

# PLANET STORIES



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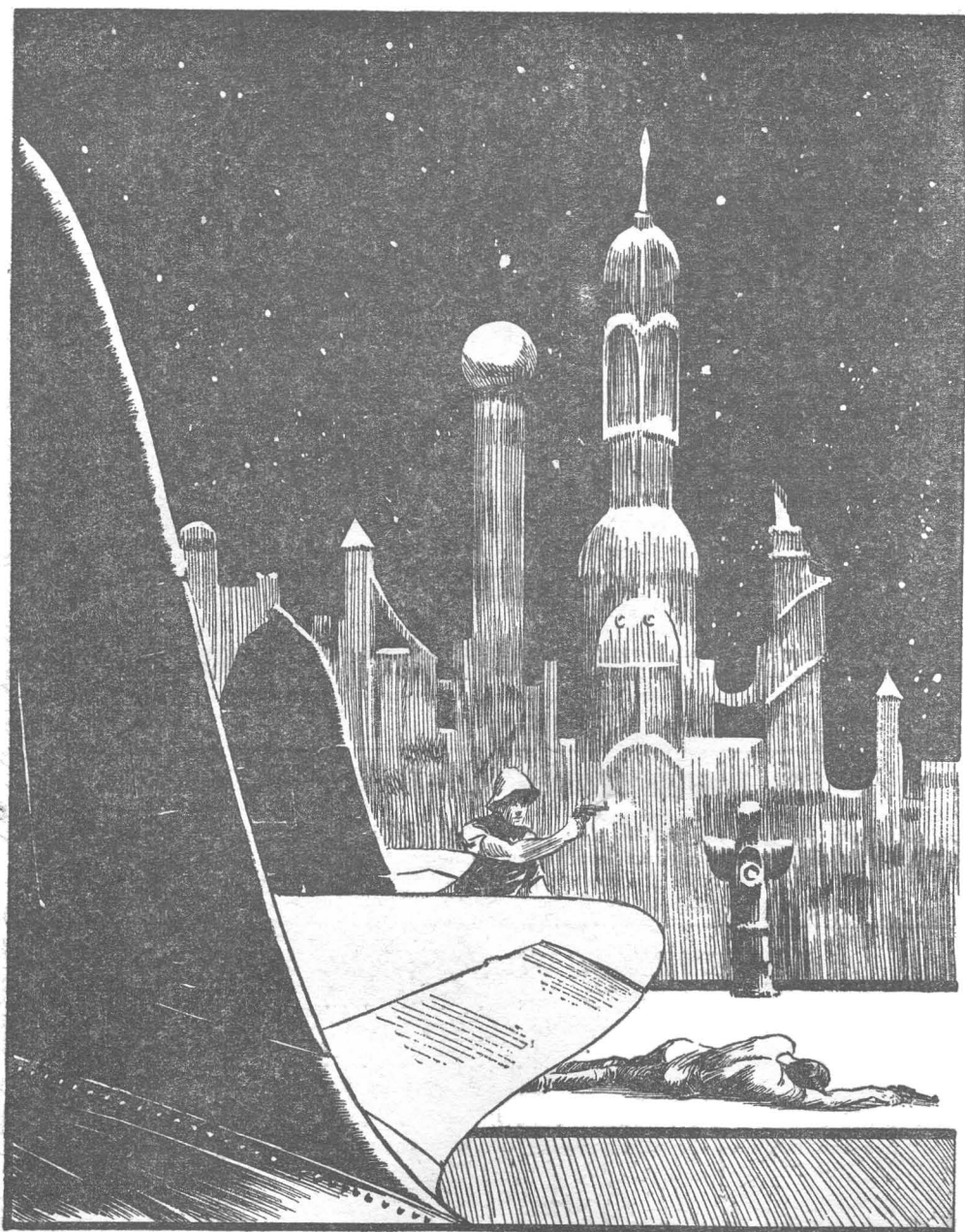


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# Minions of the Crystal Sphere

By ALBERT DE PINA

**Like a monster flashing jewel, Plastica hovered over Neptune. And burning at its heart like the malignant sparkle of a gem was the blazing hate of millions of slaves, ready to flare into raging battle at the ringing tocsin of Vyrl Guerlan, the man without a country.**

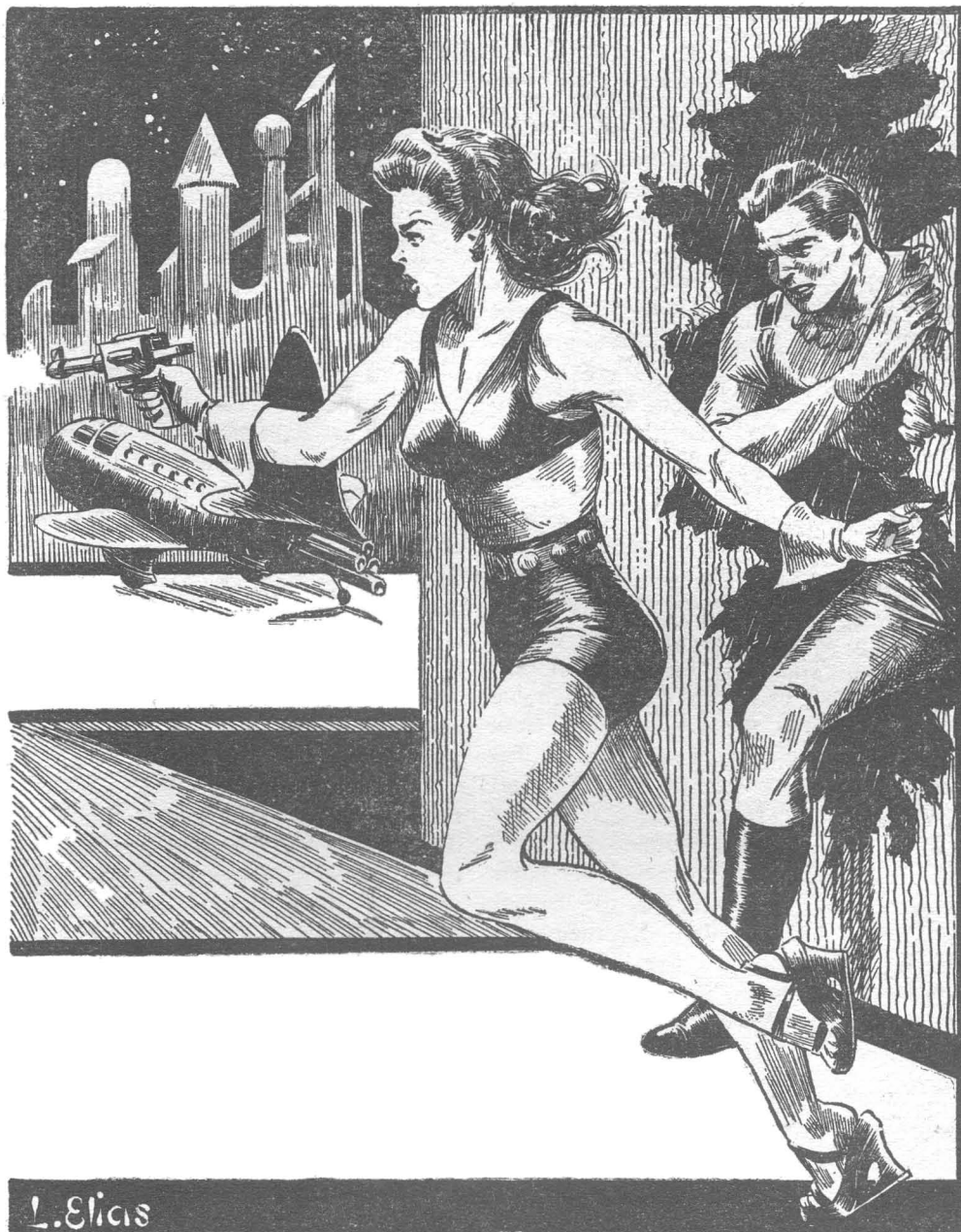
*Illustration by ELIAS*

THE vast globe of transparent plastic, infinitely stronger than the most powerful columbium steel, hung suspended in space, ablaze in brilliant pyrotechnics of light. And as cold and impersonal as the laws of the empire it ruled.

Within it was the City of the Inner Circle. Patterned after the City of Plastica itself, it rose within the globe in graduated tiers, but unlike Plastica, there were no graduations of caste—they were all Protectors, these scientists of the Inner Circle,

and above them ruled the legendary figure of *His Benevolence*, the "Protector in Chief."

Six thousand feet below, the turbulent ocean tossed restlessly as if resentful of the awful pressure of the stupendous anti-gravity beams that kept the glittering sphere in space—sacred, inviolate, invulnerable. Above the ocean's shoreline, set amidst low hills, rose Plastica, entirely enclosed in a shell of the same transparent plastic, and rising tier on tier—each one a small



L. Elia

*Guerlan followed Perlac through the gaping hole.*

world unto itself, and each barred from communication with other tiers. Here the millions toiled and loved and died . . . and entered the portals of Blessed Sleep.

In the vast reaches of Neptune, only this continent—Adamic, was livable, thanks to immense volcanic valleys where constant volcanic activity of titanic proportions maintained a temperate atmosphere in contrast to the frigid, desolate continents to the north and west. And dotting the valley of Plastica like transparent beehives, the twelve jewels of the diadem—twelve cities where five million human beings dwelt in each, formed the empire of sixty million descendants of the original immigrants who chose to follow the Council in their flight from Venus.

There was no other sign of man, except among the virgin forests of the volcanic valleys, where the Irreconcilables who fled the rigid laws of the Protectors, carried on a precarious existence, assailed by fierce wild beasts of prey, and hunted for sport with lances and long-swords by the members of the Inner Circle, and the Scientists of the first order. Burdened by the awful gravity of the great planet, and without adequate arms to defend themselves, they were doomed quarry.

Within the capital, Plastica, and in each of the twelve cities, each individual life had a definite pattern known only to the members of the Inner Circle. Any deviation from that pattern brought instant retribution. There was no appeal, for each judgment was based on cold, inexorable law. Ever since the great exodus from Earth, when the original Council had fled Terra, and forced colonies on Mars and Venus, and later after their disastrous war with Europa, the Council itself had been given the alternative of leaving the inner planets or being executed, the members of the Council had colonized Neptune with millions who unable to live without the "controls" had chosen to accompany them into space. As the centuries passed and a new ruler of the Council had been elected, changes had occurred in the laws, methods had been perfected, until now, all Neptune was ruled by the City in the Flaming Sphere, and to the millions in Plastica and the other great cities, the Protectors (as they now styled themselves), had become legendary figures. The Law was

supreme. And behind the Law, was the "Blessed Sleep."

IN THE fabulous hall of the palace, where the reeling torches in relief threw faces of ink and of gold, there was a sudden silence as an unearthly voice rose limpid, supernally lovely, in a single ululating note. It was as if a gargoyle were singing with the voice of an angel.

But the bizarre assemblage of jaded, pleasure-sated "Protectors" of the *Inner Circle* had no eyes for the cadaverous Minister of Justice, whose distorted features seemed uglier as he directed a stream of modulated notes upward toward the gigantic doors at the top of jewelled stairs. All eyes peering through the slits of black and golden masks that completely hid their faces, were directed at the great red doors, shining like gigantic, square cut rubies under the primitive light of resinous torches. Every detail of the masquerade was perfection itself, copying faithfully the conditions of primitive ages thousands of years past. The magnificent costumes of the guests harked back to pirates and slave-dealers, to vanished kings and oriental potentates. Back to an era when humanity was young, as if these scientists who had the command of miracles at their fingertips, had wearied of their scientific perfection.

Bejamel, Minister of Justice, had conceived the idea, and His Benevolence had approved. From the current "favorite" of His Benevolence, to the newest neophyte of the Inner Circle, the Masquerade had immediately become a command performance.

Only one thing they had no need to imitate, one thing that harked back to the darkest annals of Terra and surpassed anything that Planet had ever known—their utterly ruthless intrigues for the favor of His Benevolence. Assassinations were a commonplace, besides it provided a constant incentive to the Scientists of the First Order, for from them were chosen the fortunate ones who filled the vacancies of the Inner Circle.

The audience gave a vast sigh, like a susurrating breeze, as the ponderous doors began to open under the exact tonal vibration of Bejamel's voice, for Bejamel, Minister of State, was the only one who could open those doors, aside from the "Pro-

lector in Chief" himself. Within the inner chamber nothing was discernible as the doors opened—nothing but a vast radiance intolerable to their eyes. As if a command had been given, all of them kneeled with bowed heads. At last, Bejamel's ululating chant ceased and when they looked again, the jewelled door had closed, but on the dais at the top of the stairs immediately above them reclined a figure—a monstrous figure of man, whose sharp, pale-yellow eyes gazed at them with bored contempt from amid folds of bulging flesh.

"Benevolence!" The roar of thousands of voices rose in servile tribute, and left hands were flung upwards, fingers extended in salute. His Benevolence looked them over with cold, cruel eyes that seemed to miss no detail, and a little smile extended the bulbous lips. Languidly he waved a massive hand to the masqueraders, noting that none had achieved the bejewelled opulence of his Mandarin's costume, and instantly the revelry burst into tumult. The corps of exquisite dancers until now frozen in motionless attitudes, began a series of provocative movements, while barbaric drums and percussion instruments wove a theme of madness and desire. Over all, the shrill *passionata* of the reeds and strings winged insistently to combine in a diabolic pattern that plucked at raw nerves and bared hidden jealousies and hates and bared the instincts of the jungle, red in tooth and claw.

A group of dancers weaving and undulating in the suggestive rhythms of the Venusian "*Vuda*" passed like an uncoiling serpent before the august dais and burst into bacchanalian frenzy before the sardonic yellow eyes of His Benevolence. The fantastic splendor of the scene was heightened by the young, supple bodies of the most beautiful girls in the empire, the Virgins of the Sacred Flame, chosen yearly for that sacred trust.

"WELL," an impassive voice inquired of a tall, dark-haired *guest* who stood in the side-lines, stiff and uncertain, his conventional black mask too small to hide the firm, square-cut mouth, his blue-black mane of shoulder-length hair betraying him as a newcomer lacking as it did the curled and perfumed artistry of the other guests.

"I suppose it's superfluous to ask your reactions to your first visit to the mysteries of our City." The faint laughter that accompanied the words brought a flush to the cheeks of the newcomer, fortunately covered by the mask.

"How did you know I was a newcomer?" The youth inquired in turn.

"Simple," the cold, impassive voice replied. "You have no jewels save that ring of a scientist of the First Order you're trying to conceal. Your costume's far too simple. . . . When do you begin your probationary period for the Inner Circle?" The speaker was below medium height, slender as a sheathed rapier, and dressed in a single garment of tight-fitting silk literally emblazoned in diamonds of the first water. His square-cut mane of red-gold hair was starred with myriad blue and red and yellow flashing stones, but the face was thoroughly hidden by the golden mask.

"Tomorrow!" The words were spoken with a vast regret. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand. . . . I hadn't expected this. Why I thought Sacred City was a heaven of achievement of . . ." he stopped as if words failed him.

"Go on!" The sexless voice had a hint of mockery in its depths now. "This is merely a preamble." He waved a marvelously slender hand in the direction of the revellers. "Later . . . but then, I always manage to slip away before the real feast commences. If you wish, you may come with me."

"But who are you? I might as well tell you who am I," the youth began, but his unknown acquaintance waved his words aside with a gesture.

"I know who you are—scientist of the First Order Guerlan, as for me, it does not matter who I am—you will see me again . . . soon." He turned to leave.

"Wait!" Guerlan exclaimed. "Take me with you out of this . . . this welter of vice and . . ." words failed him in his disgust.

"Traitor . . . Blasphemer!" A hoarse cry of rage rose above the music and tumult. The swirling dancers split asunder as if a giant's hand had flung them back. In the center of the cleared space, Guerlan found himself facing a stocky, powerful figure of a man, costumed in the ancient garments of a Pirate, eyes gleaming

through the slits of his golden mask. In his hand he hefted a long columbium sword with bejewelled hilt. "Draw, vermin!" He taunted the dazed youth. "Draw before I spit you on my sword like a spider!"

On the dais, still reclining as he gulped superb white grapes, His Benevolence had begun to show signs of interest for the first time. The veil of boredom had left his yellow eyes, an expectant grin split his lips hungrily. Here was an unscheduled diversion of the first order.

Guerlan wore a long, thin rapier for a weapon, it had come with the costume, or he'd never have thought of wearing it—nothing like this fantastic nightmare could possibly have occurred to him. "Why did they have to choose me!" He groaned inwardly. But with a swift movement he drew the blade and stood *en garde*. He sensed dimly that it was a true weapon, flexible and needle-sharp, not a costume-toy. And once he had it in his hand, all his relentless, austere training in fencing and sword-play came flooding in his mind. It was not considered sportsmanlike to hunt Irreconcilables with atmo-pistols, only swords and spears were used—but the end was the same for the defenseless rebels.

Dimly Guerlan was aware of the dispassionate voice whispering in his ear, "Watch out for tricks . . . and win! The penalty will be far less severe."

Guerlan wondered if his unknown acquaintance of the frigid voice meant that his rebellious words had reached the awesome figure on the dais, and that by winning he might be shown mercy. But he had no more time to think irrelevant thoughts, for with a cry of drunken fury, his accuser struck without preamble, slashing downward in a mighty blow calculated to have cloven anything in two. But Guerlan smiled contemptuously at the transparent maneuver; he merely shifted sideways and flicked his rapier, and the sword slid harmlessly along the shining columbium steel rapier. But the pseudo-pirate had no intentions of giving up the initiative, he whirled the saber over his head and again brought it down in a glancing blow that would have sheered through Guerlan, and the young scientist again parried it with such precision that the razor-sharp blade slid off singing to one side.

IT WAS a superb struggle, and His Benevolence had directed his palace minions to clear space for his unobstructed view. He now held a gigantic uncut, but polished diamond to one eye, which he alternated with an emerald and then a ruby, watching the battle through various colors. An immense golden platter of viands and fruits slowly disappeared down his capable maw.

Suddenly Guerlan closed in. His rapier flashed with vertiginous speed, flicking in and out, so rapidly that it barely seemed to touch the brawny forearm of his attacker, but when it came away it left a flowing gash from elbow to wrist. With a bellow of humiliation and rage, the pirate-costumed scientist lunged with a tremendous slash, but his sword-point speared the air and before he could recover his balance, Guerlan drove his rapier deep into the fleshy shoulder.

His attacker was silent now, an ominous rage contorted the brutal face from which he'd torn the golden mask. He had but one single idea, to kill and kill quickly. Laughter and jeering shouts rose around him. As did the acrid odor of blood mingling with the exotic fragrances that cloyed the atmosphere . . . his own blood! His reaction to the audible scorn of the other inner circle scientists was instantaneous. He came in whirling his saber until it was like a silver vortex, then he brought it down in a savage slash to sheer Guerlan's head off his shoulders. But the youth leaped back, engaging the Pirate's sword at the same time and with a strange flicking motion accomplished faster than the eye could catch, he twisted suddenly at a precise instant and sent his attacker's sword flying through the silent hall.

It was an all but forgotten, ancient Italian trick whose origins were lost. But the Scientist of the Inner Circle, sweating under his gaudy pirate's costume knew nothing about Italian fencing tricks—he only knew that one moment he'd thought to shear his opponent's head off his shoulders and the next he was disarmed. A look of sheer horror came into his blood-flecked eyes and next an uncontrollable scream escaped his lips. That sealed his doom. Guerlan saluted and made no motion to finish him. But from the fabulous dais where the jeweled stairs were like

a flowing stream of fire, a mocking, infinitely sardonic laugh chilled every scientist present in that room.

"Our unfortunate brother is afraid, he is tired, is he not Bejamel? After such an ordeal he deserves sleep . . . soothing 'Blessed Sleep!'" Again that demoniac, perversely cruel cackling that travestied laughter, while the scientist, grovelling now, babbled in a frenzy of appeals for a mercy that didn't exist. He was led screaming to a side door and then once more there was silence in the hall.

"Bring the rebel!" Once more it was the voice of His Benevolence, purring now, silky, filled with anticipatory pleasure. But Guerlan needed no one to bring him before the dreaded presence. He walked calm and erect to what he sensed would be his death. He knew that from this soulless being he could expect no justice—nothing but death. But there was to be a surprise in store for him. His Benevolence was an adept at ringing the changes of torture on a human soul, and this was a magnificent occasion. "We have heard you disapprove of us?" His Benevolence's voice was light, cheerful, there was no hint of danger in the silky tones. But Guerlan knew. That partly developed extra-sensory perception that was a part of his heritage was prenatally alert now. He was not fooled.

"I expressed a misunderstanding, Your Benevolence," Guerlan bowed and slowly took off his mask. Above the wide-spaced deep-green eyes, flashing like tourmalines, a tiny tattooed six-pointed star seemed to tremble with the pulsing of a vein.

"You see, Bejamel? I told you that 'Perceptives' would never do, yet you so persuasively sold me the idea of how useful they could be if their extra-sensory perceptive powers were developed." He sighed. "It's that genius of yours for intrigue. . . . But it has failed. We can allow no dissidents to enter the mysteries of the inner circle, Bejamel!"

"I kneel before your Benevolence," Bejamel's gargoyle features were painfully contorted as he tried to grovel. "In my zeal for service to your Magnificence I have failed, but there's always the Blessed Sleep for this blasphemer, O Symbol of Charity!" He finished ominously and

pondered what a jewel of a victim he would make.

**B**UT His Benevolence gave Bejamel a look of such cold, devastating evil, that *he* should dare to offer a solution, that the cadaverous Minister of Justice seemed to shrink, pale and desperate, against the wall of scientists who watched avidly the *miseen scène*.

"No mercy, no finesse." His Benevolence again was wearing the mask of merciful forgiveness. "No Bejamel—not the Chamber of Blessed Sleep, just . . ." and he held up two fingers weighted with jewels. Then he turned to Guerlan.

"My son!" Guerlan flinched. "Having been offered the sacred honor of entering the Inner Circle, you failed to understand your first test of the lesser mysteries . . . all this . . . this pitiful show of human frailty and weakness, this odious travesty on the sins of the flesh, was staged to test you. And you." A world of sadness seemed to darken His Benevolence's voice, "and you condemned us! Instead of seeing it as a mere test, and valuing it for what it was worth, you believed that we were such monsters of hypocrisy as to entertain such lives." He wagged his head from side to side in inexpressible disappointment and grief. I would pardon you from the depths of my heart, but The Law is inexorable—I can but soften the harshness of your retribution.

"And so, my son," he held up two fingers again, "you not only are barred from entering the sacred inner circle, but are demoted from scientist of the first, to that of the second order. There is one plastic center where a problem has not been solved. Achieve its solution and you will be promoted to your original place, and perhaps . . . perhaps as you grow older, you may again be considered for the priceless boon, the blessed destiny you have lost tonight."

A brooding sadness mantled the obese face, lending it dignity and a transitory greatness. The soft echoes of the august voice ceased, and Guerlan found himself being led by members of the Inner Circle Guard back to the atomo-plane that had brought him here from Plastica. He was too dazed to think, a vast, anguished feeling of defeat and shame filled his mind, the



words of His Benevolence whom he had dared to doubt, were etched in acid in his brain. But, deep in the recesses of his consciousness, something mocking, something not quite articulate, struggled to plant in his chaotic thoughts, the swiftly growing seeds of doubt.

Behind him, had he only been there to see and hear, a cataract of laughter had engulfed the great Hall, and His Benevolence, surrounded by his favorites and the most magnificently beautiful girls of the empire, shook in paroxysms of mocking laughter.

But Guerlan knew nothing of this. His muscles ached from the battle and his brain was awlirl. Once out in space again, he noted that a great storm was in progress.

Hurtling under guard through the stormy reaches of space, he idly watched through the plane's transparent dome how lightning danced a drunken saraband. But although Guerlan strove to re-direct his thoughts, the echoes of His Benevolence's voice were like a sunset gun in his brain—final, incontestable, a sentence to the obscurity of the Second Order, and problems . . . he had mentioned a specific problem. And Guerlan remembered with chill apprehension the sentence for failure to solve problems in the second order. Three failures brought a warning, five a probation and the sixth . . . final judgment.

The upper air of the First Level, reserved for the Scientists of the First Order, had the exhilarating quality of Burgundy. As far as Guerlan's eyes could reach, the opaline and prismatic domes of the First Level's exquisite structures extended in every direction. The light was soft and caressing, thanks to the illumination and climate conditioning of the mammoth Weather Stations. A soft, lilting melody reminiscent of the ancient ballets of another age of centuries past, was like a ripple of melodic laughter, enhancing a background of inaffable peace. But Guerlan knew how illusory all this was for him. Only enough time—a few hours to arrange his affairs and move to the Second Level had been granted him. A profound pang of regret was like a dull ache in his heart.

He had been trained from childhood to be a scientist of the First Order, his mental coordinates had warranted it. So

he had never seen any other level but the First. Vaguely he had heard of that Second level where spartan simplicity was a virtue, luxury-less, where toil was constant, and thinking—a dangerous luxury, except where work-problems were concerned. And the columbium steel band around his young heart seemed to constrict more and more. Quickly he finished packing his personal possessions. Nothing else was allowed him—a sentence of demotion entailed complete personal loss.

## II

**"IN TWENTY-SEVEN seconds,"** an impassive voice vaguely reminiscent, predicted from the inter-connecting catwalk above, "the vat will burst, flooding the safety moat with acid."

The marvelous tonal quality was startling, for in its depths there was no emotional content—almost as if it were a sexless voice prophesying the most natural thing in the world.

With a swift movement that sent the muscles rippling along a Leander-like torso, Vyrl Guerlan abandoned the precision tool with which he had tackled a gigantic refractory coupling. Gleaming with perspiration, his square-cut mouth compressed into a line of fury, he gazed up at the speaker and wondered where he'd heard that voice before. Above him rose the titanic vat of processing acid, that treated the materials and converted them into gelatinous masses in the first process.

"I was a First Order Scientist, I'm now an Analyst," Guerlan said brusquely. "Nothing in my tests indicates such an accident." But the whining crescendo of the vat's machinery was threnody in major and minor warning of sudden, devastating trouble, as its originally smooth purr changed to a cacophony of sound.

"Twelve seconds!" Came the placid voice in reply. "Care to test *my* prediction?"

For an answer Guerlan scrambled up the hetero-plastic ladder to the upper catwalk with the agility of dread, his mane of blue-black hair tangled and dishevelled, his face white and strained.

Guerlan towered beside the fragile figure of the scientist, whose wasp-like waist and marvelously slender hands gave him



an elfin quality in comparison with Vyril's streamlined strength. For an instant Guerlan felt an overpowering desire to seize the delicate body in his own great hands and break it in two. But the luminous violet eyes on the abnormally lovely face, appraising him now as if he were a particularly obnoxious specimen, held him in check with their utterly calm detachment. It was then he remembered where he'd last heard those impersonal tones, that sexless voice that seemed devoid of all emotion.

"Why . . . you're the scientist of the golden mask when I was at the . . ." but a cool hand was suddenly pressed against his lips. A vague fragrance as of Venusian jasmines was in Guerlan's nostrils and before he could say any more, a livid crack appeared down the length of the vat, growing swiftly until the vat where Guerlan had been working on the defective coupling, split into two halves with a prodigious hiss, like an apple cloven in two.

A cataract of spuming acid flooded into the safety moat, while hundreds of analysts and technicians came scrambling up the opaque hetero-plastic ladders that surpassed columbium steel in tensile strength and cycle-endurance for unlike metal, there was no fatigue factor. A babel of voices rose above the broken hum of the machinery and the swirling hiss of the released acid. Intolerable fumes taxing the conditioners in the safety towers, burned the membranes of their nostrils and mouths as they gasped for air.

And, above the hum of the machinery, the growing turmoil of panic-stricken technicians and tumult of excited voices, rose the crystalline tones of the slender scientist once more:

*"Vat 66 explodes in twelve minutes!"*

A desperate look—the look of a trapped animal glazed Guerlan's green eyes. If this was true, it was the end for him.

"The organic acid vat! . . . But, it's impossible!" He gasped. Yet, inwardly, even as he denied the possibility, he knew with soul-wrenching dread, and the certitude of a *perceptive* that it was true.

But he didn't have time to think, to plan a solution of the problem, for already the outpouring technicians were sweeping

him onward in a desperate exodus toward the multiple conveyors that reached every section and floor of the titanic structure that was known as Plastic No. 15. Once as he was being pushed forward by the press of horrified analysts, synthetizers, selectors, graders and all the technical complement of the Second Order who actually transformed all foods, materials, minerals and in fact everything produced in Neptune, he glimpsed the calm features of the scientist he had first seen at the Feast of the Jewels in the City of the Sphere, and it seemed to him there was a hint of pity in the violet eyes.

Guerlan's face was white as *Jadite* as he roared orders in an effort to stem the maddened flood of men. He exhorted them to don their masks of cristo-plast and try to hold back the expected explosion, but no one paid any attention; it was doubtful if they even understood him in their growing horror of the dread, corrosive acid that converted organic matter into a secret formula that none but the Scientists of the Inner Circle were permitted to know anything about. They never saw the final product under the penalty of death.

AT LAST they debouched into the conveyors, and Guerlan, among a group of others, was taken to the Dispersors—platforms where the ultra-sensitive dispersal machines sensitized to the vibrations of their individual plastic wrist-band of rank, unerringly sent them to their proper levels.

Guerlan's generous mouth was compressed into a pale scimitar. His odd, slanting green eyes with long dark lashes, were almost black with rebellious fury. Suddenly he was shunted into a special conveyor and a platform where the conveyors to the inner corridors revolved.

"They already know!" He exclaimed bitterly. And he was not wrong. For presently a plastic arm the color and texture of aluminum, but incredibly stronger gathered him in and gently pushed him into an alcove that immediately became hermetically sealed the very moment he had entered. Guerlan saw that he was in an Efficiency Cubicle where technicians were periodically tested. Before him stood a towering Neuro-graph entirely fashioned of several types of plastics including crys-

tallite, as transparent as its namesake. It was an invention so complicated that it resembled nothing so much as a multiplication of tesseracts. Presently it became activated by Guerlan's mental frequency, and one of its slender rods moved forward silently.

A magnetic current went through the analyst and held him rigid, while another rod clamped a plastic helmet over the young man's head. For several seconds the almost inaudible sighing of the complex machinery was the only thing that disturbed the silence. Then, in precise, clipped tones an uncannily human voice began in sonorous tones to summarize his mental and physical coordinates:

"Efficiency totally neutralized by intense mental stress. Subject suffering from psycho-atavistic retrogression. Paranoid tendencies with delusions of persecution. Immediate fear of death . . . intense."

THERE was a pause in which Guerlan had time to remember how many times he had attended councils with other Scientists of the First Order, when the readings of the Master Neuro-graph on the First Level from which he'd been ejected, had been tabulated from the readings of the various neuro-graphs in the Plastic Centers and transmitted to the Council of the Inner Circle in the City of the Sphere. Guerlan, his eyes flaming, his face mutinous, awaited for the recommendation. It was not long in coming.

"Report to Psychiatry III for amnesiac treatment for removal of *superfluous* knowledge. Recommendation: *Reclassify for Level III.*"

"Damn them!" The desperate rebellion of a man condemned to worse than death rose from his heart as the magnetic rod freed him and the helmet was removed from his head.

He began to circle the cubicle like a trapped animal. "Level III!" He wailed inwardly. The Level of the Automats conditioned to slave-labor, dwelling in semi-darkness and squalor, on a diet restricted to barest essentials of energy units, until finally the Blessed Sleep claimed him—whatever that was, he shuddered. He'd had six failures in his section—Plastic No. 15, and six meant the ultimate sentence. There was no trial, no jury, no

opportunity even of explaining or seeking in a rational manner the reason for those ghastly explosions. Inexorably, the Law was final. But who was *The Law*? From the high Level of a First Order Scientist engaged in scientific work that had resulted in the miraculous array of plastics that had made their civilization a thing of undreamed of power and wealth, he was cast without recourse to the Level of Darkness—memory-less, reflex-conditioned, practically mindless except for slavish toil and animal needs.

Little had he dreamed, even when a Scientist of the First Order, that there existed such stupendous extremes as the fantastic splendor of the City of the Sphere, and the hellish misery of Level III. The Neuro-graph was speaking again in the sonorous, purple period that made his hackles rise.

"Analyst Guerlan," it intoned and paused impressively. "You have failed in your *Allotment*. Six accidents have destroyed enormous wealth and caused inexcusable damage. You had not less than five previous repetitions of the same type of accident to study and find a solution to the problem . . . a problem given you because of your blasphemous attitude toward the Inner Circle. The sixth explosion was your epitaph. Retribution is The Law.

"You will be immediately conditioned for Level III. Amnesiac Treatment will be administered to save needless suffering—we are merciful—a robot-proctor will guide you henceforth through the various stages. A Protector has spoken." The icy voice was silent.

Guerlan wondered which Protector had passed sentence. The hum of the machine told of coordinators falling into place as his mental and psychic state was recorded, the amount of energy of his metabolism checked and the time potential of his servitude unerringly estimated. A livid glow enveloped the strange instrument, and then, silently, a part of the seemingly blank wall behind him slid aside for a robot-proctor's entrance.

Guerlan knew that the inexorable sentence had been transmitted by remote control through incredibly delicate processes to the machine before him. But who'd decided on the sentence, or why the reason for its harsh cruelty, he had

no way of knowing. He doubted if the elephantine Protector in Chief had bothered to pass it. But Guerlan had no time to dwell on this question, for the beryllastic robot-protor, its non-abradable crystallite eyes gleaming, had grasped him firmly by the elbow to lead him away.

It was then that Guerlan acted without preconceived plan. His magnificent chest arched as he sucked in air; then with a sinuous movement of vertiginous speed, he twisted free and swooping downwards at the same time he grasped the robot by its legs and then heaved with a muscle-wrenching effort, flinging the plastic man with shattering impact into the Neuro-graph. A dry, staccato rattle followed the rending crash. Part of the robot-protor protruded from what had been the machine's crystallite dome and fragments of delicate mechanism and scintillating shards of priceless *Jadite* showered on the plastic floor.

Instantly the cubicle was illuminated by a vivid, crimson fluorescence, while the opening in the wall began rapidly to close. But Vyrl Guerlan was already speeding toward the closing aperture. Instantly he was through, seconds later only a blank wall showed where an opening had been. A series of alarms in coordinated prismatic flashes flared in every direction, activating the Safety Machines. Long, crane-like alumi-plastic arms extended from ramps and conveyor-heads to trap him; all efficiency cubicles became hermetically sealed cells, and over all, a shrill maddening whine rose in fiendish wail, insistent, nerve-shattering.

Guerlan knew death was at his heels. He dodged the gasping arms and magnetitic traps, straining his extra-sensory perception to its fullest power without slowing down the killing pace he maintained. Still he wondered how long he could last against the diabolical ingenuity of the Inner Circle. If he only had some human to go up against, with atomo-pistols, or the more devastating supernal fire of the electronic flash, forbidden to all but the Inner Circle Scientist—or even the primitive swords and rapiers used to hunt Irreconcilables in Neptune's vast forests. But machines! Soulless, cold plastic machines! His capable hands clenched and unclenched as he flung himself toward the

ascending conveyor before him, his breath labored, his chest heaving.

"No, idiot . . . not that one!" There was an intense urgency in the crystalline voice that speared into his consciousness. Even before he turned to locate the speaker, he recognized the voice. Twice before in a moment of crisis he'd heard it.

"You!" Gerlan breathed explosively. He tensed himself to leap upon the fragile figure at the least movement. But once more the preternaturally calm gaze from the violet eyes held him in thrall.

"That conveyor was purposely set in motion to trap you . . . it leads to Phychiatry III where you would have been neutralized, Guerlan. Take the blue, lapiz-lazuli conveyor behind you to the right. Hurry! We've only seconds before the chamber is gassed!"

Suiting action to his words, the slender scientist dashed to the gleaming plastic conveyor that imitated in all its sapphirine perfection the blue glory of lapiz-lazuli. In an instant Guerlan was beside the scientist in a leap. He grasped the fragile shoulder with fingers that dug into rounded flesh.

"If this is a trap, you die with me," he said briefly.

"Your fingers," the scientist remarked impassively, "are like columbium steel. Suppose you await developments before indulging in atavistic impulses—besides, a real man offers no violence to a woman!"

"A woman . . . you?" Guerlan's dazed expression was ludicrous. "I thought you were one of those repugnantly beautiful 'Intermediates' the Inner Circle uses for intricate mental synthesis."

"Am I repugnantly beautiful?" the scientist asked in cold detachment, luminous violet eyes gazing inscrutably into the reddening features of the young analyst.

**G**UERLAN gazed at the exquisite face before him, and said laconically, "On the contrary." He was too confused for words just now.

"My name is Perlac," the girl scientist said without preamble. "Listen carefully. This conveyor happens to be the only one that leads to the aero-dome. All the rest have no exit, for although you do not know it, every rest period you are directed to exit-conveyors by magnetic coordinators

that act on impulses sent by Selectors. These selectors are attuned to the mental wave-length of the individual. No scientist, analyst or technician may leave a plastic center without being tested and their fitness for even limited temporary freedom established . . . *not even to rest!* That is why the direction of the conveyors is changed for every allotment period and no one is permitted to know which is the exit conveyor! Had you remained in City of the Sphere and joined the Inner Circle, you would have learned all this."

Guerlan stared at Perlac in incredulity. "But . . . where are the Selectors? I've never seen them!"

"Is that strange? They're in the walls, imbedded in the flooring beneath your feet . . . oh, in a thousand places! But we've no time for involved explanations just now. We're nearing the Aero-dome. Prepare for the worst; but if we can get to my plane, we'll be beyond capture."

"In a slow, propulsion type craft?" Guerlan asked unbelievably. "We'll be captured in minutes, if not blasted out of the Second Level by Robot-Proctors!"

**P**ERLAC turned and gazed into the young analyst's eyes; a gentle, slow smile illumined her features like a tardy dawn.

Suddenly they were at the vast platform that exited into the Aero-dome, but where the great section of wall should have slid aside, it remained blank and hermetically closed. It was a definite dead end.

Far below them a greenish opalescence began to rise in tenuous, billowing clouds, and the faint odor of new-mown hay came almost imperceptibly to their nostrils. From the bowels of the gigantic plant, robot-proctors began to debouch onto the blue conveyor in serried ranks, impervious to death. Guerlan gazed curiously at the girl scientist. "Looks like your plan has failed, Perlac. What I can't understand is why you've thrown your lot in with me. I'm condemned . . . first it was to Level II, then for six failures to the living death of Level III, and now that I have rebelled, I have no end but death. You must have known there were *six failures!*

"Yes, I knew . . . that's why I'm here." The unearthly voice was barely

a whisper. "Ever since the night you were at the Feast of the Jewels and you were appalled at the debauchery of the Inner Circle, you have been chosen. And my plan has not failed!" There was a world of conviction in the exquisite voice, yet she said it softly, very softly indeed.

Slowly Perlac raised her hand, and Guerlan saw it held a tiny, slender instrument the butt of which was a round ball concealed in the palm of her hand. It was the dreadful electronic-flash, and she calmly aimed it at the blank wall, playing it up and down its length. The seemingly impenetrable wall of toughest berylo-plastic parted from top to bottom under the supernal fire of the electronic-flash, as the electronic balance of the plastic's atomic structure was disrupted and literally dispersed into space. There was no flash, no explosion, nothing but a silent widening of the breach, until it was wide enough to permit Guerlan's herculean shoulders to squeeze through.

Nothing seemed to have issued from the instrument in Perlac's hand, no beam of force, no light—literally nothing, yet, the strongest material known to their civilization, surpassing even the heaviest columbium steel armor, had been riven in seconds.

Once out in the immense Aero-dome, the platform was filled with ships of every description under robot-proctor guard, from tiny electro-copters with retractible vanes, to a large, powerful cruiser reserved for Inspectors of the First Order. The moment Perlac and Guerlan came into view, the robot-proctors aimed their electro-pistols and atomo-pistols, but Perlac already had covered them with her electronic-flash and their plastic bodies disintegrated in seconds.

"The Cruiser!" Guerlan was exultant. "That's what we need, it has the speed and endurance, and perhaps we can get by the robot-guard at the outer gates of the shell, and reach the forests!"

"No," Perlac shook her gold-red mane, "we'll take my ship, no time to argue now . . . you'll see!" She was already running toward a blunt-looking four-seater of the electro-type usually reserved for scientists of the First Order who were not inspectors.

Guerlan hesitated exasperation written

in his face. To disdain a powerful cruiser for this slow-going, vulnerable craft was beyond his comprehension. But Perlac without slackening her stride made a peremptory motion with her slender hand and shouted: "Follow me! I've been right thus far; trust me, you fool!"

Behind them, through the breach in the wall a phalanx of robot-proctors was emerging, and wisps of green gas were beginning to reach the Aero-dome.

In giant strides Guerlan covered the distance to Perlac's plane and entered its cabin. The die was cast, after all he owed her his life in a way. But for her he would be in Psychiatry III right now.

HE HAD scarcely strapped himself, when the ordinary-looking craft shot forward in a dazzling burst of acceleration that pressed Guerlan back against the mulioned seat with almost paralyzing force. But even then his trained faculties noted the sheath of columbium with which the plane was completely lined, and his ears detected the unmistakable hum of powerful atomic engines. One glance at the complex instrument panel told him that here was a craft that was far more than it seemed to be.

But he'd scarcely time to begin to think order out of chaos, when a growing nausea born of the steadily increasing acceleration cleaved his tongue to his palate, and his lower jaw slowly twisted to one side.

Perlac, an immobile figurine of alabaster, eyes closed, seemed crushed against her seat. On and on the plane sped slanting upwards as if determined to crash the transparent barrier that separated them from the next level. And then as suddenly as it began, their terrific speed slackened and the plane levelled off. The intense agony Guerlan had momentarily felt dwindled and disappeared. He saw the girl manipulate what was evidently a robot control, setting it for a new direction and rate of speed, then lock it in place.

"Look downwards, Guerlan, there to our right," Perlac whispered

An umbrella of atomo-planes in all the sleek glory of deadly interceptors, spread below them in battle formation; behind them the immense plastic pylons that supported the next tier, and the crenelated superstructure of Level II, combined with

distance to dwarf them into toy-like dimensions. The semi-transparent roof of Level II was dangerously near, Guerlan saw, and the forest of pylons dead ahead that marked the center of their level was another fatal hazard. But Perlac manipulated the intricate controls with casual ease leaving the rate of speed and general direction to the robot-control, she merely made minute adjustments.

"We outdistanced them!" Guerlan was awed. That anything in the possession of even an Inner Circle scientist could outdistance the Pursuit Fleet of the Protector in Chief was unimaginable.

"This spacer's something His Benevolence would give the Diadem Jewel for—or rather for the secret of its construction!" The girl laughed softly. "It's atomic, of course, but a variation based on a principle that goes beyond Terran equations."

Guerlan gazed wonderingly at the exquisite features of the fragile girl-scientist, marveling at the incredible courage of this puzzling being who unaccountably had chosen to throw in her lot with his own.

"Perlac," Guerlan spoke thoughtfully. "I'm afraid today has been something of a mystery. From what I've seen you do to that Aero-dome wall, the inexplicable accidents of the acid vats were undoubtedly your doing. Yet, you've saved my life and in so doing forfeited your own. Why? What interest can you possibly have in a doomed life such as mine?"

The girl smiled slowly, ineffably, in a mixture of melancholy sweetness and inexpressable sadness. She turned her golden head slightly and when she spoke her voice had sombre overtones rich with emotion.

"Do you know what is piped into the so-called organic vats, Guerlan? No, you wouldn't know. Plants, you thought, beasts and cattle and dead flesh. . . . Dead, yes. The murdered bodies of human beings, such as *you* would have been!"

All Guerlan's rigid training rose in protest at the charge against the Protector in Chief. It could not be! There could be no murder in Plastica, duels yes, honorable combat between men . . . but murder! He acknowledged that the Laws of Plastic, Inc., were ruthless and harsh, and the Inner Circle had become lax in their supervision,

until Plastics, Inc., had become an octopus. But to imply that His Benevolence would countenance cold-blooded murder . . . every fiber of his being revolted from such a charge.

And then he remembered the Feast of the Jewels, and the travesty of justice in his case, and he was silenced.

"His Benevolence and the Inner Circle are Plastics, Inc." Perlac continued imperturbably as if reading his thoughts. "Don't argue now, strap yourself and prepare for an orbital fall, we'll wheel in direct ratio with the rotation of the planet then dive in a concentric spiral that will become tighter and tighter until we reach our objective. It is the only way we can elude the robot-proctor patrol. . . . Look, they are climbing already. The plane's robot control is set and timed—it will take us there. No human being can possibly retain consciousness to guide the plane in such a maneuver," she explained, pale as alabaster.

**B**EFORE Vyril Guerlan had time to do else but tighten the broad straps and lean back against the mullioned seat, the girl had touched a series of knobs. Suddenly the craft began to wheel with meteoric speed, then dived with a violence that sent the landscape spinning into a fantastic pattern that quickly blurred. Guerlan felt as if the very marrow in his bones had liquefied, an intolerable pain lanced at the back of his brain like an atomic needle, and his face was contorted into a spasmodic grimace he was unable to control. He tried to close his eyes but couldn't, tried to shout and suddenly plummeted into an abyss.

They were diving downward into the outskirts of the immense city, down a secret inter-communicating passage that connected the various levels, past the third, fourth and finally into a yawning chasm where all was darkness. The hurtling craft sped on unerringly as if drawn by a magnetic beam.

When Guerlan finally awoke, he found himself in intense darkness. Only his labored breath disturbed the silence. Motionless, his body a living pain, he tried to adjust his thoughts and piece together the jig-saw puzzle of the last few hours. Groping into his tunic he brought out an atomo-torch. By its discreet illumination,

he saw that the girl was quivering like a being in torture. Gently he massaged her temples and the base of her neck then her soft, white throat; with infinite care he opened her mouth and inserted a pellet of *alphaline* to stimulate her heart, then stroked the gleaming red-gold hair back from her forehead until the girl showed signs of coming to.

"Have you any stimulants aboard?" he asked her, when Perlac opened her eyes. "I feel drained, but that's nothing to what you must feel, Perlac!"

She gave him a pallid smile. "There," she pointed weakly, "to the left of the instrument panel."

Guerlan pressed the combination lock and found in the compartment a full kit of surgical instruments and bandages in a superb *Jadite* case. A priceless flask of *Sapphirac* filled with sterile water, and, to his intense surprise, a Platino-plastic bottle, encrusted with tourmalines more brilliant than emeralds and filled with the utterly proscribed *Sulfalixir*!

"That . . . that's it," Perlac gasped and reached for the bottle in Guerlan's hand.

"But, it's deadly!" Guerlan was aghast. "How can you risk addiction to that dreadful drug?"

"You're a victim of conditioning." Even as weak as she felt, Perlac managed a low laugh, "*Sulfalixir* is a miracle drug—not what you've been taught to believe." She drank sparingly and offered him the bottle, but Guerlan drew back in categorical refusal. "As you wish. Now we must leave the plane."

"But where in ten thousand Hellacoriums are we?" Guerlan's voice was mutinous. "I've been a pawn in a game ever since I went to the sphere and blasphemed, since you burst the acid vat and exploded Organic 66! By Neptune's Moon I'll be dissolved if I stir another step without knowing what this is all about!" His green eyes were wide and gleaming, his handsome face set in rigid lines.

"All right, atavism! You're on Level Five, and you're going to a meeting. I want you to appraise what the Amnesiac treatment does to human beings, and how the condemned live on this level. The third level is sheer luxury compared to this. You Scientists of the First Level

have no conception of what happens on the third, fourth and fifth levels, where life ceases to be even existence and becomes. . . ." But words failed her, and she fell back against her mullioned seat breathing heavily. After a pause she asked: "Will you come now?"

"No," Guerlan grinned. "I'll lead the way. It was an experience seeing you in a fury; blessed if I thought anything could disturb you!" He stood up and pressed the plane's dome release and the stale, fetid air of the nether regions of the city swept in. Only the conditioners broke the silence with their constantly iterated and reiterated subconscious homily of simple, child-like thought-patterns for the amnesiacs. It was an eternal reiteration of the "Conditioning Controls" which no amnesiac could ever escape, except at intervals when the amnesiac counter-reaction set in as their metabolism building up a resistance to the administered drug rendered them impervious and they regained a measure of their former memories as consciousness returned. That was the period of danger, when they were at the verge of any madness, in their utter hopelessness. Deliberately they invited death. But here in these vast catacombs, their end was but a detail, and the organic vats eventually received them.

"Listen!" It was Perlac's voice indistinct with indignation, "listen to the 'conditioners,' Guerlan!"

"Sleep . . . sleep now. Deep, dreamless sleep . . . for the conservation of your energy is your noblest effort . . . so you may conserve your strength for work . . . work . . . you must, you absolutely must *Achieve* . . . so that you may fulfill your maximum allotment . . . maximum . . . and be rewarded. . . . Sleep . . . sleep. . . ."

Endlessly the fiendish mosaic of lies and psychological half-truths went on and on, imbedding itself in the violated minds that slept in the stupor of the utterly exhausted.

Guerlan shivered. A malefic aura of death and torture seemed woven into the matrix of darkness that surrounded them. The very odor of death was in their nostrils as they left the atomo-plane by the light of his torch and faced the narrow, tortuous thoroughfare that wended its way

from the wide circle where the plane had come to rest.

Perlac pressed close to him and her slender hand gripped his arm. There were no robot-proctors in sight, none were needed here where no amnesiac ever left alive. No victims were in sight, for the day workers rested and the nocturnal shift toiled in their prisoning workrooms. Behind them, in front of them, from every side, the Conditioners continued their endless chant: "Loyalty . . . obedience . . . unquestioningly you must achieve . . . for our glorious State."

### III

IN THE abysmal darkness their atomo-torch was a pool of light that advanced before them. But Perlac unerringly went directly to a building whose front seemed to be an impenetrable, blank wall. She pressed a hidden mechanism near the far corner of the structure, and presently a door slid aside, revealing a passage-way to the beam of the torch. Once within, Guerlan became aware it was some sort of dormitory, for stretched on rows of cots made of cheap plastic, the amnesiacs slept in their leaden tunics. These were the pitchblende workers who had but a brief life-period, due to the radiations.

In another corridor slept the brown-tunics, the organic-matter workers, blood-stained from their gruesome labors, their stertorous breathing witness to their exhaustion. Perlac kept on rapidly going from corridor to corridor until she stopped at a door leading to the cellar, opening it, she scrambled down a plastic ladder, followed by Guerlan, and finally into a sub-cellar gallery that wound tortuously into the very bowels of Neptune.

Here were the sightless wrecks who lived in eternal darkness and whose task was to tend the machinery that air-conditioned and kept reasonably warm the dreadful Fifth Level. Some seemed strangely twisted and had the loathsome whiteness of fungi, others mindlessly tottered by like automatons. Guerlan drew aside in a mixture of nausea and profound pity. A welling, terrible anger strove to rise within him at the sight of these horrors that went by like Dantesque shadows of the damned.

At last Perlac stopped and made six



curious rasping sounds at a heavy rocky section of the dripping wall.

As if in a nightmare, Guerlan saw part of the stone surface pivot silently inward, and before them was another passage-way. But this one was immaculately clean, completely sheathed in neutral grey heteroplastic, and the aura-lumes diffused a gentle light that was soft and yet perfectly measured. The murmur of voices reached them, and the air was fresh and exhilarating after the fetid, miasmatic air of the Fifth Level and the sub-cellars.

"We have arrived, Guerlan!" Perlac gazed at the young scientist, as if essaying to appraise his reactions to what he'd seen en route. "You're going to meet the leaders of the Irreconcilables . . . not those poor creatures of the forests and jungles, but the real 'underground' that has but one purpose—Freedom from the Protectors. Now, do you understand why you were brought here?"

Guerlan nodded in silence. His face was impassive, but the odd, slanting green eyes were burning with lambent fires and his powerful hands were knotted.

**W**ITHIN seconds the passageway led them to an immense cavern—on Terra it would have been unthinkable, but in keeping with Neptune's bulk, the cavern was a gargantuan retreat. Stupendous stalactites pending from the ceiling defied adjectives, their bases lost in darkness. The walls as far as the eye could reach were sheathed in a gleaming plastic new to Guerlan. The floor, too, was resilient plastic, smooth and perfectly laid, as if an army of workmen and machines had labored on its perfection, which indeed they had. Buildings clustered at the far distant end, like a miniature city; and in the very center of the vast grotto, surrounded by an army of scientists and technicians, an atomo-Spacer, super-armored and longer than any Guerlan had ever seen, rested in its cradle in all its sleek, shining glory.

Testing and repair machines were scattered around the great subterranean chamber, driven by technicians and co-ordinators who worked feverishly, silently, as if engaged in a life-and-death race with time.

Toward the left, where the cavern extended into another vast grotto, an

ordine-plastic building caught Guerlan's eye because of the fact that it was ordine. That plastic was used only where need for staunchest material existed. Ordine, an adaptation of the plastic mineral principle, could withstand a siege—was practically indestructible, and Guerlan wondered what it housed. Perlac sensed his curiosity and gazed in turn at the great structure. Her eyes brooding and dark with an emotion he could not fathom slowly filled with tears.

"That's the psycho-clinic," she told him. "We try to neutralize the amnesiac treatment, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Under certain conditions, it can be neutralized, but remember the amnesiac treatment here on Level Five is an intensification of the treatment applied on Levels Three and Four. . . . They're practically lost when they come here, but our work in the higher levels is too dangerous to be carried out in large numbers. Care to go in and watch the therapy used?"

"Yes." Guerlan's laconic reply was an index of his mental state. Words came with difficulty in the face of this ghastly drama that had suddenly unfolded before his eyes.

He wondered about the other cities, Perdura, and Telluria and semi-tropical Columbia, with its warm springs and teeming soil where the most exquisite delicacies for the Inner Council, and to a lesser extent the First Order were grown. Wondered if they, too, were condemned to this inhuman rule of death and oppression.

Perlac made a signal to one of the technicians, and a two-seater "Treader" with its revolving belt instead of wheels moved out from among the parked vehicles. But before Guerlan and Perlac could enter the swift surface car, a dull roar that seemed to shake the very foundations of the cavern paralyzed all movement, as if in a slow motion-picture of ancient days, a tremendous section of the cavern wall fell in a shower of rock and plastic, and through the gaping breach, rank upon serried rank of "Intermediates" poured through. They wore the Inner Council's conventional plastic armor, vividly scarlet, with tight-fitting helmets of cristo-plast. Silently they deployed with grim precision and aimed their atomo-rifles.

But if they had expected to wreak

havoc aided by the element of surprise, they were mistaken. Technicians and scientists working on the super-spacer, instantly entered the armored ship, while the army of mechanics, graders, coordinators and workmen, who labored on treaders and tended the mechanical appliances and repair machines, took cover in and behind their charges.

For a second Guerlan had been frozen in his tracks. The thought that flashed into his mind was one of exultation instead of despair. Here was an enemy he could really fight. All the pent-up fury, the terrible anger of a decent man who has had all his beliefs swept away in a matter of hours, who had seen depths of human degradation he had never dreamed possible, was like a bath of cold fire that left him calm, determined and with one desire . . . to exterminate.

As if she were a doll, Guerlan swept Perlac beside the armored "Treader" and without preamble snatched the Electro-Flash the girl wore at her waist. "Keep covered. Let me do the fighting!" He exclaimed, impervious to her outraged stare. Carefully he aimed at the foremost leader of the Intermediates, and the obscenely beautiful, sexless warrior, crumpled as part of him instantly dissolved. A vast, coruscating sheet of blue, atomic fire swept forward from the deadly atomo-rifles of the invaders, and vehicles, technicians, and several machines, became a welter of smoking flesh and melting metal.

It was then the super-spacer went into action with its two frontal atomo-guns, the thunderous echoes vibrated with tympani-shattering force, and Guerlan saw a phalanx of Intermediates vanish as if they were leaves in a wind.

UNAWARE of doing so, Guerlan was bellowing exultantly, as he played the Electro-Flash horizontally across another phalanx that had succeeded in gaining the proximity of the Spacer. They had seen him now, and the survivors aimed their atomo-rifles at the treader that sheltered them from the blue fire. But before they could bring their fire into focus, the supernal fire of the electro-flash had decimated them. A few managed to direct the stream of atomic fire on the treader,

however, and half of it was a molten mass while the rest was already cherry red and the heat becoming unendurable.

Electro-rifles, atomo-pistols, the guns from the giant spacer and a few electro-flash weapons were concentrated on the Intermediates who by sheer force of numbers had gained the center of the Cave.

And then they were met by a wall of flesh. From the buildings at the further end and from every vehicle and machine a wall of humanity surged forward, firing ceaselessly, hacking with long-swords and poniards; and the carnage under the brilliant plastilumes was without quarter . . . to the death. Slowly, inch by inch, the Intermediates were driven back. Scores had died, and the losses among the defenders were appalling; it seemed as if a Pyrrhic victory was to be the end. And then, like creatures from a nightmare, released from depths of living hell, a motley, ragged, maddened multitude came shrieking, shouting and hurling imprecations from the chaste building Perlac had called the Psycho-clinic. Like avenging furies, they flung themselves at the hard-pressed Intermediates. Wounds did not stop them; atomic-fire left gaping holes in their ranks, around which the survivors raced on. Impervious to pain, and welcoming death, these travesties of human beings fought with the savagery of madness.

They were the Amnesiacs. Deprived of the hypnotic drug, partly in possession of their faculties and their memories, they remembered! And remembering, they paid back for the torture of a lifetime!

Assailed from every side, the crack Inner Circle battalion of Intermediates split into two halves and strove to meet both fronts. But Guerlan with a cry that would have done credit to a Venusian *Calamar*, snatched the sword from a fallen technician and raced to where the Amnesiacs were tangled in a death struggle. With the electro-flash in his left hand, he stabbed and hacked at exposed limbs and through shattered cristo-plast. And the battle turned slowly, increasing in tempo until it was a rout that pressed the remaining Intermediates into a demoralized race of life. But they were not to escape. Out of all control, all semblance of humanity now, the remaining Amnesiacs were a screaming horror that pursued the quarry

and pulled it down like the giant *Calamar* of Venus pulls down its prey in the virgin forests, until only the moaning wounded and the dead remained on the blood-drenched plastic flooring of the titanic grotto.

Guerlan never knew when the battle was finally over. His tunic was a crimson stain from top to bottom; a long slash across his ribs to the center of his powerful chest, had left a shallow gash that dripped a slow gout of blood. His shoulder was seared by a slanting atomic-blast that would have taken half of him had it come any nearer. He became aware of the ghastly silence only when Perlac's marvelously slender hand was pressed to his cheek, and her melodious voice was repeating: "Guerlan, Guerlan, my dear!" He turned and saw her eyes were aswim with unshed tears.

He took her hand in his powerful ones without a word, and held it caressingly, while all about them was a shambles of death and wreckage.

"My initiation," he said slowly, huskily, with a hint of a smile in his long, green eyes.

"I knew I was not wrong in choosing you," Perlac replied and bravely essayed a smile, too; but she had reached the end of her physical resources and with a whispered, "Oh, my dear," she wilted unconscious in his arms.

Guerlan lifted her fragile form as if she were a precious doll and walked toward the super-spacer; a group of scientists who had emerged from its interior, watched his approach with a hint of anxiety as they motioned for him to hurry. Among them, a tall, elderly scientist of the second order, whose white mane was like an aureole about the pale, sharp-featured face, hurried forward as if unable to contain himself.

"Is Perlac wounded?" He inquired with a world of worry in his voice. "Tell me, man! Hurry!"

"Peace," Guerlan answered wearily. "She's not harmed, just fainted . . . the miracle is that she's been able to stand as much as she has. Have you restoratives?"

"Bring her into the plane, we have everything needed, stranger. Praised be the Ultimate Power she has not been harmed!" Then he drew himself erect as he and

Guerlan came abreast of each other, and said with quiet dignity:

"I am Paulan, ex-scientist of the first order, now Leader of the Underground. I saw you fight with us. Welcome, my son." His eyes were as clear and as blue as a child's, but the fires of a profound intellect shone from their depths.

"THE TIME," Guerlan was speaking, "is now, not at some supposedly psychological moment logically thought by the Board. I'm a new member, true, but it is evident the Inner Circle has been aware of your activities for some time, or they wouldn't have sent such a well-armed, ultra-trained battalion of Intermediates. The time to strike is now! Unless you want to await an attack in such force that this cavern will become a hecatomb."

"We are already harassing them in every city," Paulan said thoughtfully. "Vats are exploding regularly, amnesiacs are being restored to usefulness and our forces are increasing day by day. What more would you propose, my son, an attack on the city of the sphere?"

All eyes in the heavily guarded and armed Board meeting room were upon the young scientist. At the head of the long, exquisite Platino-plastic table sat Paulan, the leader, and at his right sat Perlac. All down the length of the great table, scientists of the first and second orders, analysts, technicians, and even members of the lower strata chosen for their value to the movement, sat to consider the crisis. Their underground movement was in the open now, and they could expect nothing but extermination at the hands of the Inner Circle.

"That would be madness at present," spoke a tiny Venusian, not more than four and a half feet tall, wrapped in his long, scarlet wings that joined to the sides of his fragile body, reached from wrists to his ankles. "Although," he grinned impishly, "I would like to take a crack at them in their holy of holies!"

Morluc, the Martian, snorted.

"Mars will help, but we must have a share of the machinery and plastics of Neptune . . . a *preferred* share," he emphasized gazing disdainfully at the Venusian member.

"Equal shares!" the latter snapped dryly.

"Mars' help is still to be seen, as your excellence is aware!" The Venusian drove his point home with emphatic gestures.

"We've offered our fleet!" Morluc, the Martian member, said stiffly. "Can any more be asked?"

Carladin, the Venusian, shrugged his shoulders. "We don't offer, Morluc, we've *delivered* one hundred electro-flash pistols, and it took genius to analyze and copy the design and manufacture them secretly, not to speak of smuggling them here!"

"Peace!" Paulan thundered. "Scientist Guerlan is unable to reply to my question!"

Both the Martian and the Venusian members were silent, although they still glared at each other across the table. The rivalry of Venus and Mars was legendary and had endured for centuries. Little eddies of whispers and conversation, came to a standstill, and once more their eyes were turned expectantly toward Guerlan who stood up from his seat toward the foot of the table.

"I have a plan," he stated quietly. His bandaged shoulder and chest were living aches, and breathing was difficult, but a great enthusiasm transfigured his features until with eyes alight with the fire of a great purpose, he seemed boyish for all his magnificent height and musculature.

"Unless we divert the power of the Inner Circle . . . I say *divert*, but decisively, we're doomed. Any army we can muster would be met by the legions of fanatical Intermediates who from pre-birth are conditioned and scientifically bred for battle. An Intermediate's glandular structure has been modified to heighten unbelievably the combative instinct. If atomo-rifles and atomic fire don't crush us, they'll start using electro-flash. Their fleet is legion, and they have at their command the Scientists of the First Order, as deluded as I was, not to speak of the Neophytes of the Inner Circle. Don't forget that the City of the Sphere has two million scientists, not counting the women.

"But, if we divert their Intermediates, cut off their sources of supply, and breed revolt *on every tier, in every city*, their forces will be divided, and we will have a chance to win. When I was a child, I had access to the ancient records which were translated by my father for the Inner Circle. Among them I came upon a parch-

ment so ancient that it was ready to crumble into dust. After it had been treated for preservation, I read the translation made from that forgotten language by my father; it was about a great city that once ruled most of Terra, and their motto was—Divide and Rule. And that," Guerlan paused, "is my plan."

He sat down a little abashed when he realized the vehemence with which he had been talking. His eyes sought Perlac's, and a wave of color suffused his face as he saw the open admiration in the girl's eyes.

"Magnificent, if it works," Carladin said with a satirical smile in that husky voice of his that seemed too big for so small a body. "But, my friend, who is going to 'Muzzle the Calamar'? In other words, who is going to breed revolt in every city and tier . . . and, above all, just how?"

"My son, you can't rouse emotions in amnesiacs—they haven't any, even in the higher levels where the treatment is mild. As for the scientists of the Second Order—they'd consider revolt blasphemy, not to speak of the First Order. Unless you have a complete, thought-out plan, I'm afraid you've been carried away by your own enthusiasm," Paulan said very gently.

"My plan is complete, Paulan. And I have work for both Venus and Mars. I'm sure they would like to share in our victory. Listen!"

#### IV

IT WAS NOT only a garden of vast dimensions, it was an Eden riotous with the most exquisite blooms of Venus, and myriad bright-plumaged birds that sang with a complete abandon that bespoke no instinct of fear, for they were sacred. In the near distance, the rose and white crystoplast temple of the Virgins of the Sacred Flame was a triumph in architecture, for here within the inviolate garden of His Benevolence was the sacred shrine.

A muted orchestra was playing, hidden in the foliage, and the incredible re-creation of sunlight drew an iridescent aureole from the alabaster fountain that constantly renewed a miniature lake in the center of the garden.

Rose-colored *Garzas* and sparkling, blue azurines searched for tid-bits in the shallows, while a flight of *Albas*, the snowy-

white nightingales of the Volcanic Valley, swept overhead in an ecstasy of song. It was idyllic, a spot instinct with peace under the soft hand of beauty.

But near the shore of the small lake, idly moving his hand in the cool waters, while with the other he stuffed roasted doves into the red, cruel mouth, His Benevolence listened in ominous silence as the Chief of the Intermediates made his report. Standing behind the gargantuan corpulence of the 'Protector in Chief', Bejamel listened, too, and his gargoyle's features slowly registered a rising fear that whitened his repulsive face. It was incredible! Had anyone else dared to make such a report, he would have instantly banished him or her to the 'Blessed Sleep.' But the Intermediates, be they either of the warrior class, and trained to fight to the death, or of the scientist category, were cold, unemotional beings whose precision could not be questioned. As for their loyalty—that was under control, for their only *imperative* was Vanadol, reacting on them curiously instead of drugging them to sleep—compensating them for their sexlessness with an unearthly ecstasy. And Vanadol was under absolute Inner Circle control . . . under Bejamel!

"Only three Intermediates escaped alive from the caverns under the fifth level?" Bejamel inquired incredulously in that magnificent voice that was a melody in itself.

"Silence!" There was nothing lovely in the harsh command of His Benevolence. "Bunglers! Should condemn you and your strategists to the Blessed Sleep, but the quota of jewels is filled. . . . What do you plan doing now? Or are you going to let those Irreconcilables become a cancer on the side of the empire?" His voice became indistinct as he stuffed golden nectarines into his mouth.

"Magnificence! If your Benevolence permits. . . ." Bejamel's attempt at a smile was a ludicrous failure. But the sulphuric stare he received for his pains, left him wordless and pale.

"Proceed!" His Benevolence nodded at the Intermediate. The pale yellow eyes were blazing.

"Our plans are to destroy the cavern immediately, and utilize our Intermediate Scientists to ferret out the dissenters for

disposal at your Effulgence's orders." The Chief of the Intermediates replied calmly, evenly, as if his life were not hanging by the thinnest thread. He bowed profoundly, and then stood erect, in all the glory of his golden tunic and platino-plastic helmet.

"Also, a flight of pursuit atomo-planes awaits disorders in every tier of every city, Your Benevolence!"

"Like over-fed blackbirds," His Benevolence observed scornfully. "They didn't prevent Guerlan and that unidentified companion of his from escaping! And that reminds me, Bejamel," his voice changed to a silken purr. "I thought you had checked the safety coordination of the plastic centers. Surely, with all the safeguards you reported installed, the machines supplied you by scientists, and the robot-proctor guard, not to speak of the selector-controlled tests of the workmen, I still fail to understand how Guerlan escaped retribution." His lips parted in a smile of sadistic pleasure, as Bejamel went green.

"**A**ND," His Benevolence held up a hand that flashed with a vortex of prismatic fire from the many jewels, "what has become of your daughter, Perlac? I seldom see her any more."

"Since Your Benevolence said that her hips were too narrow and her face too sharp, I banished her from your presence, Effulgence!"

"Well, bring her back!" He snapped in fury. "Sometimes I think you usurp my authority, Bejamel." His eyes narrowed speculatively, and the enmity he felt for the Minister of Justice because of the latter's silent opposition to allowing his daughter to become a Virgin of the Sacred Flame, smouldered within him.

Bejamel bowed profoundly, but a glint of savage rage shone in his eyes.

"Send the Virgins . . . let them sing!" His Benevolence commanded, "and convey my forgiveness to Estrella; she may enter the presence!"

"Your Benevolence's favorite will rejoice at the magnanimous decision!" Bejamel replied in a soft murmur that was sheer music. But the expression on his averted face belied his words.

He hurried away through the foliage of the Venusian Jasmine trees and

the tangles of fragrant Maravillas, until he came to the pavillion of white *Jadite*, so exquisitely planned that in its white simplicity it might have been an idealized Greek temple.

"Estrella," he called the moment that he entered. "Hurry, child!" And seeing her curled on a couch worth a respectable fortune, "*He* will see you . . . mind you, he's in a vile temper—as capricious as I've ever seen him. But evidently he has need of you. Soothe him from this evil mood, or we'll all suffer!" He paused out of breath.

Estrella uncoiled languorously from the Sapphirine couch and stood lightly swathed in filmiest draperies of spider silk, that revealed the distracting beauty of her limbs and full, firm breast. The large, brilliant dark eyes, shadowed by curling lashes were rebellious and scornful, and the flower-like red mouth mutinous. A cascade of pale gold hair tumbled curling about the marble shoulders, and sent gleaming tendrils to the satiny throat, encircled by a necklace of star-sapphires, rarest of all jewels because of the tremendous difficulties in creating the star in the depths of the jewel.

"Let *him* wait . . . I have had to wait too long!" she blazed.

"Sheesh! . . . even the walls have ears, Star of the Evening! And remember his saying: 'A favorite in disfavor is a jewel that has crystallized'. He means that literally; I couldn't bear to see you as a ruby in his finger ring."

Estrella paled, shrugged her shoulders and dashed out of the pavillion. Out in the garden, she was like a butterfly in the sunlight, a gorgeous creature that came to rest at His Benevolence's feet. A choir of Virgins sang softly and undulated with the rhythm of the music, while His Benevolence fondled Estrella with one hand and with the other ate.

Meanwhile, in the sumptuous Audience Chamber, a multitude of Protectors of the Inner Circle, Scientists of the First Order, the Directors of various cities, and even Intermediate Scientists moved restlessly, pacing up and down the imposing length of the chamber. Their faces were pale and anxious; some seemed distraught, rehearsing silently, over and over in their minds what they had to say.

But among themselves they barely spoke.

A careless word, flung in a moment of anxiety, might be the beginning of a fatal intrigue. They were taking no chances.

The dour, ascetic visaged Marvalli, Scientist of the Inner Circle and Chief of Columbia, seemed on the verge of nervous prostration. He wondered in anguish what would His Benevolence say when he learned that the warehouses filled with exquisite tropical and semi-tropical delicacies for his table and that of the Inner Circle, had been destroyed by a raging holocaust that had left nothing but blackened cinders, and that the priceless machinery for the Vibroponic farms, which speeded up the growth and maturity of exotic plants and fruits, and a multitude of legumes and vegetables, was a twisted, molten mass—he quaked inwardly and a cold sweat oozed out of his pores.

Vidal, Chief of Plastica had a harrowing report too. Vat after vat of processing acid had split in halves and flooded moats and safety levels until the acrid fumes made the Plastic Centers of his city untenable. Conveyors had been disrupted and even robot-proctors dissolved as if they'd been made of *papier-mache*. All his efforts at locating the source of these depredations were in vain. Meanwhile, the plastic industry in Plastica was paralyzed. That as bad as it was, however, could be remedied temporarily by the installation of more vats, but an amazing thing was that even the replacement vats had been found damaged beyond repair.

**B**UT of them all, Weiman, "The Butcher", as he was called, was the most distraught of all. Never in all the history of Perdura, his beloved Perdura, where the Neptunian *Bagazo* plant was processed into the drug for the amnesiac treatment, had such depredations been committed. A veritable nightmare of explosions had shattered the intricate machinery of the processors; the receiving vats of staunchest plastic had been found in shards and slivers, while the stores of the sacred drug had disappeared. An emergency order sent to the nurseries where the plants were grown obtained no response and investigation disclosed that the nurseries had been destroyed.

It was then he had ordered a search party to go into the semi-tropical forests far

up the valley in search of wild plants and they were met by a savage mob of Irreconcilables! But not the gravity-burdened, frightened Irreconcilables he had been used to hunt with lances and swords, but a grim, determined company of fighters armed with atomo-pistols and atomo-rifles who exterminated the searching party except one member, whom they sent back with the insolent warning: "Stay out of our land!"

The atmosphere of the Audience Chamber was electric. A wave of rebellion seemed to be sweeping the Empire.

When Bejamel, Minister of Justice, entered the Chamber, there was a concerted rush to meet him.

"Excellency, I request an audience!" And from another Chief of a City. "Nay, Excellency . . . Mine cannot wait, it's a catastrophe!" "I crave a hearing . . .! Your Excellency!" Pandemonium had broken loose in the chaste precincts of the Audience Hall.

"Peace!" Bejamel shouted above the tumult, and strove to present a calm exterior. But an icy fear constricted his throat, and his usually commanding tones of unearthly beauty failed him. Nevertheless he stemmed somewhat the rising confusion.

"You, Vidal!" Bejamel singled out the Inner Circle Scientist in charge of Plastica. "Your report."

"I demand Martial Rule, and sufficient troops to insure order," Vidal gasped. "Plastica's paralyzed. Most of the plastic-acid vats have been destroyed; conveyors in shambles and robot-proctors disintegrated. I know of only one weapon capable of shattering Columbium-Plastic and Bery-Plastic—and do it without a sound. These weapons are electro-flash, and assigned to the Inner Circle. When an Inner Circle Scientist loses the one assigned to him, he is under penalty to report it immediately. I can't conceive how these weapons could have fallen into the hands of whoever these depredators are, and in sufficient numbers to wreak such havoc in such a short time!"

"I didn't ask for a diagnosis, and least of all for a cure!" Bejamel said frigidly. "I asked for symptoms. Your report, Vidal!"

And Vidal gave it, freed from the fear His Benevolence's presence always inspired,

he gave it bitterly, in complete detail.

"And you Marvalli?" Bejamel's voice shook a little despite his efforts to control it. From Marvalli's expression he feared the worst.

"Columbia has been unable to provide its quota of special foods for forty-eight hours, and all its reserves have been destroyed." In a voice filled with foreboding, he told his story, wringing his hands from time to time, unconscious of doing it.

Weiman was next. He gave a minute account of depredations in Perdura. "And so," he finished in an anguished voice, "we not only have no Bagazo for the amnesiac treatment . . . we are unable to procure any, and even if we had it, the machinery is a shambles, Excellency!" His voice ended in a wail.

On and on the audience continued, each account adding to the seriousness of the situation. At last Bejamel rose. His face was inscrutable. "What a gargantuan indigestion His Benevolence is going to have today," he thought grimly.

"Remain!" He exclaimed peremptorily, and strode in the direction of the enchanted garden.

HE DIDN'T even pause to watch the gyrations and posturings of Virgins of the Sacred Flame. Brushing aside the tall Intermediates that stood guard over the recumbent form of His Benevolence, he bowed slightly, and in a cold, tight voice explained his mission.

"Your Benevolence," his voice never had been lovelier, "the empire is in open revolt. We are not facing isolated cases of vandalism. Nor the underground opposition of the Irreconcilables. This is a fiendishly planned and perfectly executed strategy of destruction. Unless we meet it with overwhelming force, we lose control of the empire!"

"Don't exaggerate, Bejamel!" His Benevolence snorted disdainfully. "A few vats have been shattered—others can be made. Bagazo has been destroyed . . . we'll get all we need from the forests, and later have our chemists synthesize the drug. Just issue the necessary orders, I can't be bothered now."

Bejamel's smile was feline, and feral lights gleamed in the eyes that gave him



such a gargoylish expression amidst his twisted features.

"No, Effulgence. This calls for a meeting of the Inner Circle. You may not know it, but hundreds of thousands of amnesiacs, now deprived of the drug, *remember!* Death to them is a boon, and before they die they will be sure to take as many of us as possible. And *they are being armed!*"

"Let a few thousand die!" He exclaimed heartlessly. "They'll pave my new Hall of Rubies!" But he knew now that Bejamel was not exaggerating. The great intellect of the evil ruler, had grasped the disastrous consequences of such a revolt, and instantly he acted.

"Very well, Bejamel. Call the Council. Hold all witnesses for the session. Meanwhile, mobilize all the Intermediates of the warrior order, and the Scientists of the first and second orders. Every Inner Circle Scientist who is still worthy of his rank, and all Inner Circle Neophytes to be in readiness. Make a survey of robot-proctors, and coordinate all available defenses. We can at least be ready at a moment's notice. And, find out how long our present stores of food will last . . . we should have enough for months! Think you can remember all this?" He purred mockingly.

"To hear your Benevolence is to obey!" Bejamel replied imperturbably. And left to carry out the orders. A little smile was at the corners of his mouth, and the feral light was still lambent in his strange green eyes.

He could hear His Benevolence's harsh tones as the latter told His Virgins: "Get out!" Only Estrella remained by the side of the obscene bulk. Bejamel pitied her.

ONCE back in the Audience Chamber, pandemonium broke loose, but with a peremptory wave of his hand and the words: "You will remain as witnesses for a full meeting of the Council tonight," Bejamel quelled them. He watched them file out with a speculative gaze. "When the sea's disturbed," he murmured softly, "creatures from the bottom rise to the top." Then he walked slowly to his own chambers, singing softly to himself, and it was as if the voice of an angel were issuing from the throat of a Gargoyle.

Only one thought worried him, and that was the protracted absence of Perlac. She

had been gone for days. Perhaps he had missed her in his preoccupation with duties of State, he thought. Bejamel shrugged his thin shoulders and sat down at a jewel-encrusted desk worthy of an Inner Circle Scientist ransom. Silently he began to write with an electro-stylus on a sheet of transparent plastic. Nothing showed.

It was to Gualdamar, whom to give the full plenitude of his titles was Chief Guardian of the City of the Flaming Sphere, The Leader of the Intermediate Warriors, Chief Strategist, and Scientist of the Inner Circle.

As Bejamel wrote, he thought with part of his mind of the many minor revolts that had occurred when the amnesiac treatment failed because of the defense against the drug that human metabolism built periodically, but nothing like this had ever happened in the annals of the Empire. Plastic Inc., as the Inner Circle taught the people to believe, was part of them, and they rose and fell together. It occurred to Bejamel that he was very old, it was indecent to thrust such a crisis on his fading intellect. The thought made his smile acidly. There was nothing decadent about that Machiavelian mind that enabled him to remain in power through decades of intrigues, pitfalls and traps, and lately, the growing enmity of his Benevolence because he would not allow Perlac to become a chattel of his Obese Effulgence in the Temple of the Sacred Flame.

He wondered if he would be able to weather this crisis. Still he wrote swiftly, invisibly on the transparent plastic, and as he did so, the thought of Venus, great in its first bloom of advanced civilization, of Europa, transmuted into an Eden by the courage of its Terrans and the strange unearthly science of the Panadurs. If all else failed, he could seek sanctuary in either one of these two planets. Mars repelled him, none of that grim land for his weary bones. But if he had to flee, he meant to flee alone with Perlac, and he had a score to settle before he went.

When he had finished, he pressed a button, and a robot-proctor entered noiselessly, received instruction and as quietly disappeared. Bejamel knew that his robot would deliver the message in person, nothing could take that plastic message from him short of destruction.

## V

"TONIGHT we attack!" Guerlan persisted uncompromisingly, but his eyes sought Perlac's and found confirmation in her swift smile. "I offer the counsel of daring—all or nothing!" A roar of approval greeted his words, the echoes dwindling down the series of subterranean caverns that formed a continental link in the bowels of Neptune and was used to shelter the army of scientists, technicians, analysts, coordinators, mechanics and workmen. They were now under Columbia's Fifth Level, and rising to the crysto-plast dome, each tier was now under the domination of the Irreconcilables.

But Paulan, the Commander in Chief, arose in all the dignity of his great age. He frowned in disapproval, sighing before he spoke.

"I fear too great an army has been assembled against us, *Plastica*, *Telluria*, *Perdura*, the eleven remaining cities will have to be conquered, and remember, since we captured *Columbia* with comparative ease while the Inner Circle's Army was engaged in destroying the caverns beneath *Plastica*, all the other cities swarm with Intermediates and the Scientists of the First and Second Circle, not to speak of those fiends of the Inner Circle themselves. We have converted millions through the use of the *Ethero-Magnum*, thanks to our loyal Perlac, who taught us to use it as the Inner Circle used it to condition the amnesiacs; we have paralyzed the Plastic Industry; destroyed the machinery for processing *Bagazo* into the amnesiac drug, and we control all the stores of *Bagazo*. We have achieved the arming of thousands of our followers. Surely, that is a great victory. I feel that should be enough for the present; besides, the Inner Circle will want to come to terms with us."

And it was true. Hunger and privation stalked the tiers of the great cities; chaos reigned. Even the great Plastic centers now had become a shambles of exploding acid vats; conveyors bore a welter of half-asphyxiated humanity, gaunt with hunger and the spasms lack of the amnesiac brought on; transportation was paralyzed, and everywhere the amnesiacs flared into madness as the effects of the drug wore off; and in frenzy of remembrance and need

of the drug, they attacked all in the ranks of scientists, destroying everything they could lay hands on. Thousands died under the trained precision of the Intermediates, and Scientists of the First Order, but the casualties they inflicted in the serried ranks of the Chief Protector were appalling.

"A compromise is not enough!" Guerlan was pitiless. "We have but one *Ether Magnum* here in *Columbia* with which to carry our message to the Second Level of each city and the workmen of the Third Level. True we have close to a quarter of a million warriors, but in a war of attrition, they have the greater resources. Besides," his voice was acid with scorn, "who wants a compromise? Not I?" His great green eyes under the long dark lashes flashed fire and the generous, square-cut mouth was bitter. He pointed an accusing finger at the legion of men and women that filled to overflowing the immense central cavern.

"You have asked for enough food to insure health in your children and have been told that synthetic-parturition will take care of your offspring, as indeed it does, and you never see them again! You who have asked but a measure of happiness and have been giving all you possess in energy, loyalty and obedience, and are given in return a brutalizing drug that robs you of the will to life! You who through the intrigues and machinations of the Inner Circle have been brutally thrust into the Second, the Third and even the Fourth Levels without a trial, without a hearing merely to satisfy the sadistic minds that rule us from the City of the Sphere. . . . YOU, would you want a compromise?"

The negative roar that rose in response, shook the lofty ceiling of the cavern and was like whirlwind. When it had died down, Paulan stood up again.

"I resign," he said simply. "Younger hands than mine will have to lead you. Perhaps you're right, Guerlan, if so, take my place as Commander in Chief, my son."

For a moment there was silence, and then another multi-throated roar of approval.

Guerlan was silent before the majestic dignity of the old man, and something akin to pity welled out of his heart for the great patriarch; but Perlac was on her feet, her sculptured arms flung

above her head demanding attention from the great multitude.

"I second the nomination!" Her limpid tones carried far.

"And I . . . and I . . . and I!" Thousands of voices strove to be heard, down into the farthest reaches of the linked caverns, as those who could not see, heard through the inter-connecting teleradio.

"Then," Guerlan spoke firmly, almost coldly, "the Council of War is called to session, we will meet in the Venusian spacer. All troops stand by for orders."

"Lead, Commander!" exclaimed a rich baritone voice.

It was Carladin, winged, diminutive, proud that the first session of the Council of War should be held in his magnificent atomo-plane, the one that had been repaired in the cavern beneath Plastica. He was proud, too, of Venus' inventive genius in converting the secret electronic formula of the electro-flash into a magnification of that weapon, to the size of a cannon, and raised to the sixth power, enough to practically blast an atomo-plane out of space. As for his special gift to the cause, that was an ironic touch that only a Venusian mind was capable of conceiving, for although unbelievably kind, they never forgave. "Poetic Justice," Carladin had called it, and insisted on the use of his special gift, even bringing a battalion of Venusians to handle it.

**"TELLURIA** reporting . . . Telluria . . . Fourth Level cleared. Entrance to Third Level forced . . . Fighting intense . . . Telluria . . ." The voice of the announcer faded and the magnified face in the telecast dissolved before their gaze.

Guerlan, Perlac and Carladin listened intently in the control cabin of the Venusian spacer which hovered like a great bird in the darkness above Columbia.

The enormous ethero-magnum that occupied a large section of the control room, came to life again as an ascending whine warned them, it was Perdura calling:

"Perdura calling . . . Perdura . . . Commander Guerlan!"

"Come in, Perdura!" Guerlan exclaimed impatiently, his nerves taut from inaction, but plans had to be observed. "Come in!"

The shifting swirls of light on the telecast became steady and a young, pale-

featured youth could be seen speaking with great intensity.

"We're on the second level, Commander. The defense has been terrific, they're bringing robots into the battle. One electro-flash cannon destroyed thus far, but we're pushing forward. No further news."

It was disappointing. In a concerted attack in eleven cities, thousands of Irreconcilables had emerged from the bowels of Neptune, striking upwards from the fifth levels of the cities, aided by crazed amnesiacs who fought with tooth and nail when no weapons were available. But it was Plastica that worried him most, for here was the strategic city they must capture at all costs. Unable to control his impatience any longer, he asked Perlac to contact Plastica. The girl's slender fingers played over the banked keys, adjusting tiny levers and driving home the activating selectors. Swirls of magnificent colors flooded the Telecast screen, while the ascending whine of the complex instrument went beyond the auditory limits of the human ear; and presently scene after scene of ghastly destruction showed on the telecast, the fifth level came and went a shattered welter; the fourth where destruction was appalling showed great rents in the crystoplast dome that separated it from the third. There was fighting still in the second level, as isolated parties strove to decimate the remaining, fleeing Intermediates; the fallen forms of robot-proctors littered the conveyors and inter-connecting avenues, the carnage was incredible.

But it was in the first level itself where the battle without quarter was now taking place. Divisions of ordine-plastic robots charged great masses of Irreconcilables, only to be shattered in great waves as the electro-flash cannon, gift of Venus, disintegrated their electronic balance. Thousands of lurid flashes from atomo-rifles and atomo-cannons, laboriously hauled to the first level by the attackers, belched destruction at buildings laden with Intermediates and Second-Level Scientists; aerotanks with treads instead of landing gear, were attempting to settle on the vast first level, their atomo-cannon slashing at the attackers with great scimitars of lurid blue light. It was a titanic holocaust that would long live in the annals of the Universe, for Venus, Mars, Mercury and Europa

had their Tele-Magnums trained on the fantastic struggle.

And then the face of the Commander of the Irreconcilables attacking Plastica, showed on the Telecast, a great gash over an eye still oozing a gout of blood that trickled down the left side of his face. Grim, with an awful determination in his young eyes, the Commander spoke hoarsely. "Command Guerlan, we need aircraft to engage the aero-tanks. Plastica is surrounded without the cristo-plast dome, and thousands of Inner Circle Scientists await the precise moment to enter in their Treaders and annihilate us. In reaching the first level, our losses have been too great, Commander!" He saluted and the face withdrew, as if having delivered his message there were nothing more to be said.

"Carladin," Guerlan's voice was vibrant with pent-up emotion, "you've brought with you eight-hundred atomo-spacers better than anything the Inner Circle has, if the speed and strength of Perlac's atomo-spacer is a sample. There is *your* task!"

"NOT MINE, Commander!" There was an edge of keen delight in the superb baritone voice of the tiny, winged figure. "I also brought with me a great warrior of space to lead my fleet. I have another task I shall relish even more! In one of my spacers, the flag-ship, are the hounds of Mother Venus, with which we hunt in the great virgin forests. One to each member of a battalion of my people . . . on a fragile leash! I shall communicate with my fleet immediately, may I take one of the emergency planes?" And as Guerlan nodded assent, Carladin was gone.

Guerlan wondered what the Venusian had meant by the hounds of Venus, but he was too preoccupied with the battle to care, all that mattered was that he was willing to use his fleet in accordance with the plan.

"Gloriana calling . . . Gloriana calling Commander Guerlan . . ." The monotonous iteration and reiteration of the announcer demanded attention. Perlac touched a bank of jet black keys as Guerlan said:

"Come in Gloriana, report, we're listening!"

"Gloriana reports a stalemate. We have

gained second level, almost took the first, but the fleet is above the first level, we can't combat it. All levels cleared but the first. Gloriana sounding off."

Other reports came in, but still Guerlan waited for the one thing that was imperative. And at last, through an eternity of waiting, Columbia came on the Ethero-Magnum, then like bursting flowers of fire, the atomic flashes from the emerging atomo-spacers of Venus as they launched themselves straight up into the heavens through the vertical funnel-like channel that rose from the caverns, straight up into the upper reaches of the first level. Spacer after spacer soared aloft and disappeared in the direction of Plastica. All but the last. It rose majestically upward and then, describing a parabola in midair, began to lose altitude, its atomic flashes like falling stars.

And then began the most bizarre attack in the history of six planets, for as the fleet attacked the swarm of atomo-fighters and aero-tanks of the Inner Circle, the last Venusian spacer had landed outside Plastica, and a multitude of Venusians each one leading a gigantic *Calamar*, the dreaded, armored tiger of Venus, launched themselves upon the besieging Scientists of the Inner Circle that awaited the propitious moment to enter Plastica during the battle and destroy the Irreconcilables by an attack from their rear.

The roar of the ravenous beasts was a crescendo that drowned the wild, agonized screams of the scientists as mammoth claws ripped through plastic-breast plates and Venusian silks, and fangs found fat throats and steaming blood. Overhead the clash of the two air armadas was a holocaust of fire, as the two armies beneath fought also for supremacy on the first level.

What the outcome would be, was beyond prediction, for neither side entertained any doubt now but that it was a struggle to the death—there could be no quarter. If Plastica fell, most of the Empire went with it, for within it was the very life-blood of the nation—Plastics, the beginning, the reason and the end of their existence. For plastics were clothing and shelter, and weapons and furniture, and even medicines and synthetic concentrates that went under the name of food. Besides, they had Columbia, where the sustenance of the

City of the Sphere and the first levels was grown and manufactured.

Slowly at first, imperceptibly, the battle turned in their favor, objectives that seemed unattainable were reached by the Irreconcilables, and the defenders fell back. The invulnerable fleet, the much touted and dreaded air armada, as being decimated by the unearthly speed of the Venusian spacers; and Intermediates and robots alike fell before the supernal fire of the electro-flash cannon and electro-rifles. Still, the battle wore on and on, with such an intensity that it was incredible that anything that lived could endure it. Without Plastica itself, a horror of carnage, blasted Calamars and torn bodies, marked where the Inner Circle Reserves had been, but Caladin's spacer was nowhere in view.

"The time," Perlac said softly, "has come, my dear."

**G**UERLAN gazed at the exquisite features of Perlac in misery. He was silent. But the girl laid a hand on his shoulder caressingly, and forced him to look into her eyes. "We must face it, Guerlan, unless we do, this war may last for years, and oceans of blood will flow. It is the better way."

"I know, I know Perlac. But let me do it alone. I can't . . . I just can't bear to have you risk your life, my dear." Impulsively he crushed her to him in a fierce embrace and kissed the flower-like mouth. Then he released her.

"I will be in less danger than you; after all I am Bejamel's daughter. And don't you think that I, too, could not bear to have you go alone? No, dear, we are in this together, for life or for death."

As if the gods of war relished the appalling daring of their plan, suddenly the way was opened to them, for on the immense Tele-Magnum, the heavenly tones of Bejamel's voice could be heard, as slowly, his gargoyle face came into view. Hurriedly Perlac threw the switch which prevented him at the Palace on the Sphere from seeing them.

"Commander Guerlan! Bejamel, Minister of Justice, speaks." There were rich undertones of irony, and bitterness, too, in the superlative voice of the speaker.

"I have learned that my daughter is your prisoner. We have captured important

prisoners, too. Paulan, your ex-leader, and that misguided Martian who has chosen to espouse your cause. But all this is of no moment, I am willing to ransom my daughter on your own terms, barbarian!" Even in his grief, Bejamel was unable to suppress the insulting epithet.

"What do you offer, Bejamel?" Guerlan spoke calmly, although a seething maelstrom swirled within him. "But make your offer worth listening to, I have no time for barter."

"A thousand prisoners of war, and a coffer of jewels, Guerlan!"

Guerlan laughed shortly. "Your fame for sagacity has been overrated, Bejamel, the jewels . . . we shall shortly make our own—The Ultimate Presence knows there will be enough dead when this is over. As for the prisoners," his voice became indifferent, "we'll take them, of course, but we have more men than we need, Scientist. Offer me something beyond my means and I'll send your daughter to you, unharmed!"

"Speak, Dissenter, I am a man of reason!" Bejamel's voice was filled with cunning. "Speak!"

"Since you are the only one who can open His Benevolence's doors, outside of the mechanism he can activate from within, destroy the mechanism. Take away his invulnerable robe of force, and then . . . then forget to sing! Let him starve slowly in his enchanted garden, after he has devoured all his birds and pets." Guerlan's laughter was mocking. But within he was tense with anxiety. Would his strategy win, he wondered? One could not deal in a normal manner with Bejamel.

"Agreed!" The celestial voice had risen to limpid heights.

The fleets of atomo-spacers and aero-tanks stood poised, withdrawn, marking an invisible, aerial lane through which hurtled the slim, silver flash of an atomo-plane. The most powerful Tele-Magnum in the palace of His Benevolence was focused on that ship, without pause, until every detail of its interior was exposed on the great tele-screen at the palace. But its interior revealed only the pale, haggard face of Perlac, inexpressibly lovely in its sadness, and motionless beside her, the gigantic robot-proctor of bery-plastic, embossed with the insignia of the House of Justice

and Bejamel's own intricate emblem. It had been sent to act as a guard and bring her unharmed to the palace.

Forming a perfect target, a trio of transports carrying a thousand Irreconcilables, prisoners of war, came from the opposite direction, released from the City of the Sphere, as per agreement. The vessels neared each other, crossed and passed en-route to their opposite destinations. At last, Perlac's plane reached the outer air-locks of the Sphere, where pressure was adjusted, and entering ships were guided to their berths at the base of the immense globe, where the machinery of the anti-gravity repulsor beams was housed also, and where the glittering tiers rose upward to end at the great Hanging Gardens of His Benevolence, where the palace stood.

And then the armistice was broken. Hundreds of swift, deadly interceptor planes, atomo-powered, dived after the retreating transport; tremendous aero-tanks rushed in for the kill spewing a blaze of livid radiations. One of the transports managed to dive into the inter-connecting, ascending and descending chamber of the city, but the others, trapped, rather than be rayed like sheep, courageously turned and fought. But to no avail. Outside the tropical city of Columbia, they crashed in great flaming gouts, like miniature volcanoes.

**A** HEAD of Perlac and her robot-proctor was the City of the Sphere. Majestically it blazed like a cosmic jewel against the impenetrably-black backdrop of space. It grew immense, fantastic, like a minor planet glowing in space, but suddenly, their speed slackened as the robot-control began to decelerate; and presently they slid with a vast hiss into the first airlock, where the synchronized magnetic fields instantly checked their speed. A terrific force jarred them until their bones seem to melt, then doors were opening, voices could be heard shouting orders, and the official pilot entered the ship and with an obsequious salute to the girl, he took seat at the controls and guided the ship into the second lock.

The entire length of both the first and second locks were lined with the titanic coils of the synchronized, magnetic degravitation fields, which stopped the vessels in a graduating net of force. But the trans-

parent sides of the sphere gave a curious sensation of lack of solidity, of fragility even, as if they had entered a vast hall of glass. Only those who really knew the secret composition of the Sphere, were aware of its near-invulnerability, even beyond that of the strongest known metal-alloys.

At last the long, slim atomo-plane was berthed, and the tall, cadaverous figure of Bejamel hove into view. He waited for Perlac closely followed by her robot guard to approach him, in accordance with the etiquette of Plastica. Then, unable to suppress any longer the profound emotions that stirred his complex being, he opened his arms wide and rushed forward to unfold the only being he had ever loved, in the fragile embrace of his skeletal arms. A suspicious brilliance swam in the long green eyes, and the ordinarily limpid voice was husky, uncertain, as he exclaimed: "Perlac, O my dear!" He could say no more. Perlac was touched. She brushed her lips against his cheek, then she gently pushed him back, to gaze into the inscrutable green eyes of the Minister of Justice, who was also her father.

Behind her, looming unnoticed, as a piece of activated mechanism, was the Robot-Proctor, both servant and guard.

"Father," she said impulsively, "Don't take me to the Palace! I couldn't bear to enter the temple as one of the Virgins . . . rather would I prefer to be a prisoner of the Irreconcilables."

Father and daughter gazed at each other in silence, surrounded by the deep, far-away hum of the throbbing generators as the incredible stream of atomic power fought the gravity of Neptune. Great opaque doors at the far end of the second lock led into the inner chambers where the robot-tended machinery never faltered for a second. Bejamel smiled slowly, ironically, and shook his head. "We're not going there!"

He waved an emaciated hand at the guard of honor that awaited his pleasure at a respectful distance, and instantly the Intermediate Officer in charge came forward. "Command!" he said laconically. It was the same officer that had reported the defeat of the Intermediate battalion in the caverns beneath Plastica. His superbly beautiful face was impassive, but the bril-

liant eyes were restless, as if the creature's nerves were overwrought.

"My atomocopter!" Bejamel said as laconically, and then passed a small package to the Intermediate. "For you and the entire Palace Guard," he said softly. "There will be no need of you and your men tonight. We have all but won . . . celebrate."

The light of hunger, of delight, of the nearest feeling akin to gratitude he could possibly feel, flashed like a flame into the Intermediate's eyes. "I bow in thanks, O Lord of Justice," he replied formally.

Within seconds, they were speeding upwards in Bejamel's private atomocopter, past tier after tier of the fabulous City of the Sphere.

## VI

EVERY tier was a beehive of activity, as scientists of the Inner Circle, scurried in every direction engaged in a multitude of tasks. Atomo-planes flashed through the inter-connecting levels on their way to the titanic battle below. Thousands of the Neophytes, aided by robots, supplied arms and concentrates to the departing vessels, while other thousands boarded them on their way to swell the ranks of the defenders, and take the place of their countless dead.

At last they reached Bejamel's private dwelling. He never called it a palace. In the tenebrous depths of his involved soul, there were flashes of genius, and one of them was to have and to rule without ever mentioning the fact. His dwelling was exquisite in proportions, the simplicity of its white *Jadite* facade, depending on the artistry of its composition and carved decors, not on opulence of mosaic-jewelling as was the case with the palace of His Benevolence. A repugnance of rococco display was enough to deter him from bad taste.

They went immediately into his private chambers, and here Perlac had a great surprise, for reclining on a dais covered with silvery Venusian furs and the priceless plumage of the Martian Kra, was the one person she would never have expected to see—Estrella, favorite of His Benevolence!

Once over her shock, Perlac turned and

favor her ancient father with a sly smile.

"Incredible!" she murmured. "Can it be possible?" Bejamel bridled.

"Why not?" He rose to his full, cadaverous height. "Estrella and I are going to Venus, child, I have yet many more years of life, and loneliness is not good for an active mind like mine. That's why I ransomed you from that barbarian Guerlan, so that you may go with us. I am going to the palace now, I have one final errand to accomplish well, before we leave!" He smiled slowly, satirically, as if the most delicious thought in the universe had taken shape in his mind.

"Did you take care of His Exalted Benevolence's power-screen belt, my dear?" he inquired of Estrella.

"Yes," the girl nodded, her eyes filling with hatred at the mention of the dreaded name. "It will never function again!"

"Then," Bejamel said emphatically, in the tones he used when he had delivered the final word, "meet me at the emergency outer lock. My ship is there waiting, robot-manned, provisioned, containing fortunes in jewels and priceless things. We will go to Venus, and to a new . . . a greater life!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining on the reclining form of Estrella. "I shall expect to see you, Perlac, with Estrella aboard my ship within one hour!" And to the silent robot-proctor. "Guard the women," he said directing a tiny beam of force from the microscopic mechanism concealed in his ring of office at the forehead of the robot, which instantly sealed the order within the synthetic brain of the metal-plastic man. "Guard them and bring them to my ship within one hour."

The metalo-plastic robot seemed to stiffen, his great non-abradable crystal eyes gleamed and a powerful arm went up in acknowledgment of the peremptory order. Satisfied, Bejamel turned and left.

It was then that Perlac turned to the towering robot and said softly, "Now!" And to Estrella, who watched uncomprehendingly. "Are you ready? Throw something about you, and veil your face, Estrella, we're going to the space ship!"

"But we've still got a lot of time!" the favorite protested. "It's true that most of my things are on the spacer, but I want to arrange some personal matters before we go; wait a while!"



A tremendous power was in Perlac's voice as she replied:

"We're leaving now!" Yet she said it very softly. "You're dripping with jewels, are you taking those things with you?"

"But of course! Such a question, have you gone mad?"

"You know what they are? Each one represents a life . . . they're made from organic-plastic, human beings executed by greed!" Perlac reminded her.

**B**UT Estrella shrugged her divine shoulders as she arose. "My not wearing them wouldn't help those slain ones now. Besides, they're nearer to me in death, than they could ever have been in life!" She smiled with incredible vanity. She threw a robe of Kra plumes about her, and allowed herself to be led to the atomocopter.

Within seconds they were speeding to the outer lock and Bejamel's ship. It was there that the robot-proctor left them, and hurried to the lower chamber where the pulsing generators sang their eternal threnody of unlimited power. Unnoticed he gained the great metalo-plastic doors that divided the vast chambers from the anti-gravity repulsor machinery. Unhesitatingly, it directed a thin pencil of force at an orifice slightly above the center of the great doors, just as Perlac had explained over and over, and the massive portals parted slowly, remaining open.

Robots of the lower grades worked among the maze of towering machinery, oiling, testing, doing a multitude of tasks. But the robot-proctor, without paying them any attention, seemed to suddenly open at the side and an electro-flash gun, of large size, magnified by the Venusian scientists and raised to many times its normal power, came into view from the aperture. Without making a sound, without even a beam of light, the fatal weapon was aimed at the very heart of the colossal motors and generators, wheel and pistons seemed to warp, shrink and disappear uncannily; the steady throbbing hum of the degravitator, lost its smooth rhythm and thereafter large sections of machinery disappeared under the relentless action of the supernal fire being directed at them.

Instantly the robots came to life, for a

moment they milled wildly, as if this supreme emergency were something they were not able to cope with, and then they saw the new robot in their midst. Their synthetic brains activated only to the repair and maintenance of the machines, and to their safeguard, focused on the attacker, and its removal was instantly their immediate task. They attacked *en masse*, but the robot-proctor eluded them among the mazes of metalo-plastic, of berylo-plastic rods and generators, and the tremendous motors which were being eaten by an invisible leprosy. With a swift slash of the electro-flash gun, the robot-proctor caused havoc among the robots that pursued him, legs, arms, even heads wavered and disappeared as the electronic balance was completely disrupted by the flash.

A tremor seemed to shake the gigantic Sphere. By now, the great degravitator chamber was in shambles, and the remaining motors were unable to cope with the awful pressure of the gravity of the giant planet.

With one final murderous sweep of the electro-flash, that seemed to shear like an invisible scimitar through machinery, robots and everything in its path, retreated as it had come, racing upwards towards the Sphere's emergency locks. There was no apparent pursuit. Only the vivid scarlet lights of imperative emergency, flooding what had been the degravitator chamber were witnesses to the destruction.

In the coordinating offices of the Maintenance Scientists, the telesolidographs gave three-dimensional accounts of the wreckage. But even there, confusion, bred by a growing panic, caused a delay, losing them their chance of effecting repairs. Suddenly, panic brooked no obstacles. The light of intelligence and logic was flung aside as men and women becoming aware of the ghastly fate that awaited them, poured out on the various levels in a frenzy to escape. The news of the destruction of vital machinery in the anti-gravity repulsor beam chamber was being relayed everywhere.

Already the colossal Sphere was swaying gently and settling lower, dislocating the delicate balances that held it poised in space. The stresses on the plastic structures and pylons was tremendous.

AS THE robot arrived at Bejamel's spacer, a dramatic scene unfolded before his huge non-abradable eyes. Holding an electro-flash in her slender hand, her eyes brimming with tears, Perlac seemed to have for the moment at least, control of the superb ship. She was saying:

"We don't leave here until Guerlan returns!" Her lips were white, but the sheer determination written in her lovely face, held even Bejamel who was taken aback.

"Guerlan! Are you mad, Perlac? That barbarian's below on the planet's surface!"

"On the contrary," the robot-proctor spoke in a voice leaden with fatigue, "I'm here, Bejamel." Slowly he emerged from the enclosing plastic shell of what had been a robot, then let the huge, hollow plastic man fall clattering to the spacer's floor. Silently he searched the ex-Minister of Justice, who seemed transfixed by a vast surprise. From under Bajamel's arm-pit, Guerlan took a hidden electro-flash, and a venom-tipped dagger concealed in a fold of his tunic. Having drawn his fangs, he smiled. "We can blast off now . . . but not for Venus!"

Majestically, Bejamel turned to Perlac with an inscrutable smile. He gazed at the girl in a mixture of bitterness and admiration:

"You're indeed *my* daughter!" he said at last. Then to Guerlan: "What do you propose to do with me?"

"Keep you in Neptune," Guerlan replied bluntly. "Utilize your vast knowledge of jurisprudence, and your personal and intimate knowledge of the thousands of scientists who are certain to surrender sooner or later. Human beings have inalienable rights, rights that we propose to return to them. But unfortunately, it will not be easy to give freedom to those who have never known what freedom it. We will need all the science and power of mind available. So, Bejamel, we must use you—under our supervision, of course. You see, even the venom of a cobra is eminently useful, if handled right!"

They eyed each other, these two. Both powerful, dominating intellects, both capable of profound emotions. It was the older man, who used to the devious ways of the Sphere and His Benevolence's court, yielded gracefully. Bejamel glanced at Estrella, and it occurred to him that what-

ever years of life remained to him would be sweet if she were at his side. At that instant, a vast tremor shook the gigantic city of the Sphere, and Bejamel's eyes went wide.

Seated at the controls, Guerlan turned slightly to Bejamel. "Give your Intermediates orders to open the lock and activate the catapult—we have minutes, perhaps only seconds, before the Sphere gives under the gravity pull. Make your choice, or I give the ship full power and crash through the airlock, Bejamel!" Guerlan's vice was cold, impassive.

"I shall give the order," Bejamel assented in a brittle voice.

FROM a vantage point in space, the scene that met their eyes had the memorable quality of those stupendous spectacles of nature that human eyes rarely if ever are privileged to see.

The vast sphere was aflame with color, dazzling in the vivid coruscations of blue and orange and mauve and yellow lights. Spinning slowly, it was a thing of unearthly beauty, a floating, starry globe that might have been a toy of the gods. It was being deserted by every type of craft imaginable; hundreds of planes, 'copters, electros . . . every available type of ship that could evacuate the jostling, crying, screaming thousands who had jammed the outer airlocks and emergency exits.

Inexorably, the Sphere sank lower and lower, as the remaining generators fought the awful gravity of Neptune that held the doomed globe in its gigantic grip. Enough power still remained to the incredible sphere to keep it from crashing headlong into the furious waters of the vast ocean below. But at last, as if the ultimate ounce of power were gone, the Globe seemed to lurch in a glory of prismatic lights, then with terrific momentum it began the dizzy plunge through space, whirling like a falling meteor.

Perlac, Bejamel, Estrella—even Guerlan himself, could not take their eyes from the tragic glory that was the sphere. Suddenly they saw it illuminate the ocean for miles as it neared the surface of the waters, then with a vast splash that sent a tidal wave licking the shore's hills hungrily, it sank into the cold, green waters.

"And there it will remain for all

eternity!" Guerlan said thoughtfully. "A tomb of evil, that men might live!"

Bejamel was silent. The gargoyle's face was softened by a profound sadness. He sighed like a man who has lived too much, and at last seeks rest. He turned his back to the scene below as if unable to bear it any more. "An epoch has passed," he said softly in the magnificent voice.

But Guerlan was at the Tele-Magnum, broadcasting offer of an armistice to the warring armadas below.

"Scientists of the Inner Circle and the First Level," he said with infinite assurance. "Your City of the Sphere has plunged to its doom, and, with it went His Infamous Benevolence and hundreds of thousands of your henchmen. You no longer have a haven of refuge, no base in which to refuel or obtain supplies. When your present ammunition is gone, when repairs and food are necessary, and when the men who die must be replaced, there is no spot where you can return. Yours is a certain doom—unless you unconditionally

surrender. We offer a pardon to all who are willing to join our cause; lay down your arms and aid in the reconstruction—a far more glorious future is before us!"

An immense weariness had etched lines about his mouth and eyes, and his shoulders slumped as if a great reaction had set in. But his eyes could still flame with joy, as he saw the deadly fleet of the Inner Circle abandon the struggle, as he saw the embattled armies cease their carnage. As he turned from the Tele-Magnum to go to the controls and guide the ship to their base in Columbia, he suddenly felt soft arms entwine around his neck and a soft face that pressed close to his. He didn't even need to look, the fragrance of Venusian jasmynes was in his nostrils and a warm, flower-like mouth pressed close to his.

It was then that Bejamel turned to Estrella and was eyeing him with critical eyes and said sardonically:

"Shall we make it unanimous?"

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