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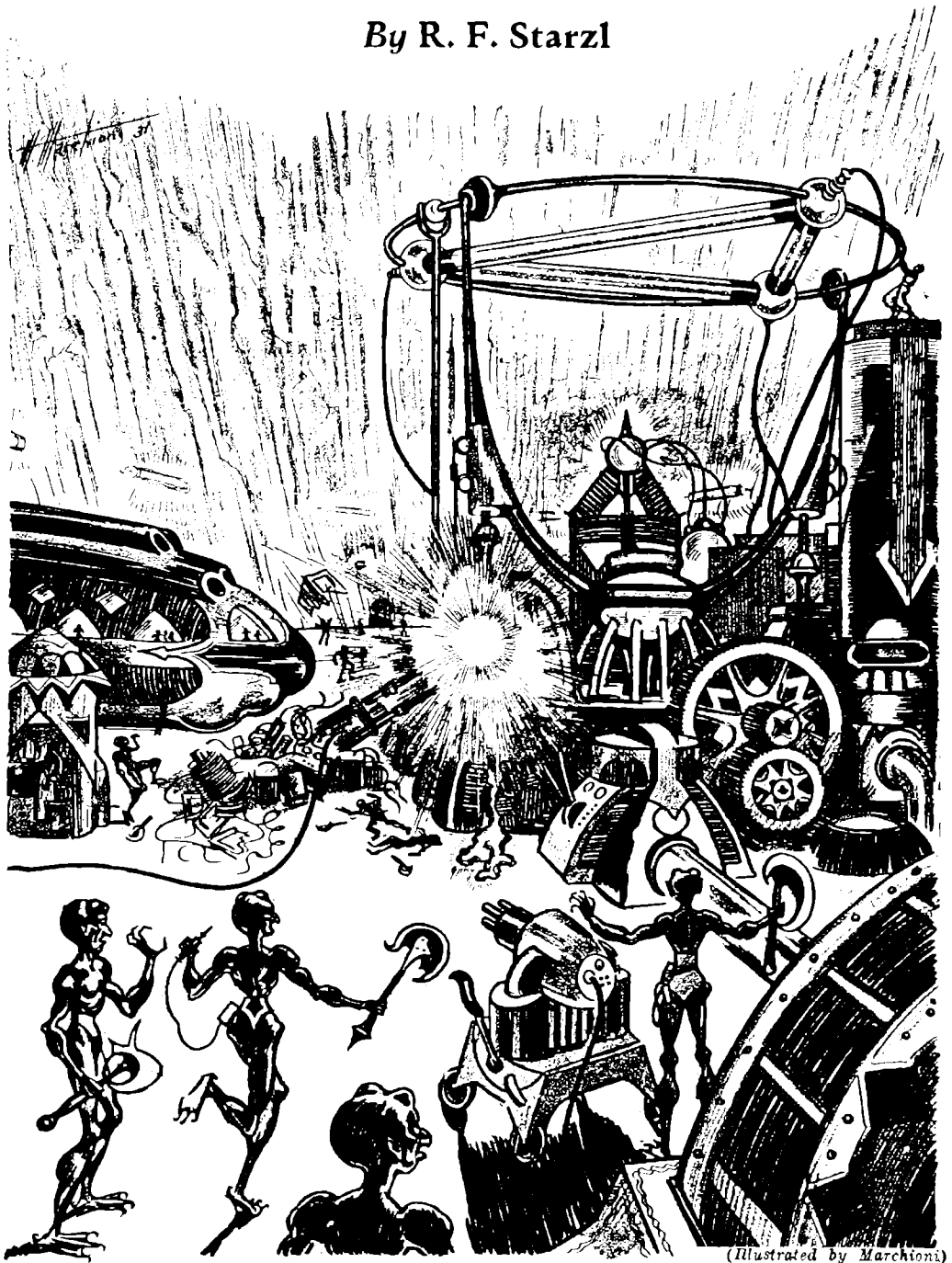
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# The Planet of Despair

By R. F. Starzl



(Illustrated by Marchioni)

He heaved mightily and slowly, very slowly, the tremendous mass turned on its bearings.

## The Planet of Despair

**H**I BUCKRAM, corporal of the Interplanetary Flying Police, handed in his report gratefully, and after an interview with the station barber, turned toward Central City, in the heart of the ancient continent of America. It was only a hundred miles away, a matter of a few minutes in the bus plane.

The vehicle had only a few dozen passengers, I. F. P. men and like Hi, pleasure bent. But the young corporal looked forward with special eagerness to the skyline for a first glimpse of that glistening colorful wilderness of needle-like towers aspiring to the heavens. For Central City was the home of Cinda Mara. And Corporal Buckram, on that lonely six months patrol of the Mercurian orbit, had thought often and fondly of lovely Cinda. Heartened by his bright new chevrons and the increase in salary that went with them, he intended to speak definitely to her when she should recover from the glad surprise of his return.

The bus plunged dizzily from the rarefied upper reaches into the denser atmosphere below, its passengers holding on tightly to resist the rapid deceleration. It swept between tall pointed spires, settling at last on an absurdly small landing platform.

The pneumatic passenger tube station, where Hi proposed to take one of the swift little cars to the suburban Mara home, was still about a mile away, and Hi elected to

*By the Author of  
"The Terrors of Aryl"  
"King of the Black Bow"*

walk, taking one of the higher promenades that crossed, like innumerable gossamer filaments, from tower to tower. He was conscious immediately of a pervading depression, a poorly concealed melancholy. Here and there were inconspicuous black streamers, the only sign of mourning allowed by law.

Hi remembered with a disagreeable shock that his pilgrimage of happiness was coinciding with a period of universal sorrow, the annual Days of Sacrifice, when the whole human race was bowed with grief and shame. It was the time of the final ceremonies when the victims, fifteen young men and fifteen girls, selected from the most perfect and the most beautiful on earth, were bid farewell with sorrowful pomp.

The crowds were drifting toward the Tower of Sacrifice, a jet-black, ugly conical structure that dwarfed the lofty, beautiful towers amid which it stood. Its top was swathed in a flimsy rag of cloud, as if even this lifeless symbol of Plutonian domination

felt somehow the reproach of a still higher power. Out of that mountain-high top would presently trail the fiery wake of the Ship of Sacrifice, the black *Aegeida*, fraught with doom and despair. It would carry into the black frigidity of space the flower of humanity, to be delivered to an unknown fate on that dark, hateful planet appropriately known as Pluto, four billion miles from the sun. Then it would return, like

***SCIENTISTS*** who examine the qualities of the human race, often tend to overlook the immense importance in our development of emotion. It is emotion—parental love—that causes individuals or races to store up wealth in various forms in excess of their needs for the use of their children. Upon this providing for the future, civilization is built.

*Scientists often look down upon their fellowmen with scorn because they are so steeped in emotional responses. Yet if it were not for such things as jealousy, fear, love, pride and other emotions we might, as a race, have accomplished little with our intellects. And if a time comes, as our author has pictured, that we are faced with a mentally superior race, emotion may well serve us to win out against sheer intellect.*

an evil omen, to await the next sacrifice.

The effect of this universal mourning on Hi was characteristic of him. Somehow he could not mold himself to the general acceptance of the inevitable. As with the majority of the I. F. P. men, the sight of the black tower filled him with bitter antagonism. His pugnacious though ordinarily pleasant face reddened, and his close-cropped, sandy hair under the small, close-fitting skullcap of the Service seemed to bristle. He went with the crowd, his narrowed blue eyes dangerous. The people made way for him, and so the soldierly figure in uniform, easily distinguishable in that sea of bright colors and flowing robes, soon reached the long ramps that led down to the half-mile circle at the base of the black tower. Several hundred yards away, under the frowning black stone, the sacrificial platform was filling. A city policeman hailed him:

"Just in, Hi?"

Hi recognized an acquaintance.

"Great time to come home, eh?" he grunted.

"Might as well come with me. I can get you through the lines."

Somewhat reluctantly Hi went with him. A

strong cordon of police surrounded the platform—a precaution against rescuing parties which were sometimes organized by the friends and families of the victims. They sat on the stone steps leading to the platform.

"Toughest assignment for a man on the city police to draw," Hi's friend stated. "People seem to think it's *our* fault, somehow. Look how they glare at us! They hate *us!*"

"Yeh," Hi agreed gloomily. "And yet," he added with vehemence, "if they left it to us we'd clean up that mess of devils or die trying!"

"I know that," the city policeman agreed

readily. "You fellows did put up a beautiful scrap, and it was only because of orders from home that you quit before they'd reduced all your ships to nothing."

He was referring, of course, to that short, decisive battle which, more than fifty years ago, twenty-five years before Hi was born, had ended with the complete subjugation of the human race—until then the lawgivers and law enforcers of the solar system. The Terrestrials still policed the solar system, but only on sufferance of the Plutonians. And the far-flung orbit of Pluto itself was taboo to the ubiquitous patrols of the I. F. P.



R. F. STARZL

A SIGH passed like a wave over the multitude, and an old man, clad in a robe of dead black with white border, stepped out of the tower on to the empty stage. On his head was an ugly, box-like cap of mourning. In his withered hand he carried a wand, or staff of purple transparent material. His white beard quivered in a slight breeze as he took his place before the amplifier microphones. He looked expectantly toward the seats intended for the sacrifices, who now

filed out of the dark tower, dressed all in white. The girls, most of them, were led on the arms of Tower servants. The young men, walking alone, came with enforced calm.

It was a pitiable effort. Chalk-faced, the sacrifices had reached the stage of merciful numbness. They took their seats, fumblingly. Hi could not bear to look at them. Under his breath he cursed the age-old human fetish for making a show of everything. How much kinder to let them spend their last few hours on Earth alone!

"The Public Apologist—he's starting!"

In a quavering voice that sounded grotesque when powerfully amplified, the old

man began his discourse. Bowing low to the sacrifices he spoke:

"In the name of all humanity. . . ."

It was the traditional formula.

"In the name of all humanity, I beg of you forgiveness. That we may live you must go to your death. So it has been year after year for half a century. We pray that it may not be so forever.

"It is not want of courage on the part of humanity that sends you away. On even terms—on much less than even terms—would the Earthmen give battle to Pluto. But you all know how helpless we are! Is not that terrible year of 3,927 still fresh in the minds of people still living? The year when the Plutonians discovered their gravity distorting beam? The year that Earth left its orbit around the sun and flew off on a tangent? The year that we saw the sun dwindle and pale while the deathly frost drove us into the deepest mines, when even the winds died, and the air condensed like water on the surface of the Earth. . . ."

One of the girl sacrifices—a maid of eighteen, suddenly burst into a hysterical shriek. Two nurses carried her quickly into the tower.

"Oh we fought them!" continued the Apologist. "Our ships flew to Pluto as iron flies to a magnet. But as atomic cohesion is only another function of gravity, their distorting beam, sufficiently intensified, actually caused the atoms of which ships, men and weapons were composed, to disintegrate. Who can fight an enemy like that?"

"So we were forced to this treaty—to sacrifice fifteen young men and fifteen girls every year—in order that all humanity might live. The Plutonians thereupon returned our planet to its orbit. Their emissaries are here. Are you ready?"

If the poor victims had been able to say anything their voices were drowned by the noise of the mob, confused shouts, shrieks, hysterical laughter. Someone started a patriotic song and it was instantly caught up, screamed in something of a frenzy by nearly half a million people.

Sickened, Hi turned to go, but a fresh outburst made him turn back. A Plutonian had come out of the tower, stooping to get

his tremendous bulk through the door. His black, lack-lustre eyes viewed the public indifferently, puzzled perhaps, by that maelstrom of emotion that encompassed the entire range from bitter hate to adulation.

The Plutonian was Fernon, the scientist who was to officially accept the sacrifices. He was black with a hard, glossy blackness. Twelve feet tall, he stalked in like a conquering colossus. Only superficially did he resemble human form, for his powerful legs had webs, not feet. From his repulsive, wrinkled head sprouted two brilliant crimson knobs. The ears were small, close to the head and sharply pointed.

Fernon was entirely naked, draped only by the tattered and burned looking remains of what had been great, batlike wings in his youth, a thousand years ago. From a belt dangled an ordinary heat-ray weapon. From a ligament on one shoulder sprouted a young Plutonian, about six inches tall and fully formed, for the Plutonians have no sex, reproducing by fission, like the simple Earth cells. The young Plutonian was squalling and cursing in a tiny, mosquito-like voice, but Fernon paid him no attention whatever.

On Fernon's face, the most nearly human thing about him—was that same expression common to all Plutonians—an expression of neither good nor evil, showing no passion or emotion save that of vague curiosity. As he glanced at the teeming and hostile multitude, he seemed to be looking through them, eternally seeking for the answer to some cosmic riddle.

### A Daring Exchange

**F**OLLOWING Fernon came the renegade technic, Bilks, one of the few humans in the service of the dark lords. Bilks was huge, for a human being, though dwarfed by his master. He was hairy, truculent, but now, as he darted furtive looks from side to side, he was sweating with nervousness. He had no physical violence to fear, but it was as if his brain could not withstand the silent storm of contemptuous hate that beat against him. Naro, Plutonian

master of the sacrifice ship, stooped to look out and nodded his head.

"Go in!" Fernon waved his hand, tersely careless.

Amid a deep silence the sacrifices started to file in. Hi Buckram watched them with deep pity. And a girl whom he had noticed before turned so that he saw her tear wet face. She saw him at the same time, shook her head with a pathetic smile.

"Cinda!"

Hi was clambering up the stone side of the platform. His friend of the City police pulled him back.

"Stop!" he muttered. "What's the use? I didn't know she was your girl."

"Let me go!" Hi panted. But several of the City guards seized him. A low growl welled up terrifyingly all around until it became a bestial roar, and the guards became the center of a battle royal. These riots were not uncommon, and as the City police battled for their lives Hi managed to escape. But against the press of the milling mob he was unable to win his way back to the platform before the door of the tower was closed. Hi looked at it for a long time, unmindful of the tumult, and when at last he went away it was with the air of a man who has determined to stake his life on a desperate venture, fully expecting to lose.

\* \* \*

The Banquet of the Sacrifices was in progress. Night had turned the heavens black, spreading over a dream city. As far as the eye could see were exquisite pillars, towers, arches, bathed in milky light and flooded with rainbow colors. But the windowless Tower of Sacrifice was black and dark. Within it the choicest specimens of humanity sat at tables laden with selected viands that they could not eat, while a famous director was leading a symphony of colors and sound that went unheeded.

Servants came and went, wearing the special striped black and white sacrificial robes that were used for this purpose only. Guards scrutinized carefully the badges they wore, for it was a strictly enforced rule that whoever permitted a sacrifice to escape must himself be executed, or if physically perfect

enough, to take the escaped sacrifice's place.

As one of these servants passed along the base of the tower in the shadow, a sturdy young man, wearing the conventional long loose robe, accosted him:

"Say fellow, how'd you like to make a tenner and have the rest of the evening off?"

"Can't do it, whoever you are. And besides, I don't handle nothing but fruit juices. Another guy has the sacrificial merclite."

"I'm not looking for merclite," explained the stranger. "I want to take the place of one of those fellows in there."

"I never heard of any exchanges this late," objected the servingman suspiciously. "Why don't you go see the conscripting judges?"

"I did, but they're afraid of the political effect. But—well, my girl is in there. You see? I'm Hi Buckram of the I. F. P. I can't let her go out there alone! Listen here, fool, d'ye know what that means?"

"It means the same to the rest of 'em," the man remarked unfeelingly, stooping to pick up his burden.

Hi knocked him out and dragged him into a niche in the wall, where he changed clothes with him. Then he boldly walked in, carrying a case of bottled goods with him. Fortunately he was met by an excited caterer, whose impatient admonitions to hurry amused the guards. Hi caught a glimpse of the banquet hall, with more than half the places around the great table empty. That meant that many of the sacrifices would be wandering around the tower.

He found his lucky man dispiritedly coming down the long spiral ramp which wound around the central space ship well of the black tower. Hastily explaining the situation, Hi effected another change of clothing, curtly stopped the boy's flood of incredulous thanksgiving. At any moment the call for the examinations might come, and if the full quota of the sacrifices failed to respond there would be an investigation. He reached the lower levels just in time.

**F**ERNON was already at work. One at a time the sacrifices would be taken

before him, stark naked, and subjected to a searching physical examination. To the girls, most of them delicately reared, Fernon's impersonal examination was far less intolerable than the hungry officiousness of the renegade Bilks. Fernon saw this and sent Bilks out. But the Plutonian showed no great interest until he regarded Hi Buckram's muscular body.

"Are you the one they call Tycho Larus?" Fernon inquired rumblingly.

"I am," Hi replied without hesitation. Tycho Larus was the name of the youth with whom he had exchanged.

"They lied about your age, Tycho Larus?" Fernon remarked, making a perfunctory adjustment in a mass of strange instruments.

"It is perhaps your machine that lies," Hi rejoined evenly.

"You are actually twenty-four years old," Fernon pursued, "which is contrary to the covenant."

"All right," Hi exclaimed harshly. "Let me go then!"

"Oh, I don't know." Fernon thought for a moment. "It is perhaps because you Earthlings have kept too well to the covenant that we have failed in our quest." He squeezed Hi's arm in his ironhard grip until the soldier winced.

"Yes," he mused, "There is something about you which these others lacked. Are you happy?"

Hi looked at Fernon steadily, not speaking.

"Yes, I see," Fernon said after a moment. "You would be happy to fight me. Usually they are soft and whining and beg for mercy. But I never have found out what mercy is, except not to do the thing that you are going to do."

With a small pocket transparency ray Fernon carefully examined Hi's inner organs. "Good stomach," he mumbled, "good lungs, very good heart. Brain convolutions excellent. A firmness about you, Tycho Larus, that indicates you will be a good subject. By my knobs, but you are a stout one! You seem to feel no more fear than I. Here, how did you get that burn on your shoulder?"

"That? Oh that! Happened to stand back of a rocket plane when it started," Hi falsified.

"These Earthlings are in need of a lesson. The covenant stipulates that the sacrifices must be free from blemish. Still—I'll accept you. You may be more useful in our research than the others."

\* \* \*

On board the *Aegeida* the sacrifices were well treated. The youths and the girls had separate quarters, comfortable, though they now had to do without servants. Bilks and Nara were the only crew, as the ship was a small one. Fernon appeared occasionally to check up the health of his charges but did not disturb them otherwise. Some of the victims were still sunk in dull apathy, while others, conscious that the end was near, sought the solace of love and companionship to help them forget.

Fernon continued to take unusual interest in Hi, known to him as Tycho. He did not fail to observe the attachment between him and the fair-haired girl who called herself Cinda Mara. One day he asked:

"Earthling, it strikes me that the ancient wisdom of our race is faulty. Although we are in every way superior to you, in your puny, shortlived bodies is something that we have not. Something finer. Something that we can no more imagine than you can imagine the color of ultra-violet which does not affect your eyes. What is happiness?"

"Seems to me I'm specially favored," Hi remarked warily. "What do you want to know about happiness?"

"What is it? Is it what you call emotion? You call them love, hate, happiness, sadness. What are they? For fifty years the great scientists of our race have tried to learn. Although we separated you in tiny bits we could not find out what made you as you are. But we know there is something. We have seen that to the Earth animals their trifling span of life is more than our great spans are to us. But why? To solve that riddle would be a great scientific accomplishment."

Hi looked into the gigantic black face that loomed above him. Fernon's disclosure reminded him sharply that to the Pluton-

ian he was no more than a mouse under the knife of a laboratory investigator. The dead black eyes seemed not even to be looking at him, but through him into the nebulousness of a cosmic secret.

"For fifty of your years, since the time of the Covenant, I have been bringing home the ship of sacrifice. Always they have been the same. The very young of your race, taken to a fate which they no doubt dislike, somehow seem to draw from some inner source strength—tell me—" and the Plutonian's gaze was all at once direct and penetrating—"tell me, is it their *souls*?"

**H**I BUCKRAM, former corporal of the I. F. P., alias Tycho Larus, laughed in Fernon's emotionless face. He slapped his thigh. He doubled up and shouted until the tears ran down his face, at the grisly absurdity of Fernon's casual disclosure. How interested they would be on Earth to learn what Fernon had just said, for the Plutonians had never deigned to explain the object of their research before, any more than the terrestrial scientists considers it necessary to explain to his guinea pigs why he is cutting them up.

"Listen!" He gasped when the paroxysm had passed. "Why, long ago—long before even you split from your parent—many generations of yours ago, your ancestors were looking for the very same thing. They came to the Earth. Somebody sold them on the idea that Earth people are different because they have souls. They spent a lot of time and did a lot of harm chasing around for souls. They certainly earned themselves a bad reputation, but they never found any souls."

"Tradition is that they did," Fernon insisted stubbornly, "but as the great work was about to be consolidated they met unexpected resistance. The Earthlings learned to fight. Earth was abandoned, and it was not until we invented the gravity distortion beam that we could renew our research."

"Well, of all the dumb—" Hi forgot his own position as he looked at Fernon with exasperated wonder. "Searching for souls—

What were you going to do with them—eat 'em? How do you handle 'em?"

"Well," Fernon started to explain, "we go at it in various ways—" and with meticulous attention to technical detail Fernon explained the conflicting theories of various Plutonian schools of vivisection until Hi no longer saw any humor in the situation, but swayed, white-faced, thinking of Cinda.

\* \* \*

Pluto was occulting more and more stars. The planet itself was dim, a vague, monstrous mass that seemed to hang menacingly a little above and to the right of the ship's bow. To the sacrifices it seemed to grow with ominous swiftness. Now it blotted out the entire heavens, and then the ship lurched as the bow rockets\* were started, to decelerate.

A pilot ship of the Plutonian patrol fleet flashed by them, convoying them over hundreds of miles of icy, sterile terrain, until at last, directly below them, lay a yawning black pit, immeasurably deep. The ship dropped like a plummet, Nara, the master, anxiously watching the dull red glow that presently appeared below. Again came that swift deceleration, and the ship darted into a gigantic lateral tunnel, illuminated by a lurid, smoky light from a source somewhere in the depths, which Hi assumed to be of volcanic origin. Here, it was rumored, were the giant thermocouples from which the Plutonians drew incredible amounts of power.

### A Bargain

**T**HE rockets were now cut off and the ship was carried and drawn along by gigantic magnetic levitators attached to the ceiling of the great tunnel. There was artificial lighting from long, blood-red tubes. It seemed very insufficient to Hi's eyes, but he knew that the tubes no doubt emitted large quantities of infra-red light, by which the Plutonians see best.

\*While the Plutonians used the gravity distorting beam in navigating some of their space ships, those touching the Earth were not so equipped, lest the terrestrials capture one and learn the secret of the beam.



So they came at last to a Plutonian city, a fantastic conglomeration of angular, misshapen buildings that looked like a wilderness of black basaltic rocks. The bloody red light seemed to lap them like waves of fire. It streamed in through the ports, painting the pale faces of the sacrifices.

The *Aegeida* touched the ground within high walls. Clean metal cages were carried out by a number of Plutonians, the sacrifices herded into them and locked up. Attendants carried the cages to a number of tables in a great pentangular room which was flooded with the throbbing red light, they saw to food and water, and then departed.

"So that's that!" Hi Buckram remarked. He had clung to Cinda Mara, and she was in the same cage with him. Hi's heartening presence had somehow raised her courage. He looked down at her now. She was sitting on the floor, looking at him with adoration, with confidence. Hi had told her that the I. F. P. had perfected a new weapon and would make a surprise attack to rescue them, adjuring her to keep that fact a secret. Of course she believed the blessed lie, for in times of extreme peril it is human to be optimistic.

As for himself, Hi was too hard-headed to indulge in such hopes. But he had promised himself that his own body and that of Cinda should be useless to the Plutonian investigators, in case a certain farfetched and doubtful plan of his should fail.

But first he would play that long chance. Fernon's casual disclosure of the Plutonian search for some kind of a usable soul-essence had somewhat reduced their mental stature in Hi's estimation. Perhaps they could be tricked. The trick might yield much. At the least it might yield a chance to reduce the population of the dismal planet somewhat.

They slept on little shelves around the sides of their cages. After some hours a Plutonian came, bringing food and water, but Fernon did not return until the equivalent of a day later, bringing with him a young assistant of three or four hundred years. They looked over their captives, discussing, in their guttural purring lan-

guage, the work they intended to do. Hi Buckram had a smattering of that tongue, and mused that it was well the other captives did not.

"We will try this one first!" Fernon decided, opening the door of Hi's cage and reaching inside. The other captives ran, crouching into the farthest corner. But Hi went forward to meet the great black arm. He seized the wrist and vaulted into a sitting position in the crook of Fernon's arm.

"It won't be long before I see you, Cinda dear," he called cheerily. She did not see the fine dew of perspiration that covered his face, and was reassured.

Again Fernon paid him tribute.

"Look, Ushtur," he rumbled to his assistant, "how tractable it is. The others squeal and kick. A good subject. It is the one I told you about."

Hi squirmed about until he faced the huge scientist.

"Hey, I want to talk to you!"

Fernon let him stand on a work bench, so that Hi's eyes were on a level with the dead black questing ones.

"I have something of importance to tell you. Take me where we can be alone."

"To tell me of what?"

"Of what you want to know."

Fernon picked Hi up, strode into another wing of the great underground laboratory. This room seemed to be the one in which the actual work was done, for it was equipped with a wilderness of chemical and research apparatus, including huge tanks and test tubes as tall as a man, in which perhaps the Plutonians sought to isolate the elusive soul substance of humanity.

"Now, tell!"

"Fernon," Hi said with an air of extreme frankness, "I do not wish to die."

"Perhaps not," Fernon remarked indifferently.

"There is a girl in one of your cages whom I love. I wish to live, and with her."

"All our specimens wish to live." Fernon displayed slight impatience.

"My proposition is simply this. Set us free—let us live in your service—and I will show you how to extract the soul essence you are looking for."

FERNON did not hesitate to strike the bargain. The Plutonians had found other Earth renegades useful.

"You may try," he remarked. "If you fail you and your female can still serve as specimens."

"There are certain matters of equipment I will need," Hi stipulated.

"You shall have them."

"During one process of the reduction I shall need a tremendous amount of power."

"We have power enough."

"And the work must be performed somewhere where the cosmic rays from outside can reach us. They are essential. Without them the experiment must fail."

"We could lay power conduits to the surface, but that is five of your miles." Fernon was dubious.

Then Hi, with elaborate casualness, made the suggestion that was at the very core of his plans.

"In that pit, where you keep your gravity distorting beam—the big one I mean—you have both power leads and access to the outside. Also plenty of room.

But Fernon was cool toward the suggestion.

"We could use the pit we came in through, but not the pit of the beam," he objected. "We can not use that. It is the very heart of our defenses. Always under heavy guard. Only by special permission of the Prince could we use it, and I doubt that he would give it."

"You can ask him, can't you?" Hi argued. "Well, if you won't do it I won't work for you. Here!" He pulled open his robe, baring his chest. "Go ahead and carve me. See what you can find out!"

But Fernon did not attempt to wrest the secret from his breast with a scalpel. He locked Hi securely back in his cage and went to see the overlord of the planet. The other specimens crowded to Hi, and excited cries echoed from cage to cage. This tough and cocky young fellow had come back alive, as he had promised. He had vaguely promised something more. They dared to hope again.

Hi managed to shake the others off, drew Cinda to a corner and sat down with her.

"Things are looking up," he murmured. "I made a deal with him."

It was another twenty-four hours before Fernon returned, the victor of a battle in council, on his hand the ring with the august seal of the Prince, which made the wearer, for the time being, the equivalent of vice regent in so far as this applied to his own profession. His leathery old wings were even more tattered and useless than they had been before, but Fernon did not even bother to explain to Hi that his victory had included a duel to the death with Orfas, former custodian of the pit of the Beam. He merely told Hi that the required permission had been obtained.

The Pit was perhaps thirty miles from the hideous city where the prisoners were kept. It was a funnel like depression in the outer skin of Pluto, about a hundred yards in diameter at the bottom, with walls inclined at an angle of forty-five degrees. It had been formed quite simply after the Beam had been constructed in the underground cavern selected for it, by directing the Beam against the roof of the cavern. All the enormous mass of superincumbent rock, five miles thick, deprived of its gravity, was thrown out into space by centrifugal force.

In the center of the hundred-yard circle which Hi entered with his giant companion, was the Beam. Hi looked at it curiously. Although he was by no means a scientist, he had a smattering of such things that was as far advanced over our present scientific knowledge as a present-day radio amateur is advanced over a peasant of the Dark ages. Somehow Hi had expected to see a gigantic searchlight of some sort. Even the heat-ray weapons he was accustomed to were like that. But the Beam of gravity distortion seemed to emanate from a triangular arrangement of three polished metal bars several feet thick and about fifty feet long, joined at the corners by polished metal balls about six feet in diameter. The triangle was balanced horizontally on massive gimbals capable of swinging the Beam in any direction.

Hi had been toying with a vaguely defined plan to break through the guard, turn on the Beam, and direct it against the Plu-

tonians themselves, some time during the construction of his "soul-reduction machine." Now he saw that the movement of the triangle was limited by a massive quadrant that would not permit its being turned beyond the angle of the pit's walls. The Prince, with foresight, had seen to it that the weapon would be used against the outside world alone. Revolutionists would find little inducement here.

### The Great Strategy

FERNON held up the Prince's ring, and the guards reluctantly raised their hands in salute and token of submission. There were about twenty of them around the Beam, as big as Fernon, but younger and stronger. Strong guards were at each of the numerous entrances of the pit, and walking guards, armed like the rest, with heavy maces and heat rays, paced their beats. The pulsating red light was over all, lapping at the rock walls, streaming out into space. On Earth, Hi knew, it was thought that this red light was the Beam itself.

"Begin!" Fernon commanded.

"Where are the main power leads?"

"You can connect up at one of those small red doors."

"Very well, but I will have to set up my apparatus near the center of the floor, to get the cosmic rays from all sides."

Fernon grumbled at that. "The guards complain about your getting so close to the Beam."

"Let 'em complain," Hi rejoined. "Show 'em the ring. This is important business."

Under Hi's direction Fernon and his assistants set up a nightmarish conglomeration of tubes, coils, polished bells, condensers. It must have puzzled the Plutonians, for it appeared to be nothing but a contraption for the dissipation of electrical energy, which, in fact, is all it was. But the end finally came, and Hi declared the formidable monstrosity complete.

"Now bring on your specimens, and don't forget your promise," Hi commanded. As Fernon turned to go he added:

"On second thought, better bring 'em in

the *Aegeida*. That's more like home to 'em. It will quiet them, and make it easier to get the clear soul essence. The special solvent ray which I use at first will penetrate the metal of the hull easy enough. Later we will have to remove them for further treatment."

Fernon regarded Hi steadily. He mused.

"The further I go with this the more I am convinced that your mind is twisted somewhere. But if it is your intention to try and escape through the Pit with the ship you are warped worse than I realize. There will be a heavy guard. And if you fail to do what you have promised, you will be the first subject of a new line of research, which may be—very—painful!"

"Bring 'em in!" Hi repeated.

The *Aegeida* was brought. Through her ports, flushed pink by the throbbing lights, could be seen strained faces. Plutonians, negligently dangling their maces, rode astride the hull or walked along. Then, as the Plutonians and the renegade Bilks left the ship occupied only by the sacrifices, heavy heat weapons were trained on the hull. Should the hapless passengers attempt to move away under their own power they could be instantly reduced to cinders.

"The girl," Hi turned to Fernon. "Bring her out as you promised me."

"The female remains," Fernon replied without change of expression or intonation. "We have need of her soul substance now. But if you succeed you shall have your choice of all the females in the solar system."

Fernon's refusal, half expected, filled Hi with elation, for it simplified one phase of his plan considerably, but he was careful not to show it. Instead he affected resentment.

"All right!" he barked, "you go back on your agreement and I won't carry on with mine."

"The research I have in mind," Fernon rumbled, "is like this. We think that perhaps your soul substance is in the bones. We will therefore remove all the bones in your body, being careful not to let you die, and note the changes, if any. We will know then. . . ."

"All right! All right!" Hi shouted, and the sick look on his face was not acting. "Here goes!"

He pulled a lever, and the astonishing collection of electrical misfits he had constructed collapsed upon itself. The collapse had the appearance of haphazardness. But two massive bars of copper, connected to the five-inch cable that writhed over the floor like a monstrous serpent, fell straight toward the Beam. Two of the guards saw them toppling and dashed forward to seize them. They vanished in an arc of blinding light and searing heat. The bars continued their fall, carrying the arc with them. It enveloped the quadrant, and in a few seconds the metal began to drip on the floor.

Hi dashed through a pair of Plutonian legs, scratching his face on wiry hairs so that it bled. He was through the guard line, clambering through the understructure of the great weapon. A sentry saw him through a billowing cloud of red tinted smoke, but Hi dashed into a maze of rods and levers where the black giant could not reach him. Neither could the heat rays be directed into that delicately constructed heart of calamity.

The arc flared out. Someone had pulled the switch at the wall panel. The Plutonians as well as Hi were blinded, but as one of the former lurched against the delicately balanced triangle Hi realized that the quadrant had been burned off. He crawled to one of the sides, heaved mightily, and slowly, very slowly, the tremendous mass, weighing many tons, turned on its bearings.

A GUARD noticed it, leaped upon the rising side to bear it down. Another one also leaped. Immediately the triangle tipped the other way, gathering momentum. Before the bewildered guards could collect themselves the triangle had turned clear around, and the dangerous side of the bars was turned directly to the center of the planet. Someone attempted to start the controlling motor, but the connecting links were warped by the heat, and the only effect was to wedge the triangle in its dangerous position.

Hi burrowed deeper into the strange mechanism in the base of the great weapon. He took frightful chances, crawling through massive coils that might be charged with electricity, squeezing between the teeth of enormous cogs. The Plutonians were still probing for him from above when Hi crawled out below, almost under their feet, and very cautiously looked around.

He saw the *Aegeida*, still under vigilant guard, the strained faces of the sacrifices at the ports. And on the floor was the body of Fernon, his head split straight between the knobs by a mace. The young Plutonian had managed to break the ligament, however, and make his escape.

Hi had vainly been looking for a way to actuate the great beam, knowing that the distortion or reversal of Pluto's gravity would make the entire planet fly to pieces of its own centrifugal force. Now he noticed an inconspicuous kiosk about thirty feet away. The patent jealousy with which it was guarded by two of the Plutonians indicated its real importance, especially when the precarious position of the triangle was considered.

"Now all I have to do is get rid of those two fellows," Hi thought, grinning a little. His eyes narrowed speculatively, for he had noticed Fernon's ray weapon still hanging at his belt. In order to reach the body he had to cross a well lighted space. Once, he might make it, but back again—well—

But he did not have to make it back. One of the dead scientist's capes had flopped awkwardly over one side of the body. Under its sheltering obscurity Hi crawled, stifling his disgust as he felt the sticky, hot blood. He dragged Fernon's heat ray with him, found a rent in the leathery covering and looked out.

The Plutonians were still looking for him under the frame of the Beam. Perhaps they thought him mangled and dead beneath there. And the two guards still kept close watch over a wheel—it looked like an ancient water ship's wheel—in the kiosk.

Hi set the localizer on the ray, which would concentrate it in a narrow beam, sighted on the nearer of the two guards.

That one dropped silently, and the other died a second later. Like a flash Hi bounded across the floor. He had difficulty reaching the control wheel, but reach it he did, before any of the other Plutonians were aware of what had happened—spun the wheel frantically.

Immediately he was conscious of a feeling of weightlessness. Almost instantly came the pangs of suffocation, and the bite of cold. Hi realized that Pluto was indeed flying to pieces. By some chance, possibly because only the rock directly below them was in the path of the spreading Beam, the part of Pluto's crust that held the pit and adjacent territory, had broken away in one piece. Nevertheless, it did not have sufficient mass to hold an atmosphere, and their air was rushing out into space.

The crimson lights still pulsed with diabolical life, indicating that they were still connected with the great thermocouples. But at any moment that connection might be broken. The Beam would lose its power, and the fragments of Pluto would crash together again. Well, it was certain that none of its inimical life would survive that crash!

Hi lay gasping on the floor of the kiosk. He wondered numbly why none of the guards came, until he realized that they too, were distressed by the lack of air. Then he saw something bending over him—something monstrous, but he could not focus his bloodshot eyes. Slim strong hands grasped him. He realized that the monstrous thing was someone in a space suit, the air-tight, helmeted dress for moving about in airless space. He was being floated—for gravity was so slight—toward the airlock of the *Aegeida*.

A Plutonian bounded toward them, arms moving ineffectually in the rarefied air. He passed, not seeming to notice them. Other bodies lay on the floor, but barely touching. From one of these huddled lumps a hand shot out—a human hand, though coarse and bestial looking. The renegade

Bilks seized the figure in the space suit by the ankle and attempted to trip it. But his hand slipped, and he lay there, chest heaving convulsively in the torment of air hunger, his mouth open and gasping like a fish out of water.

Hi was conscious of being pulled into the airlock, of the dull thud of a closing door, of a rush of glorious air. After a few minutes he was able to sit up. The bloody light still streamed through the ports. Hi saw that his rescuer was Cinda Mara, as he had thought.

"That fellow Bilks—" she tried to hide her tremulous reaction by assuming a matter-of-fact air—"He wanted my space suit. I dropped him a spare before closing the lock."

"And lucky for him if his oxygen plays out before our patrol picks him up!" Hi Buckram growled. "What I'd give to climb into a uniform now! I sure don't feel natural as Tycho Larus!"

"Hi, can you navigate the ship alone?"

"I can wiggle her out of this pit before something happens, and start her for home," Hi agreed, getting to his feet.

Four weeks later the black ship of sacrifice was sighted by a swift cruiser of the Interplanetary Flying Patrol. Hi let her commander in through the airlock, blushed as the officer's secretly amused glance took in the soiled robe on the figure in correct military salute.

"Corporal Buckram, sir!" Hi reported stiffly. "A little volunteer duty while on leave."

"Well, Corporal," drawled the commander, "suppose you stand at ease and tell me a little more about this. If our astronomers really told the truth then I'd say you'll be sporting a commission for whatever you did to those devils. By the way," he added in a lower, confidential tone, "who was that in here just a minute ago?"

"Oh that, sir? That was an angel," Hi grinned.