

# ★ PLANET ★

## ★ STORIES ★

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### A SMASHING PLANET NOVEL

#### COLOSSUS OF CHAOS. . . . . Nelson S. Bond 2

From the Void it came, born of lifeless space. It drew life from Terra itself, that it might slay those who peopled the earth.

### FOUR OUTSTANDING NOVELETS OF OTHER WORLDS

#### PLANET OF NO-RETURN . . . . . Wilbur S. Peacock 28

The 'Thing' of Venus could not die—weapons were useless on the water-world.

#### SPOILERS OF THE SPACEWAYS . . . . . Neil R. Jones 40

Crespy moved silently among the Space Wreckers—a deadly purpose in his eyes.

#### THE MAN FROM SIYKUL . . . . . Richard Wilson 77

The price of freedom was small. Myra and Steve had but to leave their sanity behind.

#### METEOR MEN OF MARS . . . . . Harry Cord and Otis A. Kline 98

The fate of a world rested in Hammond's hands—and his wrists were fettered at his side.

### FOUR PLANET SHORT STORIES

#### DOORWAY TO DESTRUCTION . . . . . Garold S. Hatfield 55

The doorway to Earth's invaders was open—and the key was lost.

#### OUTPOST ON IO . . . . . Leigh Brackett 58

Death was the only release from that European prison—but MacVickers had to escape and save his world from tyranny.

#### PERIL OF THE BLUE WORLD . . . . . Robert Abernathy 70

"Beware the Blue World," the Martians were warned. "It is peopled with 'beings' that weapons cannot fight!"

#### GALACTIC GHOST . . . . . Walter Kubiilus 91

Willard laughed. He had seen the "ghost" of space—and lived.

### P. S.'s DEPARTMENTS

#### P. S.'s FEATURE FLASH . . . . . 39

Say, "Howdy!" to Leigh Brackett, whose tales nourish PLANET STORIES, and who is a thwarted "ham" at heart.

#### THE RINGER FAMILY . . . . . Guy Gifford 69

#### SPECIAL PLANET STORIES' ANNOUNCEMENT . . . . . 97

#### THE VIZIGRAPH . . . . . 116

Kicks and kudos, bombs and bouquets from the cash customers.

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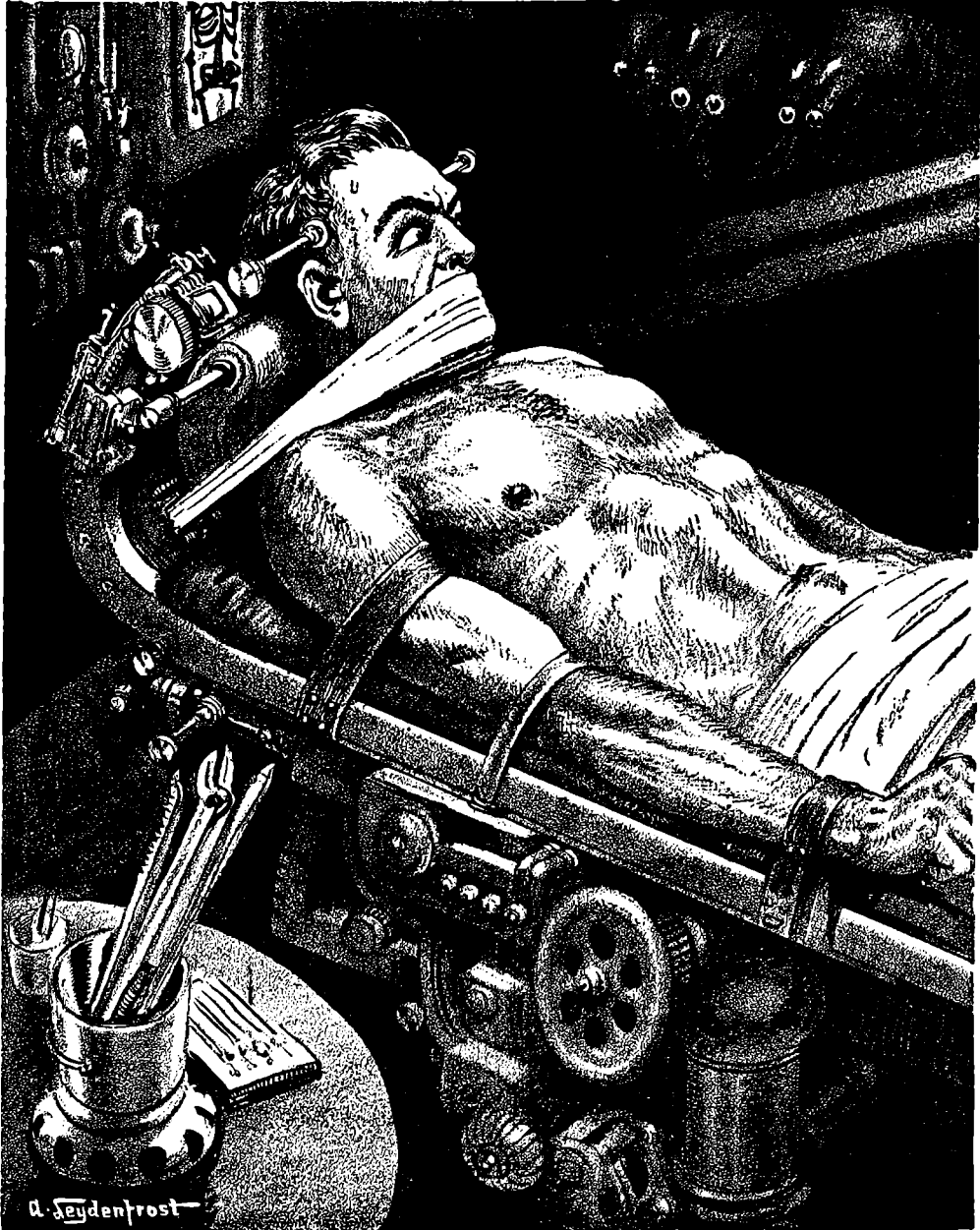
# Meteor-Men of Mars

By Harry Cord and Otis Adelbert Kline

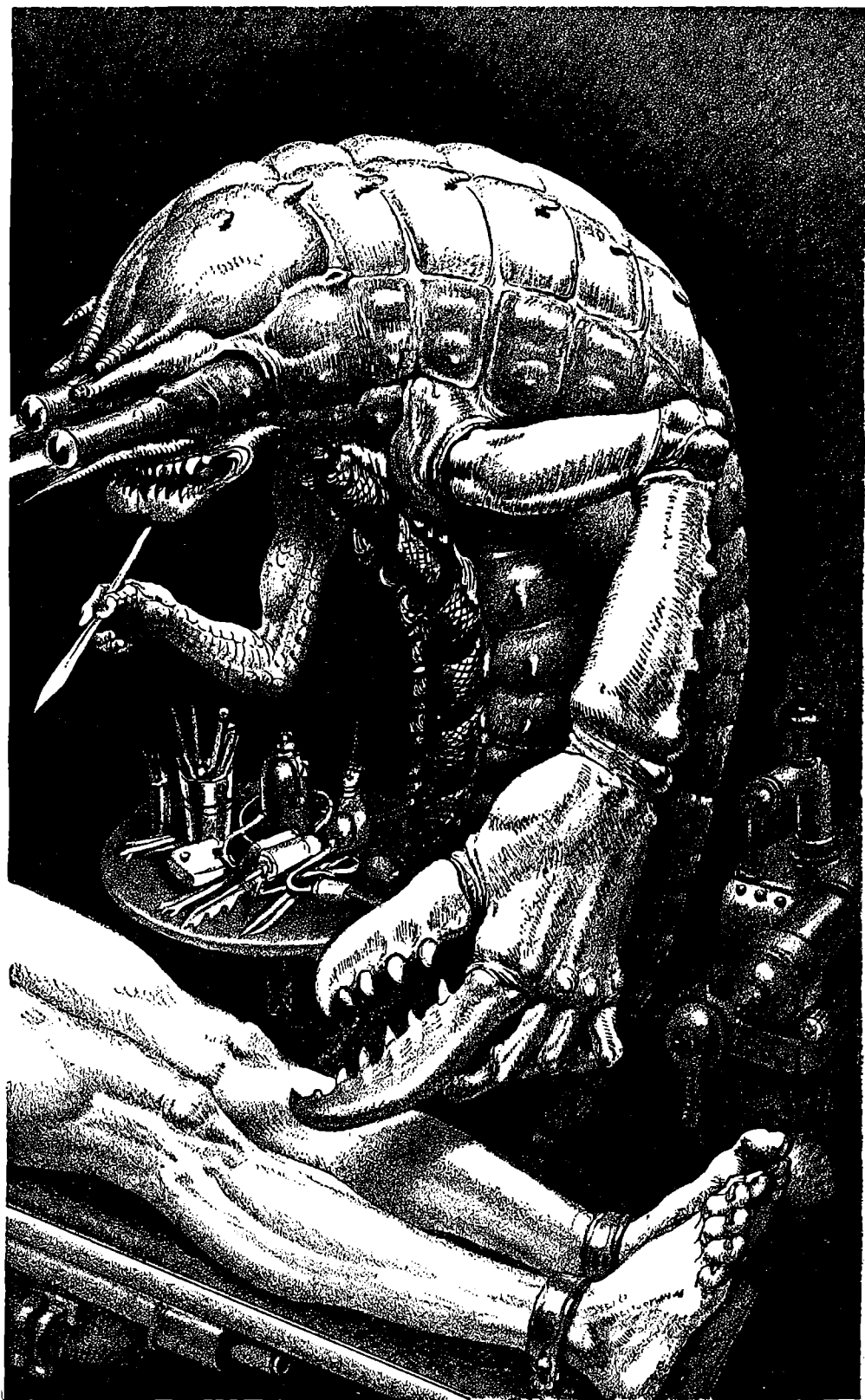
**Like tiny meteors, the space-ships plunged into Earth's atmosphere, carrying death for all who opposed their flight. The fate of a world rested in Hammond's hands—and his wrists were fettered at his sides.**

**I**T came out of the dawn sky, slanting like a fiery meteor out of the east. The two men in the skiff saw the glowing streak in the sky and heard the sound of its passage, like the loosing of a nest of angry snakes overhead, a scant second before it plummeted into the calm waters of the Sound.

*Illustrated by Leydenfrost*



*Zuggoth turned to Hammond. His dwarfed right hand, humanlike, with tiny fingers, picked up a glittering knife.*



A geyser of water and steam shot up not a hundred yards from the maroon and gold skiff. The boat rocked and pitched to the disturbance.

Frank Hammond, seated at the bow, clamped a taped hand over the side to hold himself, surprise quickening the intentness of his dark, handsome face. He was a lithe, bronzed figure, clad only in blue trunks and rope sandals. Stroking for his college crew in years that were warm memories had padded naturally wide shoulders.

"What the devil?" he ejaculated. "Did you see that, Pete?"

Peter Storm grinned. Two inches under his companion's six foot length, he weighed ten pounds more—a heavily muscled figure who could move with deceptive speed as many an opposing eleven had found out in his college football days. Blond, phlegmatic of nature, he took things easier than his more restless friend.

"Meteor, you dummo!" he jibed, good-naturedly. "Ever hear of one before?"

Hammond stared at the spot where the agitation was quieting. "I heard of them," he said shortly. "But this is the first time one ever fell this close to me."

Storm shrugged. "Forget it. This is our last day before going back to the grind.

Let's make the most of it. Remember that bet we— Boy!" He broke off, standing up to haul in.

His catch proved to be a bluefish, a three pounder. He unhooked it, disgustedly, while Frank, measuring it with a quick glance, gave him a Bronx cheer. "If you can't do better than that that new hat's in the bag," he jeered.

They went back to their heaving and hauling, bantering good naturedly over every catch, completely forgetting the strange visitor from the skies.

Both were research chemists for the New York Analytical Laboratories; both were unmarried. They had been inseparable comrades since their college days, when both wore identical crew cuts, dressed alike, and always either double-dated or staggered it. In memory of those days their skiff, the *Crawfish*, had been painted maroon inside and a golden yellow outside, maroon and gold having been their school colors.

Their vacation camp was on Ramson's Island, just off Ramson's point on the

Connecticut shore. The rocky island was uninhabited. They had left camp early, intent on making the most of their last day. Reaching the fishing "hole" they had anchored. Both men taped their hands, and each prepared his jig, a long bar of lead to which a hook was attached, and began the process of "heaving and hauling" used in the vicinity for luring bluefish.

They had been at it for about an hour when the "meteor" landed.

Fifteen minutes later they had forgotten it.

THE sun was a huge red ball balanced on the rim of the sea when Frank suddenly felt a jerk on his line that nearly wrenched his arm from its socket. He said nothing. His lips merely tightened, eagerly, as he wished to surprise his companion by hauling in the big one unexpectedly.

But this proved harder than he thought.

His potential catch darted off with such a burst of speed and strength that it dragged boat, anchor and all!

"Hey!" yelled Storm, clutching the boat sides to hold himself. "What's on that jig? A shark? Better cut that line before it swamps us!"

"Like heck I will!" Hammond grunted, hanging on to the line with both taped hands. "This must be the grandfather of all big blues. That new hat's in the bag!"

With both feet braced against the thwarts, he leaned back and pulled with all his strength. But by bit he hauled the "big one" in close, till finally he was able to lift it out of the water and into the boat.

Both men exclaimed in amazement at the thing which came over the side and clanked to the bottom of the boat. It was neither a giant bluefish nor a shark. It was a shiny, iridescent object, slightly shaped like a shark, but quiescent now, and seemingly lifeless.

"What kind of a fish do you call that?" asked Storm disgustedly, leaning forward for better view of the catch. "It looks like a cross between a shark and a toy submarine."

"Damned if it don't!" Hammond replied, staring bewilderedly at his catch.

The thing was about thirty inches in

length, with both vertical and dorsal fins. But instead of one dorsal fin it was equipped with four fins placed equidistantly around the body. These fins contained numerous tubular quills or spines with round openings at the ends, and Hammond's hook had caught between two of these spines. It was as heavy as if made of steel, but despite its weight and metallic sound when struck, it appeared to be constructed entirely of a bluish, iridescent mother-of-pearl.

Hammond removed his hook from between the spines, and lifted his catch onto the empty boat seat between them.

"Better heave it overboard," advised Storm, seriously. "It might be a new-fangled type of mine or bomb. I don't like the looks—"

He stood, open-mouthed, as the "thing" suddenly shot off the boat seat with a hissing roar like that of a small rocket. It scorched the paint as it took off with small, orange-green flares emanating from the tubular quills. It shot upward with incredible speed and was almost immediately lost to view.

Storm's mouth closed slowly. "Hell!" he said, a little dazedly. "I'm afraid to start fishing again, Frank. Might catch a cross between a battleship and a whale."

"I'm hauling up anchor," Hammond countered, grimly. "I don't like the looks of this at all. The coast guard ought to hear of this."

He got one hand on the anchor rope and was starting to hoist in when the strange "catch" suddenly reappeared. It came down in a long slant, circled over the skiff a few times, and finally settled on the scorched seat from which it had taken off.

Hammond stared at the thing and swore. Peter Storm took a firm hold of his oar.

Holes suddenly appeared in the strange craft. Hammond noticed that there were no doors in evidence. The holes seemed to dilate open, like camera shutters, in the gleaming body.

From these openings a host of small creatures crawled. They swarmed out toward both ends of the boat seat.

Storm straightened, oar in hand. "Ants!" he snapped, disgustedly. He began to swing the ash blade down on the scurrying creatures.

The things continued to move about, apparently unharmed. Dents appeared in the oar and in the seat.

Hammond bent over the scurrying creatures and studied them. "No use, Pete," he muttered. "They're not ants. There's no division of head, thorax and abdomen. They're eight-legged and cephalothoracic—more like the arachnids." His startled surprise was fading under the prod of scientific curiosity. "Funny thing, Pete—the legs and shells seem to be composed of the same substance as the 'thing' they come from. Look!"

Storm dropped his oar and came forward. The boat rocked a little to his shift of weight. A faint humming came from the "thing" on the seat, catching his attention.

But Hammond, intent on one of the small creatures he was about to pick up, did not notice. Not until Pete's hoarse shout jerked him away.

"Look out, Frank! That tube—"

Hammond straightened up to face his friend. But Peter Storm had vanished, as if he had never been!

Between Hammond and where Storm had been was the "thing" on the seat. The humming emanating from it now was distinctly audible, and ominous!

A shining tube, mounted in a turret, had appeared in one of the openings. The tube was swinging around, lining itself on Hammond.

The dazed chemist did not think. He reacted instinctively, knowing, somehow, that that tube was related to Storm's disappearance. He twisted, violently, and tried to dive over the boat side.

Something halted him in the act. He felt a strange numbness wrap itself about him, and a cold like nothing he had ever experienced penetrated to his very vitals. Then he felt himself falling, as if through an endless blackness. . . .

THE darkness faded, slowly. He felt his feet jar on solid ground, and the terrible cold left him. But for long moments Frank Hammond stood rigid, his dazed mind trying to accept the strange world he had fallen into.

The landscape about him was maroon in color. Irregular ridges and gullies of apparently molten stone hemmed him in.

Off to his left he could see a huge, bubbly pit that reminded him of fumaroles he had seen in the National Yellowstone Park. Far in the distance, to his right and left, maroon cliffs towered into blue mists.

Hammond stared at the weird scene. Under him he could feel the slow rise and sway of the entire land, as if it were unstable, rocking in space!

For the first few moments Hammond thought he was dreaming. He must have been rendered unconscious by the strange "thing" on the boat. Soon he would awaken—

But the slightly swaying maroon landscape persisted. Hammond looked down at his nearly naked, bronzed body. He hadn't changed. He took a few tentative steps toward the bubbly pit, and the sudden realization that all this *was* real sickened him.

Where was he? What had happened to him and Storm?

A harsh, metallic rattle answered him. Hammond whirled. Topping one of the far ridges appeared an eight-legged monster of gigantic size. It was without head or tail. Its unsegmented body was an iridescent blue, and shaped like a giant pumpkin seed.

The thing flashed menacingly in the bright light of a sun that was but a huge blur in the misty sky. It headed for Hammond with incredible speed, a huge foreleg stretching out in readiness.

Hammond wasted no time in speculation. His dazed mind reacted to but one impulse. Flight!

Turning, he ran for the nearest gully. He went down in a half scramble, and ran along it, the walls looming over his head.

But his huge pursuer gained on him. He could hear the metallic rattle of those flashing legs close behind him. Despair gripped the young chemist as he scrambled out of the gully and ran up the nearest ridge.

The landscape ahead of him was dipping down as he ran, seemingly being tilted by his weight. The thought came back to Hammond that this must be a nightmare. The eight-legged, colossal thing pursuing him was exactly like the tiny antlike creatures that had swarmed out of the strange "catch" he pulled into the *Crawfish* but a few hours ago. Or was it a few hours?

He didn't know. He no longer knew anything. Grim-faced, his breath beginning to come in gasps, he slid down a steep maroon bank, and raced along the shadowed cut that gradually deepened.

It was a hopeless flight. Behind him the clattering monster came, running along the top of the ravine which was too narrow to allow it to enter.

The steep-walled cut suddenly ended. The sides here were steep and smooth—a perfect cul-de-sac. Hammond turned, his brown fists clenched.

The walls hemming him in were perhaps fifteen feet above his head. The metal monster halted on the rim. A strange light blinked on in the nose of that creature, or mechanism. It probed down at him, spotlighting him. A giant foreleg, ending in a formidable pair of forceps, reached down along the light beam for him.

The focussing light, swinging along the opposite wall before steadying on Hammond, had revealed to the desperate research chemist a transverse fissure, barely wide enough to admit him. Hammond took the chance. The giant claw was but a foot above his head when he twisted, sprang away from the wall. The forceps jerked, swung after him. Hammond beat it to the fissure by a foot.

He didn't stop. He kept running, looking back over his shoulder to see if the monster was following. He didn't notice the fissure ended abruptly in space. Not until he suddenly felt himself treading empty air. Then he began to fall, turning slowly, like a slow motion diver in the newsreels.

HE fell a long way. In terms of feet, as he judged it, the drop was incredible. Below him a huge mass loomed out of a brown, heaving sea. Above him—he saw it, once, as he faced upward in his turning fall—he glimpsed what was a gigantic span of maroon earth, hundreds of feet thick, that was supported by the huge, maroon cliffs at either side.

It was from that span he had fallen!

A strange, numbing thought came to him, then, so incredible in its implication he discarded it. But it persisted, kept tapping at the back of his mind—

He was still in the *Crawfish*!

The thought was fantastic. Yet it was less incredible than if it were not true. The turreted tube, evidently, had sprayed an invisible ray that had so changed him in size that the antlike things he had been about to examine now loomed like colossi over him. The ridges and gullies and fumaroles were brush marks and paint bubbles in the maroon paint of the seat, and the towering cliffs were the boat sides. The high span from which he was falling must be nothing less than the boat seat!

And the huge, elliptical land mass toward which he was falling must be—

He landed then. The substance beneath his feet was soft, spongy. It broke his fall. Around him was a momentary red glow, as of the sun shining through a filter that blocked out all waves above the red band. He passed through slimy pools within the huge mass, and momentary revulsion gripped him. Then he emerged out into brief daylight, riding a huge disc to the brown, heaving sea.

He hit with a splash. Fathoms deep to him, he went directly to the bottom, as if he were composed of a substance many times heavier than lead. And he remained on the bottom. Not even his instinctive attempt to swim upward could lift him to the surface.

The ironic thought hit him then, as death stared at him with grinning face. The huge mass through which he had plunged must have been the body of one of the bluefish they had caught. Evidently, though incredibly reduced in size, his weight in relation to the earth's pull, was still one hundred and eighty pounds. And the brown, heaving sea at the bottom of which he now rested, was merely the bilge water of the *Crawfish*. And in the next minute or two he, Frank Hammond, was going to drown in it!

He turned, instinctively, and ran for the boat side. Again he felt the boat tip to his unbalancing weight. Overhead the bilge water rushed to lap high against his side.

There was danger that his weight would so tip the skiff that it would ship water from the Sound. But he had to chance it, or drown where he stood.

His lungs were nearly bursting when he came upon the dark, gigantic loom of

the boat side. And strangely, at this moment, the steep slant of the floor began to level—the bilge water washed back from the side.

The thought came to Hammond, then, that Peter Storm must be running for the opposite side of the boat, instinctively realizing the need of keeping this strange world on an even keel.

Lungs bursting, Hammond started the climb up the dark wall. Like some tiny mite, almost invisible to the naked eye, Hammond finally emerged from the bilge water. Aching lungs drew in great draughts of clean air.

Spent, still somewhat dazed by the incredible truth, he did not notice the eight-legged colossus that came down along the cliff toward him. Not until it loomed over him, and a giant claw reached down for him, did he become aware of it. And then it was too late.

He gasped, tried to dodge.

A giant forcep grasped him about the middle, and with a quick, deft motion another claw-like appendage clipped a small, parachute-like metal harness over his shoulders. Then the first forcep lifted him, easily, and drew him up to the metal monster where a round port dilated open and he was thrust inside.

THE huge claw withdrew, and the port closed. Hammond blinked his eyes. He was in a big room, the ceiling of which was transparent, letting in a subdued light. Ringing him, in a circle two deep, were warriors of an ancient era. Amazons, complete to breast plates and oval shields, cinctures and sandals. Lithe, beautiful, yet erect and disciplined, they watched him as a trainer watches a jungle cat on its first day in the arena.

Hammond waited. The thought came to him, now, that these were very modern Amazons. For beside the shield they carried a weapon that closely resembled a modern rifle. And on their shoulders each carried an identical parachute-like contrivance similar to the one fastened on Hammond.

The young chemist took a deep breath. He said: "What's the idea, girls? This some kind of a new game?"

The sound of his voice seemed to startle them. A golden haired warrior, perhaps

a minor officer, for she wore a green armband, made a short, quick gesture.

The ringing warriors closed in on Hammond. Instinct moved the young chemist's arms—the instinct to fight, to win free of this strange experience he could not understand. But crippling that instinct were the habits of civilization.

He couldn't bring himself to hit these girls, warriors or no.

Yet he tried to win free. He pushed the first two off their feet, whirled, and bucked the rest of the line with his shoulders. They parted under his assault. But with disciplined movement the others closed in and fairly smothered him under them.

He felt metal clasped about his arms and legs, and suddenly he was unable to struggle, to heave free of that pinning mass. Panting, his face grim, he subsided.

**T**HE Amazons reformed ranks. He was left with arms and legs chained in a manner that allowed him, when on his feet, to take short steps forward.

The officer with the green armband gestured again, and gave with it a verbal order. Her voice was musical, in a tongue entirely alien to Hammond.

Two warriors marched forward, bent, helped Hammond to his feet. The officer took hold of the free length of blue chain, and started to walk Hammond toward the far end of the big room.

Hammond followed. Behind him the two warriors kept pace, rifle-like weapons held ready.

A door dilated open in the wall, and Hammond found himself in a long, softly lighted runway. He was marched along this to another door, and motioned within.

The door closed behind him.

It was a small room, bare and blank on three sides save for a number of iron handgrips on the walls. The fourth wall was transparent. Hammond shuffled to it. At the same moment the floor under him pitched and rolled, and the clank of machinery rumbled through the iron monster.

He grasped the nearest handgrip, and clung. Looking out through the transparent wall, he could see that the monster tank (for now he guessed the eight-legged antlike thing to be) was climbing up the boat side to the seat.

The tank leveled off. Above him towered the outlines of the "big one." Scores of the monster tanks were climbing back up the parent side, to disappear in as many openings.

The tank which held Hammond moved steadily, nosed into its compartment. The door closed after them. The tank rumbled on across a large, dimly lighted room, more like some enormous storage garage, for Hammond could glimpse the bulks of dozens of the huge tanks along the far walls, and in one corner he saw several of what resembled fast, ultra streamlined, all metal planes.

The tank came to a halt. The door of Hammond's cell opened, and the officer with the two guards came in. Hammond was motioned to follow her out.

He was led out of the tank which was immediately maneuvered to its niche among the vague bulks along the wall. A door dilated open at the officer's approach, and they passed through it into another long, green lighted runway. They went along this for some distance, then turned into another room, as huge as the colossal garage into which the tank had entered.

Thousands of the wiry Amazons were swarming in through a hundred doorways to this room. Evidently they were members of the expedition which had been sent to locate and capture him, and which must have consisted of nearly a hundred of the strange, ambulatory war tanks.

The Amazon officer led him across this huge room which reminded Hammond of a railway or bus terminal, and into another corridor. It was then that the hugeness of the "big one" became evident to Hammond.

They marched through a number of huge rooms, climbed three spiral ramps, and popped into a half dozen tranverse corridors. And only on these upper levels, in rooms that held banks of whirring machinery, did Hammond see the males.

They carried no weapons. They all wore white, collarless crew neck garments that resembled smocks which came down to their knees. They sported bearded chins and jowls, but smooth shaven upper lips. The beards were all trimmed to sharp points, and they looked alike as stenciled copies.

But here and there among them were



some with remarkable physical characteristics. Each of these occasional individuals had a tremendously large left arm, fully as big as one of his legs. It was carried crooked at the elbow, with the forearm held horizontally in front of him. The right arm, on the contrary, was spindly and underdeveloped. These males had thin, scraggy beards, and strange dull eyes that followed Hammond as he was marched past.

If the other males noticed him they gave no sign. They seemed completely subordinated in this huge craft.

The spiral ramps kept leading upward. Finally they reached a corridor with a transparent ceiling, and Hammond realized that he was now at the top of the strange craft. A moment later he was led before a door at either side of which stood a stiff Amazon guard.

The guards saluted the officer by raising the right hand to the heart. Then they stepped aside. The officer stared at the closed door. Her forehead furrowed slightly. Then she nodded. Turning, she removed the shackles from Hammond, stepped back.

The door dilated open. The officer made a sharp, unmistakable gesture with her right hand, and the armed guard took a stolid step forward.

Hammond shrugged. Ducking a little to clear the top of the doorway, he stepped inside.

**A**CROSS the well lighted room, close to the transparent prow of the ship, was a huge, metal desk. Papers and small charts lay scattered upon it. But Hammond's eyes scarcely noticed.

He stopped, just within the room, the door closing silently behind him. Then he took a deep breath, and grinned: "Now I know I must be dreaming!"

The girl behind the desk did not smile. She looked at him, solemnly, then a strange, quick fire leaped across her startlingly beautiful face. She lowered her gaze abruptly, and her hands stiffened on the desk. She rose, and when she looked again at Hammond there was a hardness, a piercing penetration to her sea-green eyes that seemed to probe like a surgeon's scalpel into Hammond's very brain. A fire seemed to spread, quickly, through his

mind, as though long dormant cells were stirring, growing to awareness.

And with it, impacting strangely on his ears, the girl spoke, her voice low and musical. "Earthman, your thoughts are unpleasant to me. I, Gena, commander of the spacecraft, *Vandar III*, with a million warriors at my disposal, am not for you."

Hammond's grin changed to a startled gape. Confusion moiled in his brain. How had she known what he was thinking? And where had she learned English! She spoke it like an American.

The girl smiled, as if hearing his confusion. She was a tall, lissome girl; a corn-yellow blond of remarkable beauty. But there was an imperiousness in her manner, a quiet dignity to her regard, a grace to her movements that set her above the Amazons that had captured Hammond. That she was a warrior also, albeit, the commanding officer of this strange craft, was evinced by her attire which was the same as that of the other female fighters. On a small table to her left was a shield, differing from the plain blue of the others by the single, glowing white star in its center. With it reposed one of the rifle-like weapons.

On her left arm she wore a metal band, like that of the minor officer that had escorted Hammond here. But this band was of gold, and it held the same symbol of high status, the single white star of glowing stone that writhed with a strange white fire.

Hammond took control of his confused thoughts. He said: "I'm sorry if I've offended you, Gena. But I can't control my thoughts, and they were sincere." His handsome face lighted with his quick, infectious grin. "You are very beautiful, and very desirable."

The quick fire leaped across the girl's face again, and in Hammond's mind there suddenly beat a tumultuous surge of emotions other than his own. Then the girl's face went sombre, and the strange surge in Hammond abruptly ceased. "You are a very impetuous young barbarian," she said, coldly. "But perhaps your uncouthness can be excused. You will indeed prove an interesting specimen to present to Alea, the Queen Mother."

Hammond frowned. He had almost

forgotten the utter strangeness of the entire experience, but it came back to him now, and with it the clamor for explanation.

The girl read his thoughts. "I, Gena, am not of Earth. Nor did I, before you entered this room, know your language, or know that your people call this planet Earth and the planet from which I come Mars. All this, and as much of Earth and your civilization as you know I have probed from your mind while you stood there."

She came around the desk, smiling now. "Your thoughts are confused. You do not readily believe. Mars—impossible! No ship has yet been constructed that can negotiate the airless void of space—no *Earthian* craft!" she emphasized. "But we of Mars have."

Hammond looked about him, out through the transparent hull wall to the far low maroon cliffs that he knew were the boat sides. He shrugged. Fantastic or no, this was the reality, and with a true scientist's adaptable mind he accepted it.

"How is it then," he questioned calmly, "that the warriors that captured me did not learn my language, nor read my thoughts?"

Gena's imperial features held dignity. "I am a commander," she answered. "Which means that I am a thorough master of that which your scientists call ESP—extra-sensory perception—as well as its opposite, which they have not yet recognized, but which they might call EST—extra-sensory transmission. It takes a certain type of personality, even on Mars, and years of training to attain to the power to perceive what is in other minds, plus the power to transmit to them, selectively, and at will, that which I wish them to know, understand, or obey."

Hammond relaxed, his keen mind enjoying itself. "Then you are not speaking to me in American? Yet to me it seems you are talking my language."

Gena's eyes quickened. "Precisely. I am speaking the language of the mind. Your mind reinterprets what I say in the phonetic symbols you call American, due to speech habits, just as it interprets such phonetic symbols as thoughts and ideas. If you spoke another language

the written symbols and sounds conjured up by your mind would be different, but the thoughts and ideas conveyed would be the same."

Hammond frowned. "Then, if you and your people use only the language of the mind, how does it happen that I heard spoken words which I did not understand?"

"I did not say we use *only* the language of the mind. We have our own phonetic symbols; in fact, I am talking audibly to you now. When you first entered I probed your mind, and put you *en rapport* as you might call it, not only with our mind language, but with our thought symbols, so you now reinterpret both as your own language."

Hammond shook his head. "But I still speak in American."

"No, you are only thinking in American. You are now vocalizing in our language as naturally as if you were speaking your tongue. Here, look at this chart."

HAMMOND glanced at the chart she held before him. It seemed written in English, though the ideas conveyed were somewhat startling and foreign, having to do with intricate calculation of space travel. Yet Hammond recalled that only a few moments before they had been in strange and unintelligible symbols.

He nodded, slowly, a little awed. "You have advanced far on Mars. And here on Earth we smugly pride ourselves on our knowledge, on a civilization that even now is tearing itself to shreds. Surely, you of Mars, with your advanced science, have succeeded in founding a better and more peaceful world."

The girl's eyes clouded, and for a moment her thought control slipped. Hammond had a wondering sensation of fear and anxiety.

"We have come far, Earthman," she nodded. "Evolution seems to have started from the same base on Mars, and taken the same general course as that of Earth. With variations, of course. We, the Metiphrons, the mammals of Mars, have achieved to high civilization. Our cities are united and at peace—among ourselves. Our science has wrought wondrous changes. We have crossed space, and we

have harnessed as well as condensed the atom. On Mars we are of normal size, which is to say we average about the size and weight of you Americans. This space ship, those tanks, our weapons—all weigh and bulk accordingly. But for space travel, and for certain doubtful ventures, we have condensed the atoms of our bodies and that of this craft and all our weapons, without changing their mass or qualitative characteristics. The electrical particles are all there, and in precisely the same proportion. But in each atom the particles are much closer together, moving in smaller orbits."

Hammond nodded. "Then I still weigh one hundred and eighty pounds?"

"You did, till your weight was reduced by the degravitator strapped to your back. Remove it, and your body, without changing size, will once more attract and be attracted by your planet sufficiently to weigh one hundred and eighty pounds. This ship, small as it no doubt appeared to you and your companion, weighs countless tons. Were it not for the giant degravitator in the central room it would plummet down to the ocean depths."

Hammond nodded, slowly. "With such science, and at peace among yourselves, you must be supreme on your planet. And yet—" His gaze shifted to shield and weapon on the small table. "You seem a warrior people."

Gena's face clouded. "Life is a struggle, Earthman. Forever and beyond, perhaps. We Metiphrons have achieved to unity and peace. But on Mars evolution took two parallel paths. That which culminated in the Metiphrons, my people, arising as on Earth from the lowly protozoa. And with it, keeping pace, that of the crustacean—culminating in the opposite life form of Mars—the Sediphrons. For centuries now they have fought us for mastery of the planet. Somewhat related to your arachnidæ, their later evolution has been consciously anthropomorphic, as they strove to imitate us in everything, even in bodily shape. Their motives?" The girl smiled bleakly. "The ancient motives of life—to enslave us, to be dominant on the planet, to infuse our blood with their own in order to speed their anthropomorphic evolution—and finally, to use as food those of us not

suitable for slaves or to bear their hybrid progeny.

"You can see why the very thought of them is repugnant to us. Why every female bears arms from infancy. And why we hoped to find aid, from the females here on Earth, for our fight to crush the Sediphrons."

Hammond nodded. "Then the Metiphron males don't bear arms?"

"Bear arms?" Gena smiled. "The males attend to our machinery, take care of the incubators and watch our young until they are able to take care of themselves. But fight?" She shook her head, as if the idea were strange and almost laughable.

Hammond grinned. "Things are somewhat changed around on Earth, Gena. The women do plenty of scrapping here, of course—and there's some who would insist they have it over the males, most of the time, in domestic life. But the really big blowoffs, like the ones going on in Europe and in Asia—they're still strictly for males."

The girl commander shrugged, dubiously. "Men are too phlegmatic to make good fighters."

She broke off, caught by a warning red signal that suddenly flashed to life on a complicated instrument board to left of the desk. For the space of several seconds she concentrated, her pretty brow slightly furrowed. When she turned to Hammond there was a worried frown in her eyes.

"My audiodetector indicates the proximity of a strange space ship. Its commander does not answer my telepathic inquiries. Something is definitely wrong. I must place my sub-officers on the alert. Also Ardiné, my division commander, who is conducting the search for your friend, Peter Storm."

Once more she concentrated on the issuance of telepathic orders.

THE floor suddenly lurched violently beneath them. Hammond thrown off balance, went down to his hands. He twisted erect, supple as a cat, and reached out a supporting arm for Gena, who had been thrown against the desk. A strange thrill tingled through him at the softness of her.

The girl was half turned, facing the transparent prow wall. She said: "Zugoth, the Sediphron King!" There was fear in her, momentarily. Then she stiffened, her brow furrowing in telepathic concentration, evidently issuing orders to the defense posts of the *Vandar III*.

Hammond, glancing over her shoulder, saw that a second craft, exactly like the one he was in, had alighted on the boat seat beside them. Holes were already dilating open in the gleaming side. Ugly muzzles, huge and ominous to Hammond's changed perspective, thrust through these holes. A moment later the flash and roar of heavy artillery shattered the quiet.

At the same time hundreds of the eight legged war tanks swarmed out of holes in the lower part of the space cruiser. Some of these charged toward the *Vandar III*, and were immediately met in combat by the divisions Gena had ordered out to assist sub-commander Ardiné in her search for Peter Storm. Others scuttled off to engage the separated scouters.

Gena seemed to have forgotten Hammond. She watched the heavy electronic artillery from the hostile war cruiser, her mind sending telepathic command after command to the various sections of the ship. The *Vandar's* own artillery was firing, but spasmodically, as if trouble was aboard. Gena's brow furrowed.

**H**AMMOND watched the strange battle. The ambulant tanks, he saw, were not only fighting with similar guns of lighter calibre, but were engaging each other with their clawed feet, like crustaceans. The guns did not fire projectiles, but flashes of electronic force which resembled lightning. The armor of the space ships held under the primary blasts, but was eroded by them, and repeated bolts, striking in the same spot, would eventually break through.

The quick flame of combat surged through Hammond as he watched. "Why don't you maneuver the ship?" he shouted, forgetting the girl-commander could read his thoughts. "Circle over them, come down on them from some blind spot. You can't win in this position. They've got more guns!"

The girl faced him, as if suddenly aware he was by her side. Her features

were white, and there was strain in her, in her flashing eyes.

"I can't!" she replied. "There were traitors among the men in my crew. Sediphrons, disguised as hybrids. They have seized the control room, and wrecked many of our big guns. We've lost!"

"No!" Hammond cried, roughly. "The control room! Maybe we can still take over, if there's not too many of them. If they haven't wrecked the driving mechanism we might still get away. Where is it, Gena?"

The girl looked at him, strangely. "The males of Earth are indeed a different breed," she commented. Then: "Come! Perhaps we have a chance."

She gathered up her shield and electronic rifle, and headed for what seemed a blank wall. Hammond followed. A door suddenly dilated open before Gena, and they passed through, hurried down a short, deserted ramp that spiraled downward for about a hundred feet.

It ended at an open doorway. Beyond, in the midst of electronic crackle and strange battle shouts, a dozen hybrids were holding the control room against a company of Amazons trying to force their way in from another doorway across the room. Two of Gena's operators were on the floor, evidently dead. Three others struggled in the grip of the scraggy bearded, huge-armed "fifth column" hybrids.

Other hybrids were smashing the delicate controls. These saw Gena and Hammond first. They swung around, reaching for electronic rifles.

Gena succeeded in killing two of them. Hammond, closing in quickly behind her, noticed that the rifles were fired, not from the shoulder, but held with the stock beneath the arm, and manouvered with one hand while the shield was held with the others.

Before she could fire again Gena became the target for two of the traitors. She caught the flash from one rifle on her shield, but could not raise it in time to ward off the other. The electronic bolt caught her squarely on her helmet.

With a muffled growl Hammond charged. The scraggy bearded traitor fired hurriedly, evidently disconcerted by sight of a bronzed, muscled male diving for

IV

him. The blast seared lightly across Hammond's back muscles. Then his hurtling body smashed into his opponent, hurling him down.

He swore monotonously, viciously, clubbed with savage fists at the bearded, screaming face. His victim screamed for aid.

At the next instant a wave of the fighting Amazons, evidently spurred to frenzy by sight of their fallen leader, surged forward, blasting into the room.

Hammond clung to the struggling saboteur he had flogged. The Sediphron had lost rifle and shield, and was gouging at Hammond's eyes with the fingers of his dwarfed right hand. The other, huge and leg-like, was locked behind the chemist's neck in a bone crushing grip.

Hammond's shoulder muscles writhed. He thrust his right hand up to a scraggy bearded chin. To his surprise, not only the chin but the whole face came away, revealing another beneath it. A hideous, crab-like face with popping eyes that stood out on stalks. It was covered with a green chitinous armor.

Startled, the Sediphron "fifth columnist" relaxed its grip on his neck. Hammond wrenched free. His hand clamped down on the huge arm.

The Sediphron surged back, leaving the artificial limb in the chemist's hand. A huge, toothed claw was revealed. The Sediphron surged in, reaching for Hammond.

The Earthman twisted, a faint sneer writhing his lips. The Sediphron was unbelievably clumsy. Hammond caught the descending claw and gave a sharp, quick twist. The entire limb came off in his hands, broken cleanly at the shoulder joint. Swinging the heavy limb in a swift moulinet the Earthman brought it down with crushing force beneath the popping eyes of his adversary. It crashed through the chitinous skull as if it were an eggshell.

Hammond whirled back to the fallen girl-commander, bent by her limp body. Her fallen rifle caught his eye, and he reached for it, sensing the swift swirl of battle swing toward him.

His fingers fell short. A numbing pain lashed through his head, bringing quick blackness.

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly to Hammond. He felt himself being carried. But it was the sharp barked order that lingered in his mind, that seemed to rift the blackness that shrouded his aching brain.

His eyes opened. He found himself looking up into the hideous, crablike face of a Sediphron who carried him by the shoulders.

The sharp, imperious voice came again, halting Hammond's carriers. The young chemist was put on his feet, flanked immediately by a half dozen Sediphrons with menacing electronic rifles.

Hammond stiffened. He was back in Gena's big observation and chart room. A horde of armed Sediphrons filled the room, drawn up in stiff military array.

Behind the metal desk sat a huge manlike crustacean, deep green in color. An enormous, toothed claw rested before him on the scattered flight charts.

The crablike mouth moved constantly. Words drummed against Hammond's ear, in a language he strangely understood. "Bring in the other Earth specimen, Vard. And the Metiphron sub-commander, Ardiné."

Hammond turned. Only then did he see Gena, flanked by a Sediphron guard, facing the hideous crustacean behind the desk. Their eyes met, and a warm surge of thankfulness enveloped Hammond.

"Thank God, Gena!" he thought, forcefully, "you're unharmed."

The girl-commander smiled wanly. "This is the end, Earthman. Zuggoth has won."

The crablike thing behind the desk teetered a little in the chair. His thoughts interrupted harshly. "Not the end, Gena, for you. You and your sub-commander will round out my harem back on Syrrvi. This daring, primitive Earthian male and his companion will be minutely examined."

Back of Hammond a door dilated open. Grim-faced, with a gash over his left eye, stocky Peter Storm was pushed into the room by a squad of Sediphrons. A flashing-eyed brunette, reaching barely to Storm's shoulder, walked by his side, head erect.

Storm's grim face relaxed as he saw

Hammond. His mouth cracked into a wry grin. "So they got you, too, Frank!" he said in English.

Hammond nodded, gravely. "How'd they get you, Pete?"

Storm shrugged, looked down at the brunette by his side. "Ardiné finally cornered me, with one of those eight-legged tanks. *Under a nail in the boat seat!*" Storm shook his head, as if the thing was crazy. "We were heading back for the 'big one' when the other space cruiser landed on the seat and started blasting. Three Sediphron tanks cornered us and wrecked our vehicle. Ardiné," he glanced down at her again, in a manner that flicked understanding into Hammond's eyes, "put up a good fight. But they finally got us, and marched us here. Looks like this Zuggoth has taken the ship. A division of his blitzkrieg panzers are mopping up—"

Zuggoth's harsh order suddenly obtruded. "Silence!"

Storm shrugged. The Sediphron warriors in the room stiffened expectantly.

The hideous crablike mouth worked. "Imperial orders of Zuggoth, first in command over Kulaav, land of the Sediphrons! All the males of the *Vandar III* shall be immediately put to death, and stored in the cargo rooms, along with the female warriors who have been killed in battle. These we shall use for food on our journey back to Syrrvi. The unharmed females shall be divided among you, according to rank, and placed in your harem. All but these two—" His huge claw lifted to indicate Gena and Ardiné. "They are reserved for the First One!"

A low, satisfied beat of sound came from the attentive warriors.

"The machinery of the *Vandar III* shall be immediately repaired for our triumphant return to Kulaav. These two strange males, natives of Earth, I personally wish to dissect in the laboratory. Important information concerning future forays in greater force to this green planet may be obtained in this manner."

The huge claw waved imperiously. "I, Zuggoth, first in command, have spoken."

For a moment there was silence. In that stillness Hammond's desperate gaze sought Storm's. Death, so casually pro-

nounced, death on the dissecting table. It was monstrous.

It was Storm who moved first. He took a quick sidestep, and swung, without preamble. His still taped, solid fist crushed through the green chitinous armor of the nearest guard's face. Then he was whirling, striking again, and Hammond was joining him, lashing at the nearest guard, trying to slash a path to Zuggoth, first in command.

It was a bitter battle while it lasted. Hammond nearly made it. He saw Zuggoth rear back in alarm, half lift his electronic rifle— Then a clubbed weapon sank the fighting chemist to his knees, and a moment later he was smothered under a pile of bodies.

Chains were shackled about his wrists and ankles. He was jerked erect to face Zuggoth, who had relaxed again in his chair. The ball-like eyes of the Sediphron king glared at him.

"Take them to the dissecting rooms at once!" he ordered. "There shall I cut the wild life from them, slowly, with much pain!"

Hammond shook the hair from his eyes and met Storm's battered grin with one of his own. Then his gaze sought Gena's.

The girl's face was white, her lips trembling. Her thoughts reached him, heavy with regret. "Goodbye, Earthman!"

The chemist's lips went grim. "Goodbye, Gena," he answered. Then a Sediphron guard shoved him roughly toward the door, after Storm.

THE dissecting room was high-walled, white, full of strange apparatus that only vaguely resembled similar machines of Earth. There was the Martian fluoroscope with which Storm and Hammond were minutely examined, and notes taken on a Martian "talkie"—evidently a highly advanced type camera with sound track arrangement which recorded that revealed by the fluoroscope and the comments of the observer.

The fluoroscope was a vast improvement over the earth type. Hammond, watching Storm being examined with it, saw that any part of his companion's internal anatomy could be brought into sharp focus on the screen. Heart, lungs, bone structure, arteries. Each was

minutely examined, probed into—the while the Martian “talkie” hummed softly.

A number of strange drugs were needled into them as they stood behind the fluoroscope. Drugs that burned like fire, contorting their bodies with convulsions, and which were immediately eased by the introduction of a neutralizing drug. Others that paralyzed motor nerves, and that deadened the sensory cells. All was recorded by the laboratory scientists.

Finally, Hammond and Storm were strapped on the dissecting tables. A blinding, white light beat down on their almost naked bodies.

Zuggoth came into the laboratory then. For a few moments he and the laboratory scientists held a consultation. Hammond, craning his neck, could see the Sediphron king’s crablike mouth work, see the ball-like eyes wave on the end of their stalks.

The Martian “talkie” was run for him, the picture sequences thrown against a special screen that held the scenes clear without the dimming of the bright laboratory lights. Zuggoth watched attentively, only his revolting eyes swaying.

Then he waved his huge claw. The “talkie” was shut off. Huge, hideous, he walked to the dissecting tables. A smaller table, holding a gleaming array of scalpels and cutting instruments of all types was wheeled to his side.

He turned to Hammond. His dwarfed right hand, humanlike, with tiny fingers, picked up a knife.

**A**T that moment a hidden bell began to clang incessantly. Zuggoth paused, half turned. The laboratory assistants fidgeted. One of them said: “It is the alarm signal, First One. Something has happened in the ship!”

Zuggoth hesitated. Then he flung the knife down on the small table. “Keep guard over the Earthians, Cuzzvi,” he snapped to the head scientist. “I will see what’s causing the trouble!”

Hammond’s tightened muscles relaxed: the sweat on his forehead felt cool. Unexpectedly, he had been given a breathing spell. But for how long?

Instinctively he tested the flexible, silken straps that held him to the table. They did not give, though his muscles bunched

and strained. There was a silken thong about his neck, holding his head down. He turned his head, slowly, till he faced Storm.

“Looks like our friend Zuggoth never heard of an anesthetic,” he muttered, with an attempt at casualness he did not feel. “Funny thing, Pete, it still doesn’t seem real. All this, I mean. Just a few hours ago we were in a skiff, fishing for blues. Now—”

Pete managed a grin. “Now we’re still in the boat. Only it isn’t—”

Looking toward Hammond, he was facing the laboratory door, and he saw them first. Hybrids, armed with shield and electronic rifles. Two of them. One of them carried red and green insignia on its dwarfed right arm.

Hammond turned his head, warned by the look on Storm’s face. The laboratory head, Cuzzvi, saw the intruders a moment later. He drew up stiffly, evidently noting the rank of the foremost hybrid. Then, all at once, he whirled, gave a short cry of warning to his assistants, and reached for an electronic rifle in a wall rack.

The rifles in the hands of the strange hybrids lanced their electronic bolts. Cuzzvi staggered against the fluoroscope, his green face fused into black mess. The other two assistants made a dash for a door in the far end of the room. Neither reached it.

A moment later the hybrid officer was bending over Hammond, releasing him. The other hybrid was doing the same for Storm.

Hammond’s mind whirled. He said: “Thanks, boys. We sure—”

He gasped, his fingers tightening on the hybrid’s huge arm. The scraggy bearded face had been pushed back, revealing beneath the disguise Gena’s beautiful features.

“Come!” she said sharply, drawing forth a similar hybrid disguise from within the garment. “Get into this, Earthman. We have no time to lose. We must get away from here before Zuggoth returns.”

Hammond and Storm obeyed with alacrity. They got into the hybrid costumes Zuggoth’s Sediphrons had used to plant themselves in Gena’s ship. They padded out the huge left arm with a

soft, cottonlike material they found in the laboratory. Ardiné helped them in the task.

In the meantime Gena disappeared in a closet-like room at the far end of the laboratory. When she returned she held two strange-looking metal objects, like long, dull tubes with a dial face and a knob. She tucked these away under her costume without explaining.

Ardiné, also, had been foraging. She came back to them with what seemed like two small flashlights. Her voice was hurried. "The size reducing and expanding ray guns. Perhaps we'll have use for them."

Gena nodded. Her voice was quick, determined. "Earthmen, Ardiné and I are going to make an attempt to capture Zuggoth's ship, and escape back to Mars. The *Vandar III* is being repaired, but it will take hours. Our only hope is the unharmed Sediphron craft."

Hammond caught up one of the electronic rifles. "We're with you, Gena," he said grimly. "Lead the way!"

THE door dilated open as they approached. A moment later they were marching stiffly down a long corridor.

Hammond gripped the electronic rifle he had taken from Cuzzvi, his eyes hard under the strange optical openings in the hybrid mask. The ship was swarming with Sediphrons, searching for the girls who had escaped from Zuggoth's harem. At any moment—

As if in answer to his worst fears a Sediphron squad appeared from a side corridor. They halted abruptly. The leader eyed the insignia on Gena's arm. Then he raised his huge left arm at a diagonal across his chest, evidently in salute.

Gena's thoughts rasped: "The engine rooms. The First One orders. The escaped Metiphrons have been sighted."

The Sediphron guard wheeled, went down the corridor at a shuffling gait. Hammond relaxed, feeling sweat in the palms of his hands, on his brow.

"This way!" Gena ordered. They cut down the side corridor from which the guard had emerged, and took a long ramp downward. Several times they met squads of the ugly crustaceans, but their

disguise and Gena's harsh commands got them by.

They were well down in the ship, cutting across a big machine room, deserted by the Metiphron workers who tended the whirring machines when Gena halted. Ardiné and the Earthmen waited while she darted a long aisle and vanished into a smaller room beyond where a huge, turbine-like thing of glinting metal spun with high-pitched hum.

The girl-commander had withdrawn one of the dull metal tubes before leaving them. She turned the knob, which moved the dial hand, evidently setting it to desired position.

Several minutes later she was back without the tube.

Ardiné's voice was shaken. "Gena—how long?"

"Four hours!" Gena replied. "Four hours until the degravitator of the *Vandar III* blows up." There was regret in her voice.

Hammond kept his silence. But the need for haste now, dogged them as they followed ramp after ramp down into the ship.

"Hurry!" Gena said again and again.

Some of the route was familiar to Hammond, who remembered being led along it on his way to Gena's navigation room. He was sure of it when they stepped into the huge garage where row upon row of war tanks stood dark and unmoving along the walls.

There was no guard about. Across the room a tank was just rumbling in, its eight legs clanking metallically. Evidently it was one of the Sediphron scouts that had been combing the boat for any of Gena's tanks that might have escaped the surprise attack.

Gena led the way swiftly. They clambered into one of the squat parked vehicles. A moment later it clanked out, passing the larger one that was sidling into parking position nearer the door.

They weren't stopped. A moment later they were climbing down the side of the "big one" to the boat seat, and scurrying across the ridges and gullies that were strewn with the wrecks of Sediphron and Metiphron war vehicles.

Through the observation prow Hammond could see the vague maroon



cliff that was the near boat side. For a moment longing assailed him—longing to be in his own world again, to be out of this fantastic world of ultra-smallness. His thoughts turned to the ray guns Ardiné carried, then he dismissed the thought that came to him.

He owed Gena and Ardiné his life; and for what it would be worth he was with them in this suicidal attempt to wrest from Zuggoth and his crustacean horde the huge battle craft that had followed the *Vandar III* across space.

Zuggoth's ship finally loomed up, like a colossus over the small tank. Unhesitatingly Gena sent the ambulatory vehicle up the spiny side. The Sediphron craft was an exact copy of Gena's ship, and the girl-commander guided the small tank unerringly to one of the dilating doors that opened to a telephatic command.

The huge room they entered was an exact duplicate of that which they had left in the *Vandar III*. A Sediphron guard watched them slide the small tank into parking space. Then his telephatic order crackled into their thoughts.

"Who enters the flagship of the First One? Answer."

Hammond kept his mind blank. He saw Gena's brow furrow slightly. The words seemed to sound in his ears. "Volkzv, second in command of hybrid Intelligence. Searching flagship on order of Zuggoth, the First One. Gena, commander of the *Vandar III*, and her sub-commander, Ardiné, have escaped with the two Earthmen. All squads dispatched to the search. Zuggoth orders!"

There was a moment of hesitation. The hideous Sediphron squad leader's eyes swayed gently. Then his reply came. "Proceed, Volkzv. We stay to guard the tank room."

Hammond kept a grip on his thoughts. Stiff-legged, marching with the shuffling gait of the hybrids, he followed Gena and Ardiné and Storm out of the war tank, and across the vast chamber to the corridor.

Zuggoth's ship was practically deserted. Evidently only a skeleton guard had been left behind. All others had been ordered out to battle, and were now concentrated in the captured Metiphron space cruiser.

Hammond breathed a sigh of relief. It looked as if Gena's desperate plan might succeed.

The sudden clanging of a huge bell somewhere in the ship's bowels stiffened them. Storm's quick voice sounded. "The alarm signal! The tank room guard must have suspected—"

"Come!" Gena snapped. "The control room. If we can take over, and seal ourselves in—"

THEY hurried along the corridor, ducking into side rooms to avoid being sighted by squads of the green crustaceans that suddenly sprouted into being.

Thus, playing a grim game of hide and seek, they finally made their way up to the control room. But here they ran into a huge, massed group of the Sediphrons, who had evidently been ordered to await any such move on the part of the desperate fugitives.

The lurid crackle of electronic bolts fused against the corridor walls. Storm and Hammond worked their rifles with grim methodicalness, blasting a half dozen of the green crustaceans into oblivion. But there were too many of them. They had to fall back along the corridor.

Then Ardiné received a partial shock from a glancing bolt that dropped her. Storm sprang for her, heedless of the bursting bolts, and caught her up in his strong arms. Gena and Hammond covered him under a steady flare of bolts.

With Storm ahead of them they turned and ran.

It was up to Gena. The Earthmen followed blindly, lost in the bewildering maze of ramps, rooms and corridors.

As if in a grim nightmare they fought their way back through the ship, escaping annihilation many times by Gena's unerring knowledge of dilating doors that gave temporary safety.

Once Hammond saw Gena glance down at her chronometer, and he felt the rise of alarm in her thoughts before she blanked them out. And the chemist remembered then the time-bomb she had planted in the degravitator room of the *Vandar III*.

They crossed a momentarily deserted corridor, Storm still carrying the unconscious Ardiné, and went into a long room

that held a maze of long metal pipe overhead and squat machinery with smaller feeders leading up to the huge conductors.

Gena's thoughts came to Hammond as they paused here. "If we *must* die, let us at least take Zuggoth and his hideous horde with us. I can't let them get back to Mars now."

Hammond said: "Gena! Wait!"

But the lithe, young Amazon was already running along a row of banked machinery, withdrawing the second time-bomb from under her hybrid disguise. In the far wall a green light glowed as she approached. A door dilated open, and a Sediphron appeared in the opening.

For a moment he hesitated, stalk eyes swaying toward Gena. Then suspicion fused to purpose, and he swung his electron to target her.

Hammond's rifle lashed out first. Gena scarcely slowed in her run. She stepped over the crustacean's green body, and vanished into the degravitator room.

Sweat gathered on Hammond's brow as he waited, rifle held tight in his right hand. Storm was stroking Ardiné's forehead, his face grim. The high-pitched hum of the giant degravitator filled the room.

Then Gena returned, swiftly, tearing off her hybrid disguise. "One hour, Earthmen!" she said, unevenly, her eyes dark with the terrible strain. "One hour, and then we go down with Zuggoth and his hideous horde!"

"No!" Hammond's voice was rough. He ripped the disguise from him, flung it aside. Bronzed and rangy, his square jaw set, he faced the girl-commander. "You've handled this so far, Gena. But we're not giving up. We're getting out of here if we have to blast our way through every foot!"

**H**IS ringing cry seemed to whip hope into Gena. The strain in her white face seemed to ease, and a strange smile touched her full lips.

"Earthman, I think I shall like your breed. It does not easily give up!"

They turned away, crossed the huge room just as a squad of Sediphrons burst in at the other end. Hammond dropped behind, his rifle covering the burdened Storm and Gena, the girl he loved.

In a swift rearguard engagement, they

fought their way out of the room. Gena's aimed electronic bolt fused the hidden mechanism of the dilating door through which they escaped, momentarily holding up the rush of the hideous crustaceans.

"The tank rooms!" Hammond barked, taking command. "You know how to reach one of them, Gena?"

The girl nodded. Tensed, grim-faced, Hammond followed the girl, keeping Storm and Ardiné between them, electronic rifle held ready.

A small Sediphron squad patrolled the area, evidently on the alert for such a break. But the sudden appearance of the Earthmen and the girls caught them by surprise.

There were eight of them, and four went down to the combined fire of Gena and Hammond before they could train their rifles. Then Storm, laying Ardiné on the hard floor, took a hand.

Only one of that crustacean squad emerged from that withering fire. He succeeded in reaching a huge wall switch. A moment later the huge bell clanged its harsh alarm through the ship.

Hammond killed him, without regret.

They took the nearest war tank, a small, fast scout vehicle. Gena sent it clattering toward the far wall just as Zuggoth and a horde of Sediphrons burst into the room.

The electronic rifle bolts splattered harmlessly against the armor of the speeding tank. Unharmed the fugitives passed through the dilating door, and dipped down the side of the huge space craft.

Hammond hung on to the hand grips, watching Storm. The blond American held Ardiné in the curve of his strong arm, anxiety in his face. Only when the brunette began to stir, open her eyes, did relief finally ease the grimness of Storm's face.

The girl smiled up at him, her arms tightening. Hammond took his gaze away from the oblivious pair, and peered through the observation windows.

Gena was guiding the small tank along the huge ledge that was the boat side.

Back of them a score of bigger war tanks were following. Huge rays were blasting at them, burning scars in the ledge about them.

The small tank finally dipped down the boat side onto the far seat. For a

moment they were safe, out of range of the bigger tank batteries.

Gena brought the tank to an abrupt halt. "Our only chance!" she snapped. "We must use the size-expanding ray!"

They clambered quickly out. Far across the void between seats the "big ones" loomed. Nearer, coming toward them along the heaving boat side, clattered the Sediphron war tanks.

For a brief moment Gena's eyes mirrored a deep regret. Then she set the adjustment on her ray gun, and turned it on Hammond, while Ardiné did the same to Storm.

The familiar, whirling darkness, the bitter cold, claimed Hammond.

The darkness faded. He found himself facing Storm on the boat seat. The skiff was rocking crazily. Hammond teetered, stumbled back into the stern, and at the same moment Ardiné and Gena appeared.

A wave shipped over the side, washing tiny, antlike things that a moment before had loomed as colossal war tanks, into the bottom of the boat. And at the same moment Gena stiffened.

Thrusting from a turret in the Sediphron space craft appeared a small, glinting tube, similar to the one Gena had used to change them to tiny mites. In another moment they would experience again the sickening change to ultra-smallness.

The twin reports, like small firecrackers going off inside the "big ones," cut across Hammond's instinctive yell to dive overboard. The space cruisers on the boat seat, with the degravitators gone, seemed suddenly sucked down with irresistible force. They crashed through the seat, through the bottom of the skiff, and vanished in a swirl of water.

**T**HE *Crawfish* foundered, precipitating Hammond and his companions into the Sound. Hammond stroked instinctively to Gena's side, but the girl was as good a swimmer as he.

Ardine and Storm swam alongside, and together they idled, looking back to where the *Crawfish* barely showed between swells, her thwarts awash.

"That's the end of Zuggoth and his

crustacean horde!" Storm remarked with relief. "Both ships must be buried deep in the muck and rock of the Sound!"

Gena's eyes clouded. Hammond had the sudden knowledge she was thinking of the Amazon warriors that had gone down with the *Vandar II*. Yet he knew, too, that it was better this way, than the more horrible fate that had been in store for them.

Gena stroked closer, her shoulder brushing his. She was still staring at the bobbing skiff, a strange half-fearful doubt tightening her wet face. Hammond sensed the trend of her thoughts.

The occupants of the pursuing war tanks, unfitted for water travel, must have surely drowned. But the huge space craft were water tight. It might be that Zuggoth and his crustacean horde, buried in the muck of the Sound, by their tremendous weight relative to their size, would yet succeed in repairing the degravitator of his ship and win free before death overtook them.

Hammond thrust the chill apprehension from him. He grinned reassuringly as Gena looked up at him, eyes dark with uncertainty—with sudden loneliness. She was no longer master of a million warriors—commander of a mighty ship of space. She was just a girl, now, soft and lovely and somewhat afraid.

"Frank," she said softly, tremulously. "What is it like—on Earth? We are lost, Ardine and I—"

"Not lost, Gena," Frank answered, his voice serious. Over the girl's wet shoulder, in the west, he could see the swollen red orb of sun setting behind the wooded island. He saw farther, into tomorrow, and after. To his friends in the lab—to a story he knew would be incredulously received—to a world he and Storm would have to try to explain to these girls from across the star hung void.

"You'll be with me, Gena," he said, his voice gentle. "As my wife. And perhaps some day, with your knowledge, and Ardine's—"

The girl smiled, and followed the line of his upward glance. The shadows were lengthening across the heaving Sound. But in the still, flushed sky a pin point of light beckoned, like a smiling answer—the brilliant disc of glowing Mars.