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THE CRUCTARS ARE COMING!

by PAUL LAWRENCE PAYNE



MINIONS of the MOON

by WILLIAM GRAY BEYER

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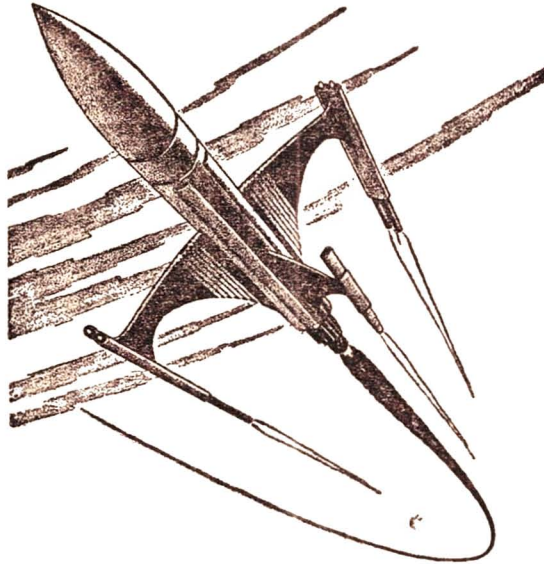
• SUMMER (Apr.-June) 1952

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THE CRUCTARS ARE COMING!

by Paul Lawrence Payne **2**

Earth, the year 1992. Dark atrocities suddenly startled the Utopian world. Yet only one man had actually witnessed the Cructar Death, and who wanted to believe him—"Bottleneck" Blodgett, that inconvenient, flat-footed, prophetic fool.



MINIONS OF THE MOON

by William Gray Beyer **54**

This was the Dawn World, not Civilization's gloaming, that awoke the centuries-entombed Mark. Fur-kilted hunters again roamed Earth's forests. Wing-helmeted warriors plundered the dead-city coasts. Only Evil had advanced, climbing to technological perfection. Mark, 20th-century man, marched to meet the bursting renaissance terror with the slim weapons of the primitives.

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The Cructars Are Coming!

By PAUL LAWRENCE PAYNE

Earth, the year 1992. Dark atrocities suddenly startled the Utopian world. Yet only one man had actually witnessed the Cructar Death, and who wanted to believe him—
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flat-footed, prophetic fool.

THE METEOR drifted in from space. A jagged, tortured mass of nickel-iron weighing some thirty metric tons, it tumbled slowly across the black and empty hours as if it were on the path of cosmic destiny.

Far ahead of it, a small star blazed. The meteor's path bent as it acknowledged the luminary's faint pull and took up a sweeping curve in toward it. The meteor began slowly adding to its own hundred-kilometers-a minute drift, accelerating at an infinitesimal rates. . . .

Yet something nearer lay athwart the meteor's orbit. It appeared to be a flat wheel of metal standing on its edge, at right angles to the distant star. The rim of the metal disk spun at blurring speed, but the center remained still. The whole of it was as fixed in space as anything can ever be.

But now this little plate of metal began to move in its place, turning toward the meteor as the latter swung past, at a distance of one and a half light minutes, about a third of a million kilos.

In the center of the disk's outward face was a small transparent dome swelling from the polished sheen of metal. Within the dome perched a tiny man, hardly more than a meter in length.

Not once did this little fellow look up through the dome toward the meteor. At that distance he could not have seen it. Instead, his unblinking little eyes remained fixed on instruments before him—radar screen, gauges and dials which told the little man about the mass, volume, density, composition, static charge, course and velocity of the meteor trundling so innocently past. To the Martian—or native of Guzdla

as they called the home planet, there was nothing suspicious about the meteor.

The meteor slipped on in toward the star, now a fiery sunburst swelling against the brilliant-studded backdrop of space. The fragment's broken points and surfaces began to catch its far-off gleam.

Presently—in a mere matter of a thousand hours or so—a lesser planet of the star came spinning up out of the night, a lustrous, opalescent globe, about which circled one cold, pale bead of a satellite. Sweeping past, the planet picked up the false meteor and began pulling it in.

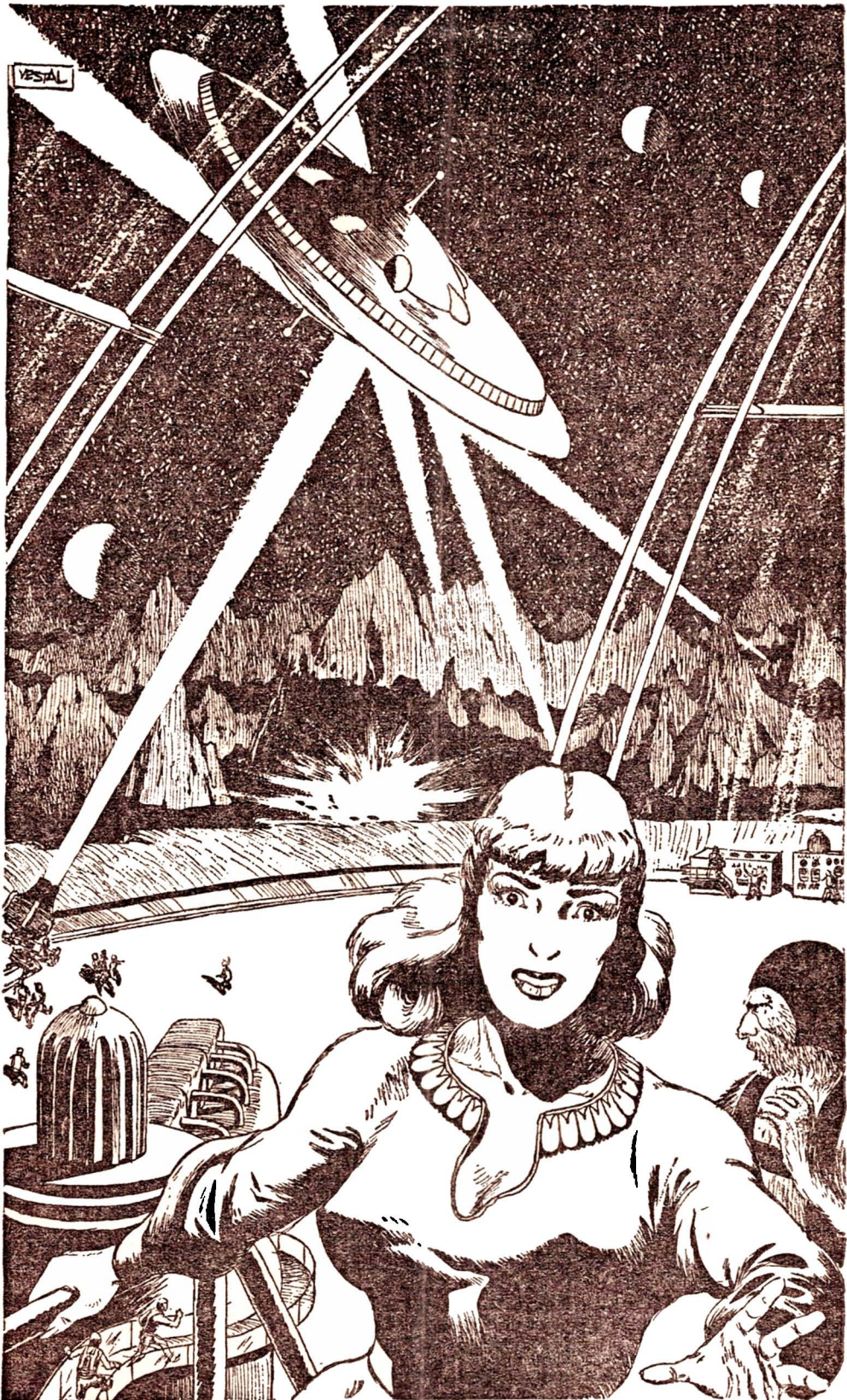
Abruptly the meteor exploded into a hurtling charge of white-hot particles that streamed in a body across the planet's sky, each particle sizzling rapidly into nothingness, vaporizing in the heat. Yet the explosion, at that altitude, seemed nothing more than a brief flare along a streak of light.

But, within the cloud of its glowing matter, traveled something else. Invisible at that height and obscured in the bursting light, something like a yacht-sized black egg emerged in the rear.

Coruscating fire blossomed from its nose and the ebony ovoid fell further back. Its dull surface reflected no light. The fire it spurted would seem from below but part of the shooting star skittering across the night.

The egg changed shape. Wings thrust out from its sides and it banked off into the darkness. Its course became a downward spiral, but gentle and easy. From the surface below no one could have known it was coming in. The most trained observer would hardly note that momentary flicker.

Gently and easily, down it came. . . .



"VERY pretty," said a young man atop a hill in Oregon. He was only a long, thin shape in the darkness. His big hands held a pair of powerful field glasses, of the type known as "super binocs," to his dark, piercing eyes. Powerful as the instrument was, it did not greatly enlarge the thread of fire across the velvet, star-strewn night.

"Yeah," said the other young man beside him. His shape was shorter and bulkier. The instant that streak of incandescence faded into a momentary after-image, he dropped his gaze to the mountain that reared across the valley. Three and a half kilometers away, its black peak was a shoulder against the stars.

The longer of these two shapes hunched against the fallen tree stretched his arms and yawned. The crack of his distended jaws sounded clearly on the still air. Bringing his arms down, his gaze fell on his wristwatch. It had no face or dial, but on the edge toward him four luminous numerals shone steadily into the night. 2359. As he looked, the 3, 5 and 9 blinked out, to be replaced by a four and two zeros. 2400. Midnight.

He sighed and stretched his long legs restlessly out along the ground. "Ed, I wish somebody'd tell me just what we're doing up here."

"We're watching that Martie observatory," came in a dogged voice from the other shadow.

"Why?"

"Why?" The other's voice became a little incredulous. "Because the time's come to do *something*, that's why. There are Marties out tonight, roaming the world, lookin' for fresh victims."

"So . . .?" The long shadow's voice was ruminative, patient.

"What's the matter with you? You thinkin' of arcin' out on me?"

The long shadow sighed again. "I don't want to arc out on you. All of a sudden, it doesn't make sense."

"Why don't it make sense?" Ed demanded. "How do you know we won't see something up there that'll give us a clue to these atrocities? It's a wonder nobody's thought of it before this. Marties makin' the snatch almost every night now and all the while there sit them observa-

tories, so quiet and innocent that nobody ever thinks of them. I'm playin' a hunch, Link—and the hunch is that we'll see something come out of one of those observatories one of these nights. And then we'll know something."

"And I'm beginning to get a hunch of my own, Ed—a different kind of hunch. My hunch is that we won't see a thing."

ED squirmed. "They'll be thinkin' they're not being watched way off here."

"Can't you see how silly this is? Nobody has ever seen an atrocity."

"Yeah, an' you know why? Because the Marties get to them, that's why. They get to any witness and drag him off with the rest—for whatever they do to them. Take 'em off to Mars and cut 'em up alive."

"That's slag," Link informed him. "They're smarter than that, Ed. You ought to know how smart they are. They've been on Pslan here, as they call it, for just about forty years now, and look at all the things they've given us. The nucleonic converter—no more shortages of any elements. The magnetic furnace—melts anything in a second. The hydroponic concentrates. Alloys, fabrics, technical shortcuts—"

Ed peered up at him curiously. "Know who you sound like? You sound like that television producer, Newton Campbell."

Link snorted. "I'm not for the Marties. I'm a paid-up member of Free Terra, my boy. I only mention what the Marties have done for us to remind you that they're smart. In fact," he mused, "that's what's wrong about these atrocities. Everytime the WBI pokes around afterwards, it finds a bit of evidence that seems to prove the Marties are the ones who did it. Nothing much—a little belt or a ring, or something. But they're too smart for that, Ed."

"Smart, hell! They're just careless. They are getting ready to take all of Terra and it don't matter anymore who knows it."

"What gets me," commented the tall man, "is the way Free Terra has been acting lately. You've heard it as often as I have, Ed—we're going to drive the Marties out. Drive 'em out?" He laughed. "How are we going to do it?"

It was Ed's turn to snort. "I wouldn't worry about that, fella. The way I hear it,

we've got more than one ace up our sleeves."

Link waved a weary hand. "Sure, sure."

"That stuff takes time," complained Ed. "There's still too many people who think the Marties are gods. You've heard 'em. They say we shouldn't call 'em Marties. We should use their own name—Guzdla, and Guzdians." He grunted. "I'll goozle them!"

A DULL throb shook the night about them, a soundless reverberation of pressure too low for sound. Pivoting on his heel, Link caught a faint wash of light across the treetops of the far wall of the valley, a flicker that died as he looked.

"Hey," said Ed, frozen in a half-crouch, "what was that?"

Link was already on tiptoe, craning to peer over the shoulder of the hill.

"I can't see," snapped Link, moving forward a bit.

There came another sheet of light, followed by another heavy surge of pressure on their eardrums. Then the valley went dark again. But what sounded like a thin scream floated up to them.

"N-n-no!" whispered Ed shakily. "It couldn't be. . . ."

Link scooped up the binocs and leaped forward. "The camera, Ed," he shouted over his shoulder. "Let's get down where we can see!"

Link heard the other plunging madly through the bushes away from the strange light.

Quickly and surely he moved to his left where a rock outcropping hung over the trees below. "Come back, Ed. This way!" he called, flinging himself out on the rock and clamping the binocs to his eyes.

The steep valley below was beginning to light up again. The light, wavering and dancing, came from a house that was burning, one of the older wooden dwellings that still stood in backwaters like this.

"The Thatchers!"

Link put his eyes to the binocs again. Full magnification brought the burning house, lying some five hundred meters below, to within five meters of him.

Flames were licking along its eaves. And as he looked, his muscles became rigid. Like one who had gazed upon Medusa, he was turned to stone.

Several figures moved about the ever more brightly burning house. They were tall—*tall*, their shadows mere black ropes writhing across nearby trees, or ribboning out along the Thatchers' acreage of early planting.

They were—what? These things, stalk-like, with rubbery limbs and large heads, standing a good meter higher than the humans struggling in their grip—their faces serious and thoughtful, as if worried lest the humans might not yet be saved from the fire. . . .

But, if the Thatchers had been rescued in time from their blazing home, why did they continue to struggle out there on the lawn? Why did Mrs. Thatcher go down on her knees, lifting her hands like that? Why did Old Man Thatcher swing so mightily with his fists all of a sudden, until a ropy arm rose and fell on his head, causing him to sag, limp? Why were the Thatcher brothers being dragged off like sacks of potatoes, each held by the scruff of his neck, toes furrowing the grass? Why was the younger Thatcher girl, still in her teens, writhing and kicking so fiercely, her mouth agape with screams that Link's binocs couldn't bring to him?

The tall ones, in the end, had to drag off every one of the Thatchers, limp or fighting. Link followed them tensely with the binocs.

OFF down the dirt road went the tall ones, their motions strangely fluid, their big heads bobbing almost indolently, their various burdens causing them no apparent effort. One of them led the Thatcher cow. The beast was tossing its head and bucking a little, its udder swinging wildly. Another walked backward, behind the rest, sweeping the road in his odd way with a branch, as if to obliterate all footprints. The flickering flame-lights followed them all, rippling over the group.

Further down the road, where Old Man Thatcher had evidently cleared a bit of land for an extra crop of hay, there now rested a Guzdian ring-ship, slightly canted on the slope.

To it went the tall ones. It was one of the big ships, some fifty meters in diameter, the kind the Guzdians had converted for Terran use.

Link, his breathing now only a shaky flutter, watched the ship's ventral door slide open, watched the tall ones force their burdens within, watched them enter, the door shut, the perimeter ring begin to revolve, to spin, the ship rise with graceful ease and glide off into the air.

Down below the house blazed brightly. Smoke permeated the air through the valley and its faint tang drifted in and out of Link's flaring nostrils. His eyes held dancing light that reflected from their own shiny hardness, as he stared down.

Then his head jerked up. Far down the valley, the ring ship hung at a tilt, spinning, beginning to drift back slowly. Its course was a rising line that would carry it level with the rock on which Link lay.

He rolled down off the rock and landed in juniper. He crouched there for a moment, his eyes darting about. Then he began inching his way through and around the bristling bushes, working toward the nearest tree.

Once under its thick spreading branches, he turned to peer back. Above the murky glow of the burning house, the ring-ship floated gracefully, almost lazily, tilting this way and that. Link held his breath as it drifted past, scarcely fifty meters straight out from him, and went on up the valley.

He waited until it was cut off by the shoulder of the hill and then he was up and running. "Ed! Ed!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

No answer came as he dashed between the trees. Near the top of the hill, the pines thinned out and he paused, searching the sky and the surrounding country with wary eyes.

The mountain was a dark featureless bulk, its outlines indistinct. The little knob riding its crest eluded even the hypermagnification of the super binocs. There were many such knobs clinging to mountain peaks all over the world. They were the astronomical observatories of Guzdla.

Yet the tall things had not come out of the observatory.

Equally impressive were the little men who had put it there. So perfectly like the denizens of Terra, even to their dainty fingernails and their seed-pearl teeth, the wonder of it was that their evolution had been so closely parallel. They would have

seemed children of Earth, were it not for their daintiness and grace, and the light fuzz all over them. Link well remembered the time when they had come and gone freely among their friends of Earth.

He had never seen one standing full three meters tall, nor one with a disproportionately large head and strange, fluidly flexible limbs. . . .

He shook his head wildly, as if to shake the pieces of this puzzle into place. "Ed!" he shouted once again.

An answering cry rebounded dimly from the valley wall opposite. "Ed!" his own voice echoed back.

III

THE West Fork Branch of the Office of Protection and Welfare for the State of Oregon was a glowing bubble of solaglas half sunk in the ground. It sat amid the night-darkened blocks and cubes, regularly spaced, that constituted the town of West Fork. Atop the glowing bubble, the letters PW in neon slowly revolved about the radio-radar spire.

Link Blodgett rolled his three-wheeler, a little car powered by the Guzdlan cumulating engine, up to the station's circular door and got out. Inside the solaglas dome he could see the two men on the night shift brooding over a game of tessero, the three-dimensional electric chess imported from Guzdla.

He slid the rolling door open and walked in.

"The Thatcher place, out on the Old Mill Road, has just been raided," Link announced tersely. "The Thatcher family has been taken away and their house burned."

Both men stared at Link with hanging jaws. The man who had been facing him—Link knew him slightly as Jerry Cooper—brought his jaw back into use.

"You say—raided?"

Link nodded somberly.

"By whom?" rapped out the other man, getting up.

Both of them were tensely facing Link now, their faces dark as if certain of his answer. Link shoved a hand through the unruly mop that crowned his height. "That's the trouble," he said slowly. "I'm not sure—now. I guess they must have been Marties."

"What do you mean, you guess?" said Cooper. "How'd you find out about it?"

"I saw it."

"You saw it?" said the second man. "Then was it the Marties or wasn't it?"

Link gave his head a puzzled shake. "They weren't like any Marties I ever saw."

"Why not? What was the matter with them?"

Again Link paused, looking deep into one pair of eyes and then the other. "They were three meters tall."

"Three meters!" burst out Cooper. "What in hell do you mean?"

Link lifted his shoulders and spread his hands. "I can't help it. I was looking down on the whole thing from the top of Gilson's Hill. I was using super binocs. I couldn't be mistaken."

They were looking at him with narrowed eyes. The second man said, "Are you trying to kid us or something? Marties don't even grow to half that size."

"I'm giving it to you straight," said Link.

"In your hat," said the second man and started to turn away.

"Hold it, Fred." Cooper laid his hand on the other's arm. "I know this guy. You are Blodgett, aren't you?" he said to Link. "Inspector or something over at Projector Mount." He grinned. "Bottleneck Blodgett."

"That's right." Link rumbled his hair.

Cooper said, "Let's get going on this. When did it happen?"

"Shortly after midnight."

"Shortly after midnight!" exploded the other man, his eyes on the station clock. "And here it's oh two fifteen. Did it take you all that time to contact us?"

LINK eyed him steadily. "I couldn't have contacted you until ten minutes ago—when I finally got down out of the woods to my car. By then it was too late—much too late."

"You're sure there's nothing to be done?"

"Nothing," said Link. He dropped wearily into a chair. "It's all over. I know the people, and I know every one of them was taken away. They even took the cow. They put them all in a big ring-ship and took off."

"In a ring ship?" Cooper cocked his head.

Fred flapped his hand at Link and walked away. "I ain't tracking on this at all. Things three meters tall, riding in a skimmer. Let's get back to the game, Jerry."

Cooper turned to Fred. "Call the state office and tell them to have a copter investigate."

Fred shrugged and walked over to a table in the center of the station, which held all manner of equipment.

"I'll have to get your statement on tape, Blodgett. Come on over here," ordered Cooper.

He opened the recorder unit. Link, after starting off with his name, address and registration number, carefully recited the facts. Cooper put in a few questions to clarify an occasional detail. When Link had finished, Cooper cut the tape, date-stamped it, and dropped it in a drawer.

"Now," he said, "you want to hang around until the copter reports?"

Link shook his head. "What for? I know what they'll find. On the other hand, would they be wanting me?"

Cooper looked down at his feet for a second. "Why, I don't think so," he replied slowly. "Your report is in. They can run it through. If they want you, they can contact you any time."

"Any time." Link repeated it slowly. "Shouldn't this report be right on the teletype?"

"I'm running this office," said Cooper quietly. "And I can't afford to be laughed at—if you know what I mean."

"Come on, Jerry," said Fred. "Game's waiting."

Link looked at him. Fred peered back at him through the tessero maze. "Go home," he advised. "Sleep it off, Bottleneck."

IV

THE rouser in Link's pillow gave a click. He did not stir. It clicked again. His head remained buried in the pillow. The rouser clicked again and again. The clicks increased in frequency, became a rattle, a purr, a continuous sound, a low note that began to climb the scale from base through tenor to alto—

Link wrenched up his head from the pillow, and the rouser stopped short of screaming. He glared down at the pillow with bleary resentment; then his eyes suddenly rolled toward the wall-shelf by his bed. The numerals, now white, of his wristwatch stared back at him dispassionately: 0815.

He fumblingly kicked away the electropane and sat up, shaking his head and yawning.

One after another, the details of the night took their shapes in his mind.

Bright sun streamed through the solaglas that made up one whole wall of his room, illuminating its cell-like confines—empty of all furniture but the bed that took up half its space. Hand-pulls along the wall indicated compartments that contained the personal goods and devices of Lincoln Blodgett. The low foot-bar on the door and an open shelf of books were all, beside the swing-down wall-shelf, that broke the blue-gray surface of the room.

He stepped over to the wall, staggering slightly with sleep not fully thrown off, and flipped a toggle-switch. In an instant a voice muttered into the room.

“. . . no cause for alarm. Guards are patrolling the area and Lieutenant Hoppner reports that the entire valley is quiet and without sign of life. Further reports will be issued as received.

“The Guzdlan Embassy in New Washington has issued a statement which does not vary from all recent Guzdlan statements following these atrocities. It is brief, not to say terse, and consists of categorical denial, ending with the words, ‘No further comment is deemed necessary.’

“James Davis, North American Leader for Free Terra, has announced that this latest atrocity will unquestionably result in another wave of recruits for the movement and urges that everyone be at their screens for the Chicago Rally, scheduled for tonight . . .”

Link went to the door, unzipped his sleeper. He toed the footbar into its groove and the door slid away into its frame. He stepped across the circular hallway, through which a faint aroma of eggs, bacon and coffee drifted. He entered the bathroom in the utility core of the house and pulled its door to behind him.

He re-entered his room, bathed and refreshed, and began zipping on his clothes. The voice was still muttering.

“. . . in your opinion, Lieutenant Hoppner, is it definitely of Guzdlan origin?”

“I would say so. This ornament, which was undoubtedly torn off in the struggle with the Thatcher family, I have seen on many Mart—uh—Guzdlan uniforms. Hope the folks will overlook that little slip, Barrett—we’ve been out here since oh three hundred. I’ve got to go, Barrett.”

“Well, my time’s up, too. Thank you very much for the interview, Lieutenant. Folks, this is your local telannouncer, Mel Barrett. Keep tuned to your—”

LINK’S hand swept over the toggle switch and he stalked out into the hall, his face thoughtful. Halfway around the circular building that was his home, he came upon the sun-flooded breakfast alcove off the kitchen. The Blodgett family—Pa, Ma, Doris and Ellen—were seated in a row, with their backs to him, at the long counter by the window, overlooking the garden and the road. They turned eagerly at his footsteps, their faces grim or glowing with excitement, according to their ages.

Pa, a tall, but slightly stooped man, with a cockatoo crest of white hair rising behind the pinkly bald forward half of his head, said, “You heard?”

Ma, her slight frame only now after all these years beginning to fill out under her housework jumper, bore a pinched worried look on her still somewhat girlish features. She got up, tucking a strand of graying hair behind her ear, and said, “Those Marties! Sit down, boy, I’ll get your food. You were up till all hours.”

Pretty, teen-aged Doris, her full breasts visible through the sheer marfilm blouse after the fashion of the day, turned bright hazel eyes on her adored brother and cried, “Oh, Link, isn’t it awful?”

“Linky,” babbled twelve-year-old Ellen, “the house was burned down and they were murdered! Even the cow!”

Link moved to the counter and slid onto a stool. He put his head in his hands. Their voices died against his silence. Ma put cereal and fruit juice before him and said, “What’s the matter?”

“I saw it,” said Link.

A fork clattered on the counter. A coffee cup clacked down against its saucer. Across the hyacinths outside, a robin flashed his orange breast, dropping down to the lawn.

"You—saw it?" Pa rumbled at last.

Link nodded. Ma sucked in her breath. Ellen whispered, "Oh, Linky!"

Doris gasped. "What *happened?*"

Link told them. They listened avidly. But, when he began describing the tall ones, he caught reflections in the solaglas before him of the puzzled frowns they were exchanging. He finished lamely. "It may not make sense to you, but that's what I saw."

"Why, of course, dear," said his mother. "We all believe you—"

"But, Linky," cried Ellen, "Marties—three meters tall! Gosh!"

"Link," cut in his father, "did you report this to the cops?"

Link nodded, tossed off his juice and attacked the cereal.

"There was nothing about you on Tele-news," said Doris.

"They didn't believe me, either," mouthed Link. "The peedubs, I mean. I could tell, the minute I stated my estimate of the height of those things, the peedubs thought I'd drifted off the beam. They probably figured I was trying to be sensational." He scraped up the last of his cereal and switched the bowl for the plate of eggs and bacon. "I wonder what happened to Ed," he mused.

"If he saw what you saw," chimed in Doris, "they'd have to believe you both, wouldn't they?"

Ma began gathering up the plates. "Folks have been just dying to learn the real truth of these atrocities."

Link stared down at his plate. It was as if, instead of seeing that simple plastic circle, he had been staring idly down into a pool—and had been startled by something sinister writhing faintly in its depths.

A thought had dodged in and out of his mind, before he could quite grasp it . . .

V

"I CAN understand about the peedubs," muttered Link. "They get a lot of cranks and leaks, trying to get their names in the news."

He and his father were bowling along

toward the center of West Fork in Link's three-wheeler. Link held the steering rod and the little car purred along at an easy forty kilos.

Normally, as they passed this way each morning, there was the ordinary bustle of a world going to work—cars leaving the houses, planes and a ring-ship or two sailing through the sky, children hurrying to school on their little growlers.

But now there was a heightening of activity. Two official U.S. Army ring-ships could be discerned quite high above, and slightly to the south, hovering over that tragic spot where a farming family had once lived and worked. A patrol car shot past the Blodgetts, going the other way.

"But it comes a little harder when your own family doesn't believe you," Link went on.

"Well, now," the elder Blodgett rumbled, "I wouldn't say that, boy. It's a mighty strange tale. Sometimes it just takes a little time to sort of swing yourself around."

He quickly changed the subject. "Your idea that those tall critters might be a new kind of Martie reminds me of the time that they—the Marties—asked us for permission to set up military bases. That was long before your time, but you've probably heard the story they told."

Link knotted his brows. "Seems to me—" he began.

"They claimed they'd been attacked by some monsters out of space—and that was the whole reason they'd come here, with these Flying Saucers and everything. They said they wanted to protect the Solar System."

A bead of light began blinking on the little car's radio panel. "Teleflash," said Link and flicked a switch next to the little light, which promptly went out. A voice, portentous in tone, flooded the cabin of the three-wheeler.

"Attention. Special flash. This is Ralph McBride, Station Orgon, Portland. Attention. I am speaking on a world-wide hook-up. Those who can should turn on their screens. I repeat! Turn on your screens. Translations will follow immediately.

"Attention. For the first time since mysterious outrages have begun occurring on our world, occurring all over, causing in-

nocent persons to disappear and significant damage to be visited on property of all kinds—I repeat, for the first time—we have an eye-witness report, a genuine eye-witness report as to the cause of the latest of these unspeakable tragedies.”

LINK sat bolt upright. His father's eyes, under their bushy white brows, slid toward him.

“Yes,” the announcer went on oracularly, “last night the Thatcher family, living in a secluded valley above West Fork, in this state of Oregon, was attacked and kidnapped—for what purpose or fate no one can say—and Thomas Thatcher's old-fashioned farm was completely destroyed. These facts, you know, including the finding of a Guzdlan officer's insignie of rank.

“But *this time*—THIS TIME—an American citizen was in the vicinity. He had the courage to fight down his terror. He stayed to see what he could see, to come back and tell the world the *truth* behind these atrocities.

“I am very happy to present to you now this American citizen, to let him tell you in his own simple words what he saw this morning. I present to you—Mr. Edward Warren!”

Link stared at the radio panel. A voice he knew well was speaking. It was a trifle shaky, as if its owner was dismayed by all the cameras and microphones he must be facing. Just as surely as if he were sitting at a screen, Link could see that broad, freckled face with its characteristic expression of belligerent righteousness.

“Yesterday,” said Ed, “I gave in to an idea that had been growing on me. It was to set up teams of watchers to watch the Martie observatories by night, entirely on the off chance that somebody might see something that would give a clue to the nature of these atrocities. I didn't think I was the first to have such an idea, but on the other hand I hadn't heard of anybody else doing it. Anyway, I wanted to do something about these atrocities.

“Well, I spoke to several of my friends, and got a lot of different reactions. One man finally agreed to go up with me to the top of Gilson's Hill, and he went, he said, mainly because he liked bein' out in the woods at night. He didn't seem to think

much of my idea.

“We took along a rapid camera and a pair of super binocs. We got up on the top of Gilson's Hill, which gives a good view of Mt. Williams and the Martie observatory there, and we sat and we talked from about twenty-two hundred to a little past midnight, when this thing happened.

“I want to say right now that neither of us had any idea we'd see an actual atrocity. At about oh oh thirty, I should judge, we saw a flash of light from the valley below us. We saw another. We jumped up, but neither of us could see over the edge of the hill. I ran forward, yelling to my friend to work down the hill with me to a point where we could see.

“When I got down to a good place, I found that I had lost my rapid camera—somewhere in the bushes I'd had to struggle through. I also realized that I had lost my friend—somewhere.

“I climbed the tree I had picked out—it kind of leaned out from the hill. I saw what I knew was the Thatcher home—on fire. Up the road a piece was a skimmer, one of their bigger ones.

“And down around the burning house was a whole lot of Marties, herding the whole Thatcher family away from there. There was nothing I could do.

“So I watched the Marties take the Thatchers over to the ship and get into it. They had their emmy guns on 'em all the time. The ship took off and began roaming up and down the valley.

“I realized then that I, myself, was in danger. The Marties were probably looking to see if the coast was clear, if anybody was watching. I dropped down out of the tree and ran back up over the hill. I hid under a ledge. The ring-ship sailed over the hill at least twice and then apparently went away, but I didn't move from where I was until I heard human voices and then I knew the Office of Protection and Welfare was throwing guards into the area.

“And that's the whole story. Free Ter—”

An alert engineer in the Portland station nipped off what was not yet allowed on an editorial telecast. And Link savagely slapped off the switch in the car. His father looked at him, startled.

“He lies,” said Link. “Ed Warren's lying.”

His father cleared his throat judiciously. "He tells a mighty convincing story, boy. Folks are going to buy every word of that."

"He lies, just the same," growled Link. "He didn't see anything. He couldn't have. He calls them Marties."

"Well, weren't they?"

Link frowned. "Maybe they were Marties, sure, but not the Marties as we know them. Ed doesn't mention their height. He doesn't describe them at all."

"Link," said Pa Blodgett. "You're almighty sure of one thing, aren't you?"

"Of what?"

"That you can't possibly be mistaken."

Link's eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth, and shut it again. They were rolling into the town of West Fork now, rolling among the solaglas fronts and concrete cubes of the business section. Pa halted the three-wheeler before the Office of Communications where he worked.

Link spoke then. "Yes, Pa, I'm sure."

The old man got out of the car, but paused by the open door. His eyes looked into Link's steadily for a minute.

"I'm not saying I don't believe you, son. Why don't we just leave it that I'm reserving judgment?"

Link smiled wryly. "Well, that'll be something," he said. He started the motor and drove away.

VI

PROJECTOR MOUNT lay just beyond the town, a long low frame of solaglas and plastic. From a distance it could be taken for an old-fashioned, mid-century hothouse. As Link tooled the three-wheeler into the parking lot, he could see the entire factory—the acres of glistening floor, the various machines, some gigantic, some small and compact, spaced at regular intervals, the men and women tending them, the electronically-guided truck-bins gliding from turret lathe to drill press to milling machine with parts in various stages of completion.

Link parked the little car and entered the factory by a corner door. Just inside, he stepped on a black square and halted. Immediately a floodlight flashed in his face and the shutter of an automatic camera clicked. Then a speaker overhead intoned,

"Oh nine oh two. You are late."

Link said, "My fault. I accept the fine." He stepped off the black square and moved out onto the floor, heading for a machine at the other end.

As he strode swiftly along the aisle, heads looked up and turned to watch him pass. Here and there voices rose— "Hi, Bottleneck" . . . "Morning, Link." To these Link responded with a grave nod and a wave.

He was aware of eyes following him and indistinct murmurings in his wake. He reached Ed Warren's machine and halted, staring at it thoughtfully. It was untended, of course, and not in operation. A truck-bin full of partly finished trunnion pins stood near the feed-pan.

The driving whine of a nearby turret lathe died down, sliding down the scale into inaudibility amid the familiar noise pattern of the shop. Instinctively, Link raised his head in its direction, a frown of disapproval starting up between his eyes. Any interruption of these machines was directly his concern.

Then he grinned resignedly. The operator of the machine was coming toward him. She was a tall, willowy brunette, with merry green eyes. Only, the eyes were not merry today.

Ever since her mother had tied on her pinafore and sent her out with a spank to play, Mary Dunham had gotten in Link's hair. Calling him "Wink" and "Blodghey" and other things calculated to make a lanky boy hate a dumpty little girl, she had trailed him doggedly through their teens.

To say Link loved her was to invite a handful of knuckles in the mouth. To say that she loved him was to elicit a laugh from her. Yet the people of West Fork, on seeing the tall Blodgett boy, invariably looked a little closer and saw, somewhere in the vicinity, that gangling Dunham girl.

She put her head on one side now as she came up to him, "And where were you?"

He grinned at her. "You mean, last night?"

"Sure, I mean last night."

"I was there." Her question told him much about the atmosphere in Projector Mount this morning. About everybody there knew that he had gone with Ed to spy on the observatory.

"Oh, Link!" Her eyes grew large and somber. "Was it—wasn't it terrible?"

"It was pretty bad," he said. That little frown of his started up again. He noticed some others shutting off their machines and threading their way toward him.

"Did you hear Ed's story?" said the girl.

"I didn't miss it."

"Well, then, why weren't you on Tele-news with him?" she demanded.

LINK was conscious of the others gathering around him—lanky Bill Johnson, mousy little Jack Howe, the red-headed Small twins, Phyllis and Marvin Carey, and Big Hans Opdyck, Ed Warren's closest friend.

"And why didn't Ed mention your name?" pursued Mary.

Link stared helplessly into those green eyes. "I don't know," he said slowly. "There are a lot of things I don't understand. Anybody know if Ed's going to show up today?" He looked around at the faces of the others.

They shook their heads. "He ain't," said Hans Opdyck. "Telenews won't let him go."

"And Jimmy Davis is trying to get him to Chicago for the rally tonight," added Marv Carey.

"But what did you see?" insisted Mary.

Link shook his head. "I'm beginning to think I'd better keep my mouth shut. I'm afraid you won't believe me."

"Why not?" said Doug Small.

"Why shouldn't we believe you?" demanded Mary.

Link cocked his head and shrugged. "Back to the machines, gang."

Hans was slouched against Ed's bench, his eyes calculating. "Is there some detail, maybe, where you differ with Ed?"

Link became aware of a tightening in his stomach.

"Could be," he answered lightly.

"Like whether they were Marties or not?"

So! Link let his breath out slowly.

"Not little," Hans went on, "but big. Three meters tall." A ghost of a smile lifted his round red cheeks. "With long, rubbery arms and legs."

"Three meters tall!" The mutters ran this way and that. The young inspector let his

deliberate eyes rove over the faces around him. They were puzzled faces, with here and there a look of plain disbelief. Link's gaze came back to Mary. Her face was pale. "Link," she whispered, "were they really like that?"

In that moment Link's heart jumped. Here was one person who believed him. He turned back to the grinning Hans.

"I guess," he said, "the peedubs released my report after all."

The other lifted a thick shoulder. "As a matter of fact, Ed told me. Came by the Civic Dormitory on his way to Portland. Anyway, when I asked about you, he very reluctantly told me. He didn't understand it. Said you'd wandered into the peedub station at about oh two hundred with the craziest tale they'd ever heard."

Mary leaned past Link, her breasts heaving in their transparent work binder. "Did you ever know Blodgett to tell a lie?"

Link swept her back with one arm. "Let's put this in words of one syllable," he said. "You figure I'm the one that ran away. And that I'm covering up for myself with a lot of lies. Right?"

"Right."

Link's fist caromed off Hans' jaw. Hans went staggering back. Hands grabbed at Link. He flung them off savagely.

Hans charged. Link's left banged twice into his face, but the right cross went over the other man's shoulder.

Link's stomach cringed under hammering blows. He spun free, mashed Hans' nose, snapped his head back with uppercuts, drove heavily for the ribs. Dancing back, he caught one on the head that made it spin.

Somebody yelled, "Slater!" and then arms were about him, pinioning him. He blinked, saw Opdyck similarly held.

"More—later?" panted Link. But the big man was already staggering off to his machine, wiping at his face. Somebody grabbed Link's arm and hissed, "Over here . . ."

When slim, precise Director Slater arrived at the scene, having had to cross nearly the whole floor from his corner office, he found Link bending over Bill Johnson's machine, checking an adjustment.

"Blodgett," he said. Link straightened up inquiringly.

"Would it be too much to ask what's

been going on?" said Slater icily.

"Why, nothing—nothing much," said Link.

The director's eyes slid toward the swelling ear on the inspector's head. "Have you been quelling a mutiny?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir," said Link.

Slater permitted himself a brief smile. "All right, Blodgett. I thought for a minute there had been some fighting on the floor. It's against regulations."

"I know, sir," said Link, trying to smile in return—but it came out a bit crooked.

The director cleared his throat. "I know you know," he remarked and walked away.

VII

HE CAME awake, rigid and bathed in sweat. He had been dreaming. The flames and faces and shouting died out of the room. In the quiet his muscles and nerves loosened. A cool breeze from the window passed over him and he groped for the electropane.

Drawing it up over his shoulders, he lay back. His eyes rolled toward the wall-shelf. The glowing numerals of his wristwatch read 0058.

The nightmare came back to him, in odd, distorted fragments. Even as he tried to focus his mind on each phase of it, the scene changed and became confused and dim.

But, while the nightmare faded, it left something behind. The young man lying in the dark had had his share of nightmares, but always before they had taken fear away with them when they went away. And, in any case, fear seldom entered his life.

Yet, now, Link Blodgett lay in the dark and was afraid. Afraid of what? True, these were tense times, with atrocities mounting daily and the dead space between two planets becoming charged with suspicion anger and terror—

No, he knew his was somehow a personal fear—a nameless, faceless thing looming dark and close.

He scowled at the wall of night, concentrating furiously.

And something swam once again across the pool of his mind. It had wriggled there before, during the day past, and he had not

been alert to seize it.

It was the elusive thing that had been playing tag with his conscious throughout the day. It came now to the surface of his mind and looked up at him boldly.

It was a sentence, spoken by Ed Warren the night before—almost exactly twenty-four hours ago—as the two of them sat on the hill in the chill spring night, watching the observatory.

They make sure nobody lives to tell . . .

Why had there been no other witnesses? Inevitably, others must have stumbled onto the scene as he and Ed had. But why had no word of what they had seen been given to the world? What had happened to them?

Link's eyes narrowed in the dark. There could be only one explanation. The dangerous mouths must have been sealed.

This, then, was his fear.

Involuntarily, Link raised his head to the window. Night drenched the garden outside. Stars glittered in the sky—

A shooting star skittered across the spangled heaven.

He dropped his head, listening. The aircro pump thrummed softly deep in the house, making all the sound there was to hear.

Who believed Blodgett — and was in mortal danger for it? Only one. Only one—and could he be sure of her?

He rolled over toward the window, sighing and blinking. Through the window he could see the stars and the saw-tooth profile of the night-black mountains. In the foreground, the garden around the house was a mass of shadow.

His eyes did not close. They blinked slowly with thought. There was great quiet, now, within the house—and outside.

Then a dog burst into furious barking down the valley, a thin, high yammering.

The slow blink of Link's eyes stopped. He lifted his head from the pillow, his eyes on the window, on the garden. And his trembling stopped, as his muscles tensed.

A shadow writhed across the blackness, a wraith of dim gray. It disappeared beyond one side of the window. Another shadow moved in a kind of slow drift. It vanished, but Link's eyes caught it again where it had stopped. It remained there, deep in the garden, wavering and hard to see. Link had to look away and back again.

Was the thought to become reality? Was the nightmare to become a fact?

He eased up from the bed, but his motions increased in rapidity. He tipped open a wall cupboard and slid out something wrapped in a cloth. He ripped off the cloth and stood for a second in calculating thought, holding a Guzdlan beam-projector. They themselves had given Terrans this weapon, called an "emmy gun" because of its magnetic energy.

Could he turn this house into a fortress? Had he time to run around the hall, banging at doors, giving the alarm without as well as within, precipitating the attack? Would even words whispered into the radio-phone bring the P and W men in time, in sufficient force?

"No," he whispered into the gloom, "I've got to get them away from the house."

He toed open the door and ran lightly down the circular hallway. He slid open a door and his feet pattered on the concrete stairs leading down to the garage.

He sidled past the three-wheeler to the door. Careful not to show his face, he peered through one of its two circular ports. He nodded grimly.

"They're not going to shut me up this easily."

Quietly, he opened the car door and, as quietly, shut it behind him after he had slid in under the steering rod. He stood the emmy gun between his thighs so that its tapering muzzle rested against his chest. Then he punched two buttons in quick succession.

The little car's motor whined dully into life. And the garage doors began to roll aside.

From beyond, Link thought he heard a hoarse, hooting sound. The garage doors were wider, in another microsecond they would be just wide enough—

He slammed down a switch and the little car shot forward. It scraped the edges of both doors, making them tremble and rattle on their tracks. It shot up the ramp, straight for the tall thing swaying in the night.

The tall thing leaped aside, its arms flailing. Link shot past, raising his emmy gun. Aiming the now bulleting car at the curving driveway beyond, he abruptly twisted back and raised the gun.

Two, three tall shadows were racing

around the house, going in tremendous leaps. The one by the garage was raising a rubbery arm, at the end of which something gleamed.

Link squeezed the studs and a vibrating thread of violet split the night, burning cleanly through the car's rear window. He saw it rake across the tall shadow.

Then he whirled to grip the jerking rod of the wildly jolting car. It had left the driveway. Link jammed the rod over and sent the car bouncing along the foot of an embankment.

There was a silvery flare of light sparkling behind him. He whipped the rod the other way. The three-wheeler crashed through heavy brush and took off across a ditch. It lit with a *crump* on the main road.

Link fought it steady and hunched over the rod. He stabbed at the radio panel. The little three-wheeler's motor mounted toward frenzy. The gentle curves of the road ahead began to look like hairpin turns.

"Calling PW station," said Link to the radio panel. "Calling PW station."

He glanced up into his rear-view mirror. In its field of vision an oval shape hung low against the skyscape above the receding road. The oval shape tilted, and grew.

"PW station here," came a somewhat familiar voice. "What is it?"

"This is Lincoln Blodgett," snapped the man in the rocketing three-wheeler. "I'm coming down the North Valley Road like a bat out of hell—and those tall babies are after me."

"Those tall—oh, you mean those scarecrows you were telling us about?" The voice of the man called Fred was amused. "Blodgett, you'll murder us!"

The oval shape in the rear-view mirror had vanished, blotted out by a cone of bright light sweeping along the road behind.

"They're catching up!" yelled Link. "Come on, you leaks, get off your duffs and help a man!"

"Get excited," laughed Fred. "Jump up and down. Call the peedubs. What've you been drinki—"

Savagely, Link chopped off the radio. He whipped the car around a curve. Behind him, the cone of light blinked out, cut off by the hill around which the road ran. Then the tip of the circle of light it cast

on the ground poked out again and ran up the road after the car like quicksilver.

The road was too straight here, arrowing ahead to another bulking hill. On either side of the road, meadowland undulated off toward the hills.

Link swung the steering rod and held on. The car bumped off the soft shoulder and bucked into the meadow. The cone of light swept past on down the road.

The three-wheeler jolted and swayed like a mad thing as it hurtled through the meadow, screaming down the slopes and surging up the rises. Link, slammed this way and that, fought to keep its nose headed for the hill . . .

The forward right wheel hit something. The car became a spinning, plunging confusion. Link let go the rod and clapped his arms about his head. Slam, bang, heave—and crump . . .

He found himself looking at the floor of the car. It hung above him, the two seats, the snapped-off steering rod, the smoking dashboard. Gingerly, he flexed legs and arms, groaning and wincing. He worked the emmy gun out from under his back where it had been prodding him and stared at it in dismay. The tube was bent.

"Maybe I can bend it back into alignment," he muttered. He edged to the rear locker of the three-wheeler and dug around frantically for something, anything, like a pipe wrench. Instead, he hauled forth a dirty coverall, stared at it for an instant, and then dug out a pair of work shoes. He jammed the coverall over his sleeper, stamped his bare feet into the shoes.

Then he staggered out of the overturned car. It lay between two hillocks, one wheel on the ground beside it. The meadow was still and moist underfoot.

Link slowly limped to the top of a hillock and stared toward the road. Even as he raised his head cautiously above the grass, the ring-ship emerged suddenly beyond the distant hill. Humming softly, it flew low back along the road the way Link had come. From its underside, the cone of searching light tilted far ahead, but sweeping from side to side.

He didn't wait to see more. In another second or so they would find where the car had left the road. He inched back down and then began running. He sprinted

around the far hillock and stumbled up the slope beyond, forgetting the bruises that had made him limp, striking out for the hill ahead.

A slight luminosity suddenly tipped the grass blades around him and he flung himself over a rise and rolled to the bottom. Then all went black around him again. He arose and ran on up the next slope, casting a glance back over his shoulder.

The ring-ship was floating into the meadow from the road, its cone of light steady on the place some hundred meters behind Link. He knew it must be where the three-wheeler lay. They'd had no trouble following those three furrows through the grass.

Panting, Link reached high ground. He began shifting his course, from bush to tree-trunk to bush.

Quick as thought, dazzling light swept across the hillside. The light swept on and he stumbled through the gloom into the bush. He knelt there, peering under a shading hand through the branches.

The light had returned, a searing pinpoint from the meadow that etched Link's surroundings into sharp relief. Then, mysteriously, it vanished and night was, for a second, a black wall before Link's eyes.

Had they lost him? He held his breath, while vision returned. Gradually, details emerged into gray distinction. The ring-ship was perched in the middle of the meadow, light glaring from its open door down on the three-wheeler.

A bobbing, greenish light was describing peculiar, parabolic leaps across the meadow toward the hill. As he looked, Link saw another light begin to leap lengthily after the first, and another—from a point half-way across the meadow in the other direction. A faint hoarse hooting drifted up to him. More lights came leaping from the ring-ship, and its door blinked with the passage of thin figures.

Link looked down at the bent barrel of the emmy gun. His teeth ground together. Then he jumped up. "Not yet!" he growled. He scrambled on up the hill. There he stopped and pointed the emmy gun at the nearest thicket. The brilliant violet thread hummed forth, quivering. The bent barrel began to glow. The thicket burst into flame as he flung the gun away.

Link went down. The sharp declivity,

the loose earth, the frequent patches of slithery brown needles, all combined to give him the kind of slide he had enjoyed as a boy. He slewed to a mucky stop at the bottom where a spring slicked the grass and softened the ground to mud. Ahead lay an abandoned road overgrown with weeds, and the river bank.

He ran down to the river, kicked off his shoes and swam with slow, steady strokes, keeping himself close to the bank. After a while he caught up with a partly water-logged branch. He dove under it and came up among the twigs.

To an observer on the bank, or from the air above, there was only the branch, drifting with the current, destined for the sea . . .

VIII

MR. ARNOLD SCHWARTZ, a graceful wiry man, with sandy hair and a pair of blue stones for eyes, walked off the elevator at his floor and set off down the corridor. Against a door ahead of him leaned a tall man of angular, bony face, crowned by a mop of violently tousled dark hair. His shoulder partly obscured the lettering on the door: **WORLD BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION**.

"Good morning," said Mr. Schwartz pleasantly, fishing for his keys. His eyes took in the dirty, rumpled, damp coverall and the grimy bare feet.

"Morning," murmured the tall man. His eyes had a somber haunted look.

"Want to see me?" Schwartz shoved in the key and opened the door.

The man nodded. "I'd like to know first if it's true you have to send in a report of duly registered complaint."

Schwartz strode in, stopping first to pick up his mail. Then he went on through the reception room to the office beyond. The tall man followed him.

"I have some latitude," shrugged Schwartz. "If a little boy comes in to say he lost his dog, New Washington will never hear about it." He sat at his desk and began opening the mail.

"Attempted murder?" prompted the man.

"Local stuff. Only if we're called in." Schwartz began reading a letter.

"So-called Martian atrocity?" The man's

voice was casual.

Schwartz lifted his blue stones above the sheet he was perusing. "So-called? What do you mean?"

"Would you like to hear?" countered the man.

"If it's brief."

The man began talking. After a minute, Schwartz held up his hand, got up and closed the office door. A girl had come into the outer office and was hanging up her coat. He sat down again, cocked his feet on the desk and swung his key-chain, his blue stones unblinkingly directed at the talker.

"And so," concluded Link, "I don't mind at all walking barefoot through the streets of Eugene, if it means that you will take this story seriously. Seriously enough to send a tape of it to your main office. You're my last chance." He spoke lightly, but his gray eyes were intent.

The WBI man looked at him for a moment. Then he reached out for his radio-telephone. Instantly, Link was on his feet and his hand closed over the other's just as it touched the instrument.

The next instant he was staggering sideways, his jaw throbbing from a neat left jab. He recovered his balance, to find himself looking down the barrel of a stubby little ultrasonic.

"What are you trying to do—represent yourself as a dangerous character?" said Schwartz coldly. He didn't wait for a reply, but picked up the phone.

"Get me P and W, West Fork," he said, and hung up.

"You don't believe the story," said Link slowly, "or you wouldn't do that."

"How do you know what I'm going to do?"

"It doesn't matter exactly what you're going to do. What matters is that you're going to tip them off to where I am."

"So the local peedubs might want you, is that it?" Schwartz smiled briefly. He hefted the ultrasonic. "Good thing I called, then. I was only going to verify a couple of points in your story. As a matter of fact, one of them is already verified—"

The phone tinkled and he picked it up, finished his remarks. "I heard on the morning Telenews—at eight hundred—about the flash forest fire on—Hullo . . . Schwartz,

WBI at Eugene, calling . . . Collins? Right. Want to know if you boys are interested in a citizen name of Lincoln Blodgett. Right—Blodgett. Redge number two nine oh seven seven kay oh eight—what's so funny? . . . Oh? Tell me . . ." The WBI man listened, his blue stone eyes steadily on Link, his face blank. Link, who had subsided into a chair, could only stare hard back at him, his face set and a little pale.

PRESENTLY Schwartz spoke again. "Okay, I have the picture. Listen, any report on a three-wheeler wrecked out there? . . . No, it would be off the road—other side of the river . . . Okay. Now, any report of a skimmer flying low along the North Valley Road at, oh, about oh one hundred? . . . There was? With its ventral flood light on, you say? Uh-huh . . . What about that forest fire? What caused it, do you know? . . . Okay, that's all. Thanks."

He hung up. Link said bitterly. "Beginning to make a little sense to you now, isn't it?"

Schwartz smiled again and put away the ultrasonic. "Yes, it's beginning to make sense." He leaned forward and picked up the letter he'd started reading. "You'd better give it up and get back to Projector Mount."

Link put his hand to his forehead. "You mean, you don't buy it," he muttered.

Schwartz rattled the letter. "Come on, arc out of here."

"You buy the Ed Warren story," said Link slowly. "You figure I'm the one who's building a big lie to cover up my running away."

"Not a shred," said Schwartz. "Any guy can get hold of a skimmer and run it up and down with its lights on. Any guy can go crack up his family car. Any guy can set a forest fire. But you're not going to get yourself on Telenews with that slag."

He reached for the radio-phone. "Now, shall I call the local peedubs to clear you out of my office?"

"Where?" Link spoke dully.

"Where?" snapped Schwartz. "You've got a home. You've got a job. Get with it."

"No." Link stood up, slowly and aching-ly, his face sad, but his eyes clear and hot.

"That would be stupid."

The WBI man eyed him. "Why?"

Link gave him a crooked, weary smile. "Why should I tell you again? You didn't believe me the first time. These tall creatures you think I've invented, they're after me."

Link started to get up out of the chair. Then he sat down again, rather carefully, his eyes on the agent's ultrasonic held in an unwavering hand.

"I don't care how badly you've cracked," said the sandy-haired man, "back you go. Are you too far gone to recall the UNT National Registration Act?" The phone tinkled. "Hullo? P and W? Schwartz, WBI. Have a problem here . . ."

He hung up. "You're ticketed, friend. We're all ticketed. We don't just move like the old Okies. Any time you want to relocate elsewhere, you apply for a transfer."

Link leaned forward, a strange light in his eyes. "A transfer," he murmured. "A transfer it shall be."

IX

ON the road leading south from Eugene, traffic was of only moderate density that morning. The city's P and W staff car thrummed along at an even sixty kilos per, weaving now and then from lane to lane.

In front, beside the driver, Link stared somberly ahead, squinting a little from the glint of sunlight off the road's fine steel mesh. At this rate, he would be back in West Fork in a matter of minutes.

Behind him sat another man from the Eugene P and W. In the panoramicrear-view mirror, Link could see that the man's hands were free and empty. But he knew in just about how many microseconds the man could dig out his ultrasonic. Of course, the ultrasonic only stunned—unless set to kill—but there was no use in bringing that numbing shock on himself.

"What did they book you for, pal?" queried the man behind him.

"Drunk and disorderly," muttered Link carelessly, his gray eyes studying the road unwinding ahead.

"That's interesting. How does the WBI get into the act?"

Link moaned and put his hand to his head. "I don't remember," he said.

Both men laughed.

Link continued to answer their idle questions and comments, but a little map began unwinding in his mind, showing a stretch of the road beyond that which was now curving into sight. His nerves, unstrung and trembling with fatigue, began tightening in reply to the summons from his brain.

Of all the chances he had taken, Link thought, this was the most desperate.

The road curved away from the river and then back toward it. It would run straight down a grade and then curve away again.

The plan Link had worked out was rough, containing a thousand uncontrolled and unknown factors. It could be abandoned up to a point, after which he would be committed—and perhaps defeated. But it had one great and shining virtue—simplicity.

It was part of the plan that he should now uncross his legs and squirm a bit restlessly . . .

“ . . . damn good rally, seemed to me.”

“Yeah. And now watch Jimmy Davis go. Warren’s given him all he needed.”

“You bet. Jimmy can’t miss now. In a month he’ll be in that UNT.”

“And so will be a lot of others—like Slobodin, and that Chinese boy—Tsang what’s his name . . .”

Their words indicated the degree of their relaxation, Link realized. He could hardly hope for less of their attention at this moment.

The car ran down the straight stretch. The driver let it out a little, as Link expected and hoped he would. Link glanced, as if idly, out of the window at his right, at the river flowing so quietly.

Hardly slowing, the driver being confident of the stability of its triangular wheel base, the staff car swooped into the curve that led away from the water. At this speed, the curve was not too gentle.

Link yawned and started to cross his right leg over his left.

With a lightening thrust he jammed the leg clear on across the front of the car. His foot caught the steering rod squarely, slamming it hard over against the side.

The rear steering wheel angled sharply over in response. The car swerved sharply, so sharply that the right wheel lifted.

Then it settled screechingly out of the lurch and shot off the road. Like a slow

bullet, it floated straight out from the steep embankment and began its short trajectory into the river.

It had all happened so rapidly that the PW men had hardly time to yell—and the man behind Link to change his mind from grabbing for his ultrasonic to bracing himself—before the car’s cabin shuddered down into a gray, translucent smother, throwing them all forward and then sideways, the impact occurring at an angle.

Link’s arms crossed against the dashboard saved him. The man behind, having braced too late, hurtled across his shoulder, striking his head a glancing blow against the dashboard and landing in an unglorious tangle in the cavity underneath. The driver had braced himself well, but he was too confused to do other than heave and struggle about wildly.

Link snatched at the door-pull, callously jammed his feet into the side of the helpless man below him, and shoved. The car had plunged totally under. Jets of water were spurting in stiff rods from various minor apertures. The car was dark, under a fathom of water, but it was beginning to rise slowly.

Link’s muscles bulged and the door moved out from its frame a crack. A pressure of water burst through in an instant drenching flood. Link tossed his head back to gulp one last mouthful of air and heaved himself out.

He swam under water, aiming back toward the bank. He felt his body rising and expelled some of his precious stock of air. Then he clamped his will down on laboring, clamoring lungs and swam on.

His heart began to pound and the muscles of his diaphragm ached in revolt against asphyxiation. Just when it seemed the subconscious will to live would force his mouth open for a gulp of water, his head broke the surface and he gasped noisily.

He was partly shielded from observation by a low clump of elderberry bush. Out on the river bubbles were rising into an oil slick. On the highway above cars were screeching to a stop and people were shouting.

Link looked downriver and spied the next overhanging clump of bushes. He breathed in and out several times to prime his lungs, inhaled deeply, and then slipped

under again, thanking those days of his boyhood when he had learned to outswim other boys under water. He emerged this time well under the overhanging branches and with a shred of breath left to spare.

From this distance he couldn't see whether more bubbles were rising from the spot where the three-wheeler had sunk. Some men were sliding down the embankment and running up and down, shouting. Two men were stripping off their outer clothing. In the distance, a siren wailed dimly.

But Link felt small concern for the men trapped in the car. In a matter of minutes, they would be laid out on the ground and a crew of specialists with inhalators and pulsators would be laboring over them. A few more minutes of that, and they would be able to gasp out their stories . . .

Link swam on down the river, under the surface most of the way, working from overhang to clump to overshadowed inlet. The last he saw of the accident, as he worked around a bend, was a PW copter hovering over the scene.

X

AS TWILIGHT deepened over the valley north of West Fork, the Blodgett House began to glow. Like all the other rounded solaglas homes scattered about it, its inner lights sprang on at the needful touch of its occupants. Figures moved through it, sometimes plainly, sometimes dimly.

It would take a discerning eye to catch anything different about the house. What was different was external. A figure leaned in the shadow of a tree at the garden's boundary. Another figure stood directly under the blaze of the living room light, well back in the shadows beneath and almost obscured. At the foot of the driveway and off the road, a car of a certain type rested dark and motionless.

There were discerning eyes, however, to see these things. Link Blodgett sat back on his haunches and wrapped his arms about his shivering self. It was getting to be a rather chilly night for a man wearing a thin sleeper and a simple marloid coverall, neither of which were equipped with radiant mesh.

He was cold, but he was not hungry, nor was he tired. He had traveled a wide circle since mid-morning, running lightly through deep forest lanes and leaving behind him a trail so erratic and broken that the most persistent Javert would have to spend laborious days unraveling it.

But there had been no sign of pursuit.

He had violated caution once. Hunger pangs had driven him to enter an untended hydroponics shed and help himself to its bulging tomatoes. There, too, he had found a discarded pair of workshoes—a double boon, soothing the twig-and-stone-scarred soles of his feet and enabling him to begin an utterly different and misleading trail. Of shod feet, calmly striding along a quiet country road . . .

He had slept, too, in a fox's den on a mountain slope—three hours of restoring slumber. With the first owl's cry he was up and loping over the hills.

Now he hugged himself and brooded. His situation seemed hopeless, his problems insurmountable.

He could not go on this way. It was one thing for a lad in his teens to camp out of a night or over a weekend, thrilling to the thought of returning to home and friends. It was another thing for a man in his prime to face a future of solitude, furtiveness and outlawry. Sooner or later, he would have to fight his way back.

But how? He did not fear giving himself up. The peedubs now surrounding the Blodgett house wanted him for only a moderately serious violation; the penalty for his defiance of law and order, in this last decade of the Twentieth Century, would be as much the tedium of psychiatric observation as it would be imprisonment and fines.

No, it was others he had to fear. Others who were tall, bulging of head and ropy limbed. Who had mysterious ways of finding him out, once he was imbedded in civilization. And who, on finding him out, would proceed once more toward his destruction.

That placed them high on his own order of business. He must find out more about them—if he could.

And it was also high on that order of business that he reach a much higher authority than he had yet. Somewhere, somehow, there had to be someone who would

listen to what Lincoln Blodgett had seen that night—listen without prejudice or preconception and then know what next to do. Someone who would grant him sanctuary until it would be safe for him to return.

But, until he found this someone, he was an outlaw, a lone wolf, hunted—and under a secret sentence of death.

It was clear to Lincoln Blodgett, even if it remained to be proven to the rest of the world, that he and his account of the Thatcher Atrocity was suicide. It was deadly to believe in it, or in him.

He had come back to warn whoever believed that story enough to repeat it to others that they must not. They must, if they were to go on living, act as if they had changed their minds. If only to preserve the story itself, they must loudly deny their faith.

The Blodgett family was safe. That conviction grew in him as he looked down on it now. The presence of peedubs meant nothing, as they would eventually withdraw. No, the Blodgetts had unwittingly established their own immunity. He could envision how each, in his or her own way, had shown reluctance to discuss Link's mad, impossible story. Their attitude would show so clearly that, while they felt great family loyalty to Link, they simply could not accept his report—and please let's change the subject. He smiled crookedly. Well, the only trouble there now was that they would be worried sick about him. Poor Ma! Maybe later he could give her some sign . . .

What of his friends? Bill Johnson had hardly shown more than curiosity. Doug and Tommy Small, Jack Howe, and perhaps the Careys—they had been accustomed to regarding Link as an overconscientious inspector, but otherwise a good egg—and not above a joke, even a grim one. None of them had showed any marked eagerness to hear his story further, much less accept it.

But Mary Dunham! She believed! Link knew that as surely as he knew the sweet curves of her maiden self. She believed and was not content to hold her peace—not while Blodgett was in trouble. He groaned inwardly, hearing in his imagination her voice raised in heated argument.

Then, as his mind leaped ahead, a sudden terrible thought stunned him into mo-

mentary paralysis. It was now approaching midnight. If that girl had managed to talk herself into the attention of the tall beings—

He sprang to his feet and raced along the ridge.

THE Dunham House lay nearer the town among a scattering of dwellings up a gentle slope. From the ridge he could look down over a neighbor's rounded roof right into her solaglas living room.

As he crouched in the darkness, recovering his breath, he saw the garage doors slide open and the Dunham's three-wheeler roll up the ramp, heading for the road. Within its lighted dome Link had just time enough to make out a gray head before it was gone.

Mary's mother. Link's eyes narrowed. With Mrs. Dunham driving off and her brother George working in town, Mary—whose father had died several years ago—Mary was alone.

Then Link saw her. She sauntered into the living room and flung herself into a chairmock before the video screen. All he could see of her after that was a slipper-shod foot, kicking idly—or was it in impatience?

But she was alone.

He angled down the steep bank and cut across the neighbor's garden. A dog across the way bayed deeply and rushed to the end of his tether, to stand growling.

Link stepped out of his shoes and moved soundlessly along the flagging that half-circled the house, running between garage and garden entrance. The little garden door was blessedly well-oiled and slid back silently. Most houses being alike, Link could feel his way barefooted up the narrow stairs to the hall. He touched a toe-bar and the hall door slid back with a slight clack.

"Mary." Link called.

She did not hear.

"Mary," he called again.

The video clicked off. "Is that you, George?" came the girl's voice. She was coming around the hall. Link waited; the hall light was full upon him, but he could not be seen from outside.

Mary stopped, a hand going to her bosom. "Link!" she gasped. Then she ran to him. In her transparent loungers, she was

unbelievably soft and lovely. Her lips were fierce and clinging.

Trembling, Link held her off, shaking her a little. "We've got no time for this," he said.

"But where have you been? What's been happening to you?"

"Never mind about that now." He spoke rapidly, a trifle harshly. "Listen to me. You believe me, don't you? You believe I'm telling the truth when I say the Marties who attacked the Thatchers were three meters tall—and all the rest of it?"

She frowned. "Sure, I believe you."

"Okay. Then will you believe this: that just precisely because you believe me, you are in danger?"

She could only stare at him.

"Listen," Link urged, "why did your mother leave the house a couple of minutes ago?"

"Why, Dan Forbes asked her to come over—for some sort of a surprise or other. He said Tilda especially wanted her."

"Forbes," muttered Link. "They live on the other side of town."

Mary frowned. "Link, what is this?"

He gripped her wrist. "Mary, has George got an emmy gun?"

"I think so—yes." She stood there transfixed, shrinking into herself.

"Get it!" he snapped. "We're going to need it. Hurry!"

She turned, slowly at first, her green eyes like moons clinging to him. Then she ran down the hall. In a second she had returned with the short tapering tube. Its handle fitted snugly into Link's palm.

"Now, listen to me carefully," he breathed. "Go back into the living room. Stay in plain sight. Turn on that screen. Try to look bored."

Her chin was quivering, her whole body shaking. Link opened his mouth—and outside the dog barked. Barked and barked and barked. And was quiet.

Link spoke through his teeth. "This is—this—" He searched the back of his mind for old, old words. "This is for the devil!"

Long years ago, they had dared each other into tobogganning through the pines—tricky steering—down Knob Hill and out onto the river. The daring words had been, "This is for the devil . . ."

Some part of her echoed and understood.

With a sob, she turned and stumbled off around the hall.

Link, lips back over bared teeth, backed into the hall, his eyes on the door through which he had come. It was the easy, logical way for them to come, too—the quick, the quiet way. He backed on into the kitchen, the cold metal of the projector's grip almost seeming to squirm in his moist hands.

Inconsequentially, he thought about the shoes he had left outside, wondering if they would mean anything to the things coming through into the house.

There was no sound, for a moment.

Then something filled that hall door. It stood there, as he had stood. Looking. Listening. Feeling, with its mind.

Tall. Too tall for the door. Two legs, tapering oddly up from broad, flat feet. A skirt, of the same dull egg-white shade as the body, with a rod-like thing sticking out of the waistband. A curiously tubular body, with narrow shoulders from which dangled long, thin, round arms. Hands that seemed like flaring cups, with raised knobs around the rim. In one hand—if it could be said to be a hand—was a Guzdlan ultrasonic. And that enormous head, like a pumpkin, hanging forward, lowered to look into the hall.

The huge face was the most chilling of all. For it was humanesque. And yet there was complete inhumanity in its calm, cold predatoriness.

Link, in those split-seconds, was not breathing. But the shallow fluttering of his lungs was not due to caution, or the result of his will. For he was in the grip of such panic terror that all of him was as paralyzed as the bird before the snake.

The creature stepped into the hall and began to walk toward the living room. Another one stepped through after it and followed. Their movements were obscenely fluid, like a dancer imitating the swooping forward sway of a camel.

For one second more the man in the kitchen could only stare after them. Then his mind awoke. He triggered the emmy gun slow and carefully.

The vibrating thread of violet was a line of death, ending at the foremost big head. There was a snap and a hiss as it struck. The whole body subsided as if let down on a string.

Like a doll flung aside, the second one leaped back, one whiplike arm darting to its waist. The glass partition behind it glowed with a red dash as Link pulled the beam back toward it.

There was a curdling sputter. It writhed away. It cried out, sounding that hoarse hoot Link had heard last night, as the livid thread of devouring energy stabbed home, and held.

The second one crumpled bonelessly down, its legs coiling and kinking under it. And still, with frightful vitality, a cup-like hand pulled the rod from the waistband and raised it—

Link stepped back hastily. Silvery fire spewed past the kitchen door and died. The steel of the door-frame blackened and bent out, as if writhing. Then there was silence.

It was several seconds before Link could bring himself out from behind the radar range and creep to the doorway.

There was a pungent odor lingering in the hall. The two tall things were quiet, one sprawled at grotesque length, the other crumpled in a wierd tangle. Link edged the shaking barrel of the emmy gun around the door-jamb and flicked a single short jab of violet light at the sole of the nearer one's foot.

The dull white flesh darkened into a hole. But the foot did not move.

"Link?" It was the merest whimper, floating down the hall.

"Where are you?" he called.

"Still in the living room." The voice was small and shaky, a little girl's voice.

"Good girl," he said. "But we're not through yet."

"Oh . . ."

"Mary!"

"Y—yes?"

"Don't faint now. Put your head down between your knees. Hear me?"

"I'm doing it," came her muffled answer.

He edged to the door that led down into the garden, showing himself and leaped back. Nothing.

He crept down the stairs and slowly opened the outside door. Garden. Houses. Trees. Stars. Nothing else.

So. Two had been thought enough for this.

Link went back. "Mary," he said, "we haven't much time. Let's get out of here."

WITHIN five minutes the man and the girl were stealing out the garden door. Link was fully dressed in George Dunham's marloid sportswear and carried a bag full of things he had scooped out of the wall-bins in the room occupied by Mary's brother. In his other hand he carried the emmy gun and in an outside pocket was stuffed the ultrasonic that had fallen out of an inert cup hand in the hallway.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to pick up the grayish rods the tall ones had worn at their waists. The rods seemed short-range weapons and anyway he did not understand their operation. Mary was also fully dressed and carried a synthetic mesh bag that bulged with little cubes and cylinders—tins of food concentrates.

They picked their way through the Dunham garden and the neighbor's garden, to the ramp that led down to the neighbor's garage. Mary stood watch there, while Link went down the ramp, broke the photo beam and squeeze hurriedly through the opening doors. In a few seconds, the neighbor's three-wheeler purred slowly up the ramp, its door swung open and Mary hopped in. The car was dark.

"All safe," she breathed, twisting her head to look back as Link let the car roll down the short driveway. "No cries of Stop Thief."

Link swung out onto the road, running not too fast. As he rounded the curve before the main highway, he switched on the headlights and let the thing out cautiously.

"You can get more speed than this out of her," said Mary. She was opening a tin of beef-pack.

He gobbled a mouthful from Mary's fingers, which she withdrew hastily. "Hey, I use these."

He grinned a quick grin. "Now, here's what I want you to do. Get yourself some protection and get me some action at the same time. I'm going to let you off just beyond my house. You run up there and tell the peedubs—you'll find them around there—what they'll find—no, just tell them to investigate your house. But quick. I want them to find those characters there before their pals can get in and hide them. And, when you get the chance, tell my folks on

the Q.T. that I'm alive and kicking. Got it?"

"No," said Mary in a small voice. She jammed another chunk of beef-pack into his mouth.

As soon as he could work his jaws around it, he demanded, "What do you mean, no?"

"Enn Oh, No."

He pushed away the next chunk of food. "Look, dammit, I have no time to argue with a half-wit girl. Don't give me trouble now."

"Who's giving you trouble? We're in this together." She curled the last of the beef-pack out of the tin with her finger and poked it at him. "Here."

He groaned. "We? Are you crazy?"

She licked the meat off her finger and dug into the bag for another tin. "I'll be good. I may even be useful. Besides, I don't like to think of you roaming around all by your lonesome. It worries me."

Link clamped his jaw shut and peered ahead.

"By the way," she said casually, "did you ever get an ultrasonic shock?"

His eyes slid her way then, and he saw the gleam of metal in her hand. He'd never felt it coming out of his pocket.

"Just keep rolling, angel child," cooed Mary. "I don't brush off that easily. Don't even slow down, because I really will use it. Just keep pushing this little coffee-grinder until you've taken me so far you can't possibly bring me back."

SHE took the steering rod when they hit the Expressway. Link opened tin after tin of concentrates and packed food into his clamoring system. He switched on the radio and tuned to the PW band, while he set a coffee-gel on the car's heating tray. Routine calls from local stations muttered into the car as the gel expanded and liquesced into steaming black fluid in a paper-thin cup that mysteriously remained cool to the touch. He sipped at it and listened.

"It's too soon for the Fosters to report this," protested Mary. "Chances are they won't even know their car's gone until Jim Foster's ready to go to work in the morning."

"That's not all I'm listening for," replied Link. "I want to know what's going on. Hear that?"

They caught a peedub somewhere calling

another. "What's the latest on the Blodgett hunt?"

"Aah," said the other wearily, "he must have drowned. They've been all up and down the river."

"He couldn't have gotten far," went on the first. "No car-thefts reported here. Any around you?"

"Nah," retorted the other. "He'll starve anyway. They're watching the 'ponics stations . . ."

Other voices cut in on other business. Link smiled and shook an energin pill out of a jar; he swallowed it with a gulp of coffee.

"One thing bothers me," muttered Mary. "I only hope Mother doesn't run into our tall friends when she comes home."

"I wouldn't worry about that," said Link. "They've got her road-time figured out to a second, no doubt."

"Besides, Mother'll probably stop and chat with the Forbeses anyway. How on earth did they manage that, Link?"

"You mean, faking that call? Listen, kid, those Marties are clever. There'd be a million ways of doing it. They could tape Dan Forbes' voice on the phone, cut out the words and phrases they wanted. They could just listen and maybe imitate it."

Link explained all that had happened to him, glad to talk—for the monotony of the highway was having a hypnotic effect on his exhausted body.

"But why is Ed telling all those lies?" demanded Mary when he'd finished.

Link laughed shortly. "Look, put yourself in Ed's place. It's pretty plain to me that he did the running away. He ran, say, back over the hill a way and then hid. He decided I was done for. He also decided he wanted to live to a ripe old age, after all. He went down that trail like a crazy rabbit. He got lost wandered frantically here and there, and after a few hours managed to stumble into the arms of the P and W guards."

Link chuckled grimly. "Then came the hitch. The peedubs told him I'd survived and made a report. That must have been a bad moment for Ed, when he found out our stories didn't jibe.

"Only, it quickly became clear to him that what I'd reported didn't make sense. Nobody was going for it. It made no differ-

ence to Ed that I might have been speaking the truth, or that it was important to back up any eye-witness story we could get about these atrocities. No, Ed saw only how he could save his face."

"But, Link," pursued the girl anxiously, "can't you get to him and make him straighten the story out? It's really important, as you say, that the whole world gets the story straight."

"I've got about as much chance of getting through to Ed now," Link cut in, "as I have of driving us both to the moon tonight in this thing."

There seemed no answer to that. They rode on in silence. The kilometers thrummed under the little car's tires. Link felt the sodden weight of fatigue pressing him down, down, down . . .

He sat up energetically. His eyes sought the kilo trip meter. "Take the next turn-off," he said.

"What for?"

"I don't want to wait for this car to be reported. Somewhere along the road, and sometime later than now, we could run into an identification block and a squad of peedubs waiting for us. It might be a hundred kilos ahead—it might be a lot nearer. Let's not run into it, I say."

Mary said, "All this could be such a lark, if they weren't in on it."

Link grunted and took the steering rod. They were approaching a turn-off. In another minute they were swooping off down toward a narrow transverse road.

Mary peered at the country road. "You really are burying us in the wilds, aren't you?"

Link gestured at a farmhouse as they passed. "We're still on Main Street. What I want is the road they no longer put on the maps."

In half an hour he found it. The three-wheeler crept up a pair of ruts that climbed straight up and over ledges and through underbrush. He had to steer in zigzags to avoid fouling the third rear wheel. The engine groaned and whined.

"Looks like an old logging—road," he bit out between being tossed from side to side in the lurching car. "They used to—use mules—"

"What's—a mule?" was Mary's only answer.

At last they came to a leveled off place, a sort of pocket in the hillside. The wheels squished and sucked through mud from the winter's snows.

Link slammed into a wall of foliage, cut the lights and power and sank back. "That's all, baby. I'm beat. If they can find us here, they can have us."

Mary lowered his seatback gently until he was lying full length. She stuffed her rolled-up coat under his head and then kissed him.

"Better be glad, 'cause here I am."

"Sweet . . ." His hand fell away. She caught it and held it fiercely between her breasts for an instant, then put it down gently.

Then she took the emmy gun and put it in her lap. All about was blackness. Safe, smothering gloom.

XII

LINK'S long nose was the first of him to wake up. As the aroma of coffee curled around it, it twitched. Instantly, alertness spread through him and he came up on his elbows, blinking. Sunlight was streaming through the trees. The dashboard clock said: 1204.

Mary had coffee-gels and scrambled eggs set out on the heating tray. She kissed him and said, "Sorry, I couldn't bear to wake you sooner. You were doing such a beautiful job of sleeping."

While eating breakfast he listened to the news. A mystery had developed in the night. In the town of West Fork, Oregon, according to a PW report, a person named Mary Dunham was missing and foul play was feared.

Some sort of fire had occurred in the Dunham house, but it had been accompanied by odd radiation effects—quite evident on all the burned surfaces. The young lady's mother had been mysteriously lured from the house by a spurious phone message. Her brother's room and the kitchen commissary had been hastily rifled. And a neighbor's three-wheeler, an '89 Truxton, was missing. Altogether a baffling case. It might be assumed to be one more atrocity, were it not for certain significant departures from the regular pattern. Never before, for instance, had the marauders taken a vehicle. The entire Northwest was now alerted with

its description.

"Yes," mused Link, patting the steering rod, "this is what they used to call 'hot', in the old days of the great rackets. I'm afraid we can't use it any more."

Mary wiped off the heating tray and snapped it back in place. "Just what are our plans, then?"

"I don't know." Link's hand rasped over the stubble on his face. "Shave, maybe."

"What for? So you can be recognized?"

He chuckled. "That's a point. As for you, we'll have to cut your hair off."

"Oh, very funny. Try it. I'll burn you down where you stand. Besides, they're not looking for me. I'm dead. The Marties got me—I can prove it."

He looked at her sideways. "Calling me a Martie?"

Her green eyes danced. "What do you think, you long, lanky son of a—"

He grabbed her and they wrestled, spilling out of the car onto the ground. She bit. He pulled hair. And then they made love.

After a minute or two, Mary said casually, "As I was saying, what are our plans?"

He scratched his head. "Well, there are certain obvious steps. I want to climb this hill and scout the region. If there's a game warden's camp or forestry lookout near, I'd like to see how near."

She smiled fondly at him. "Well, as I see it, our main problem is to find somebody who will believe your story of what you saw the other night—as well as what has happened to you since. And do something about it."

She winced from his resounding clap on her back. "Good work," he said. "I'm beginning to realize that what we have to do is contact the Marties—the little ones."

The girl didn't answer. She stared out into the deep forest about them, at the gleaming pillars of sunshine standing in their own pools of light.

"You see, the main point is this. Whoever or whatever is behind these atrocities is against the Guzdans. I have a feeling they would love to know what I know. I have a feeling the little guys are worried."

He flung up his hands and let them fall in his lap. "I ask you, what have I got to lose? Is there anybody on Earth, any human being I can contact—who won't immediately turn me over to the Office of Protec-

tion and Welfare, for observation and detention and correction?

"On the other hand, if I go about my contact with the Guzdans real carefully, I can maybe find out by their reaction whether I'm on the right track—"

"They'll welcome you with open arms," said Mary caustically, "and put you away somewhere where you won't bother them any more. Say, a hole in the ground two meters deep, two meters long and a meter wide."

Link's grin was tight. "Maybe. Maybe not. The more I think of it, the more I think it's the thing to do. For one thing, if I'm right about this, they can—and will—give me more protection than any of my own people."

"How," said Mary calmly, "are you going to go about contacting them?"

He shrugged. "Where's the nearest one of their observatories?"

She groaned. "Oh, Lord, a million kilos from here." She brightened. "Oh, but we have the car!"

"Can't use it," snapped Link. "Come on, let's start getting our stuff together. We've got some overnight hiking to do."

Mary Dunham sighed and began digging around her feet for the yet-unopened food tins. "Whither thou goest, there shall I go," she said gaily.

XIII

THE nearest Guzdan observatory was perched on Mt. Shasta's three-and-a-half kilometers high peak. They had traveled some two hundred kilometers that night on the expressway that ran from Portland down to Salt Lake City and were now somewhere near the south-east corner of Oregon. By the map, the Northern California mountain was closer than the Mt. Williams observatory which Link and Ed had watched that other night that seemed so long ago now.

"If we strike out overland to Bly," Link pointed out, "we'll find an old railroad right of way from there. We can follow it right down through the Cascade Range. The roadbed will be pretty overgrown but at least it'll be mostly level walking."

They moved by night. They used up the food concentrates as quickly as possible to

cut down the load. Thereafter Link used the ultrasonic on small game. They also ate dandelion greens and such as they found them. It was enough.

On the fourth night out they were picking their way down a rocky stream bed. Mary was no longer demonstrating her girlish agility, but stumbled doggedly along behind Link, muttering about her sore feet.

Link stopped suddenly, his hand out in a signal for quiet. Ahead, the night flickered redly and there was the sound of many voices, blending into a sort of growl.

The man and the girl crept down the stream bed. It widened out into a wide upland meadow. They crouched among some second-growth conifers and peered out at the wild scene before them.

A small mob of men were milling about a lightning-blasted oak, shouting in a confusion of anger. Off to one side, a bonfire, evidently lit purely to provide them some light, blazed brightly.

Through the flicker and smoke and rapidly moving figures, Link and Mary could see what appeared to be the subject of the group's attention, the focus of its anger. At first it seemed that all these grown men were intent on man-handling a mere child.

Then Mary gasped. "It's a Martie! Link, they've caught a Martie!"

"But how can they?" he whispered hoarsely. "The Marties stick to their observatories, or their embassies. There never would be one away out in the wilds like this."

Yet, even as he spoke, someone lifted the slight body up and shook it. Even had he doubted his eyes, he could hardly doubt his ears, catching the wrathful shouts echoing about the meadow, bouncing back from the mountains.

"We'll show you an atrocity!"

"Don't kill him yet. Lemme at him."

"That's right! Bill says to mail the body to their Frisco embassy!"

"Let's string the stinking little Martie up and be done with it!"

"Wait! Joe's heating up that soldering iron. We gotta write Free Terra on him when we're through with him!"

"Do it while he's still alive!"

Link and Mary were sickened, although fascinated horror kept their eyes glued to the scene.

"Link, I can't stand it! It's—it's not fair—"

"No," he said through clenched teeth. "Not fair, but it shows how feeling has risen."

"Oh, can't we do something?"

"There's one little chance. Are you willing to take it?" In rapid whispers he outlined his plan. He'd hardly finished before she ripped the emmy gun from his hands and crawled back into the trees.

Link waited tensely until he could be sure that she'd gone the proper distance. Then, cupping his hands toward the milling mob, he bellowed. "Hey! Marties! The Marties are coming. Scatter!"

At that instant, a brilliant purple thread cut through the branches high over his head. Mary had cut loose with the emmy gun. The tree above him exploded into resinous flame. Link let out his best scream of fear.

There was stunned silence out on the meadow. Then bedlam. Men ran this way and that. A hasty kick scattered the bonfire. The ground trembled with thudding feet.

Link leaped forward. In the rapidly diminishing light of scattered brands, he collided with bodies that shoved him off with curses. He plunged toward the tree.

At its foot lay a pitiful little figure. Over it stood another, larger, raised on tiptoe in headlong wrath, a club lifted for one last blow.

Link hurtled in with his shoulder, driving the man reeling off into the night. He scooped up the little body and ran on, stooping low and making a wide circle that brought him back to where the fire that had crowned the little pine was dying into random flickers.

He stumbled on into the forest with his burden. Mary brought up the rear, ultrasonic ready for any pursuit.

In two minutes they had rounded a sharp bend in the rocky bed and Link could tenderly lay down the thing that he carried.

"The first-aid kit," he snapped. "And the lamp. But shield it."

Mary passed him the lamp first and then dug into his back-pack. Link turned the lamp's shield to a mere slit and flicked it on.

"Ugh!" Mary's voice was choked.

Link edged the slender beam away from the terrible damage.

A thin tired echo of a voice came up to Link. "Who on Pslan befriends one of Guzdla?"

"You're all right now," said Link quickly. "Just rest and don't talk."

The tiny, mashed lips moved around the broken seed-pearl teeth. "I cannot live with what they have done to me. I feel the life trickling, trickling . . . water . . ." It was a sigh.

Link turned his head. "Mary!"

She thrust a dripping cloth into his hand. The cloth turned dark against the mouth.

A dainty hand pulled it away. Link took it, started to sponge the little face.

"You cannot help. I am going—back—to Guzdla . . ."

Mary choked back a sob.

"How in hell did they get hold of you?" exploded Link.

The dainty hand waved delicately. "We wander unseen over Pslan, hoping to see, one of us, these attacks you call atrocities. If it is not too late—"

"I saw one," said Link, and started to sketch rapidly what he had been through. As he described the tall ones moving about the flaming Thatcher house, the little figure on the ground before him rose to its elbows. Out of the bloody mask of its face, one good eye gleamed like a black bead.

"The Cructars!" Those two words sliced across Link's speech, and then the head fell back.

"Half an energin, and a morphine syrette," muttered Link. Mary's fingers fumbled in the dim light of the lamp.

The mashed lips moved. Link bent over to catch the thready whisper.

". . . Cructar legend . . . we warned you . . . but all Pslan was so amused . . . they . . . are the Cructars . . ."

The broken energin fell into a bloody hole. A slim needle entered bruised flesh. It was too much morphine, but Link hoped the energin would hold the little alien above the threshold of pain.

". . . must be told . . ." The voice came a little stronger. "Tell the Council of Masters."

Link dared to cut in. "We're headed for your observatory on Mt. Shasta."

Blood gushed from the ragged mouth. The dainty hand clutched Link's sleeve. Mary turned away from the sound of that

voice gurgling in its fight through the flooded throat.

"L-42 is too far. Go to Newton Campbell. Much nearer. Goose Lake. Go fast. In pocket, ring set. Pluck eight one . . . my . . . sig . . ."

The little black bead of an eye became curiously fixed.

XIV

THE house of Newton Campbell was not a house. It was a confection. Poised on a low foothill overlooking Goose Lake, in Northern California, it was nothing more or less than a glittering basket hanging from a golden tripod. The three buttresses sweeping up from the ground were of creamy Guzdlan bronze. From their convergent apex depended a construction of solaglas banded with horizontal rings of kisthram, so cunningly fused with the glass that the whole seemed one impossible casting of fragile transparency.

Seen in the deepening twilight, this huge glassy construction began to change subtly, began to glow faintly. Somewhere within it, photocells were registering the fading of the primary's afterglow and prodding the electron rheostats; the rheostats were inching up their coils, bringing more and more juice to banked and hidden lumens. No one scanning a book-tape would know, without glancing toward the windows—and yet the basket among the three legs was slowly turning into a lantern, gleaming in the dusk.

"What a shack!" breathed Mary. "What a dream!"

Link grunted, his gray eyes unblinking and thoughtful.

From the perimeter of the bases of the great bronze arches, a formal garden rolled down the hillside, fanning graciously down in every direction—massed beds of blooms among smartly clipped privet hedges. Quite artfully, the formal blended as it went into the informal, with seemingly random magnolia and pear and oak trees standing up here and there, until, rather suddenly, the garden was no more and one stood as Link and Mary did now, on the edge of wanton wilderness.

Link looked at the thing in his hand, the little hoop of black metal with the all but

invisible gold thread stretched taut within it which he had taken from the bloody pocket of the dead Guzdlan. He could see how a much smaller hand than his could hold this concealed and contrive to pluck that wire with a free finger. How far and how often had that wire sent out a call for help that dark night, now almost a week ago and some hundred and sixty kilometers behind?

"Oh, why don't we just go up there and yell 'Hallo, the house?'" demanded the girl. "Ye gods, Link, the little fellow vouched for him, didn't he?"

"Yes, but he seemed to think we should use this," replied Link. "Even if he hadn't, I'm bearing in mind that I'm making contact with civilization again."

"Okay, okay," muttered Mary. "I was just hoping we could stop playing cowboys and Indians one of these days."

"Any minute now," said Link. He scowled down at the ring set in his hand. Experimentally, he flicked a fingernail across the golden filament. Eight times, pause, and once.

The wire vibrated under the plucking, but gave forth no sound. Link began to feel a little silly, crouching there behind a bush and picking at a thing in his hand.

Then Mary clutched his arm. "The house," she whispered in awe, "It's coming—coming down!"

The now brightly glowing cage up on the hill was slowly descending, on slender cables that gleamed faintly silver in the growing dark. Silently, the whole confection came down and a slot in its dark underside opened to lay a bright rectangle along the ground. A figure flickered through the slot and became the outline of a man silhouetted against the glow of the house.

The figure moved through the shrubbery unhurriedly, as if sauntering. Up in the shining house another figure, indistinctly seen through the distorting rings, moved from point to point, as if aimlessly looking out.

Link and Mary waited, not quite knowing what to do. He had ceased sending through the ring set. Was this Newton Campbell? Was he an enemy—or a friend?

The figure came on, appearing and disappearing, vague as the shapes among which it moved. Its progress, however, was roughly a straight line—right toward where the man

and the girl crouched. The ring must have told many things.

The figure stopped.

Link spoke up. "Mr. Campbell?"

The figure stood still. Then it dropped to the ground. "Who's there?" came a harsh voice.

"There are two of us," said Link. "Are you Newton Campbell?"

"Two Terrans, eh? What are you doing in my garden?"

Link took a deep breath. "A dying Guzdlan gave me his ring-set and sent me to you. He also gave me his signal—eight one."

"Jemzdok!" The rasping voice grew harsher. "What did you do to him?"

"We didn't do anything," snapped Mary. "We tried to save his life. Are you Campbell, or aren't you?"

"I am. But I don't understand—"

"We have to be careful," said Link. "We're violators of the Registration Act."

"Worse than that," put in Mary. "The Cructars are after us."

The voice cracked. "The—Cructars?"

Link stepped forward a pace, holding the ultrasonic loosely ready. "I think you'd better believe me," he said thinly. "Somebody's got to believe me—before all hell breaks loose. The Cructars are here, here on Earth. I saw them committing the Thatcher Atrocity."

"You—you saw the Cructars . . ." The figure advanced, revealed in the dim light as a short, stumpy, elderly man, with a well-proportioned head. "Young man," he said, in a voice whose perpetual rasp had softened somewhat, "That's a wild tale you tell. But I'd like to hear more of it. Will you come up to my house?"

Link shook his head. "We can talk well enough here. I gather there are others up there, and you seem to have some need of caution yourself—the way you came down here."

"Only my granddaughter," said the other. "I think Cynthia—" he jerked his head toward the house—"suspects something. So, when I get these little shocks—" he pulled a flat black box out of a pocket—"I mention that I'm going for a walk in the garden."

They sat down there in the dark, their faces faint against the dark shapes of the

massed foliage about them. Link pitched his voice low, not to carry far.

The old man was silent for several moments after he was finished. Then his rasping voice sounded. "It's incredible. But it must be true. We must act immediately. Jemzdok was right—their Council of Masters must be notified at once."

"We were thinking," said Mary. "You have a television network. We could kill two birds with one stone. Put Link on telecast and make sure the Marties listen in."

"No." Campbell coughed apologetically. "No, we must act, but not hastily. The telecast may be good, but the Guzdians must be notified first. I rather think they will know what to do." Stiffly, he climbed to his feet. "Now, will you please come up to the house?"

"Sure," said Link, picking up the emmy gun and handing the ultrasonic to Mary. "I'll just hang on to these things, if you don't mind."

Newton Campbell cleared his throat. "Well, I find it hard to imagine that my humble dwelling harbors any danger for you. But I can see you've developed the habit of caution to quite a degree."

"It's kept me alive so far," said Link succinctly.

They started walking up the hill, Link bringing up the rear with many a glance over his shoulders.

"I wish," said Mary to the man plodding at her side, "I knew more about this Cructar business."

"I'm afraid even Guzdla doesn't know too much," said the television magnate. "It seems that some fifty of our years ago these creatures came to their world. Apparently, they completely underestimated the little people, living in loose-appearing communities strung out along those gigantic gorges and looking as if all they cared about were their art and music and odd sports. The Cructars started to work up the gorges with their weapons, as if they were cleaning out vermin.

"It took the Guzdians a little time to find out there was to be no reasoning with these killers. It took the Guzdians a little more time to find out how to make their own old weapons that they'd buried centuries ago. But it didn't take them too long.

"They hit the Cructars very suddenly and very thoroughly. They almost forgot to take any captives, but they managed to get into the minds of a couple of them before they died and get some sort of explanation for all this.

"It was nothing more or less than a migration. The Cructar world—somewhere in our Galaxy, presumably—is fast becoming uninhabitable. Once a lovely place to live in, some inexplicable perturbation of its orbit about the primary was causing upheavals and eruptions, rising toxicity of atmosphere, decline of vegetation . . . hell on wheels, in fact.

"What could the Cructars do but try to find another world? They sent out scouting expeditions. The expedition that came to Guzdla was fully equipped for—er—you might say *preparing* the planet for mass migration that was to follow. And we can thank God that they found Guzdla first—working their way in toward the sun from the outer giants. If they had landed here—"

The rasping voice stopped.

They had reached the house. In the light blazing from it, they looked at each other. Campbell's jutting nose and chin gave him an air of majesty. Link's stern face, with its now heavy beard, made him appear like a prophet of old. And Mary's hair needed combing.

They climbed the steps leading up through the under-entrance and found themselves in the garage. A heliicopter hung over a huge circular opening in the floor. Campbell pressed a button, and the steel floor pressed against their feet. Link and Mary stared down through the hole and saw the ground moving away into the darkness. The house was rising.

Campbell ushered them into an elevator, pressed more buttons. The doors slid shut, and then opened again.

They stepped out in a chamber that extended the full width and diameter of the buildings. Its luxurious furnishings and ornate design made Mary sigh. Here was a pinnacle of living that drew on the skills and materials of two worlds.

Then something that only one of the worlds could have produced got up from a low divan and came toward them. As she moved, Cynthia Campbell made every luxurious appointment take on a shabbiness

and a cheapness by sheer comparison.

"Cynthia," said Campbell, "I'd like to have you meet my new friends. Miss Dunham and Mr. Blodgett, my granddaughter, Cynthia."

Link bobbed his head awkwardly, knowing he had no voice to speak with for the moment. And how was he going to take his eyes off this vision?

Her shimmering robe with its filigree of silvery lace utterly failed to conceal the voluptuous perfection of her slender, aristocratic body. In a face exquisitely molded from the stuff of dreams, eyes danced within a fringe of sweeping lashes. Her hair was a rippling cloud of black that curled about straight, white shoulders. And her voice had all the modulations of a cherished viola.

"How nice," she murmured. "So these are the people you've been hiding down in the garden, Gramp. Why didn't you bring them up sooner?"

"My dear," replied Campbell, his rasping voice taking on a tone of unction, "I haven't been hiding them from you. I haven't been hiding anything from you."

Cynthia's laugh was a sweep of harp strings. "Now, Gramp, I've been intrigued too long by those sudden impulses of yours to go rambling down toward the woods."

The old gentlemen coughed. "We have some business to perform. Although it's nothing we wish to hide from you. As a matter of fact, it concerns you—indirectly."

"Immediately I'm fascinated." Those limpid eyes fell again on Link, numbing him from head to toe. They swept slowly, almost lingeringly, down his gangling frame in its dirty, rumpled clothing—and held for a moment on the emmy gun in his hand.

Abruptly, the spell was shattered in him. An instinct raced along his nerves, crying alarm. When the limpid gaze rose again to his face, his own eyes met it, eyes gone cold and steady.

"I think we'd better get busy." He spoke to the back of the older man, who had started for the rolling bar in the middle of the room.

"Yes, yes, by all means," said Campbell over his shoulder. "But we have time for a bit of refreshment and I think you folks could use it."

"Yes, do at least sit down," urged Cyn-

thia. "And, if you'd like to clean up and change—"

"I don't believe we have the time," said Link.

"Oh, rest for a second, will you?" Impatiently, Mary flung herself into a chair-mock.

Link subsided into a chair-mock beside her. As casually as possible, he laid the emmy gun across his lap.

"Besides," said their host when they had all been supplied with tinkling tumblers, "I haven't yet decided what is the best thing to do."

"Contact the Guzdians," said Link laconically.

"Yes, of course. And I think that means we must go to New Washington."

Cynthia's limpid eyes shuttled brightly from speaker to speaker.

"I can arrange for a jet in half an hour. In two more hours we can be there."

Link nodded.

"May I just say," intruded Cynthia sweetly, "that I haven't the least damned idea what you're talking about?"

Campbell turned to smile benignly on his grandchild. The smile, nevertheless, was a trifle taut. "Why, it's nothing, my dear, really. Just that the world is being secretly invaded by the Cructars."

The limpid eyes narrowed for an instant and then grew wide. "The—what?"

Patiently, the old gentleman rapidly sketched in the highlights of Link's adventures. As he went on to explain the Cructar Legend, Link watched the girl gravely. His gray eyes did not flicker when she burst into a musical laugh.

"Why, Gramp, how wonderful! Is this a new play you're going to telecast? It's tremendous."

"You know," Link said conversationally to Campbell, "I think it would be nice if Miss Campbell would accompany us to New Washington." He grinned a tight grin at the girl. "I'd really like to have her along."

The eyes of the two men met. Mary pursed her mouth and looked down at her hands, twisting in her lap. Cynthia's lashes fluttered.

"Oh, but I'd love to!"

The old gentleman cleared his throat and reached for the radio-phone clipped to the side of his chair-mock. "I see what you

mean," he said to Link. "Her presence could be so reassuring."

XV

THE quaint standards of morality and modesty which prevailed at the start of the Twentieth Century had all but vanished by the time it was drawing to a close. Only one who had lived through some seventy-odd years of world-shaking changes could fully savor the thought that it had once been grossly improper to assign a young unmarried couple to the same room and bath in which to refresh themselves and change their clothing.

Newton Campbell had little time for such thoughts. Yet he enjoyed a brief flash of amusement as he approached his personal chambers and, through its glass partitions, observed Miss Dunham, clad only in undershorts, struggling to comb out her tangled hair and Mr. Blodgett, completely naked, briskly toweling himself.

They seemed to be arguing about something. If the old gentleman had been so ungentlemanly as to tune in on the house circuit, he would have heard how warmly Miss Dunham was objecting to Mr. Blodgett's apparent interest in Miss Campbell. Nor would he have guessed that the young man's irritatingly noncommittal replies were given with an inner thought to that very house circuit.

Campbell opened the door and announced, "Well, it only took them half an hour to ready a jet for us. I suppose, in this day and age, that's pretty good service. We can leave as soon as you're ready. We can eat in the copter."

"Right," said Link.

And in another fifteen minutes the small copter, its blades already spinning and the gorgeous Cynthia at the controls, dropped out of the bottom of that fabulous house, drifted between two gleaming buttresses, and rose slanting into the night.

Cynthia had made up some sandwiches, too. When she handed them to Link, he managed a fatuous smile—and Mary snatched them out of his hands. Her green eyes were as hotly angry as Cynthia's luscious brown ones were slyly amused.

In a few minutes the little craft was settling down on the glinting steel mesh of the

airfield. The floodlights were on and what few humans were about cast thoroughly human shadows.

A shining four-jet transport stood close by where they had landed. A man in pilot's uniform stood by the open door, smoking. He threw away the butt as they approached and saluted. Link took in his serious, homely face as he climbed aboard.

The four seated themselves comfortably. The pilot sat down in his bucket seat, after closing the glass partition behind him, and began flicking the switches arrayed before him. The jet's doors snubbed to and their locks clicked. The cabin lights went out. The priming pumps of the big Stadman engines sounded their thin whines through the quiet of the sound-proofed cabin.

The whines were lost in the rising rumble of the turbines. The ship began to roll. Then the hyperalcohol really took hold and the thunder dropped behind. The pilot pulled back the wheel and the cabin slanted up. Looking out, Link saw jagged mountain peaks flashing away behind.

Mary's hand stole across the aisle into his. "We were lucky to meet that little Guzdlan. Pretty soon now everything will be straightened out, won't it, Link? Maybe, when they realize what you've done, they'll drop all those charges against you."

Cynthia's chuckle sounded from the seat ahead. "Tall, dark and handsome there is in good hands now."

"I'm sure of that." Link's voice was enigmatic in the dark.

He felt vaguely uneasy. Something was wrong somewhere, and suddenly he saw what it was. Too late, he realized the extreme vulnerability of his position. High in the air, in a slow jet that was doubtless showing its riding lights, with two other men, neither of whom was armed and one of whom was too old to be counted on, and two girls, one of whom . . . he wished he could see more of the sky.

He glanced out of the window. There were no ring-ships in sight, or any other craft, on his side. The Pacific was a silvery gray expanse to his right.

That meant the ship was on a southerly course. Why? New Washington, located between Kansas City and Omaha, lay almost due east. Link's eyes narrowed and his grip tightened on the emmy gun.

He quietly unhooked his seat-belt. Leaning across the aisle, he whispered to Mary to do the same.

Then, as he was settling back in his seat, the cabin lights went on. He had just time enough to register the fact when another set of lights went on.

They were the sudden blinding flares set off in his brain by an ultrasonic discharge. The flares were followed by the unremitting blackness of unconsciousness.

XVI

WHEN nerves awoke from ultrasonic shock they did more than tingle—they snapped. You got the feeling you were made of thousands of fine glass rods, too fragile to exist and therefore exploding of their delicate weight. For a brief moment that seemed forever, you were a mass of fiery needles.

Link clenched his jaw and squinted his eyes open. The cabin seemed full of people. Furiously blinking away the blurring tears of pain, he looked again—and the figures resolved into Cynthia and three men, standing up front and facing the cabin. Since their backs were against the pilot's plexiglass partition, Link guessed the pilot was in on this, too. That would make four men and a girl, all armed. Cynthia held her ultrasonic as if she knew how to use it.

One of the men was speaking. "All right, he's coming to. Get behind him, Steve, and keep a bead on him all the time."

The one called Steve kept his ultrasonic on Link as he passed him and dropped heavily into the seat behind. Link shook his head soggily, trying to grasp the situation. It was still night. They had all evidently been given a light shock, only enough to deprive them of weapons. He could have been out as little as two hours, but it was probably more.

Mary, across the aisle, was beginning to stir and groan. Newton Campbell, in the seat ahead of her, was also beginning to writhe.

The Pacific gleamed below, a metallic expanse as far as the eye could see. Link guessed they were flying at an altitude of about five kilometers. He wondered if their course was still southerly.

"Well, say something," Cynthia's husky voice came down the cabin to him

Link studied her, his gray eyes coolly lingering on the curves of her body imperfectly shrouded in filmy blouse and snug trousers. He said something.

The girl's eyes narrowed. The man behind him growled, "Hey, watch your language." The fair-haired athlete who stood beside Cynthia clamped his jaw tight and started forward. Cynthia's hand checked him.

"Relax, Everett. Besides, he's out of his mind."

"I sure am," said Link, "to have let this happen. How did you work it?"

"What's going on?" Mary mumbled. The television magnate was coming out of it also, tossing his blocky bald head from side to side and making sounds of distress deep in his throat.

Cynthia eyed Link mischievously. "I put a call through back at the house, when you were busy. Your name, dear boy, is really magic. Orders flew thick and fast. These boys were stashed in the toilet at take-off. Pretty tight fit, but they managed to get an ultrasonic on you." She tossed back that lustrous hair and smiled. "As I said before, you're in good hands. Are you angry with me, Blodgett boy?"

"Cynthia." Campbell was sitting up, shaking his head to clear it. "What's this all about?"

The girl laid her hand on the fair-haired athlete's arm. "Gramp, I'd like you to meet Everett Hinds, special agent for Free Terra. Mr. Hinds will explain everything."

The old gentleman grunted. The corner of his jowls that Link could see was purplish. The fair-haired Mr. Hinds inclined his head courteously.

"Mr. Campbell, the essence of this situation is that you appear to have been completely taken in by the impossible and false story of that man back there. I wish to present the regrets of the entire organization of Free Terra that we have found it necessary to intercept you before you present this mad improvisation to your public and, what is worse, to the enemy."

"Do you mean to tell me that Free Terra is involved in this?" Campbell growled.

"Free Terra," said Hinds, speaking slowly and with determination, "is only inter-

ested in preventing Blodgett's misleading and confusing story from reaching the minds of the masses."

"So are the Cructars," said Link.

"This is fascinating," rasped Campbell. "I always thought Free Terra was a parliament of fools. Now, it would seem, your organization aspires to nothing short of betrayal of the entire world. I repeat, fascinating."

"Oh, Gramp," said Cynthia wearily.

"We are well aware of your stubbornness," said Hinds, "and, in a way, we have always respected you for it. It is, after all, only an example of the kind of freedom we are fighting to preserve. But, ever since the early days of the USSR, we have been forced to realize that freedom—of speech, or of anything else—can be carried to a dangerous extreme. This, we're afraid, is one of those times."

Campbell snorted. "Tell me, young man, do you get all that mealy-mouthed balderdash out of your own head or are you quoting that self-appointed savior of all mankind, James K. Davis?"

Hinds smiled coldly. He and Cynthia exchanged a glance and a shrug.

"And let me tell you something," Campbell went on, his voice rising. "The first chance I get, I'm going to make some nasty charges against the so-called Leadership of Free Terra—not to mention all the civil suits for damages and etcetera my lawyers can think up. I'll tie up your little collection of thugs, procurers and itinerant maniacs hand and foot. I'll—"

"You'll be doing pretty well to tie up Free Terra," remarked Hinds. "It's already the biggest single political force in the world."

"Hm!" The TV tycoon settled himself and folded his arms. "Now, let me just get this straight. This forcible abduction is an action of Free Terra, you say. It is being done to prevent any further spread of the story of Mr. Lincoln Blodgett. And why is this story so unpalatable, so formidable—especially to an organization devoted to freeing this world of an alien menace?"

"I do not work on the level of policy, you understand," said Hinds. "I and my friends here have dedicated ourselves to the protection of Free Terra, its Leaders and its cause."

But surely you can see for yourself, sir, the harm this absurd story can do.

"It presents the Marties with a perfect opportunity to revive that transparent old Cructar Legend that Terra long ago flung back in their faces with the scorn it deserved. It would be futile for them to attempt to revive it now by themselves. They have had to resort to their other shabby contention—that Terrans themselves are perpetrating these atrocities."

"But now they have a Terran witness in this poor half-wit yokel. In fact, it is not unreasonable to surmise that this is all their contrivance. Perhaps Blodgett is not so half-witted at that. Maybe, for all we know, he has been offered a most tempting reward—"

"Why, you—" Mary gripped the arms of her seat as if to rise.

"Sit down," snapped Link, in sudden fear that her rising might betray the fact that her safety-belt was still unfastened. His was, too. Somehow, their captors had overlooked that. "Let the joker rave. He's got the guns, kid."

Hinds smiled indulgently and turned back to Campbell. "The results of this should be clear to you, sir. The Marties could undoubtedly achieve some effect, gain some credence in certain quarters. Even some of those in Free Terra might stop and wonder—maybe the Cructars are real and striking in our midst!"

"All this, mark you, to happen at a most critical time. For, as far as we can see, the Marties are getting ready for a major operation against us all. What, we do not yet know."

"But, when it happens, it is of the utmost importance that Terra be united. With unity, we have some hope of success in defending ourselves—perhaps in ridding ourselves of them forever."

"That unity, sir, can be seriously threatened by having such a rumor as this heap of slag of Blodgett's circulating among us—"

The old man's loud clearing of his throat shattered the rest of Hinds's words. "Slag, you say. You are utterly sure it cannot be anything else but slag?"

Hinds shrugged. "If the Cructars are those painted in the Marties' account of them, they would descend on Guzdla with

a mighty armada, attack in force. They would not sneak around on Terra, killing isolated humans—"

"They do, though," interrupted Link. "I saw them."

"Quiet, down there," ordered Hinds.

"What about me?" demanded Mary. "I saw them, too."

"I advise you two to shut up," said Hinds with sudden energy. "You've already made more trouble than you're worth."

"Want me to rap her one?" said Steve, the man behind Link. "I can reach over easy."

"No. Keep that leak covered. According to all reports, he's the explosive type."

"Blodgey, hey?" Cynthia put her head on one side, smiling. "What a terrible name—for such an attractive man."

Link looked at her steadily for a moment. She colored and her chin went up. He turned to the window, hearing no more of the argument raging in the cabin.

He was startled to see the gray stipple of the Pacific below. It was getting light. Dawn was coming. The streak of light in the east had a ragged edge to its bottom. Mountains.

All over the world, where there were mountains, there were likely to be one or two Guzdlan observatories . . .

He drew in a quick, shallow breath. A plan was taking shape in his mind.

XVII

THE seats of a passenger transport were adjustable. A simple lever near the floor could be pulled up, releasing a ratchet and spring. Then a slight pressure against the back of the seat caused it to swing back and down.

The dawn had washed down the black of night against the windows to a dull gray. Even if the cabin lights went out, a man could still see.

Link turned his head and caught Mary's eyes once more. He moved his lips in a casual murmur: "This is for the devil."

She frowned, and then blinked as the impact of the words sank in.

She could not know what he planned. He would have to rely on her quickness of wit. The man behind him was occupied with lighting a cigarette. Link inched the

lever up slowly, while looking out of the window. He was banking on one thing—the evident desire of the Free Terra men to avoid harming the elderly television magnate. This kidnaping was going to prove embarrassing enough as it was.

The lever was up, the ping of the released spring a vibration to Link's hand rather than a sound.

He took a deep breath, just as Steve's first exhale of cigarette smoke billowed past his head.

He went back in a lunge. The seat-back banged down flat across Steve's knees. Link pulled himself over in a backwards somersault. His feet swung through a wide arc that almost touched the cabin roof and smashed on over into Steve's face.

The rest of him followed through, slamming into the man's body. He grappled for the hand that held the ultrasonic. The man under him groaned and twisted.

Hinds was rushing down the aisle, followed by the other man. Mary shot out of her seat and literally exploded in Hinds's face. In trying to sweep her aside, Hinds gave Link a clear shot at the second man. Link pressed the ultrasonic's trigger and saw the man's head jerk back.

Hinds was having his hands full with Mary. Link came up and took him by the front of his jacket, a bunch of it in his fist. As he threw his right for the man's jaw, he caught a glimpse of Cynthia moving down the aisle, ultrasonic waving for a clear shot, and her grandfather's hand swiping across her face in a mighty slap that sent her staggering. Then Link's fist bounced off Everett Hinds's jaw. Hinds went down hard.

Link whirled. The man he had kicked in the face was struggling to get up, cut and bleeding. Link strode back and fetched him an uppercut that lifted him over two seats.

"Look out!" screamed Mary. Link turned to see her charging up the aisle. Cynthia was straightening up with the ultrasonic after having shoved Campbell sprawling. The ship was lurching and the pilot was evidently having his hands full keeping it in trim with all the commotion.

Mary hit Cynthia like a cyclone. The two girls were a straining, wrestling, slapping Laocoon. Link vaulted over the bodies in

the aisle and took Cynthia's wrist. He slung her into the front seat with a force that tossed her hair in a mop over her face.

He picked up her ultrasonic and gave it to Mary. He dug up another out of the tangled bodies on the floor and went forward to the pilot, leaning over the man's shoulder, noting how the freckles stood out in that whitened face.

"Guess who's in charge now," said Link.

"I didn't have nothing to do with this," complained the pilot. "They gave me a mess of credits and a couple of orders. I don't go for this rough stuff."

"That's smart of you," said Link, "because it can get awful rough. Where are we?"

"That's Mexico." The purple-lined horizon was tilting back to level ahead of them. The sun was a dazzling bead swelling between two peaks.

"I don't care about Mexico so much," said Link. "Keep your eyes peeled for a Guzdlan observatory. I'm right interested in the nearest one you can find. Mary?"

"Yes?"

"Give Mr. Campbell your ultrasonic and then come back here."

"By the way," said Newton Campbell, "that was a pretty piece of action, Blodgett."

"I wasn't sure we could pull it off," said Link. "You keep an eye on those sleeping beauties for a minute, will you?" He spoke to Mary: "You ride herd on this lad. See that he heads for land and no fooling."

He gave her his ultrasonic and turned back to the cabin.

None of the men had moved much. Cynthia's blouse had been ripped clean off one breast and she was calmly trying to pin it together. Her eyes darted provocatively up at Link through her tumbled hair.

"They told me you were dangerous," she murmured, "but they didn't say how dangerous. What a man!"

"Cynthia," grunted her grandfather, "you are turning into the cheapest sort of camp-follower."

"Now, now, Gramp," smiled the gorgeous girl. She turned the smile up at Link as he passed. "You're having your kind of fun, and I'm having mine."

The old man snorted and turned to watch Link. "Well, boy, you seem to move fast.

Where are you aiming next?"

Link finished searching the men before he answered. "We're headed for the nearest Guzdlan observatory."

The ship tilted, and Link whirled erect. Mary called out over her shoulder. "He says he sees an observatory, Link."

Link nodded at Campbell. "That's the next step. We'll drop in on them."

"What!" yelled the pilot. "You crazy? There's no place we can land in these mountains."

"Who said anything about landing?" retorted Link. "I said 'drop'."

"Drop!" Old Campbell looked unenthusiastic.

"Whee!" cried Mary.

XVIII

THERE was no trouble. The pilot, who vowed he'd done a lot of jumping during his turn at military training, made a practice pass to show them how to go and then wheeled to come slanting down over the observatory's spherical eye and they stepped out smartly at his call. Before that Link had locked up Cynthia and her friends in the overcrowded washrooms.

The big canopies billowed and tilted in early morning downdrafts. Link grinned and hooked his fingers in the emmy gun's studs, squinting his watery eyes to sight into the sun. It was weird to be thus lowered into night-chill again when, only minutes before, they had leaped into the warmth of the rising sun.

He looked down at the great arm of snow rushing up at him. This was the spur of the ridge on which the observatory sat higher up. The pilot's aim had been good.

Mary's chute abruptly collapsed, its shrouds fanning out from the hole in the snow into which the girl had disappeared. Newton Campbell's chute swung out next in a wide flutter on the white expanse and Link saw the old gentleman had luckily landed square on Mary's chute, punching it in.

It was hard to judge the distance, but it suddenly seemed to Link that he was going to overshoot the ridge and go on down into the hazy jumble of darkness that was the valley below. More or less instinctively, he sawed hard at the lines and managed to

spill enough air.

He landed in deep snow, driving with a mighty *chuff* deep into its smothering chill. He had a moment of panicky rage there, as his efforts to climb out of the hole resulted only in wild thrashing. Then he took a grip on himself and began hauling on the shroud lines. They held enough for him to climb up on them.

The first thing he saw as he pulled himself slowly out of the hole was a chiseled miniature of a face—the face of a Guzdlan.

There were a dozen of them and they had come equipped for any contingency—a chest of first aid equipment, lengths of light strong rope and a little marvel of a snow tractor that churned through the snow on flanged balls. More than anything else, however, Link was astonished to note the three pairs of unmistakably Terran skis lashed to the side of the tractor.

It was scarcely a hundred meters to the observatory, but the snow was deep. The Guzdians insisted, gabbling and piping among themselves, on fitting the humans with skis. Then, each holding a rope from the tractor, the terrans were pulled up the gentle slope.

"This is the way to do it!" exulted Mary.

Link grinned, but he had no reply to make. His gray eyes stared ahead at the observatory looming before them, its great eye-ball looking like a moon with the sun glowing over half its face.

Inside, he could only stand, shuffling absently out of the skis in obedience to the impatience of shrill voices. He had never before been in one of the Guzdlan observatories. Never before had he stood in a place that was purely Guzdlan.

It was a place of dimness and thin, faintly acrid air—acrid from the concentrated body odors of the Guzdians, thin because the little men from the fourth planet found the atmosphere of Pslan uncomfortably rich and dizzying. Only two kilometers above sea level did they begin to find conditions approaching those on Guzdla's surface.

But Link and Mary could pay little attention to the air and the smells. Their eyes were caught and lifted up and held by the huge ball of kisthram above them.

The observatory interior was like a well. The sheer cylindrical walls reared straight against that ball which rested on their rim. Their eyes followed on through the transparent bulge almost as if it were not there, to gaze on the clear morning sky, brushed now with random wisps of cirrus.

Yet, by the miracle of Guzdlan optics, the light of some star, now unseeable by the naked eye because of daylight, was caught in that limpid sphere—caught, focused and remagnified. That light shone now in the chamber, a swirl of some distant nebula, rather than a star, clearly limned on the eyeball's underside.

What seemed to be a large basket on a collapsible frame hung beneath, bathed in the transfixed flare of that distant nebula. In the basket reclined a Guzdlan, his eyes on the nebula. Before him hung a small bank of instruments, topped by a long narrow screen on which shone the bands of the nebula's spectrum.

While the three Terran intruders stood hushed, shuffling out of their equipment, the scene on the low swell of the eye changed. The nebula appeared to explode softly, its outer limbs fading as they writhed up the sides of the ball. Speckles of light emerged, became suns. As each sun grew dazzlingly, it wheeled aside and faded. At last a small hot blue disk swelled shimmeringly. It expanded, its fine edge blurring. It stopped and retreated, until the sharp edge reappeared. A blue dwarf, it blazed down into the observatory's well.

The Guzdlan astronomer adjusted a dial or two and then rose to step down out of the basket. As he advanced across the dull finish of the floor toward the three friends, he appeared ghostly in the dim light. His spectral appearance was partly due to the fine down that covered every square millimeter of his skin. It was white with age.

"Greeting to Newton Campbell," he said in a quavering whisper of a voice, looking up at them, "and his friends. I am Director Grul Vezmin of Observatory L-12. You have information of importance, it would seem."

The television tycoon introduced Link and Mary. Link had the startling impression of speaking to someone on the floor below—having to bend down his head and look into a face whose features seemed only

small with distance, as it were. The Guzdlan gravely tilted his head up at them as if they, in turn, were on a balcony above him.

"You received my message?" said Campbell.

"Yes. but we fear we do not understand it. You claim the presence of Cructars here on Pslan?"

"This young man saw them and I am inclined to believe his account."

"I saw them too," said Mary. "Although it was just a glimpse it was quite enough."

The little Director's eyes flicked beadily from her to Link. Staring down into them, for all of his height advantage, Link had a sudden reaction of humility. There was a power behind those tiny pupils.

"Did you contact the Council of Masters?" said Campbell.

"No," the quavery whisper floated up. "I must know more of this. I cannot summon a Master or arrange a meeting, even with your very favored name, Newton Campbell. Surely you know that."

The TV magnate lifted a shoulder gently. "It is merely that I believe that time is now of the essence, as we say here on Pslan. Things are approaching the eruption stage. I had hoped it would be enough to say that I bring one — no, two — eye-witnesses to Cructar activity, here."

The tiny lips curled slightly. "It is more than enough. It is too much. In fact, it is impossible."

"What is impossible?" demanded Campbell harshly.

"It is impossible that the Cructars could be anywhere within the Solar system. We have great respect for you, Newton Campbell, but you cannot know of all our defenses, and all our precautions. Not so much as one of them could get through."

A knife of exasperation began to turn in Link's vitals. This all too closely resembled the utter incredulity of the peedubs, of his friends, of Schwartz, the WBI man, and even the Blodgett family.

Campbell turned to him, shaking his head. "I guess you'll have to take the time to run through it, Blodgett—just once again. Start right at the beginning, the way you told it to Jemzdok," he added significantly.

Link was unable to resist the impulse to

squat down on his heels. It put his face on a level with that of the Guzdlan, and gave him the feeling of getting on the same level with the other's mind.

As he rapidly sketched the sequence of his adventures, the other Guzdlan came up and soon there was a ring of the little men about them. Their tiny faces were imperceptible at first.

And then those faces grew harsh, the beads of their eyes fixed and piercing. The voice of Lincoln F. Blodgett, until recently Inspector and Timer of Work-Flow at the Projector Mount, West Fork, Oregon, became the only sound in that great shadowy chamber. The little blue star blazed down into the observer's basket unnoticed . . .

As Link concluded the episode of his flight from the Cructars that night when they surrounded the Blodgett house, the little Director held up his hand to interrupt. He wheeled and yapped Guzdlan syllables at an underling, who hurried off to a large circle cut into the floor. The circle promptly dropped out of sight with him.

"He goes to call the Masters," said Grul Vezmin shortly. "Resume."

Before Link had finished the underling shot up on the circular platform again. With him were several more, whose clothing distinctly suggested military uniforms. The underling returned to the group, shouldering his way through to the Director, who signaled him to remain quiet until Link had finished.

And, as Link wound up the fray aboard the jet, he was suddenly aware of the floor. It seemed to have developed a pulsing thrum.

The underling reported in Guzdlan and the Director turned back to the two men and the girl. His little eyes were bright and his voice had acquired strength.

"We are summoning a ship from Mexico City," he announced. "You will immediately go to New Washington. The Masters are assembling and, with them, such UNT officials as are available on this short notice."

The little Guzdlan looked up at Link. "If only Pslan had more allies like you. This world is so much against us." A gusty little sigh floated up to them. "We tried so hard to prepare for the Cructars, but we failed. And they outwitted us. We failed

to achieve unity with Pslan. And they chose an attack we did not foresee."

"You assumed a frontal onslaught in force straight out of space," murmured Campbell.

"Yes. You see, although we captured a few Cructars after that first attack years ago, we were only able to drain their minds of superficial information. They all died before we could penetrate to more residual facts.

"What little analysis we did achieve convinced us of their arrogance and desperation and sense of power. That seemed to mean they would return in force, for vengeance.

"We directed all our efforts to developing space travel. We had long known it was theoretically possible with magnetic energy. Now we needed it. We knew that, to defend ourselves, we would have to defend the Solar System. We could not permit the Cructars to establish bases anywhere within it. So we flung out our web of posted ships all about the perimeter. We garrisoned such of the outer giants or their satellites as permitted any installation at all. We fortified the Thkeesious, Major and Minor—or Venus and Mercury, if you prefer.

"And—" the little man smiled grimly, "—we came to Pslan."

"In your Flying Saucers." The television magnate's returning smile was equally grim.

"In our Flying Saucers," acknowledged the Director gravely, "which we call magnetic energy transfer vessels. We extended every benefaction in our power and made every effort toward unity. But—Pslan psychology and Guzdlan psychology—" he shrugged, "—they do not meet too well. The request for bases . . . the full report on the Cructars . . ." Again that little sigh floated up. "Oh, well. And now we know the reason for the atrocities. It is clever, but, now that we understand, it is also very obvious.

"They investigated us secretly. They found our weakness. One planet controlled by another. Hidden resentments, old superstitions, alien antagonisms, general uneasiness." The little white head shook in despair. "Their basic strategy, however—that was the obvious thing. You of Pslan have a phrase—divide and conquer. For them it

would be so easy to start the wave of atrocities, let it slowly intensify. They knew the angry men of Pslan could be counted on to do the rest. They could predict the organization of Free Terra. What could it do but follow the pattern of Pslan's whole history?"

"While you're talking about Free Terra," Link cut in, "there are a couple of points there I'd like to have explained. I was all for the organization myself, you understand. I was just as sore at the Marties—excuse me—as the next man. But I couldn't figure out how, if it came to shooting, we were going to drive you out. We don't begin to have your weapons and equipment—"

"We so earnestly hope it will never come to that."

"—and yet the leaders of Free Terra seem to be so sure we'll be on an equal footing. They don't say how, but—"

Campbell snorted. "Sheer bravado, my boy. Now that you're a little wiser, I'm sure you can see what a pack of fools they are. For my part, I'm more perturbed that they would go to such efforts as they did last night to suppress your story. Good Lord, you're the hero—not that idiot, Ed Warren!"

"I don't know the answers to your questions, my friends," the Guzdlan said. "I only know that Free Terra, in its present mood, is a tragedy. In the name of a thing sacred to your world—freedom—it is actually betraying it, betraying you all. While Pslan and Guzdla fight, the Cructars will come in. And they will take this world."

"Wait! There she is." Campbell pointed up through the dome. They could see a ring-ship lowering straight out of the sky overhead.

At that moment a Guzdlan called across the floor to the Director. The little man frowned and looked up.

"There seems to be something wrong with its signal. And it's not the type of ship I ordered—"

Premonition exploded within Link. The ship should not be coming straight down on the observatory that way, if it was going to land and take on passengers . . .

Then he saw it and cried out. The outer surface of the huge eyeball glowed sudden red. Then the transparent metal dripped away—and the lower inner surface in turn began to glow.

The observatory floor burst into motion. Guzdilans ran to the walls, except for the few who jumped onto the circular hoist and dropped out of sight. The Director pushed at them with his dainty hands. "Back! Back! To the wall!"

Link dodged around him and moved out toward the hole now dripping white-hot drops onto the floor. He raised the emmy gun, edging under the hole.

Thus he was the first to see the dark object plunging down from the ship. He was the first to see, and dodged back.

The dark object was a canister. It fell straight through the hole in the eye and burst on the floor of the observatory.

It was not a heavy explosion. But a dirty yellow cloud mushroomed from the spot. The smoke seemed almost liquid, like cigarette smoke in a still room. It rose upward only from the force of impact and release.

Then it settled in huge lolling waves that tumbled and rolled through the chamber. They could only stare helplessly for an instant, watching through the rising fog the way the thick heavy stuff poured in through the elevator-hole in the floor, streaming down into the levels below . . .

When the cloying mist sent a tendril up his nostrils, Link woke up. "Outside!" he bellowed and wheeled to lash out at the observatory-door toe-bar.

Reeling a little from the strange numbness working into his brain, he stumbled out into the snow and whirled, raising the emmy gun.

The ring ship was huge and low. He had only to aim roughly upwards and press the studs.

But the ultrasonic shock hit him before he could do a thing.

XIX

THE needles were not nearly so painful this time. Link's first awareness was of twinges rippling through him. Dimly he wondered why, if he was coming out of a light shock, it didn't hurt more.

Then, trying to move, he felt the pressures. Thin pressures, across his chest, his arms, his wrists, his thighs. He was tied.

He opened his eyes. And blinked at a blank expanse of bright metal scant centimeters from his nose. Its polish was so high

that his own face looked back at him. He was able to run his eyes down the length of his body reflected there and see the woven metal straps that so securely trussed him.

His eyes dropped to his feet. Beyond them lay a familiar-seeming head of light brown hair. Mary Dunham lay on a bunk like his own but at a slightly different angle.

She, too, was bound and motionless.

His eyes followed the low curve of metal wall down to the next bunk in line, angling out still further. Or it lay the doughty little television magnate. Newton Campbell was not bound, Link saw, although his body, too, was still.

Much of the wonder had gone from Link's eyes by now. He recognized the flat parabolic curve of that metal wall and the bunks pressed so tight against it. He recognized the dull whine in his ears.

It was not the first time he had ridden in a ring-ship.

He rolled his head. The compressed ovoid vista of the ring-ship's cabin greeted his eyes. He saw that the ship was a Terra-converted job.

Figures met his eyes next. He blinked the last blurs of unconsciousness from his vision, the better to see them.

A low circular padded bench faced the bunks that ringed the cabin wall. Inside it, a low-backed stool faced the ship's drive mechanism, a single gleaming post topped with an assortment of knobs and dials.

Facing him on the padded bench was the fair-haired athlete, Everett Hinds. His face was cold and hard. Link observed with satisfaction the splotches along the man's jaw where his knuckles had hit. Hinds held an ultrasonic in his hand.

Next to him . . .

Link's stomach turned over.

Reclining on Hind's right, laying at full length, was a Cructar. A thick cushion supported its mammoth head. The rest of its body trailed along the bench with repellent flaccidity, arms and legs in sinuous, serpentine curves, one wide, flat foot grotesquely adangle over the other.

The creature's skin was a faintly mottled gray. Its only costume was a skirt, scarce half a meter of some fine, lustrous fabric which closely matched the color of its skin.

Link's fascinated gaze returned to the

head, that enormous head. Again, as on that grim night in the Dunham hallway, he was struck by its essentially human appearance. Each hungry feature was familiar in structure and placed where it should be—the huge, black protuberant eyes, the single large nostril-tube slanting down from between them, the impossibly wide mouth, the flaring delicate ears . . .

Numbly, he realized the Cructar's eyes were looking into his. Smooth pools of jet, without cornea, iris or pupil, they stared at him. It was a stare to shrivel the heart. It was a stare from outer space, from the very Edge itself.

He tore his gaze away in revulsion. There were two other Cructars on the ship. One reclined along two bunks on the other side of the cabin. The third sprawled obscenely within the space enclosed by the bench, his head near the speaker of the radio which was the other side of the control column.

Seated on the driving stool was the stocky pilot of the jet transport. His face was pale and stiff.

In these first few seconds of Link's awakening, silence had reigned in the cabin, except for the whine of the ship's perimeter ring. Sunlight poured dully through the cabin's polarized dome at an angle that proclaimed the day to be at its midpoint.

Hind's voice broke the silence. "That was a mighty fast shuffle you promoted back there on the jet. For a backwoods slob, you can make plenty of trouble. I'd like to get in a ring with you, and some six-ounce gloves."

Link's mouth quirked ruefully. "It'd be a pleasure, but I'm afraid I've used up all my luck."

Mary began to struggle against her bonds. Link sent his voice down to her. "Take it easy, baby. They've got us just about where they want us." She quieted, tried to roll her head around so that she could see him, but stopped with a half-gulp, half-gasp at the sight of the Cructar.

The TV magnate started to worm out of his bunk and Hinds sprang forward to help him. He started to lead the old man toward the bench. The two of them stooped over to avoid bumping the ceiling, when Campbell raised his eyes—and stopped, frozen where he stood. His face had gone pasty, his eyes bulging, filling with the sight of the Cru-

tar. The Cructar sat up, its motions full of liquid grace. Link, noting the attempts it made to sit in a human fashion—its long, tapered legs bowing absurdly out from the hips, its arms hanging limply straight on either side—Link wondered what weird skeleton and musculature it possessed.

Something like an apologetic chuckle issued from its throat now—and Link suddenly noted, as it began to speak, that the mouth was not used. It merely opened, displaying the pointed tips of rather steely-looking teeth, and the words were formed somewhere back in the throat—for all the world like a parrot's mimicry.

"Do not be alarmed—and do not form hasty judgments on us. At this moment a great task lies before the people of Terra, a task in which we few from Cructar will be happy to assist. Because of the difficulty you and your friends, Mr. Campbell, could add to this task, we have had to intervene and, to put it simply, place you all, along with Mr. Blodgett's ideas, where you, on the one hand, will be quite safe, and we, on the other hand, shall not have to contend with you."

"Protective custody, eh?" the old man rasped.

"Quite right—as I understand the Terran phrase."

"That applies to my friends here?"

"Certainly."

But the Cructar's eyes lingered for a chilling instant on Link and he knew exactly how safe he would be if Newton Campbell were not involved in this. Evidently the elderly television magnate was enough of a power to warrant gingerly handling. Free Terra must have persuaded the Cructars that not only he but his two new young friends also must not be harmed. Link's only hope now was in the power of Newton Campbell.

The Cructar raised its cup-like hands and dropped them again in a curiously distorted version of a Terran gesture. "Both we and the men and women of Free Terra who have come to know us—we all regret more than we can say that any such occasion as this should have arisen. We regret that we have had to take such steps—"

The little old gentleman had been motionless, except for licking his lips. Now he backed away, shaking off Hinds's hand.

"I thought you said there were no Cructars." His voice was a whisper directed at Hinds.

Hinds shrugged and sat down beside the Cructar. "You were to be told the truth—in a rather pleasanter manner. But Blodgett, as usual, had to screw it up."

"And, what is worse—" the old man's voice grew into its wonted rasp, "—it would seem that there is a connection between Free Terra and these—these—" He waved his hand in despair at his useless vocabulary.

The Cructar let his huge head bob forward once. "There is indeed a connection, I am happy to say. But we can go into that later. I wish first to explain to Newton Campbell and his friends what has happened and what is going to happen.

"You are in this situation, Mr. Campbell, because you have—rather precipitately, we believe—accepted the report of Mr. Blodgett. If you will think back, I think you will see that you have yourself not one iota of proof as to his report."

The television magnate opened his mouth, but the Cructar lifted a cup-hand against any interruption.

"Mr. Blodgett—and Miss Dunham—you are, we feel sure, the victims of some sort of error, Mr. Blodgett's error, in the main—"

"The only mistake I made," said Link, "was in trying to convince anybody of what I'd seen."

The Cructar stretched his enormous mouth even wider in a ghastly attempt at a smile. "Well, no, not exactly. It was only part of the larger error."

Campbell grunted. "By the way, why isn't my scheming little granddaughter here among this cutthroat crew?"

"Miss Campbell," said the Cructar, "was on that level of Free Terra which has as yet not been acquainted with the fact of our existence. When she emerged from the jet and saw us, she grew hysterical and seemed instantly converted to the Blodgett story." Again came that hoarse sigh. "I'm afraid she rendered herself quite useless."

"Poor twisted kid," muttered Campbell. "I suppose she never had a chance, either?"

"It's only ultrasonic shock," protested Hinds. "When she comes out of it, Jack and Steve—the two guys with me on the jet—they'll take care of her."

"My impression is that you are all a

bunch of murderers," snapped Campbell. "Go ahead and murder us then, but don't bore us with your damnable hypocrisy."

The Cructar gazed at him thoughtfully. Hinds made no attempt to speak. Link felt his admiration for the television magnate's courage rising higher every minute.

"With all the rumors circulating about us," began the Cructar at last, "and the very peculiar story of Mr. Blodgett, I can understand your talk of murder. But you aren't going to be murdered, my dear sir. If you will spare me one minute of your patience, I may be able to convince you of that. I ask you, to begin with, to recall the circumstance of your revival from ultrasonic shock just now. Tell me, Mr. Campbell, how did it feel?"

"Not bad," growled Campbell. "What did you do?"

"We have a drug, something you might call a pre-stimulant. We administered it to you, and to your friends. But—" the Cructar waved the odd cup-like hand at the end of his arm "—that is not so important. Really, if we wanted to murder you, how is it that you are here now? Could we not have done it back at the observatory? How convenient, my dear sir! The outstanding opponent of Free Terra—and two persons who seem devoted to spreading a malicious rumor about us . . ." The narrow shoulders lifted in a shrug.

"Speaking of killing," interjected Link casually, "how is everybody back there at the observatory now?"

The twin black pools from outer space slid around to him. "Zelgu's not talking to you," said Hinds. "That's for sure."

The Cructar's wide lips stretched wider. The flesh around its eyes bunched and crinkled. Link's gorge rose when he realized this was an attempt at a smile.

"Now, Mr. Hinds, we bear Mr. Blodgett no ill will. He is responsible for the death of two of us and has created certain other difficulties, but—" the great head cocked over in a grotesque show of coyness "—we have more momentous matters to engage us. Now, let us—"

"I asked about the observatory," said Link.

The great mouth hung open for a minute. "And I want his question answered," rasped Campbell.

"I'll answer it, then," snapped Hinds viciously. "There were a hundred and forty-four observatories. Now there are a hundred and forty-three."

"So," murmured Campbell. "And I suppose your forces are even now attacking them. Is it *Der Tag*?"

"*Der Tag* . . . ?" The Cructar turned to Hinds in mute question. The fair-haired agent explained. Zelgu again smiled that ghastly travesty of a human smile.

"This is not the introduction to us we meant you to have, Mr. Campbell. Now, of course, you are confirmed in your conception of us as murderers."

At that moment, the radar bell pinged softly. McAvoy which seemed to be the name of Hinds' fellow-worker, twisted around on his stool, craning to look up through the dome and down through the transparent sections of the ship's deck. "You got a ring-ship comin' up," he said.

Link's heart beat a little faster. The far Cructar got up and undulated toward the center, toward another post that stood near the control column. Hinds and Zelgu remained facing their captives, but there was a backwards look about their faces and a noticeable rise of tension in the general atmosphere.

One Cructar sprawled before the radio-telephone and looked up at the third Cructar member of the crew. The latter laid a cup hand negligently on the post before him. Link knew it for a fire-control post.

A thin, piping gabble came over the radio, followed by silence.

The Cructar turned a dial slightly and opened his mouth a slit. From his throat came an answering gabble, as high and piping as that of any Guzdlan.

There was a short burst of gabble in reply and the Cructar piped up again. Link did not need to shut his eyes to know how perfect was the imitation with which the Cructar was replying to the challenge of the other ring-ship. McAvoy glanced up woodenly as the shadow of the other ship flicked over the dome above him and was gone.

"That's quite an act," said Mary. "First they sound like humans, and then they sound like Guzdlan's."

"Tell me," said Campbell, "where are you taking us?"

Zelgu started slightly, as if roused from

meditation. "We have arrived," he murmured.

"Oh?" The old man raised his eyebrows.

Wearily, the cup hand thrust down. Campbell looked puzzled. Hinds spoke up. "If you will step over to the bench, sir, you can look down on our destination."

Gingerly, the television magnate edged to a clear place where he could kneel on the bench and peer down through the heavy glass center of the ring-ship's deck.

"South America!" he exclaimed. "Good Lord, you must be a hundred kilometers up."

"Specifically, the Amazon," offered Hinds. "We are only waiting for the sky to clear. We have been hovering here for over an hour. You won't see anything until we go down."

"We have our base there," said Zelgu. "Thanks to Free Terra. You are to be our guests, and theirs. In fact, you will find some friends waiting to greet you down there."

"Friends?" Campbell turned away. "I have no friends in Free Terra, of that I am very sure."

"They seem to think so. Would you like to know who they are?"

"I can guess," Campbell snapped.

At this juncture, a Cructar arose on his arms. "The sky is clear," he said. "We shall descend now." He pressed a switch.

Blodgett felt he and the world were sinking, whirling, sucked down and ever down into a maelstrom of rising horror . . .

XX

IN THE bright air of noon, the green blanket of the Amazon jungle stretched far into the hazy distance. Only to the west was the misty horizon broken, where faintly glimmered the white teeth of the Andes.

Within one minute the ring-ship had fallen halfway toward its goal, somewhere among the close-packed and impenetrable mass of vegetation below. It swooped on down, rushing steadily, until it seemed sure to plunge out of sight into that tangled mat of tree and vine and creeper. Then—an impossible thing happened.

A crack appeared in the foliage, widened to a slit, a slot and finally a long rectangle of darkness. The ship straightened out of

its down-slanting curve and entered the rectangle at one end.

Even as it glided, slowing, into the darkness, the rectangle began to close over it. By the time it had halted, settling on the standard ring-ship snubbers at the other end, the last meager slit of hot bright sky had vanished.

To the passengers stepping down through the ventral port of the ship all was gloom for a moment, after the sun's blaze. Then details about them emerged, illumined well enough by the light that still filtered through the artificially interlaced branches above.

Link followed Mary out of the ship. As he crept, stooping under the low, broad curve of the ship's circumference with its curious, thin, white perimeter ring still a-shimmer from the transference of magnetic energy, almost the first thing he saw was a small forest of knee-less, tapering legs, of a dirty white shade. Whatever this place was, it was full of Cructars.

Mary waited for him to emerge and put her hand in his. The hand was quiet, almost limp, but it had a trembling undercurrent, the kind of trembling that can seize any creature in the presence of death.

She turned her green eyes up to his, and they, too, were steady, if shining a bit too brightly. "Looks like the last stop, eh, Blodgy?" she tried to sound casual.

His gray eyes bored into hers hungrily. He and this girl had seen a lot together. His face grew hard, and yet his tone stayed soft. "Don't worry, kid."

She gave a shaky laugh. "Okay, Inspector." Her hand gripped his with savage intensity. That's the way it would be from here to the end, her fingers told him—hand in hand for the two of them.

The little party walked across the steel mesh, Link's head craning this way and that.

Not much greeted his eye. A moderately long airstrip and a few buildings set back in clearings fire-blasted from the dense jungle-wall. Several ring-ships and a few Terran jets parked along the edge of the strip. Hardly a hundred Cructars were scattered up and down its length; most of them had gathered about the ring-ship to watch the Terrans arrive.

One low, squat turret caught his attention. Heavy power cables from its roof went

looping off into the jungle behind. In a flash of intuition, Link guessed that the false roof of the jungle which had opened to admit their ship was controlled from this small structure.

They approached a long, low building of pleasing design—its light glass-and-steel construction making it look as if the jungle rearing behind it could crush it at will. Through the broad windows, several unmistakably human figures appeared.

On entering, Link saw that it was evidently a sort of recreation and rest house. In its main room, tastefully but lightly furnished, stood a small group of Terrans, waiting amid a scattering of chairmocks loosely drawn up in a circle.

Then Link blinked. He had seen their faces, all of them. As Leaders of Free Terra, they had appeared often enough on the Blodgett home screen.

Advancing now from the group, hand outstretched in greeting, was James Knight Davis, North American Leader, a benign and stooped old man. Following him came the beaming, roly-poly Tsang Chu-lin. The phlegmatic bulk of Dmitri Slodin. Jacob Wetterbein, lank and dour. Juan Hernandez, his patrician nose making the smile on his swarthy face seem faintly patronizing.

They followed Davis as he bore down on Newton Campbell, his hand still outstretched. The stalwart little television tycoon looked at that hand until it was well within grasp. Then he folded his arms.

Davis's smile went a little wry and he dropped the hand. "The Leadership of Free Terra greets you, Newton Campbell. We have come—"

"Leadership?" said Campbell. "You mean, a conclave of traitors."

The smile on the other's gentle, seamed face froze. "We have come, as I started to say, from all over the world. Only Juan has had a short trip, from his beloved city of Buenos Aires. Tsang—"

"I know where you came from," snapped Campbell. "The gutters of civilization. Get on with your business, man."

"So this is our Mr. Blodgett." Jimmy Davis was the first to recover his attitude of good will. "The boy who has caused us all so much trouble."

Mary stood up and dropped an ironic curtsey. "And his flighty girl friend, Mary

Dunham." She sat down again in prim defiance.

Zelgu spoke up. "Mr. Davis, I may as well warn you that you will find your efforts to explain utterly useless. Mr. Campbell's mind—"

"Explain, explain!" Campbell's voice rose. "I am most anxious to hear how any person on Earth can justify his trafficking with a pack of killers from nowhere."

Rocking silently in his place, Jimmy Davis let the silence gather. He had come a long way from the street corners where he harangued passers-by, and he had learned many of the tricks of the forum. He was evidently the agreed-upon spokesman.

"First," he began gently, "let us apologize to you, Mr. Campbell. You have been handled more roughly than we would have wished."

"Apologize, also, to my friends here," snorted the television magnate.

Davis smiled. "We apologize, then, to all three of you. Secondly, let us explain. My dear Mr. Campbell, no one can be more aware than you of the progress of events in this world of ours. No one can be more aware that things are rushing to a climax.

"Thanks to Mr. Blodgett's companion of that night of the Thatcher Atrocity, we are an aroused and prepared people. Mr. Warren has won himself a niche in history but, even without his courageous report, we were hardly asleep. No, nor were we exactly helpless." The long, kindly face turned toward Zelgu and smiled warmly. The Cructar inclined his head as he lay grotesquely sprawled along his chairmock.

"The insidious design of Guzdla is becoming clearer with every passing moment," Davis went on.

"I've heard all this," Campbell cut in harshly, "I can't tell you how many times. What I need to have explained to me, if there is any creditable explanation, is how you can bear to associate with these—these—this galactic scum." He waved disdainfully at the giant thing in the chairmock. Zelgu regarded him impassively.

"I think," murmured Tsang Chu-lin pleasantly, "that that is just what Leader Davis was about to explain."

"Yes," smiled Davis. "Bear with me, sir, please do. I was going to say that we have the gentlemen from far-off Cructar to thank

for making that pattern plain to us in time. Perhaps it would be reasonable to thank the Guzdians themselves for exposing this pattern—were we to wish to be grateful to them for anything—when they attacked the world of Cructar.

"Essentially, as I say, the pattern was revealed there. The Guzdians came, with their soft words and their wonderful science, to the Cructar world. They dwelt there—as friends and benefactors, even as they have here—and for long enough to deceive the Cructars. Then—they struck.

"But they underestimated the Cructars even as they underestimate the men of Earth—of Free Terra. The battle was long and bloody, the scars everlasting. But they drove the vicious little fellows out.

"The damage had been great. The Guzdians had sunk their roots deep and tearing them out was achieved only with great anguish. The Cructars, however, are—inside themselves—like we of Terra. They were determined to rebuild. And, more than that, they thirsted for vengeance.

"They went in search of Guzdla. One of their scouting expeditions came at last to this System. Fortunately, perhaps, it landed first on Earth."

"There it found Guzdla already well launched on another campaign—having chosen for its prey a much closer, but less desirable world than that of Cructar. To the horror of the Cructars, they could see that the Guzdlan pattern of occupation and conquest was reaching its final stage. The atrocities had begun."

Newton Campbell's laugh was short and entirely without mirth. "And you believe all this?"

Davis swung angrily toward him. "Certainly! We have proof, Mr. Campbell, proof! Whereas you—" the scarecrow relaxed and strove to smile and regain his composure. "Excuse me, sir, if I point out that you, too, believe implicitly everything uttered by every Guzdlan. Not only that, you have amazed us all by swallowing completely this travesty put forth by an utterly unknown young man. What proof did he bring you?"

"Himself," Campbell answered quietly. "Now show me your proof."

"Ah, the hell with it," said Link suddenly. "We know what's going to happen. We

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know what's going to happen to me—and Mary—and maybe even to Mr. Campbell. It doesn't even matter, any more. What you damn fools don't realize," he snarled at the leaders, "is that it's going to happen to you, too—"

"Be quiet!" It was a bellow, now, that leaped from Zelgu's throat. "We have had enough trouble from you!"

Link sprang to his feet. His hand was torn from Mary's. Rage and fear tightened his throat.

"I saw you, you killers! I saw you that night. Kill me—go ahead. It's the only way you can shut that out of my mind. I saw you—"

He whirled on the leaders. "How can you believe the Guzdians would wait forty years to attack us when they could have had us so easily right at the beginning? Why have they given us arms, ringed our cities with projectors? How can you believe the story told by these cold-minded devils. Why can't you see that they're leading you into a trap?"

Zelgu started to rise awkwardly out of his chairmock. Other Cructars in the room began to drift forward. Mary jumped up to clutch Link's shoulder in a sudden access of terror.

But the tall young man's voice thundered on. "Think what you're doing! Ask yourselves. You are betraying the whole world!"

The five pairs of eyes before him blinked in shock and anger. Then, unaccountably, Newton Campbell was in front of him, shaking him by the arms.

"Blodgett! Stop it! It's no use, man! You're only tearing everything. Stop it!"

The shouting words died, and Link stood—tense, trembling and silent at last. The only sound in the room was Mary's sobbing, as she clung to his shoulder.

Davis was the first to speak, after clearing his throat. "I don't like to hear this talk of killing. I want that stopped, definitely. This young man is all too clearly a psychotic case and will, as soon as we can find the time, be given adequate treatment. But to you, Newton Campbell, and you, too, Miss Dunham, we wish to give every assurance that you will be kept safe from harm."

He stood up. "Why don't we all escort you three now to the quarters we have had made ready for you? Come . . ."

THE accommodations were unquestionably very nice. The chamber in which they found themselves may not have equalled the luxury of the Campbell house at Goose Lake, but it was hardly a barren cell, either. One sweeping curve of solaglas wall revealed the gloom of hungry Amazonian jungle, whose tangled maze of greenery seemed almost crushed against the thick metallic glass. The very air-conditioning was impregnated with ripe scents.

The three of them stood quietly in the softened illumination from the radiant walls. They could have sat. There were chairmocks and couches. They could have turned on the Telenews, or selected a bookspool, or started a music tape in the wall recorder. But, to do such things, one had to be at ease, relaxed, confident, secure . . .

They just stood there and listened to the muted roar of the last Terran jet taking off. They had been standing like this over an hour ago, stonily watching Davis and Hinds walking off down the glass-partitioned corridor—back to the main room, back to the field, back to their ships—and Terran civilization. They had watched them go, realizing that they themselves were in another civilization. Although the room they were in might be Terran in concept, with an overlay of Guzdlan culture, all about them now was the world of the Cructars—a small toe-hold in the Solar System.

The jets had taken off immediately. The sky had darkened and sudden drenching rain had fallen. The jungle depths outside had teemed and dripped with it, and a small level of water had risen momentarily along the base of the outer wall. "It's quite punctual," Campbell had informed his less-traveled friends. "A feature of this part of the world. You can set your watch by the oh two hundred rain."

In a matter of minutes it was over. Then they could begin to count the jets as they took off. Now they stood, a little numb, as the last hollow roar died.

Campbell shook himself and turned, rubbing his hands briskly and smiling cheerfully. "Well, here we are, children. No one knows for how long, but we might as well make ourselves comfortable."

Mary came and knelt before Link, *laying*

her soft brown curls in his lap. "Blodgy," she said with great simplicity, "are we going to die?"

Campbell made a sound in his throat and wheeled away to the window.

Link laid his long, big-knuckled hands on her head. "Let's not make foolish talk, hey?" he said lightly. "Daddy has had a long, hard day . . ."

A few minutes later he heard the old man's groan by the window and looked up. Three Cructars were coming down the corridor.

He clenched his hands slowly. "Get up, baby."

The girl heard the door slide back and jumped up.

The first Cructar flung out his arm like a whip. "All of you—come." His voice came out hoarsely.

"Where to?" queried the TV boss.

The Cructar stalked across the chamber in three swift strides. Campbell tried not to flinch, but the lash of a thick rubbery arm sent him staggering.

"Out!" Link felt the ice in his chest at the sound of that single explosive word. Not too long ago, he had heard more than one hoarse hoot like that.

He pulled Mary to him and their lips clung fiercely, bruisingly.

Then an incredibly steely grip took Link's arm and tore it from around the girl like so much paper. His head rang from a stunning crack above the ear. He threw a fist feebly into the darkness and heard Mary's scream—thin and remote—as he fell.

THEY were stumbling across the field before he had completely regained his senses. The first thing he saw at all clearly was a Cructar crossing his path. The incredibly tall and disjointed thing was carrying an armload of light metal bars and was all too obviously on a mission of his own. He glanced down at Link with a brief, contemptuous curiosity and stalked swaying on. The cold regard in his black, insect-eyes was utterly soul-chilling. So would a man glance at three sheep being led to the abbatoir.

A Cructar walked ahead, idly flailing his arms in a purely goading fashion against the backs of Newton Campbell and Mary

Dunham. The girl twisted back her agonized face.

"Won't you even let me hold his hand?" she pleaded. "You dirty, rotten, stin—"

Link snapped his eyes shut against the sight of that cup hand curling around toward her face, but he could not shut his ears against the solid slap and the choked sob of pain.

Behind him he heard the soft plodding of two pairs of Cructar feet. That was only right, he realized numbly—he was the dangerous one.

They crossed the field and entered a passage leading into the jungle. The path they were now entering had an appearance of infrequent use. Jungle growth had had time to spring up between passages, nor was it ever thoroughly burned clear.

In fact, the upleaping ferns and the out-thrusting branches and the downlooping vines had made such inroads that the old man and the girl up ahead found their way impeded. The Cructar behind them turned and gabbled hoarsely at his companions.

One of those behind shouldered carelessly past Link, thrusting him into the jungle. He stepped up into place behind the leader, who in turn trampled indifferently on Mary and Campbell as he strode past them.

He was not so far ahead that Link could not, however apathetically, observe how he handled the rod he took from the waistband of his skirt, how the knobs of his cup hand closed about its end.

Blinding, silvery fire bloomed abruptly along the path beyond. The only sound was that of crackling fire. Black wisps of vegetation eddied and danced in the air made turbulent by sudden heat. And the dark hole of this tunnel through the jungle was neat and clear, unfringed by leaf or creeper.

The little party moved ahead . . .

Alternately numb with dread and shaking with fury, Link's mind still kept some semblance of function, as if automatically. Little facts continued to set up their clamors in his reeling, stupefied brain.

There were three Cructars. But two were ahead of him at this moment. Only one had his eyes on Link. And one of those ahead was separated from the others by the two Terrans . . .

He was mad—mad to hope, mad to plan.

Almost certainly the one behind was keeping his rod steadily pointed at Lincoln Blodgett's back. At any minute they would come upon the place of death. He could not escape far, even alone and unencumbered. All around was impenetrable jungle. They were in the heart of Cructar Land—their first outpost on their new world. And any one of them—the rubbery-limbed beasts—was more than a match physically for the most powerful Earthman . . .

Yet, what lay ahead but death—cold, contemptuous death? Here must be Lincoln Blodgett's last stand, if any . . . if ever . . .

He leaped, driving his fist forward. It slammed into the base of the great, unwieldy skull bobbing above and ahead of him. His leap carried him against a writhing, gray-skinned back, and both bodies crashed forward in a tangle.

A silver sun burst over Link as he rolled off the cold, leathery body, his hand sliding frantically along the waistband of the skirt for the rod stuck in it somewhere. Hot bright sparks stung him. His fingers found the rod and wrenched it out.

The end that fitted his palm was a simple stud that closed with pressure. He swung it in a wide arc behind him.

The silvery brilliance seared his retinas. For a second, he crouched helplessly, staring into blackness. Then, grayly, details took on shape before him.

Down the path, two tapering stumps of legs stood swaying. The stumps were black. They leaned against each other, crossed incongruously and then toppled.

Mary's scream pulled his head around.

Newton Campbell was clinging like a bear to the head of the leading Cructar. Mary was kicking at it as the tall thing circled, tearing at the body clamped over its face. Even as Link looked, the rosy arms found the old man's head and wrenched it back. Link winced at the muffled crack of Newton Campbell's spine. Mary sank shuddering into the foliage beside the path.

The twisted body was flung to the ground, thrashing where it lay. Link brought up the rod.

He shut his eyes in time. Even so, the glare turned his eyelids into yellow paper. He squinted them open again.

One head and one body lay along the path. The body, thankfully still, was that

of Newton Campbell. The head, huge and rolling hideously in a narrow circle, was all that was left of the Cructar. The rest was a litter of black filth . . .

The rod was snatched out of Link's hand and went sailing off into the jungle. He ducked as a rubbery arm ripped the air over his head, and scrambled wildly away.

But his ankle was gripped, bringing him floundering down again. He kicked out with his other foot and felt toe impact on something bony. The grip on his ankle slipped and he kicked it free.

He leaped to his feet. The Cructar he had struck down was rising sinuously before him, up and up. Link bellowed and leaped in, driving lefts and rights to that broad, astonished face. The big head jerked slightly and Link felt the tingling shock up his arms.

But the blows were unavailing. Link's pistoning arms were caught crushingly at the biceps and he was lifted up.

The broad face was impassive. The black eyes were glistening like twin pools in snow. The wide, wide lips parted, drawing back from teeth that were close-packed fangs, gleaming dully. The breath was acidly metallic . . .

They stared at one another, towering gray ghost of Cructar and dangling Earthman. It was as if, in that one second, they both sought to understand each other . . .

And the thought exploded in Link's boiling mind that, whatever else this thing was that held him, it was male. He did not know what was hidden by that skirt, but, if it were a man—

He kicked.

The great mouth opened. Air rushed into it with a scream. Link was flung, sprawling through the air, to land in a thrashing, jolting tumble.

He staggered to his feet. The Cructar was down, writhing, its limbs coiling and uncoiling. Link ran toward it. He jumped, driving his heels toward the too-large eyes. His feet slipped and he went sprawling to within arm's reach of the other Cructar's head, upside down on the path.

He was up instantly. The Cructar was trying to rise, gabbling hoarsely, holding its cup hands over its face.

Link moved about in desperate search. There were no rods in sight. But his fran-

tically darting eyes caught a heavy branch, fire-deadened by some previous Cructar in passing, angling starkly up over the path. It needed only his leap and kicking swing to bring it cracking down.

It was almost too heavy. He hefted it like a spear. The Cructar was swaying erect, turning around toward him. Link's stomach churned at the sight of that face. One eye was like a burst plum, but the other, still clear and black, swiveled in his direction.

Link drove in low. The sharp end of the branch chunked into the creature's abdomen and Link felt the tough skin give. The impact stopped him cold, but the Cructar went over, gasping hoarsely.

Link charged in, somehow lifting the branch over his head. He brought it down with a savage, explosive grunt, and it broke off.

What was left in Lincoln Blodgett's hands was a beautifully balanced club, with a cruelly splintered end. He stood over the long, sprawling shape, his legs spraddled, and again and again raised himself on tip-toe to bring his weapon down. In that moment he was neither sane nor human, but a desperate animal with dilated eyes and bared teeth.

Mary's frantic clutch on his arm stopped him. "Link! It's dead! Stop, stop, stop!"

He leaned on the broken branch, swaying, sobbing for breath. "I killed him," he gasped, "They can be—killed . . ."

It was too much for Mary, her eyes filled with the chopped up thing on the ground. Once more she crumpled where she stood.

That brought Link out of it. He staggered over to her and managed to gather her up.

In his first wild sweep with the strange ray of the Cructars, he had blasted a small clearing about the path. He carried Mary there and laid her well out of sight amid the still-smoking underbrush.

Then, jaw clamped and face working, he went back to clear the path of all the evidence he could. Dragging one grisly remnant after another off into the jungle, scuffing dirt over the rest, he gave humble thanks that his stomach was empty. Even so, it took all the starch in his being to lift the broken body of Newton Campbell and lay it gently in a nest of ferns.

"If I come back here at all," he whis-

pered, "it will be to bury you deep, my friend, and build a monument to your courage." His eyes smarted at the thought of how the old gentleman had leaped, with the first sound of a scuffle behind him as his only signal.

In five minutes, that section of the path merely looked as if some Cructar had been careless with his rod. Link came back to Mary with two of the rods, all that he could find. Gentle slapping and chafing brought her around. She lay shivering in his arms, while he stared over her head and through the foliage, his eyes continually shifting from one end of the jungle to the other.

"What good will it do?" she moaned. "Where can we go from here?"

"I don't know. I guess we'd better move."

He twisted his head to study the jungle wall behind him. "I wonder how we'd make out in there." He jiggled one of the rods thoughtfully. "I wonder . . ."

XXII

THE silvery incandescence went before them. Nothing appeared at the tip of the rod, but the first object in line with its mysterious force flared into unearthly radiance, sparks glittering out from the edge of the burst.

"It seems to cut about ten meters deep through this stuff," said Link. He and Mary were shielding their eyes from the glare. "I don't know what its range is, but it doesn't seem to be the same tight beam principle of the Guzdlan beam projector."

He looked back from time to time. They were cutting a zigzag swathe through the jungle as close to the path as they dared. The zigs and zags helped to obscure the supernal fire from the rear.

Finally he stopped. They had been burning their way for over an hour. Now they stood, in the gloom and the low roar of insect hum, and looked helplessly about them. Parrots squawked and screamed from a safe distance, frightened off by the bright bloom of fire.

"We're lost," muttered Link. "It was a fool trick anyway."

"I like it, being lost," said Mary. "I'm not for your idea of working back to that airstrip. That's suicide."

"How else are we going to get out of here?" he demanded. "If we could sneak back to one end of the field, grab a ship and wait until they opened that roof business for an incoming flight, it would be our only chance to make a break for it. Do you like wandering in this bush until the rods give out and we starve?"

The air had filled with mosquitoes and other stinging insects while they stood there. Mary slapped her face and stared at the red-flecked palm of her hand.

"Well, all right," she sighed, "let's keep moving anyway."

Once again the jungle flared blindingly before them and they resumed their unsteady progress over root and vine. The silvery fire seemed brighter than before and Link realized that the day was waning.

After one burst, they walked to the end of the alley they had burned. Link, raising the rod for another shot, halted. His arm brushed down Mary's arm just as she had been about to fire an assist.

"Listen."

Above the insect hum and the outcries of distant parrots came a steady beat, as of the throb of machines. Link swung his head slowly about, trying to orient the sound.

"I think it's almost dead ahead," he muttered. "Let's try crawling through to it. Another burst from the rods might give us away."

It was an ordeal of struggle, struggle, struggle with every branch and creeper. "Link," gasped Mary after a few short minutes, "this is crazy. We're only running into more danger. Can't we backtrack?"

"We've got to make it, kid," he panted. "This is our only out, whatever it is."

But in another minute he had stopped, spraddled half through a clump of vines. There were lights ahead. For even as they strove to peer through the tangle, the jungle night came down in one swift darkening of the air.

At last they wormed their way to the very edge of the jungle wall. There they worked themselves down, as close to the mossy muck as they could get. Their eyes were wide with awe.

They were gazing down into an enormous arena. It stretched away in every direction as far as they could see. Mostly, it con-

sisted of hundreds and hundreds of pits in regular rows. In each pit there lay what appeared to be a large black egg, each one canted at the same angle as the others. Here and there stood odd sloping buildings, looking like truncated pyramids. Chains of green light hung above, the greenness of the light washing the green out of the surrounding jungle so that a leaf looked gray.

Above the lights, which were not much above the level of Link's and Mary's eyes, lay the jungle. Trees, flowers, vines—all grew from an intricate network of hydroponic troughs and tubes. Here and there slender pillars upheld what must have been many square kilometers of this false jungle roof—an engineering feat of astounding proportions. Studying it, Link guessed that it would screen what lay beneath even from a low-flying copter.

And all through this area stalked the Cructars—swarming thousands of them. The whole area had been dug deep enough to allow for this tremendous, sprawling installation, and to Link, staring down over it all, the tall, big-headed men from out of space looked like ants. They did not hurry, and yet there was a sense of bustle in every motion.

Most of their activity centered about the large black eggs in the pits. The meaning of those egg-shapes suddenly became clear to the gaunt, hollow-eyed man crouching beside the weary-faced girl.

"They're ships," he whispered. "The ships of the Cructars. Room for only one in each. They're getting ready, Mary, they're getting ready!"

"Oh, Link, this is terrible!"

He nodded grimly. "We're sunk if they get loose. They're only waiting for the word—the word from Free Terra!"

"Free Terra!" The girl said. "To think I ever—"

"Brother!" muttered Link. "If they could only see this set-up, what would they say?"

Mary gripped his arm. "Link! What's—that?" Her voice failed her as she pointed a trembling finger.

To their left, Link at first saw only a giant of an air-strip. Then his eyes focused on a fenced-in enclosure. Through its heavy bars, things moved.

He rose to his feet, jaw clamping shut like a vise. "Come on," he told the girl

harshly, "we've got to get them out of there."

She followed him. Here at the very edge of the jungle, on the lip of the great hole scooped out from the Cructar works, it was possible to move with rapidity and yet remain concealed. They worked their way toward a spot that almost overhung the enclosure and there crouched to stare again.

The enclosure was full of humans. Men and women, old and young, all races and colors. Some stood or walked about, but others lay huddled or crawled feebly, helped by stronger ones. Here and there a prostrate form had some sort of cloth or ragged garment laid over its face.

Link was the first to speak. "Well," he said bitterly, "there are some more people who believe in the Cructar Legend."

"But, Link, what are they there for?"

He was silent for a moment. His eyes were following a Cructar that was moving toward a squat, cylindrical tower on the edge of the airstrip. He had seen another tower like it that afternoon, with the same arrangement of cables swinging up into the jungle foliage above.

"I don't know. But whatever it is it isn't good."

His voice trailed off. His eyes were on the airstrip. The Cructar had long since entered the tower. Now there came a sort of purring rumble.

And the two humans could just see, from where they crouched, the widening slit of black, star-shot sky as two impossibly long strips of false jungle roof slid back.

The rumble faded before another roar—and a large Terran jet transport lowered into the haze of green light and came rushing up the strip, touching down its wheels as it came.

And, as it slowed under the grip of its brakes, the Cructars came running from nearby pits and buildings, bounding in long, not ungraceful leaps. They began to form a rough double line that led all the way from the door of the plane to the enclosure. Link saw that the double line ended at a sort of gate set in the interwoven bars of the enclosure.

Mary gripped his arm. Neither of them could speak. It was plain enough, what was taking place down there.

The plane's door opened and humans

began tumbling out, as if shoved or thrown. They staggered to their feet, staring wildly about them. Immediately cup-hands seized them roughly and began propelling them down the gauntlet of Cructars. Those who did not rise or move fast enough were picked up bodily and flung. Hoarse hootings sounded from the tall ones in the lines.

"More of them," whimpered Mary. "Oh, the poor things."

Then Link seized her. His eyes seemed aflame. "Kid," he gritted, "this is it! This is our move. Are you with me?"

She stared at him numbly. "What are you going to do?"

"Listen. When the captives get near the gate, the Cructars are going to open it. And, when that gate is open, we're going to give those poor devils a chance to fight for their lives." He stopped, his face suddenly haunted with pity and sadness. "It probably won't work, Mary darling. But it's the only thing to do."

The girl's green eyes filled with tears. "It—it's for the devil," she said shakily. "Oh, Blodghey . . ."

They clung to each other, there in the matted growth, under that ghastly green light, their wet faces together, the air about them atremble with machinery and the hoarse hoots of the gloating Cructars.

The gate was open. The first of the stumbling, battered Terrans were within ten meters of it. Inside the fence, the imprisoned Terrans were clustering close to the gate, as close as they dared.

Link and Mary gripped the rods—

And the Cructars at the gate dissolved in blinding flashes of coruscating silver glory.

Link plunged down the embankment, Mary at his heels, shouting, "Grab those rods! Everybody, grab those rods!"

For a moment, they were the only things moving. Cructar and Terran alike were frozen with shock. Those near the gate could only stare at the hideously blackened jumble of bodies.

Now lightning blazed among the Cructars there. The rod was a fearful weapon. Link steadied and forced himself to sweep it slowly across the group of scattering, leaping Cructars, squinting his eyes against the dazzle.

Then a roaring grew in his ears. "They're doing it," Mary screamed by his side, her

rod picking off isolated, still-dazed Cructars. "They're grabbing the rods, Link!"

He turned to look. And his heart leaped.

Men and women were boiling out of the enclosure. A small group of men were racing toward him, brandishing rods. In the distance, Cructars were coming, bounding elastically this way and that among the pits and buildings. The Cructars that had been in line were fearfully decimated, their blackened lengths strewn in windrows. The survivors were bounding away in every direction, confused and terrified.

Link ran toward the men.

"Spread out. Work those rods. Throw up a wall of fire. Down on your bellies—"

A man grabbed his arm. Link turned to face a hot-eyed, grizzled chunk of a man. "Colonel, Projector Corps," the man barked. "What's your plan?"

"Somebody's got to get out," snapped Link. "Grab that ship—and some women—and tear out of here. Tell the world—"

He winced. A flare like sunlight on a mirror erupted nearby and a man screamed. But the men of Terra, lying along a loose, hasty line, were sending hell deep into the Cructar works. Incandescence bloomed and sparks showered in a constant dancing curtain over the pits, among the buildings. A pillar vaporized, searing the eyeballs, and a section of flaming roof began to sag.

"You need a rear-guard," the Projector Corps colonel was howling in his ear.

Link turned on him, teeth bared and snarling. "That's me. You get out. Take as many ships as possible. Tell the world, man!"

He moved forward. A Cructar had leaped, perhaps only for firing advantage, into the little cylindrical tower that controlled the false roof over the air-strip. The roof itself was still open.

Link aimed at the tower. It glowed—and he shut his eyes. The sudden sun of it made his eyelids bright.

He dropped to the ground beside Mary. "Sweetheart, go with the colonel."

Mary glared at him.

He glanced quickly over his shoulder. The colonel was sprinting toward the jet. Silver fire flared among the men following him. But the colonel leaped aboard, and a man and a woman after him.

Link tugged several people out of the

line and led them around the plane. Across the field stood a couple of ring-ships.

"Who can fly a ring?"

A bony woman raised her hand, and a couple of men followed suit.

"Okay," snapped Link. "Take 'em out—on the double. You've got to get out as many as possible."

"What about you?"

Link laughed, a little crazily. "I live here."

The jet exploded with a roar behind them and they all fell to the ground. Then the three ring-ship pilots were up and running.

Cructars, too, were running down the field, trying to flank the main body of the Terrans. "Get 'em," bellowed Link and dropped to the ground. Those running for the ships flopped and raised their rods.

The oncoming tall ones, seemingly unaware of the tiny handful out on the field, dissolved in blinding sheets of fire.

This crazy, chaotic battle seemed to go on forever, Link thought, swinging the rod this way and that, trying to cover the escaping ships. Any minute now the Cructars would hurl a crushing blow at the tiny insurrection.

Then Link's heart leaped. One after another, the ring-ships rose, their edges blurring with speed. They lifted a little—and one of them suddenly burst into bright, eye-stabbing silver on one side. It stood up on edge in midair and went pinwheeling mightily off into the jungle with a screaming roar.

But in the blaze of its destruction Link saw the other ship, or rather saw it disappear. Such was the maximum speed of the Guzdlan ships, if their pilots dared to brave that killing acceleration. One minute, floating. The next, a flicker out of sight.

He gazed for one taut moment at the vague slit of black into which it had gone. There went the hope of the world.

Then Mary was shaking him. "Run! Run! They're coming—getting through. Oh, Blodgey, my love, let's live—if we can—"

He was up and running with her, the two of them crouched over as they went. A section of blazing roof sagged down ahead of them and they swerved just in time. A pool of silver leaped alongside them.

"Zigzag!" yelled Link. "Keep zigzagging. We might make it—!"

The embankment, and the jungle wall beyond, loomed tantalizingly. Two figures were scabbling frantically up the dirt slope ahead of them. They leaped into sharp prominence from a sudden glare behind. Link and Mary saw their own running shadows flowing up the bank, shrinking and sharpening as they drew near . . .

Somehow, they were up and over, struggling into the jungle's hostile growth—hostile, and then suddenly blessedly sheltering. Silver hell-fire crackled here and there, searching them, but they burrowed deeper, deeper, panting, sobbing . . .

SOMEONE had saved a Cructar rod. Clawing frantically into the wall of vegetation, Link saw its sudden silvery sparkle biting into the jungle to their left.

"Come on," panted Link. "They've got the right idea—and we've got to get with them. My own rod is dead!"

They found the freshly smoking tunnel and dashed prayerfully into its blackness. By the dazzling light of the next burst, they saw the silhouettes of several humans.

They stumbled on into the ensuing gloom, waiting for the next blaze of light to guide them. But they stumbled against the persons they were following first.

"Lucky you didn't flash one of them rods as you come," said a man's voice. "We figured on staging an ambush here. We'd 'a' burned you down, for sure."

"Ja," came another, heavier voice. "Ve may be der only vons. Ve must get oudt und tell der vorl' about dis blace."

"One ring-ship got out," Link told them. "Maybe whoever was in it had sense enough to hit the radio before the Cructars got him. Maybe he, or she, even got away."

"How did it all happen, anyway?" said another voice. "First thing I knew I was down on the ground, learning how to work one of those rods."

Link cut in hastily. "We can't stand here gabbing. Whoever's got the rod, blast off at an angle here. We've got to keep going."

"Vot are dey doing? Listen . . ."

Strange sounds were issuing from the arena behind them. *Zzzaunggg . . . crash . . . zzzaunggg . . . crash . . .* was it the Cructar ships escaping?

"We'd better not wait to find out," someone said.

IT WAS perhaps an hour later that Link looked up through the jungle and saw the ring-ship. Then he saw another—and another—

Within the next microsecond he saw their dull red finish, and recognized the stylized golden sun and nine planets of a familiar insignia emblazoned on their under sides. He did not wait to see the ball-tipped projectors thrusting down from those smooth, flat bottoms.

"Those are the Marties!" he bellowed, leaping to his feet. "Back—back, everybody! That's ME they're turning loose!"

ME, Magnetic Energy . . . that dread power of nothingness, disrupting magnetic balances, disintegrating whatever it came in contact with.

Six humans, gone animal in their terror, flung themselves staggering and stumbling the length of the tunnel burned into the jungle. Stumbled on behind the silver fire they flung before them . . .

At first, there was only silence behind. A silence that grew like a brooding thing.

Then came the wind. The little humans paused, in the black depths of the jungle, and listened in awe to the roar swelling above them, felt the trees beginning to lean, the leaves whispering, rattling, tearing away, the whole press of matted, tangled forest begin to lean down on them . . .

Link wrapped himself and Mary around a tree, their wrists intertwined in a fiercely-locking grip. He tried to yell to her to hang on, but the words were ripped from his mouth.

Far above this howling inferno, the sky was a-flicker with fires. Some silver, some golden, and some an unearthly quivering violet—they flared up seemingly from nothing. Glowing sparks fell from some of these fires. They were the escaping Cructar ships. Link and his little band had heard the black eggs bulleting through the hydro-ponic roof.

Atop the mountains of Terra, a hundred and forty-three Guzdlan observatories swung aside on giant pivots, exposing wide, metal-rimmed holes. Up from these holes poured the ring-ships, a fountain of dull red disks slanting, sliding and tilting—to vanish suddenly this way and that.

The one hundred and forty-fourth observatory, on a Mexican peak, was a crum-

pled, silent shell. Under it, the immense caverns that ran down into the mountain were dark and still—filled with little bodies and half-melted machines.

Aboard the ring-ships, luminous screens showed occasional shapes—some flat and plate-like, others rounded like eggs. When the shadowy egg-shapes slid into the field of a screen, dainty fingers pushed buttons. The egg-shapes promptly moved to the center of the screen, where two fine lines crossed. There and then the egg-shapes appeared to dissolve into the vague rippling images of fire. Or their shape was displaced by something that looked curiously like an expanding ring on the screen.

Now and then it was a ring-ship that leaped into heavenly prominence as a small nova. But, far more often, it was the black ovoids that flared goldenly and ran dripping down the night. Or disappeared in the bubble of their own ionization.

Far out into the cold black void the battle raged. The golden fires became mere specks, little chips of light, winking on and off. As the earth swung its dusky shadow-cone along, these too died, giving way to the steady lights of the ages-far suns.

The Cructars had fled, a remnant, back to their galactic tomb . . .

TOWARD dawn, a ring-ship careened slowly over the jungle, so low that tree-tops rustled under its spinning ring.

In the cabin several little men clustered over the transparent deck-port, staring down at the jungle slowly sliding past in the dim but strengthening light.

"Let us begin our work," said the Guzdlan who was wearing the uniform of a commanding iksrin. He stood in the center of the cabin by the control post. "The orders are to clean off a wide perimeter. Some Cructars may have taken to the jungle before the raying. Also, we wish to establish a safety zone. So—" He looked up.

His subordinate saluted with a smart chop of his tiny hand and wheeled toward the projector butt slanting up from the deck. At that moment, another thin voice piped up from across the cabin.

"Master, check the ship. I saw something."

The ship halted, its rings spinning laz-

ily. The bright cone of its light flicked back.

Standing along the top of a tree that had been laid almost flat stood a group of figures, waving wildly. The ship slid back and lowered over them. A flexible ladder unreeled down through the light . . .

"They are exhausted, Master," said a sub-iksrin. "They say they were captives of the Cructars."

The commander wrinkled his small brow. "How did they survive? That is what interests me."

In a few minutes, the Terran survivors climbed up into the upper level of the cabin. The commanding iksrin and his officers were seated, waiting gravely. The commander studied the brown-haired, green-eyed girl and the five men who followed her. Unconsciously, his gaze lingered on the tallest of them—a gangling, gaunt-faced, black-haired man. His was a face, the Guzdlan knew instantly, that had seen much.

"Greetings to you," he piped. "We have much to do and may not be able to return you to your home districts as soon as you would like. However, we may be able to make you quite comfortable in the meantime. May I have your names, that I may report to Terran Registration?"

The tall, dark man scowled and then grinned, a warming, lop-sided grin that touched the commander. He watched the man step forward in his turn.

"Blodgett," said the man. "Lincoln Franklin. Redge number two nine oh seven—"

"Blodgett?"

The little commander was rising. His officers, their beady eyes sparkling, were rising with him. To a man, the little ones removed their pointed uniform caps. To few, either on Guzdla or Pslan, did Guzdlangs thus make a show of awed honor.

"Please repeat that name—sir," said the commander in a voice that was the faintest of whispers.

The tall dark man frowned uncomfortably. The other Terran men eyed him wonderingly. But the green-eyed girl came to his side and took his arm.

"That's right," she said proudly. "His name is Blodgett. Bottleneck Blodgett . . ."