

PLANET STORIES

SUMMER
1944

20c



STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS
—THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

TERROR OUT OF SPACE

ALONG THE AEON-OLD HIGHROAD
SLITHERED A DEVOURING HORDE

Novelet by **LEIGH BRACKETT**

MORGUE SHIP

by **RAY BRADBURY**

DE PINA

• **WELLMAN**

PLANET STORIES



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Planet Stories' Off-Trail Tale

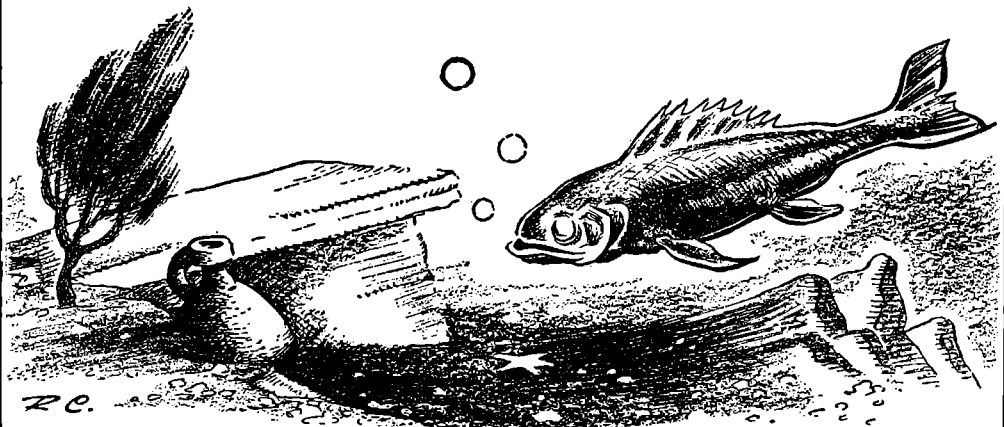
TERROR OUT OF SPACE

An eerie story of a silver land beneath the black Venusian seas. A grim tale of brooding terror whirling out of space to drive men mad, of a menace without name or form, and of the man, Lundy, who fought the horror, his eyes blinded by his will. For to see the terror was to become its slave—a mindless automaton whose only wish was to see behind the shadowed mysterious eyelids of "IT".



A WEIRD BRACKETTALE OF A SPACE FRONTIER

by
LEIGH BRACKETT



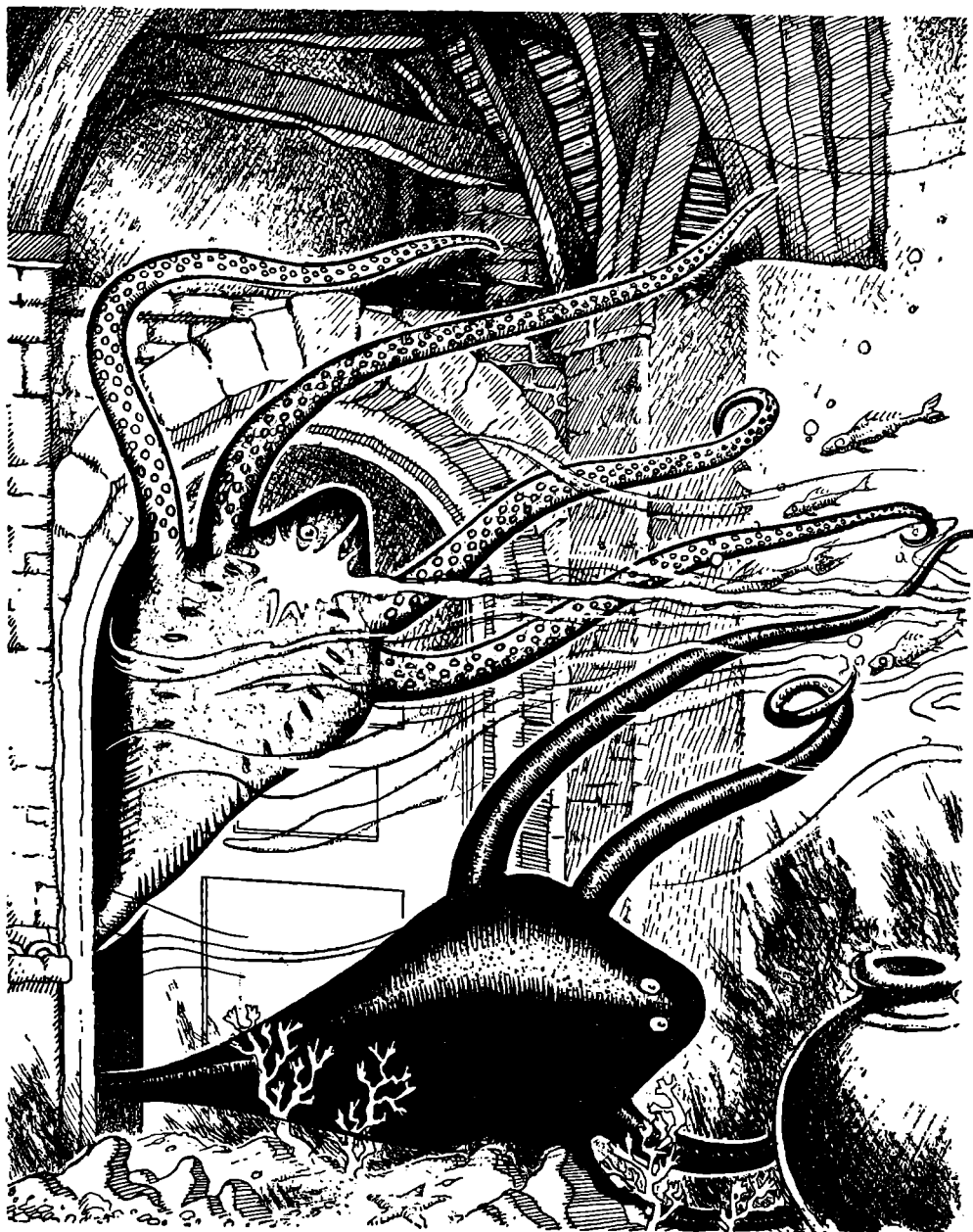
TERROR OUT OF SPACE

By

LEIGH BRACKETT

One of the greatest science-fantasies of the year.

Illustration by CLYNE



LUNDY was flying the aero-space convertible by himself. He'd been doing it for a long time. So long that the bottom half of him was dead to the toes and the top half even deader, except for two separate aches like ulcerated teeth; one in his back, one in his head.

Thick pearly-grey Venusian sky went past the speeding flier in streamers of torn cloud. The rockets throbbed and pounded. Instruments jerked erratically under the

swirl of magnetic currents that makes the Venusian atmosphere such a swell place for pilots to go nuts in.

Jackie Smith was still out cold in the co-pilot's seat. From in back, beyond the closed door to the tiny inner cabin, Lundy could hear Farrell screaming and fighting.

He'd been screaming a long time. Ever since the shot of *avertin* Lundy had given him after he was taken had begun to wear thin. Fighting the straps and



Lundy fired the last shot in his gun.

screaming, a hoarse jarring sound with no sense in it.

Screaming to be free, because of *It*.

Somewhere inside of Lundy, inside the rumpled, sweat-soaked black uniform of the Tri-World Police, Special Branch, and the five-foot-six of thick springy muscle under it, there was a knot. It was a large knot, and it was very, very cold in spite of the sweltering heat in the cabin, and it had a nasty habit of yanking itself tight every few minutes, causing Lundy to jerk and sweat as though he'd been spiked.

Lundy didn't like that cold tight knot in his belly. It meant he was afraid. He'd been afraid before, plenty of times, and he wasn't ashamed of it. But right now he needed all the brains and guts he had to get *It* back to Special headquarters at Vhia, and he didn't want to have to fight himself, too.

Fear can screw things for you. It can make you weak when you need to be strong, if you're going to go on living. You, and the two other guys depending on you.

Lundy hoped he could keep from getting too much afraid, and too tired—because *It* was sitting back there in its little strong-box in the safe, waiting for somebody to crack.

Farrell was cracked wide open, of course, but he was tied down. Jackie Smith had begun to show signs before he passed out, so that Lundy had kept one hand over the anaesthetic needle gun holstered on the side of his chair. And Lundy thought,

The hell of it is, you don't know when It starts to work on you. There's no set pattern, or if there is we don't know it. Maybe right now the readings I see on those dials aren't there at all . . .

Down below the torn grey clouds he could see occasional small patches of ocean. The black, still, tideless water of Venus, that covers so many secrets of the planet's past.

It didn't help Lundy any. It could be right or wrong, depending on what part of the ocean it was—and there was no way to tell. He hoped nothing would happen to the motors. A guy could get awfully wet, out in the middle of that still black water.

Farrell went on screaming. His throat seemed to be lined with impervium.

Screaming and fighting the straps, because *It* was locked up and calling for help.

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, and opened his pale green eyes.

"I'm cold," he said. "Hi, Midget."

Lundy turned his head. Normally he had a round, fresh, merry face, with bright dark eyes and a white, small-boyish grin. Now he looked like something the waiter had swept out from under a table at four A.M. on New Year's Day.

"You're cold," he said sourly. He licked sweat off his lips. "Oh, fine! That was all I needed."

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, to joggle himself. His black tunic was open over his chest, showing the white strapping of bandages, and his left hand was thrust in over the locked top of the tunic's zipper. He was a big man, not any older than Lundy, with big, ugly, pleasant features, a shock of coarse pale hair, and a skin like old leather.

"On Mercury, where I was born," he said, "the climate is suitable for human beings. You Old-World pantywaists . . ." He broke off, turned white under the leathery burn, and said through set teeth, "Oil Farrell sure did a good job on me."

"You'll live," said Lundy. He tried not to think about how nearly both he and Smith had come to not living. Farrell had put up one hell of a fight, when they caught up with him in a native village high up in the Mountains of White Cloud.

LUNDY still felt sick about that. The bull-meat, the hard boys, you didn't mind kicking around. But Farrell wasn't that kind. He was just a nice guy that got trapped by something too big for him.

A nice guy, crazy blind in love with somebody that didn't exist. A decent hard-working guy with a wife and two kids who'd lost his mind, heart, and soul to a Thing from outer space, so that he was willing to kill to protect It.

Oh, hell! thought Lundy wearily, *won't he ever stop screaming?*

The rockets beat and thundered. The torn grey sky whipped past. Jackie Smith sat rigid, with closed eyes, white around the lips and breathing in shallow, careful gasps. And Vhia was still a long way off.

Maybe farther off than he knew. May-

be he wasn't heading toward *Vhia* at all. Maybe *It* was working on him, and he'd never know it till he crashed.

The cold knot tightened in his belly like a cold blade stabbing.

Lundy cursed. Thinking things like that was a sure way to punch your ticket right straight to blazes.

But you couldn't help thinking, about *It*. The Thing you had caught in a special net of tight-woven metal mesh, aiming at something Farrell could see but you couldn't. The Thing you had forced into the glassite box and covered up with a black cloth, because you had been warned not to look at *It*.

Lundy's hands tingled and burned, not unpleasantly. He could still feel the small savage Thing fighting him, hidden in the net. It had felt vaguely cylindrical, and terribly alive.

Life. Life from outer space, swept out of a cloud of cosmic dust by the gravitic pull of Venus. Since Venus had hit the cloud there had been a wave of strange madness on the planet. Madness like Farrell's, that had led to murder, and some things even worse.

Scientists had some ideas about that life from Out There. They'd had a lucky break and found one of The Things, dead, and there were vague stories going around of a crystalline-appearing substance that wasn't really crystal, about three inches long and magnificently etched and fluted, and supplied with some odd little gadgets nobody would venture an opinion about.

But the Thing didn't do them much good, dead. They had to have one alive, if they were going to find out what made it tick and learn how to put a stop to what the telecommentators had chosen to call The Madness from Beyond, or The Vampire Lure.

One thing about it everybody knew. The guys who suddenly went sluggish and charged off the rails all made it clear that they had met the ultimate Dream Woman of all women and all dreams. Nobody else could see her, but that didn't bother them any. They saw her, and she was—*She*. And her eyes were always veiled.

And *She* was a whiz at hypnosis and mind-control. That's why *She*, or *It*, hadn't been caught alive before. Not before Lundy and Smith, with every scien-

tific aid Special could give them, had tracked down Farrell and managed to get the breaks.

The breaks. Plain fool luck. Lundy moved his throbbing head stiffly on his aching neck, blinked sweat out of his blood-shot eyes, and wished to hell he was home in bed.

Jackie Smith said suddenly, "Midget, I'm cold. Get me a blanket."

Lundy looked at him. His pale green eyes were half open, but not as though they saw anything. He was shivering.

"I can't leave the controls, Jackie."

"Nuts. I've got one hand. I can hang onto this lousy tin fish that long."

LUNDY scowled. He knew Smith wasn't kidding about the cold. The temperatures on Mercury made the first-generation colonists sensitive to anything below the range of an electric furnace. With the wound and all, Smith might wind up with pneumonia if he wasn't covered.

"Okay." Lundy reached out and closed the switch marked A. "But I'll let Mike do the flying. He can probably last five minutes before he blows his guts out."

Iron Mike was just a patty cake when it came to Venusian atmosphere flying. The constant magnetic compensation heated the robot coils to the fusing point in practically no time at all.

Lundy thought fleetingly that it was nice to know there were still a couple of things men could do better than machinery.

He got up, feeling like something that had stood outside rusting for four hundred years or so. Smith didn't turn his head. Lundy growled at him.

"Next time, sonny, you wear your long woolen undies and let me alone!"

Then he stopped. The knot jerked tight in his stomach. Cold sweat needled him, and his nerves stung in a swift rush of fire.

Farrell had quit screaming.

There was silence in the ship. Nothing touched it. The rockets were outside it and didn't matter. Even Jackie Smith's careful breathing had stopped. Lundy went forward slowly, toward the door. Two steps.

It opened. Lundy stopped again, quite still.

Farrell was standing in the opening. A

nice guy with a wife and two kids. His face still looked like that, but the eyes in it were not sane, nor even human.

Lundy had tied him down to the bunk with four heavy straps. Breast, belly, thighs, and feet. The marks of them were on Farrell. They were cut into his shirt and pants, into his flesh and sinew, deep enough to show his bare white ribs. There was blood. A lot of blood. Farrell didn't mind.

"I broke the straps," he said. He smiled at Lundy. "She called me and I broke the straps."

He started to walk to the safe in the corner of the cabin. Lundy gagged and pulled himself up out of a cold black cloud and got his feet to moving.

Jackie Smith said quietly, "Hold it, Midget. She doesn't like it there in the safe. She's cold, and she wants to come out."

LUNDY looked over his shoulder. Smith was hunched around in his seat, holding the needle-gun from Lundy's holster on the pilot's chair. His pale green eyes had a distant, dreamy glow, but Lundy knew better than to trust it.

He said, without inflection, "You've seen her."

"No. No, but—I've heard her." Smith's heavy lips twitched and parted. The breath sucked through between them, hoarse and slow.

Farrell went down on his knees beside the safe. He put his hands on its blank and gleaming face and turned to Lundy. He was crying.

"Open it. You've got to open it. She wants to come out. She's frightened."

Jackie Smith raised the gun, a fraction of an inch. "Open it, Midget," he whispered. "She's cold in there."

Lundy stood still. The sweat ran on him and he was colder than a frog's belly in the rain; and for no reason at all he said thickly,

"No. She's hot. She can't breathe in there. She's hot."

Then he jerked his head up and yelled. He came around to face Smith, unsteady but fast, and started for him.

Smith's ugly face twisted as though he might be going to cry. "Midget! I don't want to shoot you. Open the safe!"

Lundy said, "You damned fool," with no voice at all, and went on.

Smith hit the firing stud.

The anaesthetic needles hit Lundy across the chest. They didn't hurt much. Just a stinging prick. He kept going. No reason. It was just something he seemed to be doing at the time.

Behind him Farrell whimpered once like a puppy and lay down across the little safe. He didn't move again. Lundy got down on his hands and knees and reached in a vague sort of way for the controls. Jackie Smith watched him with dazed green eyes.

Quite suddenly, Iron Mike blew his guts out.

The control panel let go a burst of blue flame. The glare and heat of it knocked Lundy backward. Things hissed and snarled and ran together, and the convertible began to dance like a leaf in a gale. The automatic safety cut the rockets dead.

The ship began to fall.

Smith said something that sounded like *She* and folded up in his chair. Lundy rubbed his hand across his face. The lines of it were blurred and stupid. His dark eyes had no sense in them.

He began to crawl over the lurching floor toward the safe.

The clouds outside ripped and tore across the ship's nose, and presently only water showed. Black, still, tideless water dotted with little islands of floating weed that stirred and slithered with a life of their own.

Black water, rushing up.

Lundy didn't care. He crawled through Farrell's blood, and he didn't care about that, either. He pushed Farrell's body back against the cabin wall and began to scratch at the shiny door, making noises like a hound shut out and not happy about it.

The ship hit the water with a terrific smack. Spray geysered up, dead white against the black sea, fell back, and closed in. Presently even the ripples went away.

Dark green weed-islands twined sinuously upon themselves, a flock of small sea-dragons flapped their jeweled wings down and began to fish, and none of them cared at all about the ship sinking away under them.

Not even Lundy cared, out cold in the space-tight cabin, with his body wedged

up against the safe and tears drying with the sweat on his stubbled cheeks.

II

THE first thing Lundy knew about was the stillness. A dead feeling, as though everything in creation had stopped breathing.

The second thing was his body. It hurt like hell, and it was hot, and it didn't like the thick, foul air it was getting. Lundy pushed himself into a sitting position and tried to boot his brain into action. It was hard work, because someone had split his head open four ways with an axe.

It wasn't really dark in the cabin. A wavering silver glow almost like moonlight came in through the ports. Lundy could see pretty well. He could see Farrell's body sprawled out on the floor, and a mess of junk that had once been equipment.

He could see the safe.

He looked at it a long time. There wasn't much to look at. Just an open safe with nothing in it, and a piece of black cloth dropped on the floor.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh, my Lord!"

Everything hit him at once then. There wasn't much in him but his stomach, and that was tied down. But it tried hard to come up. Presently the spasms stopped, and then Lundy heard the knocking.

It wasn't very loud. It had a slow, easy rhythm, as though the knocker had a lot of time and didn't care when he got in. It came from the airlock panel.

Lundy got up. Slowly, cold as a toad's belly and as white. His lips drew back from his teeth and stayed there, frozen.

The knocking kept on. A sleepy kind of sound. The guy outside could afford to wait. Sometime that locked door was going to open, and he could wait. He wasn't in a hurry. He would never be in a hurry.

Lundy looked all around the cabin. He didn't speak. He looked sideways out of the port. There was water out there. The black sea-water of Venus; clear and black, like deep night.

There was level sand spreading away from the ship. The silver light came up out of it. Some kind of phosphorescence, as bright as moonlight and faintly tinged with green.

Black sea-water. Silver sand. The guy kept on knocking at the door. Slow and easy. Patient. One—two. One—two. Just off beat with Lundy's heart.

Lundy went to the inner cabin, walking steadily. He looked around carefully and then went back. He stopped by the lock panel.

"Okay, Jackie," he said. "In a minute. In a minute, boy."

Then he turned and went very fast to the port locker and got a quart bottle out of its shock cradle, and raised it. It took both hands.

After a while he dropped the bottle and stood still, not looking at anything, until he stopped shaking. Then he pulled his vac-suit down off its hook and climbed into it. His face was grey and quite blank.

He took all the oxygen cylinders he could carry, emergency rations, and all the benzedrine in the medicine kit. He put the limit dose of the stimulant down on top of the brandy before he locked his helmet. He didn't bother with the needle gun. He took the two Service blasters—his own, and Smith's. The gentle knocking didn't stop.

He stood for a moment looking at the open safe and the black cloth dropped beside it. Something cruel came into his face. A tightness, a twitching and setting of the muscles, and a terrible look of patience.

Being under water wouldn't bother a Thing from outer space. He reached up and lifted the net of tight-woven metal-mesh down off its hook and fastened it on his belt. Then he walked over and opened the airlock door.

Black water swirled in around his weighted boots, and then the door opened wide and Jackie Smith came in.

He'd been waiting in the flooded lock chamber. Kicking his boots against the inner door, easy, with the slow breathing of the sea. Now the water pushed his feet down and held him upright from behind, so he could walk in and stand looking at Lundy. A big blond man with green eyes, and white bandages strapped under his open black tunic, looking at Lundy. Not long. Only for a second. But long enough.

Lundy stopped himself after the third

scream. He had to, because he knew if he screamed again he'd never stop. By that time the black water had pushed Jackie Smith away, over to the opposite wall, and covered his face.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh Lord, *what did he see before he drowned?*"

No one answered. The black water pushed at Lundy, rising high around him, trying to take him over to Jackie Smith. Lundy's mouth began to twitch.

He shut his teeth on his lower lip, holding it, holding his throat. He began to run, clumsily, fighting the water, and then he stopped that, too. He walked, not looking behind him, out into the flooded lock. The door slid shut behind him, automatically.

He walked out across the firm green-silver sand, swallowing the blood that ran in his mouth and choked him.

HE DIDN'T hurry. He was going to be walking for a long, long time. From the position of the ship when it fell he ought to be able to make it to the coast—unless It had been working on him so the figures on the dials hadn't been there at all.

He checked his direction, adjusted the pressure-control in his vac-suit, and plodded on in the eerie undersea moonlight. It wasn't hard going. If he didn't hit a deep somewhere, or meet something too big to handle, or furnish a meal for some species of hungry Venus-weed, he ought to live to face up to the Old Man at H.Q. and tell him two men were dead, the ship lost, and the job messed to hell and gone.

It was beautiful down there. Like the dream-worlds you see when you're doped or delirious. The phosphorescence rose up into the black water and danced there in wavering whorls of cold fire. Fish, queer gaudy little things with jewelled eyes, flicked past Lundy in darts of sudden color, and there were great stands of weed like young forests, spangling the dark water and the phosphorescent glow with huge burning spots of blue and purple and green and silver.

Flowers. Lundy got too close to some of them once. They reached out and opened round mouths full of spines and

sucked at him hungrily. The fish gave them a wide berth. After that, so did Lundy.

He hadn't been walking more than half an hour when he hit the road.

It was a perfectly good road, running straight across the sand. Here and there it was cracked; with some of the huge square blocks pushed up or tipped aside, but it was still a good road, going somewhere.

Lundy stood looking at it with cold prickles running up and down his spine. He'd heard about things like this. Nobody knew an awful lot about Venus yet. It was a young, tough, be-damned-to-you planet, and it was apt to give the snoopy scientific guys a good swift boot in their store teeth.

But even a young planet has, a long past, and stories get around. Legends, songs, folk tales. It was pretty well accepted that a lot of Venus that was under water now hadn't been once, and vice versa. The old girl had her little whimsies while doing the preliminary mock-up of her permanent face.

So once upon a time this road had crossed a plain under a hot pearl-grey sky, going somewhere. Taking caravans from the seacoast, probably. Bales of spices and spider-silk and casks of *vakhi* from the Nahali canebrakes, and silver-haired slave-girls from the high lands of the Cloud People, going along under sultry green *liha*-trees to be sold.

Now it crossed a plain of glowing sand under still black water. The only trees that shadowed it were tall weeds with brilliant, hungry flowers, and the only creatures that followed it were little fish with jewelled eyes. But it was still there, still ready, still going somewhere.

It was headed the same way Lundy was. It must have made a bend somewhere and turned to meet him. Lundy licked cold sweat off his lips and stepped out on it.

He stepped slow and careful, like a man coming alone down the aisle of an empty church.

He walked on the road for a long time. The weeds crowded in thicker along its edges. It seemed to run right through a dense forest of them that spread away as far as Lundy could see on either side. He

was glad of the road. It was wide, and if he stayed in the middle of it the flowers couldn't reach him.

IT GOT darker, because of the weeds covering the sand. Whatever made the phosphorescence didn't like being crowded that way, and pretty soon it was so dark that Lundy had to switch on the light in the top of his helmet. In the edges of the beam he could see the weed fronds moving lazily with the slow breathing of the sea.

The flowers were brighter here. They hung like lamps in the black water, burning with a light that seemed to come out of themselves. Sullen reds and angry yellows, and coldly vicious blues.

Lundy didn't like them:

The weeds grew in thicker and closer. They bulged out from their roots, in over the stone edges. The flowers opened their bright hungry mouths and yearned at Lundy, reaching.

Reaching. Not quite touching. Not yet.

He was tired. The brandy and the benzedrine began to die in him. He changed his oxygen cylinder. That helped, but not much. He took more dope, but he was afraid to go heavy on it lest he drive his heart too hard. His legs turned numb.

He hadn't slept for a long time. Tracking Farrell hadn't been any breeze, and taking him—and It—had been plain and fancy hell. Lundy was only human. He was tired. Bushed. Cooked. Beat to the socks.

He sat down and rested a while, turning off his light to save the battery. The flowers watched him, glowing in the dark. He closed his eyes, but he could still feel them, watching and waiting.

After a minute or two he got up and went on.

The weeds grew thicker, and taller, and heavier with flowers.

More benzedrine, and damn the heart. The helmet light cut a cold white tunnel through the blackness. He followed it, walking faster. Weed fronds met and interlaced high above him, closing him in. Flowers bent inward, downward. Their petals almost brushed him. Fleishy petals, hungry and alive.

He started to run, over the wheel-ruts and the worn hollows of the road that still

went somewhere, under the black sea.

Lundy ran clumsily for a long time between the dark and pressing walls. The flowers got closer. They got close enough to catch his vac-suit, like hands grasping and slipping and grasping again. He began using the blaster.

He burned off a lot of them that way. They didn't like it. They began swaying in from their roots and down from the laced ceiling over his head. They hurt. They were angry. Lundy ran, sobbing without tears.

The road did him in. It crossed him up, suddenly, without warning. It ran along smoothly under the tunnel of weeds, and then it was a broken, jumbled mass of huge stone blocks, tipped up and thrown around like something a giant's kid got tired of playing with.

And the weeds had found places to stand in between them.

Lundy tripped and fell, cracking his head against the back of his helmet. For a moment all he could see was bright light flashing. Then that stopped, and he realized he must have jarred a connection loose somewhere because his own light was out.

He began to crawl over a great tilted block. The flowers burned bright in the darkness. Bright and close. Very close. Lundy opened his mouth. Nothing came out but a hoarse animal whimper. He was still holding the blaster. He fired it off a couple of times, and then he was on top of the block, lying flat on his belly.

He knew it was the end of the line, because he couldn't move any more.

The bright flowers came down through the dark. Lundy lay watching them. His face was quite blank. His dark eyes held a stubborn hatred, but nothing else.

He watched the flowers fasten on his vac-suit and start working. Then, from up ahead, through the dark close tunnel of the weeds, he saw the light.

It flared out suddenly, like lightning. A sheet of hot, bright gold cracking out like a whipped banner, lighting the end of the road.

Lighting the city, and the little procession coming out of it.

Lundy didn't believe any of it. He was half dead already, with his mind floating free of his body and beginning to

be wrapped up in dark clouds. He watched what he saw incuriously.

The golden light died down, and then flared out twice more, rhythmically. The road ran smooth again beyond the end of the tunnel, straight across a narrow plain. Beyond that, the city rose.

Lundy couldn't see much of it, because of the weeds. But it seemed to be a big city. There was a wall around it, of green marble veined with dusky rose, the edges worn round by centuries of water. There were broad gates of pure untarnished gold, standing open on golden pintles. Beyond them was a vast square paved in cloud-grey quartz, and the buildings rose around it like the castles Lundy remembered from Earth and his childhood, when there were clouds of a certain kind at sunset.

That's what the whole place looked like, under the flaring golden light. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset. Remote, dreaming in beauty, with the black water drawn across it like a veil—something never destroyed because it never existed.

The creatures who came from between the golden gates and down the road were like tiny wisps of those clouds, torn free by some cold wandering breeze and driven away from the light.

They came drifting toward Lundy. They didn't seem to be moving fast, but they must have been because quite suddenly they were among the weeds. There were a lot of them; maybe forty or fifty. They seemed to be between three and four feet tall, and they were all the same sad, blue-grey, twilight color.

Lundy couldn't see what they were. They were vaguely man-shaped, and vaguely finny, and something that was more than vaguely something else, only he couldn't place it.

He was suddenly beyond caring. The dull black curtain around his mind got a hole in it, and fear came shrieking through it. He could feel the working and pulling of his vac-suit where the flowers were chewing on it as though it were his own skin.

He could feel sweat running cold on his body. In a minute that would be sea water running, and then . . .

Lundy began to fight. His lips peeled back off his teeth, but he didn't make any noise except his heavy breathing. He

fought the flowers, partly with the blaster, partly with brute strength. No science, no thought. Just the last blind struggle of an animal that didn't want to die.

The flowers held him. They smothered him, crushed him down, wrapped him in lovely burning petals of destruction. He seared a lot of them, but there were always more. Lundy didn't fight long.

He lay on his back, his knees drawn up a little toward a rigid, knotted belly, blind with sweat, his heart kicking him like a logger's boot. Cold, tense—waiting.

And then the flowers went away.

They didn't want to. They let go reluctantly, drawing back and snarling like cats robbed of a fat mouse, making small hungry feints at him. But they went.

LUNDY came nearer fanning off for keeps then than he ever had. Reaction wrung him out like a wet bar-rag. His heart quit beating; his body jerked like something on a string. Then, through a mist that might have been sweat, or tears, or the edge of the Hereafter, he saw the little blue-grey people looking down at him.

They hovered in a cloud above him, holding place with membranes as fluttering and delicate as bird-calls on a windy day. The membranes ran between arm and leg-members, both of which had thin flat swimming-webs. There were suckers on the legs, about where the heels would have been if they'd had feet.

Their bodies were slender and supple, and definitely feminine without having any of the usual human characteristics. They were beautiful. They weren't like anything Lundy had even seen before, or even dreamed about, but they were beautiful.

They had faces. Queer little pixie things without noses. Their mouths were round and tiny and rather sweet, but their eyes were their dominant feature.

Huge round golden eyes with pupils of deep brown. Soft eyes, gentle, inquiring, it made Lundy feel like crying, and so scared that it made him mad.

The flowers kept weaving around hopelessly. When one got too close to Lundy, one of the little people would slap it gently, the way you would a pet dog, and shoo it away.

"Do you live?"

III

LUNDY wasn't surprised by the telepathic voice. Thought-communication was commoner than speech and a lot simpler in many places on the inhabited worlds. Special gave its men a thorough training in it.

"I live, thanks to you."

There was something in the quality of the brain he touched that puzzled him. It was like nothing he'd ever met before.

He got to his feet, not very steadily. "You came just in time. How did you know I was here?"

"Your fear-thoughts carried to us. We know what it is to be afraid. So we came."

"There's nothing I can say but 'Thank you'."

"But of course we helped! Why not? You needn't thank us."

Lundy looked at the flowers burning sullenly in the gloom. "How is it you can boss them around? Why don't they . . ."

"But they're not cannibals! Not like—*The Others*." There was pure cold dread in that last thought.

"Cannibals." Lundy looked up at the cloud of dainty blue-grey woman-things. His skin got cold and a size too small for him.

Their soft golden eyes smiled down at him. "We're different from you, yes. Just as we're different from the fish. What is your thought? Bright things growing—weed—yes, they're kin to us."

Kin, thought Lundy. Yeah. About like we are to the animals. Plants. Living plants were no novelty on Venus. Why not plants with thinking minds? Plants that carried their roots along with them, and watched you with sad soft eyes.

"Let's get out of here," said Lundy.

They went down along the dark tunnel and out onto the road, and the flowers yearned like hungry dogs after Lundy but didn't touch him. He started out across the narrow plain, with the plant-women drifting cloudlike around him.

Seaweed. Little bits of kelp that could talk to you. It made Lundy feel queer.

The city made him feel queer, too. It was dark when he first saw it from the plain, with only the moonlight glow of the sand to touch it. It was a big city, stretching away behind its barrier wall. Big and

silent and very old, waiting there at the end of its road.

It was curiously more real in the dim light. Lundy lost trace of the water for a moment. It was like walking toward a sleeping city in the moonlight, feeling the secretive, faintly hostile strength of it laired and leashed, until dawn. . . .

Only there would never be a dawn for this city. Never, any more.

Lundy wanted suddenly to run away.

"Don't be afraid. We live there. It's safe."

Lundy shook his head irritably. Quite suddenly the brilliant light flared out again, three regular flashes. It seemed to come from somewhere to the right, out of a range of undersea mountains. Lundy felt a faint trembling of the sand. A volcanic fissure, probably, opened when the land sank.

The golden light changed the city again. Cloud-cuckoo land at sunset—a place where you could set your boots down on a dream.

When he went in through the gates he was awed, but not afraid. And then, while he stood in the square looking up at the great dim buildings, the thought came drifting down to him out of the cloud of little woman-things.

"It *was* safe. It was happy—before *She* came."

AFTER a long moment Lundy said, "She?"

"We haven't seen her. But our mates have. She came a little while ago and walked through the streets, and all our mates left us to follow her. They say she's beautiful beyond any of us, and . . ."

"And her eyes are hidden, and they have to see them. They have to look into her eyes or go crazy, so they follow her."

The sad little blue-grey cloud stirred in the dark water. Golden eyes looked down at him.

"How did you know? Do you follow her, too?"

Lundy took a deep, slow breath. The palms of his hands were wet. "Yes. Yes, I followed her, too."

"We feel your thought. . . ." They came down close around him. Their delicate membranes fluttered like fairy wings.

Their golden eyes were huge and soft and pleading.

"Can you help us? Can you bring our mates back safe? They've forgotten everything. If The Others should come . . ."

"The Others?"

Lundy's brain was drowned in stark and terrible fear. Pictures came through it. Vague gigantic dreams of nightmare . . .

"They come, riding the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy." The little woman-things were shaken suddenly like leaves in a gust of wind.

"We hide from them in the buildings. We can keep them out, away from our seed and the little new ones. But our mates have forgotten. If The Others come while they follow Her, outside and away from safety, they'll all be killed. We'll be left alone, and there'll be no more seed for us, and no more little new ones."

They pressed in close around him, touching him with their small blue-grey forefins.

"Can you help us? Oh, can you help us?"

Lundy closed his eyes. His mouth twitched and set. When he opened his eyes again they were hard as agates.

"I'll help you," he said, "or die trying."

It was dark in the great square, with only the pale sandglow seeping through the gates. For a moment the little blue-grey woman-creatures clung around him, not moving, except as the whole mass of them swayed slightly with the slow rhythm of the sea.

Then they burst away from him, outward, in a wild surge of hope—and Lundy stood with his mouth open, staring.

They weren't blue-grey any longer. They glowed suddenly, their wings and their dainty, supple bodies, a warm soft green that had a vibrant pulse of life behind it. And they blossomed.

The long, slender, living petals must have been retracted, like the fronds of a touch-me-not, while they wore the sad blue-grey. Now they broke out like coronals of flame around their small heads.

Blue and scarlet and gold, poppy-red and violet and flame, silver-white and warm pink like a morning cloud, streaming in the black water. Streaming from

small green bodies that rolled and tumbled high up against the dark, dreaming buildings like the butterflies that had danced there before the sunlight was lost forever.

Quite suddenly, then, they stopped. They drifted motionless in the water, and their colors dimmed. Lundy said,

"Where are they?"

"Deep in the city, beyond our buildings here—in the streets where only the curious young ones ever go. Oh, bring them back! Please bring them back!"

"If I come back myself," said Lundy, "I'll bring them."

He left them hovering in the great dark square and went on into the city.

HE WALKED down broad paved streets channelled with wheel-ruts and hollowed by generations of sandalled feet. The great water-worn buildings lifted up on either side, lighted by the erratic glare of the distant fissure.

The window-openings, typical of most Venusian architecture, were covered by grilles of marble and semi-precious stone, intricately hand-pierced like bits of jewelry. The great golden doors stood open on their uncorroded hinges. Through them Lundy could watch the life of the little plant-people being lived.

In some of the buildings the lower floor had been covered with sand. Plant-women hovered protectively over them, brushing the sand smooth where the water disturbed it. Lundy guessed that these were seed beds.

In other places there were whole colonies of tiny flower-things still rooted in the sand; a pale spring haze of green in the dimness. They sat in placid rows, nodding their pastel baby coronals and playing solemnly with bits of bright weed and colored stones. Here, too, the plant-women watched and guarded lovingly.

Several times Lundy saw groups of young plantlings, grown free of the sand, being taught to swim by the woman-creatures, tumbling in the black water like bright petals on a spring wind.

All the women were the same sad blue-grey, with their blossoms hidden.

They'd stay that way, unless he, Lundy, could finish the job Special had sent him to do. The job he hadn't been quite big enough to handle up to now.

Farrell, with the flesh flayed off his bones, and not feeling it because *She* was all he could think of. Jackie Smith, drowned in a flooded lock because *She* wanted to be free and he had helped her.

Was this Lundy guy so much bigger than Farrell and Smith, and all the other men who had gone crazy over Her? Big enough to catch The Vampire Lure in a net and keep it there, and not go nuts himself?

Lundy didn't feel that big. Not anywhere near that big.

He was remembering things. The first time he'd had It in a net. The last few minutes before the wreck, when he'd heard Her crying for freedom from inside the safe. Jackie Smith's face when he walked in with the water from the flooded lock, and his, Lundy's, own question—*Oh Lord, what did he see before he drowned?*

The tight cold knot was back in Lundy's belly again, and this time it had spurs on.

He left the colony behind him, walking down empty streets lit by the rhythmic flaring of the volcanic fissure. There was damage here. Pavements cracked and twisted with the settling, towers shaken down, the carved stone jalousies split out of the windows. Whole walls had fallen in, in some places, and most of the golden doors were wrecked, jammed wide open or gone entirely.

A dead city. So dead and silent that you couldn't breathe with it, and so old it made you crawl inside.

A swell place to go mad in, following a dream.

After a long time Lundy saw them—the mates of the little seaweed women. A long, long trail of them like a flight of homing birds, winding between the dark and broken towers.

They looked like their women. A little bigger, a little coarser, with strong tough dark-green bodies and brilliant coronals. Their golden eyes were fixed on something Lundy couldn't see, and they looked like the eyes of Lucifer yearning at the gates of Heaven.

Lundy began to run against the water, cutting across a wide plaza to get under the head of the procession. He unhooked the net from his belt with hands that felt like a couple of dead fish.

THEN he staggered suddenly, lost his footing, and went sprawling. It was as though somebody had pushed him with a strong hand. When he tried to get up it pushed him again, hard. The golden glare from the fissure was steadier now, and very bright.

The trail of little man-things bent suddenly in a long whipping bow, and Lundy knew what was the matter.

There was a current rising in the city. Rising like the hot white winds that used to howl in from the sea, carrying the rains.

"They ride the currents that go between the hot cracks in the mountains and the cold deeps. They eat. They destroy."

The Others. The Others, who were cannibals . . .

She led the bright trail of plant-men between the towers, and there was a current rising in the streets.

Lundy got up. He balanced himself against the thrust of the current and ran, following the procession. It was clumsy work, with the water and his leaded boots. He tried to gauge where *It*—or *She*—was from the focus of the plant-men's eyes.

The hot light flared up brighter. The water pulled and shoved at him. He looked back once, but he couldn't see anything in the shadows between the towers. He was scared.

He shook the net out, and he was scared.

Funny that *It*—or *She*—didn't see him. Funny *It* didn't sense his mind, even though he tried to keep it closed. But he wasn't a very big object down there in the shadows under the walls, and creating an illusion for that many minds would be a strain on anything, even creature from outer space.

He'd had the breaks once before, when he caught up with Farrell. He prayed to have them again.

He got them, for what good it did him.

The current caught the procession and pulled it down close to Lundy. He watched their eyes. *She* was still leading them. *She* had a physical body even if you couldn't see it, and the current would pull it, no matter how tiny it was.

He cast his net out, fast.

It bellied out in the black water and came swooping back to his pull, and there was something in it. Something tiny and cylindrical and vicious. Something alive.

He drew the net tight, shivering and sweating with nervous excitement. And the plant-men attacked.

They swooped on him in a brilliant cloud. Their golden eyes burned. There was no sense in them. Their minds shrieked and clamored at him, a formless howl of rage—and fear, for *Her*.

They beat at him with their little green fins. Their coronals blazed, hot angry splashes of colored flame against the dark water. They wrenched at the net, tore at it, beating their membranes like wings against the rising current.

Lundy was a solid, muscular little guy. He snarled and fought for the net like a wolf over a yearling lamb. He lost it anyway. He fell on his face under a small mountain of churning man-things and lay gasping for the breath they knocked out of him, thankful for the vac-suit that saved him from being crushed flat.

He watched them take the net. They clustered around it in a globe like a swarm of bees, rolling around in the moving water. Their golden eyes had a terrible stricken look.

They couldn't open the net. Lundy had drawn it tight and fastened it, and they didn't have fingers. They stroked and pawed it with their fins, but they couldn't let *Her* out.

Lundy got up on his hands and knees. The current quickened. It roared down between the broken towers like a black wind and took the swarm of man-things with it, still clutching the net.

And then The Others came.

IV

LUNDY saw them a long way off. For a moment he didn't believe it. He thought they must be shadows cast by the fitful glare of the fissure. He braced himself against a building and stood watching.

Stood watching, and then seeing as the rushing current brought them closer. He didn't move, except to lift his jaw a little trying to breathe. He simply stood, cold as a dead man's feet and just as numb.

They looked something like the giant rays he'd seen back on Earth, only they were plants. Great sleek bulbs of kelp with their leaves spread like wings to the current. Their long teardrop bodies ended

in a flange like a fishtail that served as a rudder and they had tentacles for arms.

They were colored a deep red-brown like dried blood. The golden flare of the fissure made their cold eyes gleam. It showed their round mouth-holes full of sharp hair-spines, and the stinging deadly cups on the undersides of their huge tentacles.

Those arms were long enough and tough enough to pierce even the fabric of a vac-suit. Lundy didn't know whether they ate flesh or not, but it didn't matter. He wouldn't care, after he'd been slapped with one of those tentacles.

The net with *Her* in it was getting away from him, and The Others were coming down on top of him. Even if he'd wanted to quit his job right then there wasn't any place to hide in these ruined, doorless buildings.

Lundy shot his suit full of precious oxygen and added himself to the creatures riding that black current to hell.

It swept him like a bubble between the dead towers, but not fast enough. He wasn't very far ahead of the kelp-things. He tried to swim, to make himself go faster, but it was like racing an oared dinghy against a fleet of sixteen-meter sloops with everything set.

He could see the cluster of plant-men ahead of him. They hadn't changed position. They rolled and tumbled in the water, using a lot of the forward push to go around with, so that Lundy was able to overhaul them.

But not fast enough. Not nearly fast enough.

The hell of it was he couldn't see anything to do if he got there. The net was way inside the globe. They weren't going to let him take it away. And if he did, what would it get anybody? They'd still follow *Her*, without sense enough to run away from the kelp-beasts.

Unless . . .

It hit Lundy all of a sudden. A hope, a solution. Hit him neatly as the leading kelp-thing climbed up on his heels and brought its leaf-wings in around him, hard.

Lundy let go an animal howl of fear and kicked wildly, shooting more air into his suit. He went up fast, and the wings grazed his boots but didn't quite catch him. Lundy rolled over and fed the thing

a full charge out of his blaster, right through the eye.

It began to thrash and flounder like a shot bird. The ones coming right behind it got tangled up with it and then stopped to eat. Pretty soon there were a lot of them tumbling around it and fighting like a flock of gulls over a fish. Lundy swam furiously, cursing the clumsy suit.

There were a lot of the things that hadn't stopped, and the ones that had wouldn't stay long. Lundy kicked and strained and sweated. He was scared. He had the wind up so hard it was blowing his guts out, and it was like swimming in a nightmare, where you're tied.

The current seemed to move faster up where he was now. He gathered his thoughts into a tight beam and threw them into the heart of the cluster of plant-men, at the creature in the net.

I can free you. I'm the only one that can.

A voice answered him, inside his mind. The voice he had heard once before, back in the cabin of the wrecked flier. A voice as sweet and small as Pan-pipes calling on the Hills of Fay.

I know. My thought crossed yours. . . . The elfin voice broke suddenly, almost on a gasp of pain. Very faintly, Lundy heard:

Heavy! Heavy! I am slow. . . .

A longing for something beyond his experience stabbed Lundy like the cry of a frightened child. And then the globe of man-things burst apart as though a giant wind had struck them.

Lundy watched them wake up, out of their dream.

She had vanished, and now they didn't know why they were here or what they were doing. They had a heart-shaking memory of some beauty they couldn't touch, and that was all. They were lost, and frightened.

Then they saw The Others.

IT WAS as though someone had hit them a stunning blow with his fist. They hung motionless, swept along by the current, staring back with dazed golden eyes. Their brilliant petals curled inward and vanished, and the green of their bodies dulled almost to black.

The kelp-beasts spread their wings wide

and rushed toward them like great dark birds. And up ahead, under the sullen golden glare, Lundy saw the distant buildings of the colony. Some of the doors were still open, with knots of tiny figures waiting beside them.

Lundy was still a little ahead of the kelp-things. He grabbed up the floating net and hooked it to his belt, and then steered himself clumsily toward a broken tower jutting up to his right.

He hurled a wild telepathic shout at the plant-men, trying to make them turn and run, telling them that he'd hold off The Others. They were too scared to hear him. He cursed them, almost crying. On the third try he got through and they came to life in a hurry, rushing away with all the speed they had.

By that time Lundy was braced on his pinnacle of stone, and the kelp-beasts were right on top of him.

He got busy with both blasters. He burned down a lot of the things. Pretty soon the water all around him was full of thrashing bodies where the living had stopped to fight over the dead. But he couldn't get them all, and a few got by him.

Almost without turning his head he could see huge red bird-shapes overhauling stragglers, wrapping them in broad wings, and then lying quiet in the rush of the current, feeding.

They kept the doors open, those little woman-things. They waited until the last of their mates came home, and then slammed the golden panels on the blunt noses of the kelp-things. Not many of the little men were lost. Only a few small wives would hide their petals and wear their sad blue-grey. Lundy felt good about that.

It was nice he felt good about something, because Old Mr. Grim was climbing right up on Lundy's shoulders, showing his teeth. The kelp-beasts had finally found out who was hurting them. Also, now, Lundy was the only food in sight.

They were ganging up for a rush, wheeling and sideslipping in the spate of black water. Lundy got two more, and then one blaster charge fizzled out, and right after it the other one became dull.

Lundy stood alone on his broken tower and watched death sweep in around him.

And the sweet elfin voice spoke out of the net:

Let me free. Let me free!

Lundy set his jaw tight and did the only thing he could think of. He deflated his vac-suit and jumped, plunging down into the black depths of the ruined building.

The kelp-things folded their leaves back like the wings of a diving bird and came down after him, using their tails for power.

Fitful flares of light came through broken walls and window openings. Lundy went down a long way. He didn't have to bother about stairs. The quakes had knocked most of the floors out.

The kelp-things followed him. Their long sinuous bodies were maneuverable as a shark's, and they were fast.

And all the time the little voice cried in his mind, asking for freedom.

Lundy hit bottom.

The walls were fairly solid down here, and it was dark, and the place was choked with rubble. Things got a little confused. Lundy's helmet light was shot, and he wouldn't have used it anyway because it would have guided the hunters.

He felt them, swirling and darting around him. He ran, to no place in particular. The broken stones tripped him. Three times great sinewy bodies brushed him, knocking him spinning, but they couldn't quite find him in the darkness, chiefly because they got in each other's way.

Lundy fell through suddenly into a great hall, lying beside whatever room he had been in and a little below it. It was hardly damaged. Golden doors stood open to the water, and there was plenty of light.

Plenty of light for Lundy to see some more of the kelp-beasts poking hopeful faces in, and plenty of light for them to see Lundy.

The elfin voice called, *Let me out! Let me out!*

LUNDY didn't have breath enough left to curse. He turned and ran, and the kelp-beasts gave a lazy flirt of their tails and caught up with him in the first thirty feet. They almost laughed in his face.

The only thing that saved Lundy was that when they opened their leaf-wings to

take him they interfered with each other. It slowed them, just for a moment. Just long enough for Lundy to see the door.

A little door of black stone with no carving on it, standing half-open on a golden pivot, about ten feet away.

Lundy made for it. He dodged out from under one huge swooping wing, made a wild leap that almost tore him apart, and grabbed the edge of the door with his hands, doubling up and pulling.

A tentacle tip struck his feet. His lead boots hit the floor, and for a minute he thought his legs were broken. But the surge of water the blow made helped to carry him in through the narrow opening.

Half a dozen blunt red-brown heads tried to come through after him, and were stopped. Lundy was down on his hands and knees. He was trying to breathe, but somebody had put a heavy building on his chest. Also, it was getting hard to see anything.

He crawled over and put his shoulder against the door and pushed. It wouldn't budge. The building had settled and jammed the pivot for keeps. Even the butting kelp-things couldn't jar it.

But they kept on trying. Lundy crawled away. After a while some of the weight went off his chest and he could see better.

A shaft of fitful golden light shot in through a crack about ten feet above him. A small crack, not even big enough to let a baby in and out. It was the only opening other than the door.

The room was small, too. The stone walls were dead black, without ornament or carving, except on the rear wall.

There was a square block of jet there, about eight feet long by four wide, hollowed in a peculiar and unpleasantly suggestive fashion. Above it there was a single huge ruby set in the stone, burning red like a foretaste of hell fire.

Lundy had seen similar small chambers in old cities still on dry land. They were where men had gone to die for crimes against society and the gods.

Lundy looked at the hungry monsters pushing at the immovable door and laughed. There was no particular humor in it. He fired his last shot, and sat down.

The brutes might go away sometime, maybe. But unless they went within a

very few minutes, it wasn't going to matter. Lundy's oxygen was getting low, and it was still a long way to the coast.

The voice from the net cried out, *Let me free!*

"The hell with you," said Lundy. He was tired. He was so tired he didn't care much whether he lived or died.

He made sure the net was fast to his belt, and tightly closed.

"If I live, you go back to Vhia with me. If I die—well, you won't be able to hurt anybody again. There'll be one less devil loose on Venus."

Free! Free! Free! I must be free! This heavy weight. . .

"Sure. Free to lead guys like Farrell into going crazy, and leaving their wives and kids. Free to kill. . . ." He looked with sultry eyes at the net. "Jackie Smith was my pal. You think I'd let you go? You think anything you could do would make me let you go?"

Then he saw her.

Right through the net, as though the metal mesh was cellophane. She crouched there in his lap, a tiny thing less than two feet high, doubled over her knees. The curve of her back was something an angel had carved out of a whisp of warm, pearl-pink cloud.

V

LUNDY broke into a trembling sweat. He shut his eyes. It didn't matter. He saw her. He couldn't help seeing her. He tried to fight his mind, but he was tired. . . .

Her hair hid most of her. It had black night in it, and moonbeams, and glints of fire like a humming-bird's breast. Hair you dream about. Hair you could smother yourself in, and die happy.

She raised her head slowly, letting the veil of warm darkness fall away from her. Her eyes were shadowed, hidden under thick lashes. She raised her hands to Lundy, like a child praying.

But she wasn't a child. She was a woman, naked as a pearl and so lovely that Lundy sobbed with it, in shivering ecstasy.

"No," he said hoarsely. "No. No!"

She held her arms up to be free, and didn't move.

Lundy tore the net loose from his belt and flung it on the altar block. He got up and went lurching to the door, but the kelp-things were still there, still hungry. He sat down again, in a corner as far away from both places as he could get, and took some benzedrine.

It was the wrong thing to do. He'd about reached his limit. It made him light-headed. He couldn't fight her, couldn't shut her out. She knelt on the altar with her hands stretched out to him, and a shaft of golden light falling on her like something in a church.

"Open your eyes," he said. "Open your eyes and look at me."

Let me free. Let me free!

Freedom Lundy didn't know anything about. The freedom of outer space, with the whole Milky Way to play in and nothing to hold you back. And with the longing, fear. A blind, stricken terror. . . .

"No!" Lundy said.

Things got dark for Lundy. Presently he found himself at the altar block, fumbling at the net.

He wrenched away and went stumbling back to his corner. He was twitching all over like a frightened dog.

"Why do you want to do it? Why do you have to torture men—drive them crazy for something they can't have — kill them?"

Torture? Crazy? Kill? I don't understand. They worship me. It is pleasant to be worshiped.

"Pleasant?" Lundy was yelling aloud, and didn't know it. "Pleasant, damn you! So you kill a good guy like Farrell, and drown Jackie Smith. . . ."

Kill? Wait — give me the thought again. . . .

Something inside Lundy turned cold and still, holding its breath. He sent the thought again. Death. Cessation. Silence, and the dark.

The tiny glowing figure on the black stone bent over its knees again, and it was sadder than a seabird's cry at sunset.

So will I be soon. So will all of us. Why did this planet take us out of space? The weight, the pressure breaks and crushes us, and we can't get free. In space there was no death, but now we die. . . .

Lundy stood quite still. The blood beat like drums in his temples.

"You mean that all you creatures out of space are dying? That the—the madness will stop of itself?"

Soon. Very soon. There was no death in space! There was no pain! We didn't know about them. Everything here was new, to be tasted and played with. We didn't know. . . .

"Hell!" said Lundy, and looked at the creatures beating at the crack of the stone door. He sat down.

You, too, will die.

LUNDY raised his head slowly. His eyes had a terrible brightness.

"You like to be worshiped," he whispered. "Would you like to be worshiped after you die? Would you like to be remembered always as something good and beautiful—a goddess?"

That would be better than to be forgotten.

"Will you do what I ask of you, then? You can save my life, if you will. You can save the lives of a lot of those little flower-people. I'll see to it that everyone knows your true story. Now you're hated and feared, but after that you'll be loved."

Will you let me free of this net?

"If you promise to do what I ask."

I would rather die at least free of this net. The tiny figure trembled and shook back the veil of dark hair. *Hurry. Tell me. . . .*

"Lead these creatures away from the door. Lead all of them in the city away, to the fire in the mountain where they'll be destroyed."

They will worship me. It is better than dying in a net. I promise.

Lundy got up and went to the altar. His feet were not steady. His hands were not steady, either, untying the net. Sweat ran in his eyes. She didn't have to keep her promise. She didn't have to. . . .

The net fell away. She stood up on her tiny pink feet. Slowly, like a swirl of mist straightening in a little breeze. She threw her head back and smiled. Her mouth was red and sulky, her teeth whiter than new snow. Her lowered lids had

faint blue shadows traced on them.

She began to grow, in the golden shaft of light, like a pillar of cloud rising toward the sun. Lundy's heart stood still. The clear gleam of her skin, the line of her throat and her young breasts, the supple turn of her flank and thigh. . . .

You worship me, too.

Lundy stepped back, two lurching steps. "I worship you," he whispered. "Let me see your eyes."

She smiled and turned her head away. She stepped off the altar block, floating past him through the black water. A dream-thing, without weight or substance, and more desirable than all the women Lundy had seen in his life or his dreams.

He followed her, staggering. He tried to catch her. "Open your eyes! Please open your eyes!"

She floated on, through the crack of the stone door. The kelp-things didn't see her. All they saw was Lundy, coming toward them.

"Open your eyes!"

She turned, then, just before Lundy had stepped out to death in the hall beyond. He stopped, and watched her raise her shadowed lids.

He screamed, just once, and fell forward onto the black floor.

He never knew how long he lay there. It couldn't have been long in time, because he still had barely enough oxygen to make it to the coast when he came to. The kelp-beasts were gone.

But the time to Lundy was an eternity—an eternity he came out of with whitened hair and bitter lines around his mouth, and a sadness that never left his eyes.

He'd only had his dream a little while. A few brief moments, already shadowed by death. His mind was drugged and tired, and didn't feel things as deeply and clearly as it might. That was all that saved him.

But he knew what Jackie Smith saw before he drowned. He knew why men had died or gone mad forever, when they looked into the eyes of their dream, and by looking, destroyed it.

Because, behind those shadowed, perfect lids, there was—*Nothing*.