but it was home to him. What did he care for what she thought?

Doyle took a cigarette from a pack on the table and sat down on the bed.

The girl said abruptly: "I was told that you often hire out your jet flier on chartered flights."

Doyle blew a cloud of smoke and nodded. Her eyes were brown, he saw, steady and direct. Her features were small and even, holding vivacity and humor instead of just the empty doll-like prettiness of the girl she so startlingly resembled. She wore a hooded cape over a mannish blouse and flaring, knee-length shorts. On Venus, clothes for women tended to be practical rather than decorative.

The girl went on, "I want to hire your flier, Mr. Doyle. It's very important, and money is no object—up to a certain point, at least. My name," she added as an afterthought, "is Edith Bancroft."

"Where do you want to go, Miss Bancroft?" Doyle asked.

"To a certain valley among the Titan Mountains."

Doyle winced. The Titans had to be seen to be believed, and with cloud conditions on Venus what they were, they seldom if ever were seen. Numerous peaks in the Titan range towered up well over forty thousand feet. Pilots preferred to keep away from the Titans. More than one had come to grief among that maze of incredibly soaring pinnacles.

SEEING HIS hesitation, the girl said, "I think the valley is well within the cruising limits of your flier, Mr. Doyle. It isn't too far from Korremkaz—that is, it doesn't look far on a map."

"It isn't that, Miss Bancroft. The Titans are...well, pretty rugged. It might be impossible to land a flier in this valley you speak of."

"I understand that the valley is quite large, and almost level in the center," she returned. "You see, I happen to know a little about it."

Doyle rubbed his whiskery jaw, wishing he had taken the time to shave. He squinted at the girl, wondering how long he could keep getting information out of her, without in turn definitely committing himself. He made the mental reminder that he was interested in her problem only as far as it shed light on Purple-scar's warning.

He said, "I can hardly hire out my ship without knowing exactly what I'm getting into, Miss Bancroft. May I ask why you want to visit this valley?"

"Because of my father," the girl said. "You may have heard of him—Milton Bancroft, the archaeologist. He's an authority on the Aztols, you see, an extinct Venusian race that reached a level of culture comparable to that of the ancient Egyptians on Earth. There are some Aztol ruins in the valley, known only to Father and a few other men in his field, and he went to study them. That was quite some time ago.

"Since there is a large element of risk involved in his work, Father and I had an understanding that he was to get in touch with me after a certain amount of time had passed. When I failed to hear from him, I knew something had happened. I tried to get the Venusian authorities to investigate, but for some reason I received only polite evasions. Finally I decided to come here and make a search of my own."

"How do you know your father is still in this valley?" Doyle asked.

"I'm not certain, but I want to look. The valley would be a good place to start. A search there might show what happened to my father, or where he went."

Doyle shook his head. "Evidently you don't know what it's like among the Titan Mountains, Miss Bancroft. Finding this valley of yours might be an impossible job."

"But I have a map that shows exactly where it is." The girl searched quickly through her accessory case. "Here. It's a copy of one that Father had."

Doyle took the white square of paper that she unfolded and handed to him. The map was neatly and carefully drawn, distances and directions clearly detailed. Locating the valley wouldn't be such a difficult job after all, he decided. But so what? The girl's part in the mystery was explained, and that was all he cared about.

STILL, THE oddness of the situation gripped him. All the girl wanted was to be flown to a valley among the Titan Mountains, to search for her archaeologist father. What was so important about this that persons high in the Venusian government should wish to stop her?

Edith Bancroft said eagerly, "As you can see from the map, the valley won't be hard to find. And it isn't too far from here. We could start out in the morning."

"I haven't said I was going to fly you there, Miss Bancroft," Doyle pointed out.

"But...you won't?"

Doyle spread his hands. "I'm sorry. For certain reasons, I just can't do it."

"Oh." The girl's whisper held utter hopelessness. She looked down at her hands. Her eyelids worked desperately, but in another moment tears slid down her smooth cheeks. She made no sound or movement. It was as though she were too far gone in her despair.

Doyle shifted in discomfort. He said

soothingly, "You can find someone else to help you, Miss Bancroft. My flier isn't the only one, you know."

Her head jerked erect. "But that's just it! I've been here a week, and I've already seen everyone else. They all turned me down. Then I heard that you returned today from a long flight. I came to you as a last hope."

Doyle squinted. "Everyone turned you down?"

"Yes. I can't understand it. The people here seem against me for some reason."

"And the Venusian authorities turned you down?"

She nodded earnestly.

"Who did you talk to?"

"Takkom Guriz, the Minister of State. I had gotten in touch with him early in my efforts to learn what had happened to Father. When I came to see him personally, he told me the same thing he'd told me in his messages—that Father was certain to have left the valley, and that a search for him among the mountains would be hopeless. He also warned me of savage tribes and dangerous animals in the mountain regions. He was polite enough, but I got the impression that he was deliberately trying to discourage me."

Doyle's interest rose. Takkom Guriz, it appeared, was behind the persons in the Venusian government who sought to prevent Edith Bancroft's search. The revelation somehow wasn't much of a surprise. Guriz seemed to be involved in just about everything. In addition to being Minister of State, he was enormously wealthy, his control reaching into every part of the planet. It was rumored that Guriz was the real leader in Venusian political affairs, the emperor being a mere figurehead. Doyle knew that Guriz was ruthlessly ambitious and would stop at nothing to achieve his ends.

WHERE EDITH BANCROFT was concerned, Guriz seemed to be taking great pains to keep her from searching for her father. Doyle knew now that he hadn't been the only pilot warned away from the girl by Purple-scar and Muzzag. But what was Guriz' motive? Whatever it was, Doyle decided, it was something big. Guriz was the sort that played for high stakes.

Edith Bancroft rose slowly to her feet. "I'd better be leaving, Mr. Doyle. I'm sorry to have troubled you with my problems."

"Sit down," Doyle said gruffly. "I've changed my mind. I'm going to fly you to the valley and help you look for your father, after all."

The despair in her face vanished. Relief flooded into it, a relief so great that she seemed unable to speak at once.

Doyle tried to ignore her wordless gratitude, unwilling to face what he considered proof of his own weakness. He told himself he wasn't going to help the girl because he felt sorry for her, or because she looked so much like another girl he had known. He was going to do it because there was a mystery involved that drew him like a magnet. It was a satisfactory explanation for an act he knew was foolhardy. But it left him with a guilty feeling.

He said, "Now, since I'm going to help you, we'll have to be careful. You were right about Guriz trying to discourage you. This afternoon, when I returned from a flight and finished checking over my ship, two special police agents showed up and warned me not to hire out again until further notice, or my permit would be cancelled. It developed they had only one person in mind—an Earth girl."

Edith Bancroft looked suddenly dismayed. "Then helping me means that—"

Doyle waved a hand. "I can always take care of myself. The important thing is that someone high in the Venusian government was behind those two special police agents. What you told me about Guriz, added to what I know about him already, indicates that he's the one. For some reason he doesn't want you to visit that mountain valley in search of your father. He took the trouble to scare off all the pilots who were in a position to help you. Why? What's his motive? That's what I intend to find out."

HE BLEW a cloud of smoke, squinting through it at the girl. "So if Guriz learns I've decided to help you, he'll try to stop us. Cancelling my permit isn't all he can do, either. He mustn't learn of our plans until we're out of reach.

"Here's the trick we'll use: You're to pretend I've turned you down and that you've lost all hope. Sit around your hotel for the next two days, as though undecided about your next move. That will give me time to put my affairs in order and arrange for the flight. On the morning of the third day, check out of the hotel and take a cab to the spaceport.

"You'll be followed, of course. But at the spaceport building you're to go to a washroom and change clothes. The idea is to disguise yourself as completely as you can, yet to wear something that will be an identifying mark. A friend of mine will be watching for that mark. He'll take you in his helicar to a spot outside the city, where I'll be waiting with my ship. I'll have left the spaceport a considerable time before, so there won't be any suspicion that our paths might cross.

"As for Guriz' agents who'll be following you, they'll think you somehow boarded a liner without being seen. With the crowds at the space-

port what they are, that could happen easily enough. At least the agents will report it that way, not being willing to admit you might have given them the slip."

Edith Bancroft nodded quickly. "I understand. And the time, the identification I'm to use?"

They discussed the interior details of the plan Doyle had outlined, and then the girl rose to leave.

"I don't know how to thank you, Mr. Doyle. You're making things very difficult for yourself by helping me."

"Forget it," Doyle said. "Some men live only for a little trouble now and then. I guess I'm one of them."

She went to the door. With her hand on the knob, she paused. "May I ask you a question? A rather personal question?"

"Go ahead."

"When you first saw me, did you think I was someone else?"

Doyle squinted. "What if I did?"

The girl said nothing. She looked around the room, and then back at Doyle. He felt suddenly that she had seen through him and into his past.

She said softly, "In three days, then. Good night, Mr. Doyle." The door closed behind her.

Doyle swore under his breath. Clever little devil! She seemed to have guessed that a woman was the cause of his present condition. He uncorked the bottle of *keth* and drank until his throat burned. But the liquor couldn't take the bitterness of old memories out of his mouth.

DOYLE SAT on one of the extended wings of the jet flier in the moist, gray Venusian morning. His clothes were spotlessly fresh, he was shayed, and his hair was trimmed. In one hand he held a length of branch, in the other a small, slim energy-knife. He hacked viciously at the purple

wood with the pale-blue, six-inch "blade", muttering to himself.

"You're a fool, Greg Doyle!" he accused, and a wooden shaving flew. "A blasted, space-crazy fool! What if she *does* look like Rita? What if she obviously *is* a thousand times finer than Rita ever was? You've stuck your neck out—and the axe is certain to fall." By way of example, the energy-knife carved away a large piece of branch. "And for what? She can't be interested in you. You're only a bum—even if you *do* have a string of engineering degrees after your name."

The jet flier rested on a long, narrow tongue of rock in an uninhabited strip of swampy land a considerable distance from Korremkaz. Huge trees grew all around, their interlaced branches forming a screening canopy overhead, yet with sufficient gaps to provide entry and exit for craft of a certain agility and size. The spot was well known to persons who would not have cared to have their activities subjected to close scrutiny by police authorities, human or Venusian.

An occasional craft whistled by overhead, following invisible guiding beacons through the fog. Each time Doyle squinted upward expectantly. At last a helicar came darting through a space among the surrounding trees, jet-tipped rotors whirling. It dropped lightly to a landing on the tongue of rock, and two figures emerged. One was a girl.

Doyle sighed in relief and felt the tension of the past several hours suddenly leave him. He pressed a tiny button to extinguish the "blade" of the energy-knife. Thrusting the device into the top of one of his light neoplast boots, he lowered himself from the wing.

EDITH BANCROFT looked eager and vivid. She had cleverly altered her appearance with makeup, a

different hair arrangement and style of clothing. At a casual inspection, from a distance, she would not easily have been recognized. She had, evidently managed to hoodwink Guriz' police agents. Her only luggage was a small bag.

Doyle gave the girl an impersonal nod and glanced at the man who accompanied her. "How'd it go, Jerry? Sure you weren't followed?"

Jerry shook his coppery thatch. "Positive, Greg. I kept my eyes open all the way. It was an easy job with Miss Bancroft along, though," he added gallantly. "Too bad you didn't pick a spot further out than this."

Edith laughed. "Jerry flew slowly enough to make up for that."

Doyle asked, "Where's the rest of your luggage?"

"Jerry's going to take care of it for me until I send him word about where to forward it."

"Fine. I'd overlooked that angle. Well..." Doyle extended his hand. "We'd better be hitting the clouds. This is fast-jetting, Jerry."

The other sobered. "Fast-jetting, Greg. Let me know where you settle down again, afterward."

"I'll do that."

Edith made her own farewell, and then Doyle took her bag and they turned toward the flier. He helped her inside and buckled on her g-straps. Then, stowing away the bag, he slid into the adjoining seat.

Jerry, in the helicar, took off first, to avoid the flier's blast. Then Doyle sent the craft shooting up into the clouds, g-pressure a sudden giant hand against his body.

They were suddenly in the gray mist-ocean, thick and featureless, that was the eternal cloud blanket of Venus. Nothing could be seen of the terrain below, but Doyle was a veteran of countless trips through the cloud layer. The flier's instruments

and radar eyes told him everything he needed to know. The result was the same as if he'd had full visibility at every angle.

LIKE AN amphibian of metal, the flier hurtled through the cloud-ocean, jets roaring. Patterns appeared and vanished in the radar screen. On the instrument panel lights glowed, died, and glowed again. Needles crept over dial faces.

"The map," Doyle said presently.

Edith pulled the folded sheet from somewhere within her clothing. Smoothing it out, she extended it to Doyle. He took it without glancing at her, and was conscious of her eyes on his face as he studied the directions.

Finally Edith said, "Was that a very personal question I asked?"

"Forget it," Doyle grunted. He examined the map a moment longer, then checked his instruments.

He said, "You got away without any trouble, then?"

She shook her head. "The plan worked perfectly. They most probably were certain I'd given up all hope."

"Guriz get in touch with you?"

"No."

Doyle nodded and returned to watching his instruments. These and the radar screen told him that the Titans were shouldering massively into the cloud-ocean, ahead, thrusting their impossible bulks a full ten-thousand feet higher than the highest peaks of Earth.

With delicate care, Doyle began altering the flier's course. Two monster peaks loomed directly before the craft, and he guided it through the cleft between them. They had passed over the Eastern range, he knew, and were now moving toward the Central Range. The Western Range lay just beyond this latter.

According to the map Edith had given him, the valley that was their

objective lay somewhere amid the peaks of the Central Range, almost at the point where the three ranges radiated outward. There were few spots more tumultuous and desolate in the entire Titan region. The ancient Aztols apparently had built their cities there before a cataclysmic upheaval of the crust of Venus had sent the Titans rearing skyward.

Edith had grown tense with expectancy, watching the radar screen. She seemed to have gained understanding of the shifting patterns. Abruptly she pointed.

"There! That looks like a detail drawn on the map."

DOYLE NODDED and changed course again. He sent the flier moving parallel to the gigantic buttresses of the Central Range, then cautiously angled downward out of the clouds and into the enormous trough between the Central and Eastern ranges. The trough narrowed, and then, among the precipitous slopes of the Central Range, Doyle saw a deep valley, within which was the silvery oval of a small lake.

He swung the flier toward it, excitement kindling in him. The valley drawn on the map contained a lake, but he wasn't certain as yet that he and the girl had reached their destination.

The valley grew in size and detail, its enclosing walls towering up on all sides. In another moment Edith was pointing tensely.

"There are buildings down there! Ruined buildings."

Doyle squinted, nodded. "They check with the position of the ruins drawn on the map. This is the place, all right."

He circled the flier over the valley. Near the center, along one side of the little lake, the ground was level, as Edith had said it would be. He ma-

neuvered the flier into line with the strip and sent it gliding down to a landing.

"Here we are," he said. "Now to see what there is to see."

He unfastened his and the girl's straps and climbed from the flier. Edith jumped down beside him, and for a moment they stood gazing about them.

Abruptly Doyle stiffened, releasing a startled sound.

"What is it?" Edith asked.

"Buildings! Down there, at the other end. And they're modern structures, not ruins."

The nose of the flier pointed toward the near end of the valley. The Aztol ruins started here, arranged in a great semi-circle, facing the lake. Opposite the ruins, at the valley's far end, stood several large featureless buildings, with somewhat the same number of smaller structures grouped around them. All were colored in shades of brown, gray and green, blending almost indistinguishably with the hues of the valley wall, beyond.

"Why, we didn't notice them from the air!" Edith said. "And even here you have to look closely before you can make them out."

"They're camouflaged," Doyle said. "And it's a good job—done by experts."

"What do you suppose they're for?"

"I don't know. But I have the idea those buildings are the reason why Takkom Guriz didn't want you coming here to search for your father."

"There must be people living—" Edith broke off, clutching Doyle's arm.

THREE VENUSIANS had leaped suddenly from behind an ancient stone building almost directly opposite Doyle and the girl. They came running forward, their electro-rifles pointed in silent menace. In another mo-

ment two more figures appeared. The group evidently had made its way from the far end of the valley behind the concealment of the ruins.

Doyle cursed inwardly. He and the girl had flown straight into trouble. Had been caught flat-footed! Discovery of the camouflaged buildings should have warned him, but the arrival of the Venusians had followed too soon.

He felt Edith's fingers tighten on his arm. Her voice reached him in an anxious whisper.

"What do you think this means?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Doyle returned. "I'll do the talking. Don't act surprised at anything I say."

Doyle suddenly realized that only the first three figures were Venusians. The remaining two were Earthmen. The Venusians he dismissed as relatively unimportant. They obviously were underlings of some sort, most likely guards. It was the other two men with whom he would have to deal. One was tall, blond, and heavy-set, the other slight of build, with a sharp, shrewd face and grizzled dark hair. Both held weapons and were breathing heavily, out of breath from their run.

"Who are you?" the sharp-faced man demanded between gasps. "What are you doing here?" He spoke with a noticeable accent.

"I operate a private air service," Doyle explained with the readiness of one who has nothing to conceal. "My name's Doyle. Miss Smith, here, is an archaeologist. She wanted to examine the ruins in the valley, and hired me to fly her here."

The sharp-faced man glanced at Edith. "How did you know where the valley was located?"

The girl shrugged. "I had no idea it was supposed to be a secret. The location is known to several others in my field. We're all interested in the

ancient Aztols, you see. I hope I haven't done anything wrong by coming here."

Doyle nodded. "I didn't know this was restricted territory. Miss Smith and I will leave immediately, if you say so."

"Not so fast, my friend!" the sharp-faced man barked. He gestured with his weapon at the three Venusians. "Search them."

THE VENUSIANS found no weapons or anything else out of the ordinary. Sharp-face looked disappointed.

Doyle took a deep breath and relaxed. The energy-knife in his boot had gone undiscovered. But there was an automatic in the flier which he had kept out of sight so as not to worry Edith.

Sharp-face didn't overlook the flier. His next order sent one of the Venusians on a search of the craft's interior. The native appeared shortly with Edith's bag and the automatic.

Sight of the weapon brought no visible reaction from Sharp-face. Evidently the fact that Doyle hadn't been carrying it made it unimportant. An examination of Edith's bag produced nothing more illuminating than a large neatly wrapped lunch and various feminine articles.

Doyle said, "Well, if you're convinced that Miss Smith and I weren't deliberately trespassing, then you can't have any objection if we leave."

Sharp-face shook his grizzled thatch emphatically. "Allow you to leave and tell others what you saw here? Oh, no, my friend, I'm afraid not."

Doyle squinted. "But we didn't see anything. At least, nothing that we understand. You haven't any right to hold us, as far as I know. What's going on here anyway?"

"Never mind," Sharp-face grunted.

"And if I choose to detain you, that's my affair."

Doyle looked slowly at the grimly alert figures before him and lifted his shoulders. "Since you enforce your hospitality with guns, I don't suppose I can refuse. But just what do you intend to do with us?"

"That remains to be seen." Sharp-face jerked his weapon toward the buildings at the far end of the valley. "We will now return. You and the lady will lead the way—and do not be so foolish as to attempt resistance."

Edith glanced up at Doyle as they started into motion, her small face worried. He smiled a reassurance he didn't feel.

Inwardly he was drawn and cold. They'd flown into something, all right. Exactly what, he didn't know. The buildings toward which they were walking gave no hint of their purpose. But one thing seemed clear enough: Sharp-face had no intention of releasing them.

THEIR PROGRESS paralleled one sprawling wing of the Aztol ruins. The ancient city hadn't been a large one. Doyle estimated there couldn't have been over a hundred buildings in all. One in particular held his attention. It was a sort of pyramid temple, standing near the edge of the lake. A stone ramp led up to it, almost grown over with vegetation. The other buildings were more or less box-like, rising in terraces along the sloping base of the mountain wall.

The mysterious camouflaged structures ahead began to loom closer, their details growing more distinct. There was nothing decorative or ornamental about any of them. They were severe and utilitarian, apparently having been designed to work in and nothing more.

Doyle squinted as presently he made out a road or path, at the far end of the valley, running from the

camouflaged buildings to a number of cave-like openings in the mountain wall, beyond. Figures—Venusians, he realized—moved along the path in both directions, pushing hand carts.

The camouflaged buildings seemed the hub of some sort of mining activity. But, Doyle thought, what could the occupants of the valley possibly be mining that required such secrecy?

Sharp-face suddenly spoke: "Turn toward the building to your left."

Doyle saw that he and Edith had reached the first of the camouflaged buildings, a long shed-like structure, before which stood two Venusians with electro-rifles, obviously on guard.

"This is where we keep unwelcome guests," Sharp-face told Doyle. "You and Miss Smith will remain here until we decide what is to be done with you." He smiled thinly. "Since accommodations are limited, it seems you will have to be kept together. Unfortunately, Bruhl and I cannot entertain Miss Smith as we have more pressing duties."

"Perhaps it could still be arranged, Starkhov," Bruhl said, sensuous lips twisting in a sly grin.

STARKHOV, as the sharp-faced man's name appeared to be, shrugged. "Perhaps. But not now."

"Where do you get the authority to treat us like criminals?" Doyle demanded. "As far as I know, Miss Smith and I haven't broken any Venusian laws. When the representatives of the government of Earth learn of this, you can bet there's going to be a very thorough investigation."

Starkhov's thin mouth curled. "That possibility does not worry me. Soon there will be no representatives of Earth left on Venus—nor any government of Earth, for that matter." Dismissing Doyle with a contemptuous gesture, he snapped orders at the Venusian guards.

Doyle felt his arms grasped at either side, then found himself being propelled roughly toward the shed-like building. He was shoved sprawling into a small room.

Edith was pushed in after him. She clutched her bag, which she had been allowed to keep, its contents intact.

The door closed with a slam. There was the metallic sound of a lock clicking shut.

Helped by Edith, Doyle picked himself up from the floor. She was solicitous. "Are you hurt?"

"Could have been worse," Doyle grunted, touching various bruises. "I'm going to remember this—if and when I'm able to do something about it."

The room was little more than a dozen feet square, lighted by a single small fluoro-tube in the ceiling. A few tiny barred windows, set high in the walls, provided ventilation. Furnishings were scanty, consisting of a cot and a table and a bench. A space roughly three feet square had been partitioned off in one of the rear corners, its entrance covered with a length of sacking.

"What's in there?" Edith asked, as Doyle briefly investigated the closet.

"Take a look for yourself."

She did so, retreating hastily. Her face was several shades pinker than usual.

A SOFT rapping noise broke the momentary silence. Doyle, in the act of seating himself on the bench, froze into rigidity. Within a few seconds the rapping came again. Someone in the next room, he realized, was rapping on the intervening wall.

He placed his ear over the spot. There were numerous spaces between the boards where they had not been perfectly fitted together. Edith joined him, craning over his shoulder. **A**

man's voice whispered: "Are you Earth people?"

"Yes," Doyle said. "Who are you?"

"My name is Milton Bancroft."

Edith's body jerked in startled surprise. "Dad!" she gasped. "Dad!"

"Edith! Edith, is that you?" Bancroft's voice was filled at once with joy and dismay.

"Yes, Dad. I came to look for you."

"Great galaxy! You shouldn't have done that, girl. Now we're all in trouble."

"But I didn't know about... about the people here, in the valley. Not until it was too late."

"Neither did I. I've been a prisoner for months. But, Edith, how did you get here?"

"Mr. Doyle brought me to the valley in his flier," Edith explained. She told of her decision to conduct a personal research, after her failure to obtain aid from Takkom Guriz. She described how her efforts to hire a private flier had met with refusals—refusals for which, as Doyle later revealed, Takkom Guriz seemed directly responsible. Then she explained Doyle's generosity in aiding her, despite the resulting loss of his flying permit and consequently of his air service business.

"That was mighty decent of you," Bancroft told Doyle. "Wish I could shake your hand. It's too bad your sacrifice has gone to waste. But you were right in your suspicions about Guriz. He's the one behind what's going on here."

"But what is going on anyway?" Doyle asked. "All I've been able to learn so far is that they're doing some sort of mining in the valley. I can't understand why that should be so important."

BANCROFT laughed shortly, bitterly. "It is important, though—devilishly important. So important

that Earth is in terrible danger. You see, what they're mining here is uranium."

Doyle whistled softly. "I get it now! So that's what Guriz is after—atomic weapons!"

"Precisely," Bancroft said. "Guriz and the others have a complete atomic plant set up here, in the valley. Starkhov and Bruhl are a couple of traitorous Earth scientists in charge of the work. There are several other Earthmen here, handling the more important jobs, while all the rest are Venusians. The whole thing is a deep secret, apparently. Guriz literally has the government of Venus in his pocket, which explains how he was able to keep matters quiet. He knows very well that Earth has forbidden atomic power to Venus and would clamp down at once if word leaked out."

"But just why does Guriz want atomic weapons?" Doyle questioned. "What is he planning to do?"

Bancroft said slowly, "I've managed to learn a great deal about that. I've been here quite a long time, you see, and was forced to work in one of the laboratories until Guriz and Starkhov decided I had learned too much and had become too dangerous.

"Guriz' scheme is slightly fantastic. But he's insanely ambitious and will stop at nothing. What he hopes to do is to destroy Earth's hold on Venus. That would give him unlimited power over the planet, something he doesn't have now. To obtain this, of course, he must first of all destroy Earth's ability to resist. And he hopes to accomplish that by beating Earth into submission with atomic weapons."

"But...but that's impossible!" Doyle burst out. "Guriz must be completely mad!"

"Maybe," Bancroft returned. "But his plan has a good chance of succeeding. Too good a chance. Consider the facts. Earth could be taken by

surprise and seriously crippled at one stroke. There would be little or no advance warning for a number of reasons. Earth isn't prepared for war and won't be expecting an attack. Least of all one with atomic weapons. The key cities and military installations of Earth could be wiped out before the authorities had time to strike back.

"With Earth powerless to stop him, Guriz then intends to take over full control of all Venus. He could organize the whole planet as a vast military base against any possibility of retaliation. But Earth's weakened condition would be an enormous opportunity to a person like Guriz, and there's no reason to suppose that he'd be satisfied with just the control of Venus."

BANCROFT'S voice grew urgent. "The attack on Earth is due to take place soon. Starkhov and Bruhl were already in production when I arrived here, and by now they must have built up a stockpile of atomic weapons great enough for Guriz to launch his offensive. They've been using Venusian natives as slave labor, working them night and day. Earth's danger increases with every passing minute. And we're the only ones with her interest at heart who know of it."

"We've got to do something," Doyle said. "Somehow, we have to make an escape. And no matter what the cost to the others, one of us has to get through with a warning."

"Escape seems impossible under the circumstances we're in," Bancroft said hopelessly.

Doyle touched the energy-knife in his boot and peered thoughtfully around the room. He quietly told Bancroft, "I think we could swing it."

"But how? We'd have to get out of here first, you know. This building is constructed of boards, but we couldn't

kick or pry them out, or do anything else that would make noise. The guards outside are always alert for trouble."

Doyle explained about the energy-knife. "We could carve an opening through one of the rear walls, then make for my flier at the other end of the valley. They'll have guards around the flier, I suppose, but we'll be able to take care of them. We could get up close by using the ruins as a screen, as Starkhov and Bruhl did when they caught Edith and me."

Bancroft's tone held sudden elation. "We can try it. The plan might work. It *must* work!"

"We'll have to wait for darkness before we do anything," Doyle said. "While it's light, someone might walk in and catch us at work. And darkness will give us a better chance to reach the flier without being discovered."

"That's right, of course."

Doyle was silent a moment. "Can you handle a flier?" he asked Bancroft finally.

"Yes. I flew here in one, you see, though I don't know what has become of it after all this time."

"Good. Your being able to fly will be useful in a pinch." Doyle fell silent again, his thoughts grim. If it came to a fight with the guards posted around the flier, one of the party would have to keep busy long enough for the others to get away. And Doyle realized that the job was his. Bancroft clearly was too old, too weakened by confinement, to be effective.

WITH TIME now an element to consider, it seemed to Doyle that the minutes began to pass more slowly. He fell to a restless pacing of the floor.

Edith spoke to her father for a while, then turned back to Doyle. She

gestured at the bag on the table. "We seem to have forgotten something. I'm hungry."

Doyle came to a stop. "Come to think of it, so am I."

Bancroft's voice sounded through the wall. "Better tighten your belts, then. We're fed only twice a day—once in the morning, and once in the evening."

"Who's we?" Doyle asked. "Are there any other Earth people being kept prisoner here?"

"No. Just a handful of native slave laborers who tried at one time or another to escape. They're too valuable as workers to kill, so Starkhov locks them up for a while and then puts them back to work. It brings results, too. Nobody hates being locked up as much as a native who has lived out in the open all his life."

Edith told her father about the lunch packed away in her bag. "On two meals a day you must be practically starved. If I could only get a package in to you—"

"Can do," Doyle said. He took the energy-knife from his boot and, tracing a particularly wide gap in the boards of the wall to its juncture with the floor, he began to widen it. Finally the hole was large enough to admit the separated parts of a food package. Doyle moved the table so that one of its legs covered the hole. Edith had carefully picked up and hidden all the shavings.

Satisfied that everything else had been done, Edith handed Doyle a package. "Soup's on," she announced with a grin.

"Remarkably condensed, I see."

Doyle hadn't talked much with the girl, but sharing the lunch brought an intimacy that encouraged speech. He found her an easy person to talk to. She somehow managed to combine frankness and humor with intelligence

and dignity. There was no coyness about her, no feminine gush or flutters.

HE BEGAN to wonder more acutely about her personal life. Probably tied to some guy, he thought. A man with any brains at all would hardly let her get away. He decided to maneuver the conversation around to the point where he could indirectly find out.

It developed that she wasn't engaged.

"I was," she said. "He had everything in the way of appearance and background—except courage. I wanted him to help me look for Dad, but he was chilled to the marrow by the very idea of the dangers and inconveniences involved." She moved her slender shoulders indifferently. "I'm glad I found out in time. The man I stick with must be able to forget himself—face anything that comes up." She looked intently at Doyle for a moment, then glanced down at her hands.

"That's almost exactly what was wrong with Rita," he said musingly.

"Oh, her name was Rita?"

"Yes." He was looking back into the past. "We hadn't been married long before she decided she didn't like following me around on engineering jobs. There were no nightclubs in most of the places we went to, no people who gave expensive parties. So finally I stuck it out alone, even though my work kept us separated most of the time.

"I'd always let her know in advance when I was returning home; she'd asked me to. But one day I got back unexpectedly. A job had fallen through, and I hadn't been gone long enough to think that the usual advance notice was necessary. I found her with...well, it was the usual

thing. What made it worse was having her call me a low-minded snoop.

"It killed something in me. I was serious about life—serious enough to have acquired a string of degrees that no real engineer needs anyway. But after that I just didn't care any more. Rita and I worked out a divorce and I came to Venus. I bummed around for a while, then bought the flier. It gave me something to do, even if it wasn't exactly safe or profitable."

Edith said softly, "And now you've lost even that."

"Maybe not. We have a good chance of getting out of here."

"Are you so certain that you had to ask Dad if he could fly?"

Doyle shrugged. "It just seemed a wise question to ask."

A SILENCE fell. They sat side by side on the cot, not looking at each other, not moving. Finally Edith reached out to cover one of Doyle's hands with her own. Her voice was low.

"Something bothers me, Greg. Did you ask Dad that question because you thought you might... might not be able to escape with us?"

"We all have a chance. Forget it."

"But if something goes wrong, you intend to sacrifice yourself. Isn't that the answer?"

"I said forget it."

"I'll try. But there are some things I'll never forget. I'll never forget a man named Greg who gives his all for maidens in distress—maybe because they look so much like an erring former wife. Greg, with a string of degrees after his name, and a squint in his eyes, who looks so nice when he's cleaned up." Her voice caught on something and tore.

Doyle swore under his breath and moved his hand out from under the soft one covering it. Then he swore

again, found her hand and buried it in the hard clasp of his larger one.

They sat wordlessly, waiting. The barred windows were darkening with the approach of night. There was the steady rhythmic sound of footfalls as Bancroft, in the next cell, paced the floor. From outside came other footfalls and a muttering in the native tongue as the guards were changed.

In the ominous quiet a distant sound grew. It quickly swelled into the roar of a jet flier engine.

Doyle had stiffened tensely, listening. "Somebody's coming to the valley," he said.

Bancroft's voice lifted behind the wall. "Greg? You hear that?"

"Yes. Know who it might be?"

"Guriz, most probably. If so, something unusual is up. Maybe about you and Edith. Starkhov keeps in touch with Guriz by radio, and he doesn't come here often."

Doyle felt a sudden chill. Starkhov had hinted that his and Edith's fate remained to be decided. If the flier's passenger were Guriz, would that be his purpose in coming? Suppose action were taken before Doyle and the others could get their intended escape under way?

HE FELT Edith's touch on his arm. He sensed that the same thoughts were passing through her mind. He drew her against him and she clung to him, taut with dread.

The flier landed. There was silence again. Silence, while minutes like centuries crept past. Then came the intermingled noises of an approaching group.

The lock clicked and the door swung open. Starkhov and Bruhl entered the room, weapons gripped in their hands. They stood aside as a third figure appeared behind them, a huge-bodied Venusian, garbed in a

splendid kilt, official mantle and headpiece. His heavy-jowled leathery features held the stamp of power and authority. Doyle knew he was looking at Takkom Guriz.

Guriz' eyes settled on Edith. His grimly purposeful expression became touched with mockery. He spoke with the hissing sound peculiar to Venusians of all classes.

"Well, Miss Smith, so we meet again. The last time I saw you, however, your name was Miss Bancroft. So confusing, all these names."

Edith bit her lip and said nothing.

In the stillness Starkhov breathed audibly. Rage and dread seemed to struggle in his sharp face. Bruhl was silent and impassive.

Guriz went on, "If Starkhov had known of your little deception, he wouldn't have placed you in such convenient proximity to your father, Milton Bancroft, the eminent though unfortunate archaeologist. In spite of this, Starkhov might have remembered that since all the persons concerned were Earth people, certain... ah... dangerous information might be exchanged."

"I have explained that I did not know of Miss Bancroft's father being in the next cell," Starkhov muttered. "I have important work to do. I cannot keep in mind hundreds of insignificant details."

"But insignificant details sometimes develop into momentous matters," Guriz pointed out. "A good point to remember, Starkhov." He turned back to Edith. "Well, Miss Bancroft, you have found your father. Are you now satisfied?"

"Leave her alone," Doyle growled. "She was only trying to do something decent. Which is more than you can say for yourself."

GURIZ surveyed Doyle with narrow-eyed interest. "Ah, Gregory

Doyle, the gallant Earthman. You would not be warned, eh? A word to the wise is reputed to be sufficient, but it seems that you would be satisfied with nothing less than becoming involved in serious trouble."

Doyle shrugged. "That's nothing compared to the trouble you'll be in if you try a sneak attack against Earth."

Guriz' fleshy face hardened. "You will speak to me with respect, *Kazko!* I am delighted that the problem presented by Miss Bancroft has been solved, but my patience has definite limits."

"So has your intelligence, if your power-mad schemes are any examples!" Doyle shot back.

Guriz stepped forward, eyes suddenly wild with rage. One of his bludgeon-like fists leaped out at Doyle's cheek. Rolling his head with the blow, Doyle managed to take most of the sting out of it. He fell into a crouch, his fists clenched and his mouth set tightly.

Starkhov crowded forward, jabbing the muzzle of his weapon against Doyle's chest. "Careful!" he warned. "Another move and you die!"

"Greg!" Edith cried, alarm twisting her face. "Don't!"

Doyle got himself under control with an effort. Guriz' calm arrogance had been hard to stomach, coming as it did on top of the knowledge that the Venusian was endangering countless millions of human lives. But Doyle was aware that expending himself uselessly would accomplish nothing.

Guriz' mouth was curled. "Your defiance is a small matter, *Kazko*. Your death and that of Miss Bancroft and her father has already been arranged. I shall generously overlook your last actions while alive. To keep you here indefinitely would be too troublesome,

while temporarily it would be too much of a risk. My preparations are almost complete, and I shall take no chances at this point. Very soon, I shall see your insolent race humbled—as it has humbled mine!”

GURIZ PAUSED, studying Doyle and Edith with a malicious smile. “No doubt you will be interested in the means by which your deaths are to be brought about. The mine here in the valley is quite extensive, and certain portions of it, I understand, are unusually deep. You are to be taken to one of these spots, after which the tunnel is to be sealed up by explosives. Your fate will never be discovered by Earth authorities—and I will be at liberty to follow my plans without the risk of interference.”

Doyle asked tensely, “Just when is this supposed to take place?”

“Immediately!” Guriz snapped.

Doyle felt Edith’s fingers tighten convulsively on his hand. He knew what was in her mind. They would have no time now to carry out their intended escape.

Starkhov said, “Immediately? I am afraid that will be impossible.”

Guriz whirled to him in swift anger. “And just why, if I may ask?”

“The tunnel system at the lowest mine levels is complex and dangerous. Only a few of the overseers know the proper route, and these at present are in a drugged state as a result of their addiction to chewing *jasht* seeds. It is impossible to keep them from indulging in this vice when not on duty. Overseers are too important to order around like slave labor.”

Guriz nodded reluctantly, scowling. “How long will it take to get one conscious?”

“About an hour,” Starkhov returned. “Even the strongest stimulants work slowly on *jasht* cases.”

“Set somebody about it, then. I want to see this business over with before I leave.” Guriz turned toward the door.

Doyle was thinking rapidly. It would take considerable time for Bancroft and himself to carve exits through the walls of their respective cells. An hour might not be enough for both, and Doyle didn’t like the idea of leaving the archaeologist behind. He spoke swiftly, before Guriz could leave the cell.

“A moment, your Excellency. I want to make a last request.”

Guriz stopped and turned, suspicious, but flattered by Doyle’s use of the title. “And what is that?”

“Since Miss Bancroft, her father, and I have only an hour more of life, wouldn’t you be generous and let us spend it together?”

Guriz scowled. “After the insulting manner in which you spoke to me, you deserve no favors of any kind.”

“I’m not asking this for myself, but for Miss Bancroft,” Doyle explained.

Edith caught the drift of Doyle’s cajolery. She added her own pleadings.

Guriz shrugged irritably. “You are all to die shortly anyway, so what does it matter?” He gestured at Starkhov. “Have the old man brought here, and then lock them up again. Be certain that the guards outside remain alert. I will not feel entirely safe until this whole affair has been ended.”

Guriz left, and Starkhov snapped orders at the Venusian guards. Presently Milton Bancroft was shoved roughly into the cell. Starkhov and Bruhl had already left. The door slammed shut, and the lock clicked.

EDITH WAS staring at her father in dismay. His clothing hung in

tatters, and his hair and beard were an overgrown tangle. He was pale and gaunt, but apparently in fairly good condition.

Sobbing, Edith flew into his arms, and he held her tightly, swallowing hard. After a moment he held out a hand to Doyle.

"This will make it official, Greg."

"And a pleasure!" Doyle grinned. He sobered. "There isn't much time. We'll have to work fast. We'll tackle the wall through the closet, over there. That'll let us out at the back of the building, and it isn't likely that the guards will be expecting anything of the sort. Working in the closet will cut down our chances of being caught, if anyone should happen to look in on us." Doyle reached into his boot for the energy-knife. "I'll start in."

Bancroft nodded. "I'll warn you by coughing in case a guard shows up and you're too busy to notice."

Doyle went into the closet and set to work with the energy-knife. The object was to cut a square opening in the wall, just large enough for him and the others to squeeze through. In practice, however, this was not easy. The boards of the wall were of tough Venusian wood, wide and quite thick. And the "blade" of the device Doyle was using did not slice like a hot knife through butter, but more like a cutting torch attacking steel.

Doyle's arms and back began to ache. His eyes watered with strain. The "blade" had to be held perfectly in line with each cut. Any wavering meant precious seconds lost, as well as a waste of the energy capsule powering the device he wielded.

At last Doyle could keep it up no longer. His hands had begun to tremble too badly from the torture of keeping them rigidly in one position. He turned the energy-knife over to Bancroft with a brief explanation of

the technique involved in its use.

SEATING himself on the cot beside Edith, Doyle massaged his hands and arms. After a moment she took over, the touch of her fingers soothing. He watched the play of shadows over her small face, an ache of a different kind nagging deep within him.

"There isn't much time left," Edith said finally, as if voicing a fear that had been growing in her mind. "Think we'll make it?"

He nodded a reassurance he didn't completely feel. "We have a good chance."

Several minutes later Bancroft hurried from the closet, perspiration beading his forehead. His gaunt features were twisted in dismay. "The knife!" he said huskily, gesturing with the device. "The capsule's exhausted!"

Doyle shot erect, a chill flashing through him. He searched frantically through his pockets.

Nothing.

He felt sick. Were their efforts doomed to failure after all?

Then he remembered his jacket, draped over the bench near the table. Pawing hastily through the articles contained in the garment's pockets, he exclaimed in triumph.

"Thought I had a spare, but for a second or two it looked like we were finished. . . . I'll take over again," he told Bancroft. He slipped the fresh energy capsule into place and returned to the closet.

The minutes passed swiftly as Doyle worked. He knew the deadline was approaching. Not an instant could be wasted now.

Weariness crept back into his hands and arms, but there could be no stopping, no rest. Each board cut through added further hope for Edith and her father. Each added further hope for Earth.

FINALLY, when it seemed that he could control the energy-knife no longer, the last board was cut through. He carefully lifted it out of the opening. There was a square gap in the wall now, and beyond it was darkness—and freedom.

Doyle thrust his head through the opening, his heart racing. Had the guards at the front of the building grown suspicious? If they came around to the rear, they would hardly fail to discover the hole that had been cut into the wall. But he saw and heard nothing unusual.

Doyle joined Edith and Bancroft. "All right—out we go," he announced. He nodded at the older man. "You first. Edith next."

Doyle waited tensely as Bancroft entered the closet. There were a few faint scrapes and rustlings, then silence. Bancroft had made it without mishap.

Doyle turned to Edith. "Next."

She went to him impulsively, and for a moment he held her. Then she was hurrying toward the closet. More faint scrapes and rustlings. Silence again.

Doyle stood alone and tense, listening. He had chosen himself as the last to leave in the event that anyone entered the cell while the escape was under way. He would be able to put up enough of a fight to give the others the start they needed.

There was no alarm, no sounds of an approach. He stepped into the closet, squeezed through the opening, and lowered himself to the ground outside.

Edith and Bancroft were waiting. Gesturing for them to follow, Doyle strode toward the end of the building. Ahead, gray and spectral in the darkness, stretched the ruins.

Doyle struck out for the tangle of rocks and vegetation at the base of

the valley wall. This would offer concealment until the ruins were reached. The way was rough, and they had to move slowly and carefully to avoid tripping.

A heavy pounding filled Doyle's chest. They were losing a lot of time. At any moment now, Guriz and Starkhov would return with the awakened overseer and find them gone. The alarm would be out.

The ruins reached out slowly to receive them. Plant growth filled cracks between the ancient stone paving, but the going was easier. They set out at a trot now, stopping occasionally to climb over heaps of fallen masonry that blocked the narrow street.

ABRUPTLY Doyle halted. Between two buildings, looking down toward the lake, he saw a flashlight beam cut the darkness. He motioned for Edith and Bancroft to keep out of sight and slipped cautiously through the opening. A figure was approaching along the narrow strip between the ruins and the lake—a man, Doyle discovered. The man was alone, swinging his torch idly at the ground as he walked.

Alone. And perhaps he carried a gun. It was a possibility worth investigating.

Doyle gestured for Edith and Bancroft to remain in concealment. Then he lowered himself down to the next terrace, moving at right angles to the torch swinger's line of approach. Reaching the strip near the lake, he picked out an ambushade behind a section of stone wall and settled down to wait.

The torch swinger came on, completely unsuspecting. He passed Doyle's hiding place, whistling a tune.

Doyle reached him in a cat-like leap. His arm circled the other's neck,

choking off a possible outcry. At the same time he snatched at the flashlight, fumbled with it a moment, and switched it off. Then he bore his wildly struggling but slighter victim into concealment at the fringe of the ruins. His fist, weighted with the flashlight, swept down in a chopping blow. The man went limp.

A quick search doomed Doyle to disappointment. There was no gun.

Doyle gazed bitterly at the unconscious man. He was slim and dapper, dressed in natty flying clothes. Guriz' pilot, Doyle decided. Evidently he had gone to the other end of the valley for a look at Doyle's flier.

THERE WAS no sound from the guards at the craft. If they had noticed the abrupt darkening of the flashlight, they apparently had decided that the pilot had turned into the ruins.

Doyle shrugged and shoved the flashlight into a pocket. He turned to retrace his way back to where he had left Edith and her father. An idea flashed suddenly into his mind. Edith and the pilot were almost of the same size. Wearing the pilot's outer clothes, Edith might be able to draw the guards at the flier into a trap.

Doyle whirled back to the man and swiftly began to strip him. Then, with the pilot's clothes slung over his arm, he climbed rapidly to where Edith and Bancroft were waiting.

Edith asked, "What were you up to, Greg? I was worried sick."

"Thought the fellow I saw might have a gun," Doyle explained. "He didn't. But I think I got something almost as good." He extended the clothes and outlined his plan.

She grinned. "So I'm to be the bait for a trap, is that it?"

"Check. It's a little risky, though. If the guards make a move with their

rifles, duck quick. But I'm pretty certain they'll bite. They saw the pilot only a while ago, and won't have any reason to be suspicious of what they'll think is him showing up again."

"It's worth the risk." With the clothes, Edith stepped around the side of a building. Shortly there followed rustling noises as she changed.

Bancroft asked, "What's our part in the plan, Greg?"

"There can't be any more than two guards. We'll hide behind the ruins near the flier, and when they follow after Edith, we'll jump them and knock them out with rocks. It's as simple as that—provided the guards think Edith is Guriz' pilot and are curious enough to see what she wants."

Presently Edith appeared. The flying clothes fitted her well enough for the purpose they were to serve.

"All right, let's go," Doyle said. "And hurry. We've lost a lot of time."

THEY RESUMED their progress through the ancient Aztol city at a trot, slipping on loose rubble, leaping mounds of debris. The flier drew closer, until at last it was on a direct line with their position among the ruins.

Doyle peered through the darkness at the silvery shape of the craft. Two dim figures showed against it. He nodded in satisfaction; his guess had been right, then. He gestured to Edith and Bancroft and began descending the terraces toward the strip.

Doyle and Bancroft placed themselves on each side of a gap between two buildings at the bottom. Then Doyle handed Edith the flashlight. She hesitated a moment, stepped through the gap. Turning on the torch, she pointed it first at the guards, then at her clothes.

"Come here!" she called.

The guards straightened into startled alertness, clutching at their rifles. In the next moment they relaxed as they recognized the clothes Edith wore.

"What do you want?" one of them called back.

"Come!" Edith said.

They started forward, rifles cradled casually in their arms.

From the other end of the valley came a shout. Voices followed it, rising into a confused babble of excitement. Flashlights began stabbing the darkness. Someone yelled an order, and silence came. In the silence a voice called across the valley.

"Flier guards, be alert! The Earthling prisoners have escaped!"

Edith broke from her paralysis of surprise. With a cry of dismay, she whirled back through the gap among the buildings. The two guards yelled in realization of her identity, lifted their rifles, and came leaping in pursuit.

Across the valley flashlight beams sent lances of brilliance through the darkness as the group there began running forward. Doyle felt a numbing chill close over him. A pincers movement was threatening his own little party. Capture would be only a matter of time.

He thrust aside his despair. They weren't caught yet, he reminded himself. There was still time to do something.

HE CONSIDERED the situation quickly. The two guards were closest, and therefore of greatest danger. It would take several minutes before the group at the other end of the valley came within range. He knew that the movements of Edith, Bancroft and himself would be restricted by the valley wall on one side and the openness of the strip beside the lake on the other. With the two

guards drawing perilously near, there was only one direction in which they could go—and that was toward the other, farther group.

Doyle grasped Edith's arm, gestured to Bancroft. "We've got to go back. As quickly and quietly as we can. It's the only way out of this mess. Follow me now."

He set off a short distance down the narrow, plant-choked street, then turned around the side of a building and climbed swiftly up to the next terrace. He pulled Edith and her father after him, and they started out again. Behind them sounded the voices of the two guards, puzzled at finding the lower terrace deserted.

Shortly Doyle shifted to the next, higher terrace, again assisting Edith and her father. The two guards had separated, one on each of the lower levels. With their quarry still somehow out of sight, they sounded even more puzzled than before.

Ahead, the larger group of pursuers roared forward, like a pack of excited hounds. Doyle was sharply aware of them, but for the moment he concentrated on the two guards. Sooner or later, he knew, one or both of the Venusians would shift to the terrace he was on. He wanted to be ready when that happened.

Presently it did. There was the rattle of stones as one of the guards climbed to Doyle's level.

Motioning urgently to Edith and Bancroft, Doyle swung down to the terrace that had just been vacated. Edith and Bancroft followed. What little noise they made was swallowed up in the confusion of voices and pounding footsteps from ahead.

Doyle trotted on. He realized that his breath was becoming more and more labored. He wondered how much longer Edith and Bancroft could hold out—especially Bancroft.

HE STRAINED his ears, trying to keep check on the positions of the two guards in his rear. In another moment he heard lurid curses as the lowest of the guards slipped in his efforts to climb up to the terrace along which Doyle and the others were running. At the same time there came the clatter of stones as the second slid down to join his companion.

With frantic haste, Doyle dodged around the side of a building. Edith and Bancroft joined him barely in time to escape detection. Lowering himself down to the first terrace, Doyle reached for Edith. He swung her down beside him, then turned to Bancroft. The older man was descending along a number of stones projecting from the crumbling wall. One of the stones abruptly slipped out of place, and with a gasp of dismay Bancroft noisily slid the remaining distance downward.

From above came shouts of eagerness as the two puzzled and angry guards once more located their prey. Their cries were answered by the group splayed out ahead.

Doyle bent quickly to help Bancroft back to his feet.

"Better leave me, Greg," the archaeologist whispered tiredly. "I'm all played out. You and Edith will have a better chance without me."

"We're sticking together," Doyle said doggedly. "We aren't licked yet."

"But what can we do?" Bancroft protested. "I can't go much further."

Doyle glanced around swiftly. Wildly waving flashlight beams were slicing the darkness up above as the two groups of pursuers converged. A short distance away, dim and unreal in the gloom, bulked the pyramid temple Doyle had noticed earlier. He seized at the possibility it offered.

"The temple over there!" he said swiftly. "We've got to reach it."

Ignoring Bancroft's objections, Doyle slipped an arm around him and urged him forward. Edith added her own assistance and, inspired to new effort, Bancroft stumbled into motion.

THEY REACHED the ramp leading up to the temple doorway just as one of their pursuers sighted them. The Venusian swung up his rifle and fired. The bolt struck the balustrade at the edge of the ramp and sent up a shower of stone.

"There they are! They're going into the temple!"

"After them, you fools." It was Guriz' voice, shrill with rage. "Kill them! Do not let them escape!"

Rocks clattered as the group began descending toward the temple. A few retained enough presence of mind to direct their flashlight beams at the ramp, while others hastily fired their weapons at the fugitives.

By this time, however, Doyle and the others had gained the protection of the balustrade. Not until Guriz and his henchmen reached the foot of the ramp would their fire be effective.

Half pushing, half pulling, Doyle and Edith got Bancroft up the ramp and into the temple doorway at the top. Doyle flashed his torch around. They were in a small chamber, he saw. Against one wall stood a tall carved stone idol, in front of which rested a large stone bowl. There was no other exit from the room except that by which they had entered.

Doyle groaned inwardly. They were hopelessly trapped. Yet they couldn't wait in passive resignation while Guriz and the others closed in for the kill. Something had to be done.

In flashing around the torch Doyle suddenly noticed that the stone idol didn't fit flush with the wall. It was turned at an angle, leaving a gap of a foot or so at one side.

Investigating the gap, he exclaimed

In surprise. "There's a hole in the wall of some sort here! If I can just move this hunk of rock out of the way—"

He handed Edith the torch, grasped the edge of the stone figure, and pulled, one foot braced against the wall for added leverage. Slowly the idol moved aside. A small square opening was revealed.

"A doorway!" Doyle breathed.

Bancroft nodded slowly. "I might have guessed there would be an arrangement like this here. The Aztols were clever at things like that."

Doyle stiffened, listening. Their pursuers had reached the bottom of the ramp.

"We've got to get out of here!" he said. "I don't know where this doorway leads, but it might be a way out. Get inside, quick!"

EDITH WENT first, Bancroft following. Slipping through after them, Doyle found himself at the top of a narrow stairway leading downward. In the flashlight beam he saw a stone ring fastened to the back of the idol, obviously used once for pulling it flush with the wall. He grasped the ring and pulled, but shortly the idol stuck, leaving the gap between it and the wall somewhat larger than it had originally been. He gave up after a moment. The gap wouldn't be noticed immediately, and Guriz' party was already near the top of the ramp. He hurriedly followed Edith and Bancroft down the narrow, twisting stairway.

To Doyle the descent seemed to take them into the very bowels of the planet. Faintly, from above, came cries of consternation as Guriz and the others had found the chamber empty. But presently a shout rose as the gap behind the idol was discovered.

Doyle reached the bottom of the stairway, found himself with Edith and Bancroft before a square open-

ing in the rock that gaped outward into utter darkness. He took the flashlight from Edith and pointed the beam through. A tunnel stretched down at a slant.

"Wish I knew just what we're getting into," he muttered. "But we've got to keep moving. Guriz and his gang will be coming down the stairs in another few seconds."

Doyle swung into the lead. The tunnel floor was level and free of debris. They could move at a headlong pace without fear of tripping.

The tunnel slanted steadily downward. Then, suddenly, it straightened out. Doyle halted with a hoarse whisper of astonishment. Gasps followed from Edith and Bancroft as they, too, saw.

THE WALLS of this portion of the tunnel were lined with niches. And seated within each were mummified Venusian figures, crowned with gorgeous headdresses and draped in richly gleaming robes. Necklaces of glittering gems hung about the withered throats, and jeweled bracelets and rings covered the skeletal wrists and fingers. Resting in the laps of the figures were sceptres and ceremonial axes of precious metal, all gem-encrusted.

Bancroft was in an archaeologist's paradise. He examined the mummies feverishly, muttering to himself.

"I'd been wondering where the tombs were hidden! Princes and nobles, these. This is the way the ancient Aztols buried their dead, you know—the important ones, anyway. . . . Lord, this a regular treasure trove! If only—"

"I know," Doyle said gently. "But Guriz and the others are coming after us. We've got to keep moving."

Abruptly he held up a hand for silence and listened intently. From the other end of the tunnel came a swell-

ing babble of voices, mingled with the dull thunder of running feet.

He flashed the torch down the length of the tunnel ahead. Not far distant another square opening yawned.

Doyle beckoned urgently. "Come on! We've got to hurry."

The opening gave out on a short stairway. Reaching the bottom, Doyle found another tunnel stretching ahead of them. A damp clammy chill struck into him through his clothing. The tunnel walls gleamed with slime, and the floor was ankle deep in ooze. Faintly, from up forward, came the steady dripping sound of water.

THE OOZE made their progress difficult. Gradually, however, it thinned out into muddy water. The water grew deeper, and shortly they were sloshing through it up to their knees. In their rear came the relentless thunder of pursuit.

With the flashlight Doyle kept probing the velvet blackness ahead. Always it kept opening before them, seemingly without end. He was chilled from the cold dank water through which he moved and icy with a growing despair. He knew he couldn't keep going much longer. By what miracle Edith and Bancroft kept up with him, he didn't know. But he was certain it couldn't last.

And then, abruptly, the flashlight beam was reflected from a wetly gleaming wall. The tunnel had ended at last. But—

In a blind alley.

Doyle turned to Edith and Bancroft, shoulders sagging. He pointed the torch mutely, and the sick hopelessness that leaped into their faces caught at him like a pain.

In the distance sounded cries of amazed delight as Guriz' henchmen discovered the mummies in the niches. The sounds of pursuit momentarily

ceased. The greater part of Guriz' band evidently had paused greedily to plunder the long-dead figures of their jeweled ornaments.

Doyle heard Guriz speak in a tone of sharp reprimand. But the others ignored him for the moment as they argued among themselves over the division of the loot. Then Starkhov's voice added itself to the exhortations of Guriz.

On an impulse, Doyle sloshed toward the imprisoning wall, flashing his torch about in desperation. The tunnel just couldn't end this way, he told himself. It had to have an outlet somehow.

In the next instant he had all he could do to keep himself from shouting in utter joy. Stone rungs were set into the side wall, leading up to a small opening in the ceiling.

He whirled, gesturing excitedly to Edith and Bancroft. Incredulous hope leaped into their faces as they glimpsed the rungs and the opening above.

BEHIND them the sounds of pursuit suddenly resumed. Guriz and Starkhov had finally succeeded in getting the others back on the chase.

"Here they come!" Doyle whispered. He started toward the rungs in the wall. "Up we go—and fast. The tunnel here is straight, which means they'll be able to use their weapons when they sight us."

Edith climbed swiftly. Bancroft went up after her, boosted along by Doyle. As Doyle started up, the first of a number of flashlight beams reached toward him—touched him.

"There they are!" Guriz bellowed. "Hurry, you clumsy dolts. They're climbing up the wall somehow. Do not let them escape!"

A rifle made its spiteful crackling sound, and the bolt splashed coruscantly against the end wall, near Doyle's legs. Other weapons began fir-

ing. With frantic haste, Doyle literally hauled himself up hand over hand. Squeezing none too soon through the opening, he found himself in a low, narrow chamber. Bancroft was examining a heavy length of wood which projected from a slot in one wall.

"I think I know what this is for," Bancroft muttered. "All that water down here, you know, and the lake nearby. If I'm right—"

He grasped the length of wood and threw his weight against it. For a moment it refused to budge. Then there was a slight scraping noise, a faint rumble as of sliding rocks—and the lever moved.

Abruptly, like thunder in the silence, the roar of rushing water filled the room. Doyle dropped to his knees, flashing his torch through the opening. He could see nothing but water, shooting past in a solid stream. Shouts and screams of terror reached him muffledly from the trapped men in the tunnel below. There had been no chance of escape for Guriz, Starkhov and the others. The water had come too rapidly.

THE VOICES were choked off one by one. There was left only the roaring of water, fading slowly as the tunnel became completely filled.

Doyle stood up slowly, dazed. Bancroft's voice came to him as if from a distance.

"The lever opened a water lock connected with the lake. The Aztols were ingenious at devising little tricks like that. At any rate, Guriz and Starkhov got what was coming to them. Their deaths remove a serious danger to Earth."

Doyle took a deep breath, nodding. "Well, that leaves only the problem of getting out of here."

"There's a doorway in the wall over

there," Edith put in. "When you get around to noticing it, let's go."

There *was* a doorway, Doyle found. Steps led up and ever up. Holding Edith's hand, the climb didn't seem to take very long at all. He felt a mild surprise when suddenly they emerged from a narrow cave and into the dark bowl of the valley. The lake gleamed a short distance ahead, and outlined against it was the shape of the flier.

Doyle felt Bancroft grip his arm. But he had already glimpsed the sight at which the older man was pointing.

At the other end of the valley a number of fires burned brightly, growing larger. Flames were destroying Guriz' secret atomic arsenal.

"The native slave laborers most likely did that," Bancroft said. "Everybody joining in the search for us gave them their chance to revolt. Starkhov and Bruhl drove them mercilessly, and you can bet that not a single building will be left standing."

Doyle stiffened. "The atomic stuff Starkhov was working with! If the natives meddle with that—" His fingers tightened on Edith's hand. "We've got to get out of here—and fast!"

They plunged recklessly down the slope, toward the flier at the edge of the lake. Shortly Doyle had the craft in the air, streaking up into the cloud blanket. The valley dropped out of sight, a bad memory left behind.

BUT NOT quite. A short time later the surrounding clouds brightened with a sudden vast brilliance, the mere reflection of a holocaust from which the flier alone was escaping untouched.

"We got away just in time," Doyle said. "Something big went off down there."

Bancroft nodded, his expression
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COME TO VENUS —AND DIE!

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mournful. "That finishes the valley—and the temple. Too bad. I'd have liked another look at those mummies."

"One look was enough for me," Doyle said. He grinned and began to pull an assortment of objects from his pockets. Rings, heavy bracelets and jeweled necklaces glittered in his hands:

Edith laughed. She, too, began removing ornaments from her clothing.

"Edith and I helped ourselves while you just spent your time examining the mummies," Doyle told Bancroft. "You can have some of this stuff for your collection, if you wish. As for the rest of it...well, it takes money to build a home and set up housekeeping."

"And give a certain engineer a chance to use all the degrees after his name," Edith added.