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INVASION of the



DARK ONES

By
**HAL
ANNAS**



MYSTIC

We have always been afraid of the dark. Even when we know there is nothing there that wasn't visible in the light. It is because it is much easier to see, with our imagination, the Dark Ones that we suspect might be there, but obviously are not when we can see with our eyes. Is this because the Dark Ones are there? That half-seen thing out of the corner of your eye — was it really not there? Here is a story that dwells on a great truth: that there are dark corridors in our own minds where exist creatures more real than we realize — and a story of how these Dark Ones can come forth to attack!

THE world had gone mad. Ed Driscoll had no doubt about it. His orders were insane. They instructed him to become the bodyguard of a beautiful girl who had supernatural powers, to accompany her to the presence of the gods, observe a few miracles, and then—

That was the part he didn't like. He had gambled, brawled, had his share of demimondaines. He had never sunk to crime. Now he had to commit what he considered the lowest crime imaginable short of treason or attacking a child. He had to kidnap the girl. Not only that, he had to deliver her to an underground room near the White House in Washington. And his orders had come from Sam Millbro who in turn received them from a special committee appointed by members of the United Nations to cooperate with the gods from space.

Gods! Not little green men from

Mars, but gods who could and had endowed an Earthling with extraordinary powers. That was the clincher. The girl herself, he had been told, could perform miracles, could kill him with a gesture.

He didn't believe it. Everybody was nuts but him. Of course the public in general knew nothing about what was going on. Security!

He punched the bell button with vigor. The door swung open. The girl stood there, one hand on the knob, the other pressed in the hollow between her pointed breasts. Her features were just as they had been described to him, including the autumn-brown eyes and flame-colored hair, but he wasn't prepared for sight of her amazing figure.

"Come in."

His grey eyes swept her from head to foot. Through the translucent wrap her pink flesh seemed

constantly in motion as though her body were reflected in crystal clear water with smooth wavelets on its surface. He drew a deep breath, moistened his lips with his tongue, entered, dropped his hat on the table and turned.

"I'm Ed Driscoll." He withdrew a hand from an inner pocket. "My identification."

From beneath half-closed lids the brown eyes measured him, seemed to judge his strength. "I'm Vivi van Veck." Her voice was soft, soothing. "You fit the description." She looked down at his hand. As she gently shook her head her hair seemed to flame in reality. "Identification papers mean nothing. In a moment you will accompany me to the gods. Then we will know."

As she moved gracefully to the adjoining room he watched the light play through her garment, realized it was refracted, possibly curved by the material, giving the illusion that the flesh beneath danced in rhythm with her breathing. The sight was disturbing.

Seating himself on the lounge, he glanced about the room. It was large and luxuriously furnished. In addition to an open passage, it had two doorways. He had entered through one; the girl had departed through the other.

She returned in less than three minutes. A red and yellow dress hugged her curves and the high-heels made her at least five feet nine inches tall. The top of her

flamelike head was still a trifle above his shoulders when he rose.

"Close your eyes," she said softly.

"Huh?" He blinked. "Why?"

"Close them and count five—please!"

Driscoll stirred uneasily. He didn't like to be off guard. As though understanding, the girl advanced. Her hand found his. The touch was like velvet.

"Now," she said, "close your eyes and count five."

His fingers closed firmly over her hand. They would let him know, he knew, if she made the slightest move. His lips tolled off the count slowly.

"Open your eyes," she breathed.

He blinked, stared. For a long moment he stood as though rooted, holding his breath.

"You're hurting my hand," the girl said.

He hadn't realized that every muscle in his body had involuntarily contracted. He tried to relax and take in the scene.

It resembled nothing of the girl's apartment in which he had stood while counting. It was a hall acres in area and at the same time no larger than a closet. It had two sets of furniture, one gigantic, the other doll-size, and yet they were both the same. He couldn't grasp it.

"It's the perspective," the girl whispered. "I should've warned you. It has two perspectives. One is near and one is far and they blend and actually are the same.

Call it another dimension if you wish. But prepare yourself. The gods are coming."

Where they came from was not clear. One moment he and the girl were alone and then the gods stood before them. They were like humans in appearance. He tried to count them, failed, felt confused. They were the size of men and they were the size of dolls. The perspective. It was like looking at men and women several blocks away and the same men and women close at hand.

He heard talk in a strange language, and it, too, was close at hand and a distant echo without a time lag.

His mind whirled. Unearthly thoughts intruded as if probing and sorting the components of his mental make-up. Some of the thoughts were unpleasant. They seemed to seize upon his sense of reality and shred it and refashion it in a new pattern.

What appeared to be an aged man stood directly before him. His words were meaningless echoes from beyond evoking pictures and concepts in Driscoll's mind. He had no trouble translating the concepts and pictures.

"Doubt is the beginning of wisdom," said the god. "It is Uncertainty seeking Truth. The Believer closes the door to new knowledge. In every Certainty there is room for Doubt. So long as it remains, Doubt will seek Truth. Cease now to believe in mental limitations

bounded by physical science."

Driscoll realized it was true that the boundaries of man were his beliefs.

"Darklings hold the minds of your planet," the god went on. "They make you believe that war, disease and trouble are man's lot. In another millennium you might overcome them unaided. But the Darklings have led astray one of us. On this planet walks a god influenced by all the things you call Evil. We have come to find him. The mortal woman with you has been chosen to aid us. You have been chosen to protect her. Your fidelity will determine whether the planet shall be rid of the Darklings."

Driscoll had not moved. His mind had stopped whirling and come to a focus. There was a rational explanation for all of this, he believed. He was conscious of the girl at his side, her hand scarcely an inch from his. Out of the corner of an eye he saw the look of intense concentration on her features. She too, he thought, sought an answer.

"In due course you will learn all things that you need to know," the god added. "We have entrusted to the woman at your side two objects of great power. They will enable her to locate and recognize the lost god. Guard her well. Should harm befall her, or should you betray her, your life shall be forfeit."

There was a pause. Then: "Close your eyes. Count five."

Driscoll hesitated. The girl's hand crept into his. He closed his eyes. When he opened them he was back in her apartment and what had happened seemed a trifle vague as if he had dreamed it.

"I'll get you a drink," she said, withdrawing her hand.

He needed it more than he dared admit. And as he fingered the vial in his pocket he remembered the warning. He also remembered his orders. Included in them was the information that reliable intelligence about the gods was vital to the United Nations. The security of the planet was at stake. It was hoped that much could be learned by questioning the girl under drugs.

Driscoll didn't like it. He liked least of all the role he had to play. He understood the difficulty of obtaining intelligence about beings who could whisk mortals out of their presence at the count of five. But he didn't want to betray the girl. The warning that it would cost his life was not his sole objection. Of that he was not entirely convinced. His other reason was not well defined, but was connected with his sense of honesty as well as with some deep-rooted drive stirring in his subconscious.

"Where," he asked when she returned with the drinks, "are the gods located?"

"In this building. With the exception of this apartment, they have this entire floor."

"How did they convince the au-

thorities?"

"They convinced some scientists and they in turn convinced the members of the United Nations. I don't believe they've been accepted as gods. But they obviously aren't ordinary humans, and I think the general idea is to cooperate and study them."

"You believe in them?"

She nodded. "I believe facts. Call them gods or superscientists, it alters nothing. They can do things contrary to natural laws as we understand them. That makes them supernatural."

"You communicate with them mentally?"

She bent forward, parted her thick hair. Close against her scalp was a tiny diadem. "Touch it if you wish," she said. "But don't pull it loose."

Her hair was like silk to his touch. "Is that how you communicate with them? Through that thing?"

"I don't really communicate with them. They communicate with me. I feel a faint prickling under that little crown which, you'll admit, is a nice piece of jewelry. I obey the thought that comes at that moment."

"Then the gods must read your mind?"

"I'm certain of it."

"Do you think they can read mine?"

"Yes."

"Then they know I'm getting ready to kidnap you? They know

I've emptied a vial in your drink and that in another moment you'll be unconscious."

There was a long moment of tense silence. The autumn-brown eyes gazed steadily into his. Then she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't know why I switched our drinks. But you've drunk only half of yours. Maybe I can get enough coffee into you—" She seized his hand. "Hurry!"

Confused and with dimming awareness, he followed her to the kitchen. She asked questions: "Where were you to take me? When? And what is to happen there?" And he answered to the best of his ability.

The coffee helped, but his eyelids became heavier and heavier. A soothing lassitude stole over his body. His muscles refused to obey his commands. He felt her tugging at him as his head sank toward the table.

HE was in the underground room near the White House, not knowing how he got there, watching, while the girl counted herself down into drugged automatism. She stopped counting at thirteen. She was neither asleep nor awake.

The huge man in the white smock withdrew the needle. The horse-faced nurse glanced at the younger and more comely nurse who held a second syringe in case it was needed. Two muscular and alert men sat one on either side of

Driscoll on the second couch. In a straight chair, nervous and fidgety, and keeping his eyes on the wire-recorder on the table, sat a thin bespectacled man.

The man on Driscoll's right looked at the man in the smock. "How about it, Doctor?" he said.

The doctor lowered his voice. "I advise that you refrain from unnecessary comments," he said. "You might implant suggestions. Confine yourself to questions. And no talking at all aside from questioning the girl."

The man rose from beside Driscoll and stood over the girl. His voice was even and well modulated.

"Tell us what happened at your apartment," he said.

The doctor touched his arm. "Questions," he said. "Not positive statements."

The man nodded. "What happened in your apartment?"

The girl's voice was hoarse and a trifle thick. "I tried to revive Mr. Driscoll. Then the thought came that he was suggestible and would obey commands."

"Did the thought seem to be stimulated by the diadem?"

"Yes."

"What happened then?"

"I began to understand that I must come here and allow you to question me."

"Why?"

"Because you might otherwise cease to cooperate with the gods and that would mean the planet was doomed."

"You made this concession solely to get cooperation?"

Again the doctor touched his arm and repeated, "Questions. Phrase them as questions, not statements."

"Why did you make this concession?" the man corrected.

"I made no concession," the girl said. "Neither did the gods. They gave me to understand you are children and must be humored."

"What do the gods want on Earth?"

"They must find one of their own who has been led astray by the Darklings."

"What will happen if they don't find the lost god?"

"I don't know. I gather that it's a test of power between them and the Darklings. The thought that the Darklings might win gives me a feeling of terror and gloom. I get a vision of chaos, murder, pillage, insanity and unimaginable destruction."

"What is your task?"

"I am to find the lost god. I will receive instructions as to what to do."

"How about Mr. Driscoll? Do you feel that he has betrayed you?"

"No. Neither do the gods. He was bound by his orders. He had to empty the vial in my drink. To do anything less would have been betrayal to his superiors. That proved him trustworthy. But he must not again be bound by orders. He must be free to carry out the task the gods have given him."

"And that task is to protect you?"

The doctor again placed a hand on his shoulder, but the man shook it off.

"Yes," said the girl. "He must prevent my being killed before I find the lost god. After that, what happens to me will cease to be important. He must then return the god to the beings from space."

"And you're in danger?"

"Yes."

"From what?"

"The Darklings. They may be in this room at this moment."

Driscoll felt a prickling along his spine. He glanced about apprehensively. He noted that, with the exception of the doctor and nurses, the others did likewise.

"Can you tell us anything," the man went on, "of how you're going about finding the lost god?"

"Only this: tomorrow you must have a long-range jet stratoliner ready to fly on a moment's notice. It must have sufficient fuel to cross the continent with a stop in Death Valley."

"But you can't get into Death Valley. That's where the spaceship landed. Some sort of field of force keeps planes from coming near."

"I know nothing of that. I know only that you must have the jet-plane ready."

"We'll check with Sam Millbro. Anything else you can tell us?"

"Only this: I knew all your questions in advance. I knew what I was supposed to answer. You must cease now. I am in danger. I

must recover quickly from the drugs."

The two men, who had sat beside Driscoll, looked at each other. The one who had done the questioning turned to the doctor.

"Can you give her some sort of countershot?"

The doctor was slow about replying. "Might make her nervous. Best to let the drug wear off of itself."

"But she said she was in danger."

The doctor put on his bedside manner. "She's tired. Her fear probably comes from nagging questions and having so many people about her. It's a plain case of Messiah Complex with a touch of paranoia. I advise that she be confined in an institution and given proper treatment."

The man turned to Driscoll. "Take her back to her apartment and stay on guard."

The doctor said, "I shall send two nurses. If she suffers hallucinations during the night they will call me."

"I don't think you should do that."

"I know what's best for the patient."

The man shrugged, said to Driscoll, "You two must've come here in a taxi. My car is parked near. I'll drop you off at the apartment. And I'll leave two men downstairs."

time from the room in which the girl lay sleeping. It hammered inside of Driscoll's head. But he could not force himself awake.

He lay on the sofa a few steps away from the bedroom. The deep carpet between him and the door seemed depressed in two places as though an invisible being stood there. The rose light about him shimmered as if sparkling dust had been sprayed into it. The entire room seemed unreal to his sleep-fogged mind.

Turning sluggishly, as if a great weight restrained him, he felt of the sofa, the silken pillow, of his own clothes, and with great effort forced himself up from the unreal depths, sought to drive back the fog of illusion.

His mind would not come clear. Inside his head the hammers of alarm bells seemed to throb; the carpet remained depressed; the air shimmered; the unreality became real.

The depressions in the carpet moved. The nap in one of the depressions sprang erect as though a foot had been lifted. Four feet away it depressed again. This repeated twice, thrice as though an invisible person walked. The footsteps stopped before the door behind which the girl slept.

A gland in Driscoll's neck throbbed, poured a stimulant into his bloodstream. Slowly but definitely he came awake, despite something which still pressed down and sought to hold him in the

THE warning seemed to come from a distance and at the same

foggy depths.

"The Darklings!"

The words echoed silently through his mind. They seemed to have no point of origin, but to belong to a former life or to something apart from here and now.

"Darklings!"

The single word brought a warning to his heart, caused it to hammer furiously, and the warning raced through his body in the wake of the stimulant that came from the gland.

With a final mighty effort he shook himself free of the clutching fog and came up from the sofa like a steel spring. In a single leap he was across the room, before the door that led to the sleeping girl. His hands swept the space above the imprints, felt nothing.

Like a man in a crazy house confused by mirror illusions, he drew back, studied the imprints, tried to orient his thoughts, to separate imagining from reality. He kneeled and felt the impressions. The nap was crushed down precisely as though a person stood there. Nothing was visible directly above.

Cautiously he rapped on the bedroom door. A moment passed and the knob turned and the dark head of a young nurse appeared.

"Is everything all right?" he asked anxiously.

She smiled, said, "You're lonesome?"

He swore under his breath. "Is everything all right?" he repeated.

"I'm all right," she smiled.

"Let me look again at the patient and then I'll leave the door open and come out and sit with you."

The nurse withdrew, leaving the door open. He continued staring into the room. Seconds passed before his eyes became adjusted to the shaded light so that he could see the shape of the girl outlined by the silken coverlet. She lay on her right side, facing him, left hand on top the cover, her hair spread in an unmoving flame across the pillow.

And then he saw, as though from the depths of a dream and at the same time with startling clarity and reality, the imprints march into the room and to the bed.

It came to him like the first sharp pain from the lancet as the surgeon cuts out a piece of imbedded matter that whatever it was had tricked him into getting the door open.

He hurried into the room. The nurse turned startled brown eyes on him. Vivi sighed in her sleep. He watched the coverlet sink at one point as though a hand rested there while someone leaned over the bed.

Indecision lasted but a second. He placed a hand on Vivi's shoulder, shook.

"No," the nurse cried. "She's taken something. She won't wake."

He glared at the nurse. "Do you see that?" He pointed at the imprint.

The nurse frowned. "A beauti-

ful young girl in bed asleep. I suppose it does stir something in such robust men as you. But you'd better get out. I'm taking good care of her."

"I must take her out of here," Driscoll said.

"Don't be silly," the nurse replied. "What you need is a sedative. Go outside and I'll come and keep you company."

Driscoll watched the second imprint appear as though a second hand had been placed on the bed to enable whoever or whatever it supported to lean closer. He turned to the nurse to learn if she had seen. She was staring at him.

"Look!" he said, pointing.

She glanced at the bed, back at him. "She hasn't got anything that I haven't. Go on out. I'll fix you a drink."

Driscoll moved to the wall, pressed the light switch, blinked. The nurse blinked and watched him.

"Something is standing there leaning over her," he said, pointing at the imprints in the carpet.

The nurse placed a hand on his arm, smiled, "The doctor would call it wishful fantasies. Come along with nursie and get a nice big drink and she'll let you lean over her."

"Don't you see those imprints?"

"Spots in front of your eyes, huh? I'll call the doctor and he'll come right away. I have his unlisted number. He thought I might need to call him."

"Where's the other nurse?"

"Sleeping in the next bedroom. There wasn't any reason for both of us to stay awake at the same time. I'll call her and she'll make coffee."

"I must get Miss van Veck out of here."

"You mustn't touch her. And we mustn't talk in here. You must go outside."

Driscoll leaned over the bed, shook Vivi.

The nurse seized his arm, pulled. "Don't disturb the patient. If you don't get out I'll have to call someone to help me."

Ignoring the nurse, Driscoll carefully worked his arms underneath Vivi, lifted, bedclothes and all. The nurse gasped, snatched open the door to the adjoining room, screamed, "He's attacking the patient! He's attacking the patient!"

Carrying Vivi, he went back to the room he had quitted, made certain the imprints were still in the bedroom, and drew the door shut. He placed her gently on the sofa, glanced about, saw no sign of the imprints.

Both nurses stormed from the bedroom, leaving the door open. Driscoll leaped to close the door, and as he did so he saw the imprints come marching into the room.

"Don't you see those things?" he said to the nurses.

They didn't even look down. One picked up the telephone while the

other bent over Vivi.

Driscoll pushed the nurse aside, again picked up the sleeping girl, carried her back to the bedroom, closed the door after him. Before he could place her on the bed the younger nurse came in, leaving the door open. The imprints came behind her.

"Dammit!" Driscoll swore. "If you'd leave the door shut I wouldn't have to move her again."

The older nurse came into the bedroom. "Don't dare touch that patient again," she warned peremptorily. "You may be important in your own business, but that patient is in our charge, and in a moment someone will be here to restrain you."

Driscoll knew the futility of trying to explain. He picked up Vivi, shook the nurses off, went into the second bedroom, drew the door shut and held it. He ignored the screaming and pounding on the door, and as soon as they stopped carried the girl to the bed and gently lowered her.

A second door opened and the older nurse stormed through the doorway, came to the side of the girl, leaned over her. Driscoll hurried to close the door, saw no imprints, but before he could accomplish his purpose and return to the bed the door to the first bedroom opened and this time the imprints came in with the younger nurse.

"Goddamn people who won't close doors!" he snarled. "I'm taking the girl back into the other

bedroom."

"You're doing no such thing," the older nurse snapped.

"Maybe we'd better humor him," said the other.

"Keep quiet a minute," Driscoll ordered. "I'm taking her back. You may come in there if you'll close the door before those imprints get through the doorway."

The nurses looked at one another, nodded knowingly as though to say, "A violent obsession. Sidetrack it till help comes."

"We'll take her in there," the older said. "You stay here. Somebody will come soon to keep you company."

And then Driscoll saw another phenomenon. The imprints moved toward the door to the first bedroom as though to take advantage of whatever decision was made.

He held up a hand to stop the nurses. They were already lifting the girl between them. He knew he had to outwit both the nurses and the thing pursuing the sleeping girl. He would not get any help or cooperation. And somebody soon would come to see that he didn't accomplish his purpose.

Watching the imprints, he placed himself across the doorway. The nurses, carrying the girl, started toward him.

"Through the other doorway," he ordered.

Instantly the imprints turned to go in that direction.

"Go on before I kick you," Driscoll snarled at the nurses.

They hurried through the other doorway. He was right behind them, slammed the door. The imprints were still here, now turned back toward the first bedroom. He didn't reach that door in time to close it, but went through the doorway with the imprints, hurried to the second door, slammed it.

"Put her on the sofa," he called to the nurses. "And if either of you opens another door I'll lift your skirt and take your pants down and tan the broadest part of your body."

He turned back to the imprints. "Now," he said, "goddamn your tricky shadow! Come up to visibility or I'm going to set you afire."

AND all the time he was carrying me back and forth," said Vivi, "I was trying to scream, 'Fire. Threaten to burn it.' But I couldn't make my lips move, my tongue work."

"What gave you an illusion like that?" asked the doctor.

The man who had questioned Vivi in the underground room pushed the doctor aside, said, "Has she recovered from the effect of the drugs?"

The doctor nodded. "Possibly some complication—"

"Then get out and get those nurses out of here," the man interrupted. "We'll ask the questions without further supervision."

"But that patient—"

"Is no longer a patient. Get out

and take the nurses with you."

The doctor and the nurses neither hurried nor delayed. Instead of taking offense, the doctor seemed tolerantly amused, but the nurses kept their noses in the air, secure in their own thoughts that everyone in the room was crazy except them. They left the door open as they departed.

Driscoll closed the door and returned to Vivi's side.

"Now," said the other man, "can you tell us what made you want to scream 'Fire'?"

The girl parted the red hair above her forehead, revealed the diadem. Driscoll bent over her as did the other man.

"Did they shave part of your head?" the man asked.

"No," Vivi said. "They didn't remove a hair. But it rests against the scalp."

"How is it fastened?"

"Pull on it. Wait! Let Edward—I mean, Mr. Driscoll. He has a very light touch, and it mustn't come loose."

"What holds it?"

"It has some attraction of its own. I've had it off once, but have been warned not to remove it more than three times. It breaks some sort of connection. Do you want me to remove it now?"

The man shook his head. "I'd rather not do any tampering. Do you know what that invisible creature was after?"

"Not exactly. I know it terrified me. When it leaned over me the

first time I thought Edward would never get there. I thought I was going to suffocate."

"You think something would have happened if he hadn't brought you out?"

"I'm positive of it. Something horrible."

"Do you think that creature influenced the nurses and later the doctor?"

"I don't know. I got the impression everyone but Edward was doing what it wanted."

The man turned to Driscoll. "What happened after you threatened to burn it?"

"It became visible."

"You saw it? What was it?"

Driscoll weighed his words carefully. "Just a dark outline. The point is it took on substance when it became visible. When I swung at it, it leaped back and knocked the table over."

"Did you manage to get in a blow at all?"

"I landed all right. When I got it pinned against the wall and let it have one my fist sank up past my wrist. It was like hitting something inflated with air."

"Did it fight back?"

"Not in the way a human would. Something like air pressure kept striking me. Not light blows. They were enough to knock me off balance. And it seemed to be sucking the breath out of my lungs."

"Did you think it was winning—that it would wear you down?"

"I felt that it was weakening,

especially after I got it against the wall. I can't be positive I was hurting it before that because it was just like hitting into a stream of compressed air."

"But when you got it against the wall you nailed it?"

"Pretty hard. I thought it had been riding with my blows and I knew I had it where it couldn't back up and so I uncorked a couple."

"Did you feel you had hurt it bad?"

"That was the impression I got. I thought it was slumping and the thing that stood out in my mind was to get out my lighter and burn it."

"Then what happened?"

"That was when the doctor came in with those nurses. They all grabbed me."

"Couldn't they see this thing?"

"Apparently not. When I nailed it against the wall it stopped being visible. That's the reason I wanted to burn it, to make it become visible again."

"And the doctor and nurses jumped on you?"

"They thought I'd lost my mind. Wanted to keep me from hurting myself."

"I'm glad you didn't uncork one at the doctor."

"So am I. But I was boiling and I did rough them up a little. If you hadn't come at that moment someone might've got hurt."

"No harm done. I think the doctor was proud he could stand up

to a man like you. But to get back: that was the last you saw of that thing?"

"Yes. And there are no imprints about. I've been waiting to ask if you left the door open when you came from the corridor."

"No. But I know how it got open. One of the nurses ran to the door to scream for help when you were roughing up the doctor. That's probably when the thing escaped."

"We still don't know how it got in."

"I think we do. There are two entrances to this apartment. Two nurses were on duty. They watched in turns. One went back to the second bedroom where she would be within call. Maybe she decided to step out for something, cigaret, drink, anything. That's the way it figures."

"Did you ask them?"

The man shook his head. "No use to put them on the spot. They don't know what it's all about. Nothing has been explained to the general public."

"What do we do now?"

The girl broke in, "I don't know what you two have in mind, but I'm going back to the kitchen and cook breakfast. Shall I make it for three?"

Driscoll nodded. The other man grinned. "From this moment on," he said, "I cease to be simply a government man. Call me Boxer. The last name is Winslow."

"Boxer?" Vivi lifted an eyebrow.

"Comes from Boxley. My par-

ents had a dog named Boxer. It got killed by a car. They named me Boxley after the dog. They even liked me as well as the dog and soon began calling me Boxer. It's been both a handicap and an asset. Had it been different I might have been treated like any child and not received the special treatment a dog gets. I might have turned out to be average."

"You aren't average?" Vivi asked.

"No more so than Driscoll. You can't be average and hold our jobs. There's no point in concealing it longer. We're both Intelligence Operatives in the State Department of the United States Government. I suppose you know what that means?"

"No. What does it?"

"Our job is to keep the State Department informed well in advance of enemy action."

"Dangerous?"

"Not a bit of it. A spy is promptly executed except in this country. All we have to do to remain alive is never make a mistake. We aren't going to make one with you. I'm on this job with Driscoll now."

"Spying on me?"

"By no means. We're convinced you're sincere. Our job is to help you."

"In that case I'll fix breakfast for three."

They followed her to the kitchen.

Boxer stopped suddenly. "Would you know if that thing is near?"

"Not unless I was fighting it."

"I think I would," Vivi said. "If it threatened me—" She paused, stood in a listening attitude. The color drained from her features. Then: "Hurry!" She raised her voice. "Something terrible is closing in on us. She seemed to listen again. "We must get to the plane. We haven't a moment to lose."

Driscoll turned in a circle, studying ever niche in the room. Boxer stared at the girl. She trembled.

"Okay," Boxer said. "I've a car downstairs and a good man at the wheel. If you say go—we go."

Driscoll brought up the rear, reluctant to leave the apartment. He felt a tingling in his body and an itching in his palms. His hands involuntarily knotted into fists. He noticed that Boxer had unbuttoned his jacket and that his left shoulder hunched forward. It meant that he was cleared for action, that he could get to that shoulder holster in a split second.

Nothing visible followed them, but Driscoll experienced the uneasy feeling that their every move was watched by some alien presence awaiting a propitious time to strike. Nor did the feeling leave him as the heavy car carried them to Bolling Field.

THE jetplane rose on multiple plumes of vapor, preceded its sound across the sky, almost held its own in a westward race with the sun.

Boxer leaned across the aisle

and spoke to Driscoll. "Forget about orders for a moment. They're flexible and we can use our own judgment. The thing to keep in mind is what we're going to see."

"The spaceship?" Driscoll said. "Why haven't men seen it already?"

"Some sort of light-distortion field." Boxer nodded toward the girl. "She thinks they'll drop it when we approach. But she doesn't know what's going to happen. That's the question. Why do they want us at the spaceship?"

Driscoll studied briefly. "She said she got the impression something important is to take place there."

"Yes. But what? I don't like to walk into something blind. I trust the girl, but not enough information is coming through. We don't know what the gods are planning and we don't know what the United Nations is going to do. We're pawns in something gigantic, the biggest thing ever to happen on the planet. That means we are expendable."

"You forgot to mention the Darklings."

"Yeah. It's because they don't seem real to me. I'm not doubting your word, but I haven't bumped up against them. I get a cold feeling that maybe they are hallucinations or some mental smoke-screen to cover up something else."

"They're real to me."

"Yeah. But can you be certain you weren't under hypnosis?"

Driscoll looked out the window. Fleecy vapor flashed past near at hand. In the distance great banks of clouds drifted slowly. Miles below, the earth seemed unmoving.

Turning back, he said, "I can't be sure of anything. There's nothing to get a grip on. I'm beginning to understand why the public hasn't been informed. What we're doing is insane. We aren't functioning as rational people. And the thing goes all the way to the top. The world has suddenly gone mad."

"And you and I are pawns moved by madmen."

"That's how it seems. But we're trying to bring some sanity into the thing. We're learning a little with each effort. We may be pawns and expendable, but in time we should be able to put the pieces of this thing in order. Our job is to collect data and protect the girl. I confess I'm looking forward to each new step, especially to seeing that spaceship."

Boxer remained silent. The girl dozed or sat in silent meditation in the seat ahead. Driscoll looked at her from time to time. A faint uneasiness stirred in his chest. She had not taken time to dress. With a white silken wrap about her, she was still in pajamas. The shoulder-length fiery hair had not been brushed. She was a picture of primitive abandon. The thought was disturbing.

The plane seemed to move silently, but left thunder in its wake.

A hand touched Driscoll's shoulder. "That round ball," Boxer said. "It's more than a hundred miles away. Look just under the inboard motor. It looks green from here, like a small planet."

Driscoll studied the sphere as it grew in size. His breathing became labored.

"A planetoid!" he exclaimed. "An artificial planetoid. Why haven't we thought of that? Earth itself is a spaceship. Why not make one like it in a small way?"

"But how would you keep the atmosphere from escaping?"

"It probably has a tremendous amount of artificial gravity. And maybe they have some means of pulling the atmosphere inside when they come within reach of a planet. Think of it? A planetoid. They can travel forever in space."

"But how's it powered?"

"Who knows? The idea is terrific. With dense atmosphere to reflect their own manufactured heat and light, they have a closed system, independent of a sun, and with power can go anywhere."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe we've been going at the spaceship idea the hard way. Our planet is a perfect model, but chained to the sun by gravity and our need for sunrays to sustain life. We'll learn something down there."

"Don't get your hopes up. This jet job sets down at well above a hundred and needs a runway. No

place down there to land."

At that moment the speaker in the forward bulkhead blared: "Pilot to Mr. Winslow. The control surfaces have ceased to cut. The radio has stopped working. We're in a long glide headed straight for that sphere. We can't pull up. We're idling the motors."

Vivi turned round in her seat. "Tell him not to fight the controls," she said. "I'm in contact. Our descent is controlled from the spaceship."

It was the strangest landing ever made by an airplane on Earth. Of that Driscoll was certain. The plane lost flying speed, but didn't fall off and go plunging out of control. It held steady, and in the last seconds came down vertically on top of the sphere which appeared to be two thousand feet in diameter.

The bulkhead to the pilot's compartment opened and the pilot appeared breathing hard. "I've been holding my breath," he gasped. "We're down on our belly, but don't ask how we did it. I don't know."

The trio unbuckled their straps. Vivi spoke, "Everybody must stay in the plane except Edward and me. We must go outside."

Boxer said, "I don't like it." He brought a hand from beneath his arm, thrust a heavy automatic at Driscoll. "If you get in trouble fire two shots. I don't know what I can do, but will try to do something. I've another gun and both

the pilot and co-pilot are armed."

Driscoll preceded the girl out of the plane, waited. Her hand crept into his and then he knew she was trembling.

"This way," she said, leading him round the nose of the plane.

They went ten more paces and froze to a halt. To them it seemed they were on top of a hill two thousand feet in height. Underfoot seemed to be ordinary grass-grown earth. The thing that brought them to a stop was the realization that the hill grew steeper and steeper and finally vertical. They could not walk far, they realized, before they began sliding.

At that moment the heads of creatures like humans appeared above the horizon. Shoulders and bodies came into view, and then Driscoll understood. To them the center of gravity was the center of the sphere. They didn't lean forward to come uphill, but walked upright as though on level ground.

Then the double perspective went into effect and the illusion of being on top of a hill vanished. They seemed to be on level ground—on another planet. And this time Driscoll got the illusion that he himself was a giant and at the same time a midget. By imagining he was on a planet he felt that he was a midget. By imagining he was on a planetoid he felt that he was a giant.

From inside his head came the order, "Close your eyes." Vivi's hand came up to touch his eyelids,

and the next he knew he was inside a room with a turquoise motif and lighted by a golden glow which had no visible source. He knew he was inside the spaceship, but didn't know how he knew.

From beside him Vivi spoke, "I know now that this is the final preparation. Here we will be given new powers and knowledge. Please don't rebel. Let yourself be guided. The gods come."

Precisely what happened was not clear. The beings came from somewhere and from then on Driscoll moved as in a dream. It seemed that he was powerless to govern his own actions.

Vivi was led away and he was surrounded by dreamlike creatures, ethereal until he concentrated on one, and then that one became startlingly real and sentient. The others did not vanish but remained dreamlike until his attention shifted to one or more of them. It was as though he were among shimmering shadows which took on substance in coordination with some whim of his mind. But he could not direct the process consciously.

They danced about him and his surroundings changed to a vast garden, fragrant and beautiful, in the center of which was a sparkling pool. He was nude and swimming in the pool, feeling that he was one with the nymphs about him, and the sense of his flesh was one of exhilaration without the confusion of desire.

And then he was sleepily lying on a couch and it seemed that something was cutting into the side of his neck. His temples itched. His body was without volition and he could not so much as move an eyelid of his own will.

Terrified screams shrieked about him. His involuntary senses informed him of the proximity of horror and madness, but strive as he would he could not move. Inside him a terrific tension, an accumulation of chained energy, built up until it seemed he would burst.

How long he remained paralyzed was a question he could not answer. Time seemed suspended. The identical horror seemed to go on and on interminably. Then he was free and it seemed that he had been free all the time but unable to make the decision to act. He acted now.

Leaping off the couch, he plunged through a curtained archway into a room of grotesque shadows. A new and more terrifying shock came. Vivi was there, supine on a high table. A man stood over her with a knife raised and ready to plunge into her throat.

Driscoll's movements never paused from the moment he left the couch until he swung with all his might at the man standing over Vivi. The blow, he knew, should have broken the man's jaw and neck. But the man simply melted away.

Vivi leaped up. "It was a test,"

she cried. "They were testing your new powers."

He knew then that he would be warned when she was in danger. The warning would come with a cutting pain in his neck, increasing the adrenalin flow, and an itching in his temples to stimulate wakeful sensitivity. He knew now that he was attuned, mentally and physically, to the girl.

The thought troubled him, brought new unrest, for he had already been drawn toward Vivi more than he had ever been drawn toward another, and it required both mental and physical energy to resist the attraction, to keep his thoughts on the task ahead, and to remain alert. He became dynamically eager to get the job done.

They returned to the plane which was then launched as strangely as it had landed. It lifted vertically five thousand feet and then went westward on its own motors.

AT the airport near Los Angeles they took a taxi to midtown. In the shop district Vivi instructed the driver to halt. "I want to get some clothes," she said. With Boxer on one side and Driscoll on the other, she started toward an entrance. Halfway there Driscoll felt a sharp cutting pain in his neck, and itching in his temples.

Twisting his neck, he tried to look in every direction, saw no

sign of danger. He was reassured by the sight of a police officer who was giving them more than ordinary attention, but the pain increased in intensity and the itching became an annoying irritant.

The sudden movement of the officer galvanized Driscoll's energy. He swung Vivi behind him, rushed the officer as the gun came out of the holster. There was a sudden clap of close thunder and then he had the officer's arm in a powerful grip. He broke it at the elbow.

Other officers appeared; a crowd gathered. Driscoll demanded, "Why did you try to shoot me?"

The officer shook his head as in a daze. "I wasn't trying to shoot you. I was trying to shoot that monster behind you." He pointed at Vivi.

The other officers shook their heads, took down the names of witnesses. Boxer showed his identification and vouched for Driscoll and Vivi.

Vivi said, "They're closing in again. The Darklings! They grip the minds of the crowd. They'll turn into a mob in a moment. We must get away."

They hurried back to the taxi. The driver was standing on the sidewalk. He refused to carry them farther. "There was a shot fired." He pointed at Driscoll's jacket. "It clipped you under the right arm. Stay out of my cab. You're on the spot. I'm a married man with children. I don't want to get mixed up in nothing."

As Driscoll looked back the mob surged toward them. He turned to Boxer, nodded. Boxer rammed his own gun against the driver's side, said, "Get in and drive."

"Are you hurt?" Vivi asked as Driscoll seated himself beside her.

"Don't think so."

She probed the ripped and scorched place in his jacket until she was certain he had not been wounded.

Looking back from the front seat, Boxer demanded to know where she wanted the driver to take them.

"Toward Hollywood," she said. "I don't know the exact place yet."

Sometime later she told the driver to turn left and stop in front of the tabernacle. As they got out Boxer handed the driver a ten-dollar bill and then another. "For the wife and kids," he said.

Driscoll pointed to the assemblage before the tabernacle. "I don't like it," he said.

"Neither do I," Boxer put in. "Another mob. And that guy in the robe is performing miracles. Look! That old lady. A minute ago she could hardly hobble and looked as if she were dying. Now she's standing up straight. And that expression on her face! As if she'd received a divine revelation."

As Driscoll watched, the miracles went on and on. There was nothing really remarkable about them. They were the kind of miracles any seasoned emotion monger could perform among the

devout. A stiff knee, rheumatism in the joints, and like ailments, Driscoll knew, could be banished with an emotional upsurge. It happened every day in cult-ridden Los Angeles. He couldn't understand why Vivi was interested.

She was staring at the setting of a ring on her right thumb. Earlier he had thought it was an opal. Now its center glowed. A figure took shape within the glow. It had two perspectives.

Driscoll gasped. "It's alive," he breathed. "It's the same as the man in the robe."

Vivi nodded. "We've found the lost god. We must work closer."

He followed apprehensively as she worked through the gathering and approached the man in the robe. Boxer went ahead of her and opened a path. A hymn that evoked memories was being sung. The miracles went on with machinelike regularity. The god seemed never to fail.

As Vivi drew near, the eyes of the god lifted, burned brightly. He studied her as though struck by her remarkable beauty.

The itching began in both of Driscoll's temples. The cutting pain throbbed in his neck. His vision flashed from one to another in the gathering in effort to single out the one or many who threatened the girl. Nowhere did he see a person who looked as though he might offer harm.

The warning persisted with maddening intensity.

Vivi moved still closer under the watchful eyes of the god. The crowd fell back, to get a look at Vivi, to look where the eyes of the god looked.

A hush came over the gathering. There had been singing and murmuring and breathing and now there was no sound. A tomb could have given forth no more silence. A pause in the midst of a play could not have been more dramatic. The god and the multitude looked at Vivi, and there was stillness.

Driscoll stood in agonized quiet, nerves alert, muscles quivering.

The god lifted a fine artistic hand and pointed. He could not have made a more startling gesture. His hand stretched toward Vivi. An accusing finger pointed with an air of condemnation.

"Behold! My betrayer!"

The words, in a fine rich tone, were like a voice from beyond. They hung in the air as music, vibrant with accusation, but lacking in indignation or any of the small emotions common to men who have been wronged.

"Behold! They have come armed as against a thief."

It was then that Driscoll understood that he was among the accused. The pointing finger included him and Boxer.

Terrible doubt came into his mind. It flowed with the flood of adrenalin through his body. It brought a moment of total and

nearly fatal indecision. Almost too late he turned his back to Vivi, faced the gathering. He knew Boxer had done the same on the other side.

Murmuring ran through the crowd. Those behind pushed forward; those near at hand remained in indecision. And then the mob cry broke:

"Kill them!"

The action, for which Driscoll's body ached, came swiftly. Smashing right and left with more than ordinary strength, he knocked three men down, one after the other, and cleared a space about him. He might have plunged into the gathering itself had not Boxer followed his own training in dealing with mobs. The echoing of Boxer's gun as he fired into the air brought a cessation of hostilities.

"Cops!" somebody yelled, and others took it up.

At the sound of those frantic words the mob dispersed. The faithful deserted their god as other faithful had done two millennia in the past.

On the way to the police station Driscoll experienced shame. Peaceful people had been gathered together and he and those with him had brought among them strife, had no doubt shaken their faith.

Boxer had no difficulty arranging for their freedom, but it required more time to arrange to take the god in charge. Communi-

cation with Washington finally accomplished it.

"What now?" Driscoll asked of Vivi.

"We return to Washington."

AS they drove in the police car to the airport, Driscoll wondered. The man they had taken seemed harmless. He had not been disturbing the peace or doing anything wrong in curing his flock of their minor ailments. The thought came that he, Boxer and Vivi were making a mistake in delivering him to the beings from space.

This brooding seemed contagious. In the plane, Vivi showed signs of nervousness. Across the aisle from Driscoll, she continued twisting to look at the god who sat quietly beside Boxer. Driscoll kept one eye on her while the other tried to close.

She continued squirming. And each time her autumn-brown eyes flashed toward the god they paused to study Driscoll's features. And each time she seemed as though she were going to lean toward him and confide something.

Driscoll remained troubled. He couldn't banish from his thoughts the longing she evoked and could envision no safe opportunity to fan the flame of that longing. He knew he had to concentrate on the task ahead, or someone might die for his neglect.

When she turned toward him again he closed his eyes and opened

them. It seemed that not more than two seconds could have elapsed in the interval. She had been sitting across the aisle. When he opened his eyes she was standing over him, a look of terror on her features.

"Are you all right?" she gasped.

Boxer came forward, said, "What's the trouble?"

Driscoll stared from one to the other. "What's coming off?" he demanded.

"Something happened to you," Vivi said. "While you were asleep."

"I haven't been asleep."

"You must've been asleep," Vivi insisted. "I shook you. Your face was black. It seemed all the light had gone out of you and something come in its place."

Driscoll studied her eyes. "Are you sure you weren't suffering hallucinations?"

Vivi appealed to Boxer. "Wasn't he asleep?"

Boxer shrugged. "I saw you shaking him. I couldn't see his face at the time. He looks all right now."

"I haven't been asleep," Driscoll said.

Vivi and Boxer exchanged a look. "Okay," Boxer said. "You weren't asleep. Just had your mind on something. It took her a couple minutes to shake you out of it."

"How long?"

"A minute, anyway. She'd been standing over you over a minute before I decided to come up and

find out what had happened."

Driscoll glanced out the window, back at Vivi, at Boxer. "Do you think something could be monkeying up our minds?" he asked. Then: "Where's the god?"

Boxer whirled, turned back slowly. "It's all right," he said. "You can't walk off from an airplane in flight. He's probably gone to the washroom. I'll give him a minute and then stroll back."

"Learning anything about the guy?" Driscoll asked.

"Not much. Seems like a nice guy and I don't want to badger him. I call him Jesse. They booked him as J. Jesse in L. A."

"He may be dangerous," Vivi said.

Boxer grinned. "With me and Driscoll here, what difference does it make? He can get as dangerous as he wants. We'll take care of it."

"But something happened to Edward."

"You've been through a lot," Boxer said. "Try to relax."

"It isn't that. It's Edward. I'm worried about him."

Boxer turned to Driscoll. "Maybe you'd better sit beside her. She's nervous about something. We used to call it woman fears."

"It isn't woman fears," Vivi flared.

"But it's a good idea for me to sit beside you," Driscoll said. "I've been wondering how to make the suggestion myself. You sit next to the window."

"No. I want to sit next to the

aisle."

"He can make you feel safer if he's next to the aisle," Boxer said.

"No." Vivi shook her head. "I want him to sit next to the window."

A grin broke over Boxer's features. "You aren't afraid for yourself? You're actually afraid of what might happen to him. You want to sit on the aisle side so that it will happen to you instead?"

Vivi's hands trembled. "Don't make it so difficult," she said.

Boxer shrugged, turned away. Driscoll moved so that she could sit near the aisle.

"Slide down," she said. "Let me get my arm round your shoulders."

"Huh?"

"Something's going to happen. It may be that my powers can stop it."

"What powers?"

"One that hasn't been tested. If I lower my head until the diadem is directly in line with something, and then hold a certain thought in mind—Well, we'll see."

Driscoll slumped down in the seat, waited, hoping that what was going to happen would happen soon. With her arm about him, her soft body so warm and close, he had difficulty keeping his mind on the task ahead.

She began to tremble.

"I like the snuggling," he admitted. "If it wasn't for the job I'd demonstrate how much I like it. But I can't do things halfway.

If I let myself go I won't think about anything but you. It's the way I'm built. You do something to me and I'm flesh and blood. You understand? And I'm supposed to concentrate solely on protecting you."

"I don't care what happens to me," she breathed. "Something is going to happen to you and I must try to prevent it."

Rising, he lifted her to her feet. "We both need a drink," he said. "There's a bar in the back. Maybe we can get it open."

"No! Please! Don't move around. Something is closing in."

He searched the cabin with his eyes, noticed nothing unusual. "I'll find out what's keeping Boxer."

"No," she said. "It isn't safe to go back there."

He concentrated on his temples and the sensitive place in his neck. Not the vaguest hint of danger came to him. Nothing was out of order. They were sailing four miles above the ground in one of the smoothest flights he had ever experienced. The plane was as nearly perfect as man could make it. The possibility that something could go wrong was remote.

"You've been keyed up for some time," he said. "It's become hysteria. I know the remedy for that." He picked her up and carried her toward the bar.

Halfway there he felt something like a cold breath against the back of his neck. He didn't pause, didn't turn to look, but felt the

girl's arms tighten about him as if she were resisting something that would tear them apart.

At the bar he placed her on her feet. She trembled, almost fell, swayed against him, clung.

"I'll jiggle up a drink," he said softly and reassuringly.

Something beyond her drew his attention. The shock came then. He had consciously to will his heart not to jump, to will his hands to be steady, to keep himself from shouting.

In the archway opening into the washroom were two shoes with ankles protruding from them. They were suspended in mid-air. Whatever was attached to them was invisible behind the facing of the arch.

He drew Vivi close to him, held her attention. With consciously controlled and labored movements, he mixed a drink, extended the glass to her. Her hands shook so that she couldn't hold the glass. He pressed it to her lips.

The shoes and the ankles hung there as a hint of dreadful things, a portent of horrors to come.

Vivi's teeth clicked against the glass. He placed a hand behind her head and held her steady. She closed her eyes and seemed to drink against some inner resistance. Halfway through, she opened her eyes, lifted a hand to her face, cringed back. Her eyes were wide and staring—straight at him.

Then she screamed.

Stunned and uncomprehending, he held her close. For a moment it seemed that she would faint. Her eyes came open again, wide and staring.

Again she screamed with all her might.

Mouth open, stark horror in her features, she cringed back, her body quivering like a leaf. She backed away from him. And then with another piercing shriek she turned and fled to the distant end of the cabin.

Suspended between the demand to investigate the thing in the washroom and the overwhelming need of the girl, he remained a moment in indecision. The need of the girl won. He plunged after her.

Then he saw that she was trying literally to push her way through the bulkhead into the pilot's compartment. Her eyes mirrored dazed horror; her features were dreadfully distorted. Her lips shaped the word "Darkling" and she slumped in a dead faint.

The truth struck Driscoll like a flash of the sun in his eyes. For a moment he was blinded. Then the full impact smote his body. It was like a sledgehammer against his solarplexus.

It was physical as well as mental, a true pain-drive. He recognized it as the hot lances moved along nerves, touched with the cutting edge to make him understand that he must obey; that he must kill the girl and remove the dia-

dem, or have his own body destroyed by unbearable agony.

He hesitated. The pain lashed through his body like a length of barbed wire swung by a brute. It cut to the quick. Had it been solely physical he would have passed into unconsciousness, he knew. But a pain-drive could keep him conscious far beyond the last threshold of physical pain.

Shrinking from the girl brought the pain anew with nerve-shattering force, but as his fingers bent into claws to throttle her the pain eased.

It was a phenomenon known to psychologists and those in high places who seek to break the will of others.

Driscoll knew. He knew also that flesh has a peak for pain. Beyond that point the mind blanks out. But there is no peak when the mind can't blank out. The agony then becomes mental.

As his hands touched the girl's neck the pain eased and he felt almost elated. The relief brought a counter-surge, the will to struggle again to resist. Again the pain in every nerve. And then came the cutting in his neck, the itching in his temples, to warn him the girl was in danger—danger from him.

The warning would not come, he knew, if there was not a high probability the pain would overwhelm him and drive him through madness to the relief that would be offered upon the death of the girl.

He resisted as he would have resisted death itself, and the pain flamed anew, cutting deeper, reaching into the nerves of the brain and torturing the source of reason itself.

Hate came, distorting his features, bringing a chaotic will to violence, bending his thoughts to the shape of madness. He spun toward the depths of insanity.

Something else bobbed dimly on the fading horizon of clear reason, a wisp of light, elusive as an *ignis fatuus*. It hung there, a faint beacon, offering hope, a way out.

But he did not look. Two alternatives stood out more clearly: he could kill himself and cheat the pain; he could succumb to the pain and kill the girl and find relief. This last, he knew, was madness. But it was all that remained.

Again the light bobbed dimly from the final evanescent shade of reason. This, he knew, was his last chance. The light would not return. He must look now or what he would see afterward would be a true will-o-the-wisp of the mind. It would not be a beacon showing the way out. The body and mind could endure but so much. Beyond that all things were distorted.

In obedience to the will to survive, he turned and twisted through the pain-racked corridors of his mind, searched for the light. In every conceivable direction he mentally turned until he saw it, ages old, but bright as the day the first sentient creature used it.

A physical body makes its own pain to call attention to damage or threat. When the mind conceives damage or threat it likewise conceives pain compatible with the condition.

He suddenly realized that no pain could exist within him except that he himself furnish the energy to sustain it. He knew now that his mind had been tampered with. The knowledge gave him the will to fight.

He would never kill Vivi. As his hands went about her neck he knew without doubt that nothing could ever drive him to harm her.

A sense of exaltation came. He had defied the necromancy of the gods or Darklings and found it to be a mortal phenomenon long known to men. He believed now that he was dealing with advanced science, not supernatural things.

LIFTING the girl's relaxed body, he started toward the wash-room, then remembered. In the confusion he had lost the thread of events. Now he found it again in all of its awesome mystery and terror. Doubt crept back to challenge his newfound conviction.

After strapping the girl in a seat, he approached the washroom cautiously, advancing at an angle that would give him a clear view. He studied the archway. The shoes and ankles were now moving, drawing out of sight behind the facing.

He heard a groan.

Still cautious, he advanced and looked in. Flat on the couch provided for air-sick passengers Boxer lay and groaned. Of Jesse there was no sign.

He probed Boxer's body, found no injuries. He filled a paper cup with water and hurried back to Vivi. Lowering himself beside her, he held the cup to her lips. She made no response. He moistened his handkerchief and touched her temples. She stirred.

Seconds passed before full awareness surged back into her body. Her glazed eyes rolled and a frown of puzzlement brought back the lines of tension. Her eyes discovered him, held steady briefly, then went wide.

She shrieked.

The strap held as she tried to break free, and it was he himself who drew back. She watched him as a cat will watch a dog of doubtful intention, and terror trembled through her being.

"Vivi," he said softly.

She screamed again.

Confused, and yet understanding her terror, he put out a hand—very gently—to comfort her.

With her shriek this time came a jolting weight on his back. A powerful hand spun him about. He failed to see the blow coming in time to block it. It caught him on the jaw and was dynamic evidence of Boxer's training.

Pushing himself off the floor, he stared from Boxer to Vivi and back. He shook his head, got his

feet under him.

Boxer came in again, his long left out, his right cocked. The left seemed to move not more than six inches, a light jab, just enough to make him blink, and then the right exploded against his jaw.

Again he worked his feet under him. There was no time to think. As he straightened his legs and stood erect he got his own left up. There was still no time to think, to reason the thing out, for Boxer came boring in again. It was Driscoll's own training, rather than thinking, that made his own left jab in rhythm with the swaying of his body, made his right drive out, twisting down, from the shoulder.

Boxer now struggled to his feet. He shook his head, as Driscoll had done, and came in more cautiously, in a half-crouch. There was no doubt about his intention. Driscoll rolled with the jab, waited for the right. It came lower this time, curving upward, and instead of countering, Driscoll blocked it with the palm of his right hand. It still jarred him, drove him back, and he barely managed to get under the curving left that followed with such force that it carried Boxer with it as it missed and momentarily unbalanced him.

Driscoll struck upward, left, right. Both blows landed under Boxer's chin. His legs sagged. Driscoll started the left for the body, the blow that would snap Boxer's

head forward and in range of the right, but never finished it. He somehow managed to pull the punch before it landed against the soft flesh of Vivi. She had leaped between them.

"No," she cried. "No!" She stared at Driscoll, then turned to Boxer. "It's Edward," she said. "Look! His face is changing. It's becoming its natural color. The blackness is going away. It's Edward."

Boxer wiped the blood from his mouth. "Good God! I thought—"

Before he could say what he thought, the plane rocked and they were flung back and forth in the aisle.

The speaker hummed, grated, "Fasten your straps, please!"

The rocking eased, but the pilot's warning carried a note of urgency. They lowered themselves into seats, buckled the straps.

Again the plane rocked. Boxer grabbed the headphone, plugged it in under the window, said, "Win-slow to pilot. What the hell's happening?"

"We don't know," the speaker replied. "Keep your straps fastened. We're going down."

"Where's Jesse?" Driscoll demanded.

"That's what I'd like to know," Boxer said. "I found him in the washroom. And guess what?"

"I'm not in a mood for guessing," Driscoll said.

"What?" Vivi asked. "Don't keep us in suspense."

Boxer looked from one to the other. "He was running water into the basin and turning it into wine."

Driscoll frowned.

Vivi said, "This is no time for joking."

"I wish it was a joke," Boxer admitted. "But it isn't. He ran water into a cup and handed it to me and I tasted it. It was wine."

"You must've stopped at the bar," Driscoll said. "I saw your feet sticking out from the end of the couch. It was so out of the ordinary, especially for you, I thought something had happened."

"Something did happen. I took a sip of that wine and that's all I knew until I woke up aching as if I'd been in a brawl."

"Is that all you remember?"

"All except when I came out here and saw—"

"Saw what?" Driscoll prodded.

Boxer looked at Vivi, said, "You tell him. I don't want to hurt his feelings."

"He saw you," Vivi said. "But you didn't look as you do now."

"How did I look?"

Pain came into her features. "Don't make me tell you."

"Brace yourself," Boxer said. "If ever I have to imagine a ghoul I'll think about how you looked as you leaned over her."

"Your features had turned black," Vivi put in.

"And you had two long tushes coming down over your lower lip," Boxer added. "I've never seen a more gruesome brute."

Driscoll shook his head. "You two were imagining things. And we're not getting anywhere. We ought to round up Jesse."

The speaker hummed. The voice was low, tense, restrained. "Keep your straps fastened. Descent will be faster now. The reason we haven't told you what's happening is that we couldn't believe our eyes. But both of us see the same thing. A man keeps stepping in front of the plane and we have to maneuver to keep from hitting him."

"That tears it," Boxer groaned. "The pilot and co-pilot have gone nuts. If you can fly this crate, Ed, get on up there."

"I've never checked out on a jet," Driscoll said. "Explain to them they're just imagining they see something. Same thing happened to you when you were back there imagining water was turning to wine."

"I wasn't imagining. It happened just like I told you."

The itching came in Driscoll's temples. His neck throbbed. "Tell the pilot to fly straight and level regardless," he said, unfastening his strap. "I'm going to find Jesse."

"Hold on!" Boxer spoke into the headphone, then turned back. "You're not supposed to leave the girl. I'll find that guy. And this time he won't get a chance to do anything to me."

Driscoll said, "Better let me look for him. I've a hunch I can beat him at his own game."

Before he could rise he was crushed deeper in his seat. He heard a gasp from Vivi, an expletive from Boxer.

"Get into your parachute gear," the speaker ordered. "We're in a spin."

Vivi made a sound that was half gasp and half scream. Her features drained of color. She pointed through the window.

Driscoll looked. His breathing became difficult; his senses reeled. He turned to Boxer, made sure he was looking and that his expression told the same story.

"Is it real?" Vivi gasped.

"Looks real to me," Boxer said, picking up the headphone. His voice rose, became brittle. "Do you guys in the pilot's compartment see what we see?"

The speaker replied: "We see a man on the wingtip. He's running through the air and making the plane spin. His robe is fanning out like wings. If one of us is crazy, both of us are. We both see the same thing."

"Are we going to be killed?" Vivi cried, trying to rise. "Edward, are we going to die?"

"Don't try to stand," Driscoll warned. "Too much centrifugal force."

Boxer said, "Maybe we can shoot that guy off the wingtip."

Driscoll frowned. "Anybody who can stand out in open air and twist an airplane won't likely be bothered by bullets. But I'm in favor of trying a shot at him."

Check with the pilot on the altitude. If we smash a window in thin atmosphere the pressure in here will escape."

"Wait!" Vivi said. "Let me try something." She stared at the wingtip.

Driscoll alternately looked at her and through the window.

A sense of twisting was present as well as a crushing downward force. Clouds seemed to move downward on one side of the plane and upward on the other. The centrifugal force varied as in a car taking an unevenly banked curve.

Driscoll saw Vivi bow her head toward the figure on the wingtip. He saw the diadem among the waves of the flame-colored hair. It seemed to him that it suddenly sparkled, sent out rays. But he was more interested in the movement of Vivi's lips. The words that came forth were soft: "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"

The figure vanished from the wing as though it had never been there. The spinning ceased, but the downward pressure increased, became unbearably heavy.

"The pilot's pulling out of it," Boxer said. "It will take some time to level off because we're diving at terrific speed. We may black out. Bend forward and contract your stomach muscles."

AT length the pressure ceased and the plane was again in level flight.

The speaker sounded: "Don't

know what happened, but we're under control again. Keep your chutes on and straps buckled. Something else might happen."

It did—at that moment.

Jesse appeared leaning against the forward bulkhead. It was as though he had been there all the time. His features were sharp, softened somewhat but a fine down of blond beard. His fine hands were clasped in prayer and his fiery blue eyes were turned upward.

Boxer whipped out his gun, aimed.

"Don't shoot," Driscoll warned. "That's a high-velocity gun. The bullet would go through him and the bulkhead. Might kill the pilot."

"Right," Boxer acknowledged. "I ought to carry a lighter gun."

"This has to be done another way," Driscoll said, moving forward.

"Wait!" Vivi cried. "Don't harm him."

"I won't unless he brings it on himself."

Driscoll advanced toward Jesse who seemed unaware that he was not alone.

"Bring him back here," Boxer called. "We'll strap him down and tie his hands with his shoelaces."

"His feet are bare," Vivi exclaimed. "Look! They're visible below the robe. They're as fine as his hands."

Boxer snorted. "He had on shoes when we brought him aboard. Bring him back here, Ed. We can

cut strips from that nightgown and tie him with them."

Driscoll was hesitant about touching a man who was manifestly praying. He waited in the hope that he would finish. And as he waited, Jesse moved. He took one step to the left and stood before the door to the pilot's compartment.

There was nothing strange about that part of it. The strange part was that he left, in the position he had been standing, a dark outline.

Driscoll heard the word "Darkling" murmured with awe, knew the sound had come from Vivi. Again Jesse moved and again left a dark outline where he had stood. He advanced in halting steps toward Driscoll, and after each pause left a dark outline.

Driscoll became aware that he was backing away as the man advanced. Boxer had come to his side, and he, too, backed before the advancing figure.

There was something awe-inspiring about the halting way Jesse came on, leaving dark outlines wherever he paused. The outlines remained immobile as though awaiting a signal.

"Good God!" Boxer breathed.

A faint sound escaped Vivi. It was not intelligible but was suggestive of the awe that came from Boxer. Driscoll himself could not escape the feeling.

Abreast of the seat in which Vivi sat, Driscoll stopped. Glancing at

her, he experienced a moment of indecision, but held his ground.

Not knowing what to expect and trying to decide on a course of action, he felt in his pocket for his cigaret lighter. As though reading the thought behind the action, Jesse halted.

There was quiet. Everyone in the cabin of the plane, including the outlines, remained in tense expectancy.

Outside, the distant clouds floated lazily by; the nearer ones flashed, vanished. Hardly a tremor could be felt in the smooth flight of the plane. The jets in the wings expelled their heat with an even pulsing, their thunder always far behind. Bright sunlight came through the windows. To anyone on the ground it would have appeared a commonplace west to east passage.

Inside the cabin the drama went on.

The co-pilot's voice sounded through the speaker: "Think it's safe to remove your chutes now. Perfect weather. We're climbing steadily to pick up a tailwind. Everything checks normal. We must've been dreaming a while back. It may be a good idea to forget what happened unless you want to get us all psychoed. We'll report that we went into a spin, no explanation, and came out of it okay. They'll check the plane and find out what caused it. Probably something jammed the controls and worked loose as we went down.

The controls are working perfect now. Nothing is wrong, not a solitary thing, and the scare is over. Relax and take it easy."

Tension mounted with each passing second. Nerves ached, twanged signals to body-control centers for screams that would bring relief. One center responded, sent a scream echoing about the cabin. Vivi had endured, now wisely released the pressure. Nothing so simple for Driscoll and Boxer, but the shriek acted as a signal and their built-up tension drove their limbs to action.

Shoulder to shoulder, they advanced. And just as they had retreated earlier, now retreated Jesse. He backed into the outline behind him, and as he went on the outline went with him. As he had left outlines in his advance he collected them in his retreat.

For the third time Boxer breathed, "Good God!" Had Driscoll been of a mind to speak he would have echoed the words in equal awe. The seeming unreality was more than the mind could take in without associating it with the supernatural.

The doubt which had assailed him in front of the tabernacle in Los Angeles returned and rode him like a brutal master. It confused his effort to decide what to do, forced indecision upon him.

That Boxer and Vivi experienced the same was evident. Boxer hesitated. Vivi strained forward in the seat, eyes on Jesse.

With the doubt came another curious sense to Driscoll: that Jesse was in no way afraid. Slight though he was, he looked strong, and in his eyes burned the light that must have burned in the eyes of martyrs in the past.

In Driscoll's inner being was a sense that he was committing a grave sin in stalking a supernatural creature. He recalled the words the man had uttered as Vivi approached the spot where he performed miracles:

"Behold! My betrayer!"

Then he had included Boxer and Driscoll: "They have come armed as against a thief."

The question arose: "If the gods quarrel, what will happen to mortals?"

Then clearer thought came and drove all other out. Sympathy for Jesse, Driscoll concluded, had been induced to confuse his captors. Clear reason told him it was not a matter of dealing with gods; it was a matter of advanced science.

"Jesse!" It was the voice of Boxer. "You will have to sit down and give your word not to try any tricks, or I'm going to plant my fist in your face."

Jesse remained as though in meditation.

"I don't think we'll get anywhere that way," Driscoll said. "I'd like to know what happened to his shoes."

"If we work him over," Boxer suggested, "maybe he'll tell us." Driscoll shook his head. "I

wouldn't mind—if he started it. But I don't want to smack him just yet."

"I've done a lot of things I didn't want to do," Boxer argued. "We're in a position where we can't be nice. The guy is dangerous."

"How do you know he's any more dangerous than the others?"

"The beings from space?"

"Yes. How do we know he's not the one holding them in check? How do we know the moment we deliver him they won't cut loose with something we aren't expecting? The whole setup is wrong. We're working in the dark."

"We have our orders," Boxer said stubbornly.

"Yes. But how do we know our orders won't mean the death of mankind?"

"Edward!" It was the voice of Vivi. "Knock the god unconscious! I'm in contact. Something terrible is closing in. Knock him out! Quick! We're in danger."

"You're not in danger," Driscoll returned. "I'd know."

Vivi came out of the seat. "You've changed again, Edward. Your features aren't black, but something is wrong. You're influenced by outside forces."

"It's you and Boxer who're being influenced," Driscoll maintained. "And there's no way of knowing it isn't leading us to disaster."

Tension mounted in Vivi's features. "Edward, I know we're right

in cooperating with the beings. Any other course will bring ruin."

"They shouldn't keep us in the dark. If we can't be trusted to know what's going on, it must be something we wouldn't like."

"Edward!"

Driscoll turned to face her. Of one thing he was certain: he didn't want anything to happen to her, not even the grief that was coming over her now.

The speaker said, "Remain in your seats and buckle your straps."

Boxer worked round to where he could see Driscoll's face. Jesse seemed lost in holy meditation.

"Remain in your seats and keep your straps fastened," the speaker repeated. "We're coming in for a landing."

Jesse moved. Slowly he turned his back to the trio, faced the pilot's compartment, lifted fine hands high.

"Stop that!" Boxer roared.

There was a sudden jolt as though the plane had struck something. Vivi seized Driscoll's shoulders to keep her balance. Boxer moved forward, hesitated.

Out of the tips of Jesse's fingers flowed something like rays of sunlight. The plane started a roll, fell off, righted itself.

As Driscoll struggled to remain upright and support Vivi, he saw Jesse turn toward the window and point in that direction. And then Jesse became twins. A second Jesse stepped out of the first, passed through the closed window and

vanished from sight as though to go underneath the plane.

The first Jesse turned back toward the trio, slowly, meditatively, as if summoning power from a distant realm. He brought his beautiful hands up, pointed them.

There was hardly an itching, hardly a hint of pain in Driscoll's neck. It was as though his flesh had been deadened against pain. But he didn't need the warning nor the stimulus. He launched himself.

It was too late to stop when he realized the truth of what had happened. His shoulder should have struck Jesse at the hips. It should have smashed him against the bulkhead with enough force to drop him unconscious.

Driscoll managed to contract the extensor muscles in his arms a moment before he struck. He passed through the vision where Jesse had stood, crashed against the bulkhead. The shock ran up his arms and into his shoulders before his head struck.

Stunned but conscious, he sat up—saw Jesse standing at the distant end of the cabin.

"The diadem," he yelled. "Vivi! The diadem!"

Vivi responded, bowing toward Jesse.

And then, as a flash of sunlight, the second Jesse leaped back into the plane through the closed window and merged with the body of the first.

"I think we can handle him

now," Driscoll said, striding toward the man.

Jesse held up a restraining hand. A thousand conflicting thoughts flamed in Driscoll's mind, caused him to hesitate.

The speaker said, "We ran into rough air at Bolling Field. We're going to the National Airport. A couple minutes more. Stay in your seats. Keep your straps fastened."

With grim purpose, Driscoll advanced on Jesse. Halfway there he became aware of dark outlines appearing about him. His breathing became difficult. In reach of an outline, he smashed out with his fist, felt it strike something like an inflated balloon.

Boxer's grunting told him that he was similarly engaged. Vivi's gasp and cry of terror brought confusion.

But he didn't stop. His purpose was unwavering. He drove the outlines before him, eager for the time when he would get one against a bulkhead.

The plane was in smooth flight. Through the windows the ground appeared close.

Grimly Driscoll smashed right and left whenever in reach of an outline. And now the god gave ground, backed toward the washroom.

Vivi's cry rang in Driscoll's ears: "Your lighter, Edward! Throw me your lighter."

He paused long enough to bring out the lighter and toss it in her direction. He didn't see whether

she caught it, but in the moment his eyes were turned in that direction he saw Boxer uncork that terrible twisting right. From experience he knew the power behind it.

Again he faced Jesse, advanced, mouth working. "Monkey up minds, will you?" he growled. "Some sort of mental energy ordinary people don't know about. We'll see how your mental energy stands up to a right-cross."

An outline blocked his passage. He got it against the bulkhead behind the last seat and nailed it with both fists. He could feel the blows going clear through. The outline sagged, vanished. He maneuvered to trap another, but it eluded him, moved toward Boxer and the girl.

His breathing was becoming more and more labored. And the snorting of Boxer and gasping of Vivi told him they were in trouble. But he couldn't stop.

He nailed another outline against the bar. Then he faced Jesse.

"Now," he said, "see if you can stop this!"

His short left was followed by a piledriver right.

DRISCOLL reached down and lifted the unconscious god. But no Darklings came to its aid. The Darklings had vanished.

Boxer got one hand on the body. Driscoll watched Vivi reach for Boxer's other hand. He was dimly

aware that her other hand crept into his.

A moment passed. There was something like an overlapping as happens in dreams. The surroundings seemed to fade into other surroundings. There was nothing frightening about it. As in a dream, it seemed natural.

They were in the presence of the gods, exactly as they had, in the overlapping moment, stood in the plane.

An aged man, with long white hair, stood before them. He took the unconscious god from Driscoll and Boxer. He passed it to his companions who bore it off.

"You have done well," the aged god said. "In a moment I will give you the secret of our power, of Creation itself, of the ultimate knowledge. You must resolve now not to keep it to yourself. You must spread it broadcast across your planet. For it will enable you to rid yourselves of the Darklings. They exist solely because they are able to draw power from your minds. You will soon understand.

"Here is the secret of power, of Creation, of knowledge. How you use it will depend upon your mental development. Not all Earthlings will be able to use it. And yet it is comparably simple, so simple it is hidden from the learned and wise and revealed to children.

"The universe is composed of two things. They are energy and

a converter. Time is not a thing but a concept. Space is energy because it is part of the universe. Mass is energy at a retarded rate of motion. Everything is energy and energy is motion. The knowledge of how to convert energy into another form of energy or into mass, in its manifold forms, is the knowledge of Creation.

"You already have a glimmer of it. You have accomplished transmutations with uranium, plutonium and other substances. You release energy in dividing the atom and in many other ways. But you have overlooked the natural converters. They are life which convert sunlight, carbon, water and other things. The greatest among these converters is the mind. It has conceived the converters of energy of which you make mechanical use.

"But that is little. Without your realizing its potential, it converts sunlight, water and any form of edible into life and thought and endless ideas, which in turn convert other things. Thus far in life you have done this haphazardly. You could not be trusted with the secret of Creation and knowledge of your potential. But now you must accept.

"Use it wrongly and you will destroy yourself and your planet. Use it well and the whole universe is open to you. For the universe is energy. And you are the converter. The knowledge itself is the first step toward development of your

potential.

"Live like gods, for you are not less than us. Rid yourselves of the Darklings, for they are but the superstitions you have brought into reality with your eternal wars and hatred and greed. You cannot sustain a belief, a grief, a desire, a fear, a pain—except that you yourself furnish the energy of it. Thus you can destroy yourself or achieve your destiny, as you will.

"Clasp hands. Conceive time as a concept of motion in relation to motion. Conceive the apartment of the woman to be your surroundings. Conceive it first as an overlapping, blending with this, and then . . ."

DRISCOLL looked at Vivi. She was withdrawing her hand from Boxer's. Her features were pale. The diadem was no longer in her hair.

Boxer coughed, said, "We haven't eaten since yesterday. Do you still think you could cook something for three?"

Driscoll said, "You'd better call Sam Millbro and tell him to reassure the pilot and co-pilot of that jet. They must've got a shock when they entered the cabin and saw we'd vanished. Maybe you'd better make the call outside. You can get something to eat while you're out."

Boxer nodded. "Yeah. I should've thought of that. Love! Well, it's a striving toward creation which seems to be the most important

thing in the universe. I wonder why we ever thought we were less than gods."

Driscoll and Vivi watched him draw the door shut as he departed, then turned to each other. Driscoll said, "Food isn't important.

I'm beginning to understand things I never did before. Let's use our understanding together."

"Yes," Vivi breathed. "I don't know whether I want the power of the gods, but I'm sure we can develop it if we do."

END