

★ PLANET ★

★ ★ ★ STORIES ★ ★

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The Flame Breathers

By RAY CUMMINGS



Vulcan was a doom-world. One expedition had mysteriously disappeared, and now another was following in its path—searching for the unknown menace that stalked Vulcan's shadowed gorges.

I WRITE this narrative, not with the idea of contributing any additional scientific data to the discovery of Vulcan, but to put upon the record the real

facts of our truly-amazing space voyage.

The newscasters have hailed me as a modern Columbus. Surely I would not want to appear ungracious, unappreciative

of all the applause that has been heaped upon me. But I do not deserve it. I did my job for my employers. The Society sent me to make a landing upon Vulcan—if the little planet existed. I found that it does exist; it was exactly where I was told it ought to be. I carried out my instructions, returned and made my report. There is no great heroism in that.

So I am writing the facts of what happened. Just a bald, factual account, without the imaginative trimmings. The real hero of the discovery of Vulcan was young Jan Holden. He did his job—did it well—and he did something just a little extra.

I'm Bob Grant, which of course you have guessed by now. Peter Torrence—the third member of our party—is in the Federal Prison up the Hudson. I had to turn him in.

We were given one of the smaller types of the Bentley—T-44—an alumite cylindrical hull, double-shelled, with the Erentz pressure-current circulating in it. It was a modern, well-equipped little spaceship. In its thirty-foot length of double-decked interior we three were entirely comfortable. . . . The voyage, past the orbit of Venus and then Mercury as we headed directly for the Sun—using the Sun's full attraction—was amazingly swift and devoid of incident beyond normal spaceflight routine. Much of our time was spent in the little forward control turrent—the "greenhouse," where below, above and to the sides the great glittering abyss of the firmament is spread out in all its amazing glory.

Vulcan, if it existed, would be almost directly behind the Sun now. We had no possible chance of sighting it, we knew, even when, heading inward, we cut the orbit of Mercury. Torrence, almost from the start of the trip, figured we should follow into the attraction of Mercury which was then far to one side.

"From that angle we'll see Vulcan just that much sooner," he argued.

"They told me to head straight in, to twenty-nine million miles," I said. "And that's what I'm doing—obeying orders."

I held our plotted course. Torrence never ceased grumbling about it, and I must admit there was a lot of sense in his argument. He is a big fellow—burly, heavy-set and about my own height, which is six feet one. He had close-clipped hair

and a square, heavy face. He's just turned thirty, I understand. That's five years older than I—and I was in charge. Perhaps that irked him. He is unquestionably a headstrong fellow; self-confident. But he obeyed orders, though with grumbling. And as a mechanical technician—no one could do better. He knew the technical workings of the little ship inside out.

"We follow orders?" young Jan Holden said. "And when we reach twenty-nine million miles from the Sun—then we're on our own?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"Then, when we head off to round the Sun, if Vulcan is where they think it is we ought to sight it in a few days?"

"I certainly hope so, Jan."

"I wonder if it's inhabited. I wish it would be." His dark eyes were shining. His thin cheeks, usually pale, were flushed with excitement. He was just eighteen—only a month past the legal minimum age for Interplanetary employment. A slim, romantic-looking boy, he was willing and eager to help in every way. A good cook, expert in handling his cramped quarters and preparing the many synthetic foods with which we were equipped.

"You hope it's inhabited, Jan?" I asked.

"I sure do."

I grinned at him. "Well, if it is, you'll be disappointed to find I'll be doing my best to keep away from whatever living creatures are there. That's a job for a larger expedition than ours."

"Yes, I suppose it is."

JAN often sat with me through our long vigils up there in the greenhouse. Sometimes he wouldn't speak for an hour—just sitting there dreaming. Sometimes he would talk of the ill-fated Roberts and King Expedition—the only exploratory flight which ever had headed in this close to the Sun. That was five years ago. Roberts and King, with a crew of eight, had never been heard from since.

"I just think they found Vulcan," Jan said once, out of one of his long silences.

"They were told to return after a routine landing," Torrence put in.

"Well then, suppose they crashed their ship," Jan said. "Suppose they can't get back—?"

"What we ought to do is sight Vulcan,

round it and go home," Torrence said. "To the devil with orders to land. I'd go back and tell them that in my judgment—"

"We'll land," I said. "Determine gravity—meteorological conditions—secure samples of soil, vegetation—what-nots—you know the specifications, Torrence."

If indeed there was any Vulcan. If a landing upon what might be a fiery surface were physically possible . . .

Another day passed. And then another and another. We were all three tense, expectant. There was little apparent motion in the great starry cyclorama spread around us—just the slow dwindling of Earth and Venus, the monstrous Sun shifting slowly to the right with the starfield behind it progressively becoming visible.

"We're chasing a phantom," Torrence said, on the fourth day, with the Sun now almost abreast of us and some twenty-four million miles distant. "This damned heat! They sent us out for a salary that's a mere pittance—and give us inadequate equipment. No wonder there's been no exploration so close in here."

Bathed in the full, direct Sun-rays our interior air had heated into a torrid swelter. Stripped to the waist, with the sweat glistening on us, we sat in the shrouded greenhouse. . . . And then at last I saw Vulcan! A little round, lead-colored blur. Just a dot, but in a few hours it was clear of the intervening Sun. No question of its identity. Vulcan. The new world.

"We did it!" Jan murmured. "Oh, we did it."

IT was a busy time, for me especially, those next ninety-six hours. I was soon enabled to calculate, at least roughly, that Vulcan was a world of some eight hundred miles diameter, with an orbit approximately eighteen million miles from the Sun.

"It has an atmosphere?" Jan murmured anxiously.

"Yes, I think so." We kept away from the Sun for a time; and then at last we were able to head directly for Vulcan.

The atmosphere presently was visible. No need for us to use the pressure-suits. I envisaged at first that upon such a little world gravity would be very slight. But now the heavy, metallic quality of its rock-surface was apparent. A world, doubt-

less much denser than igneous Earth.

It was my plan to land on the side away from the Sun.

We rounded Vulcan at some two million miles out. The clouds were fairly dense in many places; sluggish, slow-moving. There were fires on the Sun side—a temperature there which would make it certainly uninhabitable to any creatures resembling humans. . . .

It was the ninth day after the sighting of Vulcan that quite by chance I discovered its *allurite*. We were now fairly close over the dark hemisphere, with the Sun occulted behind it. At a thousand miles of altitude, we were dropping slowly down upon the spreading dark disc which now occupied most of our lower firmament. I had been making a series of routine spectro-color-graphs to file with my reports.

Jan heard my muttered exclamation and came crowding to gaze over my shoulder at the dripping little color spectrograph.

"What is it, Bob? Something important?"

"That bond-line there—see it? That's a metal on Vulcan—shining of its own light—radioactive type-A."

That much, I could determine. Then Jan and I looked it up in the Hughson list of Identified Spectrae. It was *allurite*.

"That's valuable?" Torrence murmured. "Pure *allurite*—"

I laughed. "It certainly would be, if we could find any sizable deposits here. On Earth, it takes some seventeen tons of the very richest *allurium* to get maybe a grain of pure *allurite*. We'll take a look around, try and get a sample of the ore here. If it pans out rich enough, they can send a well-equipped mining expedition."

"We ought to get a bonus for this," Torrence said. "If you don't tell 'em so, I will."

THE descent upon Vulcan took another twenty-four hours. Then at last we had passed through a cloud-bank and, at some twenty thousand feet, the new world stretched dark and bleak beneath us. It certainly looked—to Jan's intense disappointment—wholly uninhabited. It was a tumbled, rocky landscape, barren and forbidding. Beneath us there were black ravines and canyons, little jagged peaks and hill-top spires, some of them sharp as

needle-points. Off at one of the distant horizons the tiered land, rising up, stretched into the foothills of serrated ranks of mountain peaks which loomed over the jagged dark horizon line.

A great metal desert here. In the fitful starlight, and the mellow light of little crescent Mercury which hung over the mountains like a falling, new moon, the metallic quality of the rock was obvious—sleek, bronzed metal ore, in places polished by erosion so that it shone mirror-like. In other places it was mottled with a greenish cast.

"Well," Jan murmured, "not very hospitable-looking, is it? Don't you suppose there's any moisture, or any vegetation?"

There was no sign of any living creatures beneath us as we drifted diagonally downward. But presently, at lower altitude, I could see gleaming pools of water in the rock-hollows. The remains of a rainstorm here. Then we saw what looked like a great fissure—an open scar rifted in a glistening, polished metallic plateau. Grey-black steam was rising, condensing in the humid night-air. The hidden fires of the bowels of the little planet seemed close at this one point. As we stared, a red glow for a moment tinged the steam with a red and greenish reflection of some subterranean glare, far down.

Nothing but metal desert. But presently, as we slid forward, no more than a few thousand feet above the rocky surface now, Jan murmured suddenly,

"Look off there. Like a little oasis, isn't it?"

There was a patch of what seemed to be rocky soil. Just a few hundred acres in extent, set in a cup-like depression with little buttes and needle-spires and the strewn boulders of the metal waste surrounding it. A clump of tangled vegetation covered it—a fantastic miniature jungle of interlaced, queerly shaped little trees, solid with air-vines and pods and clumps of monstrous, vivid-colored flowers. It was an amazing contrast to the bleakness of the bronze desert.

"Well, that's more like it," Jan exclaimed. "Not all desert, Bob. See that?"

Torrence, with his usual efficient practicality, had been busy getting our landing equipment in order. He paused beside me

in the greenhouse, where I sat at the rocket-stream controls which now were in operation for this atmospheric flight.

"Where you figure on landing?" he asked. "Somewhere about here? You want to locate that *allurite*?"

"Yes," I agreed.

IT is not altogether safe, handling even so small a space-flight ship as ours, in atmosphere at low altitudes. Especially over unknown terrain. It seemed my best course now to make the landing here, secure my rock-samples and make my routine observations. I did not need Torrence to tell me that we were not equipped for extensive exploration of an unknown world. A trip on foot of perhaps a day or two, using the spaceship as a base, would suffice for my records.

"There's a better chance of finding sizable deposits of allurium here than anywhere else?" Torrence suggested. "Don't you think so?"

With that, too, I agreed. He prepared us for a night and a few meals of camping—a huge pack for himself, which with a grin he declared himself amply able to carry; a smaller one for Jan; and my instruments and electro-mining drills for me.

We dropped down within an hour or two, landing with a circular swing into a dim, caudron-like depression of the desert where the polished ground was nearly level and free of boulders.

That was a thrill to me—my first step into the new world—even though I have experienced it several times before. Laden with our packs, we opened the lower-exit pressure porte. The night air, under heavier pressure than we were maintaining inside, oozed in with a little hiss—moist, queer-smelling air. It seemed at first heavy, oppressive. The acrid smell of chemicals was in it.

The night-temperature was hot—sultry as a summer tropic night on Earth. With the interior gravity shut off as we opened the porte, at once I felt a sense of lightness. But it was not extreme. Despite Vulcan's small size, its great density gives it a gravity comparable to Earth's.

In a little group we stood on the rocky ground with a dark, immense heavy silence around us—a silence that you could seem to hear—and yet a silence which seemed

pregnant with the mystery of the unknown. Somehow it made me suddenly think of weapons. Besides our utility-knives, we each had a small, short-range electro-flash gun. I saw that Torrence had his in his hand.

"Put it away," I said. "There's nothing here."

With a grin, he shoved it back into his belt. "Which way?" he demanded. "What will the ore of *allurium* look like? Green and red spots in sand-colored streaks of rock, that Hughson book says."

I figured that I could recognize it, though I am far from a skilled geologist. Certainly I agreed with Torrence that our most important job was to find some sizable lodes of *allurium*, measure its probable extent, and take average samples of it back with us.

WE climbed out of the little cauldron. In the tumbled darkness we picked our way among the crags. An Earth-mile, then another. Little Jan, like an eager hound was generally ahead of us, with his tiny search-glare sweeping the jagged rocks. We crossed a narrow winding canyon, inspected a slashed cliff-face. It was arduous going. Despite the sense of lightness and our tropic black-drill clothes of short trousers, thin jackets and shirts, we were panting, bathed in sweat within an hour. Silently, Torrence plodded at my side. It was my first trip with him; and I could see he did not altogether trust my efficiency.

"You can find the way back to the ship?" he demanded once. "To get lost in a place like this—"

I had marked it; little twin spires above the cauldron. They were visible now, looming against the dark sky behind us.

I showed him. "I saw them," he said. "I could lead us back. My idea is, if we cover about ten miles and then camp—"

A cry from Jan interrupted us. He was standing on a little ridge of rock like a bronze metal wave frozen into solidity. Against the deep purple sky his slim figure was a silhouette of solid black. He was staring off into the distance; his arm waved with a gesture as he called to us.

"Something off there! Something lying on the rocks—come look!"

We ran to join him. About a quarter

mile distant there was a broad gully. A dark blob was visible lying at the bottom of it—a sizable blob, something forty or fifty feet long. We picked our way there; climbed down into the ragged, thirty-foot ravine. It was a spaceship lying here—with its sleek alumite hull resting on its side with one of its rocket-stream fins bent and smashed under it.

"The Roberts-King ship," Torrence exclaimed. "So they got here. Cracked up in the landing."

There seemed no doubt of it. This was unquestionably the Roberts-King vehicle—an older version of our own vessel. We stood staring at it blankly—at its little bow pressure port which was wide open, a narrow rectangle with the interior blackness behind it.

Then I saw that here on the rocks near the doorway, a litter of tools and mechanisms were strewn; and a section of one of the gravity plates which had been disconnected and brought out here.

"Trying to repair it," I said to the silently staring, awed Torrence. "Five years ago. Now what do you suppose—"

A startled cry from Jan interrupted me. The body was lying on the rocks, just beyond the bow of the ship. It was Jonathan Roberts—stocky, middle-aged leader of the expedition. Clad in a strange costume of thin brown material, seemingly animal skin, he lay crumpled. I had never met him, but from his published portraits I could recognize him at once. In the starlight here his dead face with staring eyes goggled up at us.

"Why—why—" Torrence gasped. "Five years—"

There was no great look of decay about the body. Roberts had died here, certainly not five years ago. I was bending down over the body; I shoved at one of the shoulders and turned it over. Stricken Jan, Torrence and I stared numbed. A thin bronze sliver of metal—fin-tipped like a metal arrow—was buried in Roberts' back!

Again the alert Jan was gazing at the dim, fantastic night-scene around us. Abruptly his hand gripped my arm as he gasped,

"Why—good Lord—what's that? Over there—"

In the blackness down the gully, perhaps a hundred feet from us, a little spiral of

fire had appeared. A tiny wisp of red-green flame. It seemed to hover in the air a few feet above the rocky gully floor. Like a phantom wraith of fire, it silently leaped and twisted.

"My God—it's coming toward us!" Torrence suddenly gasped.

In the darkness the silent wisp of fire had swayed sidewise, and then came along the edge of the gully, a disembodied conflagration in mid-air, as though wafted by a rush of wind we could not feel.

II

FOR a moment of startled horror we stood motionless. The floating little flame seemed bounding now, just over the rocks. Bounding? Abruptly I seemed to see a dark shape of solidity under it—something almost, but not quite invisible in the blackness. A tangible thing? A creature—burning? Thoughts are instant things. I recall that in that second, I had the impression of a four-legged thing like a huge dog, bounding toward us over the rocks. The flame in which it was enveloped, had spread—it was a blob of flame, but solidity was there.

All in a second. My little electro-gun was in my hand. And then from beside me, Torrence fired—his flash with a whining sizzle splitting the backness of the gully with its pencil-point of hurled electrons. His hasty aim quite evidently was wild. I saw the little splash of colored sparks where his charge hit the rocks. Too high.

My gun was leveled. But in that split-second, the oncoming blob of fire abruptly had been extinguished. There was only the faint blurred suggestion of the dog-like thing. It had stopped short, and then suddenly was retreating. My shot, and Jan's, followed it. In another few seconds there was no possibility of hitting it. Silently it had vanished. There was only the black silent gully around us, with the blurred crags standing like menacing dark ghosts.

My instinct then, I must admit, was for us to retreat at once to our ship. In the heavy empty silence we stood blankly gazing at each other. Torrence was grim; Jan was shaking with excitement and the fear all of us felt.

"You heard that whistle?" I murmured.

"I heard it," Jan exclaimed. "Something—somebody—human—" There were weird, hostile inhabitants on Vulcan—no question of that now! And here was Roberts' body with a metal sliver of arrow in its back, mute evidence of what we were facing. And already our presence here had been discovered. I stared around at the rocky darkness, every blurred crag now seeming to mask some unknown menace.

"That whistle," Torrence murmured, "calling off that flaming thing—started at our shots. Something is around here, watching us now, undoubtedly."

The yawning dark doorway of the wrecked spaceship was near us. Something seemed lying just beyond its threshold.

"You two stay here," I told Torrence and Jan. "Don't let them surprise us again. We'll have to get back to our ship—"

The port doorway led into a little pressure chamber. On its dark sloping floor, as the wrecked ship lay askew, I stood with my flashlight illumining so ghastly a scene that my blood chilled in my veins. It was a bloody shambles of horror. For a moment I gazed; and as I turned away, sickened, I found Jan at my elbow. He too, had been staring. He clutched at me, white and shaken, and I turned away my light.

"The rest of them," he murmured.

"Yes. Looks that way. All of them—"

The bodies were strewn, clothing and flesh ripped apart so that here were only the bones of men, with pulpy crimson—

"No humans did that, Jan."

"No," he shuddered. "That Thing in flames that came at us—"

HIS words died in his throat. Outside there was a scream—a shrill, eerie human cry. The high-pitched scream of a woman! Gun in hand, with Jan close behind me, I ran outside. The dimness of the rocky gully seemed empty. The cry had died away.

"Torrence! You Torrence—what in the devil—"

My low vehement words wafted away. There was no Torrence. Cautiously I ran around the bow of the wrecked ship, gazed down its other side.

"Torrence—Torrence—"

The nearby rocks seemed to echo back my words, mocking me.

"Why—why—" Jan gasped, "I left him right out here. He was just standing, looking down at Roberts' body with the arrow in it. I just thought I'd go inside with you for a minute."

I pulled him down to the ground. We crouched, close against the side of the ship. "That scream," I whispered, "wasn't far away. A few hundred feet down the gully."

"It sounded like a girl. It did, didn't it? Bob, if they got Torrence that quickly—an arrow in him—"

I peered, tense. The rock shadows were all motionless. In the heavy blank silence there was only my startled breathing, and Jan's; and the thumping of my own heart against my ribs. Had this weird enemy gotten Torrence so swiftly, so silently? Something not human, that had so quickly seized him and dragged him away? Or one of those metal arrows in his back, so that his body was lying around here somewhere, masked by the darkness. Jan and I had certainly not been inside the ship more than a minute or two—

A sharp clattering ping against the alumite side of the wrecked ship struck away my thoughts. A metal arrow! It bent against the hull-plate and dropped almost beside me! The still-hidden sniper had seen us, that was evident, for the arrow had whizzed only a foot or so over our heads.

"Jan—lower—"

We almost flattened ourselves against the bulge of the hull, with a little pile of boulders in front of us. My gun was leveled, but there was nothing to shoot at. Then from diagonally across the gully again there came a sharp human cry! A girl's voice? It was soft this time, a bursting little cry, half suppressed.

Thoughts are instant things. I was aware of the cry and with it there was another whizz. Another arrow. This one was wider of the mark; it hit far to one side of us, up near the bow of the ship.

"Jan! Wait!" His little flash gun was up in the crevice of the rocks in front of us. In another second he would have fired. I saw his target—two dim blobs across the gully. For just that second they were visible as they rose up out of a hollow.

A man; and the slighter figure with him seemed that of a girl. Her hair, glistening like spun metal in the dim light, hung over her shoulders.

The two figures were struggling. There was the sound of the girl's low cry, and a grunt from the man. . . . My low admonition stopped Jan from firing and in another second the shapes across the gully had vanished.

"That girl," I murmured. "She tried to keep him from killing us. Seemed that way, don't you think?"

"Well—"

WE waited. From across the gully there was no sound. I could see now that there was a little ridge in the broken, littered gully floor, behind which the two figures had vanished. A lateral depression was there, with the ragged, broken cliff-wall some ten feet behind it.

"Do you suppose there's only one of them?" Jan whispered. "One man—and that girl—"

"And that—that Thing in flames—"

There was no sign of the animal-like creature. For another moment we crouched tense, peering, listening. A loose stone the size of my fist was here beside us. I picked it up. It was weirdly heavy for its size. Then I flung it out into the gully to the right of us. It fell with a clatter.

Our enemy was there all right. An arrow whizzed in the darkness and struck near where the stone had fallen.

Jan laughed with contempt. "Dumb enough—that fellow. Bob, listen, we've got flash-guns. That fellow with no brains—and just with arrows—"

True enough. "You stay here," I whispered.

"What's the idea?"

"You wait a couple of minutes. Then throw another stone off to the right—about the same place. Understand?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, you do it, anyhow."

There seemed a line of shadow to the left of us, a shadow which extended well out into the gully. The ground dropped down in that area—a slope strewn with crags, broken with little crevices. Crouching low, I crept to the bow of the ship, to the left away from Jan; sank down, waited.

There was no sound; evidently I had not been seen. I started again, picking my way down the slope.

A minute. I was well out into the gully now, ten feet or so down, so that I could not see the wrecked ship where Jan was crouching. From here the opposite cliff-wall showed dark and ragged. Occasionally it yawned with openings, like little cave-mouths. The place where the figures had been crouching should be visible from here. The broken, lower side of the little ridge behind which they had dropped was in view to me now. It was dark with shadow, but there seemed nothing there.

Slowly, cautiously, I crossed the gully. Two minutes since I had left Jan? I melted down beside a rock, almost at the edge of the cliff-wall. And then, out in the gully, far to the right, I heard the stone clatter as Jan threw it.

There was no answering arrow-shot this time. . . . One can be very incautious, usually at just the wrong moment. I recall that I stood up to see better, though I flattened myself against a boulder. And suddenly, close behind me, I was aware of a padding, thudding rhythmic sound on the rocks. I whirled. I had only a second's vision of a dark bounding animal shape coming at me. My sizzling little flash went under it as it rose in one of its bounding leaps.

I had no time to fire another shot. Frantically I pulled the trigger-lever, but the gun's voltage had not yet rebuilt to firing pressure. Futilely I flung the gun into the creature's face as it bore down upon me.

The impact of the dark oblong body knocked me backward so that I fell with it sprawling, snarling upon me. In the chaos of my mind there was only the dim realization of a heavy body as big as my own; spindly legs, like the legs of a huge dog. There seemed six or eight legs, scrambling on me.

Wildly I fought to heave it off. There was a face—a ring of glaring green eyes; fang-like jaws of a long pointed snout which opened, snarling with a gibbering, gruesome cry. I shoved my left forearm into the jaws as they came at my face. They closed upon my arm, ripping, tearing.

BUT somehow I was aware that I had lunged to my feet. And the Thing reared up with me. It was a Thing almost as heavy as myself. My left arm had come loose from its jaws and as its scrambling weight pressed me I went down again. A Thing of rubber? It seemed boneless, the shape of it bending as I seized it. A gruesomely yielding body. My flailing blows bounded back from it. Then I knew that I was gripping it by the head, twisting it. The snarling, snapping jaws suddenly opened wide with a scream—a scream that faded into a mouthing gibber, and in my grip the Thing went limp. I cast it away and it sank to the rocks, quivering.

For an instant I stood panting, trembling with nausea sickening me. On my hands the flesh of the weird antagonist was sticking like viscous, gluey rubber. Hot and clinging. Hot? I stared at my hands in the dimness. For a second I thought it was phosphorescence. Then yellow-green wisps of flame were rising from my hands. Frantically I plunged them into my jacket pockets. The tiny flames were extinguished. I stripped off my jacket, flung it away and it lay with a little smoke rising from it where the weird stuff was trying again to burst into flame.

The skin of my hands was seared, but the contact with the flames had been only momentary and the burns were not severe. It had all happened in a minute or two. I recall that I was standing trembling, staring at the yawning mouth of a cave entrance which was nearby in the cliff-face. A movement in there? A moving blob? Then I was aware that there was a light behind me. Off across the gully there was a blob of light-fire. A red-green blob, swirling, scrambling. And the sound of a distant, gibbering snarl. . . .

The singing whizz of an arrow past my head made me turn again. My human adversary! I saw him now. He was coming at a run from the mouth of the cave—a wide-shouldered, grotesquely-shaped man with a brown hairy garment draped upon him. He swayed like a gorilla on thick bent legs. In one hand he held what seemed an arrow-sling. In the other he carried a long narrow segment of rock, swinging it like a club. He was no more than ten feet from me. In the dimness I could see his huge round head with

tangled, matted black hair. As I whirled to meet him, his voice was a bellow of guttural roar, like an animal bellowing to intimidate its enemy.

I turned, jumped sidewise. And abruptly from a rock-shadow another shape rose up! Slim, small white body, brown-draped with long, gleaming tawny hair. The girl! Her voice gasped,

"You run! He kill you! In here—this way—"

The bellowing savage had turned heavily in his rush and was charging us. In her terror and confusion the girl gripped me, shoving me toward the cave. As we ran I flung an arm around her, lifting her up. She weighed hardly more than a child. Then we were in the blackness of a tunnel-passage. I set her down.

"Lie down. Be quiet," I whispered vehemently. She understood me; she crouched back against the side wall. There seemed a little light here, a glow which I realized was inherent to the rocks, like a vague, faint phosphorescence. But it was brighter outside. The charging savage had evidently paused at the entrance. As I stared now, his bulky figure loomed there, grotesque silhouette. Then doubtless he saw me. With another bellow he came charging in.

I stood waiting, like a Toreador, in front of a heavily charging bull. It was something like that, for as he rushed me, swinging his club and plunging with lowered head of matted hair, nimbly I jumped aside. I had seized a rock half as big as my head. He had no time to turn and poise himself as I jumped on him, crashing the rock at the side of his broad ugly face as he straightened and swung around.

Ghastly blow. His face smashed in as the rock seemed to go into it. For a second his hulking body stood balanced upon the crooked legs and broad flat bare feet. Gruesome dead thing with the face and top of the head gone, it balanced on legs suddenly turned rigid. Then it toppled forward and thudded against the passage wall, sliding sidewise to the ground where it lay motionless.

IN the phosphorescent dimness, I dropped beside the girl. She was panting with terror, shuddering, with her hands before her face.

"It's all right," I murmured. "Or at least, maybe it isn't all right with you, but he's dead, anyway."

Utterly incongruous, the delicately formed bronze-white girl—and that hulking, grotesque, clumsy savage.

"Oh—yes," she murmured. "Dear—yes—"

"You speak English—strange, here on Vulcan—"

"But from your Captain Roberts—he was the fren' of mine—of all the Senzas—"

"He's dead. An arrow in him—lying over there by his wrecked ship—the rest of them, dead inside—"

"Yes. I know it. That was these Orgs. I was caught—just the last time of sleep. Tahg—surely it seems it must be Tahg who sent this Org to take me from my father's home—"

A captive! And she had fought with her savage captor to stop him from sending an arrow into me. Then, in his absorption as he tried to stalk me, she had broken loose from him.

"Just this one Org?" I murmured. "Is he the only one around here? He and that—animal-thing which I killed?"

"That—a female *mime*—you—you—"

She was huddling beside me, clinging to me, still shuddering. "Two Orgs there were," she whispered. "And another mime—a fire-male—"

The flame-creature! Queerly, it was not until that instant that I thought of Jan. Out there across the gully, that swirling swaying blob of light-fire! Those snarling sounds! Jan had been attacked by another of the savages, and by the weird flaming creature! The mime fire-male, as the girl called it.

I jumped to my feet. "What—what you do?" she demanded.

"You stay here. What's your name?"

"Ama. Daughter of Rohm, the Senza. He my father. He very good fren' of the Captain Roberts—good fren' of all the Earthmen. Like you? You are Earthman?"

"Yes. Now Ama, listen—I came here with another Earthman—with two others, in fact. One of them is over there by the Roberts' ship. . . . You wait here—"

"No!" she gasped. I had dashed toward the tunnel entrance, but I found her with me. "No—no, I stay with you."

From the entrance the gully showed dim and silent. Over the little rise of ground, just the top of the Roberts' spaceship was visible.

Ama clung to me. "I stay with you," she insisted.

Cautiously we picked our way across the gully, up the small ascending slope. No sound; nothing moving. But now there was a pungent, acrid chemical smell hanging here in the windless air.

"The fire-mime!" Ama whispered. "You smell the fire? Then he was angry, ready to fight—"

"He fought," I retorted grimly. "I saw it—"

"Look! Look there—"

HER slim arm as she gestured tinkled with metal baubles hanging on it . . . I saw, up the slope, the blob of something lying on the rocks. Jan! My heart pounded. But it wasn't Jan. The body of one of the weird oblong animals was lying there. Lying on its side, with its six legs stiffly outstretched. Ugly hairless thing, like a giant dog which had been skinned. I could see now that the grey-green flesh had a greasy, pulpy look. What strange organic material was this? Certainly nothing like it existed on Earth. Impervious to heat, as the human stomach tissue is impervious to the action of its own digestive juices. Evidence of the thing's flaming oxidation was here. Wisps of smoke were rising from the ground about the slack body.

Had Jan killed it? The ring of eyes above the long muzzle snout bulged with a glassy, goggling dead stare. The jaws were open, with a thick, forked black tongue protruding, and green, sticky-looking froth still oozing out. The teeth were long and sharp, fangs like polished black ivory protruding from the jaw. The cause of its death was obvious. A knife-slash had ripped, almost severed its throat in a hideous wound where green-black viscous ooze was still slowly dripping, with smoky vapor rising from it.

For a moment, with little Ama clinging to me, I must have stood appalled at the weird sight of the dead fire-mime. If Jan had fought and killed it—then where was he now? And where was that other Org, companion of the clumsy savage I had

killed when it had tried to attack me?

And where was Torrence?

"Your fren'—he did this?" Ama was murmuring.

"Yes, I guess so." I raised my voice cautiously. "Jan—Oh, Jan, where are you?"

The dark shadowed rocks mocked me with their muffled, blurred echo of my call. There seemed nothing here alive, save Ama and me. The wrecked spaceship lay broken and silent on the rocks, with the gruesome, strewn bodies of the Earthmen in it. And the body of Roberts still lay here outside, near the bow.

"Jan—Jan—"

Then Ama abruptly gasped, "The Orgs! See them—up there!"

The cliff which was the gully wall, at this point was some fifty feet high. I stared up to a patch of yellow light which had appeared there in the darkness. A band of the murderous Orgs! Carrying flaming torches, a dozen or more of the gargoyle savages stood above us on the cliff-brink. One stood in advance of them, pointing down at us. He was the other one, doubtless, who had originally been down here with Ama. Around them, half a dozen of the huge greenish mimes bounded, whining with gibbering cries of eagerness.

And in that instant, an arrow came down. I saw one of the savages sling it from a flexible, whip-like contrivance. The whizzing metal shaft sang past our heads and clattered on the rocks.

Ama was clutching me. "You come! Oh hurry—they kill us both."

There was no argument about that. I flung a last look around with the vague thought that I would see Jan lying here. Then I let Ama guide me. At a run, we headed back down the declivity and diagonally across the gully. A rain of arrows came down, clattering around us, but in a moment most of them were falling short.

"Which way, Ama? Where we go?"

"My people—my village—not too far."

"Which way?"

"Through this cliff. There are passages into the lower valley."

"You know the way?"

"Yes, oh yes."

A dark opening in the opposite cliff presently was before us. The Orgs were

coming down the other cliff now; their bellowing voices and the whining cries of the mimes were a blended babble.

"A storm is coming," Ama said suddenly.

The distant sky over the lower end of the gully was shot now with weird lurid colors. In the heavy dark silence here around us, a sudden sharp puff of wind plucked at us, tossing Ama's long tawny hair.

"This way—" she added.

My arm went around her as another wind-blast thrust us sidewise, almost knocking her off her feet. Then clinging together, fighting our way in a rush of wind which now abruptly was a roar, we plunged into the depths of the yawning tunnel.

III

I MUST recount now what happened to Jan, as he told it to me when after a sequence of weird events, he and I were together again. When I left him crouching there close against the hull of the wrecked Roberts' ship, he lost sight of me almost in a moment. There was just the faint blob of me sliding into a shadow; and then the lowering ground down which I went hid me. Tensely he crouched, peering across the gully, listening to the heavy silence.

Two minutes, I had said; and then he must throw the rock. His hand fumbled around, found a sizable rock-chunk. He understood my purpose, of course—to divert our adversary across the gully at a moment when I might be close to jump him from the other direction.

Jan was excited, apprehensive, just an inexperienced boy. Was the crouching savage with the girl still there across the gully? There was no sound, no movement. Was it two minutes now?

He flung the stone at last and raised himself up a little with his gun leveled. The stone clattered off to the right. But it provoked no whizzing arrow. No sound of me, jumping upon my adversary. . . . Nothing. . . . But what was that? Jan stiffened. Distinctly he heard the sizzling puff of a flashgun shot. My gun! He knew it must be; it was to the left, out in the gully. And following it there was a low

gibbering snarl. Faint in the distance, but in the heavy silence plainly audible.

I had been attacked! Jan found himself on his feet, with no thought in his mind save to dash to me. . . . He had taken no more than a few scrambling leaps on the rocks. He reached the brink of the descent. Far down and out in the gully it seemed that he could see the blur of something fighting.

His low incautious movement had betrayed him. From behind him there was a low whistling. A signal! An eager whining snarl instantly resounded to it. Jan had no more than time to whirl and face the sounds when a great bounding grey-green shape was on him!

Jan's shot missed it, and the next second the lunging oblong body struck him. The impact knocked him backward. His gun clattered away. Then the huge, hairless dog-like thing sprawled upon him, its slavering jaws snapping. They found his shoulder as he lunged and the fang-like teeth sank in. . . .

A miracle that Jan could have kept his wits so that he fumbled for his knife as he fell. But suddenly he got it out, stabbed and slashed wildly with it as he rolled and twisted on the ground with the snarling creature on top of him. . . . And suddenly he was aware that the thing had burst into flame!

It could have been only a few seconds during which Jan fought that weird living fire. It was a wild chaos of horror. . . . Licking, oozing flames exuding like an aura from the sticky viscous flesh that horribly sprawled upon him. Monstrous ghastly adversary, with flesh that seemed now like burning bubbling rubber, stenching with acrid gas-fumes. . . .

Just a few seconds, then Jan realized that somehow he had broken loose from the jaws that gripped his shoulder. He tried to scramble to his feet. The flames searing his face made him close his eyes. He was holding his breath, choking. His clothes were on fire. . . .

THEN the sprawling, lunging body knocked him down again. He was still wildly, blindly slashing with his knife. Vaguely he was aware, over the chaos of snapping snarls, that a human voice nearby with guttural shouts was urging the

animal to dispatch its victim. But suddenly—as Jan's knife-blade ripped into its throat—the snarls went into a ghastly, eerie animal scream of agony—a long scream that died into a gurgle of gluey, choking blood-fluid. . . .

Jan was aware that the creature had fallen from him with its flames dying. On the rocks he rolled away from it, with his scorched hands wildly brushing his clothes to extinguish them. Then he was on his feet, staggering, choking, coughing. But his knife, its blade dripping with an oozing flame, still wildly waved.

And then he was aware that twenty feet away, a heavy, grotesque man-like shape was standing with a club and arrow-sling. But with his flame-creature dead and the sight of the staggering, triumphant Jan waving his flaming knife-blade—the watching savage suddenly dropped his club and let out a cry of dismay and fear. And then he ran.

For a moment Jan, wildly, hysterically laughing, went in pursuit. But in the rocky darkness the fleeing savage already had vanished. . . .

Then reaction set in upon Jan. His burned face and hands stung as though still fire was upon him. He was still gasping, choking from the fumes of his smoldering clothes. His eyes, with lashes singed, smarted, watering so that all the vague night-scene was a swaying blur. . . . He found himself sitting down on the rocks. . . .

And then suddenly he remembered me. Where had I gone? What had happened? . . .

Vaguely Jan recalled that I had left him and gone across the gully. . . . Where was I now? . . . Then he seemed dimly to recall that he had heard my shot. . . .

In the dimness suddenly it seemed to Jan that he saw me, far up the gully to the right, up on the cliff-top. For just a moment he was sure that it was the shape of me, silhouetted against the sky. . . . The sight gave him strength. Still staggering, he ran wildly forward. . . . A quarter of a mile; certainly it seemed that far. He had crossed the gully by now. The figure up above had vanished. . . . Queer. What was I doing up there? Chasing the savage? . . .

Jan climbed the little cliff, which was

ragged, and lower here than elsewhere. It led him to the undulating, upper plateau, crag-strewn, dim under a leaden sky. But there was enough light so that he could see the distant figure. It was only two or three hundred yards away, plodding on, apparently not looking back. . . .

Jan ran after it. And then he was calling:

"Bob! You Bob—"

The figure turned. Started suddenly back, and called:

"Is that you? Jan?"

It was Torrence! He came back at a lumbering run now—Torrence, bare-headed, gun in hand. But he obviously hadn't had any encounter. His jacket was buttoned across his shirt; he looked just as he had when Jan had last seen him, out there at the bow of the wrecked spaceship when Jan had gone inside to join me.

Torrence stared at the burned Jan. "Why—good Heavens," he gasped. "You—I saw that thing killing you. I was up here—I started down, but too late—"

"Where's Bob?"

"Bob? Why—he was killed. Burned—like you. I tried to help him—too late—the damned things—"

THE lameness of it was lost on the still-dazed Jan at that moment. I had been killed! It struck him with a shock. And as he stood wavering, trembling, Torrence drew him to a rock.

"Too bad," Torrence murmured sympathetically.

"Where—where were you?" Jan said at last. "We came out of the ship—couldn't find you."

"I was attacked by one of those cursed Things. Like the one that nearly got you—like the one that killed Bob. I chased it; shot at it when I got up here. But I shouldn't have come up—then I saw you and Bob—too late to get back to you. So I was starting for our ship. It's off this way, not so very far."

For a little time Jan sat there numbed, and Torrence sat sympathetically, silently beside him.

"When we get back," Torrence murmured at last, "you can put in your report with mine. We did our best—but there isn't any use now, us tackling this thing."

Jan must have been wholly silent, think-

ing of me, dead, burned, back there in the darkness of the gully.

"You all right now, lad?"

"Yes," Jan said. "Yes—I'm all right."

"When we get back, we ought to get a bonus," Torrence said. "Don't worry, Jan—I'll see you get plenty. Your report and mine—to tell them the hazards of this trip—"

"We should go back?" Jan said.

"Yes, certainly we should. Get back to Earth as fast as we can. No chance of doing anything else—"

Torrence gazed apprehensively around them in the darkness. That much at least—the reality of his apprehension as they sat there on the open plateau—that was authentic enough. And Jan also felt that at any moment one of the flaming creatures might attack them.

"You strong enough to start now?"

"Yes, sure I am," Jan agreed.

They started, picking their way along. Jan tried to remember how far we three had come from our own ship until we had discovered the Roberts' vessel. . . . For ten or fifteen minutes now he and Torrence clambered over the rocks.

"You think you know the way?" Jan asked at last.

"Yes—or I thought I did." Torrence's tone was apprehensively dubious. And that, too must have been authentic. Certainly it would be a desperate plight to be lost here on Vulcan. "It was Bob who was sure he knew the way back—"

"I think we are all right," Jan agreed. "That big rock-spire off there—I remember it."

As they progressed, Jan was aware now that the sky behind them was brightening. They turned and stared at it.

"Weird—" Torrence muttered.

"Yes—some sort of storm. If it's bad—you suppose we ought to take shelter? It's pretty open up here."

The sky was certainly weird enough—a swirl of leaden clouds back there, shot now with lurid green and crimson. And suddenly there came a puff of wind. Then another. Stronger, it whined between the nearby naked crags. In a little nearby ravine it caught an area of loose metallic stones, whirled them before it with a tinkling clatter.

"We came through that ravine, coming

out this way," Jan said suddenly. "I'm sure of it."

Torrence remembered it also. Another blast of wind came; and with it blowing them, they scurried into the ravine. The lurid storm-sky painted it with a crimson and green glare, so that the narrow cut in the rocky plateau was eerie. To Jan it seemed suddenly infernal. He clutched at the larger, far more bulky Torrence as they hurried along with the wind blasting them.

Loose metallic stones were blowing around them now with a clatter. Then suddenly the sky seemed riven by a darting, jagged red shaft of lightning. And then red rain was pelting them.

"Got to find some place," Torrence panted. He had to shout it above the roar as the wind tore at his words and hurled them away.

"Over there?" Jan gestured. "Looks like a cave."

The sides of the ravine were rifted in many places with vertical crevices. They headed toward a wider slit of opening which seemed to lead well back underground. A place of shelter until this storm passed. . . .

TO Jan, what happened then was weirdly terrifying. He suddenly realized that as they approached the opening, they were being pulled at it. Into it! A suction, as though somewhere down underground this storm had created a partial vacuum—a far lesser pressure so that the air of the little ravine was rushing into it!

Terrified, both of them now were fighting to keep away. But it was no use. Like wind-blown puffs of cotton they were sucked into the yawning opening. A sudden chaos of roaring horror. Jan felt that he was still clutching at Torrence. Then both of them fell, sliding, sucked forward as a plunger cylinder is sucked through a pneumatic tube. The ground here in the passage felt smooth as polished marble.

For how long they plunged forward Jan had no conception. Roaring, sucking darkness. Then it seemed that there was a little light. An effulgence; a pallid, eerie glow, like phosphorescence streaming from the rocks. The narrow passage was steadily widening; and then abruptly they were blown out into emptiness.

It was a vast grotto, with smooth metallic floor almost level. The effulgence here was brighter, so that an undulating, vaulted ceiling glistened far overhead. For a moment the nearer wall was visible, smooth, burnished metal rock. Eroded by the winds of centuries, all the rock here was burnished until it shone mirror-like.

The huge pallid interior roared and echoed with the tumbling wind-torrents seething in it. A lashing cauldron jumbled with eddying blasts. Jan and Torrence tried to get to their feet. They could see now that they were far out from the wall—sliding, buffeted, desperately clinging together, hurled one way and then another. Bruised from head to foot, panting, gasping in the swiftly changing pressures, Jan felt his senses leaving him. A numbed vagueness was on him, so that there was only the suck and roar of the winds and the feel of Torrence to whom he was clinking. They were lying prone now—

"Easing up a little—" He heard Torrence's voice as though from far away. And then he came to his senses to find that he and Torrence had hit against a wall of the grotto and were clinging to a projection of rock.

Easing up a little. . . . The storm outside lessening. . . . Jan must have drifted off again; and after another interval he was conscious that there was only a tossing, crazy breeze in here. It whined and moaned, echoing from one wall to another so that the pallid, silvery half-light seemed filled with a myriad gibbering little voices.

And Jan could see now that he and Torrence had been blown into a recess of the grotto—a smaller cave. The rock formation here was as though this were the heart of a monstrous crystal—vertical facets of strata that glistened pallidly.

"We'll have to try and cross back," Torrence said, and in the confined space his words weirdly echoed, split and duplicated so that there seemed many little whispering replicas of his words. "Find that passage where we came in—"

They were on their feet now—suddenly to Jan there was around them a vast vista of pallid dimness. A glowing, limitless abyss stretching off into shadowy nothingness, everywhere he looked.

"Why—why," he murmured, "this place—so large—"

Torrence still had his flash cylinder. He fumbled in his jacket pocket, brought it out. Amazing thing! As he snapped it on, its tiny white beam showed mirrored in a hundred places of the paneled, crystalline walls! The blurred image of Torrence and Jan standing holding each other with their light-shaft before them, duplicated so that there were a hundred of them everywhere they looked! And countless other hundreds smaller and smaller in the myriad backgrounds!

WITH a startled curse Torrence took a few steps into what seemed pallid emptiness, and then suddenly his image was coming at him! Lost! To Jan came the rush of horror that they might wander in here, balked at every turn. . . .

Another startled cry from Torrence stuck away Jan's thoughts. Neither he nor Torrence had time to make a move. There was suddenly everywhere the duplicated image of a thick, swaying, gargoylesavage, standing like a gorilla on thick bent legs, with one crooked arm holding a flaming torch over his head. A myriad replicas of him everywhere! Was he close to them, or far away? And in which direction?

In that stricken second the questions stabbed into Jan's tumultuous mind. Then he was aware of something whirling in the air over his head—something crashing on his skull so that all the world seemed to go up into a splitting, blinding roar of light. He felt his legs buckling under him. There was only Torrence's fighting outcry and the sound of a guttural echoing voice as Jan fell and his senses slid off into a blank and black, empty silence. . . .

IV

I GO back now to that moment when Ama and I, pursued by the roaming band of Orgs, plunged into a tunnel passage that led from the gully, near the wrecked Roberts' spaceship. It was quite evident that Ama was aware of the dangers of the wind-storms of her little world. There was a swift air-current sucking into this passage. But it was not powerful enough to do more than hurry us along. Once, where the tunnel branched, there seemed

an open grotto up a little subterranean ascent to the right. It glowed with a brighter pallid light than was here in the passage. I turned that way with an interested gaze, but at once she clutched at me.

"No—no. In times of the storm, very bad sometimes in places under the ground."

There seemed no sign of pursuit behind us. "The Orgs—they run heavy," Ama said when I mentioned it. In the pale opalescent glow of the tunnel, I could see her faint triumphant smile as she gazed up at me sidewise. Strange little face, utterly foreign so that upon Earth, by Earth standards one would have been utterly baffled to identify her. But it was an appealing face, and now, with her terror gone, the sly glance she flung at me was wholly feminine.

"Those fire-mimes," I said. "Couldn't they rush ahead of their masters, trailing us?" I explained how on Earth dogs would do that, following their quarry by the scent. She looked puzzled, and then she brightened.

"I remember. The Captain Roberts told us about that. The mimes are different. The male and female both—they follow what it is they see, nothing else."

Then she told me about the weird, dog-like creatures. The male, exuding a scent—if you could call it that—a vapor which in the air bursts into spontaneous combustion as it combines with the atmospheric oxygen.

How long we ran through what proved to be a maze of passages in the honey-combed ground, I have no idea. Several Earth-miles, doubtless. Several times we stopped to rest, with the breezes tossing about us as I listened, tense, to be sure the Orgs were not coming. Then at last we emerged; and at the rocky exit I stood staring, amazed.

It was a wholly different looking world here. The pallid underground sheen was gone; and now again there was the dim twilight of the interminable Vulcan night. From where we stood the ground sloped down so that we were looking out over the top of a wide spread of lush, tangled forest. Weird jungle, rank and wild with spindly trees of fantastic shapes, heavy with pods and exotic flowers and tangled with masses of vines. Beyond it, far ahead of us there

seemed a line of little metal mountains at the horizon; and to the left an Earth-mile or so away, the forest was broken to disclose a winding thread of little river. It shone phosphorescent green in the half light. The storm was over now, but still the colors lingered in the cloud sky—a glorious palette of rainbow hues up there that tinted the forest-top.

Ama gestured toward the thread of river. "The Senzas—my people and my village—off that way beyond the little water. We go quickly. But we be careful, until we get beyond the water."

"Swim it?"

"We can. But I think I remember where there is a Senza boat hidden on this side."

SHE had already told me more of what happened to her. The Senzas, primitive obviously, yet with an orderly tribal civilization, were the dominant race here on little Vulcan. The savage Orgs—a far lower, more primitive type both mentally and physically—in nomadic fashion, roamed the metal deserts and little stunted forests which lay beyond the barren regions. They were, at times of religious frenzy, cannibalistic, with weird and gruesome festival rites which Ama only shudderingly sketched.

For the most part, the clumsy Orgs and their weird mime-creatures were kept from the Senza forests. But occasionally they raided, stealing the Senza women, and roaming the lush forests for food. There had been, in the Senza village, one Tahg, a wooer of Ama. An older man, but somehow well liked by the Senza tribal leader. Repulsed by Ama, he had threatened her—and then he had vanished from the village; gone hunting, and the Senzas considered that the Orgs might have killed him.

"But I think it was Org blood in him," Ama said. "I told the Captain Roberts that—I remember just before he and his men left us to finish the repairs of their ship—and then we found later that the Orgs had killed them all."

Tahg, Ama thought, had become the tribal leader of this group of the Orgs—indulging with them in their gruesome rites. . . . Then, just a few hours ago, two Orgs had crept upon Ama as she slept—with extraordinary daring for an Org,

had successfully seized her and carried her off. Taking her into the Org country, past the Roberts' spaceship, where they had come upon me, and Torrence and Jan. . . .

"We be careful now," she was telling me as we stood gazing out over the forested slope. "After a storm it is when the Orgs mostly roam—the hunting here is better when the little creatures are out after the water."

The little creatures! Best of the animal foods here on Vulcan. . . . The red-storm quite evidently had emptied torrential rain on the forest. The fantastic trees were heavy with it. Suddenly it dripped from the overhead branches. And now as we started down the slope, I saw the little creatures. Insect or animal, no one could have said. A myriad sizes and shapes of them, from a finger-length to the size of a cat. Before our advance they scurried on the ground, scattering with weird little outcries. Some flew clumsily into the leaves overhead; others ran up there on the vines, peering down at us as we passed. We came suddenly upon a pool of rain-water. Greedily a hundred little orange-green things, seemingly almost all head and snout, were crowding at the pool, sucking up the water. With eerie, maniacal little voices they rolled and bounced away at our approach.

This weird forest! Abruptly I was aware that there were places where the rope-like vines and leafy branches of the underbrush shrank away from us as we advanced—slithering and swaying little vines in sudden movement before us. Sentient vegetation. There are plants on Earth which shrink and shudder at a touch. Others which snap and seize an unwary insect enemy. But here it was far more startling than that. I saw a vine on the ground rise up upon its myriad little tendrils; the pods, like a row of heads upon it were quivering, puffing. The extended length of it, like a snake slithered from my threatening tread.

"It fears every human," Ama said. "A strange thing to you Earthmen?"

"Well, slightly," I commented. "Suppose it—some of this vegetation got angry—" Fantastic thought, but the reality of it—a looping, swaying vine over our heads, as thick as my arm—that was a

stark reality. "Would a thing like that attack us, Ama?"

She shrugged. "There is talk of it. But I think no one is ever truthful to say it really happened."

We were in the depths of the forest now. In the humid, heavy darkness it was sometimes arduous going. That thread of river—we could not see it now, but I judged it still must be half an Earth-mile away. Once we sat down in a little open glade to rest. In the thick silence the throbbing voice of the forest, blended of the scurrying life and the rustling vines, was a faint steady hum. Then suddenly I saw that Ama was tense, alert, sitting up listening. She looked startled, abruptly frightened.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Off there—the vines, they are frightened. You hear?"

IT seemed that somewhere near us, the vine-rustling had grown louder. A scurry, mingled with little popping sounds from the pods. Someone coming? I recall that the startled thought struck me. Then from a thicket near at hand a group of little creatures came dashing. They saw us, wheeled and scurried sidewise. I was on my feet, peering into the shadowed leafy darkness. I thought I heard a low, guttural voice. Whether I did or not, the whizz of an arrow past me was reality enough.

A wandering band of the Orgs were stalking us! At the whizz of the arrow I made a dash sidewise. My gun was gone; I jerked out my knife. Ama was up, and another arrow barely missed her—an arrow that came from a totally different direction so that I knew we must be already surrounded.

"Ama—lie down! Down—"

A woman under some circumstances can be a terrible handicap. She didn't drop to the ground; she stood gazing around her in terror, and then she came running at me, clutching me so that I was futilely struggling to cast her off. Another arrow sang past our heads, and then from several directions, the Orgs were bursting into the glade.

I tore loose from Ama, but it was no use. Whatever effective fight I might have put up, it could have brought a rain of arrows

which might, probably would, have killed the girl.

"Quiet," I murmured. "They've got us. No chance to fight."

I stood trying to shield her as in the dimness the Orgs crowded around us. Ten or more of them, jabbering at us, seizing me and presently shoving us off through the forest.

Two or three others seemed to join us in a moment; and abruptly Ama gasped: "Tahg! There is Tahg—"

The renegade Senza, quite obviously a leader here, shoved past his jabbering, triumphant men and confronted us. He was seemingly startled, and then triumphant at seeing Ama here. Then his gaze swept to me. He was a big, muscular, but slender fellow. He was clad in a brief brown drape; but his aspect was wholly different from the heavy, misshapen, clumsy-looking Orgs. His thick dark hair fell longish about his ears, framing his hawk-nosed, thin-lipped face. And his narrow dark eyes squinted at me as he frowned.

"Well," he said, "Earthman? New one?" His English was evidently less fluent than Ama's, but it was understandable enough.

"Yes," I agreed. "Friendly—like all Earthmen."

He had signaled to the Orgs, and two of them had shuffled forward and taken Ama from me.

"Jus' good time," Tahg said ironically. "Org gods pleased tonight to have Earthmen—"

Earthmen! The plural! I had little opportunity to ponder it. Roughly I was shoved onward through the forest, back to where it thinned into a stretch of metal desert—and beyond that into a new terrain of stunted, gnarled trees and rope vines on a rocky ground. To me it was an exhausting march. Ama, with Tahg beside her, usually was behind me. Once we stopped and food and water were given me. When we started again, I saw that, at Tahg's direction, one of the savages had hoisted Ama to his back, carrying her in a rope-vine sling. Occasionally other small bands of Orgs joined us, until there were fifty or more of them, triumphantly returning to their village. Their torches were burning now, and a little ahead of

us a pack of the huge green-grey mimes were leaping.

Then Tahg came toward me. "Good-bye," he said. "You look more good to me when I see you next time. The gods prepare you now."

HE turned and was lost in the darkness. My ankles had been fettered with a two-foot length of rope; my wrists were crossed and lashed behind me. No one was with me now but my two captors who urged me forward, impatient at my little jerky steps. The village and its jabbering turmoil and lights was in a moment hidden by a rise of the rocky ground. Then I saw before me a fairly large, square building of stone, flat-roofed, with a cone-shaped stone-pile on top like a crude church spire.

An Org temple. It was windowless; some twenty feet high from ground to its roof. A narrow, rectangular slit of doorway was in front, where two huge torches, like braziers one on either side, were burning. An Org stood between them, with the torchlight painting him—an aged savage in a long, white skin drape which was fantastically ornamented. He was thin and bent, his round brown skull almost hairless, his body shriveled, parched with age. His skinny arms were upraised, outstretched to welcome me.

But my startled gaze turned from him, for on the ground just at the edge of the swaying torchlight, I saw that two figures were lying. Two men, roped and tied into inert bundles.

They were Jan and Torrence!

V

THERE was a time when, roped and tied like Jan and Torrence, I was laid beside them while in the torchlight, alone with his pagan gods, the ancient Org priest stood intoning his prayers and incantations. It was then that Jan was able to tell me what had happened to him. He was lying between Torrence and me. I had little chance to talk to Torrence. Nor any great desire, for I considered him then merely a craven fellow who had deserted us at the very first of the weird attacks.

Human emotions work strangely. It was obvious now, as we lay there in the

darkness, with the aged savage in the torchlight near us—obvious enough that we were doomed to something horrible which at best would end in our death. Yet Jan and I—each having considered the other dead—were for a brief time at least, pleased that we were here. No one yet alive, can normally quite give up hope of escaping death. I recall that in the darkness I was furtively trying to loosen my bonds, twisting and squirming.

"You needn't bother," Torrence muttered. "I've tried all that. And those two damned Orgs who carried you here—they're still watching us."

"Going to take us inside, I guess," Jan whispered. "Inside this temple to—to—"

His shuddering imagination supplied no words. But his idea was right, for presently the old priest was finished his incantations. His cracked voice called a command and the two savages who had brought me here came from nearby. One by one, they picked us up and carried us inside.

I was the last to go in. The place was a single stone square room. It was lurid with a swaying torchlight. Carved gargoyle images, crude and hideously ugly—grotesque personification of the pagan Vulcan gods—where ranged along the walls. The old priest was standing now on a little dais, between the two interior torches. His arms were upraised toward me as I was carried in; behind him there was a quick stone altar, with a line of smaller images on it. His voice rose, quavering, as I was slowly carried past him; and his hands over me might have been purifying me for the coming rite.

In the center of the room, raised some five feet above the floor, there was a broad stone slab, with a big, grinning, pot-bellied stone image mounted up there. Then I saw that the slab had a broad, cradle-like depression in front of the image. Still bound, lying there side by side, with the belly of the huge image projecting partly over them, were Jan and Torrence. And now the two savages hoisted me up and rolled me among them.

The sacrificial altar. Heaven knows, I could not miss the realization now. There was a weird, acrid, nauseous smell clinging here from former ceremonies. And as I was hoisted up, I saw that the smooth sides

of the altar were seared, blackened by the heat of flames which so many times before must have been here.

And the heat—the fire? Within a moment after I was rolled into the saucer-like depression of the altar—with Torrence muttering despairing curses and Jan pallid and grim beside me—outside the temple there sounded a weird gibbering chorus of baying. Ghastly, familiar sound! The mimes—the giant fire-males! Released at the temple doorway, they came bounding in—blobs of leaping red-green flame! A dozen or more of the weird creatures, all of these much larger than the male Jan had killed near the Roberts' spaceship. Fire-males trained for this ceremony. Enveloped in their lurid flames they rushed at the altar, circling it, swiftly running one behind the other so that we were encircled with a ring of leaping flames.

I heard Torrence mutter, "To roast us! Just to roast us slowly—"

THE shoulders and heads of the running, circling fire-mimes were nearly as high as the altar slab on which we were lying. The flames of them swirled two or three feet higher—blobs of fire which merged one with the other. A circular curtain of mounting flame walling us in. Through it the temple interior was blurred, distorted. Vaguely the figure of the aged priest was visible. He was now on his knees, turned partly away from us as he faced his little row of god-images, supplicating them.

Curtain of swirling fire. Within a moment the heat of it was searing us. Heat slowly intensifying. It was bearable now; but the confined circle of air here was mounting in temperature; the big gargoyle image over us, the metallic-rock slab beneath us both were slowly heating. The smoke and the swirling gas-fumes would choke us into unconsciousness very quickly, I knew. And then the mounting heat would at last make this a sizzling griddle, on which we would lie, slowly roasting. . . .

A chaos of confused phantasmagoria blurred my mind in those first horrible moments. . . . I saw the old priest, so solemnly, humbly supplicating his gods as he officiated at this gruesome pagan ceremony. . . . then I could envisage us being carried off, back to the Org village where

the people, not worthy of being here in the sacred temple, were so eagerly awaiting us . . . then the orgy—sacred feast, endowing its participants with what future virtues and panaceas they conceived their gods would give them. . . .

The end, for us. . . . Already Jan was pitifully coughing. . . . But what was this? I felt a shape stir beside me; a small, slender figure with dangling hair; I felt trembling fingers fumbling at my bonds.

Ama! She had crept from a little recess under the giant bulging statue of the gargoyle god, here on the altar. Ama, who had found a chance to slip away from the wooing Tahg, and had preceded us here—hiding up here so that she might try and release us. . . .

But it was too late now. So obviously too late! She had accomplished nothing, save to immolate herself here with us!

Into my ear her terrified voice was whispering, "I thought that the fire-males would not come so soon."

In the blurring, blasting heat and smoke, she had untied us, but of what use? "No—no chance to try and jump," she stammered. "As we fell they would leap upon us—kill us in a moment—"

The sizzling, crackling of the flames—the gibbering baying of the fire-mimes mingling with the incantations of the old priest—it was all a blurred chaos. . . . Then suddenly I was aware that Jan, coughing, choking, had struggled half erect on the slab. There was just an instant when I saw his contorted face, painted lurid by the flames. Wild despairing desperation was stamped there. But there was something else. An exaltation. . . .

"You—run—" he gasped.

And then he jumped. A wild, desperate leap, upward and outward. . . . It carried him through the curtain of flame and out some ten feet to the temple floor. The thud of his crashing body mingled with the gibbering yelps of the fire-mimes as they whirled and pounced upon him—all of them in a second, merged into a great blob of flame out there on the temple floor where they fought, scrambling over him, ripping—tearing—

Gruesome horror. . . . I knew in that second that already Jan was dead. . . . And then I was aware that the other side of the altar, behind the gargoyle image, was

momentarily completely dark. All the flaring creatures were fighting over Jan's body. Torrence, too, had realized it. I saw him stagger up and jump into the darkness. I shoved at Ama; rolled and tumbled her off the slab. We fell in a heap and scrambled erect. The pawing, snarling group of fire-mimes, twenty feet away with the big altar slab intervening, intent upon their scattering fragments, for that moment did not heed us. On his little dais by the wall, the old priest had turned and was standing numbed, confused. There was no one else in the sacred temple. The single doorway was a vertical slit of darkness. Already Torrence was running for it. I clutched at Ama and we ran.

OUT into the rocky blackness. I recall that I had the wits to turn us away from where the Org village lay nearby, behind the hillock. . . . Then, suddenly, from behind a crag, a dark figure rose up. Tahg! Tahg, who had been crouching here, evidently impatient for his feast so that he would be the first to see us as we were brought from the temple. . . .

He stood gasping, startled; and in that same second I was upon him, my fist crashing into his face so that he went backward and down. With desperate haste I caught up a rock from the ground—pounded it on his head—wildly pounding until his skull smashed. . . . Then I was up, clutching Ama. Torrence already was ten or twenty feet ahead of us in the darkness. We ran after him; he heard us coming and waited.

"Which way?" he gasped. "She ought to know. Our spaceship—that would be best—"

At the door of the temple the old priest now was standing screaming. From behind the little hill, answering shouts were responding. . . .

"Is it closer to your village, or to our ship?" I demanded of Ama.

"Why—why to your ship, I think."

"You know the way?"

"Yes—yes, I think so. Not to where you landed—that I do not know. But to the Roberts' ship—"

And the Orgs doubtless would consider that we would head into the Senza country. The forests in that direction would be full of roaming Orgs hunting us. . . .

She and I and Torrence ran, plunging

wildly forward in the rocky darkness, with the lights and the turmoil behind us presently fading away into the heavy blank silence of the Vulcan night. . . .

I THINK that there is little I need add. It was a long, arduous journey, but we reached our little spaceship safely. And in a moment, with the rocket-streams showing downward and with the lower-hull gravity plates in neutral, slowly we were rising into the cloudy darkness.

"You will take me to my people?" Ama said anxiously. "You did promise me—"

"Yes, of course, Ama—we'll land you near your village—"

Queerly enough, it was not until that moment after all the tumultuous events which had engulfed us, that suddenly I remembered the deposits of *allurite* which we had hoped to locate upon Vulcan. If I could take back samples of the ore—to my sponsors that doubtless would be considered the major success—the only success indeed—of my expedition. . . . It occurred to me then that we could land at the Senza village, and for a little time, prospect from there. . . .

But even that plan was doomed to frustration. I mentioned it to Torrence. "We should head for Earth," he said dogmatically. "I have had enough of this."

It was then, before we had gone far toward the Senza country, that I noticed the rocket streams were acting queerly. A seeming lack of power. . . . Torrence had gone down into the hull; he came back presently to the turret.

"The Pelletier rotators are slowing," I said. "What's the matter?"

He shook his head. "I noticed it," he said. "Haven't found out yet. You want to come and look?"

I locked the controls, left Ama and went down into the hull with Torrence. In the

dim mechanism cubby, as I bent over the Pelletier mechanisms, suddenly Torrence leaped on me! It came as quickly, unexpectedly as that. The culmination of his brooding, murderous, cowardly plans. His heavy face was contorted, his eyes blazing. In his hand he held a sliver of metal arrow. It was bent, doubled over, so that all this time he had been able to keep it hidden in his clothes. The arrow he had taken from Roberts' body, as it lay there near the bow of the wrecked spaceship! The little light in the mechanism cubby gleamed on it now; glistened on the green and red spots of the sleek, sand-colored metal. *Allurite!* The precious substance—not an alloy, not a low-grade *allurium* ore, but *allurite* in its pure state! On Earth this single bent little arrow could be worth a fortune!

And the frenzied Torrence was gloating: "See it, you damn fool—your *allurite*—right under your nose all the time! And now it's mine—" In that second he would have plunged the needle-sharp arrow-point like a stiletto into my heart. But his own frenzied, murderous hysteria defeated him. My fist struck his wrist, knocked his stab-thrust away, with the arrow clattering to the floor. And then I had him by the throat, strangling him until he yielded and I tied him up. . . .

As you who read this, of course, already know from the news reports, I dropped Ama near the edge of the Senza village. I recall now how she stood in the Vulcan night, in the torchlight with the excited crowd of her people behind her; the last I saw of Vulcan was the little figure of her waving at me as I rose into the leaden sky and headed back for Earth. . . . Maybe—just maybe—I'll return some day to that land where Jan gave his life that his friends might live.



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