

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET stories

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Out of the dark waters of anonymity stormed

THE LOST TRIBES of VENUS

Novelet by
Erik Fennel

SIXTY-YEAR EXTENSION

He died twice — once
for himself and once
for the stars.

Novelet by
Alan E. Nourse



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THE LOST TRIBES OF VENUS

By ERIK FENNEL

On mist-shrouded Venus, where hostile swamp meets hostile sea . . . there did Barry Barr—Earthman transmuted—swap his Terran heritage for the deep dark waters of Tana; for the strangely beautiful Xintel of the blue-brown skin.

EVIL luck brought the meteorite to those particular space-time coordinates as Number Four rode the downhill spiral toward Venus. The football-sized chunk of nickel-iron and rock overtook the ship at a relative speed of only a few hundred miles per hour and passed close enough to come within the tremendous pseudo-gravatic fields of the idling drivers.

It swerved into a paraboloid course, fol-

lowing the flux lines, and was dragged directly against one of the three projecting nozzles. Energy of motion was converted to heat and a few meteoric fragments fused themselves to the nonmetallic tube casing.

In the jet room the positronic line accelerator for that particular driver fouled under the intolerable overload, and the backsurge sent searing heat and deadly radiation blasting through the compartment



before the main circuit breakers could clack open.

The bellow of the alarm horn brought Barry Barr fully awake, shattering a delightfully intimate dream of the dark haired girl he hoped to see again soon in Venus Colony. As he unbuckled his bunk straps and started aft at a floating, bounding run his weightlessness told him instantly that Number Four was in free fall with dead drivers.

Red warning lights gleamed wickedly above the safety-locked jet room door, and Nick Podtiaguine, the air machines specialist, was manipulating the emergency controls with Captain Reno at his elbow. One by one the crew crowded into the corridor and watched in tense silence.

The automatic lock clicked off as the jet room returned to habitable conditions, and at Captain Reno's gesture two men swung the door open. Quickly the commander entered the blasted jet room. Barry Barr was close behind him.

Robson Hind, jet chief of Four and electronics expert for Venus Colony, hung back until others had gone in first. His handsome, heavy face had lost its usual ruddiness.

Captain Reno surveyed the havoc. Young Ryan's body floated eerily in the zero gravity, charred into instant death by the backblast. The line accelerator was a shapeless ruin, but except for broken meter glasses and scorched control handles other mechanical damage appeared minor. They had been lucky.

"Turnover starts in six hours twelve minutes," the captain said meaningfully.

Robson Hind cleared his throat. "We can change accelerators in two hours," he declared. With a quick reassumption of authority he began to order his crew into action.

It took nearer three hours than two to change accelerators despite Hind's shouted orders.

At last the job was completed. Hind made a final check, floated over to the control panel and started the fuel feed. With a confident smile he threw in the accelerator switch.

The meter needles climbed, soared past the red lines without pausing, and just in

time to prevent a second blowback, Hind cut the power.

"*There's metal in the field!*" His voice was high and unsteady.

EVERYONE knew what that meant. The slightest trace of magnetic material would distort the delicately balanced cylinder of force that contained and directed the Hoskins blast, making it suicidal to operate.

Calmly Captain Reno voiced the thought in every mind.

"It must be cleared. From the outside."

Several of the men swore under their breaths. Interplanetary space was constantly bombarded, with an intensity inverse to the prevailing gravitation, by something called Sigma radiation. Man had never encountered it until leaving Earth, and little was known of it except that short exposure killed test animals and left their bodies unpredictably altered.

Inside the ship it was safe enough, for the sleek hull was charged with a Kendall power-shield, impervious to nearly any Sigma concentration. But the shielding devices in the emergency spacesuits were small and had never been space-tested in a region of nearly equalized gravitations.

The man who emerged from the airlock would be flipping a coin with a particularly unpleasant form of death.

Many pairs of eyes turned toward Robson Hind. He was jet chief.

"I'm assigned, not expendable," he protested hastily. "If there were more trouble later . . ." His face was pasty.

Assigned. That was the key word. Barry Barr felt a lump tightening in his stomach as the eyes shifted to him. He had some training in Hoskins drivers. He knew alloys and power tools. And he was riding Four unassigned after that broken ankle had made him miss Three. He was the logical man.

"For the safety of the ship." That phrase, taken from the ancient Earthbound code of the sea, had occurred repeatedly in the indoctrination manual at Training Base. He remembered it, and remembered further the contingent plans regarding assigned and unassigned personnel.

For a moment he stood indecisively, the

nervous, unhumorous smile quirking across his angular face making him look more like an untried boy than a structural engineer who had fought his way up through some of the toughest tropical construction camps of Earth. His lean body, built more for quick, neatly coordinated action than brute power, balanced handily in the zero gravity as he ran one hand through his sandy hair in a gesture of uncertainty.

He knew that not even the captain would order him through the airlock.

But the members of the Five Ship Plan had been selected in part for a sense of responsibility.

"Nick, will you help me button up?" he asked with forced calmness.

For an instant he thought he detected a sly gleam in Hind's eyes. But then the jet chief was pressing forward with the others to shake his hand.

Rebellious reluctance flared briefly in Barry's mind. Dorothy Voorhees had refused to make a definite promise before blasting off in Three—in fact he hadn't even seen her during her last few days on Earth. But still he felt he had the inside track despite Hind's money and the brash assurance that went with it. But if Hind only were to reach Venus alive—

THE blazing disc of Sol, the minor globes of the planets, the unwinking pinpoints of the stars, all stared with cosmic disinterest at the tiny figure crawling along the hull. His spacesuit trapped and amplified breathing and heartbeats into a roaring chaos that was an invitation to blind panic, and all the while there was consciousness of the insidiously deadly Sigma radiations.

Barry found the debris of the meteorite, an ugly shining splotch against the dull superceramic tube, readied his power chisel, started cutting. Soon it became a tedious, torturingly strenuous manual task requiring little conscious thought, and Barry's mind touched briefly on the events that had brought him here.

First Luna, and that had been murderous. Man had encountered Sigma for the first time, and many had died before the Kendall shield was perfected. And the chemical-fueled rockets of those days had been inherently poor.

Hoskins semi-atomics had made possible the next step—to Mars. But men had found Mars barren, swept clear of all life in the cataclysm that had shattered the trans-Marian planet to form the Asteroid Belt.

Venus, its true surface forever hidden by enshrouding mists, had been well within one-way range. But Hoskins fuel requirements for a round trip added up to something beyond critical mass. Impossible.

But the Five Ship Plan had evolved, a joint enterprise of government and various private groups. Five vessels were to go out, each fueled to within a whiskered neutron of spontaneous detonation, manned by specialists who, it was hoped, could maintain themselves under alien conditions.

On Venus the leftover fuel from all five would be transferred to whichever ship had survived the outbound voyage in best condition. That one would return to Earth. Permanent base or homeward voyage with colonists crowded aboard like defeated sardines? Only time would tell.

Barry Barr had volunteered, and because the enlightened guesses of the experts called for men and women familiar with tropical conditions, he had survived the rigorous weeding-out process. His duties in Venus Colony would be to refabricate the discarded ships into whatever form was most needed—most particularly a launching ramp—and to study native Venusian materials.

Dorothy Voorhees had signed on as toxicologist and dietician. When the limited supply of Earth food ran out the Colony would be forced to rely upon Venusian plants and animals. She would guard against subtle delayed-action poisons, meanwhile devising ways of preparing Venusian materials to suit Earth tastes and digestions.

Barry had met her at Training Base and known at once that his years of loneliness had come to an end.

She seemed utterly independent, self-contained, completely intellectual despite her beauty, but Barry had not been deceived. From the moment of first meeting he had sensed within her deep springs of suppressed emotion, and he had understood. He too had come up the hard way, alone, and been forced to develop a shell of hardness and cold, single-minded devotion to

his work. Gradually, often unwillingly under his insistence, her aloofness had begun to melt.

But Robson Hind too had been attracted. He was the only son of the business manager of the great Hoskins Corporation which carried a considerable share in the Five Ship Plan. Dorothy's failure to virtually fall into his arms had only piqued his desires.

The man's smooth charm had fascinated the girl and his money had opened to her an entirely new world of lavish nightclubs and extravagantly expensive entertainments, but her inborn shrewdness had sensed some factor in his personality that had made her hesitate.

Barry had felt a distrust of Hind apart from the normal dislike of rivalry. He had looked forward to being with Dorothy aboard Three, and had made no secret of his satisfaction when Hind's efforts to have himself transferred to Three also or the girl to Four had failed.

But then a scaffold had slipped while Three was being readied, and with a fractured ankle he had been forced to miss the ship.

He unclipped the magnetic detector from his belt and ran it inch by inch over the nozzle. He found one spot of metal, pin-head-sized, but enough to cause trouble, and once more swung his power chisel into stuttering action.

Then it was done.

As quickly as possible he inched back to the airlock. Turnover had to start according to calculations.

BARRY opened his eyes. The ship was in normal deceleration and Nick Podtiaguine was watching him from a nearby bunk.

"I could eat a cow with the smallpox," Barry declared.

Nick grinned. "No doubt. You slept around the clock and more. Nice job of work out there."

Barry unhitched his straps and sat up.

"Say," he asked anxiously. "What's haywire with the air?"

Nick looked startled. "Nothing. Everything checked out when I came off watch a few minutes ago."

Barry shrugged. "Probably just me. Guess I'll go see if I can mooch a handout."

He found himself a hero. The cook was ready to turn the galley inside out while a radio engineer and an entomologist hovered near to wait on him. But he couldn't enjoy the meal. The sensations of heat and dryness he had noticed on awakening grew steadily worse. It became difficult to breathe.

He started to rise, and abruptly the room swirled and darkened around him. Even as he sank into unconsciousness he knew the answer.

The suit's Kendall-shield had leaked!

Four plunged toward Venus tail first, the Hoskins jets flaring ahead. The single doctor for the Colony had gone out in Two and the crewmen trained in first aid could do little to relieve Barry's distress. Fainting spells alternated with fever and delirium and an unquenchable thirst. His breathing became increasingly difficult.

A few thousand miles out Four picked up a microbeam. A feeling of exultation surged through the ship as Captain Reno passed the word, for the beam meant that some Earthmen were alive upon Venus. They were not necessarily diving straight toward oblivion. Barry, sick as he was, felt the thrill of the unknown world that lay ahead.

Into a miles-thick layer of opacity Four roared, with Captain Reno himself jockeying throttles to keep it balanced on its self-created support of flame.

"You're almost in," a voice chanted into his headphones through crackling, sizzling static. "Easy toward spherical one-thirty. Hold it! Lower. Lower. CUT YOUR POWER!"

The heavy hull dropped sickeningly, struck with a mushy thud, settled, steadied.

Barry was weak, but with Nick Podtiaguine steadying him he was waiting with the others when Captain Reno gave the last order.

"Airlock open. Both doors."

Venusian air poured in.

"For this I left Panama?" one of the men yelped.

"Enough to gag a maggot," another agreed with hand to nose.

It was like mid-summer noon in a tropical mangrove swamp, hot and unbearably

humid and overpowering with the stench of decaying vegetation.

But Barry took one deep breath, then another. The stabbing needles in his chest blunted, and the choking band around his throat loosened.

The outer door swung wide. He blinked, and a shift in the encompassing vapors gave him his first sight of a world bathed in subdued light.

Four had landed in a marsh with the midships lock only a few feet above a quagmire surface still steaming from the final rocket blast. Nearby the identical hulls of Two and Three stood upright in the mud. The mist shifted again and beyond the swamp he could see the low, rounded outlines of the collapsible buildings Two and Three had carried in their cargo pits. They were set on a rock ledge rising a few feet out of the marsh. The Colony!

Men were tossing sections of lattice duck-board out upon the swamp, extending a narrow walkway toward Four's airlock, and within a few minutes the new arrivals were scrambling down.

Barry paid little attention to the noisy greetings and excited talk. Impatiently he trotted toward the rock ledge, searching for one particular figure among the men and women who waited.

"Dorothy!" he said fervently.

Then his arms were around her and she was responding to his kiss.

Then unexpected pain tore at his chest. Her lovely face took on an expression of fright even as it wavered and grew dim. The last thing he saw was Robson Hind looming beside her.

By the glow of an overhead tubelight he recognized the kindly, deeply lined features of the man bending over him. Dr. Carl Jensen, specialist in tropical diseases. He tried to sit up but the doctor laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Water!" Barry croaked.

The doctor held out a glass. Then his eyes widened incredulously as his patient deliberately drew in a breath while drinking, sucking water directly into his lungs.

"Doctor," he asked, keeping his voice low to spare his throat. "What are my chances? On the level."

Dr. Jensen shook his head thoughtfully.

"There's not a thing—not a damned solitary thing—I can do. It's something new to medical science."

Barry lay still.

"Your body is undergoing certain radical changes," the doctor continued, "and you know as much—more about your condition than I do. If a normal person who took water into his lungs that way didn't die of a coughing spasm, congestive pneumonia would get him sure. But it seems to give you relief."

Barry scratched his neck, where a thickened, darkening patch on each side itched infuriatingly.

"What are these changes?" he asked. "What's this?"

"Those things seem to be—" the doctor began hesitantly. "Damn it, I know it sounds crazy but they're rudimentary gills."

Barry accepted the outrageous statement unemotionally. He was beyond shock.

"But there must be—"

Pain struck again, so intense his body twisted and arched involuntarily. Then the prick of a needle brought merciful oblivion.

II

BARRY'S mind was working furiously. The changes the Sigma radiations had inflicted upon his body might reverse themselves spontaneously, Dr. Jensen had mentioned during a second visit—but for that to happen he must remain alive. That meant easing all possible strains.

When the doctor came in again Barry asked him to find Nick Podtiaguine. Within a few minutes the mechanic appeared.

"Cheez, it's good to see you, Barry," he began.

"Stuff it," the sick man interrupted. "I want favors. Can do?"

Nick nodded vigorously.

"First cut that air conditioner and get the window open."

Nick stared as though he were demented, but obeyed, unbolting the heavy plastic window panel and lifting it aside. He made a face at the damp, malodorous Venusian air but to Barry it brought relief.

It was not enough, but it indicated he was on the right track. And he was not an engineer for nothing.

"Got a pencil?" he asked.

He drew only a rough sketch, for Nick was far too competent to need detailed drawings.

"Think you can get materials?"

Nick glanced at the sketch. "Hell, man, for you I can get anything the Colony has. You saved Four and everybody knows it."

"Two days?"

Nick looked insulted.

He was back in eight hours, and with him came a dozen helpers. A power line and water tube were run through the metal partition to the corridor, connections were made, and the machine Barry had sketched was ready.

Nick flipped the switch. The thing whined shrilly. From a fanshaped nozzle came innumerable droplets of water, droplets of colloidal size that hung in the air and only slowly coalesced into larger drops that fell toward the metal floor.

Barry nodded, a smile beginning to spread across his drawn features.

"Perfect. Now put the window back."

Outside lay the unknown world of Venus, and an open, unguarded window might invite disaster.

A few hours later Dr. Jensen found his patient in a normal sleep. The room was warm and the air was so filled with water-mist it was almost liquid. Coalescing drops dripped from the walls and curving ceiling and furniture, from the half clad body of the sleeping man, and the scavenger pump made greedy gulping sounds as it removed excess water from the floor.

The doctor shook his head as he backed out, his clothes clinging wet from the short exposure.

It was abnormal.

But so was Barry Barr.

With breathing no longer a continuous agony Barry began to recover some of his strength. But for several days much of his time was spent in sleep and Dorothy Voorhees haunted his dreams.

Whenever he closed his eyes he could see her as clearly as though she were with him—her face with the exotic high cheekbones—her eyes a deep gray in fascinating contrast to her raven hair—lips that seemed to promise more of giving than she had ever allowed herself to fulfil—her incon-

gruously pert, humorous little nose that was a legacy from some venturesome Irishman—her slender yet firmly lithe body.

After a few days Dr. Jensen permitted him to have visitors. They came in a steady stream, the people from Four and men he had not seen since Training Base days, and although none could endure his semi-liquid atmosphere more than a few minutes at a time Barry enjoyed their visits.

But the person for whom he waited most anxiously did not arrive. At each knock Barry's heart would leap, and each time he settled back with a sigh of disappointment. Days passed and still Dorothy did not come to him. He could not go to her, and stubborn pride kept him from even inquiring. All the while he was aware of Robson Hind's presence in the Colony, and only weakness kept him from pacing his room like a caged animal.

Through his window he could see nothing but the gradual brightening and darkening of the enveloping fog as the slow 82-hour Venusian day progressed, but from his visitors' words he learned something of Venusian conditions and the story of the Colony.

Number One had bumbled in on visual, the pilot depending on the smeary images of infra-sight goggles. An inviting grassy plain had proved to be a layer of algae floating on quicksand. Frantically the crew had blasted down huge balsa-like marsh trees, cutting up the trunks with flame guns to make crude rafts. They had performed fantastic feats of strength and endurance but managed to salvage only half their equipment before the shining nose of One had vanished in the gurgling ooze.

Lost in a steaming, stinking marsh teeming with alien creatures that slithered and crawled and swam and flew, blinded by the eternal fog, the crew had proved the rightness of their choice as pioneers. For weeks they had floundered across the deadly terrain until at last, beside a stagnant-looking slough that drained sluggishly into a warm, almost tideless sea a mile away, they had discovered an outcropping of rock. It was the only solid ground they had encountered.

One man had died, his swamp suit pierced by a poisonous thorn, but the others had hand-hauled the radio beacon

piece by piece and set it up in time to guide Two to a safe landing. Houses had been assembled, the secondary power units of the spaceship put to work, and the colony had established a tenuous foothold.

Three had landed beside Two a few months later, bringing reinforcements, but the day-by-day demands of the little colony's struggle for survival had so far been too pressing to permit extended or detailed explorations. Venus remained a planet of unsolved mysteries.

The helicopter brought out in Three had made several flights which by radar and sound reflection had placed vague outlines on the blank maps. The surface appeared to be half water, with land masses mainly jungle-covered swamp broken by a few rocky ledges, but landings away from base had been judged too hazardous.

Test borings from the ledge had located traces of oil and radioactive minerals, while enough Venusian plants had proven edible to provide an adequate though monotonous food source.

Venus was the diametric opposite of lifeless Mars. Through the fog gigantic insects hummed and buzzed like lost airplanes, but fortunately they were harmless and timid.

In the swamps wildly improbable life forms grew and reproduced and fought and died, and many of those most harmless in appearance possessed surprisingly venomous characteristics.

The jungle had been flamed away in a huge circle around the colony to minimize the chances of surprise by anything that might attack, but the blasting was an almost continuous process. The plants of Venus grew with a vigor approaching fury.

Most spectacular of the Venusian creatures were the amphibious armored monsters, saurian or semi-saurians with a slight resemblance to the brontosauri that had once lived on Earth, massive swamp-dwellers that used the slough beside the colony's ledge as a highway. They were apparently vegetarians, but thorough stupidity in tremendous bulk made them dangerous. One had damaged a building by blundering against it, and since then the colony had remained alert, using weapons to repel the beasts.

The most important question—that of

the presence or absence of intelligent, civilized Venusians—remained unanswered. Some of the men reported a disquieting feeling of being watched, particularly when near open water, but others argued that any intelligent creatures would have established contact.

BARRY developed definite external signs of what the Sigma radiation had done to him. The skin between his fingers and toes spread, grew into membranous webs. The swellings in his neck became more pronounced and dark parallel lines appeared.

But despite the doctor's pessimistic reports that the changes had not stopped, Barry continued to tell himself he was recovering. He had to believe and keep on believing to retain sanity in the face of the weird, unclassifiable feelings that surged through his body. Still he was subject to fits of almost suicidal depression, and Dorothy's failure to visit him did not help his mental condition.

Then one day he woke from a nap and thought he was still dreaming. Dorothy was leaning over him.

"Barry! Barry!" she whispered. "I can't help it. I love you even if you do have a wife and child in Philadelphia. I know it's wrong but all that seems so far away it doesn't matter any more." Tears glistened in her eyes.

"Huh?" he grunted. "Who? Me?"

"Please, Barry, don't lie. She wrote to me before Three blasted off—oh, the most piteous letter!"

Barry was fully awake now. "I'm not married. I have no child. I've never been in Philadelphia," he shouted. His lips thinned. "I—think—I—know—who—wrote—that—letter!" he declared grimly.

"Robson wouldn't!" she objected, shocked, but there was a note of doubt in her voice.

Then she was in his arms, sobbing openly.

"I believe you, Barry."

She stayed with him for hours, and she had changed since the days at Training Base. Long months away from the patterned restraints of civilization, living each day on the edge of unknown perils, had awakened

in her the realization that she was a human being and a woman, as well as a toxicologist.

When the water-mist finally forced her departure she left Barry joyous and confident of his eventual recovery. For a few minutes anger simmered in his brain as he contemplated the pleasure of rearranging Robson Hind's features.

The accident with the scaffold had been remarkably convenient, but this time the ruthless, restless, probably psychopathic drive that had made Robson Hind more than just another rich man's spoiled son had carried him too far. Barry wondered whether it had been inefficiency or judiciously distributed money that had made the psychometrists overlook some undesirable traits in Hind's personality in accepting him for the Five Ship Plan.

But even with his trickery Hind had lost.

He slept, and woke with a feeling of doom.

The slow Venusian twilight had ended in blackness and the overhead tubelight was off.

He sat up, and apprehension gave way to burning torture in his chest.

Silence! He fumbled for the light switch, then knelt beside the mist machine that no longer hummed. Power and water supplies were both dead, cut off outside his room.

Floating droplets were merging and falling to the floor. Soon the air would be dry, and he would be choking and strangling. He turned to call for help.

The door was locked!

He tugged and the knob came away in his hand. The retaining screw had been removed.

He beat upon the panel, first with his fists and then with the metal doorknob, but the insulation between the double alloy sheets was efficient soundproofing. Furiously he hurled himself upon it, only to bounce back with a bruised shoulder. He was trapped.

Working against time and eventual death he snatched a metal chair and swung with all his force at the window, again, again, yet again. A small crack appeared in the transparent plastic, branched under continued hammering, became a rough star. He gathered his waning strength, then

swung once more. The tough plastic shattered.

He tugged at the jagged pieces still clinging to the frame. Fog-laden Venusian air poured in—but it was not enough!

He dragged himself head first through the narrow opening, landed sprawling on hands and knees in the darkness. In his ears a confused rustling drone from the alien swamp mingled with the roar of approaching unconsciousness.

There was a smell in his nostrils. The smell of water. He lurched forward at a shambling run, stumbling over the uneven ground.

Then he plunged from the rocky ledge into the slough. Flashes of colored light flickered before his eyes as he went under. But Earth habits were still strong; instinctively he held his breath.

Then he fainted. Voluntary control of his body vanished. His mouth hung slack and the breathing reflex that had been an integral part of his life since the moment of birth forced him to inhale.

Bubbles floated upward and burst. Then Barry Barr was lying in the ooze of the bottom. And he was breathing, extracting vital oxygen from the brackish, silt-clouded water.

III

SLOWLY his racing heartbeat returned to normal. Gradually he became aware of the stench of decaying plants and of musky taints he knew instinctively were the scents of underwater animals. Then with a shock the meaning became clear. He had become a water-breather, cut off from all other Earthmen, no longer entirely human. His fellows in the colony were separated from him now by a gulf more absolute than the airless void between Earth and Venus.

Something slippery and alive touched him near one armpit. He opened his eyes in the black water and his groping hand clutched something burrowing into his skin. With a shudder of revulsion he crushed a fat worm between his fingers.

Then dozens of them—hundreds—were upon him from all sides. He was wearing only a pair of khaki pants but the worms

ignored his chest to congregate around his face, intent on attacking the tender skin of his eyelids.

For a minute his flailing hands fought them off, but they came in increasing numbers and clung like leeches. Pain spread as they bit and burrowed, and blindly he began to swim.

Faster and faster. He could sense the winding banks of the slough and kept to midchannel, swimming with his eyes tightly closed. One by one the worms dropped off.

He stopped, opened his eyes, not on complete darkness this time but on a faint blue-green luminescence from far below. The water was saltier here, and clearer.

He had swum down the slough and out into the ocean. He tried to turn back, obsessed by a desire to be near the colony even though he could not go ashore without strangling, but he had lost all sense of direction.

He was still weak and his lungs were not completely adjusted to underwater life. Again he grew dizzy and faint. The slow movements of hands and feet that held him just below the surface grew feeble and ceased. He sank.

Down into dimly luminous water he dropped, and with his respiratory system completely water-filled there was no sensation of pressure. At last he floated gently to the bottom and lay motionless.

Shouting voices awakened him, an exultant battle cry cutting through a gasping scream of anguish. Streaks of bright orange light were moving toward him in a twisting pattern. At the head of each trail was a figure. A human figure that weaved and swam in deadly moving combat. One figure drifted limply bottomward.

Hallucination, Barry told himself. Then one of the figures broke from the group. Almost overhead it turned sharply downward and the feet moved in a powerful flutter-kick. A slender spear aimed directly at the Earthman.

Barry threw himself aside. The spear point plunged deep into the sticky, yielding bottom and Barry grappled with its wielder.

Pointed fingernails raked his cheek. Barry's balled fist swung in a roundhouse blow but water resistance slowed the punch

to ineffectiveness. The creature only shook its head and came in kicking and clawing.

Barry braced his feet against the bottom and leaped. His head butted the attacker's chest and at the same instant he lashed a short jab to the creature's belly. It slumped momentarily, its face working.

Human—or nearly so—the thing was, with a stocky, powerful body and webbed hands and feet. A few scraps of clothing, seemingly worn more for ornament than covering, clung to the fishbelly-white skin. The face was coarse and savage.

It shook off the effects of Barry's punch and one webbed hand snatched a short tube from its belt.

Barry remembered the spring-opening knife in his pocket, and even as he flicked the blade out the tube-weapon fired. Sound thrummed in the water and the water grew milky with a myriad of bubbles. Something zipped past his head, uncomfortably close.

Then Barry struck, felt his knife slice flesh and grate against bone. He struck again even as the undersea being screamed and went limp.

Barry stared through the reddening water.

Another figure plunged toward him. Barry jerked the dead Venusian's spear from the mud and raised it defensively.

But the figure paid no attention. This one was a female who fled desperately from two men closing in from opposite sides. One threw his spear, using an odd pushing motion, and as she checked and dodged, the other was upon her from behind.

One arm went around her neck in a strangler's hold, bending her slender body backward. Together captor and struggling captive sank toward the bottom. The other recovered his thrown spear and moved in to help secure her arms and legs with lengths of cord.

One scooped up the crossbow the girl had dropped. The other ripped at her brief skirt and from her belt took a pair of tubes like the one the dead Venusian had fired at Barry, handling them as though they were loot of the greatest value. He jerked cruelly at the slender metallic necklace the girl wore but it did not break.

He punched the helpless girl in the abdomen with the butt of his spear. The girl

writhed but she did not attempt to cry out.

Barry bounded toward them in a series of soaring leaps, knife and spear ready. One Venusian turned to meet him, grinning maliciously.

Barry dug one foot into the bottom and sidestepped a spear thrust. His own lunge missed completely. Then he and the Venusian were inside each other's spear points, chest to chest. A pointed hook strapped to the inside of the creature's wrist just missed Barry's throat. The Earthman arched his body backward and his knife flashed upward. The creature gasped and pulled away, clutching with both hands at a gaping wound in its belly.

The other one turned too late as Barry leaped.

Barry's hilt cracked against its jawbone.

BARRY bent over the girl and realized with a start that she was different.

Her skin was a strange blue-brown. Her features were delicate, intelligent, very different from the savage faces of the males he had battled. Her dark hair grew further down the back of her neck than was customary on Earth, forming a short, silky mane between her shoulder blades.

She was slender of body, except that the muscles running down her sides from armpit to waist were amazingly well developed. Her high-set, compactly pointed breasts were uncovered, and he could see that any sort of upper clothing would interfere with full use of those unusual swimming muscles. Her skirt was short and close fitting.

Her eyes, though, were filled with hatred, defiance, terror.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, hoping his tone would convey the meaning.

She seemed more puzzled than grateful as he slid the knife gently between her ankles to sever the binding cords, and she shrank under his touch as he rolled her over to reach her wrists.

"There you are," he said, and started to straighten up.

Something struck him from above and many hands clutched at him. Within seconds he was flat in the mud. Two Venusians held each arm and leg.

Another stood over him with spear poised.

But the girl shouted and grasped the spearman's arm.

The girl spoke with rapid urgency, pointing from Barry to her erstwhile captors.

Barry could not believe his ears. The sounds were familiar. He could even understand a word here and there, and in these entirely alien surroundings the effect was eerie.

A Venusian looked at the pink clouds of diluted blood rising from the bodies, then gazed apprehensively up into the dimness overhead.

"Kill him quickly and let us go," he suggested. "The torvaks will soon come."

The girl turned upon him. "He lives!" she snapped. "From what yort he comes I know not, but assuredly he is no noru!"

Although his right arm was pinioned Barry still clutched his knife. Now the girl stooped and touched his fist without attempting to pry it open. Barry surrendered the weapon.

The men allowed him to sit up, but they remained wary. Meanwhile the girl was examining the knife with intense interest.

Barry smiled at her, and being careful to make no sudden motions that might be misinterpreted he held out his hand. Hesitantly she laid the knife on his palm while around him his guards raised their spears and crossbows.

He closed the blade. Then, showing her exactly how it was done, he pressed the button that let the five-inch blade snick out. Repeating the demonstration, he handed it back with a gesture indicating it was a gift.

The girl smiled and spoke to him, and although most of her words were unintelligible he gathered she was asking if he wanted to accompany them. Emphatically he nodded, overcome with a sudden dread of being left alone on the sea bottom.

Her suggestion created consternation among the others.

"We must consult Komso," one suggested uneasily.

The girl frowned. "We do not consult Komso," she contradicted. "I take full responsibility."

The man shrugged. "Let us go before the torvaks come," he evaded.

Weapons were slung for carrying and the

band leaped from the bottom and began swimming. Barry followed, keeping close beside the girl.

Although he relied more on power than skill he found himself able to maintain their fast pace. He soon caught the knack of using the webs between his fingers and toes.

And muscles trained under Earth gravity and without water support seemed superior to those of the Venusians.

The men talked as they swam, and Barry remembered where he had heard those particular combinations of sounds before.

A construction job had once taken him to an almost inaccessible mountain section of Mexico and there he had picked up a few words of the dialect used by the native Indian laborers. Aztec? Incan? Mayan? Something predating all three? He had no idea of its origin, but the similarity opened astounding trails of speculation.

The girl, he learned from hearing the others address her, was named Xintel.

AN UNDERSEA cliff loomed craggy and irregular ahead. As the group slanted up toward a black hole in its face the voices of the men took on tones of happy relief.

But the girl was frowning.

The group which had held together compactly during the long swim broke up, each man heading for the cave mouth at top speed. Barry saw that huge boulders had been piled one upon another to narrow the entrance until not more than three abreast could pass.

Xintel motioned to Barry to stay close behind her. She seemed to be anticipating trouble.

It came as they started to enter. A huge, bull-necked man with a well fed appearance in marked contrast to the lean muscularity of the other Venusians, stepped out and barred their passage, arms outflung. Heavy glittering bracelets jangled on his wrists. Something in the contrived melodrama of his gestures told Barry that unseen eyes were watching from the darkness.

"Xintel! What is this thing you bring to the portal of Tana?" the man asked harshly.

The girl stood her ground. "He comes with me!"

"He's an alien. He must die!" The man's tone was arrogant.

Xintel stiffened angrily. "He will not be killed, Komso. He is not a noru."

Komso's face reddened angrily. "But he is—" he began, and then stopped abruptly.

"You would take this one, then, into Tana itself?" His voice conveyed the impression that such a course was unheard of.

The girl nodded, motioning Barry to follow.

"Sacrilege! Offspring of a blasphemer!" Komso shouted.

Xintel did not pause.

Komso motioned and someone in the dark tunnel behind him placed a loaded crossbow in his hands. He swung the weapon to cover the Earthman.

"Over my dead body shall this alien thing enter Tana," he snarled.

Barry stood motionless and helpless, trying to conceal his fear.

Xintel's voice was coldly defiant. "So be it, then. Over your dead body, if you insist."

With a movement of feline grace and speed she snatched a tube-weapon from her belt. She was bluffing. Barry had seen the savages who had captured her test the weapons and find them unloaded. But Komso had not.

His face grew pale but his slitted eyes glared murder. "You bring your own death. I tried only to save you from the consequences of your folly."

He turned and swam into the opening.

Xintel did not allow herself the vestige of a smile. Instead she grabbed Barry's wrist and pulled him after her into the black hole. In the darkness she passed him his knife.

The passage was several hundred yards long but the girl guided him unerringly around its turns. The Earthman's nerves were jangling.

IV

THEY rounded a sharp bend and Barry gasped at the vista before him. The passage opened into a tremendous cavern.

Far below on the bowl-shaped floor sprawled a town composed of cylindrical houses higher than they were wide, scattered in an irregular pattern.

He looked upward for the source of the cold yellow light flooding everything, and a few yards above his head lay a flat silvery plane. Just below it the water glowed, like the phosphorescence that microscopic life forms cause in the tropic seas of Earth—but a thousand times brighter.

The men from Xintel's group had taken no part in her altercation with Komso save to watch in uneasy silence. Now they were scattering downward toward the houses. Nearly all had been joined by waiting women, but Barry saw two women swimming pitifully and dejectedly alone. The battle into which he had been precipitated had not been without its casualties.

He stared about as Xintel led him in a long dive. On the bottom were trees—he had no other name for them—with stiff trunks and snake-like branches supported by air-filled knobs.

Their pale leaves were covered with minute bubbles that gave them a frosty appearance despite the warmth of the water.

There were no streets or paths between the cylindrical houses, but in small areas around the entrances the bright varicolored seaweed-moss had been worn away by Venusian feet.

A few Venusians eyed them in curiosity as they swam downward, but none approached.

They touched bottom beside one of the houses. Xintel pushed aside a curtain covering the circular doorway. Barry saw the house was constructed by training and grafting a number of the large trees until they intertwined. Its foundations were the roots that clung to irregularities in the rocks.

There were no windows, and for a moment after the girl let the curtain fall into place it was pitch black. Then suddenly the circular room was brilliantly lighted.

From the ceiling hung a globe a foot in diameter, the translucent floatation chamber of some subaqueous plant. It was spinning at the end of a twisted cord, the luminous milky fluid it contained stirred by the motion.

Xintel sighed wearily and hung up her crossbow. Then with a graceful leap she vanished through a hatchway in the ceiling.

She returned, floating down with a pair

of pronged darts and a small round box with bubbles dribbling upward in a steady stream through the perforated lid. She opened it and, with a fingertip, smeared a dab of vermilion paste on the base of each dart. Then she pushed the missiles base first into her tube-weapons, twisting them until a latch caught.

Her weapons prepared, the girl turned back to the Earthman and made the universal gesture of eating. Barry had no idea how long it had been since he had eaten, and for the first time since the Sigma sickness began he was really hungry. He nodded.

She leaped upward and he followed her to a second windowless room above the first, then up through another hatchway to a third. This was the top of the house, for through an opening in the flat roof he could look up into open water. Several baskets, woven of strips of undersea wood and equipped with close-fitting lids, stood along the wall. In a wooden cage a few dozen strange fish swam sluggishly.

With her bare hands Xintel caught one and pulled it out. She picked up a dagger of the same material as the spears—an unfamiliar substance which Barry had had no chance to examine closely—and jumped to the open roof. She returned a few minutes later with the fish neatly cleaned and divided into halves.

Barry was hungry but Earth habits were still strong. The girl saw his involuntary grimace. She looked hurt. He forced himself to take a bite of the raw fish and to his amazement found it pleasant. Evidently his taste organs had changed with the rest of his body.

From the baskets Xintel took other foods of vegetable origin. Barry ate ravenously.

The cumulative effects of fatigue overwhelmed him even as he finished. He felt a sense of dreamlike unreality and detachment, as though nothing mattered. The girl too appeared tired but he could see she was bursting with curiosity. He appreciated her restraint in not bombarding him with questions. At her gesture he stepped through the hatch and floated down to the middle room.

The light there had gone dim but she gave the globe a deft spin that brightened

it again. She motioned to a wide pallet woven of resilient fiber, and he lay down at once. There were no coverings, no need for them in the soothingly warm water.

Despite his tiredness Barry's nerves were still tense and twitching, and he kept hearing soft sounds as the girl moved about the room. After several minutes he opened his eyes again.

Xintel had removed her brief skirt and was wearing only her silvery necklace. She was anointing herself with an oily salve that sent a pleasantly pungent odor through the water, giving special attention to her wrists and ankles where the cords of the norus had chafed them and to the livid bruises that were developing on other portions of her slender body. She paused and smiled at him, not at all embarrassed.

Finally she came toward the pallet and without hesitation lay down beside him. She stretched and moved slightly until she found a comfortable position, and then her breathing took on the slow regularity of sleep while the light dimmed.

For a while Barry remained awake. Half-formed questions spun madly through his mind but when he tried to think rationally his tired brain balked.

HE WOKE and sat up, floated up from the pallet in the unaccustomed support of the black water, settled back slowly while he strove to winnow true memories from the remnants of nightmare. The girl woke and spoke questioningly. It required great concentration on Barry's part to understand and answer, for he had forgotten much of what he had learned from those Mexican laborers.

"Yes, I feel better," he said hesitantly. "But—"

In the blackness their bodies touched accidentally. Her skin was warm and smooth, soft but with the firmness of underlying muscle. After a long moment she drew away.

Barry blinked as she spun the light into brilliance. Her dressing was a simple and brief process, and then she turned to him with an intent look on her face.

"You come here from the Above." It was more statement than question.

Barry nodded.

"But from what yort? And how did your people change to live in the Above?"

"I come from Earth."

"Earth?" she repeated with a puzzled frown. "There is no yort beneath the seas called Earth."

Trying to explain was like describing color to a man born blind. With the surface of Venus she seemed to have a slight familiarity, but she had never glimpsed planets or stars, never seen the sun.

"You are from the World Beyond—and yet you are alive!" she said in awe.

She smiled and seemed relieved when Barry hastily assured her there was nothing supernatural about his place of origin, but she understood only that he was not an undersea dweller by birth. She hurried on to other questions.

"But why have only you of all your people come to the Here?" she asked. "And how—Oh, tell me how!—did you cause the Place Of Change to work again?"

Barry frowned, trying to grasp her meaning. "An accident happened to me out in space that made me different."

"You did not come through the Place Of Change?" She seemed bitterly disappointed. "Then how will you return?"

"I will never see my own people again, I fear," he admitted.

Xintel made a soft sound of sympathy.

"I owe my very life to you, for I would have killed myself rather than bear a child to those norus who captured me. You can stay here in Tana, with me—if Komso does not cause your death."

Barry knew that if he were to survive he must learn the ways of this undersea world. Alone he would soon perish. He had no choice.

"Who is Komso?" he asked.

Xintel spat a few sibilant words that were evident obscenities.

"He is Leader of the Chosen Ones, and he fears you. If the people learn you come from the Above they will grow dissatisfied, for there are some who still remember the ancient promises that we may return."

Barry was silent and thoughtful, considering the implications of the things Xintel had said. The girl watched the Earthman with a calculating look.

"You will help me?" she asked at length.

"Help you?"

"Perhaps together we can succeed where my father failed. Perhaps together we can overthrow Komso and break the hold of the Chosen upon Tana."

Barry thought of the open sea and the savage norus he had battled, and he had gathered the impression that Komso was some sort of priest or witchdoctor who would be an adversary without mercy. All he wanted was peace. But peace, Komso's face had told him, was something he could not have.

"Yes," he said flatly. He had no choice.

The girl laid her hand on his arm, confident and suddenly affectionate.

"Good," she said. "There is nothing we can do now. We must wait for the right time."

THERE was no night in Tana and the inhabitants slept whenever so inclined, without set intervals. After several sleeping periods Barry lost all sense of time.

Whenever the girl was not attending to the routine tasks of daily life he bombarded her with questions. She asked in turn about Earth and the colony, and at some of his answers stared and giggled as though suspecting him of concocting fantastic lies for her benefit.

At her suggestion he did not wander alone, although most of the Venusians regarded him with suspicious curiosity rather than hostility.

"Trust no one," she warned him. "For the Chosen have spies everywhere. Komso may know or suspect that you come from the Above but the less he knows about you the better."

A small cave branched off from one wall of the great cavern. No houses were placed near its black mouth and the common Venusians gave it a wide berth.

"That is the Temple of the Chosen," Xintel explained. "To approach it means death."

Just outside the forbidden zone several huge baskets had been anchored to receive offerings from each inhabitant. Food, tools, clothing, a fourth of everything produced went to the Chosen and their master.

"What would happen if the people refused to pay tribute?" Barry asked.

"The Chosen have many ways of enforcing their will," the girl replied ominously. "And no scruples."

The thirty Chosen Ones ruled the thousand or so inhabitants of Tana ruthlessly and arrogantly, a government of impulse and whim without fixed laws. The rulers were immune from all work, taking whatever they desired, subject only to Komso's word.

The situation had apparently existed so long it had been accepted as the only possible mode of life, and the submissiveness of the people was shocking to the Earthman. One day he saw a Chosen One approach one of the younger women and curtly order her to follow him. The woman shrank back, but at a black glare choked off her sobbing and moved docilely away. Her mate, standing nearby, made not the slightest move to interfere.

"He will get her back when the Chosen One tires of her," Xintel told Barry later, her normally soft voice harsh with bitterness. "That is, if the poor creature lives, for the Chosen are often brutal to the women they take. If her mate had so much as opened his mouth he would have incurred the wrath of the Gods Of The Deep as enforced by the Chosen."

Occasionally Barry found himself wishing for a cigarette. That gave him a wry laugh, but it also impressed upon him the fact that the Venusians had created an underwater civilization without the knowledge of fire. An unintelligent race could never have managed, and he wondered to what stage they might have progressed without the yoke of the Chosen about their necks.

Metal was known in Tana only in the form of a few ornaments of greatest antiquity, about the origin of which it was forbidden by superstition and tradition even to speculate. Almost all were in the hands of the Chosen.

Xintel was one of the few exceptions, and upon examining her treasured silver necklace Barry discovered that each beautifully wrought link had been welded. *Welded*. That implied heat, which definitely did not fit in a subaqueous environment.

He questioned her but she only shook her head. She had no idea of the technique.

"It came through my family from the other life before the Place Of Change," was her only explanation.

The most common substance for tools and weapons was something with the cellular structure of wood but the weight and feel of cast metal. It was slightly malleable and could be sharpened by grinding against abrasive rocks, but it fractured when stressed beyond its elastic limit. It fascinated Barry, not only because of its unfamiliarity but because the Venusians had no tools suitable for working such a hard material.

But Xintel explained. The soft wood of undersea trees was carved to the required shape, and then the implements were taken to the Outside, across the sea bottom to the Cleft Of Hardening. There the wood underwent a change.

She had been returning from the Cleft—the Venusians always managed to visit the Outside in groups despite the Chosen—when Barry saved her from marauding norus.

The norus were outcast savages, hated and feared and despised. They had long since learned the folly of attacking Tana, but whenever possible would ambush anyone venturing into the Outside.

Males they invariably killed for their clothing and weapons, but females the savages preferred to capture alive. The mortality among their own women was frightfully high, particularly during pregnancy and childbirth when they were unable to defend themselves against the monstrous torvaks that scouraged the deeps, so replacement slave-wives were in constant demand.

Tana was not the only undersea city or yort, Barry learned, but the journey across the sea bottom was so perilous that communication was most infrequent and warfare impractical.

V

KOMSO had not forgotten Barry. Everywhere Barry and Xintel went a Chosen One followed, and even though their actions were not interfered with in any way it was nervewracking to know their every move was being reported. Under such continuing surveillance his temper grew ragged.

But he heeded Xintel's repeated warnings

and the watchers learned little. Finally the Leader grew annoyed and decided this outsider, this potential threat to his unchallenged supremacy, had existed long enough. And so had the girl who sheltered him.

Barry was helping Xintel in the fields beyond the house, harvesting thick, meaty leaves that were a staple article of diet. A score of Venusians were engaged in the same task nearby.

Something prompted Barry to look up just in time to see Komso and a large Chosen One called Czerki hanging in the water some distance away. They looked aside a bit too ostentatiously as they noticed the Earthman's eyes upon them.

A frown crossed Xintel's face as he nudged her.

"We avoid trouble if we can," she whispered.

But Czerki swam unhurriedly toward them and caught Xintel by the shoulder. The girl winced as the Chosen One swung her around.

"Give me that necklace," Czerki ordered.

Xintel's face was pale as he fumbled for the catch of the ornament but her arms remained limp at her sides. Raising a hand against a Chosen One was sacrilege punishable by death—and she had guessed what Komso intended.

Barry took a step forward.

"Get your hands off!" His voice was deceptively soft.

Czerki turned with a challenging sneer. "You oppose the will of the Chosen?"

"Barry! Don't!" Xintel cried. "He has killed many."

But the sight of the Chosen One touching her slender body was more than Barry could bear. He took another step forward, his fists clenching.

Czerki whipped out a long wood-metal knife and smiled.

"Suitable?"

Duel. Xintel had told Barry of their custom.

In a move too perfectly timed for coincidence, someone thrust a duplicate knife toward Barry, hilt first. In that instant the Earthman knew he had walked into a framed-up battle against an expert, and with the expert's chosen weapons, just as Komso had planned it.

He must smash that plan. Still empty-handed he braced his feet against the bottom and dived. The Chosen One's knife made one startled lunge and then Barry's hand caught Czerki's wrist. For a second Earthman and Venusian glowered face to face, the Venusian's expression of surprise changing to pain as Barry's Earth-trained muscles tightened.

Barry clutched, digging his fingers into the tendon of Czerki's wrist. Czerki's face contorted. His free hand clawed out, but Barry caught the Chosen One's middle finger and forced it back.

Joints strained and the Venusian whimpered under his breath as Barry increased the crippling pressure. The knife dropped from Czerki's numbed fingers, and then with a twist Barry brought him helpless to his knees.

The faces of the watching Venusians seemed to consist almost entirely of gaping mouths and staring eyes. Barry considered the situation. Perhaps he could do more against Komso and his Chosen by discrediting and releasing this one than by killing him.

"Enough?" he gritted.

The Venusian nodded.

"Next time you bother Xintel you die," Barry warned.

Czerki got to his feet.

"Look out!" Xintel screamed, just as the Chosen One's hand flashed to his belt.

Barry leapt. His right hand, straight-arming, jolted the Venusian's head back, and at the same instant his left whipped a deadly palm-edge judo chop to Czerki's neck.

There was a sound like the breaking of a dry twig. Czerki's body jerked once and the dart of his tube-weapon plowed into the bottom.

With a gesture of revulsion the Earthman dropped the limp body and stepped back.

He looked about for Komso, angry enough now to force an immediate showdown, but the priest had prudently withdrawn.

Xintel took his arm and smiled proudly for all to see.

"Come, Barry," she said. "It is over for now."

The uneasy stares of her people followed

them, and only the long-standing superstitious fear of appearing to criticise the Chosen kept them from breaking into excited comment.

The stranger had not only defied a Chosen One but had killed in the manner of a Leader, with the touch of an empty hand. All knew now he did not come from another yort. And his companion was Xintel!

As soon as they were alone Barry turned to the girl.

"What now?" he demanded.

"Next time Komso will not underestimate you."

"What do you think he'll try?"

Xintel frowned. "Not force. One of the secret methods which have kept the Chosen in power. Perhaps the Curse with which he killed my father."

"Your father?" Barry asked. She had never spoken of her family before.

The subject was obviously painful, but she forced herself to talk.

HER father, Soren, had been an unusual individual from a family of chronic dissidents, a doubter who despite the long indoctrination of the Chosen still possessed the power to think independently. And in his family there had been passed by word of mouth across the generations all the ancient traditions of the other life which the Chosen had nearly succeeded in consigning to the limbo of forgotten knowledge.

He had the courage to venture into the Outside alone, even into the dread Above for short periods, to see for himself the things the Chosen wished forgotten.

He had actually dared to organize groups for cooperative action and to circulate whispers that the Gods Of The Deepes were a fraud perpetrated by the Chosen for their own purposes. He had aroused doubt and become the rallying point for all the latent forces of resistance.

For a brief but exciting time his efforts to undermine the priesthood had been successful. But then the old priest of the Chosen had died suddenly and Komso had succeeded to the post. Where the old priest had been senile and vacillating, Komso took forceful action.

He had publicly named Soren a

blasphemer against the Gods Of The Deepes and had called down their Curse upon him.

A few sleeps later Soren had started with others toward the Cleft Of Hardening. They had scarcely left the tunnel when dozens of torvaks descended upon the group.

The others had escaped easily, the monsters paying no attention to them. All had converged upon Soren and he died quickly.

Komso had regained unquestioned power. His curse had been fulfilled in too dreadful a fashion for any to dispute his word.

Barry developed an unwillingness to spend the remainder of his life hiding behind Xintel's skirt. With increasing boldness, but conscious always of the menace of the Chosen, he began to leave the house and observe the Venusian way of life.

The undersea people bore him no grudge for killing Czerki, he discovered. In fact the Chosen One's death was not mourned even by his three women. But neither were the Venusians openly friendly toward this strange outlander who spoke haltingly and killed without weapons. They regarded him with mingled suspicion and awe.

Xintel's position in the community, he soon decided, was extremely odd.

Marriage relationships in Tana were informal, continuing only as long as mutually satisfactory. Polygamy was an accepted institution. It was customary for the girls of Tana to enter marriage relationships, on a temporary basis at least, almost as soon as they developed the curves of maturity.

Xintel was as beautiful as any female of Tana, and in addition she owned a house and tools and weapons representing considerable wealth. Nevertheless she was the only grown woman who did not have a mate or ex-mate or who was not a widow.

One day he asked her outright about it, and she burst into tears.

For a minute Barry stared, nonplussed. He put one arm around her bare shoulders.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," he said gently.

She snuggled closer in the curve of his arm.

"Don't talk about it if you don't want to," Barry urged.

She raised her head. "But you must know.

"When Komso put his Curse upon my father he could easily have killed me too. I was but a small girl then, and my mother already dead. But he had brought about the death of my father to display his power, and he wanted the people to remember. I was to be a living reminder.

"But, he told the people, I shared my father's guilt of blasphemy by being of his blood. Anyone mating with me would be contaminated, and upon him too would fall the curse of the Gods Of The Deepes.

"The men of Tana are not cowards despite what the Chosen have done to them. Some have faced and fought even the torvaks of the Outside. But to act contrary to what Komso has declared the will of the Gods—that they will not do. So although several have looked upon me with desire, none have dared take me as mate."

There was pity in Barry's heart as he thought of the deep loneliness to which Komso had condemned her from childhood on. More than pity, he thought now. What had started with him as a matter of survival had changed and deepened, become more than friendship.

"But I am not a man of Tana," he blurted impulsively. "And I love you."

Xintel lowered her eyes. "Barry, do you really like me—that way?"

"Yes."

"Then it is settled," she declared, and came into his arms. "See, it is simple."

Later, still holding her closely, he told her, "Xintel dearest, whatever lies ahead we shall face together."

BUT even his newfound happiness could not curb Barry's restless tension. Large as it was, the cavern of Tana was still confining to one accustomed to the open sweeps of Earth, and the threat of Komso hung like a looming storm cloud. And, despite much thinking and long, fruitless conversations, neither Barry nor Xintel could see a way to attack the Chosen's almost invulnerable position.

Roaming the great cave, Barry's attention turned one day to the gas filling the upper portion. It gathered from the tiny bubbles given off by the submarine plants, with even the living houses of Tana contributing, and its level was nearly constant. Whenever its

volume increased beyond a certain point the excess spilled into the tunnel leading to the open sea.

"What's up there?" he asked.

Xintel laughed. "It should do no harm to go there."

Together they swam high above the town along one insloping wall of the cavern, passing through the thin layer where swarming microscopic life furnished Tana's constant illumination, and reached the surface.

"Clear the water from your lungs all at once," Xintel instructed him. "It's easier that way."

She exhaled as far as possible, water pouring from her open mouth, and gasped in a breath of gas. He did likewise, and after some choking and coughing, found he could breathe.

They climbed out on a slanting rock outcropping and he stared around.

"This gas must be almost pure oxygen," he said, his voice ringing hollowly.

He looked around at the vaulted roof and irregular walls, noticing that his breathing, while not painful, was somewhat labored. Then suddenly the girl laughed wildly and did a few steps of a strange sinuous dance.

"What's the matter?" he asked anxiously.

She threw herself into his arms with limp abandon and squinted up into his face as though having difficulty focusing her eyes. He believed he understood, and besides he was beginning to cough.

She was giggling as he pushed her head under the water, but he had to force himself to overcome his instinctive Earth reactions before he could take that first breath of liquid.

After a few minutes Xintel gave him a shamefaced smile.

"Did I make a fool of myself?" she asked.

"Of course not," he replied gallantly but with a trace of absentmindedness.

Slowly they let themselves drift down into the city, with Barry's mind working furiously. He had remained out of water several minutes. He thought of the colony, and—until Xintel touched his arm—of Dorothy.

The experience gave a new purpose to his oddly timeless life. After that during each waking period he swam up to the cavern roof. Each time, as well as he could

judge, he was able to remain out of water a little longer.

At first Xintel scolded him bitterly, as from time immemorial wives have scolded husbands for their own good. Upon the Venusians breathing gaseous oxygen had the same effects as alcohol addiction on Earth. She told him horrible stories of people who had drunkenly wandered into the Outside and fallen afoul of norus or torvaks. She pointed out an oxygen addict who moved jerkily and seemed half insane. Once she even resorted to the ancient feminine weapon of contending amid loud sobs that he no longer loved her or he would instantly cease his debauchery.

But Barry persisted, and after following him and seeing for herself that he did not become intoxicated she finally accepted his habit, along with his periods of silent thoughtfulness, as an inborn peculiarity of her alien mate.

VI

GRADUALLY, so gradually he could not determine when it started, he began to hear a new word whispered around the city.

"Demon!"

"The demons are not all dead!"

"The demons have returned!"

"The demons gather to attack us!"

"Only Komso can save us from the demons!"

"Is he—?"

"Perhaps her father, Soren Who Died Accursed, was a—"

"Have they found—?"

"Will the demons—?"

A shuddering uneasiness spread insidiously among the people, and their attitude changed. Venusian men watched the Earthman with hostile speculation in their eyes and hands close to weapon hilts. Women moved aside as he approached, dragging their children with them.

Although not a single individual mentioned demons to Barry's face he knew he was somehow concerned.

"Just what are these demons?" he demanded of Xintel.

He expected her to refer to some superstition, but she surprised him with a definite answer.

"They were the last of my race to live in the Above—not devil-spirits or supernatural beings at all. But they were outlaws and killers, and so were not permitted to pass through the Place Of Change. Over this there was great bitterness, and the Last Days were filled with hatred and slaughter that is still remembered. But they are all long since dead."

"You mean your people came here from the Above deliberately?" Barry asked incredulously. "Why?"

Xintel nodded. "We—my forefathers—were to have come to the Here for a short time only, for sanctuary. But our way back was closed when the Place Of Change was destroyed. And the Chosen, gaining power, saw that misfortune overtook those who knew the secret of the Place."

She smiled tremulously. "I hoped that you could lead us back. But you too had lost the way of return."

"But why? What made your people come to the Here?"

The pain of ancient tragedy was in Xintel's eyes as she told the story.

"Around us nearly everywhere are creatures, living creatures, small beyond all normal sight," she explained.

"There." She pointed to the light. "And another sort live in the paste which produces gas. My people were always clever at making use of them."

"In the Above live many more types of these unseen creatures. My people became too clever—but they were not as clever as they thought."

She glanced at Barry and spoke with earnest seriousness. "Some of them, incredibly tiny as they are, are deadly. They get inside a person, causing him to sicken and die, killing as surely as a spear-thrust."

She hesitated as though expecting the Earthman to hoot in derision at such an idea, and continued only when he nodded slowly.

"There were quarrels among factions of my people, breaking out again and again with increasingly vicious fury."

"Ordinary weapons were not enough. With their skill my people took the unseen things—they understood, then, a way to see them—and made them change their natures to become more deadly still."

Barry shuddered as he guessed the rest. He remembered talk on Earth of developing mutant, hypervirulent strains for bacterial warfare.

"The ancients used the special unseen creatures they had created to fight their battles, and the slaughter was horrible beyond belief. But then the creatures turned against their masters. The other tiny creatures with which the ancient protected themselves failed, became ineffective, and Death walked the entire Above unhindered."

It hadn't happened on Earth yet but Barry could picture bacterial warfare out of control, spontaneous mutations loose, and no vaccines or antitoxins to combat them. The warm, eternally moist atmosphere of Venus offered ideal conditions. Perhaps that was why the Colony had found only insects and quasi-reptiles. Infection could have spread from homo Venusians to all related, warm-blooded life forms, blasting them into extinction.

"Against that deadly smallness there was no way to fight," Xintel continued. "And there was but one place to flee. So the Place Of Change was built by the wisest of my race. But by the time it was completed only a few remained to use it."

BARRY had no doubts who was fomenting talk of the demons, Komso.

But if the Venusians had once been air-breathers and had deliberately become water-breathers there was still a chance that somehow he could become completely human again. At least his condition was not completely hopeless.

He could escape. His practice sessions had taught him to remain out of water nearly three hours, as nearly as he could judge, and that should be sufficient to re-establish contact with the Colony. But escaping alone, leaving Xintel behind, was something he knew he could never do.

"How did the Place Of Change work?" he asked. "On what principles? Did your Ancients actually understand how to generate Sigma radiations on the surface of a planet? Or was the change accomplished in other ways?"

Xintel shook her head. "That knowledge has fallen into the hands of the Chosen and been destroyed. Knowledge, except for

themselves, is according to the Chosen against the will of the Gods."

"Is there nothing left?" Barry insisted, grasping at straws.

"The Place still remains amid the ruins of Last City," Xintel answered unexpectedly. "But it is wrecked and useless."

"How do you know?"

Xintel smiled sadly. "I have been there, twice. Soren once took me as a little girl, and once I went alone."

"But how?"

"Long since have the creatures of deadly smallness exterminated each other. Soren knew, and I know, and Komso knows. But Komso will not tell the people that one can go to the Above for a short time and not die."

Immediately Barry wanted to see for himself the remains of Last City and particularly the Place Of Change, but the Venusian girl demurred. The trip was perilous, she said, and if they were to leave Tana now, going into the Outside and toward the Above, it would only confirm in the minds of the people that Barry was a demon. Anything that would precipitate open action before they were able to take countermeasures against Komso's plots would be a fatal mistake.

Reluctantly Barry put the idea aside, but he did not abandon it. Instead he doubled his practice sessions in the oxygen at the top of the cavern, driving himself until his chest burned and throbbed. He was still a member of the Five Ship Plan whose duty was to the colony, and besides he had a frightening surety that without outside help Komso would eventually encompass his death.

ONE day when they were returning from the fields in the far reaches of the cavern they saw a man swimming away from their house. Barry put on an angry burst of speed, but the distance was great and the furtive figure vanished.

Xintel went through the three rooms inch by inch, checking all her possessions—but nothing was missing and nothing seemed to have been disturbed.

"We must have frightened him away before he could steal anything," Barry commented.

The girl frowned and bit her lip. "No. I do not think thievery was his object."

"What then?"

"I—I do not know," she admitted uneasily.

Komso finally took official cognizance of the talk of demons. He selected ten young men, not of the Chosen, and led them forth to reconnoiter in the Above. The men went heavily armed, but still superstitious dread would have prevented them from venturing to the myth-haunted surface without the high priest's mystic protection.

Barry grew acutely uneasy when he heard of the expedition. It boded no good for anyone except Komso. Hour after hour the underwater city hummed with speculation. For Barry and Xintel it was a nerve-wracking wait.

Then Komo returned—and with him came only three of the ten.

With lightning rapidity the story spread. There were demons in the Above, and despite Komso's great powers they had turned overwhelmingly potent weapons against them.

The mates of the slain were loud in their lamentations, and as though following prepared instructions, the Chosen spread the rumor that Barry, and Xintel too, were responsible for the slaughter. Barry was a demon spy, and Xintel had turned against her own people to mate with him.

Barry felt certain the priest had deliberately led his men into disaster for the psychological effect. He had been building hatred, and to one of Komso's mentality, seven deaths would be a negligible price for this crowning touch.

Drawn together by a spreading terror the people massed near the center of the city, each seeking company to stem their rising panic of helplessness. Their mutterings increased, their mood grew uglier.

But with dramatic suddenness Komso appeared in the doorway of his cave-temple and swam slowly forward. The murmuring died, then broke out again with a questioning undertone. The priest raised his arms so the sacred bracelets of office on his thick wrists flashed in the cold yellow light. Then slowly, deliberately he began to speak.

He expressed regret for the deaths of those who had followed him aloft. He had

underestimated the malignancy of the demons, he admitted.

A shocked silence fell over the crowd, broken only by the grief stricken sobs of one of the widows. He glared at the woman, and his eyes made her cower.

The peril was dire, he warned. One demon had already penetrated the sacred boundaries of Tana and others were gathering in the Above. Soon they would descend and overwhelm the city unless the people of Tana followed his leadership unquestioningly.

But the mission had not been in vain. Komso had discovered the demons' plans—and their vulnerability.

"We killed one demon!" he boasted.

Barry gasped. Komso was too clever to tell an outright lie when there were three surviving witnesses to check his story.

"Kill the demons! Kill all the demons!" A Chosen One began the chant, and it was taken up and echoed by the crowd.

It sounded so absurd that a group of aquatic semi-savages could hope to attack a surface settlement defended by the finest weapons of Earth that Barry almost laughed. But he remembered Xintel's account of the Venusian downfall, and was not so sure. Komso's forces would not have to breach the defense perimeter of the colony to achieve their objective. Bacterial warfare ineffective under water, could render the surface uninhabitable again.

And the colony had no inkling of such a threat.

"Damn him," Barry thought. It was all so stupid and useless.

He fumed while Komso's words calmed, influenced, and finally controlled with hypnotic completeness the emotions of his listeners.

"The demons shall die!" Kosmo orated. "I, Komso, shall call upon the powers of the Gods Of The Deep. Beasts of the marshlands shall come at my command, smashing and overturning the houses and forts of the demons in the Above! And then shall the Unseen Death smite them!"

The people roared their approval, and while they were still shouting the priest turned away in abrupt dismissal.

Barry and Xintel looked at each other, their faces white and set, each wondering

what they could do.

A hundred thoughts flashed through Barry's mind at once, dominated by the knowledge it was his duty to warn the colony. He had become a freak through accident, but he was still an Earthman. But to make his warning really valuable he must know more of Komso's methods. He thought momentarily of invading the cave-temple to steal information or even assassinate the priest, but discarded the notion. Komso would be expecting such an attempt and have his Chosen Ones waiting.

THEY were still discussing the situation hours later when Xintel suddenly raised her hand for silence. A puzzled frown appeared on her face and she dropped to the lower room. Barry, watching her peer around the door curtain, saw her body grow tense. He listened, and his ears caught a confused sound of voices.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"Men are coming this way, and they are led by Sanlan, the brother of that Czerki."

"Komso's work?"

"Naturally."

Barry reached for a spear. "They won't touch you as long as I'm alive," he promised.

The sounds outside grew louder.

"Go in through the door," he heard a voice command. "Chase the demon and his woman upward and out. Lart and I will attend to them."

Xintel leaped to the upper room and began tossing down baskets.

"Block the hatchway," she directed. "We will hold the middle room."

Quickly Barry piled them across the opening, thrusting extra spears through the wovenwork and into the material of the floor. It was a flimsy barricade but better than nothing.

Xintel loaded her crossbow. Barry stood beside her with a spear ready.

"Now!" the voice outside boomed.

Men poured into the lower room, shouting to keep up their courage. Xintel, her face pale, squinted along her crossbow and thumbed the trigger. A man screamed. A spear thwacked upward into the baskets as the girl put her strength against her weapon's reloading ratchet.

"Can you hold them off a minute?" Barry whispered.

She nodded, and he leaped to the upper room. One basket remained, and he found that by standing on it his head was just below the roof's lower surface. With his knife he began cutting into the matted fibers of the roof. He was nearly through when a whisper from above made him pause.

"Psst! Lart, be very sure your thrust misses."

That was Sanlan, Barry guessed.

The other Venusian growled under his breath.

"Komso will have your skin if you disobey," Sanlan warned.

"But why?"

Sanlan chuckled. "Have you no faith?"

Barry resumed cutting, puzzled and suspicious, opening a hole just large enough to admit his head. He had guessed his position well, for Sanlan and Lart were standing with their backs toward him while they watched the hatchway.

The Earthman withdrew silently, taking no chances that Sanlan's talk had been a trick to draw him out.

Xintel glanced up as he dropped to the middle room. A confused discussion was in progress below, for no man wanted to be the first to rush the barricade.

"Give me both your tube-weapons," Barry demanded.

She turned her hips, allowing him to take them from her belt without putting down her crossbow or relaxing her vigilance.

"Come at once when you hear me call," he directed. "We can't hold out forever. It's run or die."

"Run? Where?"

"Outside. It is our only chance."

He leaped to the upper room again.

A tube gun in each hand, he thrust his wrists through the hole he had cut. Sanlan and Lart were still waiting.

"Perhaps you should have others break through the walls," Lart suggested impatiently.

Sanlan shook his head. "There is plenty of time."

But Sanlan's own time ran out just then as Barry triggered the weapon in his left hand. He died instantly.

Lart whirled. Barry fired the other tube. Lart screamed and doubled over in agony.

"Xintel!" Barry called.

She came up with a rush.

Lart was still alive, and he screamed as they emerged onto the roof. Answering yells came from below.

"Let's go!" Barry barked as attackers began to swarm out of the house.

They swam desperately, side by side. The members of the mob trailed after them, but although they split the water with blood-thirsty yells they were reluctant in their efforts to close with the fugitives. Xintel had taught them respect during the battle inside the house, and Barry was a dread demon.

Barry broke his stroke to point. A large crowd had gathered around the mouth of the tunnel.

"Women there too," Xintel panted.

As they drew nearer he could see she was right. Women and unarmed men predominated in the group around the portal. They made no hostile moves, but nevertheless Barry drew his knife.

And then, off to one side, he saw the unmistakable figure of the priest.

Komso watched their headlong flight with a thin smirk of satisfaction, and as they drew near he pointed one arm at them in a ritualistic gesture and began a resonant chant. A deadly hush fell over the watchers.

"Accursed be ye!" Komso intoned. "Manifestations of evil who presume to flaunt those the Gods have appointed to rule, be ye accursed by the Gods Of The Deeps!

"Gods Of The Deeps, heed thy servant! Send thou thy creatures that they may feed, that they may rend the flesh and grind the bones and destroy utterly those whom I have cursed in thy mighty names!"

BARRY felt a crawling prickle of fear along his spine at the confidence of Komso's manner. Xintel's face twisted in terror as she remembered how that self-same curse had brought death to her father. The Earthman felt an almost overwhelming urge to swerve aside, to swing in a suicidal dive upon the priest and his Chosen guards. But remembrance of his duties to the colony and to Xintel overcame blind fury.

It seemed too good to be true when he and Xintel plunged into the dark passageway without interference. The armed mob followed, shouting to the noncombatants to move aside—but they were in the clear. They emerged from the tunnel mouth into the open, deadly, faintly luminous sea of the Outside.

"Hold!" They heard Komso's shouted command behind them. "Follow and you too shall be accursed!"

He did not have to repeat his order, for the Venusians were never too eager to venture into the Outside. Instead they massed at the portal to witness the fate of the demon and his traitorous mistress.

Suddenly the girl gasped in horror, clutching Barry's arm and pointing upward and outward. Against the background of dim luminosity, far in the distance, two bright pinpoints showed. Then three. Four. And then more than he could count.

"Torvaks!" she gasped.

Barry stared aghast. As though summoned by Komso's words the terrible undersea monsters were gathering from all directions.

Xintel's forehead wrinkled in desperate concentration.

"The Cleft!" she said suddenly.

Barry followed blindly as she dove toward the rocky, irregular bottom. Each time he risked a glance over his shoulder the monsters were nearer. And there were more of them. His muscles ached, but those trails of ominous light acted as a powerful stimulant.

The girl led him along the bottom, paying no attention to landmarks but relying solely on an intuitive sense of direction which all Venusians possessed. Soon Tana was lost to sight.

How long the nightmare chase lasted Barry was never to know. Seconds grew to ages and minutes to throbbing eternities. He concentrated on swimming, swimming, swimming for his very life, and hardly heard Xintel's words of encouragement.

"Just—a—little—further!"

Then stabbing, biting, burning pain seared his throat. Almost intolerable. But Xintel was guiding him straight down into a narrow fissure in the bottom. Her legs stopped their flutter-kick and she allowed momentum to carry her bottomward. Barry

too ceased his exertions in a state of near collapse.

"Perhaps—they—won't follow!" Xintel panted.

Both looked upward. The monstrous shapes—they could see the gross, hideous bodies now—seemed unwilling to follow their prey into the crevice. They wheeled above in relentless circles.

One creature, like a gigantic moray with finned pectoral legs, made an abortive lunge but turned upward again a few feet above them.

Another torvak's neck shot out, its armored head striking the eel-creature a tremendous blow. Another monster swooped, fangs ripping, and for a few minutes the water grew murky with spilled blood and roiled ooze as the three huge beasts battled. The fight ended, and once more the saurians took up a restless, watchful patrol above the cowering pair.

Barry's breathing eased but the burning in his throat remained. Something in the water was irritating the tender membranes of his lungs, nose and eyes. He glanced at Xintel and saw that she too was in pain. But it was this very irritant that was preserving their lives. The monsters did not like its smell or taste.

"Maybe they'll go away," he said, not believing his own words but trying to reassure the girl.

The cleft in the ocean floor was long and narrow, deeper than it was wide, and at the bottom it tapered to a hair-thin crevice in the bedrock. The steeply slanting walls were deeply covered with a yellow-blue greasy jelly mixed with mud and silt. Barry recognized it from Xintel's descriptions as the Cleft Of Hardening where soft wooden implements were made useable. The crack in the bottom must extend deep into the heart of the planet.

"Xintel," he asked. "Are there any weapons buried here now?"

"There always are," she answered, but her voice was filled with despair.

"Where?"

She did not know. When the inhabitants of Tana buried objects to be hardened they were extremely careful to smooth the jelly over them. Otherwise prowling norus would dig them up.

Pawing into the sticky, corrosive jelly with hands and arms they began a blind search. Within minutes the girl gave a cry as she uncovered a spear. She wiped away the clinging stuff, then wept with disappointment. It had been buried only a short time and still had the soft consistency of balsa. Angrily she threw it down.

Barry recovered it. As a weapon it was worthless, but it was firm enough to use as a prod. Methodically he moved along the bottom, thrusting deeply every few inches.

"Got something!" he called, and Xintel swam to his side.

THERE were two spears and two long knives, all thoroughly hardened. Within a few more sleeps someone from Tana would have made the dangerous trip to pick them up.

Barry glanced at the shadows overhead. It felt good to have a weapon in his hand again, even though logic told him a spear could never penetrate the armored hides of those nightmare creatures. They could do absolutely nothing but wait and hope.

He found a projecting rock that was relatively free from slime and settled down. He wanted to think.

A sudden commotion overhead made him leap up. Two bodies came hurtling over the edge of the cleft some two hundred yards away, with trails of light glistening behind them. A torvak lashed out, missed, and its frustrated bellow made the water vibrate as the newcomers settled toward the bottom.

"Norus!" Xintel hissed in Barry's ear.

"They're not armed," Barry observed.

She turned on him peevishly. "But they're norus!"

Barry, not trained to hatred by a lifetime of strife with these outcasts, felt sorry for them as they crouched trembling and gasping from their flight. They eyed him furtively.

After the first few minutes, when it became evident the norus did not intend to break the unspoken truce imposed by mutual peril, the girl relaxed. Yet she did not turn her back to them.

For a long while she and Barry sat in silence. There was nothing to say, nothing worth saying in their hopeless situation. The norus watched stolidly, their eyes flicking

occasionally between the pair from Tana and the monsters circling overhead.

Then in a quick move that startled Barry the girl stood up, unfastened her skirt, stepped out of the garment. She seemed entirely unaware of her nakedness.

"Fan your hands back and forth," she requested. "Make light."

Barry complied, swirling the water to brightness. The norus watched uneasily, staring hard at the girl. But Xintel was absorbed in inspecting the fabric of her skirt, going over it inch by inch. A couple of times she held it to her nose, but each time shook her head.

"Ha!" she cried suddenly, pointing to a slight, almost invisible stain.

"What is?" he asked.

"It may be—. Give me your knife."

She cut away the stained cloth and wrapped it around the unhardened, useless spear.

"What are you doing?"

She ignored his question.

"Take this and go part way up," she directed. "But be careful, very careful, dearest—and throw it over the rim."

Trusting her knowledge of this undersea world, he climbed the slippery wall. Half-way up he found a foothold. He tensed his muscles, heaved the weapon with the peculiar pushing gesture he had learned was the only way to throw under water. As the spear made a high arc he abandoned his exposed position in a headlong dive.

Xintel shouted happily. "Look! Barry! Look!"

Above the cleft the water was whipped to intense brilliance as the nightmare monsters converged on the spot where the spear had fallen.

"What is it?" Barry yelled.

Xintel laughed and threw her arms around his neck. "The curse, Barry! The curse Komso put upon us!"

"Huh?" he grunted.

"Everyone knows those beasts follow the smell of blood, and that a man wounded in the Outside is as good as dead. They follow other smells too!"

At once he understood. "So Komso's curse is some powerful lure that will bring every monster within miles to attack, but has a smell we ourselves can't detect."

She nodded. "That one we saw leaving our house—he did it."

Xintel put down her skirt and even undressed her precious metal necklace. Stark naked and unarmed she started up the slope.

"Come back!" he yelled as he sensed her intention.

She paused, but then continued upward.

A shadow swooped.

"Look out!" Barry screamed. But Xintel had been alert and had thrown herself into a plunging dive.

"Oh!" she sobbed as she pulled herself up beside him. "It's no good. It has gotten into my skin. Probably yours too."

But after his burst of renewed hope Barry refused to surrender. "This corrosive jelly might counteract it," he suggested.

Xintel's eyes were somber. "We have nothing to lose," she agreed.

They scooped out two troughs in the greasy jelly and buried themselves with only their heads projecting, but at Xintel's suggestion they took positions where they could keep an eye on the norus.

"Rub some on your face," Barry advised the girl. "In your hair too."

"It stings!" she complained.

"I know. But it's our only chance."

VIII

THEY let an hour of torment pass, and although Xintel tried gamely to keep her face composed she could not hide an occasional grimace of pain as the caustic jelly ate at the more tender portions of her skin.

The swarm of monsters still held patrol above the cleft with dull-witted reptilian patience. The two norus had settled down, squatting lumpishly, with only their eyes active.

At last Barry pulled himself from his uncomfortable bed. His body was red and chapped from head to foot. Xintel was in the same condition.

"I hope this works," he said.

He climbed toward the rim, nearly to the top, and still the beasts paid no attention. He made no sudden movements and their eyesight was apparently dull.

7—Planet—May

"Barry! That's enough! Come back!" Xintel called.

Deliberately he waved his arms. A swimming torvak turned in its own length and plunged toward him, and Barry barely evaded its rush.

"If we try to escape they'll see us," Xintel said.

Barry nodded sadly. Even though Komso's curse had been voided they could still only wait and hope.

The nomads who had found refuge with them unwittingly solved his dilemma. As once more the age-old envious hatred of the homeless ones for the city dwellers came to the fore they whispered to each other. For a moment Barry and Xintel grew inattentive. The norus had been waiting for just that. They dashed forward, intent on snatching the weapons that to them represented great wealth. Xintel shouted in alarm and one of the savages struck at her with a webbed fist.

Barry's knife flashed and a noru died. As the survivor swerved to evade Xintel's spear, Barry was upon him from behind.

His knife descended, this time not in a killing stroke. Deliberately he carved a long, shallow gash down the savage's back, a wound that would bleed copiously. Then he shouted and roared ferociously. The wounded noru fled.

Xintel streaked in pursuit, a grim expression on her face and a spear poised, but Barry reached out one arm and caught her ankle. Instinctively she twisted and her fingernails raked his face.

He slapped her hard.

"No!" he barked. "Let the noru go!"

She looked at him in furious disgust as the nomad churned in panic-stricken flight toward the rim.

"He's bleeding!" Barry snapped.

A great dark shadow swooped at the noru, missed, and Xintel looked admiringly at Barry as she understood.

The water above the cleft grew streaky with light as the monsters abandoned the tenuous remnants of the lure to follow a trail of fresh blood. The noru gibbered in horror as he dodged along the rocky bottom.

"Let's go!" Barry barked. "Straight up!"

It was a long, tiring swim. At last they floated just below the surface.

"Can you find the colony?" Barry asked.

"We go to the nearest shore, near Last City," Xintel corrected. "We are not safe here over deep water."

They swam again, this time horizontally, guided once more by Xintel's compass sense. Once Barry raised his head, but all he could see was a narrow circle of rippled water upon which the ever-present mists pressed heavily. A slight rosy glow overhead, dim and diffuse, was the only indication of the sun.

Finally the girl stopped. "We are almost to the edge of the Above," she said.

Barry put his head up again but still could see nothing but water and mist. They swam a few strokes more, and then he and the girl lowered their feet to a bottom of soft mud.

When he stood up in the neck-deep water and emptied his lungs there was an interval of wracking coughing and gasping. But then he found with elation that he was breathing without too much difficulty. His practice sessions in the cavern were paying off.

Xintel too stood up and gasped in the warm, stench-filled air, floundering beside the taller Earthman as they waded toward a dimly seen bank ahead. The water had shoaled to her waist, when without warning, she staggered and collapsed.

Barry caught her as she fell, and with Earth habits returning, cradled her in his arms with her face above water.

Xintel! What's wrong?"

She stirred in his arms and her eyes opened.

"Put me down," she requested.

Then she noticed the frightened expression on his face.

"I'll be all right soon," she assured him.

"Just—tired. And air—too suddenly."

Tenderly he laid her in the shallow water.

"Sure you're all right?" he asked solicitously.

She nodded.

For a few minutes he waited beside her, thinking of the colony. He understood now Komso's reference to the beasts of the marshlands overturning the houses of the demons, and the priest's plan of battle. His lure would attract the monsters with which the colony had already had trouble.

And when the colonists were forced outside by the hypervirulent bacteria of the Unseen, death would strike.

Without a warning the unsuspecting colony would be doomed, but without Xintel's guidance he could not reach them to give that warning.

"Barry." The Venusian girl's voice was still weak and unsteady. "The Place Of Change is on this shore. Go look at it. Perhaps you, with a different mind and a different knowledge, could—"

"You sure you'll be all right alone?"

She was sure, and finally Barry left her, emptied his lungs once again, and floundered up the muddy bank.

HIS body felt heavy without the support of the water to which it had become accustomed, but it was good to be walking like a true Earthman again. He plodded inland, cautiously forcing his way through the thick swamp vegetation. The ground underfoot was a tangle of roots, slime and jagged stones.

Last City was a disappointment. Nothing was left but a few scarcely discernible mounds almost hidden by the swamp jungle. It was impossible to tell even what sort of buildings once existed.

He was ready to turn back when a shift in the mists disclosed the Place Of Change.

It was a doomed building, huge even by the engineering standards of Earth, and something done in ancient times had prevented the jungle from encroaching upon it. Half submerged in mud, tilted where the ground beneath it had softened and shifted, the great hemispherical shell nevertheless remained intact. Barry hastened forward, found a circular opening, evidently once a window high on the structure but now at ground level, and after a glance at the dimness within stooped and entered.

He had not known what to expect—Xintel had told him only that the Place Of Change was irreparably ruined—but certainly nothing so bleak and disheartening. There was nothing but mud within the great building. Whatever machinery or equipment had been used to change the Venusians to water-breathers had vanished without a trace. Barry's shoulders sagged as he turned back toward the window.

But then the engineering training of his years on Earth reasserted itself, and he wondered of what material the building had been constructed to withstand the ravages of the savage environment of the Venus. With the flat of one hand he brushed at the greenish, clinging slime that covered the walls. Etched into the wall were strange symbols arranged in an orderly fashion. Writing, obviously done by the Ancients.

It was possible that the inscriptions included the technical data on which the Place had been based.

He ran to another section of wall and wiped at it, then at random to a third spot. More writing. It meant nothing to him, but in the colony there were specialists who might—

His chest began to burn, bringing his mind back to his present situation. There was nothing he could do for the present, and he must warn the colony. There was no telling how far Komso's plans had progressed. Perhaps the attack had already started.

He hurried out through the window, slid and stumbled through the swamp, plunged into the water. Xintel was sitting up.

"Can you find the colony?" he asked.

She nodded. "Far along the shore, that way, I can feel the presence of life. Your kind of life."

"That's it! Let's go!"

They followed the shoreline, and as the minutes passed a happy excitement grew in the Earthman at the prospect of seeing his own kind again. Xintel was silent.

When they came to the opening of the slough, Xintel pointed.

"That way. Not far."

Barry shook his head vigorously. "They'd shoot first and look later," he explained. "Particularly after Komso's first raid. I'll have to approach overland."

Half a mile beyond the slough a huge tree had fallen and was lying half in the swamp and half in the water.

"This should be far enough," he decided. "Wait here for me. And be careful."

He stuck his head out, studying the treacherous, mist-shrouded swamp he must cross, then ducked under again. The Venusian girl looked at him for an instant. Her hands moved as though to detain him.

"Good-bye Barry."

He kissed her and held her close.

"It's not good-bye," he promised. "I'll come back."

Xintel smiled tremulously.

He released her and climbed to the tree-trunk, emptied his lungs of water and slogged off into the swamp. It was filthy and difficult and dangerous traveling, but a sense of urgency was upon him.

After a while he began to sing, loudly and hoarsely and off key. He sang the popular songs of his last days on Earth, cowboy ballads, ribald and unprintable construction camp ditties. The sounds drifted thinly into the enshrouding mists.

He did not sing from happiness. The colony would be an armed camp and the songs of Earth offered his only means of identification in the fog. At the end of each verse he paused and listened.

He finished a particularly lugubrious cowboy number entitled *Blood On The Saddle*.

"Hey! Who's that out there?" A voice reached him through the mist.

"Ya-hoo!" Barry called. "Where are you?"

"Over here!" the voice replied.

"Keep yelling, and—don't—shoot!" Barry called, spacing his words for clearness.

But sounds moved in tricky ways through the moist, opaque air and it was only after long floundering that he saw the dim shadows of men.

"Who are you?" the voice called sharply. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm Barry Barr."

"You lie!" someone shouted. "Barry Barr's dead!"

Barry recognized the voice.

"That's what you think, Phillips!"

He sloshed his way over to join them and they stared in amazement.

"Where you been?" one of them demanded.

"At the bottom of the sea."

"This ain't no time for kidding!" the man retorted angrily.

"I mean it," Barry declared earnestly. "But guide me in quick. There's hell brewing."

HE WAITED impatiently in the vestibule of the central building while they peeled off their rubberized swamp suits. Then he was inside, back in the colony he had never expected to see again.

"Call the council of captains and get the leading technical men of each division," he snapped. "Emergency!"

He coughed, his lungs irritated by the artificially dehumidified air of the building. Just then Dr. Jensen passed down the hallway. He saw his erstwhile patient and came running.

"What happened to you, son?" he asked.

"Water machine stopped," Barry said shortly, unwilling to be diverted from more pressing matters by past events. "Had to get out or die."

"The devil!" the doctor exclaimed. "It was running all right when I came back, but the window was smashed."

For Barry that was conclusive evidence—if such were needed—that the breakdown had been no accident. Hind had turned on the water and power again to cover his deed.

Dr. Jensen grabbed Barry's arm. "Let me make some tests on you," he asked eagerly.

"No time now," Barry snapped.

The four spaceship captains and as many technicians as could crowd into the room, set up a babble of questions as Barry entered. He glanced around quickly, searching for two faces, but neither Dorothy Voorhees nor Robson Hind was there. He held up a hand for silence.

The noise subsided.

"Gentlemen, there is intelligent life on Venus, intelligent *human* life of an origin common to our own. You tangled with them recently."

"My God!" a man exclaimed. "We thought it was some animal that killed Evans."

"I told you that was a knife wound and not the mark of teeth," another interrupted.

"We heard Fred shooting out beside the slough," someone explained. "But by the time we got there he was dead and there was nothing in sight."

"Don't underestimate these Venusians," Barry warned. "They live under water. No knowledge of fire or explosives—they lost

those when they went aquatic—but their bacteriology is advanced. They once staged a full scale bacterial war. And they knew enough biological science—a damn' sight more than we know—to deliberately become water breathers to escape the mess their war created."

He noticed sceptical looks on some of the faces.

"Just look at me," he said. "What happens by accident can be done on purpose. This colony is facing death. A fanatical group of Venusians are planning to wipe us out, and the attack will come soon. They will use a chemical that attracts every swamp beast and water monster within miles.

"It works. I know it works," he insisted, and shuddered as he remembered the torvaks.

"Then there will be hypervirulent bacteria. You know what that means!"

"Why should they attack us?" someone demanded.

"You're strange to them, alien, and there is a leader among them who fears outside influences will undermine his absolute control."

"All right! Let's get ready, shoot the works, and give them what they're asking for!" The man who spoke had been a close friend of Evans.

"No!" Barry said decisively. "That would be the worst thing possible!"

"What would you advise?" one of the captains asked.

"Many of them would be friendly if given a chance," Barry explained. "But if you plant mines in the slough and wipe out the attacking party it will mean enmity between colonists and the surviving Venusians for all time to come. Both sides will be vulnerable, you to bacterial attack, they to depth charges, and the surface of Venus will be rendered uninhabitable for years or even centuries."

"What's the alternative?" Captain Reno demanded.

The door opened and Barry glanced around. Even in mud-streaked coveralls Dorothy Voorhees was beautiful. He had forgotten just how desirable she was.

"Barry!" she cried joyfully, and ran to him.

Instinctively he responded to her kiss—until he remembered Xintel and his own condition.

"I won't be able to stay," he told her, deliberately making his voice harsh. "I'm not cured and probably never will be."

"But—but your water machine can be fixed," she protested.

"There's more than that," he said, and with an effort turned away.

IX

"**A**S I WAS saying, gentlemen. Using the electric secondaries from the ships, with submerged electrodes, you can set up a high-voltage, low-amperage barrier across the slough that will stun without killing. If this first attack can be warded off without killing, perhaps we can establish friendly relations."

"What makes you think they could be friendly?" a man asked suspiciously.

"Because of a girl named Xintel who would undoubtedly become their leader if Komso were killed or discredited. She saved my life, and since then we have lived together and fought side by side. She is waiting on the edge of the swamp now, an outcast from her own people because she dared help me."

Dorothy understood more from his tone than his words alone conveyed. Her face paled.

"Barry," she began, her voice strained. "You—?"

The door opened again and three men crowded into the room. One was Robson Hind. The electronics expert's face went gray as he saw his supposed victim still alive. Barry itched to get at him but for the moment too much was at stake to permit personal revenge.

"Rig the shock charges at once," he suggested. "Xintel and I will do our best to head off the attack under water."

There were objections. Some considered it too dangerous. A heated argument broke out, but at last the council of captains nodded agreement. A sublethal current was to be used, but it was to be backstopped by mortars, machine guns and flame throwers. Any creature showing its head above water was to be blasted on sight.

"I'll attend to the power supply," Hind suddenly volunteered.

Barry guessed what was really in his mind. From Hind's unbalanced, paranoid viewpoint it was essential he be removed to forestall an investigation. He turned to the spaceship captains.

"I most strongly urge that someone other than Robson Hind take charge of the work."

"Why?" Captain Reno snapped.

"My reasons are valid, believe me. I'll explain later."

"The man's crazy!" Hind spluttered.

Captain Reno looked at his fellow officers and they nodded.

"Podtiaguine, take charge of the installation," Reno commanded.

The dry air was hurting Barry's lungs; Komso might attack at any moment; and Xintel was all alone where hostile swamp met hostile sea.

"I've got to get out," he declared. "Give me a pair of liquid fire pistols."

A storekeeper hurried to get them, and as Barry buckled the holster belt around his waist he looked for Dorothy. She was gone.

"Remember," he warned. "No killing unless absolutely necessary, but watch out for tricks. If my luck holds I'll be back. I have things to settle."

He looked meaningfully at Hind, then turned abruptly and strode down the hall, his ragged trousers flapping damply, his Venusian sandals squishing at every step. The warm, stench-filled Venusian mist closed around him, revivifying him and soothing his tormented lungs as he started toward the swamp.

"Barry!" It was Dorothy.

"Barry, I want a straight answer."

"Yes?"

"Have you stopped loving me?"

His answer was unhesitating. "No, and I never will. But I have no right since I became—like this."

She made a sound between a gasp and a sob.

"But that Venusian girl?"

Barry fumbled for words. "I—I love her too. It's just that I—well—you and she belong in different worlds and I'm—I'm part of both but not fully of either."

"Oh! But you'll come back—for short periods at least?"

"If I live through what's coming," he answered soberly.

She smiled with an effort. "Be careful, Barry dear, and—good luck!"

She turned, running back toward the buildings, and he plunged into the reeking swamp, backtracking along his own trail of muddy footprints and crushed vegetation.

He emerged at the fallen tree, dived in, and with a sense of relief filled his lungs with water.

"Xintel!" he called.

"Here!" He swung around. The bank beneath the tree trunk had been hollowed out by the action of ripples on the soft mud, and she crouched there, protected on three sides.

"I was so afraid you weren't coming back!"

"I told you I'd return."

"Barry?" Her voice trembled. "Did you see—her?"

He nodded.

"And yet you came back to me!" She spoke as though she could hardly believe it.

"Listen closely," he broke in. "What do the women of Tana think of Komso's plans?"

"They know many of their men will never return."

"Do you think you could—?"

"Perhaps I could sneak back into Tana. But what good would that do?"

Barry frowned thoughtfully. "Could you persuade some of them, as many as possible, to follow the war party and overtake their men? When they see you're alive, that Komso's curse didn't work—"

Xintel shook her head. "Most have never been outside Tana in their lives. Even to save their men they would be too fearful of the sea dangers and of Komso's wrath. They would never follow me."

Barry drew one of his fire pistols and moved aside.

"Watch this," he told her. The liquid charge was self-oxidizing and should burn under water, but there was a distinct danger the gun would backfire. His nerves were screaming as he squeezed the trigger.

Scarlet fire lanced from the muzzle with

a sizzling roar that nearly broke their eardrums.

The water surged and heaved.

Xintel pressed her hands to her ears; her eyes were round with amazement.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"That was fire," Barry answered, handing her both weapons. "Now you have magic to surpass anything of Komso's. Would that help persuade the women?"

Xintel smiled grimly. "They will follow me or else—. And if Komso or a Chosen One should interfere, would it—?"

"It would. And tell the women that if your people and mine can meet as friends there will be guns like this for everyone. Norus and torvaks will hold no more terrors."

"But you?" she asked.

"I must wait at the mouth of the slough and stop Komso there."

"But—?"

"Waste no more time! Hurry!"

AFTER she was gone he swam along the shore to the slough and settled on the bottom. He waited interminably it seemed before he spotted the distant streaks of light left by Komso's men, perhaps a hundred of them in a close group.

He remained crouched, waiting until they were just beyond crossbow range. Then he stood up, waving his arms to create enough light to make his identity unmistakable. He had decided his only course lay in turning Komso's own propaganda against him.

"Stop!" he commanded.

For a moment there was confusion in the ranks, and those in front backed water.

"Come forth, Komso, and look upon me!" Barry called. "You are a trickster and a fraud, and your curses are without power!"

Komso's jaw went slack and his face grew crimson. The priest spoke softly to a Chosen One.

"Men," he declared. "Only a demon could survive the curse of the Gods Of The Deeps—but even a demon can die!"

Barry almost missed seeing the Chosen One raise his crossbow, but some instinct warned him just as the weapon twanged. He sidestepped and the missile whizzed by.

It had been close. If they were to open upon him in volleys—

"Komso's curses are powerless but mine are not!" he declared loudly, concealing his nervousness. "You are forgiven this time, but the next man who raises a weapon against me will feel my wrath. He shall die screaming in slow agony!"

"Rush him! Kill him!" Komso ordered, attempting to rally his wavering ranks. But Barry's boast, and their belief that he was a demon, held them back.

Barry scanned the sea for the patch of light that would indicate Xintel approaching with the women of Tana. Nothing. Stalling was his only chance.

"Men of Tana," he began. "If you follow Komso you go to certain death. Already you have seen that his so-called curse means nothing. And now I shall tell you how—"

"Close your ears!" Komso shrieked. "Listen to this infidel and the curse of the Gods will be upon you too!"

The men trembled, torn between fear of the demon and fear of their own leader.

"Those from Above would be your friends," Barry argued. "They are not demons, but men very like yourselves."

"Liar!" Komso bellowed. "The people of Tana are the only true men!"

The warriors nodded, accepting the oft-repeated dogma as indisputable truth. Barry realized it was useless to argue. He waited, hoping something would swing the balance. Meanwhile Komso deployed his forces in a crescent across the mouth of the slough. To Barry it looked like preparation for a rush that would overwhelm him.

Each warrior, he saw, carried a large sealed wooden cylinder. They handled them gingerly. Barry guessed their purpose. They contained the hypervirulent bacterial cultures with which the colony was to be exterminated. But of course, to the Venusians themselves, they were magic.

Just when it seemed Komso's men were rallying from their fright, Barry sighted a speck of brightness far out to sea. One of the men saw it too and called the priest's attention to it. Komso's stare of puzzlement changed to fury as he made out the forms of thirty women.

Xintel darted ahead of the group, past Komso's men, and before the priest could

give an order, she had reached Barry's side.

"I had to use all the fire," she said in a low voice. "There were torvaks, and it killed them."

Barry squeezed her hand, although he wished she had saved one charge with which to impress the war party.

Komso's forces were disorganized. Several of the men had left ranks to join their frightened, panting mates and a series of shrill family quarrels were in progress despite all the priest's efforts. Men cursed their wives for leaving Tana and were in turn cursed for everything the near-hysterical females could lay tongue to.

"Hear me!" Komso bellowed. "Hear me!"

The quarreling stopped abruptly.

"I challenge the demon to single, bare-handed combat!"

Barry gulped. He had wanted for a long time to get his hands on Komso, and now the opportunity was here.

"I accept!" he said firmly.

Xintel's face was ashen; her lips were trembling.

"Barry! My father believed the Leaders used poison under their fingernails; the slightest scratch means death," she whispered.

Barry dared not back down now. He watched Komso advance.

THE priest swam upward and stopped, slight motions of arms and legs holding him there. Barry recognized it as a clever move. Komso had seen what the Earthman's muscles could do when he was able to plant his feet solidly.

"Come meet your doom, Demon!" Komso taunted.

Barry sensed the interest of the watchers. Many times they had seen Komso's powers displayed, and they were waiting for the demon to flee or die.

Suddenly Barry launched himself from the bottom in a headlong rush.

Komso dodged and his hands came out in a clawing, scratching reach. In that instant Barry knew Xintel had been right.

He knocked Komso's arm aside and whipped his fist toward the smirking face. It struck, but only a glancing blow. It left him floundering off balance. The water

around them glowed with increasing brightness as they twisted and turned.

Again and again Komso's poisoned nails reached out, but each time Barry managed to escape. He tried to maneuver the battle toward the bottom, but Komso stayed above and made short, threatening swoops. Barry was forced to move upward again or remain entirely on the defensive. He did not dare grapple.

In desperation he relaxed his guard and tried a judo chop at Komso's shoulder muscles. The priest uttered a cry of pain, but the blow had not disabled. Fingernails scraping along his neck filled him with blind panic. Luckily they failed to break the skin.

Komso drew away, dove in again, this time low, clawing at Barry's legs and keeping clear of his punishing fists.

Barry drew his legs up, and as the Venusian passed under him, pumped them down with all his strength.

One foot struck Komso's side. Barry felt something shatter beneath his heel.

Komso pulled up from his rush. He turned, unhurt, prepared to dive again. And then one hand went to his side, feeling through his clothing. His face went greenish; his jaw sagged. His eyes rolled and he screamed in utter despair. Barry was too startled to follow up his advantage.

Seconds passed, and then there was a whizzing, hissing sound moving through the water at tremendous speed. A streak of light. Barry barely glimpsed the shark-like creature that burst through the ranks of Komso's men. Straight as an arrow it came, ignoring those it knocked aside.

Komso's third scream broke in the middle, unfinished. Then there was only a spreading pink stain and a few remnants.

The dead silence that followed was broken by a yell of horror. Out to sea specks of light grew brighter by the second. Warriors and women alike milled in confusion, leaderless, and when one man started a panic-stricken dash up the slough, the others dropped their weapons and followed.

Barry hung in the water, still not comprehending, until Xintel shook him out of his stunned inaction.

"Quick, Barry!"

Her legs churned the water at top speed

and she guided him with occasional touches. Once he glanced over his shoulder, and the glow around the slough's mouth disclosed huge black shapes gathering. Torvaks!

The girl swam close to shore where the water was thick and muddy and fetid with the reek of decay. After a while she cut her speed so he could come up beside her. No Venusians were in sight.

"His own curse!" she said.

Barry understood. Komso had been carrying a vial of his secret lure. Barry's random kick had broken it, saturating the priest's clothing. The beasts of the ocean had done the rest, and now, in addition, they had the smell of fresh blood to attract them.

"I've got to get ashore at once!" Barry panted.

Trapped between the electric barrier and the monsters prowling the slough, the Venusians would be doomed. With their leader dead, and ravening death at their heels, they would have forgotten all about attacking the colony, Barry hoped.

X

ONCE more they reached the spot where the tree lay at the water's edge.

"Wait here, darling," Barry said hurriedly, and climbed out.

He lay on the tree trunk a moment, coughing the water from his lungs. When he glanced up Robson Hind was standing there. Under his arms was a submachine gun.

"You damned degenerate fish-man!" he said.

Barry could only stare helplessly as Hind's trigger finger tightened. The man looked mad.

A shot barked from the swamp and at the same instant a slender arm from the water caught Hind's ankle and jerked. The submachine gun roared an unaimed burst as he toppled backwards. His head thwacked dully against the wood, and then there was a splash as he sank.

Barry stood up trembling.

A coveralled and hooded figure emerged from the swamp, carrying a carbine from which a wisp of smoke still curled.

"Barry, did I—?" Under the smears of mud Dorothy's face was pale.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I saw him following your trail, and I guessed—"

A head broke water beside the log. Dorothy fired, but Barry knocked the muzzle skyward just in time to deflect the bullet. Then he knelt to give Xintel a hand up.

The Venusian girl cleared her lungs, rubbed one webbed hand across her eyes, then gave Dorothy a long, level stare.

"He breathes like you?" she asked.

"No."

"Good. Did she kill him or did I?"

"Is that your Venusian girl?" Dorothy interrupted. "And what are you two talking about?"

Barry switched to English. "Hell's still loose. Got to get to headquarters immediately."

He started off, looked back with a worried frown. Xintel had drawn a tube-weapon to match Dorothy's rifle. The slender, coveralled Earthgirl and the more fully curved Venusian, dressed in only a torn skirt, were eying each other like two alley cats. He could almost feel the crackle of emotion between them. He winced.

"IT'S MURDER if you don't!" Barry raged.

Captain Stanley of Ship Two was in charge of the slough sector of defense. He shook his head regretfully.

"Must have the approval of the other captains first," he said.

"Well, in God's name, get them!"

Barry strained his eyes, but the mist had settled down thickly. Only the vaguest hints of heaving, convulsive movement were discernible beneath the water. The air-masked crews of the machine guns and mortars and flame throwers set up to supplement the stun barrier were tense and jittery as they waited.

The radio handpiece crackled with static that drowned all communication, so Captain Stanley sent a runner to summon the others.

Anger and despair contended in Barry's mind. They would be too late. The heavy cables sprawled into the black water like great snakes, lifeless in appearance, but he knew the torturing forces with which

they were filling the slough. And he alone of all the colony knew the full horror of the torvaks.

Through the mist he could just see the building where Nick had set up the switch-board, and he hoped he would be watching for orders. Otherwise—

With deceptive calm he walked to one of the flame throwers, snapped the latch releasing the bulky mechanism from its tripod, picked it up in both arms.

"What are you doing?" Captain Stanley demanded.

"I'm going in," Barry declared.

The watching men were too dumfounded to stop him as he ran downstream.

Through the mist he saw something move just below the surface. A Venusian woman, her muscles twitching in spastic convulsions as the electric current ripped at her nerves. And then a few yards away a shadow, misshapen and unbelievably huge.

Barry stopped, cradling the heavy flame thrower in his arms.

"Turn off that current!" he pleaded once again.

Without waiting for an answer he leaped.

The weight of the weapon took him instantly to the bottom. He sprawled in the ooze. He had miscalculated. A million fiends were stabbing with red-hot knives, and his muscles twitched and squirmed in insane convulsions. His chest was clamped in a gigantic vise that kept him from filling his lungs with the water that meant life.

But he was still conscious, still able to see the screaming forms of Venusians who, in their flight from the monsters, had ventured too deep into the charged area.

An ugly creature came toward Barry. It was shaking its huge body, but it was coming on nonetheless. Its scaly hide and low-grade nervous system made it at least partially immune to the electrical charge; its killer instincts forced it to disregard the discomfort. Through the reek of decaying vegetation Barry got a whiff of the acrid odor he had learned to identify as fresh blood.

He struggled to raise his flame thrower, but he was unable to coordinate his movements.

And then at the last possible moment the twitchings of his body ceased. Someone,

Captain Stanley or Nick, had pulled the main switch.

He brought the nozzle of the flame thrower around. Flame blossomed and ricocheted through the water in burning globules. Concussion and shock wave threw him face down in the mud, dazzled and deafened.

He picked himself up, gagging and retching at the taint of charred flesh. The creature was still twitching in its death throes, stirring the water to opacity. Through the silt Barry could see several Venusian survivors moving feebly.

"Follow me!" he yelled, fearful that at any instant the current would be turned on again.

Then he went down the slough in great leaping bounds while a howling lust to kill mounted within him. The flame thrower, designed to be used from a fixed mount, made a clumsy burden in his arms. Monsters, dozens of them of all sizes and shapes, had come to kill. They remained to be killed instead.

Time after time the flame thrower sent its blazing cone licking forth. The water grew thick and uncomfortably hot, but little by little he cleared a path to the sea.

Once he looked back. The Venusians were following, and on each face was a look of adoration. Barry knew then he had made himself the new leader of Tana. They crowded close, anxious to get away from the bewitched waters. He motioned them to keep a safe distance.

And then suddenly he reached open water and the last of the monsters died in fire. Barry looked down at the pressure gauges. The tanks were empty.

The Venusians gathered around but kept a respectful distance from his person.

"Get back to Tana, all of you!" he commanded. "Remain there until either Xintel or I tell you otherwise!"

Without further questioning they obeyed.

HE WOULD have missed the half submerged tree entirely except for something white on the bottom, something from which small carrion-eaters scuttled at his

approach. Hind's skeleton, already half buried in the ooze. Gunshot or drowning? Dorothy or Xintel? What matter?

The two women were still watching each other warily on the bank. But, he saw with relief, they had laid their weapons aside.

Together, each in her own language, they bombarded him with questions.

He managed a faint smile although the skin of his face felt stiff and scorched from the flame thrower's heat.

"No war," he said.

That should have finished it, and all he wanted now was rest.

But again they spoke at once. Their languages were different but their meanings were the same.

"Barry, I want to talk to her."

Wearily he slumped down, nodding.

But as the conversation progressed he fidgeted uneasily. With the amazing frankness of two strong-willed females, they were settling his future while he translated. It was like a distorted dream.

They finally reached an agreement. Neither liked it entirely, but both were unselfish enough to consider Barry's welfare. And both were realists.

Barry blinked and blushed as he translated, but could not suppress a feeling of relief.

"I really don't mind—too much," Dorothy addressed him directly. "But if you ever tell anyone up here you're still carrying on with this bare breasted fish-girl I swear you'll be sorry."

Xintel spoke. "I understand. She is of your own people. But please, Barry, those of Tana do not need to know."

Dorothy and Xintel were watching him, waiting for his answer.

Two women in his life, both determined to remain. Either they would resent each other, and through jealousy, make his life hell, or they would become firm friends. He could easily become the most henpecked man on all Venus. But to choose between them—

Well, boredom was one thing he need never fear.

He nodded.