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The OATH of HULJOK BY NICTZIN-DYALHIS



"They set before us various portions, both cooked and raw."

"K AII-PLANG!"

The Kalion tablet on the wall above my scribble-table rang out its sonorous summons. I raised my eyes, giving vent, as I did so, to an impatient expletive. I hate interruptions when I am attempting to compose a poem. But the message which flamed out in luminous letters on the tablet's dull gray surface made me change my tone from impatience to amazement, although I repeated the same expletive.

In the ragged script I beheld was traceable no resemblance to the usually perfect characters distinguishing our greatest Venhezian scientist, Ron Ti. It did not need that I read the message to assure me he must be terribly perturbed; and the words them-

selves but confirmed that impression. The message ran:

Hak Iri: I must see you at once. I am in sore trouble, and need your advice.

RON TI.

I rose to my feet and caught up the scribble-stick where it hung at the end of its thin gold chain below the tablet. The flaming letters of Ron Ti's message had already faded as soon as read. He was my friend, had stated that he needed me. What was to write save:

Shall I come to you, or will you come here? Am, as ever, at your command.

HAK IRI.

Touching the tablet with my forefinger, I will-wafted the reply, saw the letters flame and fade, and waited but a brief second before the

clanging sound repeated and once again there shone out a sentence:

Am coming to you. Wait.

RON TI.

I reseatd myself, in my mind a queer mixture of curiosity and sympathy.

Ron Ti, despite all his wisdom and poise, in trouble, and needing advice from humble me, Hak Iri, writer and recorder of the deeds of greater men? What could be untoward? This our planet Venhez was all too well regulated for strange occurrences to take place; as, for that matter, were all the other inhabited worlds of the Planetary Chain.

Was it war? I asked myself; and replied to myself that that idea was nonsense! For war, that colossal folly, was a thing of the remote and barbarous past on and between the known Inhabited Planets. It cost too much in lives and misery for aught accruing of gain.

True, the Planets each maintain a colossal war-fleet, armed with terrific disintegrators—great ak-blastors on the aethir-torps and the tiny but not less proportionately deadly hand-size blastors for individual encounter; as we reason that the best method of insuring peace is to make war so frightful that no race will prove temerarious enough to venture its hazards.

Still, within scope of my own memory was one war. But that was, really, only a brief affray, what time Ron Ti, Hul Jok, Mor Ag, Vir Dax, Toj Qul, Lan Apo, and myself had gone to the Green Star, Aerth, and had found there an appalling state of affairs prevailing. On our return to Venhez we had stirred up first our own Venhezian Supreme Council, and, after, the ruling minds of the other worlds to an aggressive expedition which resulted in the destruction of the Lunarion Pollution—as our historians now term it. But that was the only strife recorded for ages back. . . .

“KAH-PLANG!”

That slamming note could emanate from but one inhabitant of our world. It was entirely characteristic of his fierce impetuous spirit. And the flame-symbols, as they flared, proved me right as I read:

Hak Iri: I am coming to your abode, for I need your brain to help me.

HUL JOK.

But this was serious. Ron Ti in trouble and needing advice meant no ordinary matter; but when Hul Jok, War-Prince and Commander in Chief of all our Venhezian Planetary Forces of Offense and Defense was likewise in need of *my* brain! . . . And those two were positively the most self-capable men I knew, and should be able to cope with any and all problems pertaining to themselves without enlisting outside aid. . . . It was all beyond me . . . yet, war perhaps it was . . . intuition. . . .

“Kah-plang!”

Short, terse, incisive. Vir Dax, this, he who juggled successfully with the powers of Life, the shrewdest and wisest dispenser of remedies, powders, and decoctions in our capital city Ash-Tar. And I swore again as I read his flame-words, for he, too, was in mental distress and desired to see me forthwith.

Well, I was in my own abode, and presumably master therein; and Our Lady of Bliss forbend if ever I denied myself to a friend who needed me. So I replied to Vir Dax precisely as I had done to Ron Ti and Hul Jok—that I, and all that was mine, were his likewise. And had no sooner finished than:

“Kah-kah-plang-ang-ang!”

It was only by mercy of the Guardian Powers that my sorely abused Kalion tablet did not fuse from the intensity of the three superposed flame-messages blazing on its surface! I said things—uncomplimentary, very—about my friends and their lack of consideration; for no Planetary reason could excuse such pre-

cipitancy! And then I paused, aghast, as well I might, for those last messages were from the rest of our group—namely: Toj Qul, Chief Diplomat of Interplanetary Affairs; Mor Ag, who knew the races, languages, habits, manners and customs, ancient and modern, of every inhabited world as no other man ever did know them; and young Lan Apo, whose gift was unique, in that he could unerringly detect, when listening to anyone, be it Venhezian, Markhurian, Saturnian, Mharzian, or even from far-flung Ooranos, Planet of the Unexpected—Lan Apo could, I repeat, detect infallibly whether the speaker spoke pure truth or calculated falsehood. More—he could even read the truth held back while seemingly listening attentively to the lie put forward! A valuable asset, he, to our Venhezian civilization, but somewhat an uncomfortable friend to have about, at times!

I know, I have already described these my friends, in that record I have set forth for the benefit of the future generations, that record entitled *When the Green Star Waned*,* and I know, too, that that record not only reposes among our Venhezian archives, but has been copied into every language spoken on every one of the major inhabited planets, and is preserved thus, for all time; but it does no hurt to repeat their descriptions as—but I digress.

THEY arrived well-nigh simultaneously, and gazed at one another in somewhat of bewilderment, for each had supposed that he, and he alone, had wanted to see me. It was I who broke the spell which had come upon them.

"It seems," I said, "that you each have a grief and have done me the honor of seeking my advice——"

And at that point Hul Jok, the practical, interrupted.

"Right," he growled, adding, "and speaking for myself, I care not if you all know my trouble. We seven——"

"Are even as one," suggested Toj Qul, smoothly.

"True," nodded Ron Ti. "It is so with me."

"So, I think, is it with all of us," ratified Lan Apo.

A unanimous sigh of relief went up. If Lan Apo had spoken thus, no need existed of reticence among us. He had, as usual, read our true thoughts.

But then Lan Apo doubled up in a sudden spasm of mirth, straightening his features promptly, however, as he beheld Hul Jok's unpleasant scowl fixed upon him.

"Suppose we allow Ron Ti to speak first," I proposed. "He it was who notified me first that he desired to consult with me on an important matter."

Again Lan Apo, despite his lugubrious expression, snickered; whereat Ron Ti flushed painfully; while Hul Jok made a queer snarling sound deep in his throat.

"It is Alu Rai," began Ron Ti. And at that, catching the eye of Lan Apo, I grinned, too, for I began to see, also—or thought I did.

"She was gentle, tender, affectionate," Ron Ti groaned. "What has come to her, I comprehend not at all; but she has become a veritable goblin of perverseness. I can not devote myself to my experiments for Planetary Benefit as I should, for my mental perturbation! She is a disturbance incarnate; nor is she amenable to reason; nor will she explain her attitude. Seek I her arms for rest and inspiration, she delights, instead, in tormenting me——"

"Precisely my trouble with Ota Lis," said Vir Dax gravely.

"Mine, too, with Cho Als," vouchsafed Toj Qul sadly, adding: "And

* Published in WEIRD TALES, April, 1925.

I, who am accredited with being able to talk a bird off a bough, can not persuade her, my Love-Girl, to tell me why this state of affairs should prevail."

"My fix, exactly," stated lugubrious young Lan Apo. "Kia Min, gentlest of her sex, is so obdurate that I can not read her mind!"

The others groaned, looking exceedingly glum at this; from which we all understood that in every case the trouble was identical. All but mine! I—I was exempt! And I swelled with pride thereat.

"I am untroubled," I boasted. "I will see Esa Nal and instruct her to visit your Love-Girls and ascertain——"

"*Kah-plang!*"

And the message we all read, although meant for me alone, left me in a state of perturbation worse even than all the other six of our group put together.

And once again Lan Apo, the irrepressible, snickered. But I was aghast. Esa Nal, *my Love-Maid!*

Then that hereditary temper bequeathed me by my turbulent namesake Hak Iri who lived two thousand years ago, flamed within me, and what I indited and flashed to Esa Nal should have blinded her soft, golden-brown eyes for hours, once she gazed upon those sentences. Words are my trade. And I know that upon that occasion I surpassed myself, rising to heights of objurgation and invective hitherto undreamed.

Ron Ti sighed in envy.

"Hak Iri," he murmured, generous as ever, complimenting me, even in his own distress, "could I but express myself thus to Alu Rai, I'd cheerfully pay as price for that ability that reputation I hold as the greatest living scientist on all the worlds."

"I, too," growled Huk Jok. "But after all, what are words? Less than nothing, where Love-Girls are concerned! Although," he continued

grumpily, "I can not say that my method was any improvement."

"Your method?"

Lan Apo's eyes were dancing with mirth as he caught Hul Jok's hidden thought, albeit his face stayed sober.

"Aye," rumbled the badgered giant, "*my method!* I did lay Hala Fau face downward across my knee and——"

But that was too much! And we all burst into a shout of laughter as we each pictured that strapping termagant, Hala Fau, in the predicament of a naughty child. Yet the mirth died, abruptly, as is usual with ill-timed merriment, and we gazed at each other even more blankly than at first.

And then Jon the Aerthon, without stopping at the door to announce himself, burst, incontinent, into the room and crossed it straight to Mor Ag, who, aside from Ron Ti, was the only one of us who spoke his Aerthtongue fluently. And what Jon gasped out in his excitement turned Mor Ag's face a deathly white.

"Great Power of Life!" Mor Ag ejaculated blasphemously. "That accursed Lunarion!"

Lan Apo's face was a study in horror and grief, although the rest of us were puzzled, bewildered, and, as is usual when the untoward intrudes itself into well regulated lives, we were more than a little angry. But then, simultaneously, realization came to us, one and all. Not in detail, of course, but enough.

When we returned from Aerth on that momentous first trip, we had brought with us a captive Lunarion. By decision of our Supreme Council "It" had been kept confined in our Planetary Museum of Strange Things, held prisoner in a specially devised cage, from which, despite all its evil will-force, it could in no wise liberate itself. Ron Ti had designed and constructed that cage, charging it with restraining vibrations in some mysterious manner

known solely to his profound scientific brain. But whatever had been the method he'd employed, it had so far worked.

But now!

It was apparent that the Lunarion had escaped. And we all knew Its fiendish malignancy, and Its even more demoniacal hatred for everyone and everything not of Its own type. And being of at least average intelligence, we all knew, irrefutably, that It had doubtless already revenged Itself.

But how?

Then Mor Ag spoke, slowly, dully, setting forth in plain words what Jon the Aerthon had reported in broken, excited phrases. And in substance, without quoting Jon's exact words, thus it was:

When we brought Jon with us to Venhez, Ron Ti, learning that Jon was accustomed to working in metals, had given the Aerthon place in the Experimental Laboratory over which he, Ron Ti, presided.

It had been Jon's custom, when his tasks were ended, solely as recreation to go to the Museum of Strange Things and jeer at the last survivor of his hated Master-Race. It did him good, so Jon said, to swear at the Lunarion and behold Its impotent fury at being thus mocked by one of Its former slaves.

Jon had arrived somewhat earlier than usual one night not so long back; and had observed Alu Rai standing gazing at the captive "Moun-Thing." Again, upon another occasion Jon had found several other girls whom he recognized accompanying Alu Rai. Jon had thought nothing of it, as to him it seemed but natural that the girls should be interested in the captive their men had brought to Venhez, where nothing like It had ever before been dreamed of. . . .

And at that point, Ron Ti groaned again, in anguish of spirit.

"That demon, that demon! It has

will-witched them all. Our Lady of Venhez only knows——"

But Mor Ag continued as though no interruption had occurred:

"Tonight, not an hour ago, Jon saw all seven of our Love-Girls stand before the cage again. Alu Rai in some manner neutralized the imprisoning vibration, and the Lunarion *oozed* out—free! Knowing himself as being impotent to cope with it, Jon did the next best thing, and followed It and our girls. By the darkest ways It went, Alu Rai guiding and the other girls following. They went straight to the Great Central War Castle.

There, Hala Fau, displaying the diamond Looped Cross, Hul Jok's symbol of authority, caused the guards to bring forth the great acthirtorp *Victuri*, Hul Jok's own fighting-craft. Into this they entered, and then that Lunarion, becoming in some manner aware of Jon's espionage, will-forced the Aerthon to Its presence and gave him a message for Hul Jok! After which It, too, entered, and the aethirtorp, with Hala Fau at the controls, shot away into outer space. After which, again, Jon hastened back to Ron Ti's workshop hoping to find him there; thence to his abode; and, finally, here.

"But that message for me?" demanded Hul Jok truculently.

Mor Ag stammered, hesitant, ill at ease. But Hul Jok was in no mood for evasions. His voice held a strangely repressed note as he spoke slowly.

"That—message—Mor Ag! I speak not again!"

"But—but——" began Mor Ag.

Hul Jok rose to his feet. In his eyes——

Lan Apo interposed, saved the situation:

"Hul Jok will hold *you* blameless, Mor Ag. As well punish Jon! It is the Moun-Thing's defiance, not yours. Transmit it, hurriedly, and you, Hul Jok, hold your wrath until

you have the proper cause of it within your reach!"

Hul Jok threw one great arm about Lan Apo's neck, bowing the slender boy nearly to the floor beneath its weight.

"Always I held you a flighty-minded youngster, Lan Apo," he rumbled. "But this time you speak with the wisdom of a Supreme Councilor. For it I will hold you ever as a younger brother. Very near was I to violence upon the wrong object. I am myself once again. That message, Mor Ag!"

But despite his assertion that he held full control over himself, Hul Jok's face belied his words when the full purport of the evil Lunarion's insulting defiance dawned upon him.

"Tell that gigantic fool, Hul Jok," so the Moun-Thing had charged Jon the Aerthom, "that I have repaid him, and his fellow-fools, for their deeds against myself and my race. Tell him that I hold their women in the thrall of my will. Tell him that his woman stole, at my desire, his diamond Looped Cross of which he is so proud, as well as his own especial fighting-craft—the mightiest aethirtorp on all the worlds.

"Say to him that I know I am the last Lunarion in all the universe; but that with seven such women as I now hold——"

The remainder of that message is unfit to write!

HUL JOK'S face, as I have said, was a sight to behold—and quail from. His eyes, always aglow with the light of his proud, high spirit, now shone with a lurid, implacable wrath. His heavy black brows were drawn into a frown, ominous, lowering. His wide, full-lipped mouth was but a thin, grim, straight line, pallid and sinister. His entire features seemed at one and the same time to be convulsed and frozen into a mask of hate above and beyond aught I had ever dreamed could be depicted

on any countenance anywhere. Not even the demons that, ages ago, dwelt in our Venhezian deserts could have looked one half so terrible as looked our haughty War-Prince in his consuming rage.

I state it truthfully—he frightened even *me*, and I had known Hul Jok since we played as children together. And when, after an heroic struggle to master his emotions, he finally spoke, the tones as they issued from his throat bore such dread menace that we all shuddered, friends of his though we were.

"My Hala Fau—*my woman!* A traitress? Sooner would I believe that Our Lady Venhez herself were false to her own planet! Nay! Hala Fau's will was overborne. That Lunarion devil! We did permit It to live too long. And now!

"But It shall not escape, though It flee beyond the furthestmost limits of the known universe and into the Outer Voids—even there will I pursue It and exact such vengeance as no mind in all the worlds can now conceive. Aye! though I tear the Sun from its place and plunge the entire Planetary Chain back to what it was uncounted eons ago, into the limbo of Chaos and Old Night in order to do so!

"Not the Love-Girl of the lowliest Venhezian may be stolen without a frightful reprisal—it has been our Venhezian Law for ages—and shall it be told on the worlds that *seven* Love-Girls——?

"Hak Iri! Will-waft my command to every member of the Supreme Council and bid them assemble at the great Hall of Conference at the Central War Castle within one hour. Say that it is my imperative order. Add that I will slay with my own hand any one of them who comes one instant later than the given time! And you others"—he turned the full glare of his blazing orbs upon us who gazed spellbound at him—"do you prepare, even as

once before we made preparation, for a long spatial journey—save that ten times the quantities will be needed of all supplies. In two hours we leave Venhez—to return triumphant or—to return no more!”

WE HAD no trouble with our Supreme Council. Hul Jok is not the sort to request foolish things. And this time, even had his demands been folly absolute, one look at his grim face blazoning forth the wrath of his raging soul would have effectually nullified any opposition, had any been stupid enough to raise such issue. But the Supreme Councilors have common sense, and they were commensurably angry at the stupendous shame done to all Venhez by that accursed Moun-Thing.

Hul Jok took barely a quarter of a Venhezian hour to set forth the case, and the Council took barely a quarter of that, again, to grant him, and us who were chiefly concerned, a free hand.

The only suggestion proffered was that we take a dozen aethir-torps of the Venhezian War Fleet, each fully manned and armed with the very latest in ak-blastors. But that proposal was rejected, flatly, by Hul Jok, who snarled:

“One Lunarion—and seven Venhezians whose women have been ravished away? Nay, Councilors; be the expedition ours alone!”

And we all were fully in accord with him in that.

So, as rapidly as could be done, messages were outcast to every known inhabited planet to be on watch for the great Venhezian aethir-torp *Victuri*. Albeit that was a superfluous measure, for never once was it sighted by watchers on any of the planets from Markhuri to Neptuan.

Yet we had no sooner descended to the courtyard of the Central War Castle and boarded the craft awaiting us, than we found that Ron Ti had preceded us and was already busily

engaged in installing a queer-looking contraption. Still, it was amazingly simple in construction; and without it! . . . I shudder to think what might have been the outcome of our affair had Ron Ti's brain not held that appliance within its scope.

He had not completed his adjustments when with a *swoosh* we shot into air, and in no time at all we were hurtling into space. But hardly were we clear of the atmospheric envelope about our planet than he lifted the thing bodily—a square box it was, with a disk of Kalion atop—and set it where Hul Jok, standing at the controls, could see the disk without distracting his attention from his steering.

Perturbed and enraged as he was, Hul Jok, always profane, swore admiringly. For on the surface of the disk was depicted, shooting through the darkness of interstellar space, an aethir-torp, easily recognizable as the *Victuri*, the Standard-Craft of the Venhezian Fighting Fleet.

At the moment, it showed near the rim, at Hul Jok's left. With no explanation from Ron Ti, the giant Commander seemed to grasp the principle; for he deflected the nose of our aethir-torp a trifle, and the pictured quarry swung slowly to the center of the disk. Hul Jok growled his satisfaction thereat.

“Let that Moun-Thing escape us now, if It can,” he exulted. And thenceforward that image, as well may be believed, was held exactly in the disk's center.

Once, seized with a brilliant idea, I asked Lan Apo, whose telepathic powers we all knew, respected, and trusted implicitly, if he could not contact with Kia Min. Of course, I remembered that, on that night when we had first become apprised that the girls were under the Moun-Thing's spell, he had stated that he could not do so any longer. But within me was the hope that mayhap that spell had

weakened, as the Lunarion might have his thoughts too much taken up with other matters to have time to devote toward holding the girls in steady thrall during their flight into space.

Well, Lan Apo tried it, but to no avail. Nor could he so with Hala Fau; nor with Alu Rai; nor with Ota Lis; nor Cho Als; nor with Esa Nal—although in that last attempt I had no faith anyway, knowing her as well as I did, and do! But so it was with the remaining victim of the Lunarion—the merry, laughing Lue Jes, Mor Ag's love-maid.

Yet the idea was not so foolish, after all. For Jon the Aerthon, who had accompanied Ron Ti from his laboratory, carrying the appliance we were even then using to follow our quarry by, and who had raised such a terrific *howl* at being left behind that not even grim Hul Jok had the heart to bid him stay—Jon, I say, once he realized why Lan Apo had laid himself flat on his back and closed his eyes, volunteered to do for us what Lan Apo admitted he could not accomplish.

Jon made his astounding offer through the medium of Mor Ag; and we all grinned a trifle derisively when Mor Ag translated. But Jon waxed insistent.

"Once I, and my forefathers for ages before me, were creatures of the Moun-Things' wills," he explained. "We became, inspired thereto by terror, accustomed to reading their thoughts, even when not intentionally directed at us; lest, did we fail to anticipate their wishes, divers inflections might become our portions. So now, perhaps, I can make my mind think Moun-Thing thoughts——"

"Pity he could not have caught the Lunarion's thoughts before all this happened!" Hul Jok sneered.

But Ron Ti spoke up for Jon the Aerthon, reproving the giant Commander.

"That speech is unworthy of the great War-Prince of Venhez," Ron Ti asserted flatly. "As well accuse Lan Apo of the same thing—negligence. Or me——"

"Aye," Hul Jok made amends. "Best that I accuse myself for permitting the Lunarion to survive, what time we thought we had cleaned Aerth when we exterminated the rest of his hell-brood fellowship. Let the Aerthon try—and should he succeed, rich shall be his reward should he and I survive this expedition."

What filth poured from Jon's lips in a hideous babble of broken phrases, words, and even whole sentences, Mor Ag would never, either at the moment nor afterward, wholly repeat. But we ascertained from out the jumble, that the Moun-Thing intended dodging about in space for a while, then dashing direct to Aerth, and taking refuge in some subterranean retreat he knew of.

And for a single moment we exulted, but alas! prematurely. For we thought that, by steering direct to the Green Star, we could reach there first, intercept the stolen aethir-torp *Victuri*, and—then we realized that, should we attack it and destroy it with our ak-blastors, we would at the same time destroy our own Love-Girls who were aboard. Nor would the Lunarion Itself be injured by the disintegrating power of the ak-blastors, as we had found out long ago.

Then, worst of all, from Jon's lips, Mor Ag still translating, there came the final reason why we might not attack the Standard-Craft of the Venhezian Fleet. Namely, that it mounted ak-blastors superior in intensity and range over our present ones—and also, that, under imperative dominance of the Lunarion's evil will-force, our own Love-Girls would be compelled to work fighting-craft and destroying batteries of ak-blastors against *us*! And from what would ensue, because of such an affray, Our Lady of Venhez spare us all!

So we gazed at each other, wordless and hopeless, as full realization dawned in our minds.

Hul Jok, however, refused to stay long daunted. War-Prince of a planet, the one man to whom an entire world looked as leader and strategist extraordinary, it was but natural that his brain worked more quickly on such a problem than would ours.

"We must get to Aerth first," he decided. "Not too hastily, but we must be within its atmosphere when the stolen aethir-torp makes its landing. And we must land promptly thereafter, within seeing distance, yet remain ourselves unseen. Thenceforward we must even be guided by circumstances, until we, in our turn, can guide circumstances to serve our ultimate purpose."

IT WAS the same dull, lurid, reddish-glowing atmosphere, yet not quite so dense, as we had noted upon our first visit to Aerth, into which we drove headlong; but the surface of the planet, as we gazed upon it with mixed emotions, presented to our eyes the same deadly, drear monotony. Yet we had, vaguely, expected to see some signs of change; as to our minds, the Aerthons, once freed from their demoniacal Lunarion oppressors, should have immediately commenced to improve their degraded conditions. But, instead, things appeared precisely as when we had left Aerth the last time.

No birds in the air, no animals on the ground, and no cities of men could we descry. Only dull gray-brown dirt and sad-colored rocks, with here and there a dingy grayish-green shrub, stunted, distorted, isolate.

Naturally, a second visit would reveal the same familiar scenery; still, so depressing an effect did it have upon our spirits, that I can not but describe it again, even at risk of seeming to repeat, to some extent, my previously recorded statement of our former adventure.

But we did not land just then. That disk of Ron Ti's devising showed that the aethir-torp we awaited was as yet a considerable distance outside Aerth's murky atmosphere. So we put in several Aerth-days surveying the inhospitable surface beneath us for suitable places whereon to land whenever occasion warranted.

Whether or not the accurst Lunarion realized that It might be pursued was a question we debated frequently. But that, too, Jon the Aerthon soon resolved for us.

"Too big hurry," he stated decisively. "I caught the Moun-Thing's thoughts once more. Got good place, underground. Got whole race, men like me, to serve as slaves, to eat, if It pleases. Got idea to be King over all Aerthons, *Yakshas* and *Yakshinis*——"

This last we did not comprehend for a bit. But as Mor Ag questioned and Jon replied, we for the first time became aware that there was yet a terrible hell-brood left upon this unfortunate world—a race of beings sprung from the unholy union of Lunarions and Aerthons, yet quite different from either. And then Jon's concluding words drove us to frenzy afresh as he said:

"Lunarion think he now got fine chance to rule alone; and got seven fine queens——"

It was the final infliction. After that, nothing mattered but rescue for those we loved above ourselves, or—extermination for us in a group.

True, we bore the means of communication with Venhez, and did we call for help, not solely the Venhezian War-Fleet would respond, but unquestionably those from the other planets would join the expedition should they be needed.

But, as Hul Jok had told our Supreme Councilors, we held that seven Venhezians in one aethir-torp were fully adequate to deal with one Lunarion; and whose should be the delight of vengeance, if not ours?

And our thirst therefor was very great!

Then, even as we were discussing the affair for the hundredth time, and were far too much interested to be as watchful as we should have been, there came a lurid glare of light upward from Aerth's surface, and—

Our aethir-torp was out of all control! Worse, it was falling rapidly, caught, presumably, by the planet's gravitational pull. Soon its plane altered from the horizontal, the nose dipped, inclining yet more steeply, still more, clear to the perpendicular. Then the stern overpassed the upright—in a minute more we were falling, falling, whirling over and over, apparently in all three dimensions at once—over and over, and end over end, sickeningly, until—

Crash!

WHEN consciousness once again asserted dominance in me, I was aware, first, of a most terrific headache, and, secondly, of a full realization as to what had occurred; although how I knew it, I could not then have told, had I been asked. But to adhere strictly to the truth, neither can I now wholly account for it. Only—*I knew!*

Jon's statement that the Moun-Things had left a numerous progeny to still afflict the Aerthons was rampant in my mind. Also, I was assured that, apprised of what had befallen their progenitors, they had busied themselves, inventively, and were prepared, after their own fashion, to protect what they doubtless considered their own planet from further hostile invasion.

And we had reaped the benefits of their efforts. I was not bound in any way; so, despite the throbbing anguish in my skull, I sat up and attempted to see what sort of surroundings I had. But for a bit everything spun about so giddily that I could not believe aught I gazed upon. Then my head cleared somewhat and I could

believe my own eyes—but did not want to!

There lay my companions, every one; and not one of us had on a single rag of apparel. Every particle of clothing gone, our blasters gone; and, for aught I knew to the contrary, gone likewise was our aethir-torp. Truly, we were in a mess!

Then Lan Apo sat up—and what that gentle youth said was almost sufficient! At least, it availed to awaken the others, one by one, Hul Jok last, oddly enough, considering his great size, prodigious strength and intense vitality. Wofully we stared about us, as well we might.

One comfort alone remained to us. After a hasty questioning, we were assured that, aside from minor bruises, bumps and scratches, we all were intact! But where were we?

Apparently in a cavern or other subterranean place. And what we saw in nowise exhilarated us. I say "saw," and I mean just that, for the place was illuminated by a light the source of which we could not determine, as it seemed to glow from walls, roof, and floor alike. Ron Ti, scientist as he is, commented at once upon that phenomenon.

"Cold light," he stated. "Wonder how they do it?" But as none of us knew as much about such matters as did he himself, no reply was forthcoming.

"They've quaint ideas of art," said Lan Apo, striving to put a facetious aspect upon our plight, and dismally failing therein.

"Art!" snorted Vir Dax. "Do you think those ghastly figures we behold all about us are but statuary? Deceive not yourselves. Once those were living beings! Obviously, after tortures nameless, unguessable to normal minds like ours, they have been thus preserved, *mineralized*, by some process best known to the race of underground devils who hold us here, in all likelihood, naked as we are, for like torment and a like preservation."

"Probably their Museum of Strange Beings," suggested Mor Ag, with deep interest.

But for my part, I simply stared in horror; although I wished to avert my gaze but was so hideously fascinated that I could not do so.

Staring, or shrinking in horror, however, did us no good. And Vir Dax—who is first a body-fixer, and afterward a Venhezian, as even his own Love-Girl said once upon a time—was wild with curiosity about those gruesome relics, even to the point of total forgetfulness of his, and our, peril. He rose to his feet, approached one, the most abhorrent specimen of them all, and ran his skilled hands over it, while a look of amazed incredulity overspread his usually immobile features.

"Ron Ti," he said, excitedly. "Come here! This touches your province quite as much as it does mine."

Ron Ti, the moment he felt the gruesome thing, nodded, saying in a surprized tone: "Metal—and Selenion, at that. I wish I knew how it is done. Transmuting flesh to inorganic metal is beyond my scientific attainments. That I know!"

No one explained, for none of us could, and just at that moment something occurred which took our minds off an unprofitable speculation; for a faint slithering sound we heard behind us, and as we turned, simultaneously, we beheld—

Oh, none who have not *seen* one of the damnable creatures can ever wholly form a concept of, much less believe, the description of what we were looking at.

It had the head, shoulders, arms, breasts, and torso of a woman; and in a fierce, wanton way, its features might even have been called beautiful—by those admiring that type. For it had bluish-silvery hair—a snow-white skin with a slightly golden tinge shimmering over it; lips so darkly red

that they held a purplish tint in their crimson; and eyes that were greenish-yellow with a lambent light aplay in their unholy depths. But from the hips down all resemblance to womanhood—as we know it—ceased. Instead of the bipedal form, it was a serpent agleam with iridescent armor-plate of scales as big as Hul Jok's thumbnail.

The lower, or serpent-part, was fully as long as was our giant Commander tall; but the upper, or woman-part, was small as any average ten-year-old Venhezian child. Yet it was anything except an infant, as was written plainly in its strange, disquieting eyes, wherefrom looked forth, unashamed, exultant, temptingly even, all ancient evil and original sin.

Its eyes played over us as we stood, appraising us openly, and I saw Lan Apo shudder as he read all too clearly the creature's thoughts. In a voice as silver-sweet as a love-flute's notes, she poured forth a stream of words in a language none of us understood. Yet Lan Apo—

Hastily I formulated a thought-wave and strained to will-waft it to him: "Do not betray your inestimably priceless gift of mind-reading! Later it may serve us well in time of extremity, if they know not of its power." And I felt immeasurably relieved as he nodded almost imperceptibly.

Realizing that her words were but wasted, she tried again, this time employing the tongue spoken by the Aerthon slaves, although she conveyed by her expression how repugnant to her notions it was to stoop thus. Even her voice sounded not so liquid sweet, but took on a harsher, raspier quality; more imperious, too, as if she found it needful to impress us with a sense of her superiority. Sensual, crafty, vain. Aye! that was it—vanity! I had a brilliant idea.

"Flatter her, Mor Ag," I said hurriedly. "It is her vulnerable point!"

"Toj Qul could do that better than I," he retorted. "But I will do my best."

"Translate to him, then, and, after, translate to her his replies," I suggested. "Act you simply as spokesman between them."

That devil-spawned Daughter of Sin was staring at us with rapidly mounting suspicion and hostility flickering in her glinting eyes.

"Speak quickly, Mor Ag," I advised.

"What would you with us?" he queried, bowing to her. I must say he did it well, for I saw a look of gratified importance gather on her wickedly beautiful features.

"From what world came ye here, O strangers: and why came ye here to this planet Aerth for the third time? Lie not; as well we know ye for those who once came, took one of our Moun-Lords away; came yet again with a mighty fleet of destroyers, and annihilated that godlike race who begot us, their sons and daughters. But fools ye were to come for a third time! And as fools ye fell by our arts! Now, why came ye this third time? Lie not, I say! That Jon, that renegade Aerthon slave ye took away and again brought with ye, has, true to his slavish nature, betrayed ye, in your turn. . . ."

"She it is who lies," muttered Lan Apo. "Jon has proved obdurate, and from him their questionings have elicited no gain."

She had noted the start of surprize we had all manifested at the mention of Jon's name, but evidently she thought it was because we believed her statement. So, with added confidence and more than a trifle of arrogance she awaited our spokesman's reply. But Ron Ti had been whispering softly to Toj Qul, meanwhile, so her questions were met with counter-questions.

"Tell us first, O Beauteous One, who and what you may be? Never before have we beheld your like, al-

though we have visited all the known planets."

"Does that one ask?" And she pointed to Hul Jok. "Let him tell me I am beautiful and——"

HUL JOK leaped! Caught her by her slim neck, and squeezed, hard! Her eyes nearly popped out of her head. A slap from his huge, open hand sent her spinning clear of the floor, to bring up with a solid-sounding *thump* against the farther wall, to drop thence, limply, to the floor, where for a moment she writhed feebly, then became still.

Vir Dax bent above her, straightened up again, and shook his head, reassuringly.

"Not dead, but badly jarred, although no bones are fractured. She will live," he reported.

"So?" Hul Jok grinned, well pleased with himself. "We have had enough of this dissembling. Am I Commander? Then obey! Toj Qul, we need not your smooth tongue—you take too long to get results with your flowery phrases. I will question this—whatever it is; and do you, Mor Ag, translate with exactitude. Now! Lan Apo, is she shamming?"

The boy nodded. Then, warningly: "Have care, Hul Jok! Her *bite* is poisonous! Even now she meditates waiting until opportunity presents——"

I have seen that giant Commander of ours move quickly ere this; but never so swiftly as when that warning came. Not away from her who lay there supinely, but toward her!

She, too, had moved like a lightning-flash, but not—for all her serpentine qualities—quite quickly enough. And when our eyes caught up with their motions, she hung by the neck in Hul Jok's grasp, held at arm's length, where, despite her writhing and thrashing about, she was harmless. Twice she attempted to fling a coil about his arms or legs, but each time he *squeezed*, very

gently, yet meaningly, and she soon desisted.

"Now," he commanded, "you talk to her, Mor Ag. It is not needful to translate her every word. Just tell her what I say, and tell us the substance of her replies. First, who is she? and secondly, has she any status or authority among her sort?"

Followed a volley of question and answer, until Mor Ag nodded his satisfaction.

"She claims to be a princess, Idarbal by name—says that she rules, now that the Lunarions are become extinct, but admits that a sort of devilish priesthood styled the 'Wise Ones' exercise a drastic supervision over her entire race, herself included. She herself is, according to her statement, daughter of a full Lunarion father and a mother but one-sixteenth Aerthon. Says that when the Interplanetary fleets invaded, only the full Lunarions were allowed to participate in the fighting. Their variously admixed offsprings had been reared to luxury and debauchery, and had not, at the time, the proper warlike spirits nor the scientific training; as the Lunarions, normally undying, kept these matters as their own monopoly. They probably knew their spawn too well to trust them!

"But after the Moun-Things were obliterated, their progeny were obliged to do for themselves or perish at the hands of their slaves, the Aerthons. The great calamity could not, of course, be long kept a secret. And, as soon as the tidings filtered down to the Aerthons, there followed one insurrection after another.

"Even now one is raging in the underworld caverns. And this time the Aerthons are not only holding their own, but are making some slight headway. She says that the Aerthons have naught wherewith to fight save their swords, while her race have light-projectors—"

And at that point Mor Ag broke off to smile at a grim jest she'd betrayed

without realizing that she'd done so. As he elucidated, Hul Jok burst into a bellowing shout of laughter that frightened his captive worse than anything he'd so far done.

"You all will recall," Mor Ag's explanation ran, "that when the Lunarions attacked the interplanetary fleets with aethir-torps, following the destruction of their Selenion globes, they rammed a Saturnian craft, completely wrecking it? Of course, the fragments fell to the ground. And the Saturnians use an alloy of Berulion and Iron. Magnetic; yes.

"This hell-brood experimented, built light-projectors that attracted Iron and Berulion, believing that thus, should another hostile fleet ever hover over Aerth, it could be *crashed* without any of the defenders being obliged to sally forth to do battle. Instead they could send out the Aerthon slaves to finish with their swords any who might survive. A most splendid scheme!

"Well, when these Aerthons started their last rebellion, an army of their master-race marched against them, bearing as weapons small, powerful light-projectors intended to attract the steel swords from the very hands of their slaves. Another most wondrous scheme, but it worked altogether too well! The swords were attracted so violently that over half of the pursuing army were slain by a perfect rain of steel blades traveling their way at incredible speed."

And at that explanation, we all laughed.

The Serpent-Woman princess stared in fear at us.

"What manner of beings are ye?" she demanded, quaveringly, of Mor Ag; "what manner, indeed, who, knowing your interplanetary ship is wrecked and your weapons gone, yourselves captive, naked, unfed, and facing the most ghastly torments ere ye die—if, indeed, ye may be slain—can yet laugh at a jest told by one of yourselves? Oh, release me," she

begged suddenly, abjectly. "I will struggle not against ye. I will not *bite!* Nay! I will *love* ye, all seven; will be submissive wife to ye, all! Oh, let me down, great Lord!" And she turned her pallid face and frightened eyes to Hul Jok with a look of appeal which needed no translating for our giant to understand.

Hul Jok, as Lan Apo nodded that she was sincere, very carefully set her down, giving her mute but emphatic warning against any treachery she might contemplate, by clenching his great fist and holding it suggestively within an inch of her nose.

Six of us snickered as she very humbly *kissed* that animate bludgeon. And Lan Apo, irrepressible as ever, cackled:

"She's beginning her wifely attentions promptly."

"If she's so anxious to please," said Hul Jok, "we'll make her tell us where Jon is."

"They've got him in a different cavern," she stated. "Not as yet have they tortured him. They so far do but question him, and he replies always that ye be actual gods from another planet which he insists is a part of Heaven, the Abode of the Blest; and that, ere ye depart from this world of ours, not one of the race of the Moun-Beings' children will ye leave living. Aye, great is his faith in ye. As is mine," she finished. And the glance wherewith she favored us did actually bespeak love—her sort—for us all! Very obviously, she was completely ours to do with as pleased any one, or all, of us.

For my part, I cared not a pinch of Cosmic Dust for her amorous glances, nor her too readily proffered caresses. But I realized, suddenly, that I was most abominably hungry.

"Make her get us some food," I suggested. "I feel empty clear down to my feet!"

Mor Ag explained, carefully, and Idarbal acquiesced immediately,

seemingly delighted at the idea of serving us.

"But we'll have to let her go," demurred Ron Ti. "And," he added, "we may be sure she'll either not return at all, or else—she'll poison what she fetches!"

We all looked blankly at one another. But Lan Apo spoke up for her.

"You can not understand all her mental reactions, and neither can I. But she's sincere; actually in love with us, collectively. Probably for the first time in her life she's telling the truth without any reservations. She'll do precisely as she promises."

And with that we had, perforce, to content ourselves. That boy was never mistaken since he was born. Plenty of Venhezians would like him better if he would be mistaken once in a while!

SO WE stood and watched her glide over to one corner where was a little hole close to the floor—a hole so small that Lan Apo, slenderest of all us Venhezians, could not have thrust his shoulders into it had it been possible to save all our lives by so doing. But into that hole she slipped as freely as an aethir-torp might traverse interplanetary space. Nor was she gone for very long.

"Now I wonder why she came here alone? What could be her object in so doing?"

It was Ron Ti who made the remark, and Lan Apo replied:

"Simply female curiosity, abetted by hate. For we—in her estimation—are the actual murderers of her 'god-like' race, the Lunarions. So she came to gloat over us, revile us; anticipated the delight of seeing us tortured——"

"Never mind that," Hul Jok interrupted. "What we most need to know is: How did they put us into this cavern-cage? Not through yon snake-hole, surely. My fist would nearly suffice to stop that entrance."

Immediately we investigated, but no trace of door or other opening could we find. And while we were

busied in that futility we heard a silvery ripple of laughter, spun about as one, and stared at Idarbal who had returned.

Behind her were two attendants, likewise female, but quite evidently inferior in the racial scale to herself; for, whereas she was part serpent, and a gorgeously glittering one, they were lizard, from their waists down. Covered they were with a garish, unwholesome purplish skin, blotched unevenly with greenish-yellow spots as large as the palm of my hand. And even their features were lizardlike. Why, their very hands were those of lizards! The skin of trunk and arms and face was lizard. Only, as I have said, from their waists up were they shaped as she.

I heard Vir Dax mutter: "Oh for a free hand, a few sharp dissecting tools, and plenty of time!"

But even he, despite his scientific mania for studying grotesque mistakes of nature, was ready to eat. And we seven, our systems fairly shrieking for nourishment, gathered about our self-elected "mutual wife" avidly awaiting the food her attendants bore. They placed their burdens on the floor, unrolled a bundled skin, very finely dressed and ornately painted, spreading it out as a surface whereon to place the viands. Then they set before us various portions, both cooked and raw, *of an Aerthon!* Even the head was there, baked, yet easily recognizable!

It required many words before Idarbal understood that we did not care for man-meat, or that we would not drink blood instead of wine, though poured from golden bottles. And she only laughed at us when she did comprehend.

"But what, then?"

We explained that, coming from another planet, we could only assimilate the foods we had brought with us.

"All, everything, was saved and brought below," she stated. Something she said to her attendants.

They obediently bundled up our untouched "feast" and departed through what Hul Jok had termed the "snake-hole."

IDARBAL was a strange compound of woman and demon, and for all that the demon mostly prevailed within her, still, she had her good qualities. I dare say it, now that the Serpent-Princess is no more; although Esa Nal will doubtless fly off the handle when she reads this and knows that I have so recorded my opinion.

Still, maugre Esa Nal's displeasure, I still say that Idarbal was wholehearted in her own queer way. For when the lizard-attendants returned they bore not only our own Venhezian foodstuffs and wine-bottles, but also—oh, priceless restoration!—our garments. Had they but brought our little blastors likewise! But as it was, we were immensely pleased. And Idarbal noted this and was commensurably happy, so much so that she imperiously dismissed her attendants and then insisted upon waiting on us with her own hands. Meantime, between mouthfuls, we questioned her.

"What will your people do with us?"

"Like that," she explained succinctly, indicating the horrors ranged on pedestals all about.

"How is it done?"

"Ask the Wise Ones," she shrugged. "I am the Princess Idarbal. It is no task of mine."

"No escape possible?"

"Where to?" Finality, futility even, was in her very tone.

"To the Aerthons?"

"They would kill me, your wife, as they would destroy, if they could, all my race. Am I a fool that I should help you so?"

"How were we brought here?" This from Hul Jok; one-idead as ever, where anything for our welfare was concerned.

"Never shall ye learn that from me!"

Lan Apo snickered almost inaudibly, and as one man we understood why! Nor did Hul Jok need any prompting. For the second time his broad hand slapped Idarbal into a complete coma!

Lan Apo rose to his feet, walked over to one of the metallized horrors, and indicated it.

"Tip it over," he ordered, and Hul Jok heaved with a will. As it over-set, a yawning hole showed, slanting downward, whereat Hul Jok grunted his pleasure. Then his eyes lighted. He stepped to one specimen of gruesomeness, caught hold of its legs, one in each hand, and wrenched, twisted, and tugged until both came away from their jointures. The same attention he paid to the arms, and four serviceable clubs were the net result. Two more arms and another leg completed our weaponing. They were metal clear through, and correspondingly heavy.

With a grim and mirthless smile, Hul Jok caught up our somnolent "wife," wrapped her long nether extremity about her torso until only her white face showed, so making her into a compact bundle which he coolly tucked under his left elbow. Then, holding a metallized leg, the ankle gripped in his huge fist, he stepped to the edge of the downward-slanting hole and dropped into it, bodily. Apparently it was a smooth chute, for he vanished very rapidly.

One after another we each caught up food-bundle or wine-bottles, and followed our giant, sliding adown an unknown passage, to find at the end—

HUL JOK'S bellowing voice rose to meet me as I, following him, slithered and skidded downward—the old, wild Venhezian battle-cry, handed onward from forgotten eons back: "*Hue-Hoh!*"

I heard the *thud* and *crash* of his improvised war-club, a confused medley of rapidly moving, shuffling feet,

and then a shattering, blood-curdling, screeching shriek that fairly *ripped* into my eardrums. And then I shot feet first into space, fell a short distance, staggered as I lit on a floor, and blinked as I beheld—whirled up my club, also a sizable, hefty leg, and jumped in to help Hul Jok as best I might.

That thing with which Hul Jok was fighting was a total reversal of the structural anatomy of the Princess Idarbal. It had an Aerthon's legs and trunks and arms; although instead of hands it had great claw-tipped paws at the ends of its wrists. And it stood nearly as tall as our giant Commander. Nearly as heavily built, too. But its head! Covered with tawny, reddish-yellow hair it was, with small, pointed ears laid tightly back against its skull. Brilliant yellowish-greenish eyes it had, glaring, yet *slitted*; a yawning cavity of a red mouth with long, dazzlingly white teeth—in short, it was, from the neck up, what the Aerthons later informed us was called a "*Lyen-Kat*."

Hul Jok was bleeding from a scalp-wound where the beast-man had clawed him with a slashing paw-stroke. I got in a whack at it, and was repaid by a lightninglike *rip* that left three blood-spurting lacerations on my left shoulder. As I spun about from the impact of the beast's blow, I saw Ron Ti shoot from a hole in a wall above me, saw him swing back his arm and hurl the bludgeon he carried, squarely into the man-brute's open mouth. For a moment, at least, that monstrosity's breath was shut off completely. It emitted a choking *gurgle*, clawing at the protruding club with both paws.

Hul Jok dropped her he'd been holding fast under his left elbow, grasped his leg-club with both hands and swung heartily.

Crash!

Never was skull made could withstand that! The way before us was unobstructed. Then, one by one, the

rest of our party arrived. An adoring voice behind us caused us to glance back at Idarbal."

"I *knew* ye were worthy of my love. Very mighty men are ye."

Hul Jok pointed to his victim, then shook his bludgeon suggestively her way.

"Mor Ag," he ordered, "tell her to guide us to where Jon is kept. We need that Aerthon. Speak, I say!" He reached for Idarbal, but she slitheringly eluded his grasp.

"Is no need, O Mightiest," she assured him, with a ravishing smile. "Shall not leave ye—fear it not. Enjoying myself too much with ye. If ye want that Aerthon-Slave, shall have him. Come!"

REALLY, it looked as if Jon would have a fit when he saw us. Oh, no! we had no trouble at all in locating him. Idarbal led us directly to where he was imprisoned. True, before the entrance of the cavern, wherein he was confined, was stationed another of the ugly Lyen-Kat guards, but the thing was attacked and slain before it even started to fight. It was dozing, half-asleep. And before it could gain an erect position, Hul Jok jumped squarely on the small of its back, landing with both feet. And Hul Jok's feet are no light matters. One smashing blow from his club, and the way was all our own. Idarbal chuckled.

"So it can not tell tales," she approved.

Jon started an excited gabble to Mor Ag, but Hul Jok put a stop to that waste of time.

"Shut that big mouth of yours, Jon, and come along," he growled.

Jon was too full of delight to obey for long. So he soon attached himself to Ron Ti and commenced giving him an earful regarding the Princess Idarbal, her sinful disposition. He said too much, in fact, for the Serpent-Woman caught at least a part of it, and became thoroughly enraged.

I was afraid the Aerthon, in his joy at finding himself again among us, his Venhezian friends, would blurt out something, in her hearing, about our actual mission there on that afflicted planet; but some Guardian Power must have inhibited his mind along that line until, through Ron Ti, I could caution him regarding the need of secrecy.

Hul Jok grew bored with trudging along one corridor after another in this subterranean maze, apparently getting nowhere at all. Suddenly his arm shot out and gathered the Serpent-Princess in its viselike hold.

"Whither go we?" he snarled menacingly.

"To my palace," she responded readily. "Is the one place where ye will assuredly be safe. So far ye have not met any of my people—only slaves who dare not tell of seeing ye, lest I be displeased. The time of the Moun-Festival draws nigh, and my people are busied in preparations therefor."

"This Moun-Festival," queried Mor Ag, his interest aroused in a new custom. "How is it conducted?"

As I am a living Venhezian, that Serpent-Woman shuddered in horror! Her face, even, turned a livid gray, and her vivid lips blanched.

"Thank whatever gods ye believe in that ye shall escape ever knowing how it is conducted," she whispered brokenly. "Those—*things* in that cavern where I found ye—they died—learning how we—worship the Moun! And, had I not given myself to ye, all seven, as wife, ye too——"

And again her great eyes expressed the awfulness of the untellable.

I think that we Venhezians have our share of boldness, but as we caught sight of Lan Apo's face we realized that he, at least, had correctly caught the thought-forms conjured up in her mind as she spoke—and we all felt sick from horror, too. We asked no more questions along that line. The details had suddenly lost all interest.

IDARBAL had stated that she was guiding us to her palace, wherever that might be, but after all, we never reached it. For then that occurred which changed everything for us.

Came a terrific jangling sound, much as if all the bells, gongs, and other sonorous instruments on all the worlds had all been tumbled together adown an immeasurable height to bring up with a dissonant *slam* at the bottom! Again—and yet again—until our eardrums ached in misery inexpressible. Hul Jok's bellowing voice sounded like an infant's *coo* as he demanded explanation. But Idarb-al was as puzzled as were we.

"Never sounds *that* warning," she declared, "unless great happenings are toward. Yet I can not imagine. . . ."

"That Lunarion has landed," Lan Apo spoke up, confidently. "The thought-waves from her rejoicing race are so strong that even here, deep beneath Aerth's surface, I catch them plainly."

Hul Jok decided instantly on changing our plans.

"Tell that she-devil," he commanded, "to guide us to the Aerthons, directly, if she wants not her slim neck twisted until her eyes look down her own spine!"

That threat, I think, wholly disillusioned the Serpent-Princess Idarb-al, changing all her self-aroused love for us into intense hate. That we should seek the Aerthons! It was too much! Her face betrayed her thoughts. Such utter, venomous malignancy I never saw depicted on any countenance before. Not even her Lunarion progenitor could have looked more virulent. Yet strangely commingled with her hatred was an expression of intense fear. She'd had several lessons which had inspired her with a wholesome dread of Hul Jok's inexorable nature. With a *swish* she shot ahead of us along the passage and so vanished around a bend. So fast she went that none of us, although we

immediately gave chase, could overtake her.

"Ends *that*," snapped Hul Jok. "Now ahead, and fight our way."

"This place *I* know!" It was Jon, the Aerthon. "So, from here, I can lead to where are many of my people."

That *was* a relief. We all were pleased at that, Hul Jok especially.

"If we can contact with the Aerthons and form an alliance," he said, "mayhap we can yet upset this world and reshape it for its own good. Jon, how numerous are your people?"

And when Jon assured us that his people outnumbered the Yakshasin race by fifty to one, Hul Jok saw the possibilities even more clearly. As he put it:

"All that these Aerthons need is leaders in whom they can put full confidence, in order to regain control of their own world and again evolve to their former high evolutionary status. We were grievously at fault, long ago. We should have promptly returned here as soon as we eliminated the Lunarion Pollution, and helped them, instead of leaving them to their own devices. Now we have it to do, anyhow. So! This time there will be no turning away until our task is wholly accomplished."

He was right. In our hearts we acknowledged it. And felt inspired to do our best. Ron Ti added the final inspiration, were such needed.

"Great are the mercy and the wisdom of the Ineffable Power! Once were we permitted to become the instruments whereby Its will was carried out. But we, in our shortsightedness, did but half our work. Now will we, seeing more clearly, do the remaining half. So shall we acquire merit! Perhaps, even, we may yet regain our loved ones, unharmed."

And, somehow, thereafter, the outcome was never for a moment in doubt, in our minds.

How long it was we wandered in those infernal underground passages, following Jon's guidance, before we contacted with the Aerthons, we had no means of knowing. But every last one of us was fairly aching with fatigue when we finally came into an enormous cavern, man-made, and found there a great crowd of them gathered. At first it looked as if we were due to be butchered by their long, sharp swords which they whirled in unpleasant proximity to our noses.

Jon shouted and cursed at them until finally they commenced to pay some slight attention. Well, we had a staunch advocate. Then we had two!

A gaunt, red-haired woman burst through the ring of menacing warriors, flung her arms about Jon's neck, embracing him with ardor. Plainly his wife! Few and terse were the words he shot at her, but they sufficed. She outyelled them all!

Very shortly, the long blades were sheathed, and we were eating, heartily, from our own supplies. Then we seven Venhezians and Jon the Aerthon held a brief council, surrounded by a curious, staring throng of his people. Strategy those Aerthons knew not at all. Direct attack best suited their primitive, barbarous minds. But that, as Hul Jok promptly pointed out to Jon, was but a suicidal mania. Jon proved an apt pupil, grasped our ideas easily. Evidently, travel had broadened his mind.

"What first?" he queried.

"Explain in detail to your people how wonderful you think we are," Hul Jok ordered, regardless of all appearance of modesty or lack of it; for it was necessary to impress them thoroughly with our importance, if we were to use them as allies. "Then, when they are willing to follow and obey us, send out armed parties to capture—not kill—a number of your

enemies, and bring them to us that we may question them."

Jon caught that idea, too.

"And then?"

"We ourselves do not know, until after that has happened," Hul Jok admitted frankly. "Now we would sleep. Find us a quiet place, if such may be had. Then go among your people and do as you have been bidden. When you have several prisoners, awaken us that we may interview them. That, for now, is enough."

OH, THAT Ron Ti!

I learned, afterward, that he'd slept barely an hour; then, because he could converse fluently with the Aerthons, he'd gone among them and made friends. Above all, he'd sought out their metal-workers, from whom he'd learned where their workshops were, and had been immensely gratified when he'd been told that none of the dominant race did any actual work, ever. That part they'd always relegated to the Aerthon slaves.

Learning also that, since the insurrection started, no one was in any of the shops, Ron Ti had taken an armed party of Aerthons and set out on a tour of investigation. As he told us when he returned:

"Little time have I for experimentation; but if all goes well, I feel certain that very shortly our Aerthon allies will have more potent weapons to their aid than their own sharp swords. Neither blaster nor ak-blaster can I produce; for the materials are not to be had, nor do I know where to seek for the proper minerals. But"—and his eyes lighted confidently—"I have found a number of light-projectors which do but need repairing to make them again effective, the rays from which will crumble rock, dirt, and metal to dust for a couple of thousand feet ahead. Evidently it has been by use of those that these stupendous caverns have been hollowed out.

"Should our enemies attempt to use their death-ray projectors on our Aerthon allies whenever we do attack, those instruments, being principally of metal, will be promptly rendered useless by our Crumble-Rays. And, should they attempt to barricade themselves against direct attack, we can shatter their defenses faster than they can build them up. And at close quarters, the Aerthons with their sharp swords, being in numerical superiority——"

"It is absolute extermination, then?" Lan Apo asked, horrified, for he had caught Hul Jok's and Ron Ti's thoughts. "With all their outward defenses pulverized, their light-ray destroyers rendered powerless, these Lunarion-spawn, bad as they are, will be wholly at mercy of their Aerthon-slaves, and what that mercy will prove——"

"Little girl, be still," gibed Hul Jok. "Remember, this hell-brood you are wasting pity upon are but intelligent animals—or reptiles, rather—they are un-naturalisms; depraved; given to loathly debaucheries; unfit to survive; for whom is no place in a decent universe! Once we allowed one Lunarion to live. You, as well as we, now reap the consequences of that colossal folly. Do you, Lan Apo, advocate that we repeat our former mistake?"

The boy flushed.

"You are right," he admitted. "So let it be."

Certainly, it was war, unrelenting, ferocious even, and we knew we could tolerate no thoughts of mercy. Yet when the Aerthons brought in a dozer or more captives, as they did shortly, we could not but dread that which we knew must inevitably ensue.

Those captives were an amazingly queer-looking lot. There was one much like the Princess Idarbald in appearance, only bulkier from the waist up; evidently masculine. There were two who walked upright, had

great, horny scales all over their bodies, had elongated heads, somewhat lizardlike save that upper jaws lifted as well as lower jaws dropped when they opened their mouths. And both sets of jaws were provided with long, white, spikelike teeth. One who stood erect had the head of a bird, beak and all, was covered with leathery skin, had long, cruel talons at ends of arms and legs—ugh! Monstrosities, every last one; yet fair examples, save in detail, of all the hell-brood begotten by their Lunarion parentage. For those who wish further knowledge of that now exterminate race of Yakshasins, there are the writings which Vir Dax has but recently completed, wherein he has gone to further lengths than there is space for in a brief narration of this sort.

"It sounds heartless, I know," Hul Jok told Vir Dax, grimly. "But *you* know bodies, brain, nerve, tissue, bone, muscle and blood as none other can know. So! I command you by that Looped Cross we all serve, that, should torture prove needful in order to make them talk——"

Vir Dax smiled vindictively.

"Apologize not, nor command," he said quietly. "It will be a pleasure—nor am I at all squeamish. I hope," he added emphatically, "that they will prove obdurate! Let you, Hul Jok, question that one, first." And he pointed to one perfectly gigantic fellow, huger than was our War-Prince himself.

The prisoner indicated had a face not at all bestial, structurally, although his expression, while denoting a high grade of intelligence, denoted also a most horrifically cruel disposition.

Question after question Hul Jok, with Mor Ag and Ron Ti interpreting, hurled at the captive. But all he would vouchsafe was that he was one of the Wise Ones, obviously a warrior-priest, and that he held himself too wise to tell us anything.

Vir Dax, in a voice which fairly *purred* with pleased anticipation, ordered them all, bound securely, to be laid flat on the cavern floor. Coldly, deliberately, with a short length broken from the pointed end of an Aerthon's sword, he tested each and every one for sensitivity to pain. One of the Crokhadyl-headed Yakshas proved to be the *least* sensitive; and I saw the cold eyes of Vir Dax light suggestively.

What followed, none of us Venhezians, except Vir Dax, likes to remember. Yet, ere that Crokhadyl-headed nightmare died, there was inspired in the others, who watched his gradually increased agonies, a most dreadful fear of that quiet, cold-eyed, gently smiling, softly moving Venhezian, Vir Dax—so much so, that whenever his eyes flickered in the direction of any one of them, that captive *winc'd!*

Very deliberately, as one who prologs a delight, Vir Dax selected as subject number two that leather-skinned, birdlike monstrosity.

Its squawks of fright and anguish helped it not at all. Vir Dax went on as if he were accustomed to disarticulating such beings, still living, every day. Why, when he finished with that second specimen, and rose to his feet, even the Aerthons who had watched, shrank uneasily from meeting his gaze, and we Venhezians were shuddering with horror, Hul Jok not excepted.

And when Vir Dax bent above that "Wise One," who had at first defied us, the cold sweat of terror burst out all over his naked body, and he screamed, panic-stricken, as might any weak woman.

He talked! No question about it! Told us all we needed to know. Would have—had we permitted—turned against his own people and fought for us, would have betrayed them, singly or in a mass, into our ruthless hands, gladly, if only, he whimpered, we would keep that

awful tormentor from even touching him!

WERE I to set forth in detail all that he told us, it would use up too much space, and would be out of place in this narrative, besides. But, in effect, we learned that Lan Apo was, as usual, correct, when he'd declared that the Last Lunarion had landed. We learned that our Love-Girls still lived, and—joyous news!—were as yet unharmed; were safe, in fact, until the time of the Moun-Festival.

We learned, too, that, indirectly, we had our former "mutual wife," the Princess Idarbal, to thank for their immunity since the Lunarion had arrived on Aerth. For It—or he—who had intended making our seven Venhezian Love-Girls his queens, had promptly abandoned that idea from the instant he'd set eyes on Idarbal, who suited his notions even better. But she had stipulated as price of their union that the Venhezian women be given over to the Wise Ones as sacrificial victims at the forthcoming Moun-Festival.

"And this Moun-Festival occurs, when?"

Hul Jok roared his delight as our captive informed us that it was as yet nine nights off. And Ron Ti was equally pleased.

"They might fully as well give us a thousand years to prepare in," he chortled. "In seven days I will have every unarmed full-blood Aerthon provided with a good sharp sword. Us Venhezians I will equip with those repaired Crumble-Ray projectors I mentioned. Seven will be sufficient."

Hul Jok motioned to the Aerthons standing about us, and—well! Our remaining captives did not continue to survive; that is all! Nor, from then on, were any more captives brought in by the Aerthons. We did not need any.

Thenceforward, Aerthons and Venhezians alike became busy beings, hardly pausing by day or night, save to eat, hurriedly, snatch a wink or two of sleep, and again resume our labors. And daily and nightly, more and more Aerthons came in from remote caverns. . . .

And what were their Yakshasin master-race doing, all this while?

Feasting, reveling, indulging in every debauchery their depraved desires prompted, in accordance with their unnatural natures, and rejoicing, generally, over that stupendous miracle of all unexpected miracles—the survival and return of one of their “godlike” Lunarion begetters.

Oh, assuredly, they knew that we Venhezians were somewhere on, or in, their planet, and so had apprised the Lunarion himself. But they knew, too—or thought they knew—that we had naught wherewith to stir up trouble, save, mayhap, clubs or rocks. And they? Did not they have once again a Lunarion to guide and rule them? Plenty of time in which to attend to our case, after the great Moun-Festival was ended. Then they could spare better the time to hunt us down, capture us, and hold us for the next one.

AS RON TI had promised, the night of the seventh day found all in readiness.

We knew, because of what we'd learned from the Aerthons and from our captive Wise One, that the Moun-Festival was held in the great Temple of Lunarah, which was, in reality, but a vast, dome-shaped, hollowed-out hill, with a hole in its top which let in the direct Moun-beams when that orb, at its full, hung at its greatest height in the night skies. And we knew, likewise, that it was located on Aerth's surface in the middle of a broad, flat, rocky plain. As Hul Jok remarked, sardonically, when first we were told of it:

“What, for our purposes, could be more convenient than that?”

Even more to our purposes was it that none of the Yakshas or Yakshinis would be armed, during the ceremonials—aside from a lot of Lyen-Kat guards whose duty it was to surround the victims until the Wise Ones took them over into their clutches. So far as we could see, figuring ahead, it was nothing less than a slaughter we were planning—very unpleasant, but very necessary! Yet on one point Hul Jok waxed emphatic to the Aerthons. Which was:

“Every Wise One possible must be kept alive. I must have at least a dozen, intact! And that Lunarion I will attend to, myself. Wo to that Aerthon who disobeys me in this!”

But he needed entertain no worry along that line. The Aerthons were rapidly losing their fears of their Yakshasin master-race, thanks to Jon's excellent work in telling amazing yarns regarding the great prowess of us, their Venhezian allies. But not an Aerthon of them all but dreaded, with a dread unspeakable, facing one of the demoniacal Moun-Things again. They were only too willing to leave the Lunarion to Hul Jok!

VERY early on that ninth night we seven Venhezians, each accompanied by a dozen Aerthons bearing the Crumble-Ray appliance of Ron Ti's finding, started upward to the surface of Aerth, and debouched on the rocky plain. And behind us swarmed hordes of armed Aerthons, fairly lusting for the coming fray. Long, heavy, and terrible was the account standing between them and their master-race; and short, sweet and final would the reckoning be! One look at the savage features, hate-distorted, was sufficient to vouch for that, the crowning proof being, were such needed, that they marched silently, instead of yelling, as might have been expected from hordes of barbari-

ans. But they took no chances of giving untimely warning!

Jon the Aerthon, who had developed marked ability as a leader, and who had in consequence won Hul Jok's unqualified approval, remained underground. He and that red-haired, screeching fury, his wife, in command of some two thousand Aerthon men and women, were to close every exit beneath the Temple of Lunarrah, so that none should escape that way.

"Two thousand is too plenty," Jon assured us with a cheerful grin, and his gap-toothed terror of a wife added a reassuring smile of her own that sent cold chills running up my back.

Before the Moun had climbed halfway to the zenith, we Venhezians, with the Crumble-Ray projectors assembled and focused, were placed as Hul Jok would have us, and our Aerthon allies were simply a-quiver with murderous anxiety for the attack to begin. And we Venhezians were fully as anxious as were our allies, to tell the truth about it; only, we awaited the proper signal. Ironically enough, it would be our intended victims who would sound their own death-knell. That same jangling *crash* of dissonance we'd heard when the Lunarion landed, while yet we were wandering in the underground passages with the Princess Idarbal, would once again be sounded as announcement that all were present, and that the Moun-Festival was ready to start.

So we settled down and waited. There remained naught else to do. But finally it came. . . .

My Crumble-Ray projector slammed its viciously crackling brilliance against that hill the instant the first vibration of sound smote upon my suffering eardrums.

A shattering yell sounded behind me as the Aerthons rose to their feet and charged straight for the yawning passage I'd driven into the side of that damnable hill-temple.

One thing we had hardly figured on

came into my mind and rather frightened me for a bit, although it was too late then to do anything about it, even if I'd tried. Which was, that with that enormous mass of hill being pulverized by the Crumble-Rays from seven projectors, what could save our Love-Girls from being smothered in the heap of dust ensuing? It was an appalling thought, and it brought the cold sweat of horror out on my forehead, albeit the night was warm enough.

But then I bethought me that even such a fate was more merciful than what awaited them during the ceremonials. And then I saw, with infinite relief, a huge, featherlike cloud of dust spout upward from the hole in the apex of the hill, and realized with joy that, with seven holes being driven inward with the speed of light, air was rushing inward too, as fast as the rays could make way for it; and that as soon as the shell of the Temple of Lunarrah had been penetrated the combined air-currents had sought outlet through the opening at the top. Actually, the dust was spouting upward like an extremely active volcano.

Strictly speaking, there was very little fighting. It was, rather, even as we had anticipated, merely an overwhelming catastrophe for the Lunarion and the Yakshasin race. True, the Lyen-Kat guards died fighting valorously, and it must be recorded that they took nearly thirty times their number of Aerthons with them! But aside from that, the rest was but a butchery. Nine Wise Ones and the Last Lunarion were all that were left, some time before the Moun had reached that point where it had shed its cold light into the opening, bathed in its effulgence the naked, sacrificial victims, and so given the signal for their atrocious torments to begin; ere death gave the signal, in its turn, for their transmutation from organic flesh into inorganic metal.

I was inside practically as soon as our Aerthon allies. The work of my

Crumble-Ray apparatus was finished, and for all that Esa Nal had her faults—glaring ones, too; more especially a temper—still she, such as she is, is yet all mine; wherefore I had my own feud to settle, my own vengeful feelings to glut.

I'm not the smallest Venhezian on our planet, although neither am I a giant like Hul Jok. But—for close quarters I have learned to love a hefty war-club. And I had a fine one. Ron Ti had made it for me with his own hands. And it balanced splendidly.

The first trial I gave it was on an enormous Lyen-Kat guard. He made a sidewise swipe at me with something he gripped in both paws, a something that flashed dully through the swirling dust infiltrating the air, a something that fairly *sang* as it cleft the air.

Instinctively I sidestepped and lashed out, two-handed, with the plaything Ron Ti had devised for my enjoyment. It connected, satisfactorily, with the Lyen-Kat's nose just in alinement with its greenly glaring eyes—and I passed on, well pleased. A wonderfully sweet little toy I had!

Then a thing like a fat, white worm, erect, snapped at me with its slavering, pink mouth—and *squolched* to a filthy mess as I caressed it with my war-club. A snakish being flung a few coils about my legs, like lightning—and unwrapped itself much more rapidly as I reproved it by butting it in the abdomen with the head of my bludgeon.

A bellowing voice tore its way to my ears through the din and the dust: "*Hak Iri—to me!*"

I saw our gigantic War-Prince, armed with a great club, twice the size and heft of mine, striving to smash his way through a ring of Lyen-Kat guards, six deep, in the center of which I caught brief glimpses of soft, womanly, nude flesh. Our Love-Girls, at last!

I needed no further invitation. With a yell which would have done

credit to Jon's wife at her best, I jumped to Hul Jok's side.

Those infernal Lyen-Kats were every one of them armed with long, thick metal staves surmounted by disks, convex on both surfaces, a *metar* in diameter, and sharp as knives all around the edges. Moun-symbols they were, but deadly weapons at close quarters. I saw one Lyen-Kat shear a bulky Aerthon clear through at the waist, with a single swipe. My club caught that same Lyen-Kat alongside of his ugly head at practically the same instant, and he sheared no more Aerthons!

Then, out of the top of my head, as it were—for both of my eyes were elsewhere busied in watching those shimmering, swiping disks—I saw a sight which made me gasp in amazed horror and dread.

Straight up, out from the center of that ring of Lyen-Kats, there shot into air, levitationally, the Last Lunarion! In his hands he grasped one of the Moun-disk weapons such as the Lyen-Kat guards wielded. Once above the ruck of the fighting, it made straight for Hul Jok, poised above him, and swung its keen weapon viciously downward at our leader's head.

Hul Jok must have seen that blow coming—apparently through the top of *his* head—for he flung up one arm, and caught that awful weapon just back of its *razhir*-sharp disk-head, in his mighty grasp. One terrific downward *yank*—

Hul Jok hurled his ponderous war-club into the face of a Lyen-Kat and wrapped both arms about that "god-like" Lunarion. In his inexorable grasp the Moun-Thing turned a dirty leaden-gray from fear.

"In! In, I say, Hak Iri! To the Girls! I've *this* to hold!"

Then occurred the well-nigh unbelievable.

The instant the Lunarion went *gray*, his will-witchery spell over our Venhezian Love-Girls was broken!

I heard the clear, clarion voice of Hala Fau, Hul Jok's woman, ring out in the old Venhezian battle-chant:

"*Hue-Hoh! Venhez and the Looped Cross! For Life and Love! Slay! Slay! Slay!*"

Heard, too, the high, shrill voice of Esa Nal:

"*Hak Iri! Hak Iri! My Man!*"

Saw Esa Nal dive forward, catch a Lyen-Kat around the legs with her arms, spilling him to the ground. Saw Hala Fau stamp on the back of his head, jamming his ugly nose into the hard-packed dirt floor, and, bending forward, snatch his disk-weapon from him, make sure with it that he would never attempt to regain it; saw her split with another blow the head of another Lyen-Kat—and saw *my* Esa Nal promptly equip herself and set to work like any old veteran of many affrays—which, in a manner of speaking, she was! *You* never—whoso reads—got into dispute with her. I have! Why, even gentle, tender, timid Kia Min, Lan Apo's Love-Girl, fought with a ferocity that out-vied any Lyen-Kat!

It marked the end. With seven thoroughly enraged Venhezian Love-Girls armed and athirst for revenge and liberty in their midst, the ring of Lyen-Kat guards was soon but a memory. . . .

NEVER could we ask aught from the Aerthons we could not have. Less than four days sufficed Ron Ti to erect a plant, crude, 'tis true, but powerful enough to signal Venhez. We knew, without awaiting reply, that a Venhezian War-Fleet was on the way to Aerth as soon as that message could be read.

The only way in which we could be sure that the Last Lunarion would remain innocuous, we adopted, cruel though it might seem. We turned him over to the Aerthon women and children to amuse themselves with. Well, they invented a new one! In

a place where a cavern-wall was very thin, and formed a sharp corner, they bored several holes to the outer air, letting in sunlight, such as it was; shining ever into that Lunarion's face and eyes. Also, they had fire, and sword-blades, and took turns, continuously, day and night. . . . I do not think that the Lunarion's kingship pleased him. . . .

Vir Dax, Hul Jok, Ron Ti and I held sessions with those nine captive Wise Ones. At first they were stubborn, would tell us naught. But—Vir Dax, his methods! . . .

Finally Ron Ti nodded his satisfaction, and Hul Jok's blazing eyes were agleam with triumph.

"It is even simpler than I had thought," Ron Ti said. "I can do it myself—with improved variations. Even better in my Workshop back on Venhez than I can here."

The Wise Ones, or what Vir Dax had left of them, we gave, likewise, to the little Aerthon children—the first playthings Aerthon children had had for eons past, doubtless. And the little imps certainly appreciated their new-found sport!

Then, one morning, a hundred Venhezian fighting aethir-torps hurtled into Aerth's atmosphere and effected landings in such haste that the well-nigh infusible Berulion plates of which the hulls are made were red-hot almost, from atmospheric friction. And their crews nearly went *fran-tak* from delight when Hul Jok rated them soundly for careless—not to say reckless—navigating! But it was Hul Jok! And listening to his tongue-lashing sounded good to ears that had never hoped to hear his heavy voice again.

A hundred Venhezian aethir-torps. Six ak-blastors to each craft, and a crew of one hundred Venhezians aboard each one of the fleet, each carrying one of the tiny, deadly disintegrators—the hand-size blastors—and each man aching to use his toy!

In another two days, poor, afflicted Aerth was truly clean. That hundred hundred Venhezians left not even a spider nor a toad, let alone those loathly *Blob-Things* we'd encountered on that first momentous trip of all.

Hul Jok, at request of the Aerthons themselves, left a dozen aethir-torps and a Venhezian sub-commander to govern, educate, and assist them until they became, in actuality, self-sustaining.

Then we returned to Venhez, where an entire planet went mad with delight. Not one Love-Girl of the lowliest Venhezian may be stolen without the most frightful penalties being exacted. . . .

MIDNIGHT! and in Ron Ti's great laboratory were gathered a silent, grimly waiting group. All seven of us were there, as were our lost and regained Love-Girls. Also were present all the members of the Venhezian Supreme Council.

The Last Lunarion was there, likewise. Caged again, in so narrow a space It perforce had to stand erect, and without ability to will-witch Itself out, this time. Never, since Hul Jok had *pawed* him out of the air above the fighting, back on Aerth, had the Lunarion lost his leaden-hued gray color of fear. Yet I do not think he really guessed how Hul Jok meant to deal with him; in truth, I do not think that Hul Jok himself knew the precise method he'd employ—until after he'd actually gotten his hands on the Moun-Thing.

Coldly, all emotion lacking from his heavy voice, Hul Jok, in plain, terse terms, explained to that fear-quivering thing in the cage that Its day of punishment had arrived—and why!

The Moun-Thing shuddered, whimpering, glaring out of its horror-haunted eyes at us who watched. Still, it tried to defy us:

“I can not be slain. . . .”

“True,” assented Hul Jok. “Nor do we wish your death. . . .”

Ron Ti swung a lever over.

A stream of softly glinting particles from one of Ron Ti's queer mechanisms sprayed through the bars of the Moun-Thing's cage. The particles seemed to do It no hurt. In fact, for a moment It did not appear to notice what was happening. Then comprehension dawned upon Its consciousness. Although even then, none of us Venhezians who were watching, save Hul Jok and Ron Ti, fully understood.

The scintillant stream which flowed so softly, gleaming so *prettily*, was gradually impregnating that Thing in the cage, was turning Its entire body, *while yet alive*, to a statue of solid metal—impregnating it with Selenion, the Metal of the Moun!

The terrific transmutation was finally accomplished. . . .

O Our Lady Venhez! What a fate! Although metal, and thus immobile, *the Thing still lived—had consciousness!*

IN THE center of the great public square in our Venhezian capital city, Ash-tar the Splendid, there stands an enormous cube of inky-black rock. Atop of this is another cube, but little smaller, of crystal-clear glass. So clear it is, indeed, that air itself is scarce more lucid.

Imbedded therein, a sight for all to behold, is sealed forevermore that Selenion Statue which can not die. . . .

The Last Lunarion. . . .

Surely, the oath of Hul Jok was no light threat!

And Venhezian men and women—also those who at times come to our fair planet from other worlds—gaze thereon and turn away in the full assurance that nevermore shall the universe be menaced by the malignant activities of a pollution incarnate and unspeakable. . . .