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	The Lair of the Phoenix	4
	<i>by Stanley Mullen</i>	
	Second Sight	41
	<i>by Alan E. Nourse</i>	
	Meet Miss Solar System	52
	<i>by Milton Lesser</i>	
<hr/>		
H. L. Herbert <i>President</i>	On the Average	65
	<i>by Frank B. Bryning</i>	
<hr/>		
Leo Margulies <i>Publisher</i> <i>Editorial Director</i>	The Spectacles	75
	<i>by Frank Belknap Long</i>	
<hr/>		
	Seed of Tomorrow	77
	<i>by Sam Carson</i>	
	The Neurotic Rose	86
	<i>by H. Nearing, Jr.</i>	
	The Ninety-Minute War	98
	<i>by Richard E. Lowe</i>	
	Sole Solution	109
	<i>by Eric Frank Russell</i>	
	The Blood-Stained God	112
	<i>by R. E. Howard & L. S. de Camp</i>	
Kelly Freas <i>Cover Design</i>	Universe in Books	126
	<i>by Hans Stefan Santesson</i>	

the
lair
of
the
phoenix

by . . . Stanley Mullen

**The Copperbirds dwelt in a garden
stranger than Eden—and woe to
the hunter whose tread was not to
their liking under Orion's shield.**

NIGHT ON VENUS can be darker than anywhere else in the Solar System with the possible exception of Pluto. On Pluto an astronomer might have noticed a slight gradation of difference, but Jason Hart was no astronomer. If he had been, he would not have lived on Venus, where "poor seeing" is a chronic condition. By trade and inclination Hart was a professional guide and hunter—though his license had gone down the drain with most of the other claims and symbols of respectability.

Now without a single one of those symbols to sustain him, Jason Hart sensed sound and movement somewhere along the unlighted street. Quickly he crouched back into a pool of denser shadows between two squat, vacant-eyed buildings, and the night seemed to swallow him. For a tense moment he waited motionless, his every nerve alert, his stooped shoulders blending with the darkness.

Again he heard the sound. Then a door opened, and a shaft of golden light darted into the street. Hart continued to hug the shadows,

A science fantasy brightly tapestried which weaves its spell with a poet's vision and a wandering minstrel's dedication to sheer wonderment and adventurous surmise is Stanley Mullen's resplendent gift to us here. Few writers have traveled further than Mr. Mullen into the star-bright realms beyond the Dark Tower's skyward ramparts, where fierce loves subtly triumph and strange wars blaze and die. And even fewer have his shining skill with words.

awaiting the appearance of a moving silhouette.

Tonight Jason Hart hunted big game—man. For that noble sport civilized authority rarely issues a license, but Jason Hart did not hunt to kill. His quarry was another hunter as skilled as himself—and as dangerous and elusive. Hart hunted Yuregon, his chief rival among the professional stalkers.

It was impossible to be certain which building Yuregon had entered. Hart could only await patiently the man's reappearance, and hope that he would emerge unarmed, and reasonable. Hart crouched lower, nursing his gun in the crook of his arm.

Shadows shifted within the light, and with an unnerving slowness a silhouette took form. In the doorway stood a girl in a trimly belted coat of metalweave. She was hatless and her hair, which descended to her shoulders, gleamed like spun quicksilver as it caught the light. She strode quickly from the doorway, glancing neither to right nor left. The door behind her remained open, bathing her lithe figure in a ghostly radiance.

Hart cursed silently. Under other circumstances he might have been interested. But at the moment he would gladly have traded all of her beauty for a glimpse of Yuregon's distinctive ugliness.

But seemingly he was about to have both. The girl halted and again shadows stirred within the light. A hunched grotesquerie

shaped somewhat like a man joined the girl. Only by act of law was the gnarled and froglike Yuregon human. He was a type-S5 mutant—a Venusian by birth, but Earth-educated, and he managed to combine in his unlovely personality the worst qualities of both planets.

The door closed suddenly, pinching off the light. Hart emerged from the shadows and by sound alone followed the pair as they moved together into the darkness, their bodies almost touching.

It was late, even for Cyclo City. Except for Yuregon and the girl the streets were deserted. Overhead no stars were visible through the overcast sky beyond the immensity of transparent dome. But phantom squirmings of light-reflection above the distant native quarter provided sufficient diffuse illumination for Hart's hunting-trained vision. With electricity at a premium, a frugal city-administration had salved its conscience by providing glaring fluorescent globes at every third intersection. Within the domed city windows were useless, and totally blank building-fronts faced every street.

With agile purposefulness Hart followed his quarry through three harshly glaring intersections. There was no difficulty about keeping up with them and no risk of losing them, for he was not in the dark as to their objective. But his patience was running out, and his tracking tonight was not for sport alone. At the fourth intersection,

he closed in and called out softly to Yuregon.

Tigerishly the Venusian spun about. "Hart!" he exclaimed, his eyes wide with amazement. "You fool! What are you doing here?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Hart quietly, keeping his gun trained steadily on Yuregon's midriff.

Yuregon shrugged defiantly. "Killing me would be the stupidest thing you could do. You won't get your license back, and your first shot would only bring the patrol running. If you had any sense you'd smuggle yourself out of the city as quietly and quickly as possible."

Jason Hart scowled. "Thanks for the advice. When I want some I won't come to you for it. But I'm not here to kill you—not unless I have to, Yuregon. I just want you to stand still while I talk."

"Talk ahead," grunted Yuregon, wiping sweat from his massive face. "Just as long as it doesn't cost me anything. I'm sorry about buying up your license, but you know—"

"I know." Hart's eyes flashed scornfully. "Who's the girl? Not your client—"

Yuregon grinned, and his face resembled a stone gargoyle from a waterspout. "Of course not."

By the streetlight glare Hart could see the girl's eyes flash angrily at the implication.

"I'm Dr. Maythal," she said in a curiously level tone. "And if this is armed robbery you'd do well to think twice before you molest either of us. I'm a Martian, which gives

me a lot of lungpower in this pressurized city. My appeal for help would be heard for—"

Jason Hart met her stare without flinching. "Don't strain yourself. This is a private matter. Whether anyone gets hurt is strictly up to you. A woman ought to know by instinct when a man has his back to the wall. I have nothing left to lose but my life, and that's not worth much to me . . . though there are people who would pay handsomely for the privilege of looking at my corpse. There are two rewards posted for me, dead or alive, so anyone I kill now will be on the house. Do I make myself clear?"

"Better do as he says," urged Yuregon uneasily. "He's in no position to be intimidated by threats." His voice grew more conciliatory. "Why talk to me, Hart?"

"Gossip gets around in the native quarter. I heard you've been hired to take an expedition to the western hunting ranges near the Copper Mountains. Is that true?"

A shifty expression grazed Yuregon's features. "True enough. But what has that to do with you?"

"I want to go along."

Yuregon was startled. "Go along? You must be out of your mind! Even if I gave my consent the law would crack down on you hard."

Jason Hart's eyes narrowed. "It could be managed. You'll be going out by 'copter, and I could easily enough buy or steal a protective

suit and slip out of the city. You could land in the western deserts and pick me up. There's no law against it, and outside the city I'm still a free man. At least—there's no authority with jurisdiction operating in that territory. It's completely unexplored and unclaimed. Well, Yuregon?"

Yuregon shook his head slowly. "You don't know me very well, do you? If it were an illegal and profitable undertaking I might be tempted. But there's absolutely nothing in it for me. Why should I help you, even if—if things were different?"

"You've owed me a favor for a long time, Yuregon. I saved your life in Dyel-Tyal when the grull cat was mauling you. But I'm not asking this as a favor. If you've a hunting trip planned, I can be useful. I'm the one living man who knows anything at all about the Copper Mountains."

Yuregon laughed harshly. "You know them too well, I'd say—and I doubt if your reputation would be any recommendation. Not this time, pal. Even if I wanted to repay a favor, which I don't, it's not up to me. My client is picking the personnel. If I were foolish enough to mention your name there'd be fuses blown from here to Quanta City."

"Your answer is 'no' then?" Jason Hart asked calmly, fingering the trigger stud of his gun speculatively.

Yuregon hesitated. What he

might have answered will never be known.

Two blinding wedges of light were advancing along the street toward the group. Jason realized at once that no late-operating freight robotruck could have been so brightly illuminated. The vehicle had to be a city patrol car.

All movement seemed startlingly frozen in the glare. Then abruptly the situation came apart. Jason Hart stared in consternation as the girl ran toward the police car, waving her arms and shouting. Screaming in terror, Yuregon flung himself flat on the paving. He writhed and kicked like a maimed slug.

Jason Hart did not shoot. The impulse was in him, but he liked sport with his killing. He did indulge in the luxury of burying a boot-toe in the ample proportions of Yuregon.

Then he fled. Behind him rose the shrill bleat of police whistles, and a siren began its chromatic howling.

II

BY INSTINCT Jason Hart headed toward the old native quarter of the city. Keeping to the lightless, twisting alleyways he quickly managed to lose the sound of pursuit. But he knew that by now all police radios would carry the dangerous news that he had been seen, still alive, within the confines of Cyclo City.

Sooner or later—if he remained

in the modern sector—some wary patrol would spot him, or a prowling car would stumble on him. Then the forces of law and order would converge from all directions. His career would end suddenly in the flare of blaster discharges, or a wild spatter of explosive bullets.

There remained only one refuge, Gooseflesh Alley — that ugly, sprawling city within a city, citadel of cut-throats and other ruthless human scavengers where even the police would be unlikely to follow. If he could reach the area before street-scanners found his trail and the mechanical trackers began to follow it—

The distance was not great. Overhead, like a beacon set to guide him, were the reflected swirls of color above the native part of older Cyclo City which loomed in massive silhouette shortly ahead and a little to the left.

He moved swiftly, and in silence. Mean streets became meaner, more irregular, and dirty. Finally there flashed across his vision the cavorting constellations of weaving radilumes and mobiles of neon-tubing, all designed to lure the curious and unwary, the lonely, frightened and confused. To lure, above all, men who had ceased to be pursuers, and had become the hunted and the lost.

From the maze of tortuous avenues and alleys, Jason Hart picked one at random. After the darkness, so much light was dazzling. Momentarily, he was blinded. Here

were crowds, individuals, febrile emotions, and the stench of an evil centuries old. Here, too, the sharp scent of danger, and of expensive excitement — the shrill sounds of pain, hatred, greed and defiance.

Nightlife in Gooseflesh Alley was crudely strident, and earthy was not the word for it—for South Venus had evolved parallels and tangents to all the social vices of the other planets, and each in turn had remained peculiarly Venusian. Technically, the area was off-limits to all terrestrials and Martians, especially tourists, and for that reason was stealthily patronized by both the venturesome and the depraved.

Jason Hart plunged into the swirl of humanity and not-quite-humanity, and let its turbulent flow carry him down the street. Slowly his eyes adjusted to the glare. He was aware of the surroundings in very much the same way as a savage might be who instinctively evaluates his environment. The gaudy banners and trappings of amusement meant nothing to him.

There was no sign of pursuit, and little fear of it. The symbols of authority were not welcome here, and police came only sporadically in large, armed groups which usually left some casualties and rarely accomplished their mission.

But it was a sanctuary nevertheless—a sanctuary which gave a man a chance to live or die with a

gambler's recklessness . . . as long as his money held out.

One large neon-tube spelled out in luminescent lettering: THE COPPER COCKROACH.

Below the sign an oversized insect of glowing radilume outlines went through obscene gyrations ostensibly inviting the passersby to enter and join in alcoholic and other more unmentionable delights.

Hart turned into the entrance, pausing inside the portal just long enough to glance around, and tentatively finger the cool bulk of his gun. The licensed hunters of South Venus were no strangers to the place, and at the moment it was crowded.

Hart wanted no part of his former associates, and the presence of a familiar countenance might have triggered an immediate row. Fortunately, there were no licensed men present.

Neither were there any vacant tables. Jason Hart solved that problem by hurling a gaunt, large-eared Callistan to the floor and taking over. Such treatment was traditional for Callistans, and was accepted by them as a necessary evil when they were so foolhardy as to mingle with Earthmen and Martians. Jackals who scavenge at a feast of lions can expect little courtesy of their hosts. The Callistan scowled and muttered fiercely for a moment, and then ignominiously departed.

Venusian whiskey has its uses. To Jason Hart it was one of the cheaper and deadlier anaesthetics.

When a man's credit and his profession run out at the same time, he has a right to be morose enough to drink himself to death if he so desires. The disappointments and frustrations of the past year had caused the Earthman to go nearly native, and had built within him resentments against his own kind fully equal to those of the Venusians. He had become a solitary drinker, and now he applied himself to the raw rotgut as thirstily as a tourist.

Hart was no tourist, and at times he seriously wondered if he had ever been an Earthman. Sunless Venus had bleached him, and the ceaseless battle for mere existence had toughened him until his skin resembled Kur-leather, carved and polished by the skilled hands of mutant swamp-men. His muscles, too, had become supple, and his entire body unbelievably resistant to the abrasions of time and weather.

But tough or not, fourteen years of South Venus had made him acquainted with enough savage, untamable frontiers to last him for a dozen lifetimes. At times his longing for an orderly life drove him to welcome even the synthetic civilization of Gooseflesh Alley, and between hunting trips and explorations into the unknown it had become a second home to him. As nearly as any alien can he had made himself known and liked by even the outcast inhabitants.

Fungweed smoke whirled about

him in sticky, acrid layers like noxious vapors stratified above a steaming swamp. Denizens of this particular mental and emotional quicksand were evenly divided at the moment between gabbling tourists and Venusian mutants, some of whom were almost human.

The tourists seemed blithely unaware or heedless of their dangerous surroundings, and the habitues unaware or heedless of the tourists.

At first Jason Hart thought the girl who was weaving her way among the tables toward him was a tourist. But then, almost immediately, doubt entered his mind. Some of the Venusian swampgirls were, superficially at least, as human as Earthwomen.

In the *Copper Cockroach*, it was often necessary to discourage feminine companionship by violence, and Hart did not even look up as the girl stopped abruptly by his table. Such febrile charmers were among the perils of the place, and held little attraction for him. He grunted a curt refusal, and then ignored her to concentrate upon a glass of cloudy, numbing liquor.

"Hart?" she persisted sibilantly. "You *are* Jason Hart?"

In the many years during which he had haunted the district none of its tragic or monstrous inmates had ever addressed him casually by name, for the Gooseflesh Alley dives are the last refuge of the nameless. Notorious as he might be elsewhere, in the native quarter of Cyclo City Hart was a drop of

murky gray water in a black ocean.

"What do you want?" he asked, raising his head, and steadying with an effort his already blurring vision.

Perception moved sluggishly, but the contrast between the girl and her surroundings was too obvious to miss. Tramp or tourist, she did not belong in a dive where the air was thick with animal-stench, fung-weed smoke, and the scrambled profanity of a dozen worlds.

Whatever her heritage, it required no hunter's eye to appreciate her animal qualities. She was slender, young, and strikingly beautiful, with the contours of her unusual figure thrust forward by her unusual poise. Her body was tantalizingly functional, as nature had intended, and one quick glance would have been enough to start any normal male thinking about the most effective approach to a discussion of elementary biology. Her eyes, curiously enough, looked older than the rest of her, as if they had seen more than could be crowded into a double decade of life.

Jason Hart studied her with rude detachment. A man might not love such a woman, he decided. But she would make an interesting companion.

"A friend told me you sometimes came here," she said, her voice low and purring, like that of a carnivorous cat. "I have been waiting for this opportunity."

Hart laughed grimly. "A friend of yours, perhaps? I have no friends."

"If you are Jason Hart, I can understand that." She smiled at him, with an odd, half-contemptuous curve to her lips. "It was . . . a friend of mine. May I sit down?"

"Suit yourself," Jason grunted. "But don't expect too much."

She eased herself gracefully into the chair opposite him, still maintaining the uneasy alertness of a dangerous animal with its claws only partially sheathed.

Studying her did little to sober Hart, since beauty of the opposite sex is extraordinarily intoxicating in itself. But her presence *did* change the direction of his mood. He was no longer sure he would spend the last of his money on the forbidden hypno-machines.

"I've heard that you're the best of the hunter-guides," she said. "Are you available for hiring?"

A sudden, uncontrollable bitterness surged through Hart. "How recently did you hear that?" he asked.

"A year ago—perhaps more. Does it matter?"

"To most people it would. You are out of date—by just under a year. Are you needing me, or haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" she murmured.

Hart spoke wearily. "I'm disbarred. I've lost my license. You see—game was scarce in the western deserts. I guided a famous Martian hunter into the country beyond. He insisted upon going beyond the Copper Mountains. Unfortunately

something happened there. I don't remember precisely what, because during the last part of the trip I was ill and delirious with fever. I came out alive, but he failed to return. It is widely believed that I ate him."

The girl stared at him. "Did you?"

Hart grunted morosely. "I don't know. But if I was convinced that I didn't it would make no difference on the penalty side. My profession is savagely competitive and nobody *wanted* to believe me. There are always more applicants for hunting licenses than can be certified. Good men simply wait for someone's foot to slip, as mine did.

"I was tried for abandoning my client—with an implied accusation of possible murder and cannibalism. It's unknown country out there. I don't know myself what happened. I just don't care now. Somebody bribed a judge, and there was curious substantiating evidence. I've had it."

"Evidence of what?" She sounded morbidly curious.

Hart shook his head irritably. "Part of a human arm was found in my ruck sack. A gruesomely gnawed arm. Conceivably I was hungry enough. Our food and water ran low. I begged him to leave, but he was like a madman. Then, somehow, we got separated. I looked for him for days after the supplies were gone. I was half-starved, delirious with thirst and fever when I stumbled into a desert outpost. The

trial was brutal. No defense. I just couldn't remember."

"But you could have gone back and looked for him," objected the girl, leaning across the table and refilling his glass.

"Could I?" He shook his head grimly. "I was convicted and sentenced. I got away, but—what chance has a fugitive criminal, with no license, and no money."

"Are you without funds of any kind?"

"Not quite. But I'm too broke to buy sympathy I don't want from you."

She stiffened, her eyes hardening. "My sympathy is not for sale. But drink up, and I'll buy you another. Or you can buy *me* one."

"Do you go with it?" Hart asked bluntly.

Her hand darted toward his cheek. Hart caught her wrist, and twisted it until her eyes glowed with pain and anger. With surprising strength she freed herself. Awkwardly she massaged the bloodless marks left by his fingers. Suddenly she tried again. This time her assault drew blood. Hart knocked down a second blow, and was tempted to hurl her to the floor.

"Get out," he said, restraining his rising anger. "If I want you I'll send for you."

Her tongue showed between white rows of pointed teeth. "You would better improve your manners first," she whispered hoarsely. "I hope your drink poisons you."

She moved quickly back from the table, her body a sensuous flowing within the metallic sheath of her dress. Hart dipped into his pocket for a coin and forced it inside the close-fitting fabric below her throat. It was a platinum twenty sol piece, paper-thin, but a tight fit notwithstanding.

Hart went cold sober as he saw the coin disappear and realized that it was the last of his resources. He would be lucky to get out of the *Copper Cockroach* now with the price of a spare drink for breakfast. In a moment of mad panic he toyed with the idea of recovering his money on the spot, and ignoring the uproar which would be almost certain to follow.

Instead, he turned desperately to his drink, draining it in one swallow. It struck his stomach like a firebolt, and spread in waves of fire throughout his entire body. Gasping, he waited for the effect to subside into a pleasant glowing. But instead the conflagration spread. Fiercer waves of pain and nausea swept over him. His nerves and brain and muscles raged into terrifying incandescence, then burned away to crumbling ash.

Dimly, as he struggled against the intolerable agony, Hart was aware that the girl was still standing over him. She was watching him triumphantly, her twisted smile making her mouth ugly. Satisfied at last, she glanced over her shoulder, and nodded at a pair of burly Venusians near the door.

It was not the first time that Hart had been drugged with the narcotic sap of the flame-vine. But there are some things a man never gets used to. Briefly and hopelessly, he struggled. Then the two ruffians surged toward him, gliding, whirling, expanding, and finally exploding like immense puffs of smoke. Even in his extremity, he wondered why.

It was the last thing he remembered clearly.

III

AWAY from the artificial environments of the domed cities, most of South Venus is a near approach to old-fashioned, terrestrial ideas of Hell. Most of it is dry volcanic desert, lighted fitfully from above and below. The sky overcast is not solid, but the murky, banked-up clouds filter sunlight into an unhealthy glare, and on the ground are numerous hotspots or hellish-glowing pits of molten metals fluorescent from radioactivity. Eternal grayness shifts unsteadily over the landscape, an atmospheric pall stained frequently by volcanic outbursts or colorful electrical displays.

To Jason Hart, it was all depressingly familiar. He had seen it often enough, and had long since grown utterly weary of it. Ignoring the dull, persistent throbbing at his temples he sat up and stared confusedly about him, trying painfully to orientate himself. Linger-

ing after-effects of flame-vine poisoning still clogged his memory and wove curious patterns into the fabric of his thoughts. Concentration was difficult, but he could remember enough of what had happened to account for his sensations—if not to explain his surroundings.

A face danced before his eyes with the ghostly, shimmering unreality of a goblin mask. Like the desert the face was familiar, though he had seen it only once before—on the girl in the *Copper Cockroach*.

Fury raged through him like a Venusian sandstorm. An impulse to violence brought him to his feet, hampered though he was by a cumbersome suit of protective armor, and sent him staggering forward. He tottered and would have fallen had the girl not moved quickly to his side, locked an arm firmly under his shoulder and supported him with surprising strength.

Like the Earthman, she was clad in bulky suiting which did not enhance her physical attractiveness, but was an effective triple-threat protection against hard radiation, toxic vapors and the abrasively violent sandstorms of Venus. A fishbowl helmet of transparent permoplastics enclosed her head, and as she glared coldly at Hart her voice clattered harshly inside his helmet.

"You'll have plenty of time to rage against the inevitable," she said savagely.

Jason Hart agreed heartily. He could recall stories of Earthmen who had vanished inexplicably from their usual haunts, only to be found weeks later far out in the deserts, dead from thirst, starvation or exposure to the deadly radiation from the hotspots. Quite obviously he had been brought into the desert by 'copter, since the region surrounding him was a considerable distance from Cyclo City. Morosely he wondered why anyone would go to so much trouble to dispose of him.

"Why did you bring me here?" he asked. "To abandon me in the open desert without hope of rescue?"

The girl stood back, and studied him. Apparently the paroxysm of nausea and dizziness was passing. She laughed derisively.

"Nothing so simple," she said. "Though it may come to that before I'm through with you. The client you abandoned in the wilderness was my brother, Galan. I'm Cyndar, his twin. I'm sure he must have mentioned me."

Jason Hart measured the girl thoughtfully. "Yes, he did. I don't remember details, but I remember his saying that he had a twin sister. The Martian Diana, he called her—after a goddess of that name in ancient Rome on Earth. A virgin moon-goddess and patron of hunters who loved the chase and hated men. Does that fit?"

"He called me that. What else did he say about me?"

Jason Hart hesitated. His gun was gone, and a serviceable blaster magnetically clipped to the girl's belt looked both deadly and used. Under the circumstances such a woman could be capable of sadistic ingenuity in blood revenge. Possibly her hired goons were still within call and might reappear at any moment.

He spoke cautiously. "Galan implied that there was hatred and bitterness between you. He told me very little, beyond that."

Surprisingly, she laughed. "Not hatred. Bitter rivalry, but not hatred. Galan resented my reputation as a hunter. It was only natural that he should, since his boyhood dream was to outshine me, and he never succeeded. But there was a deep bond and pride of blood between us. He often spoke slightly of my exploits. But he'd have killed anyone else who did."

"We Martians are an old race, and with us family ties are strong. Nothing between Galan and me will save you—if you killed him, or abandoned him to die. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear. You plan to kill me to avenge Galan—"

"Not yet. I'm not sure that he's dead. As an identical twin I feel that his death could not remain unknown to me. Maybe I'm wrong, for science scoffs at the mystical bond between twins. All I can sense is—a blank wall. If he's alive you're going to take me to him. If he's dead, or in serious trouble

because of you, you will discover that the legends of old Martian tortures are not exaggerated. I want you to tell me what really happened. Start talking."

Hart shrugged bitterly. "Talking won't help. As I told you before, I don't know what happened. Galan may be alive, but I can't take you to him. I'm a hunted criminal and without a license I couldn't even equip an expedition. Besides, the area has been officially closed to hunters for a good many years. It's strange, dangerous country. I'd advise you to forget it."

Her face was ugly. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? My refusal to forget could destroy you."

Hart debated the advisability of playing along with her and hoping for an opportunity to . . . well, reason with her. But like her brother Cynder seemed to have paranoid tendencies which could easily turn homicidal. He remembered Galan too well to hope for much. And the man's uncanny reflexes and skill with weapons gave him little optimism about making a fool's play for Cynder's gun.

"What you do to me doesn't matter very much," he said slowly, gesturing toward the gun. "With that you're asking the questions and writing in your own answers. If you want to organize a rescue party I'll go along and show you the way. You don't have to force my hand. It would be to my advantage to go and find out what actually happened there. If we get back

alive I might just barely be able to clear my record."

"Don't worry," she assured him grimly. "You're going, and I'll be right behind you all the way. Whether you come back alive is entirely up to me."

"Not altogether, as you'll find out," he said. "But you'll need a guide with a license to front for the expedition. There are several who aren't too scrupulous if there's enough money involved. I can give you a list of names. Some of them might enjoy shooting me in the back if you lose your nerve."

"I won't," Cyndar promised easily. "And the expedition is all arranged. Without your recommendation I've hired Yuregon. We'll pick you up here on our way. In this desert, there won't be any danger of losing you to the police—before we find Galan. In the meantime, you can sit here and think about what you may have done to my brother."

Leaving Hart, she moved quickly behind the shoulder of a nearby hill. A moment later he heard the roar of a 'copter. He was surprised to realize that she had brought him alone into the desert for the interview. He filed that confirmation of her extreme self-reliance in his memory for possible later use.

He meditated soberly, but not on the past, and there was a curious expression on his face as he watched the 'copter vanish into the writhing mists overhead.

IV

ACCUSTOMED as he was to the continuous nightmare of surface conditions on Venus, Hart found the first stage of the expedition deceptively easy. By 'copter they flew high above ancient sea-beds from which the water had long since boiled away. Far below there unrolled a wasteland of sand and bare rock, tortured by climatic extremes, tectonic fantasies and unpredictable chain reactions in unfamiliar atomic compounds.

At times Hart's Earth heritage seemed immeasurably remote. He seemed as much a part of Venus as the mist-enveloped planet was a part of him. In the beginning the adventure had appealed to him for its own sake. But after twelve years of hunting and exploration only survival and pride of profession had become important to him. Life on Venus was precarious, often uncomfortable, and terrifyingly bleak, requiring constant realistic adjustments to unreal facts.

For Hart, life had become a timeless interval in which one grew accustomed to the biological freaks of mutant vegetation and variant life-forms of rioting creative nature.

The first explorers to reach Venus from Earth had found a planet totally unlike their expectations. The mysterious veil proved to be almost unbroken cloud-canopy, composed of carbon dioxide crystals and minute droplets of resinous compounds in solution. Below the

vapor envelope was a more uncomfortably dense, and often noxious atmosphere containing oxygen in ample quantities supplied by luxuriant plant-growths. Venusian landscapes varied, with some regions densely forested, and others sere waterless desert lashed by wind, sand and rad-storms.

A harshly inclined axis, comparatively rapid rotation, and a year of just under 225 Earth-days, gave the whole planet a series of violent seasons, during which life existed at all only by constant adaptation to repeating catastrophe. Little direct sunlight reached the surface, but greenhouse effects trapped high temperatures from solar heat.

For brief winters glaciers of solidified carbon dioxide blanketed an eery wilderness at one pole and extremes of summer at the other, with the dry-ice cap speedily vaporizing, and a resonance of solar tides causing volcanic uproar, earthquakes and general tectonic instability. Equatorial and temperate zones blended the extremes, with curious inconsistencies in between.

In spite of difficulties, men from the other inhabited planets stubbornly colonized Venus. Beach-head cities were built in semi-protected areas at a boom rate. Exploration of a sort went on continuously and adventurers and exploiters proved adaptable enough to live under even the most intolerable of conditions.

The planet was rich enough in natural resources, and in unnatural

oddities of biological life and death to attract the best and the worst of men. Cities thrived under their permoplastics domes, and the dominion of civilization spread uneasily into the unknown.

In the ninety years—Earth-count—since the founding of Cyclo City, many expeditions had been outfitted there, and had ventured into the blank spaces of the map. But few had started worse than Jason Hart's second journey behind the Copper Mountains.

Personnel had been strictly limited, both by the illegal nature of the venture, and by the size of the 'copter. Beside Cyndar and Jason Hart, there were only three—the woman doctor, Maythal, Yuregon, Tanati, the Araug. Tanati could have been either man or insect from his appearance, but he was actually neither, his ancestral origin being obscurely linked to a life-form unknown except on Venus. By their manner, the other expedition members had made it clear that Hart's status was that of a prisoner.

As the flight continued the deserts were quickly left behind. The terrain lifted, and changed, becoming a checkerboard vista of rolling hillocks, forest-clad and swarming with animal life. Ahead loomed a staggering barrier wall of mountains, thousands of feet in height, with their peaks lost to view in the cloud canopy.

In color, texture and size, the range was unlike any of the more

uniform mountain chains of Earth, and did not in the least resemble the worn polished hills of Mars. It was as if an ocean of molten copper had solidified as it spilled from nature's cauldron into snarled, wirelike masses, polished by wind and sand, and with the mottlings of dark vegetation staining deep crevices in the illusion of metallic corrosion thus conveyed.

No break in the barrier was visible from the air, and no passes had been marked on the official maps. In fact, exploration had barely touched the area, and had turned back when two survey expeditions had met with utter disaster. Only by chance had Jason Hart found a way through the first time.

"This is the place," he told Cyndar. "You can land anywhere near the foot of the mountains."

"Land?" Cyndar exclaimed harshly. "We're not landing. You said my brother was lost on the other side of the mountains."

Cyndar had insisted upon piloting the 'copter herself, and now her eyes were accusing as she turned from the controls to glare at Hart.

"He was," Hart agreed patiently. "But you can't fly over the Copper Mountains. Survey 'copters were reckless enough to try it and their wreckage had to be located by rescue parties on foot. Air currents are treacherous directly over the peaks and magnetic currents constantly stall the engines. You'll wreck your ship if you attempt to fly a thousand miles further."

The girl's face took on an aspect of firmness that reminded Hart painfully of Galan.

"You'd better get it into your head right now that I'm making the decisions," she said scornfully. "Stalling won't help you. *We're flying in*—and if I want your advice I'll ask for it."

Hart said curtly: "Suit yourself."

He had been tempted to appeal to the others against her, but one glance at the frozen faces around him stopped the words on his lips. All of them were aggressively against him, except possibly grotesque Tanati and the Araug's understanding of human matters was too limited to count.

Dr. Maythal, whatever her other qualifications, appeared to think and act with the cold, metallic precision of a surgical instrument and Hart was inclined to suspect some carefully concealed emotional attachment between her and the missing Galan.

As for Yuregon, his resentment of Hart was of such long-standing that his loyalties were always to the highest bidder. Hart realized he could expect no cooperation from any of them. But the habit of personal responsibility died hard in him.

"Better fasten your crash belts," he advised.

Dr. Maythal grunted, and proceeded to ignore him. Yuregon sneered, but was cautious enough to take the advice while discounting its source. Tanati seemed com-

pletely detached, his faceted eyes glittered as blankly as clouded gems. Hart made himself fast with friction straps, for he did not trust the magnetic clips in such an area. There was barely time for even that.

An updraft caught the ship, and shot it upward like a rocket. The 'copter blades flailed wildly, striving for control, and amidst the rising turbulence the frail craft staggered and rocked madly, buffeted by gales from every direction. And as the turbulence increased heavy mists blotted out vision.

Through the jagged rifts Hart glimpsed mad, gyrating flashes of land and sky. One moment the mountains loomed huge and awesomely close, the next they fell away and became obscure again. Then suddenly there was mass movement in the clouds. Outside the 'copter's cabin was a whining snarl of wind-blown sand, grinding away the metallic skin from the framework. Showers of coarse gravel went through the cabin like bullets.

Like a leaf in a millrace, the 'copter was hurled along with the general flow. The entire canopy flowed in a single direction, rushing toward a channel in the high rampart of jagged summits like water streaming toward a tremendous waterfall. Fierce currents hurled the 'copter end over end, sweeping it through churning air-violence to the ridge. There was a terrible moment as tortured metal ground on

saw-tooth rock, and then the ship was falling through a savage tumult.

Time ceased to have meaning, became an eternity of shocks and abrasive contacts. Crash belts snapped like rotten thread, and the ship's occupants tumbled in a confusion of threshing legs, arms and bodies.

Hart fought his way out of the tangle, and managed to wedge himself into the pilot's cradle. Control was no longer possible, for most of the piloting devices were electrical, and none would respond. Also the engines were running only sporadically off-balance. The 'copter fell sickeningly, then caught, or was flipped about on a vagrant gust. After a moment it plunged again. It was riding the elements, completely at their mercy.

More saw-tooth barriers loomed, seeming to tilt at impossible angles. The engines caught feebly, giving an illusion of lift, and the ship tottered like an indecisive suicide on the brink of self-destruction. There was a shock and a vast tearing sound, then an indeterminate period of wild descent like an elevator when the cable snaps.

Hart fought with the controls, trying hopelessly to wrench the plane into sanity, well aware that the ship might tear itself to pieces if he succeeded in gaining control.

At least we are over the mountains, he thought grimly. They were—almost.

He had partially checked the fall and was wrestling the stiff controls

in an effort to level off when they struck. Shattering violence dissolved all sensation into darkness.

V

JASON HART regained consciousness slowly. Around him lay the wreckage of the 'copter. He had a fuzzy, obscure recollection of the impact, the cabin breaking like an eggshell, and then being flung clear. Supplies were scattered in all directions over the mountainside.

Battered, still bleeding from minor injuries, Hart steeled himself for the ordeal of locating his companions. One by one, he found and examined them.

Yuregon was dead, but he was the only fatality. Dr. Maythal lay unconscious, one arm curiously twisted beneath her. It was obviously broken. The Araug, Tanati, had huddled himself into a ball, and was chattering aimlessly, apparently half out of his mind with shock and fear, even though he had been saved by peculiarities of anatomy from physical damage.

Cyndar was not near any of the main portions of wreckage. Before searching further afield for her Hart armed himself. The Copper Mountains were unknown territory even to him, and Venus was full of unpleasant surprises for the unwary.

Hart roused Tanati into a more useful frame of mind and left him to attend the doctor who showed signs of coming painfully to life.

Cyndar was alive. Hart found her pinned under a twisted mass of wreckage in a tangle of rocks less than a dozen yards away. With her back propped comfortably against a slanting boulder, she sat calmly awaiting discovery. In her gun-hand the blaster rested easily. She aimed at Hart and her hand did not even shake.

"You took a long enough time," she complained.

The hunter laughed. "Times have changed," he told her. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm remarkably adept at saving you from your own folly. Doesn't that give me a certain right to complete freedom of action? A man of experience must, of necessity, take command in a situation like this."

"I'm still giving the orders," she snapped. "Get me out of here."

Jason Hart shook his head. "No, I'm not taking orders. If you still have ideas of killing me, you'd better do it now. It will save both of us a lot of trouble. Frankly, I don't think any of you are worth it. And I'm not too sure I can save you—or myself."

Cyndar lowered the gun, but kept it in her hand.

"Will it take long to get back to Cyclo City?" she asked.

"I've news for you," he said, his eyes on her face. "We're not going back. Not for a while, and quite possibly—not ever. Nobody could make it on foot over those mountains. We'll have to push on, and be grateful if we stay alive

long enough to find some landmarks. There's a way out. It's part pass and part tunnel, and it won't be easy to locate.

"We should have gone in that way and marked a trail, as I did once before. But since we didn't we'll just have to keep searching. It's weird country, with dangerous intangibles you won't understand in every unexplored foot of it. Keep your gun. You may need it. But from now on I'm giving the orders."

Cyndar said nothing, but she did return the gun to its clip.

Swiftly Hart freed her and helped her to her feet, with no injuries except to her suiting and to her dignity.

"You can strip off that protective armor, anyhow," he grunted. "We won't need it in the jungle. The air is safe to breathe, and there's shelter if a storm should come up quickly."

Her eyes glittered angrily. "You lied then? You *do* remember what it was like when you were here with my brother."

"Not . . . everything." Hart's face was grim. "The crash must have jolted my memory. I'm getting flashes—but they're just odds and ends. I still don't know exactly what happened. I didn't actually forget. It was more like a brain-wash—post-hypnotic suggestion. I was supposed to forget *everything*. But apparently it never worked completely. Now it's just starting

to come back. You've heard of the Copperbirds?"

Cyndar shrugged. "I've heard the legends. But nobody believes such creatures really exist."

"Galan believed," Hart said. "He wanted to hunt them. I tried to stop him by stressing the possibility that they might not be legal game. On Venus it's not easy to be sure whether or not a life-form is highly intelligent. Unfortunately, Galan was stubborn. In an outburst of anger he discharged me. But I insisted upon going along with him . . . to stop him from killing anything not legal game. Like you, I had heard of Copperbirds, but I didn't believe they existed."

"Do they?" demanded Cyndar.

"Galan said so. I never saw one—not that I can remember. But I think he may have found them. Quite possibly he was not spared by them—"

"He's dead?"

"I don't know. There's no use talking about it. Perhaps you'll find out for yourself."

Shadows lengthened as they joined the others. An invisible sun dropped toward a vague horizon and from the murk obscuring the peaks above them a powdering of fine crystals settled. Wherever it touched the skin, it burned like hot ashes, for it consisted of minute particles of dry ice. Wind shrieked and howled in the barren gullies like hosts of demons searching for lost souls.

Jason Hart turned Dr. Maythal

over to Cyndar. Then, helped by Tanati, he systematically began salvaging the scattered supplies and sorting them into small packs with maximum survival value. He divided the most vital items into four equal loads and made them up as compactly as possible.

The two women approached him warily. Dr. Maythal seemed badly shaken. She moved unsteadily, and her left arm was roughly splinted with tubing from the wrecked copter. Nevertheless, she determinedly presented herself for her share of the burdens. Hart appraised her critically and shook his head.

"I'll carry yours—for the moment," he told her.

"Don't do me any favors," she said, staring at him coldly.

"I'm not. I'd rather be burdened with your load now than be compelled to carry you later."

"Why not abandon us as you did Galan?" she asked bitterly.

"Don't tempt me," he said angrily. "I've been thinking of it."

The way led downward through tangled ravines. There was little to see. The unsteady light, growing constantly dimmer, distorted distance, and vision was limited in all directions. Mists gathered swiftly around them.

Hours of steady descent took grim toll of their strength but Hart knew that to stay where they were through the night could only lead to disaster. Before them, in an immense hollow, squirmed coils of

living light. Blasts of hot wind laden with moisture and alien perfumes poured upward in rivers of air. During brief rests they talked.

"What are Copperbirds?" asked Dr. Maythal.

Pain and infinite weariness had dulled Hart's memory, and he could only recall fragmentary, teasing symbols of wonder and terror.

"On Earth, long ago, they were called phoenix birds," he said.

VI

THREE days and three nights of the jungle had imposed an almost unendurable strain upon their nerves and brought them to the verge of physical exhaustion. By night, they camped uneasily. By day, they groped blindly amidst a wilderness of giant trees, guided chiefly by Tanati's magnetic directional senses and his remarkable vision, which was abnormally sensitive to polarization of light.

Weaving patterns of light made footing hard to distinguish, and lichens and damp moss made even solid surfaces treacherous. Most of the forest floor was a slippery mass of rotting vegetation.

Game of all kinds was plentiful, but Hart sternly restrained Cyndar's hunting enthusiasm. "We will kill only for food, or in self defense," he insisted.

Cyndar brooded and was rebellious, but in the end they ate only condensed rations from the ship.

Temperatures were so consistent-

ly high that all but the most essential garments had been quickly discarded. The air was breathable, even stimulating in its oxygen-richness, but at times it became almost overpoweringly dense and sickeningly charged with exotic scents. Water seemed plentiful, for the trickling cool streams fed steaming, swampy lowlands and heavy dewes dripped from the trees like constant rain. Distances blurred into misty darkness. Progress was slow and difficult.

Each night, Jason Hart posted guards, dividing the dark hour tasks in strict accordance with the strength of each weary member. Dangerous animals lurked in the deep forest, he warned. The guards were armed with pneumatic hunting rifles loaded with explosive slugs which would have stopped a large dinosaur.

Three nights passed without incident, and on the fourth, after a bad day's march, Jason Hart stood the first watch himself. Cyndar, who had not spared herself, quickly fell into a fatigue stupor. Dr. Maythal could neither sleep nor rest, and Hart was disturbed by her troubled breathing and the occasional stirring of her body as she slept.

At intervals, he fed the fire, listened nervously to vague sounds, and tried to remember or imagine what lay ahead. As the jungle's spell had deepened more and more of his previous experiences had come back to him. But the remem-

bered facts were as disturbing as the gaps in his knowledge.

Dr. Maythal threshed about again. Nerving himself, Hart approached her apprehensively. But before he could kneel at her side her voice stopped him.

"What do you want?" she demanded. In the firelight, her eyes glittered strangely.

"Are you in pain?" he asked.

"Yes—but it is of no consequence. Fatigue is always painful."

"Are you afraid, then?"

Dr. Maythal stared at him coldly. "Not of you, certainly. Nor of your weapon. Nobody ever solves real problems with a gun. Your problem is in yourself. You're the one who's afraid."

"Yes, I'm afraid," admitted Hart quietly. "With good reason. I'm remembering a little of what happened here. Not everything—but enough. I should never have returned. I should never have let Cyndar bring any of you here. It's no place for a sane human being."

"What do you intend to do about it?"

"What *can* I do now? If I had the means, I'd get drunk."

Dr. Maythal studied the shadows where his face should have been. "Do you remember what happened to Galan?" she asked.

"I never knew," he replied. "We became separated toward the last. Before that we roamed around together, though we were never on very good terms. Galan was in his element—on a kind of hunting

spree. According to my code it was wanton slaughter, but he was still within the outer limits of his permit.

"Finally we strayed into a part of the jungle that was strangely like a landscaped park. A gigantic rock-garden, constructed by titans. I believe it must have been a zoo or game preserve of some vanished race—probably not a human race. It wasn't empty or abandoned. There were guardians, of some kind. The Copperbirds. And there we were the hunted—"

"Imagination," said Dr. Maythal steadily. "Your conscience had begun to torment you."

Jason Hart laughed sardonically. "Thanks for the free diagnosis. But it was real enough. We both could sense it. Call it our hunter's instincts, if you wish. Animals of all known species—and some nightmarish things we never saw clearly—behaved oddly, as if they were being watched-over and herded.

"They hunted us, shrewdly and dangerously, but still according to some organized plan. They seemed to be directed by an alien intelligence that was using them deliberately to track and trick us. For days we lived in terror, hiding out, scavenging like rats in a spaceship for food and water. Finally, I think, we were captured. I remember some nets that glittered. Then everything blurs."

"Galan, too? But you said you were separated—"

"We were. He was not with me.

I remember that I was looking for him at the time. He may have been only in hiding. But I'm sure they got him, sooner or later."

"Galan may have evaded them. After all, he and Cyndar are the best hunters on Mars. The art of the chase has been bred into them for generations. Since war ceased to be profitable, the old Martian aristocrats turned their energies toward hunting. It's a natural outlet for the sadism and killing-urge of the human race. Any psychologist could tell you—"

Hart shrugged. "Then I guess I'm not really a hunter at heart. I came to Venus for adventure. I like danger. I like to gamble for high stakes with my life as forfeit in the game. But I've no sympathy with killing for its own sake. Except for food, or to protect a client I've never killed. I like animals better than people."

"But you've guided other men, and helped them kill—for money."

"That's only an extension of killing for food. I've held down greedy hunters, and kept them from slaughtering illegal game. Some of them won't understand that non-human species are often highly intelligent. On Venus the restricted list is large. I fought with Galan over his obsession about killing a Copperbird. But I needn't have worried. They can take care of themselves."

"And you hope they've taken care of Galan. Isn't that true?"

Hart hesitated. "Maybe it is. I

grew to hate him. And I enjoyed watching the arrogance leave him. Toward the last he was afraid—terribly afraid. Hunting was no longer a joyful experience for him with the situation reversed. I've never seen a man crumble so fast. But you'd probably rather not talk to me about Galan—"

Dr. Maythal said softly: "You're quite mistaken. As his doctor I'm interested. We fell in love, and were to be married. But I broke the engagement because of his hunting mania. I'm a healer, not a killer. I couldn't go on loving a man who was obsessed by a desire to kill—if only in sport. I don't hate him, but it's over—"

"Yet you came along voluntarily. Nobody forced you to come."

"I forced myself. I was afraid he might be injured, or need help. Friendship can be a deep bond. And I remember that you also wanted to come back—before Cyndar forced you. Why?"

Jason Hart answered slowly, choosing his words with care. "It wasn't because of Galan—either way. And not just to clear my name. I feel that I've had it on Venus, and want to leave anyway. Possibly it was because I was afraid, and wanted to face out my fear. I have to go on living with myself."

"That's a good enough reason, if it is true. But you may be lying to yourself. And your motives are probably too mixed with heredity and conditioning to enable you to attempt an impartial analysis even

if you knew the full truth about them. But I'm curious about your fear. Are the 'guardians' so terrible?"

Hart shuddered again. "I don't remember them. I'm still not sure I ever saw one—or would want to. Whatever they are, they are terrible because they're so alien. I remember only the mechanical hypnotizers, and the fear. I didn't escape. They released me. Why they should have done so I don't know.

"At first I thought they were just playing with me, like a cat might play with a mouse, or any small, helpless animal. I went nearly mad with fear. But I kept going while something I couldn't quite see paced me and herded me out of the jungle. Near the mountains I found my old trail, and the way out. That's all."

"Not quite all," Dr. Maythal said professionally. "And not quite true. If you were really afraid you would never have returned. You'd have kept on running, and trying to get away from yourself. You're curious about your Copperbirds—and so am I. And about Galan—"

"We'll know soon enough, unless Tanati has lost his instincts," Hart assured her. "We haven't far to go now. If you have any drugs you'd better take a mild sedative and get your sleep. If we find either Galan or the Copperbirds you'll need your strength."

"You'll need yours," observed the doctor, "if we don't. But I think you have it."

VII

ON THE fifth day, about noon—the precise time was known only to Tanati—they found Galan. Or to be more exact, he found them.

Fleeting sounds and strange light-phantoms accompanied them through the shadowy jungle aisles, while a watery, insubstantial glare filtered down from the dense canopies of greenery overhead. The air seemed to hang in almost visible layers and more than half of the stratified areas seemed to be in violent motion. Streamers of mist whipped through matted foliage, and giant ferns and towering *kolkul* trees gave the forest at times an aspect of nightmare unreality.

To add to their discomfort aromatic steam and choking odors of decay hovered at ground level, and thorn brakes and deadly quicksands blocked the game trails and forced numerous detours.

By a series of terraces they climbed steadily. And mysteriously and by gradual degrees the jungle became more parklike, more artificial, and more landscaped.

On and on they walked until the trees stood yards apart, and they came suddenly into a broad clearing where deep, velvety purple grass grew like a cultivated meadow. Birds screamed overhead, and browsing grass-eaters fled at their approach.

"We'll eat here," decided Hart, breaking open his pack.

The synthetic food concentrates

had become a mere ritual to sustain life, and he could hardly blame Cyndar when she cried out in bitter rebellion. "I want fresh food, and meat. I'm going hunting, and I'll kill the first thing that moves."

Hart watched her silently while she unlimbered the hunting rifle. It was not too bad an idea. All of them were in need of better fare. Dr. Maythal seemed at the ragged end of her resources, and even Cyndar, tough as seasoned leather, was showing the accumulated strains and fatigue. If only he could be sure about the Copperbirds—

"You'd be well-advised not to shoot at anything," he said.

Cyndar's voice was low, but sharp. "Are you afraid your Copperbirds won't like it?"

"I'm simply warning you to avoid drawing attention to us," said Hart seriously.

The underbrush at the jungle's edge rustled violently. From the shadowed depths came a savage chorus of beast voices and a strange wailing cry. Then with startling suddenness, a tiny figure burst from the massed greenery. It ran as if pursued by fiends, zigzagging through the deep grass across the clearing.

"My kill!" screamed Cyndar.

Her rifle swivelled to follow the darting figure. But just as she pressed the trigger stud Jason Hart struck up the gun. Its missile whined a slashing path through the foliage, and far in the distance a startled wild fowl screamed.

"You fool!" gasped Hart. "It's a man."

Ragged, breathless, staggering, the running figure came on. Throwing a desperate glance behind him, he changed direction and headed directly for the group on the far side of the clearing. The three humans recognized him at the same instant.

Cyndar gave a wild, glad cry. Dr. Maythal drew in her breath painfully. Hart swore vividly, and took a swift step forward.

"Galan," choked Cyndar.

Galan tried to stop and stumbled. Both women ran forward. Cyndar caught her brother in her arms as he fell. Galan blinked, staring blankly up at her. Words bubbled meaninglessly from his cracked and swollen lips. He made a wild snatch at Cyndar's rifle. Evading his gesture, she eased him gently toward the doctor, her face drained of all color.

"I've found him," she whispered. "Nothing else matters. I've found my brother!"

Hart stared watchfully at the base of the green cliffs of jungle. In tight-lipped silence Cyndar joined him, her gun ready. A chorus of uncanny howls echoed in the clearing, and again came the strange cry.

"They won't dare track him now," breathed Cyndar.

"I wouldn't count on that," warned Hart.

Cyndar's features hardened. "Let them come."

They came. A savage pack of

wolf-like animals burst with a savage baying from the sheltering brush. They spread out, weaving their way through the grass, crouching low. Behind them a vague figure halted just beyond range of Hart's vision.

Cyndar's pneumatic rifle coughed with metallic harshness. One beast reared up, then another. She kept shooting long after the hunting animals retired to a hoarse call from their overseer. Explosive slugs lashed the jungle where the hunters had vanished. Half a dozen wolf-like bodies thrashed into stillness in the deep grass.

"You can stop shooting now," Hart told her. "They've gone."

Cyndar turned wild eyes toward him. She swung her rifle about and aimed it at Hart's chest.

"Drop your gun," she ordered.

Wearily Hart complied.

"I'm giving orders again," she said. "How do you like it? You know who or what was hunting Galan. I'm waiting for you to tell me."

Jason Hart shook his head. "You wouldn't believe me—so I'd rather you found out for yourself. Or ask him."

Cyndar was in a trigger-happy mood. "Galan was unarmed . . . and hunted. You left him like that."

"I had no gun to give him," Hart reminded her gently. "And it wouldn't have mattered, believe me."

"I don't believe anything you say. If Galan has suffered—"

Hart glanced sardonically at the fugitive. "Galan's all right. He's just tired and scared half to death. I could remind you that you'd have shot him yourself if I hadn't stopped you."

Cyndar moved uneasily to her brother, ignoring Hart completely. She knelt by his side, and they embraced in silence. There were tears in her eyes, and Galan seemed deeply moved too.

"There's nothing wrong with him," repeated Hart irritably.

"I'll be the judge of that," said Dr. Maythal, her manner coldly professional. "Superficially, he seems in good health—only strained and tired, with some mental confusion. I'll need a more thorough examination to be certain, of course."

"Keep it safe," advised Hart. "You doctors always trim your orbits both ways, and keep a sky-anchor moonward, don't you. Why not ask your patient how he feels?"

Galan sat up suddenly, thrusting Dr. Maythal rudely away from him. "I'll be all right," he said hoarsely. He got shakily to his feet. Tottering, he made a wild lunge at Hart, who evaded him easily.

"Tell them what was hunting you," Hart said.

A complex of guilt, fear and hatred turned into a sly expression on Galan's face. "I—I don't remember," he said weakly.

"They'll find out anyhow," Hart said grimly.

Galan's finger stabbed toward Hart. "You, you!" he screamed, his voice shrill. "You're to blame. You tricked me here—into their hands. Kill him, Cyndar. Kill him before he tricks you, too. Or let me!"

Again Galan snatched at his sister's rifle. This time, he got it in his hands. He flourished the weapon wildly. Abruptly the situation took a tragic turn. Galan was not aiming, not even at Jason Hart. Certainly not at Tanati. But the Araug took fright. With a wordless scream, Tanati fled. His body was a moving pattern against the purple grass. Swiftly Galan raised the gun, took aim, and fired.

Tanati flung both arms skyward, skidded into the grass, and lay curled up in odd resemblance to a sand-burr. He was dead before his body touched the ground.

"Get Hart's gun," Galan ordered Cyndar. "We'll have to kill him too, now. We'll get out all right. I can find the trail. But we can't have him giving evidence."

"That's right," said Hart. "Evidence of murder. But I don't think you'll ever stand trial for it in Cyclo City."

Cyndar picked Hart's gun from the grass and covered him with it. She was pale, but outwardly in complete command of herself. Galan's recovery had been swift and totally unexpected. With the killing, all of his mental confusion

and curious weakness had vanished, and the old arrogance was once more in the ascendent.

"Do you want to kill him?" asked Cyndar. "Or shall I?"

Galan turned and gestured toward Dr. Maythal. "Let her do it," he said shrewdly. "If she relieves us of that burden it will make a better story when she is questioned by the authorities."

The doctor was staring at the pair in horror, as if seeing them in true perspective for the first time. Hart heard her swift, harsh intake of breath.

"You'd better do as they say," he advised grimly. "They'll kill you too if you don't."

Dr. Maythal straightened, her eyes darting to the gun in Cyndar's clasp. "They'll have to then," she said simply. "I'm a healer, not a killer."

"Whose side are you on?" Galan demanded.

"Neither side — until now." Quietly she ranged herself beside Jason Hart. She eyed the twins with sharp curiosity. "Which one of you will kill me?"

A brief silence fell. Then Galan said: "I will—if you force it. I think I've always wanted to kill you."

"Mental patients often feel like that about their doctors," Dr. Maythal said.

Galan flinched as the barbed shaft struck home. He raised his gun and nodded to Cyndar.

"Aren't you wasting good ma-

terial?" Hart asked easily. "You've always wanted subconsciously to hunt a man. All hunters do. Game animals, at best, are just a substitute. You two claim to be hunters. Why not turn us loose, give us a head start and have the sport of hunting us down. It will greatly heighten your pleasure—unless you are afraid I'll outsmart you."

Galan tightened his lips. A chill gleam came and went in his eyes.

Cyndar nodded briskly. "It's what I intended for you—after I found Galan," she said. Maythal, it's not too late. You can still change your mind. And you can't help him by making your own death certain."

Unflinching, Dr. Maythal shook her head. "I don't like either of you well enough to share your guilty world."

Cyndar shrugged. "We'll give you a half-hour start. Together or alone. A knife and a rope, if you want. But no guns."

Jason Hart accepted the knife and rope. Silently the jungle enveloped them.

VIII

TIME seemed to lose its meaning. Staying close together, the pair fled doggedly through the forest gloom. Twice the girl stumbled and would have fallen had Hart not instantly caught her. A third time they both slipped on a patch of treacherous mold, and went sliding down a long incline into a foulness of

marshland. Their clothing was ripped to shreds by clawing thorns as they fought their way up out of the quagmire.

Following game trails gave them more speed, but it had its disadvantages. The trails wound hopelessly in mazes, without direction. At short intervals Hart paused to line up massive tree-trunks, convinced that by so doing he could avoid circling back toward the pursuers, and sharply increase his chances of outwitting them.

Curiously enough, though he found no landmarks, he no longer felt completely lost. Confidence had returned to him. There was a stimulation in just knowing that there was a wild, deadly game of hide and seek afoot. Poorly armed, he still had a chance, and the sharp sense of risk kept him ceaselessly alert, with constant vigilance his weapon of choice.

Time was running out, of course. Unburdened by a need for caution Galan and Cyndar could move far more rapidly than he. But there was the possibility that they would not hurry the game and shorten their pleasure in the chase. But whether they drove themselves or not he could count on nothing but his brain and skill and courage.

Uncomplaining, Dr. Maythal kept up the killing pace as long as she could. But finally either her spirit or her strength gave out. She drew Hart to the edge of the trail, leaned back against a tree and looked at him pleadingly.

"Without me, you might get away," she murmured.

Hart stared at her. "Do you think I'd go on, and leave you here?"

"I still can't believe they'd kill me," she protested.

"Then you're a greater fool than I thought," Hart said, half angrily.

Dr. Maythal shook her head. "I'm not, really. I know they'll kill me. But without me you might have a slight chance to elude them. They're like superb killing animals, bred for the chase. You can't even confuse the trail. They'll follow by instinct alone. I know them better than you do. You must believe me."

Hart nodded gravely. "I know them well enough. I saw Galan at work on that first expedition. He was the finest natural tracker I've ever seen. Overtrained, perhaps—a bit too eager. But the best."

"You're heading toward some kind of sanctuary, aren't you?" she asked shrewdly. "Do you think the Copperbirds will protect us?"

"It's not likely. They have a low opinion of the human race—after watching Galan's indiscriminate slaughter and the killing we had to do when we were being hunted. No, I don't expect any *direct* help from them. But if we can reach their lair we may be safe. Galan fears them. He may not dare follow us—all the way."

"If Galan fears them, why don't you?" she asked.

"Maybe I do. I dread going back, but it's our only chance. I think

I lost some of my fear when you stood up to them. You were terrified, but something in you made you defy them. I guess it's like that with me. We're going to the lair—if I can find the way."

"You've remembered more about the Copperbirds," she said.

"A little. But nothing that cheers me up. I remember an odd square stone building which seemed older than time. I never saw them, actually. But there were alien minds probing mine, making telepathic and hypnotic contact, and I learned something of their purpose. They're living beings, highly intelligent, and synthetic in origin. They're not metallic robots, however. Someone put them here to guard the preserve, to maintain the natural balances among the animals.

"If too many animals of one kind die, or are killed off, they create new ones from the old by taking microscopic germ-cells from the scar tissue on the newly dead beast and growing a complete new organism from it. I've heard of such a process, back on Earth."

"So have I," agreed Dr. Maythal. "Earth scientists as far back as the Twentieth Century studied the ability of lizards and creatures of the sea to replace lost limbs and learned to duplicate that process on a startling scale. In vats, they duplicated complete adult humans, with the identical personalities and heredity of the original. Even the talents were identical. But religious prejudice forced a stop to the ex-

periments, and the knowledge was lost."

"The Copperbirds, or their long-vanished masters, have carried the process a step further," Hart said. "Everything is reproduced, even the memories and sense of identity. Only certain physical defects or the marks of injuries are left out. I know. Galan killed me. When I was captured, he stalked my captors and put a bullet into me while I still struggled in the nets.

"It was an explosive bullet. I'd like to think it was a mercy killing, but I know Galan too well. He hated me too much for that. When the Copperbirds reconstructed me, they left out my previous hunting scars."

Jason Hart fell silent, brooding. His eyes were tragic, and Dr. Maythal sensed the acuteness of his horror.

"The religious objections to the experiments on Earth had to do with the soul," she said. "Is that what's worrying you?"

Hart laughed uneasily. "I have given it some thought. But there's more to it than that. I keep wondering if I'm *me*—or someone else. Everything about me seems unchanged. I think and feel just as I did before. But I also feel curiously like a trespasser, a stranger in a familiar world, in some respects as alien as the Copperbirds."

"What was really hunting Galan?" she asked.

"Another Galan. The Copperbirds have an odd sense of justice.

Poetic justice, in a sense. Galan lives only to hunt and kill. So they gratify his strongest impulses. One of him always hunts and kills the other. Then the loser is reconstructed, given a gun and the hunting pack, and the game goes on again. *With the roles reversed.*"

"It's . . . horrible," murmured Dr. Maythal.

"It's a sample of their unusual penology. The Birds rule this jungle according to a brutal code, but their standards differ from any human values I've ever encountered."

"I'm not sure that I like your sanctuary," the girl said. "But if we're going anywhere, I'm rested now."

Jason Hart smiled at her. "No matter, doctor. But we don't want to spoil the game."

The forest seemed to march with them, its gigantic tree-trunks looming out of the dimness like the legs of giants. Equally enormous ferns stabbed upward until their summits were lost in a blinding canopy of sky. Foliage and branches intermingled high overhead like the vaulted roof of a titanic cathedral, with bright banners of mist draping the arches from vestibule to nave.

Suddenly Hart sighted a deep burn-mark on the rough bark of one forest monster. Shouting hoarsely, he broke into a run.

The tree was a giant among the giants. Its tangled roots probed into the ground like sprawling tentacles, and its trunk was house-size.

Kneeling, Hart scabbled at the

dirt packed around the roots, first loosening soil with his knife, and then digging it out with frantic fingers. Swiftly he uncovered a sliding door of corrosion-proof metal. His fingers jabbed rhythmically at the alien scrolls. As the door slid smoothly aside he motioned the girl into the opening and quickly followed her.

They found themselves in total darkness. Claspng Dr. Maythal's hand Hart groped in the hollow interior and found a steep, spiraling ramp leading upward. They climbed hastily, their shoulders almost touching. They climbed for an incredible time, with Hart feeling for every step, and leading the girl as a veteran blind man might have led a companion newly blind. Gasping for breath, she let him guide her up the endless spirals cut into the interior walls of the hollow tree.

After what seemed an eternity, he halted. Leaving her in the darkness, he briefly explored an archway beyond. She waited with dread misgivings until he returned.

"It's all right, doctor," he said. "I've found the door to the outside."

"Stop calling me 'doctor,'" she pleaded.

In the darkness Jason Hart laughed. "You're being a little unreasonable. I don't even know your first name."

"Yes you do," she said. "It's the same as my last name. Maythal-May:hal. On Earth it would sound

silly, I know. But it's the custom in my part of Mars."

IX

HART led Maythal through a smaller opening, then horizontally for a distance of perhaps thirty yards. The sides and roof of the tunnel crowded in upon them and they had to move at a half-crouch.

"I was lost for three days inside a tree like this," observed Hart. "But don't worry, Maythal. I'm sure of the way now. Watch your head."

He dropped her hand abruptly and she could hear him grunting beside her in the darkness. Then a wedge of blinding brilliance broke through from above as a trapdoor responded to the heaving of his shoulders. Hart climbed out and extended a hand to help her. He caught her firmly in his arms and held on like grim death until her eyes grew accustomed to the glare.

The ground was barely visible four hundred feet below. A cry burst from her tight lips, and ripples of nausea went through her as she stared down. They were probably halfway up the tree, but the portion above their heads was invisible in the glare. The limb on which they stood was at least eight feet in diameter and it seemed as solid as a rock. But to Maythal it also seemed as insubstantial as a cloud, for like most Martians she suffered from acrophobia.

"Will you be all right?" asked Hart.

She nodded numbly. "Maybe I'll get used to it. What do we do now?"

"We go through the trees," he told her.

The rough bark with its many deep ridges did not appear to retard Hart as he ventured resolutely across it.

Nerving herself, Maythal followed him along the perilous bridge of the branch. The transfers from one overlying limb to another were hair-raising to her, although Hart seemed to enjoy traveling through the leafy avenues of the trees.

He moved along great limbs and launched himself across yawning abysses with reckless abandon. But he managed to be always at hand and ready when Maythal needed help. Without his assistance and moral support, she could not have forced herself to move at such heights.

"Do you think they will follow us here?" asked Maythal.

"Of course. Galan knows the trees better than I do. But we've gained a little time, and tracking us now will be a slower task. I'm hoping to find some place where I can break down the tree-bridges after we've crossed. That would delay them, and make it more difficult for them to pick up our trail again."

Tremblingly she kept on. She did not dare to look down, but she

was equally fearful of closing her eyes. She did not need to be told that a second's hesitation or un-sureness could mean missed footing and a fearful plunge to the ground.

"I'm not afraid of being killed," she said. "It's the fear of falling from a great height that upsets me."

"You're doing wonderfully," Hart assured her. "Just don't look down. Keep your eyes on the path ahead."

"I'll . . . try."

For half an hour she stayed with him, gritting her teeth and trying to avoid thinking of the gulfs below. But her strength was running out rapidly. Her last fall on the ground had shaken her injured arm badly, loosening the splints and putting an added strain on the fracture. Her pain was extreme, but she knew that re-splinting the arm would take too much precious time. A numbing ache spread upward into her shoulder, and at intervals her brain reeled with spasms of dizziness.

One such moment occurred during a difficult passage. She leaped lightly from a branch to the next, her heart pumping desperately. As her feet touched the firm bark, she balanced precariously. Relief surged through her, followed by a seeping blackness. She threw out her hands to Hart, and a cry of terror rose to her lips as she felt her knees buckling.

Hart sprang to catch her, but the

splinted arm hindered his grasp. Her faintness passed as quickly as it came. But she was already too far gone to recover her footing. She sprawled, and started sliding. With only one arm she could not save herself. Sick with panic, she realized that she was sliding completely over the edge. Then suddenly, she was falling, falling rapidly, and the dense air was whistling in her ears.

She struck a heavy branch, rebounded, and—a miracle happened. Rough foliage seemed to reach up and enfold her, incredibly cushioning her fall, cradling her, and swaying with her weight.

Jason Hart's face appeared amidst the trembling branches far above. He stared anxiously down at her, his shoulders dark against the glare.

"Don't move," he cautioned. "I'll be right down."

An eternity seemed to pass before he reached her. With shaking hands, he roped her securely to himself and edged her along the frail limb to safety near the massive trunk.

"You should have lowered the rope and pulled me up," she said, when she could speak again without shuddering.

"It wouldn't reach."

"Can we get back up to the path?"

"No," Hart replied. "You'd never make it. I'll have to lower you from branch to branch. We'll go from here on the ground."

"You could get back there with-

out me," she said. "You might even get away from them."

Hart remained silent.

"Please save yourself," she begged. "Leave me here, and go on."

"Not while I live."

"You're crazy," she said, half angrily. "It's not your fault I'm here. I'm no responsibility of yours."

"I've never been in love before," Hart said harshly. "So shut up and let me enjoy it."

"You *are* crazy."

Both of them laughed, with a touch of hysteria in their voices.

"I pick a wonderful time and place, don't I?" Hart exclaimed. "At least, with a doctor, I won't have to worry about the clinical aspects of romance."

Branch by branch, he lowered her to the ground. At the base of the great tree Maythal sank gratefully to her knees and put her good hand into the moist dirt.

"I never liked boys who wanted to climb trees," she observed.

Hart grinned at her. "Remind me to kiss you when I'm less rushed."

On foot they fled through dim aisles beneath the great trees.

The game trail wound aimlessly, and with his knife, Hart chopped pathways through tangled brush to a new trail. Except for the water which dripped like musical rain from the foliage overhead there was silence and a feeling of vastness. Winds moaned invisibly in the heights, but no echo of their

fury reached the forest floor. Insects droned, but their minute wing-sounds were only part of the greater silence.

It was Hart's hunter's instinct that warned him. Nervously he glanced at their backtrail, his lips set in tight lines. From somewhere remotely behind came the faint howling of a hunting pack.

Hart stopped and listened, trying to evaluate distance by the sound. "I had forgotten about the other Galan," he said. "This may be a three-way chase."

"Is he after us, too?" Maythal's hand had tightened on his arm. "Is he?"

"It's impossible to guess," Hart said. "He may complicate the game for them as well as for us. Do you want to rest?"

"No, keep going," she urged. "I don't want to stand and wait to be killed."

They fled again. By scarcely audible sounds, and by senses that have no name in civilized society Jason Hart knew that the game was running out. The stalkers were not far behind, and they were catching up swiftly. Abruptly the jungle thinned and an immense sloping boulder-strewn field loomed directly ahead. In grim desperation they hurried toward it.

"We almost made it," Hart gasped. "The square stone building I told you about is just beyond—in the center of the highest terrace. But we can hide out in these rocks. They won't get a clear shot at us,

and will have to come in and search the field boulder by boulder. I still have the knife."

Wordlessly, she stared at him.

Then, in a terrible, frozen moment, it was all over.

The missiles struck before the metallic whir of pneumatic rifles echoed in the game path behind them. Hart saw the bullet tear into his companion's body and explode, taking her from him. At the same instant metal ripped into his chest, and became a spreading flower of fiery pain that transported him with savage violence into cool darkness. Mind and memory and identity went with him into the black unknown.

X

JASON HART's face swam mistily before Maythal's startled vision.

Behind him hovered something else—something like a mask of hammered copper, but faintly luminous. There was a helmet-like carapace upon a head both beautiful and hideous. Her instincts and her mental balance wavered with odd shock as she became aware of the rest of the creature.

It was serpent-like, but not a snake. Birdlike, but not a bird. Instead of scales or feathers, thin hairlike spines stood straight up from its metallicly gleaming skin, and except for the sentience of its face it might have been a lifeless image or grotesque artwork cast in virgin copper.

Even the batlike wings were suggestive of thin, overlapping strips of metallic foil which had been first crumpled and then straightened out and neatly folded by a craftsman with a realistic objective in mind.

It was immobile, voiceless, but somehow Maythal was aware of its thoughts and emotions. So alien were those thoughts that there were no standards of comparison by which they could be judged or weighed. She sensed age, cultured strangeness, and even a vague distaste. But that was all.

"This is Sy-ann," said Jason Hart. "He is the last of his kind."

"I know," murmured Maythal. "Some of his thoughts are reaching into my mind."

"How is your arm?" asked Hart.

Maythal sat up quickly, her fingers darting to her shoulder. "It's whole again and the pain is gone!" she exclaimed. "But this is incredible—"

Maythal's flow of words stopped as she sensed movement within her mind, as if thought-tentacles probed gently from the Copperbird into her innermost self. There was no general exchange of deep-memory stores or major idea-patterns, only a swift intermingling of surface thoughts more fluid and direct than the most intimate conversation. There was a thrust of questioning and answering without conscious volition, and a mystical evaluation of her mind and motives by a mature, though alien, judgment.

But no such exchange can be other than mutual. Even during the slight contact Maythal acquired a profound understanding of Sy-ann and his people, their ancient mission and the decay of a system. Within herself, she responded to an infinite sadness and a passionless devotion to duty.

"Long ago, someone brought them from the stars into our solar system," said Jason Hart. "They were established in outposts like this on the embryo worlds that became our planets. Even they have forgotten how or why. For many generations the Copperbirds on Venus had lost contact with their fellows on other planets. Here, all but Sy-ann were killed by a terrible accident. Now, even he is very old—and dying. Twice every thousand Earth-years, Copperbirds must be reconstructed and their old bodies burned. But there is none now to perform this service for Sy-ann."

"Why couldn't we?" demanded Maythal. "It would be slight enough payment for what he has done for us."

Again, the darting tentacles of thought. Again, the strange intermingling, the surging hope.

"You could try," Hart said. "It may hardly be worth the effort. Galan and Cyndar have been trying to break into the station for hours. Sy-ann overloaded his power system when he brought us back to life. The force fields are breaking down, and are now almost useless.

"There's nothing we or Sy-ann

can do to stop them. It looks as if Galan will have his opportunity to kill his Copperbird, the last one in existence. If you use the power needed to rebuild Sy-ann, even if he can instruct you in the process, we'll lose the last protection we have."

Maythal's face set stubbornly. "I'd like to try. Why don't you have a look at the power plant, while—while our friend is instructing me? Maybe you can do something. It will be better than just standing around waiting."

"That's a good idea," Hart agreed.

Maythal had been lying on a molded metallic dais. She stood up and looked about her. The interior space was tremendous. Glareless light flooded down from invisible sources, and there were jumbles of curious instruments, laboratory benches, culture vats, all blended into scientifically and artistically satisfying organization.

Entranced, Maythal looked swiftly around, then down again at her perfect arm. Emotion stirred in her. Sy-ann's mind tentacles probed into her consciousness with a surgeon's touch. Abstract but obvious symbols flowed from him to her.

Hart spoke, putting the symbols into words. "If knowledge such as this should ever find its way to Earth it would revolutionize medicine and surgery. Think what it could mean for victims of accidents, and the tragically deformed. I wish I knew how he snatched us away

from Cyndar and Galan. He tried to tell me but I'm too thick-headed to understand.

"Something about Copperbirds being able to flit back and forth through extra dimensions, which is why they're so rarely seen—except as glimmerings of light, or as flashes reflected from moving surfaces of metal. I'll see what can be done about the power plant, but if you need me, I'll be within call."

As Hart left them, Sy-ann moved for the first time. She was not sure how he moved, but suddenly he was close by. Beneath his great head were nests of tentacles, four to each side, giving him a weird resemblance to an ancient Hindu goddess.

A pair of tentacles reached out and fixed themselves to her temples. A stream of clear, precise instructions flowed into her brain, filling her mind and memory with the basics of a new science of embryology. Like an automaton, or a person under hypnosis, she moved to her strange new task, though surgical instruments and controls obviously designed for tentacles puzzled her briefly.

Time moved with impossible slowness for her. Life took form under her hands. Alien life. But life, newly created.

When Jason Hart returned he found her sobbing on the dais, her body huddled together, sobbing and writhing convulsively. Horror-struck, he gathered her into his arms.

"You failed?" His eyes searched the room for the alien.

Maythal stirred in his arms, her eyes bright through a film of tears.

"No, I succeeded. Sy-ann has gone—somewhere. There's a part of it that's like a ritual. I think he's . . . praying to his own gods. I got through it, but the thing is awesome. It frightened me, that's all."

"I'm glad you got somewhere," said Hart. "I didn't. The power plant is hopeless. Maybe Sy-ann can include a prayer for us to his gods. That last power-drain really fixed things. There's a generator there with magnetic bearings, practically frictionless, the most wonderful thing I ever saw. But all the leads are melted and fused. Sy-ann might fix it, but not in time. Whenever Galan and Cyndar try again, they'll come right through the force-field barriers. We can expect them at any moment!"

"But Sy-ann—"

Jason Hart interrupted her gently. "I should have told you, I guess. Before you came back to life, we had quite a talk. He's no miracle-worker, just a minor technician. Like us he has limitations. Actually, there's not much he can do about Cyndar and Galan—not while they're alive and out of his hands. He could turn the beasts on them, perhaps. But I don't think he will. They'd kill too many."

"You're not giving up now? Not after . . . everything?"

He shook his head. "No, May-

thal. We can try running some more, if we can win free of this building and somehow manage to circle around behind Cyndar and Galan. Do you feel up to trying it?"

She looked at him and nodded.

XI

DRIFTING mists helped conceal them as they left the shelter of the building and slipped across open fields. The obscurity was a mixed blessing, for it prevented Hart from locating the stalkers and avoiding them. Without discovery, they reached a twisting ravine and followed it for a full mile.

The ravine descended sharply and opened onto the sloping boulder field, where shattered replicas of their living bodies still lay sprawled on the lower rocks.

Hart studiously avoided the area and made sure that Maythal's attention would not stray to the spot, for he feared that seeing her own corpse might prove too great a shock after the strains she had already endured. With infinite care, he worked their way down the steep descent, taking advantage of the concealing shadows cast by every rock and hollow.

He knew that before long Cyndar and her brother would grow impatient, force their way into the building and find that their quarry had fled. Then the chase would resume with deadly overtones.

Escape was at best a slim chance.

The distance to the mountains, or even the nearest desert outpost was too great for the hunted pair, especially with one a tyro at trailcraft.

There could be only one end. Somewhere along the trail he and Maythal would be overtaken. In the meantime, it was pleasant to be alive, and to be with her. Hart intended to prolong the adventure until all hope had ebbed.

At last, the jungle closed around them, and they continued on swiftly through the maze, from one torturous game trail to another. This time there were no halts for rest, or other delays. For Maythal's sake Hart did not take to the trees where travel would have been faster. But he urged her continuously and Maythal did not complain nor delay him.

It was a long flight, without breaks, without incident. To Hart, it was a final game with fate, a last heart-bursting effort to save his life and the life of the woman he loved.

To Maythal, it was an idyl. The forgotten jungles of an unknown part of Venus became Paradise. An exotic, unexplored Paradise that she could share with her man. If their life together was to be short let it be all the sweeter for that. She was happy.

Like any Paradise, it existed only in the emotions and hopes of the people involved. And like all idyls, it came to an end.

Hart's hunter's instinct remained alert, tuned to the highest pitch. He sensed the pursuit long before it drew close. He considered working out traps and deadfalls, but knew that it would only hasten the inevitable. Cyndar and Galan were too skilled and too wary to be easily tricked.

He knew there was no hope, but kept his thoughts to himself.

Maythal turned suddenly, her face deathly pale. "*They're coming?*"

Hart nodded grimly. "Yes. They're not far behind now."

They floundered into a clearing, and crossed over to the far side. Maythal stopped.

"This is far enough," she gasped out. "What's a few miles or a few more minutes? They're not worth the extra breath."

Hart put his arm around her. They faced the jungle across the clearing and waited.

The stalkers were coming on carelessly, not worrying in the least about warning their quarry. They came with confidence, with a trampling and a clatter that must have terrified all game in the area.

But there was another sound—the distant baying of the hunting pack. It was not too far off, and it was approaching rapidly from another direction.

Startled, Jason Hart listened. The blood pounded in his ears, but he strained to hear, to judge with accuracy the distance and direction of the alarming new sounds.

Quite suddenly, the Copperbird stood beside them.

"Sy-ann!" exclaimed Hart and Maythal in one voice.

The alien's mind answered their unspoken question. In symbols and abstracts it seemed to speak to them. *I did not come to interfere. I cannot. The law is greater than I am, and each must work out his own cycle. Pain or pleasure must be paid for, and Justice is infinite. I came to say my farewell, for I will not see you again. I can only observe and be grateful to you for the gift of continuing life.*

Where the alien had been was a flickering ghost of light, an eery glimmering that circled slowly upward and vanished in the mists and shadows of tree foliage.

The thrashing of brush drew closer, and for an instant as brief as a dropped heartbeat the cry of the hunting pack hung against a stillness of jungle air.

The clearing seemed in that instant like a huge stage, with the great trees a nightmare forest projecting from the wings. The next moment, as if on cue, Cyndar and Galan emerged into the open. Slowly their rifles swung upward.

Hart froze, awaiting the shock, the horror of seeing Maythal blasted before his eyes.

From another quarter of the jungle more figures appeared. The howling pack of doglike beasts streamed into the clearing. After them, incredibly—

Another Galan . . .

Cyndar stood rigid. Only her head moved. Dazedly, in shock, she stared from one image of her brother to the other. Her mouth dropped open.

The twins had become triplets. Horror became a visible emotion.

At the same instant, the two Galans flung up their guns. Both weapons discharged. The blasts were simultaneous . . . and both men went down.

Maythal covered her eyes, screaming. Cyndar dropped her gun.

Long afterward, Jason Hart remembered the incident like an illusion done with mirrors.

It was over . . . and Maythal was warm and safe in Jason's arms.

They took a mindless, wooden Cyndar home with them.

It was a long journey back to the mountains, through the tunnel, across the desert to the first outpost. Without their protective armor, they would be at the mercy of either sandstorms or radiation. But, somehow, he thought they would be lucky.

As they left the jungle behind, his eyes lingered fondly on Maythal. He remembered ironically that once she had seemed to him as inhuman and emotionless as a surgical instrument. He watched her tenderness as she led the childlike Cyndar and cared for her.

"Aren't you afraid of the journey back?" he asked.

Maythal met his eyes. "Not with you along," she said.