

THE SECRET OF MARRACOT DEEP — Hell's Creatures Came Out Of The Sea

fantastic

ANC

S C I E N C E - F I C T I O N

JULY 35¢

ALL STORIES NEW — COMPLETE



fantastic

JULY

1957

Volume 6

Number 6

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY
William B. Ziff (1898-1953) Founder
Editorial and Executive Offices
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

President
B. G. DAVIS

Administrative Vice President
WILLIAM B. ZIFF

Vice Presidents —
H. J. MORGANROTH
MICHAEL H. FROELICH

Vice President and
Circulation Director
MICHAEL MICHAELSON

Secretary-Treasurer
G. E. CARNEY

Art Director
ALBERT GRUEN



FICTION

THE SECRET OF MARRACOTT DEEP

By Henry Slesar..... 6

CHANGE OF VENUE

By Richard Wilson..... 53

GAS!

By Paul V. Dallas..... 58

DARK MIRACLE

By Ivar Jorgensen..... 75

HEADS YOU LOSE

By Gerald Vance..... 88

THE DAY BASEBALL DIED

By Jim Cooper..... 96

THE MARRIAGE MACHINE

By O. H. Leslie..... 110

FEATURES

LOW MAN ON THE ASTEROID

By The Editor..... 3

ACCORDING TO YOU...

By The Readers..... 124

IT SOUNDS FANTASTIC, BUT... 128

KNOW YOUR SUPERMEN..... 129



Cover: EDWARD VALIGURSKY

Editor

PAUL W. FAIRMAN

Managing Editor
CELE GOLDSMITH

Art Editor
HERBERT ROGOFF



The invasion was on—the pattern,



carnage and destruction.

THE SECRET OF MARRACOTT DEEP

By HENRY SLESAR

In the beginning the sea gave us life and through the ages she has sustained and nourished us. But for what past sins does she now send us these monsters from her deeps?

TWO days after he married her, Burt Holrood discovered that Jessie was half-wife, half-stranger.

The wedding had been a simple civil affair in the unromantic offices of a Los Angeles courthouse. But whatever romance the ceremony lacked was made up for by the honeymoon trip. The next afternoon, they boarded a DC-7 for Oahu in the Hawaiian Islands.

Jessie was all newlywed-sweet and bride-beautiful from the moment they entered the plane to the moment they pushed aside the latticed doors of their room in the modest little beach hotel called

the Keehoa. But later that day, Jessie's mood mysteriously changed.

They were lying on the sand, glorying in the warm sun and fragrant air, when Jessie turned to Burt and said:

"Please, Burt. Would you mind leaving me for a while?"

His young, quizzical face, already showing a sprinkling of sun-inspired freckles, wrinkled with puzzlement. It was an engaging face, not handsome, but the kind you enjoyed watching. He said:

"I don't get you, honey."

"I just want to be alone for a while. I'm afraid I get that way sometimes, Burt. I just have to be alone."

He frowned, and then tried to smile. "Okay, Garbo. Mother told me there'd be days like this. But don't forget—it takes two to make a honeymoon."

She turned her face from him, her dark hair spilling over her sculptured shoulders. Jessie was beautiful in more than face and form. Her movements were beautiful, too, fluid and graceful like the movements of a dancer. But she wasn't a dancer; she was a semi-successful commercial artist, with her own studio in downtown Los Angeles. Burt

was a photographer in the city, and they had met at a party for their allied trades. Within two months they had discovered enough about each other to marry. Now, as Burt watched her turn aside from him on the empty beach at Oahu, he wondered if he really knew enough.

He got up from the blanket and brushed sand from his knees.

"Okay, Jessie. I'll run back to the hotel and investigate the bar. Don't stay out too long."

She said nothing.

Burt stalked back towards the Hotel Keehoa with his spine stiff and his mouth grim. He tried to think of what he might have said or done to react upon Jessie this way, but nothing came to mind but the tender and passionate moments they had shared since the morning of the wedding. It was a mystery, and Burt didn't like mysteries. He liked his life to be clear and uncomplicated.

The hotel, a sturdy four-story building of whitewashed concrete, was quiet. He went across the cool wood-paneled lobby towards the curtained doorway labeled BAR.

There was only one patron, sitting at a small wooden table near the window that faced

the ocean. He looked up with a smile on his lined, British face that turned up one corner of his shabby gray moustache. Burt ordered a rum and soda from the Japanese barman, and sipped it glumly.

"Will you join me?"

The moustached man was grinning openly at him. Burt wasn't in the mood for company, but he picked up his drink and came to the table. When he sat down, the man said:

"My name's Nichols. Saw you arrive today, with your wife."

"Yeah," Burt said. Then he flushed at his own bad manners and said: "Name's Hol-wood, from the States."

The man nodded. "You did not have to tell me that. And I suppose you don't have to guess that I'm British." He laughed. "Speech betrays most of us. Others things betray us, too, but one can be wrong. For instance, it was my first guess that you and your wife were newlyweds."

Burt looked into his drink.

"Now I'm not so sure," Nichols said. He looked out the window, towards the distant speck of Jessie's yellow bathing suit. "Unless you've quarreled, of course."

"We didn't quarrel," Burt said curtly. "My wife just

likes to be alone sometimes."

"I beg your pardon." Nichols looked contrite. "I have an overdeveloped bump of curiosity. An offshoot of my profession. I'm an oceanographer."

"What's that?"

"Oh, just what it sounds like. My business is to be curious about the ocean; how deep, how hot or cold, all sorts of things."

Burt looked up at him. His face was angular and grave, his eyes serious, but his voice jocular. When he lifted his whiskey in his hand, he looked like a liquor model with his chiselled and weather-roughened features.

"Very interesting," he said dryly.

"You don't really think so. Your mind's on that beach. Well, I don't suppose I can blame you. Your wife's very beautiful."

"Yeah."

"How about another drink? My round."

They were starting on the third when they heard the scream.

Nichols' reaction was curious calm. He rose from his chair and looked placidly from the window. Burt joined him, and then realized that the scream had been his wife's.

"What's happened?"

The screams came again, short shrill outbursts of fear.

"It's Jessie!"

He exploded out of the bar, tipping over chairs in his anxiety. He ran through the lobby with Nichols after him, the older man running in measured but rapid strides.

Outside, Burt looked again towards the patch of yellow against the white sand and blue sky. But he saw another intruding color now, a splotch of bright red. He ran furiously over the soft sand, until he was close enough to the scene to see the source of Jessie's terror.

"My God!" he said.

His wife was trying to get to her feet, crawling away in loathing and horror from the monstrous crimson thing waving its terrible claws at her. Its eight spindly legs slipped on the sand, its feelers undulating rhythmically.

Burt recognized the ugly shape as that of a lobster, but his mind refused to accept the designation. No lobster had ever grown so gargantuan, or had such boiled-red color as this.

"Jessie!" he cried.

His shout seemed to thaw the icy paralysis in which she had been gripped. She scrambled to her feet and ran back-

wards into his arms. They watched the giant shelled creature snap its claws viciously in the air, and then begin a slow retreat to the shoreline of the Oahu beach.

Just as Nichols reached their side, the red thing had entered the water, and its trembling antennae were disappearing beneath the waves.

Then Jessie began to cry.

She sobbed against her husband's shoulder for a full minute, while Nichols looked off at the horizon. When she was capable of speech, the first question she had to answer came from the Englishman.

"Mrs. Holrood—would you be willing to give me a detailed description of that thing?"

Burt looked at him angrily. "What the hell! Can't you see she's scared stiff?"

"Of course. You can take your time about it, but I'd appreciate a full description."

"I can give you one," Burt said tightly. "It was a goddam big lobster, biggest lobster you ever saw in your life. And red, like it hopped out of a boiling pot."

Jessie was murmuring against Burt's shoulder.

"Those awful claws . . ."

"Come on, honey." He steered her back towards the hotel. "This is what you get for wanting to be alone . . ."

"Mrs. Holrood." Nichols was persistent. "May I talk to you about this later? It's really very important."

"Later!" Burt said.

He guided her gently up the beach, feeling male and protective, and despite his wife's shaken condition, a lot happier than he had been ten minutes before.

Nichols just waited on the beach, watching them leave. His heel dug a hole in the soft white sand. Then he looked out towards the sea again, and his face was thoughtful.

Two hours later, Burt came down the squeaky hotel stairs, looking for the dining-room steward. He spotted the hotel manager, a small-eyed European named Ferner, and said:

"Mr. Ferner, is it possible to have dinner in the room tonight? My wife's not feeling too well."

The little man paddled his vest and grinned. "Ja, sure, Mr. Holrood. I understand." He giggled, indicating that he really didn't.

Burt was heading for the stairs again when he heard the dry, jocular voice of Nichols.

"Oh, Mr. Holrood. Can you spare a minute?"

He came over frowning. "Please make it short, Mr.

Nichols. I don't want to leave Jessie alone too long. She's still pretty upset."

"I understand. Only I have to make one correction. The name is *Doctor* Nichols. Not a medical doctor; if I were, I'd be delighted to prescribe a sedative for your charming wife. But I'm only a doctor of science, ocean science, you see."

Burt tapped his foot impatiently.

"If your wife feels better this evening—"

"Look, Dr. Nichols, my wife is a delicate woman. That thing scared her half out of her wits. I'm having her stay in bed until morning. And even then—I'd appreciate it if you didn't remind her of what happened."

Nichols sighed.

"Your privilege, of course. I don't want to spoil the honeymoon." His words were jovial, but his face still grave.

"Good night, Doc."

Burt turned on his heel and went up the stairs.

Jessie was dry-eyed when he reached the room. He sat on the bed and put his arms around her. Her response was warm and bride-like again, and he grinned happily.

"Feeling better?"

She nodded. "It was just the shock—"

"I can imagine. Boy, I knew lobsters grew big. But not *that* damn big."

She shuddered, and he held her tighter.

"Okay, we won't talk about it. I asked the manager to have dinner sent up here. I guess he thought we were mighty anxious to be alone. Come to think of it, he's right. . . ."

The morning sunlight was bright between the slats of the blind. Burt looked over at his sleeping wife, grinned, and leaned over to kiss the inviting hollow at the base of her throat. He felt especially good this morning, and the thought of a pre-breakfast swim made him hurry into his trunks and beach robe.

It was only seven-thirty when he walked through the dining room. There was only one customer, a bird-faced woman in her late sixties, who was stabbing aggressively at a poached egg. She looked up disapprovingly at his costume. He saluted her with a wry grin, and went out the door to the beach.

The water was somewhat cooler than normal, yet still temperate enough to be comfortable. He swam out some thirty yards from the beach, and then floated around with

his face tilted towards the early sun. The sky was a blue masterpiece, and the one white cloud overhead looked like a misplaced pillow. It was idyllic.

Burt slapped at his midriff, and imagined he felt soft flesh. The thought made him eager for exercise, and he plowed his way through the quiet waves with long hard strokes. Then he sucked in air, and dove beneath the surface to get a look at the famed undersea life of the Island.

The moody, breathtaking colors thrilled him. A flat striped fish brushed his chest, and he grabbed for it playfully. Then he saw a different kind of fish. The sight startled him at first, until he realized that it was the familiar breed called Man.

He needed air by now, so he paddled his way to the surface and gulped in a lungful. Then he dove once more to get a closer look at his neighbor. He spotted the flapping rubber fins and circular face mask, and realized he was sharing the morning's exercise with a skin diver, complete with portable oxygen equipment.

The diver seemed to have noticed him, too. He beckoned upwards at Burt, and they both rose to the surface.

"Good morning!"

The man treaded water, and lifted off his mask. It was Dr. Nichols.

"Morning," Burt said, trying to keep afloat. "That looks like fun."

"It isn't. It's work—"

He began swimming towards the beach, and Burt followed him. The younger man's towel and robe were some forty yards from the site, but Dr. Nichols handed him a rough-textured towel from his own gear. After they had dried off, they sat on the sand and Nichols handed Burt an English cigarette.

They smoked silently for a while. Then the oceanographer pointed to the sea and said:

"I thought I might find our lobster friend. But I guess he's back for the deeps."

"What kind of creature was that? I didn't know they even *had* lobsters in this part of the world."

"They don't really. There's a kind of second cousin to the rock lobster here, but that wasn't a specimen of anything in the book."

"It was a big one, all right. Maybe we should have tried to catch it."

Dr. Nichols looked at him. "It's worth a thousand dollars if you do."

"What?"

"I'm sure the American-British Oceanography Society would pay it for our friend. You see, it's not the first time he's been spotted."

"No fooling?"

"He was reported on Oahu about six months ago. But the funny thing is—he was also reported on Catalina Island a year and a half ago."

"Catalina? That's a lot of miles from here."

"That's right. Perhaps not as far as you think, however—not when you're crawling on the bottom of the sea."

Burt grinned, and flipped his cigarette butt towards the water. "That's pretty deep."

"Deeper than you probably know. It's almost six miles deep, in the Mindanao Trench in the Philippines. And perhaps deeper than that in the place they call Marracott Deep."

"But nothing could live down there. Like our lobster friend, I mean. The pressure must be terrific."

"No," Dr. Nichols said. "For a human, the pressure of less than a hundred pounds could kill. But you must remember that the pressure of our deep-sea creatures is the same within as without. There are many living things in the deep, more than we can possi-

bly know about. The miracle of many of them is that they can rise towards other pressures nearer the surface, and still survive. Their air bladders adjust to the change if they move cautiously. As long as they don't 'fall' to the surface, they're all right."

"You mean that lobster came from the bottom of the ocean?"

"I don't know anything for certain. The bottom of the sea is still a mystery, but we're learning more and more about it all the time."

Burt looked thoughtful.

"I've got a theory," he said. "How about mutations? Atomic mutations? Couldn't all those Pacific atom tests have produced the thing?"

Nichols' face went blank.

"Possibly. Shall we start back for the hotel? I could eat a hen's yearly output this morning."

There was a pleasant surprise awaiting Burt on his return. Jessie was up and dressed and smiling radiantly, all ready for breakfast and a marvelous day. Her lovely shining eyes and good humor made Burt feel that life, as the soap operas say, could indeed be beautiful. He put his arms around her, but she shooed him off and told him to dress.

When they were seated in the dining room, Jessie began talking volubly, about every subject under the sun except the gallivanting lobster.

"I've just got to go back home with a tan," she said, her eyes dancing. "Can you imagine the cracks of the people in the studio if I came back all pale and white? You know what I mean."

"Sure, honey. Only take it easy; we've got three whole weeks to fry in. Don't do it all at once."

"Oh, I'll be careful. Say, are you starting to tan, or just more freckles?"

He grinned. "Just freckles. If I can get enough of 'em, I'll look okay. Oh-oh."

Dr. Nichols was approaching their table.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hol-
rood. Feeling better?"

"Just fine. Won't you join us?"

Burt introduced the doctor by his title, and hoped that he wouldn't mention the lobster again. But the Englishman seemed content to chat about the weather, the Islands, and the Hotel Keehoa's interesting assortment of guests.

"Now that chap over there," Nichols whispered humorously, "the one with the bullet head and bloodshot eyes. He's been here a week

and never leaves the water except to eat. Think he'd be waterlogged by now, wouldn't you? It's my theory that he's a Russian spy."

Jessie giggled, capturing the mood. But Burt sat silently, not sure that Nichols' humor was ever intentional.

"As for that old lady over there, the one with the newspaper, she never leaves the front porch. However, she makes it all up by playing a mean hand of gin rummy. Took me for six pounds last week; never batted an eye."

"And how about yourself, Doctor?" Jessie asked, a bit flirtatiously. "Are you the athletic type?"

"Not in the least. In case you've heard about my skin-diving, I want to assure you that it's work, not play. I hate water unless it's in a glass, and only then with a little Scotch in it."

Jessie laughed loudly.

"As a matter of fact," Burt said, "I've been thinking about the skin-diving business. Is it difficult, Doctor?"

"Well, you should know what you're doing. However, if you'd like to learn, why not borrow my equipment this morning? I'm through paddling around for today."

"You mean it?"

"Certainly. Come up to my

room and I'll give you a short course in the art. Join us, Mrs. Holrood?"

Jessie shook her head: "I like the surface, thanks. You run along, Burt. I'll go out for a swim meanwhile."

"Okay."

A few minutes later, Dr. Nichols was displaying the paraphernalia required in aquatic diving. His descriptions were brief and lucid, and within another hour, Burt felt prepared to brave a minor depth in the device.

"Now don't overdo it at first," Nichols cautioned, as they stood on the shore. "And don't try and reach Marracott Deep on your first try. Just paddle around some fifteen or twenty yards from the shoreline, and get the feel of it. All right?"

Burt nodded, and slipped the mask over his face.

It was a strange and exciting experience, floating about in the dream-like atmosphere of undersea, not worrying about the need for air, having time to study and explore the exotic and wonderful marine life.

When he was under for some five minutes, Burt remembered Dr. Nichols' advice and decided to ignore it. He moved out further from the

shore, towards the deeper water, where the sea bottom seemed to slant sharply downwards.

Ten minutes later, he saw the movement of the red lobster.

It was hard to recognize the creature of yesterday in the hazy light. But as he came closer, the bright red color and enormous size was unmistakable. He pushed his way after it, keeping a safe distance from the great sharp claws.

It was heading for the shore.

Suddenly, the creature's speed increased. Its eight legs and huge claws began moving frantically, across the ocean bottom, as if the need to reach the beach was urgent. Burt lost sight of it momentarily, and then decided to surface.

He splashed through the water, and ripped off the face mask, just in time to see the scarlet creature reach the white sand.

Jessie's scream was even more terrible than yesterday's, the horror compounded by this second appearance of the gargantuan lobster. He shouted to her, and began swimming desperately to the site of the attack.

Then he heard the muffled

crack of a rifle, and realized that Jessie wasn't unprotected. Further up on the beach, his feet firmly planted in the soft sand, Dr. Nichols was aiming a high-powered weapon directly at the onrushing lobster. His aim appeared to be good; each repeated crack of the rifle reacted upon the creature. Most of the bullets seemed to be rebounding from its incredibly hard shell, but some were striking into the soft underbelly and brain.

By the time Burt reached dry land, the giant lobster was dead.

Nichols came towards them on the run, and Jessie fell trembling into Burt's arms.

"Well, we got the thing," Nichols said. "I wanted it alive, but this will have to do—"

"I like it better dead," Burt said grimly. Then his face hardened, and he looked at the doctor with inquiring eyes, searching for an answer.

"What I don't get is this, Doc. The thing was after Jessie again. Twice in two days."

"A coincidence."

"But it seemed to know where it was going. I was undersea at the time; I saw it heading for the beach, in a hell of a hurry. And there's a dozen people out on the shore now."

In his arms, his bride shivered.

Burt said:

"Why Jessie, Doc?"

The Hotel Keehoa came to sudden throbbing life. Guests that Burt had never known were there appeared in the lobby, buzzing about the improbable creature which had come up on the Oahu beach. An Hawaiian police official, summoned by the hotel manager, was busily taking notes that had no significance at all. As for Dr. Nichols, he was a blur of calculated activity. A phone call by the oceanographer commanded the immediate arrival of two burly young men, whose job it was to remove the carcass of the dead lobster and cart it to some place of study in Honolulu. Finally, the press seemed to get wind of the affair, and a grinning young Hawaiian named Hukoi was circulating among the hotel residents with a busy pencil.

When he approached Jessie, Burt threw up his usual protective block. But the little Hawaiian wasn't any less persistent than Dr. Nichols had been.

"Just a few little questions," he smiled. "Nothing to embarrass. For the local newspaper."

"Not right now, Mr. Hukoi. My wife's been too disturbed over the thing."

"Then perhaps you will answer some questions, Mister—"

"Holrood. Sure, I'll answer your questions. Just as soon as I get my wife upstairs."

Later, when Burt reentered the lobby, he found that Hukoi remembered the promise. He drew Burt aside, grinned amiably, and asked: "What is your wife's name, Mr. Holrood?"

"Jessica. We arrived here only yesterday, from Los Angeles. I'm a photographer, my wife's a commercial artist with a studio downtown." He went on to give a brief chronology of the events of the past two days. When he came to the second attack on Jessie, Hukoi's eyebrows lifted.

"Coincidence?"

"Of course," Burt said. "She was the only one on the beach yesterday, and today there were only a handful. That accounts for it."

"Naturally."

"Anything else?"

"One more thing." Hukoi lifted his pencil. "You have been married long?"

"No, just three days."

"Ah. And what was your wife's name before marriage?"

"I don't see why—"

"Please."

"Okay," Burt grumbled.

"Her name was Jessica Burke. Can I go now?"

"Very sorry to have been a bother," Hukoi grinned.

Burt walked off, and saw the little hotel manager pacing the floor, squeezing his hands together in vexation.

"What's wrong, Mr. Ferner?"

"Ach! Such a thing to happen. A giant lobster in my hotel! But you understand, Mr. Holrood, the hotel is not liable for such happenings—"

"Don't worry; I wasn't thinking of suing. Where'd they take the creature?"

"Dr. Nichols is bringing it to the University in Honolulu."

"Great publicity," Burt smiled. "You'll have all the fishermen in town clamoring to get into the hotel now."

Ferner shrugged his shoulders, and Burt went to the stairway. In the room, he saw that Jessie was lying across the bed, face upwards, and peacefully asleep.

He tiptoed quietly towards her, and looked down at her lovely, clear-planned face, more beautiful than ever in repose. He stared at her for a long while, until he began to sense

that something was wrong. Her color was good, but there was something disturbing, something misplaced, something unnatural that he could not define.

Then he knew what it was.

His wife wasn't breathing.

"Jessie!" Burt cried.

He sat down on the bed, and shook her by the shoulders.

"Jessie! Jessie! wake up!"

She stirred, and he could hear the normal rhythm of her breathing again. She opened her eyes, sleepily at first, and then in sudden panic.

"What's wrong? What is it?"

"Nothing," Burt said, sighing with relief. "For a moment, I was afraid—"

"Why? What happened?"

"You looked like you weren't breathing. I thought—"

"Don't be silly!" She leaned her head against his chest. "I'm just tired, that's all. I'm afraid you're not having much of a honeymoon . . ."

"I'm having a great honeymoon." He kissed her eyelids.

"I love you, Burt."

"I love you, Jessie."

It was a familiar dialogue, but they were fond of it.

That afternoon, in the lobby of the Hotel Keehoa, Burt ran into Dr. Nichols, looking flustered and busy. He stopped him in his tracks and said:

"Sorry to bother you, Doc. But I'm curious as to what's happening. Am I allowed to know?"

"Certainly, Mr. Holrood." He frowned at his watch. "I have to return to the University at five. That gives me a little time; how about a drink?"

"Sure thing."

They settled around the corner table near the window, and Nichols knocked back a sizeable amount of Scotch before beginning the conversation.

"It's the damndest thing," he said.

"What is? Our lobster friend?"

"A group of marine zoologists have been examining the creature for the past few hours. You should see the blighters; excited as kids with a new bicycle. Poking and prodding—"

"What'd they find out?"

"Well, it's a lobster, all right, no doubt of that. Some minor differences in the ratio of legs to torso, things like that. Also a superior hardness of the outer shell, proportional to its giant size. The color of the thing has them particularly fascinated. You know, at depths greater than about fifteen hundred feet, the fish are

usually dark-hued, often quite black. However, there are often unusual exceptions. Prawns, for instance. They're often bright red, too. One of nature's pranks, I suppose, since all the red rays of light are gone from water at such depth. They probably appear just as black as the other fish."

"How do they account for the thing? For its size?"

"They have all sorts of tentative theories already—including your own atomic one, Mr. Holrood."

"Might as well make it Burt."

"Fine. My wretched first name's Percival, so I hope you'll call me Nick." He grinned wearily.

"Sure, Nick."

They had another drink.

Nichols said: "How's Mrs. Holrood?"

"Okay now. Been pretty rough for her, being attacked twice in two days. You can't blame me for thinging that beast was haunting her. But I guess you were right; coincidence."

"Poor girl. But I think you can enjoy the rest of your holiday in peace and quiet."

"I hope so. Like to try that skin-diving business some more, if it's all right with you."

"You're welcome to the gear anytime, Burt."

"Thanks, Nick."

Then the doctor fell silent, and his eyes became moody.

"Sure there isn't something else?" Burt asked. "You look worried."

"Not worried," Nichols said. "Just bothered."

"About what?"

"Something I didn't tell you, about the lobster. Something I hope you won't repeat, not to anyone."

Burt's brow wrinkled. "Sure, anything."

Nichols turned his glass in his hands. "We found something on the shell of the creature. We didn't notice it at first; perhaps we might have missed it entirely if the inspection hadn't been so painstaking. And it's something rather disturbing."

"What was it?"

"A number," Nichols said. "The number 42-361, stamped in black on its shell."

At four, after Dr. Nichols had departed for his appointment at the University, Jessie came down the stairs, looking rested.

Burt came to her and said: "Look, I've got an idea. Best thing for us is to get away from this place for a while. How about going into Hono-

lulu for the evening? We can have dinner out, maybe dance a little, see the sights. Okay?"

"Fine," Jessie said. "I think that's a fine idea."

He captured the attention of Mr. Ferner, who listened to his request, and made arrangements for a taxi to take them into the city.

It was less than half an hour's ride into the famed capital of Hawaii, and they enjoyed the approach with all the innocent pleasure of tourists. Jessie loved the way the city rose from plain to mountains, loved the encircling opalescent waters and the splashes of exotic vegetation. They moved close to each other as they drove through the main thoroughfares, as if the beauty of the city inspired them romantically.

The taxi-driver pointed out the local points of interest and pride: the spacious, flower-rich park, the clean high buildings, the territorial capitol, and then on to the splendor of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel that rose beside Waikiki Beach.

"It's so lovely," Jessie said. "Like a fairytale city . . ."

"Notice something?" Burt grinned. "No billboards. Plain un-American, if you ask me. Put jokers like you and me out of business this way."

They rode on through streets bedecked with rare plants, with monkeypods and banyans, umbrella trees, palms, bougainvillea, tulip trees, and the everpresent hibiscus. The city was a garden, and in their present mood, it seemed to have been created especially for the Holroods.

They had dinner at the Royal Hawaiian, and dined on succulent native dishes that had them groaning happily at the end of the meal. Then they danced on the outdoor patio, until the moon rose fat and contented over the water. The setting was perfect.

By the end of the evening, all that had been lost between them since the hour of their wedding was recovered. Without tasting wine, they were drunk, and happily drunk, when they boarded the taxi for the return trip.

They reached the Hotel Keehoa close to midnight.

Just as they mounted the stairway to their room, Mr. Ferner, half-dozing at the front desk, called out to Burt.

"Mr. Holrood! A minute, please."

"What is it?"

"I'm very sorry," the proprietor said. "But the gentleman insisted, said it was very important—"

"What gentleman?"

"He's in the bar now. A Mr. Hukoi, from the Honolulu newspaper. He asked me to tell you to see him when you came in."

Burt frowned, and turned to Jessie.

"You go on up, honey. I'll take care of this guy."

"All right. Don't be long."

He let her go reluctantly, and went into the bar. His face showed his annoyance.

Hukoi was staring at a headless beer when Burt entered. The grin, that had seemed an inseparable part of the small, alert face, was gone.

"You have the time, Mr. Hukoi?"

The reporter looked surprised. "Twelve o'clock."

"A little late for an interview, no?"

"An interview is not quite what I came for, Mr. Holrood. I have information for you."

"What kind of information?"

"When I returned to my office today, I went to the morgue to get some background information on the lobster. I ran across this clipping."

He reached into his white jacket, and produced a folded strip of newsprint. Burt took it, his face puzzled.

It read:

REPORT GIANT LOBSTER ATTACKS WOMAN

Santa Catalina, May 24: An enormous lobsterlike creature has been reported on the beach of Catalina Island, California, by two witnesses. The giant crustacean, said to be bright red in color, is said to have "attacked" a young woman as she sunbathed on the beach. The woman, Miss Jessica Burke of Los Angeles, was said to have . . .

The print blurred before Burt's eyes.

"This is crazy!"

"Ah," Mr. Hukoi said.

"Look, buster, if this is some kind of a rigged-up joke—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Holrood. I had no idea what I would find when I looked up the file. I was merely seeking to write a somewhat better story than your, er, interview afforded me. I didn't expect to find this interesting—coincidence, really I didn't."

Burt read the item again.

The woman, Miss Jessica Burke . . .

Attacked once by an out-sized creature from the deep . . . attacked twice . . .

But three times?

He handed Hukoi the clipping. "Thanks very much,

Mr. Hukoi. It's very interesting."

"It does not disturb you?"

"Not in the least."

The grin reappeared on the reporter's face.

"Very well, then. Good night, Mr. Holrood!"

The recuperative powers of the young are remarkable; within another week, Burt Holrood and his bride Jessie appeared to have no problems in the world.

Burt's friendship with Dr. Nichols deepened during the days that followed, although Jessie seemed to only half-accept the oceanographer. The friendship centered upon their mutual interest in the art of skin-diving, and not a day passed without Burt improving his skill, utilizing the doctor's equipment.

On a Saturday morning, Burt made his first attempt at deeper waters. In a rented motorboat, he and Jessie explored the sea beyond the breakwaters of the island.

Burt tightened the flippers on his hands and feet, adjusted the portable oxygen equipment on his back, and grinned at her before slipping the mask over his face.

"I'll bring you back a goldfish," he said.

"Don't bother," Jessie

laughed. "Just don't get mixed up with any mermaids."

He slipped over the side of the boat, and flipped his way towards the botom.

The eerie light and mysterious quiet never failed to thrill him; the weirdly contorted plants and shells were like statuary in some castle of dreams.

Then he saw the man.

The sight of another skin-diver wasn't startling in itself; the waters of Hawaii were plentiful with them. But the cause of Burt's wonderment was the fact that this diver had none of the life-preserving equipment he himself carried. The man wore only bathing trunks, yet he seemed as much at home in the deep as the fish themselves.

Burt stayed out of sight behind a tangled growth of seaweed, watching the strange figure. He recognized the man finally, the baldheaded man with the Teutonic features who was a guest at the Hotel Keehoa, the one whom Dr. Nichols had described as a swimming fanatic. But the shock of recognition wasn't as great as the shock of the man's actions.

He was lying down on the

sea bottom. He was resting.

Burt came closer, and the thought in his mind made no sense. But he could swear that—the man was asleep!

He paddled still closer, and in the murky light saw the man's eyes fly open, as if he had detected Burt's approach even in the silence of the undersea.

They stared at each other.

Then, with a bound that was incredible in the cumbersome depth, the baldheaded man leaped towards his throat!

Burt was so startled by the attack that he was instantly carried off balance. He brought his arms up to ward off the plunging hands, but they closed around his windpipe. He tugged at the man's forearms; they had the hardness of steel, thickly muscled beneath the smooth flesh. He thrashed and kicked his feet in an effort to break away, but the man held fast.

Then the baldheaded man changed his plan of attack. He twisted Burt's arm into a half-nelson, and began to reach for the oxygen equipment on Burt's back. Burt was helpless in his grip; in another moment he felt a change of pressure inside the face mask that terrified him,

and filled him with thoughts of suffocating death.

Violently, he wriggled his body until he squirmed out of the bald man's grasp. His assailant's thick lips parted in a ghastly grin, but Burt was too preoccupied to wonder how a human could survive with an opened mouth underwater. He was fighting to control his breath, before the air inside his mask vanished.

He kicked his way towards the surface, and the baldheaded man reached out almost carelessly to imprison his ankles.

He awoke with the pounding of a thousand surfs in his eardrums.

He groaned and opened his eyes, and seemed to see underwater faces peering at him.

Then the images clarified, and he realized that the anxious faces belonged to Jessie and Dr. Nichols.

"What happened?"

"That's odd," Nichols grinned. "I would have sworn you were going to say 'where am I?'"

"You got into trouble," Jessie said lightly, but her voice was strained. "Your oxygen tank went on the blink. Luckily, you came up

right near the boat. I brought you in and Dr. Nichols gave you artificial respiration."

Burt looked around their hotel room. When he looked back at Nichols, his face was tense.

"It wasn't any accident, Doc. I was attacked down there."

"What?"

"I said attacked, by our bullet-headed friend, the one you said was a spy—"

"I was only joking—"

"I know that. But whatever he is, that guy is more fish than man. I came across him on the bottom. It sounds crazy, but I could swear the guy was—well, sleeping."

He heard Jessie draw a sharp breath.

"When he spotted me, he made for my throat. Then he cut off my oxygen. When I tried to make the surface, he pinned my ankles. I must have kicked like a million mules in order to get away—"

"That's fantastic," Nichols said. "Sure you didn't imagine it? The sea plays funny tricks on the eyes."

"I tell you I saw him!"

Nichols went to the telephone.

"Who're you calling?"

"The police," Nichols said. "I think they ought to ask our friend some questions."

"No!"

It was Jessie's voice.

They turned to her, and she put her face in her hands.

"I didn't want you to know," she said, her voice muffled. "I didn't want you to ever find out, Burt."

"Find out what?" He struggled to sitting position. "I don't get you, Jessie."

"About me," she said. "About what I am."

Dr. Nichols cleared his throat. "Perhaps I'd better—"

"No, stay," Burt said. He got up and went unsteadily across the floor to his wife's side. "You're involved in something, Jessie. Something to do with this man. Is that true?"

She sobbed once, and put her head against his shoulder.

"I didn't tell you this," her husband said. "But my visitor last night was that Honolulu reporter. He found a clipping in the newspaper files, about the first red lobster report. It said that the woman who was attacked by the thing on Catalina was named Jessica Burke. You never told me that, Jessie."

"I couldn't. I wanted to forget it—"

Nichols was watching in fascination.

"Tell me now, honey. Tell me all about it."

He maneuvered her to the bed, and they sat down. She took her hands from her face and stared at the floor.

"I'm not human, Burt."

The stunned look on her husband's face caused her to explode in tears.

"No, no, that's not true! I *am* human, I am! Just different, Burt, just different! But I *feel* the way you do, inside. Just the same way, Burt—you've got to believe me!"

"You're not making sense. Different how?"

"In here." She thudded her small fist against her bosom. A difference in here. My lungs. An air bladder . . ."

"What?"

Dr. Nichols' reaction was a gasp.

"It's true, Burt. Don't love me the less for it—please don't!"

"Honey, honey," he crooned, his arms around her. "I wouldn't care if you had fins. I love you . . ."

"Maybe you won't. When you hear the rest—"

"This is incredible," Nichols murmured. He took a step closer to her, his eyes wide with professional curiosity.

"I was born under the sea," Jessie said, her eyes moist

and distant. "In the place you call Marracott Deep. We call it . . . Akumu. It's a city, an incredible city beneath the water. It sounds insane to me even now, but it's there. I've never seen it, but it's been there for centuries . . ."

Burt was shaking his head, rejecting the whole idea, trying to keep his life normal.

"It's true, Burt. There are thousands of us living below, our bodies adapted over generations to the pressure. We've lived in peace until now, Burt. But now, with the land-people probing into the very depths . . . Akumu is afraid. Terribly afraid!"

"I don't understand. Why are they afraid?"

"Afraid of the land-people. Afraid of investigation, of invasion. Afraid of your curiosity, your hostility, your greed, your thoughtlessness. Afraid of your weapons, your atomic bombs, your careless testing of nuclear power . . . The Akumus believe that once the land-people knows of the presence of their city, nothing less would satisfy them but some kind of beligerent action. And that would change everything for them, Burt. Everything! Don't you see?"

"No." Burt turned his head aside. "I won't believe it,

Jessie. This is some kind of nightmarish joke—"

"You must believe me, Burt. If you don't believe me, you can't help me. And they'll kill me . . ."

He stared at her. "Why? Why you?"

"Because I'm disloyal, Burt. Disloyal to their plan."

"What plan?"

She twisted the bedclothes in her hand.

"About a hundred years ago, since the first depth-sounding operations began, the elders of Akumu have been sending representatives to the land. From infancy, they bring us upwards slowly, allowing us to become adjusted to the pressure changes over many months, until we are enabled to survive in the topmost layers of the sea. Then we are brought to dry land. We're amphibious; we can live in air or water; the greatest problem is pressure. That was how I was brought here, Burt, at the age of three . . ."

"I can't believe it! You look—" He stopped.

"Like everyone else? I know. The differences are all internal. I've always dreaded the thought that I might need X-ray examination some day—and then you'd know."

"But why have they done this?" Nichols asked eagerly. "Why send these—representatives?"

"I can't tell you that," the girl said. "Please don't ask me to tell you that. It would be—a betrayal."

"Is it something dangerous?" Burt asked. "Are they plotting in some way against the land-people?"

"Please, Burt! You must understand. Even though I knew Akumu only as an infant, I was raised as an Akumu child. My 'parents' on land were Akumus who had been brought up from Marracott Deep many years before. I loved them as my own mother and father, Burt. And they taught me to love Akumu, and to be loyal to Akumu . . ."

"But you're not, are you?" Burt stood up and looked down at his wife. "That's what all the trouble is about. You're not being loyal, and that's why they want to kill you. Those lobsters—why do they keep—"

"Yes," Nichols said. "What about the lobsters?"

"They're the beasts of our world, the domesticated animals. Some trained to kill, and possessed of the instincts of a bloodhound. There are others, too, far more horri-

ble than the red lobsters—" She shuddered.

"But what have you done, Jessie? Why are they after you?"

"Nothing. I've done nothing. But that in itself is disloyalty. I didn't do what I had been commanded from birth to do. The first time, at Catalina, that was only a warning. But now—"

"Yes?"

She looked up at him, with such tormented eyes that Burt felt close to tears himself.

"Now I married you, Burt. A land-human. And there couldn't be any greater disloyalty than that."

Her husband swore, and smacked his fist into his palm.

"Let me remind you," Dr. Nichols said. "About our baldheaded friend."

"He must be one of them!" Burt said. "That's why he tried to kill me, because I saw that he was more fish than man—" He stopped when he saw Jessie's hurt look.

"How many are there?" Nichols asked. "Akumus—on land?"

"I don't know. Hundreds, maybe thousands."

Dr. Nichols went to his knees, and touched the girl's hand gently.

"You've already demonstrated which side you're on, Mrs. Holrood. I think you should go all the way. If you love your husband, if you want to be—well, part of our branch of humanity, then you mustn't mistake loyalty for foolhardiness. You must tell us what this danger is, what the Akumus are planning to do."

"I can't!" Her voice was shrill. "Believe me, I can't! Everything in me tells me to keep silent—"

"But if they plot something that will harm you or your husband—"

"I don't care about the danger. Because it won't happen in our lifetime. Don't you understand What they plan won't happen to Burt and me—it may not happen for a hundred years!"

Burt said: "How do you know?"

"Because I know, because that's what the plan is. It won't effect us, Burt. We can be happy together—"

"And what about your children?"

Burt looked at Dr. Nichols.

"I don't know," Jessie breathed. "I'm not sure we can have children." Her face grew cold. "But what am I talking about? After you've

heard all this, Burt, you won't want me for your wife anymore, will you? So the question's—academic."

Burt sat on the edge of the bed, and put his head down almost to his knees.

"You must change your mind," Nichols said carefully. "You must, Mrs. Holrood. Whatever the personal considerations, you cannot allow a catastrophe to occur. It may be as harmful to your own people as to us. Don't forget—wars have a habit of killing friends and enemies alike."

"It won't be a war," Jessie said hollowly.

"Then what will it be?"

"It won't be a war," the girl repeated. "A war has two combatants. There'll be only one—and only one weapon?"

"What weapon?"

"Water," Jessie said.

Burt and Dr. Nichols confronted the hotel manager together, and he shrugged his narrow shoulders at their question.

"I know nothing about the gentleman," he said. "Except his name is Frederick Kammer, and he gives his address as Los Angeles. But I have not seen Mr. Kammer all day."

"No," Nichols said dryly, "and I have a feeling you won't see him for a long time."

Burt said: "Let's get a drink. I need one bad."

In the bar, Nichols opened the discussion with: "Your wife has to talk, Burt. You know that, don't you?"

Burt nodded silently. "But I love her, Doc. No matter what, I love her. And I couldn't do anything that would hurt her."

"You don't have to hurt her. You just have to find out what these—undersea people are planning. Perhaps it's not as serious as she thinks, perhaps she's—"

"Wait a minute. You're not saying that Jessie's—"

"Crazy? No, Burt. The damnable thing is I *believe* your wife's story. That giant tattooed lobster, that half-man, half-fish— I'm afraid it all adds up too well. But we still don't know if there's evil intent behind all this. The thing to do is find out, and find out fast."

"But how?"

Nichols leaned back in his chair.

"You're her husband, Burt."

"But you heard what she said. She wants to live only for today—she figures this

damned catastrophe, whatever it is, won't happen until we're dead and buried. How can I get her to talk?"

"Perhaps it needn't be completely voluntary."

"What do you mean?"

"Sodium pentathol," Nichols said. "I can arrange for getting the drug. But you'll have to arrange for its use, Burt."

"Truth serum?"

"Something like that. I know you won't like the idea, but you have to see the wisdom of it. It's as much for Jessie's own protection as ours. We've got to know what we're fighting before we can deal with it."

"I don't know." Burt gripped his glass.

"It's the only way I can think of. If you've got a better idea—"

"All right. I'll see what I can do."

They walked up the stairway to the first floor some ten minutes later, and parted at the door of the Holroods' hotel room.

"Jessie?" Burt said.

She wasn't in the room, but the door of the bath was open. He stepped over to it.

"Jessie, you all right?"

Then he saw her body crumpled on the floor, and

the spreading red stain on her dress.

The small room was crowded in thirty seconds after Burt's shout of alarm. Dr. Nichols, Ferner, and a short-winded puffy-cheeked man who was the hotel doctor, all bustled around the girl, until the physician was able to turn to the anxious husband and say:

"She'll be all right. The cut wasn't very deep; she missed the main artery completely."

He bandaged the torn wrist, and then raised his eyebrows at Burt.

"Accident, would you say? If it was a suicide attempt, then I'm obligated to report it, Mr. Holrood."

"Of course it was an accident," Nichols snapped. "I'm Dr. Percival Nichols of the American-British Oceanography Society; I'm a close friend of the Holroods. We were celebrating only a few minutes ago. Mrs. Holrood is definitely not the suicide type."

The doctor shrugged. "However, the wound was inflicted with a razor—"

"It was an accident," Burt said. "I'll swear to that."

"Very well." He sighed, and reached for his instru-

ment case. "She's still unconscious, but she'll be all right in an hour or so. Perhaps I should give her a sedative . . ."

Burt and Nichols exchanged glances.

"Yes," Nichols said, "a sedative would be a good idea. But if you don't mind, Doctor, I'd prefer to have my own physician administer it."

The doctor bristled. "Very well."

"No offense. Sort of an—idiosyncrasy of mine."

"Naturally. Well, call me if I'm needed, Mr. Holrood. I'm always around."

Within an hour, the medical man summoned by Dr. Nichols to the Hotel Keehoa bustled into the room. He was a pale, gruff-looking man with a brusque manner.

"Damn foolishness if you ask me," he said to Nichols. "You have written permission to use this drug on the woman?"

"Her husband's permission, yes. But there's something important at stake, Dr. Hal-lam. I wouldn't have dragged you in from Honolulu if it wasn't vital."

The doctor grumbled some more, and then prepared the fluid in the hypodermic. Just before he inserted the needle, he said: "Hope you know

what you're doing; I don't like any kind of shenanigan."

After a few moments, Dr. Nichols was questioning Jessie, who groaned and moved her head from side to side on the pillow. Burt looked on, feeling miserable.

"Mrs. Holrood . . . Jessie . . . Can you hear me?"

"What . . . what is it?"

"I'd like you to tell us about Akumu, Jessie. I'd like you to tell us everything you know . . ."

"Akumu," she repeated, her face contorted.

"What is the plan, Jessie. What are they going to do?"

"Must keep them . . . keep them from finding out . . . our sacred duty . . ."

"What sacred duty, Jessie? Are you speaking of the Akumus now on land?"

"Yes," the girl said. "We must guard the secret closely, until the time for the great hour . . ."

Nichols looked at Burt. "That must be the task set for Jessie and the other Akumus on land—to prevent the land-people from discovering the city's existence, until they were ready to strike. But strike how?"

He bent over Jessie again.

"How, Mrs. Holrood? How will the Akumus complete

their mission? Will they destroy the land-people?"

"Yes!" Jessie cried. "Yes!"

Nichols blanched. "How will they do it, Jessie? You must tell us how!"

"I can't!"

"You must . . . you can't help yourself, Jessie . . . you must tell us the whole story . . ."

"NO!"

She sat up, and her eyes flew open.

"Amazing," Dr. Hallam muttered. "Never saw an effect like that under narcosis . . ."

Burt came to her, his arms comforting. "Jessie, please. For your own sake, tell us the truth."

"I can't, I can't, I can't!"

She sobbed against his shoulder, and didn't stop until the room was cleared. Burt tried to comfort her.

Later, Dr. Nichols scratched his head and said:

"It's hard to understand. From what we know of the drug, she couldn't have resisted the way she did, unless there were physiological differences that might— Well, what's the difference. The point is we're still in darkness."

Dr. Hallam looked bewildered. "Is this a joke, Nick?"

Underwater people? That's an opium dream—"

"More than that, I'm afraid. We've seen a great deal of evidence already. But I think we need something else—an X-ray of Mrs. Holrood.

"No," Burt said stubbornly. "My wife's had enough rough treatment. I'm taking her back to the States in the morning."

"But you can't—"

"I don't care about anything but her, Doc. I'm sorry. But all I care about is Jessie!"

That night, he held her close and repeated his words.

"I don't care about Akumu. I don't care about all this talk of undersea people, Jessie. All I care about is you. I love you . . ."

"I love you, Burt."

"We won't ever talk about it again. We'll live our life and let the world take care of itself. Is it a bargain, Jessie?"

"It's a bargain."

But the compact was more easily sealed than maintained.

Four hours later, as the moon rose placidly over the calm waters of the Pacific, its rays slanting through the blind of their room, a sudden

shadow appeared at the window.

Burt stirred in his bed, and pulled the light blanket over his head.

The shadow deepened, and wavered.

He opened one eye and looked towards the window. The moonlight was suddenly eclipsed by darkness.

"What the hell," Burt murmured.

He pushed his feet over the side of the bed and sat up, watching the window.

Then the gray tentacle lashed through the glass, spraying the room with ten thousand shards, whipped its suckered flesh directly towards him!

Burt shouted with involuntary horror, and behind him, Jessie was jolted awake with a scream in her throat.

The hideous body of the gigantic devilfish filled the hotel room window, squeezing its soft flesh through the frame, its eight arms thrashing towards Burt. Instinctively, he reached out and grabbed a cane chair, raising it over his head and beating at the monster's hide. Jessie screamed again, and huddled into the corner of the room. When she saw the great tentacles close around her husband's body, she made a

plaintive sound in her throat and collapsed in a merciful faint.

Burt struggled in the tenacious grip of the creature, almost overcome himself with revulsion as the cold wet flesh touched him. Wild thoughts raced through his mind, and a terrifying recollection of the poisonous secretion carried by the octopus. Its huge malign eyes and parrot-like beak filled him with something deeper than physical horror as the thing drew him closer and closer to its sac-shaped body. He began to scream uncontrollably.

Then blackness.

When he awoke, he smelled gunpowder in the room. He raised himself from the slippery floor, almost retched at the acrid sea-odor, and felt himself being lifted by a strong arm.

"It's all right," Dr. Nichols said. "We scared the thing off—"

He looked up at the oceanographer, and his eyes filled with grateful tears. Nichols was holding his rifle by the barrel. There was no sign of the gigantic devilfish.

"Jessie—" he said.

"She's all right. Just fainted; best thing she could have done."

Behind them, they heard the frantic clucking of Mr. Ferner, the hotel manager. Nichols shouted at him: "Shut that door! We don't want the whole world in here!" He helped Burt back to the bed. "Fired two shots at the thing, but I only wounded it. It went off down the beach and into the sea."

Burt looked over at Jessie, lying across the bed. She was stirring now, moaning meaningless words. He bent over and touched her face, and her eyes opened. She flung herself at him, and sobbed wildly.

When she quieted, Nichols said:

"Mrs. Holrood, listen to me. You thought you could live with this secret of yours, but now you know you can't. They're out to kill Burt, too. You saw that tonight."

She turned frightened eyes on him.

"You must give us all your loyalty. Your only chance now is to tell us everything."

"All right," Jessie whispered.

Nichols sighed deeply.

"I'll get us all a drink—and we can talk."

Later, sitting rigidly in an armchair, her face chalk-white, Jessie said:

"The Akumus plan to drown the earth, submerge it

beneath the water. I don't know when it will happen, but I was told as a child that it would be four generations hence. Their scientists are busy now, getting ready for the deluge. The only humans who will survive will be Akumus."

Nichols cursed under his breath. "Shades of Noah's Ark," he muttered. "And how do they plan to submerge the land?"

"I don't know for certain. But for the past fifty years they've been spreading equipment throughout the sea bottom, along the natural fissures that surround the planet at the core. I think they plan some kind of demolition around the globe, to cause enough tidal action to drown everything that lives by air alone . . ."

Burt slapped his knees. "It's crazy! We could never prove such a thing—"

"They've started experimenting already, on a small scale," Jessie said. "Causing minor earthquakes and tremors. You must have noticed it—a whole wave of earthquakes have been reported in the last two years. They're not from natural causes. It's the Akumus—getting everything ready . . ."

Her last words hung in the

air, and seemed to chill the small room.

"What about the Akumus on land?" Nichols asked. "These so-called representatives. What's their function? When you were under narco-synthesis, you said something about them preventing the land-people from finding out about Akumu. How can they do this?"

"By infiltration. The Akumus have been specifically brought up and trained to work as ocean scientists—"

"What?" Nichols went white.

"It's true, Dr. Nichols. The only way the Akumus could prevent their discovery was by placing Akumus among the oceanographers themselves."

"That's fantastic! You mean my *own* colleagues?"

"I don't know how many, or who they are. But there can't be any doubt of it, Doctor. Many of your co-workers *must* be Akumus—"

The personal note in Jessie's revelation seemed to stun the doctor even more than the fantastic plan for drowning the continents. He sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at the floor, his hands kneading the bedcovers.

"What a terrible idea. My own people . . . even my friends . . ."

Jessie looked at her husband. "I had oceanography training too, Burt. I was supposed to enter the field when I completed school. But then, when my Akumu 'parents' were killed, I resisted the idea and became an artist."

"Killed? What killed your 'parents'?"

"I still don't know. Something awful—"

"One of those damned sea-beasts?"

Her hands covered her face. "They were off on a motor trip; their bodies were found on the shore, horribly mangled. That's all I know."

"Were they disloyal, too?"

"I—I guess so. They never spoke much of Akumu after I grew up. They became so quiet and withdrawn. I think they had come to love the land, perhaps more than they loved their memory of Akumu . . ."

"Then maybe there are other disloyal ones," Burt said. "Maybe your own colleagues, Doctor—"

The doctor stood up.

"We can't afford to wait another day. I want you both to leave with me tomorrow—for Washington."

"Why?"

"I have a close friend, in the Navy Department. Admiral Jake Colihan. I want him to hear every word of this. He's probably as skeptical a man as we'll run across there; he'll be a good test. Are you willing to come with me?"

Burt linked his arm with his wife's.

"We'll come."

The next day, the honeymooners and Dr. Percival Nichols boarded a plane stateside-bound. They made another connection in San Francisco, and went directly on to Washington, D. C. A long coded telegram, sent from Hawaii, preceded them to the capital. But despite the forewarning, the man they had come to see was too busy for a consultation until three days after their arrival.

When the meeting was finally arranged, they learned that Nichols had accurately described Vice-Admiral Jake Colihan's skeptical nature. He was a small, pocket-size naval officer, with an overlarge head and heavy-lidded eyes. While Dr. Nichols talked, he spun around slowly in the swivel chair behind his desk, frowning so hard that every crease in his sun-browned face seemed to deepen. At

certain points, he asked short, crisp questions of Jessie. Her replies, delivered haltingly, caused him to grunt.

After an hour and a half of patient listening, he folded his fingers under his chin and said:

"Let's have the truth, Nick. What is it, some kind of publicity stunt for the Society?"

The doctor's face fell. Then he rallied, and with all the intensity his voice held repeated his belief in Jessie's story.

Still Admiral Colihan seemed unperturbed.

Then Nichols exploded. "Damn it, Jake! What the hell have they done to you? You used to be a cocky son-of-a-gun; now you look like a brass monkey behind that desk. Do you think I'd stick my neck out if I didn't believe all this?"

Colihan grunted. "Okay, Nick, don't raise your blood pressure on my account. Least you can do is give me time to dig into the story. If there's something in it, I should find *somebody* to corroborate it."

"Maybe you won't. That's what's so bloody frustrating about this affair."

"Don't be so sure. I know at least one man who should know. Commander Hal Croft-

er, probably the shrewdest deep-sea man in the business, Navy-style. You know Hal?"

"Of course. But he may be as ignorant now as I was, three weeks ago."

"Well, let's give him a call," the Admiral said.

On the other side of the desk, Burt and Jessie sighed, hating the thought of rehashing the story once more.

But they did, for a sharp-featured Lieutenant Commander, who listened expressionlessly to the strange tale.

Then Crofter said: "Interesting, mighty interesting. I've had a few ideas about these mammoth sea-beasts myself. Got a file in my office, including a recent report on a giant squid and sting-ray that showed up in the Caribbean a month or so ago. I'm pretty certain they're atomic mutations—"

"No!" Jessie said. "They were there long before the atom tests!"

Crofter smiled at her indulgently. "There? You mean this—undersea city you came from?"

"Yes. From Akumu."

"Of course." His voice was bland. "Well, I don't say it's impossible—"

"You don't believe us," Burt said tightly.

"I didn't say that. I've been an oceanographer for many years, Mr. Holrood. I believe I know a thing or two about the sea, and what might and might not be under it—"

Nichols was fuming by now.

"All right. Ignore the whole thing. Wait until there are more earth tremors. Wait until there are tidal waves! Wait until the whole bloody world goes under—"

Burt leaned forward.

"Commander Crofter . . .

"Yes, Mr. Holrood?"

"Would you submit yourself to an X-ray examination?"

The question startled them all.

Crofter blinked, and then recovered his smile. "Certainly not. Why should I, Mr. Holrood?"

"You heard the story. I was just wondering if you would care to—well, exonerate yourself from any suspicion of prejudice in this matter."

Admiral Colihan's small face went crimson. "This is ridiculous, young man. Nick, I think you've carried this joke far enough."

The doctor sighed in surrender.

"All right, Jake. You're more hard-headed than ever. But that doesn't mean I'm go-

ing to stop trying. If you change your mind, you can reach us at the Hotel Broadmoor."

The Holroods and Dr. Nichols had adjoining rooms at the hotel. They returned there at five in the afternoon, and Nichols went off to keep an appointment. He left with one consolatory sentence directed at Jessie.

"You won't have to worry about sea monsters here . . ."

At six, Burt went into the lobby to get the evening paper. As he stood at the newsstand, the short hairs on the back of his neck began to tingle, and he couldn't erase the impression that he was being watched.

He surveyed the lobby casually. It was crowded with people, scurrying back and forth, sitting in the leather sofas and armchairs, chatting, reading newspapers, smoking quietly. None appeared to be interested in him.

He shrugged, and started back for the elevators.

There was a narrow mirror set between the cars, and it was only an accidental movement of his eyes that enabled him to see the man behind him.

With a shock, he realized

that it was Kammer, the water-breathing guest from the Hotel Keehoa in Hawaii, the Akumu who had tried to drown him.

He caught the baldheaded man's eyes in the glass, and Kammer turned swiftly on his heel and walked to the exit.

Burt hurried after him, pushing his way through the crowd into the street.

Kammer was walking rapidly, without looking behind him. He walked in brisk, short-legged strides, and Burt had to double his pace to keep him in sight.

He followed him for three blocks, and saw the bald man turn into a sidestreet. He waited for a moment at the corner, and then went after him.

It was an ambush, but Burt was expecting it. He ducked swiftly as Kammer's upraised fists descended towards the back of his neck. The blow glanced off Burt's shoulder, and he grunted in pain. Then he drove his own clenched fist deep into the man's stomach. Kammer went "oof!" and doubled over. Burt hit him again, throwing his body against the punch.

The struggle was over quickly. Once Burt saw he had the advantage, he bulled his

way straight at the bald man, slamming him against the bricks of the building. He saw the man's naked head snap back suddenly and land with an unpleasant crunch against the wall.

Then he slipped down to the ground, senseless.

Breathing heavily, Burt lifted him up and dragged him towards the street. He was a short, thick-set man, but his weight seemed all out of proportion.

A taxi came by slowly, and Burt waved his hand.

"Bars open early," the driver grinned.

"Too damned early," Burt grinned back. "Take my friend and me to the Hotel Broadmoor. Just down the street."

"Right, chief."

In front of the hotel, Burt put a five-dollar-bill in the cabbie's fingers and said: "Give me a hand with my pal, will you? I'll never make it alone, and I promised his mother I'd take care of him."

"Yeah, sure," the driver laughed.

They struggled through the lobby with their unconscious burden, and Burt tried to ignore the disapproving and amused stares of the guests and hotel employees. When he got Kammer to the elevator,

he steadied him against the wall and gave the operator his floor number.

Jessie came to the door and cried out when she saw Burt. He smiled weakly at her.

"I forgot the newspaper. But I brought something else."

She recoiled from the sight of the bald man, and when Burt dumped him ungracefully on the twin bed, she turned her head away squeamishly.

"We'll have to tie him up," her husband said. "Get me something, Jessie, anything. Rope, twine, maybe the cords from the blinds—"

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

"And charge him with what? No. we'll wait for Nick to come, and get his advice."

An hour later, with Kammer well-trussed and gagged, and already stirring himself awake, Dr. Nichols arrived.

His advice was short and to the point.

"Keep him right here. I'll get that hard-headed Admiral over here in a hurry—even if I have to tear down the Pentagon. Then we'll prove our story's true."

He went to the telephone.

Admiral Jake Colihan look-

ed down at the trussed body of the bald-headed man and his mouth opened.

"You've really gone out of your mind, Nick. This is plain criminal—"

"No," Nichols said. "The criminal part is still to come, Jake. This is the man that attacked Mr. Holrood in Hawaii. The fact that he followed us all the way to Washington is reason enough to believe he's up to something."

"That may be true, but—"

"Wait. The thing I want to prove is that the man isn't normal. If I had X-ray or fluoroscopic equipment here, I'd do it the easy way. But since I don't, I'm going to resort to something more drastic."

"What are you talking about?"

Nichols face went taut.

"We're going to drown him."

"What?"

Burt smiled. "Brilliant, Doc!"

"You heard me," Nichols said. "I'm going to dump our friend in a full bathtub of water. But you needn't worry about him; he'll be right at home."

"You can't involve me in this!" Colihan fumed. "I won't let you!"

"Give me a hand, Burt."

Colihan started a rush for the door, but Burt blocked his passage, snapping the lock.

"Let me out of here, young man!"

"Not until you've seen our demonstration."

"Don't make me use force," Nichols said. "I've got a rifle in my room, Jake. I'll turn the bloody thing on you if you don't cooperate. I'm serious!"

Colihan's shoulders drooped, and he smiled wryly.

"All right. You're either crazy—or telling the truth. Let's see your little demonstration."

With Burt's aid, the doctor carried the trussed figure of the bald man towards the bathroom. He was fully awake now, and he thrashed and kicked in an effort to get away. But they had the tub filled in five minutes, and were whipping off the gag.

"Help!" he shrieked. "Let me go!"

"Dump him," Nichols commanded.

They dropped him into the water with a splash, and held him down.

Admiral Colihan stood at the bathroom door, watching wide-eyed.

"You're killing him . . ."

"Not this way," Nichols said, panting with the exer-

tion. "You can't kill him this way."

For ten minutes they held the struggling body beneath the water, his round eyes staring out at them with fury and loathing.

Still he lived.

Five minutes more were enough for the Admiral. He said: "All right! All right! Let him up!"

"Convinced now, Jake?"

"Maybe. But I want a medical exam—"

"Suits me fine!"

In the front room, they heard the ringing of the doorbell.

"I'll get it," Burt said.

He went in, his arms dripping with water. The bellhop outside the door looked at him curiously, and handed him the evening paper.

"You left this in the lobby, Mr. Holrood. All paid for." He was staring at Burt's wet clothing, mouth agape.

Burt dug into his trousers and produced a coin, then slammed the door behind him.

He was about to return to the bathroom when the boldness of the headline caught his eye. He raised it and read:

**EARTHQUAKES ROCK
PHILIPPINES
HUNDREDS DIE**

FANTASTIC

Nichols saw his face and said:

"What is it, Burt?"

"Look at the headline. Still more earthquakes in the Pacific. I have a feeling that Jessie's timetable is all wrong. I think our friends in Marracott Deep have decided not to wait a hundred years . . ."

It took twenty-five precious days of meetings and secret sessions and high-level conferences before a decision was reached. And even that day saw dissension among the military, political, and scientific brains that were assembled in Washington for a plan of action.

It was General Stafford, a youthful-eyed, trim-figured man in his late sixties, who chairmanned the meeting, and was most cantankerous about each proposal for meeting the menace of the undersea people.

"I say investigate further," he told them. "This body of evidence you've gathered is alarming, no doubt of that. But it doesn't constitute irrefutable proof."

"That's a problem, of course," Dr. Nichols said dryly. "At present, we have no way of sending an exploratory force down to the bottom

of Marracott Deep. No deep-diving equipment can attain nearly that depth without being crushed like an egg-shell. The development of such equipment is not too many years off, but I'm afraid we don't have that much time."

General Stafford scowled at him.

"And you honestly believe that these recurring quakes are the beginning of this—plot?"

"I'm convinced of it, General. They're following a pattern in the Pacific that leaves no doubt in my mind, or my colleagues. And they're occurring with increasing frequency and intensity. As you've probably heard, there was a number nine quake in the Hawaiian Islands yesterday evening, at dreadful cost of life and property."

Burt Holrood, sitting in a chair by the wall and feeling misplaced in this high-powered conclave, folded his arms against his chest and thought harsh thoughts about the General. Burt had been a corporal not many years before.

"And these sea-monsters of yours?" Stafford said. "You're certain they're part of this undersea city?"

"There's no other explanation. Only two have been actually captured—a gigantic

lobster and octopus. The octopus was washed ashore only two weeks ago, on Brooks Island. We know it was the same creature which attacked Mr. Holrood and his wife that night in Oahu; my own rifle bullets were found in its body. I trust you've all seen the photographs which clearly show the identification number tattooed on its head."

"Incredible," a scientist murmured. "Branded sea-cattle . . ."

"And branded killers, too."

General Stafford shifted in his chair.

"All right, then. Let's hear about this — counter-attack you're planning."

The faces around the table looked towards the white-haired gentleman at the end whose aged but cheerful face looked up and broke into a wan smile.

"Dr. Uribe, of the Atomic Energy Commission," Nichols said, "knows the plan better than any of us. I'll let him tell you."

The scientist cleared his throat.

"I needn't tell this group of the exploratory work done during the recent International Geophysical year, with surveys Norpac and Equapac; nor of the work done in the

last few years by AEC in conjunction with the American-British Oceanography Society. Basically, our purpose was to evaluate the age of the deepwater in the ocean, to determine how great the danger of nuclear-waste pollution.

"We had no such problem as this in mind, of course. But our findings may well provide us with the answer we seek here. We have established that the rate of movement and transport of the subsurface and deepwater masses are incredibly slow processes, and that the age of the water in such a place as Marracott Deep may well be over ten thousand years."

The General tapped the desk impatiently.

"What does that prove, Dr. Uribe? As far as this counter-action is concerned?"

"If this problem is truly serious—and I'm inclined on the evidence to believe the human race has never been more endangered—then we would be justified by using Marracott Deep as a resting place for our radioactive waste materials."

The reaction around the table was excited, and somewhat fearful.

"We believe that by dumping such substances into the Deep, we will effectively de-

stroy all life—of whatever kind—without seriously endangering the welfare of the rest of the world. There will be problems, of course, with fisheries and so forth, and probably some radiation troubles developing in the nearest land points to the Deep. But we can be prepared there, too.”

He looked around the room solemnly.

“It is not easy for me to sit here and propose such a monstrous idea as this.”

He bent his old head towards the table.

“I have nine grandchildren,” he said. “None of them swims especially well.”

There was silence in the room for a full minute.

Then Burt cleared his throat and said:

“I don’t have any right to make suggestions. I’m only here out of sufference. But I’d like to say something.”

General Stafford nodded at him.

“There’s one topic we haven’t discussed in this meeting, but we should. I’m talking about the fifth column of Akumus who are on shore now, who have been infiltrated into positions of importance in ocean. I think we’d better find out who they are, and quickly.”

Nichols looked at the chairman sadly.

“I’m afraid that’s true. We must begin immediate X-ray examinations of all personnel connected with oceanography in any way. We mustn’t allow our counter-action to be thwarted within our own ranks.”

“And what,” Stafford said, “do you plan to do with the—Akumus you locate?”

“I suggest that the government place these men under temporary arrest, until their loyalty or disloyalty can be proved. Or until there is no more menace in Marracott Deep . . .”

When the meeting was over, all the hesitation and indecision and arguments seemed over, too. It was a time for swift and methodical action.

A dozen different government agencies set their wheels into motion, from the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the Bureau of Naval Sciences. With speed and precision, arrangements to implement every part of the project known officially as “Anti-A.”

Burt found himself an important figure in government circles, acting as spokesman for his wife and as special assistant to Dr. Percival

Nichols. He attended meetings with some of the nation's top oceanographers, and listened to their analysis of the plan which the Akumus were already putting into deed.

"This map will make it clearer," a scientist named Vidor told him, poking his finger at a sectional drawing of the earth's profile. "This land area represents the surface of San Francisco, perched over the crack known as the San Andreas Fault. The Fault is a break in the granite layer beneath the earth's crust, and at intervals it shifts and slides, causing tremors. If this process were aided along by some undersea influence—the results could be disastrous.

"Here, off the bottom of northern California, is what we call the Mendocino Escarpment, an immense fracture in the earth's crust more than a thousand miles long. This is one of several fractures extending from the San Andreas Fault.

"There is an extension of the California fault system in the Aleutians. You recall the earthquakes in the Aleutians back a few years? They give us a foretaste of what will happen if such quakes become widespread. The tremors in the Aleutians caused tidal

waves as high as thirty-two feet in the Hawaiian Islands. The shock carries great tidal waves in concentric circles from the center of the quake. The recent Philippine earthquakes caused tidal action as far as Japan and Korea."

Burt examined the charts grimly

"Then enough earthquakes, of enough intensity, could drown the coastal areas—"

"Worse than that. If these undersea people have demolition equipment which can use the faults in the earth's crust to their own advantage—they can drown the whole world."

Dr. Nichols looked at the map and said:

"We'll stop them first."

Then the X-ray tests began.

Within four weeks, six hundred and forty civilian oceanographers, with some natural reluctance, paraded in front of the nation's X-ray technicians. A hundred and twelve revealed an unusual formation where their lungs should have been. The majority of these, faced with the photographic evidence, confessed to their origin at the bottom of Marracott Deep. Some protested their innocence to the last, but were placed under arrest and herded off to a

special internment camp in Oregon.

Burt marveled at the discreetness with which the examinations were held. Not a word of the arrests leaked to the newspapers or public; no comment about Project Anti-A appeared anywhere in the nation's press. And more importantly, not a mention was made of the vital task imposed upon the aircraft carrier *Dragonfly* that was being outfitted in San Francisco for an unusual tour of duty.

Burt, Jessie, and Dr. Nichols visited the dock where the flying airfield was being readied.

"Look at the size of her!" Burt whistled.

"Biggest carrier built since the war," Nichols told them. "Large enough to carry a whole armada of jet fighters anywhere in the seven seas. Only she won't be carrying jets this trip. She'll have a lot more deadly cargo—"

"How will the crew be protected against the radiation from the waste materials? With all that hot stuff aboard—"

"Everything will be lead-lined, of course. But not even lead shielding can hold back all the rays indefinitely. When they strike bottom at Marracott Deep, they'll be timed to

release enough radiation to wipe out everything alive down there..."

Jessie shivered.

"I hate to think about it. They're still my own people . . . perhaps my own family . . ."

"I understand," Nichols said gently.

They started back for the parked auto some forty yards from the dock. There were two men in civilian clothes waiting by the auto door. One of them took out his wallet and flipped it towards the oceanographer.

"Dr. Percival Nichols?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry. We have to ask you to come with us."

He stared at them. "Is there anything wrong? Did something happen?"

"We're placing you under arrest, Dr. Nichols."

Jessie gasped.

"I don't understand you," the doctor said calmly. "Just what charge are you making?"

The second man said: "You should know that, Dr. Nichols. You took your X-ray test this morning."

He looked at them with bewildered eyes, and then turned to Jessie and Burt as if to reassure himself that the world was normal. Then he

smiled unconvincingly and said:

"There's some silly mistake. I'm no Akumu."

"We have our orders, sir."

"But it can't be true! My parents were—" He stopped, and seemed to grow dizzy for a moment. Burt put out his arm to support him. "I don't know who my parents were," he whispered. "I was adopted, as a foundling . . . as an infant . . ."

"We really have to go now, Doctor."

"We'll come with you," Burt said. "We'll follow in our car, Nick. I'm sure it's all a mistake—"

"Yes," the doctor said blankly. "It has to be . . ."

They watched the men lead him away, his steps hesitant and uncertain.

Two days later, Burt and Jessie were summoned to the offices of Vice-Admiral Jake Colihan in the Pentagon. They were relieved to see Dr. Nichols sitting unguarded at the Admiral's desk, but he no longer appeared to be the self-assured, vigorous man they had known.

Colihan leaned back.

"This is an unfortunate situation. The two people most closely involved with this affair—yourself, Mrs. Holrood,

and my good friend, Nick—are both members of the amphibious race we plan to destroy."

Jessie looked at the doctor, who met her eyes sadly.

"Dr. Nichols, unfortunately, knew nothing about his origin. Or perhaps I should say fortunately. His adoptive parents developed in him a love of the sea and its mysteries, but never once spoke of Akumu. It would seem that they, like yourself, Mrs. Holrood, wanted to live in peace on land. The discovery, as you can imagine, has been a shock to Dr. Nichols—and given us a tactical problem."

Then his face seemed to lighten.

"However, we have talked this over carefully at the highest level. None of us doubts for a second the loyalty of you both."

Burt sighed, but Jessie and the doctor just looked at the floor.

"The hard part comes next," Colihan said. "The destruction of your own people. The death by radiation of thousands of Akumus like yourselves. That is what we plan next week, with the departure of the *Dragonfly* for Marracott Deep.

"This isn't an easy thing for either of you to face. But

nevertheless, I'm going to ask all three of you whether you wish the dubious privilege of making the voyage with the carrier."

"No," Burt said. "Not Jessie—"

"There's no necessity, of course. I just thought—"

"Wait a minute." Jessie's head tilted. "I do want the privilege, Admiral. I feel I should be there, at the end as at the beginning. If your regulations will permit it, I would very much want to go."

Nichols spoke, his voice tired.

"You know how I feel, Jake."

"Then it's settled. We weigh anchor on Thursday of this week. We'll make our rendezvous with the escort cruiser on Saturday. We'll be on the target area on Wednesday next."

The day broke bright and clear over the Pacific when the *Dragonfly* and its escort reached the point in the ocean over the place known as Marracott Deep.

Few of the hundreds of crew members aboard knew the real purpose of the carrier's visit to mid-ocean. Essentially, it was a dumping expedition, a gigantic garbage-disposal job, getting rid

of tons of radioactive waste materials produced by the atom factories of the U. S. and Great Britain. Among themselves, the officers and men joked about it.

But in the Captain's quarters, and in the wardroom where Admiral Jake Colihan and his senior officers met to plan every step of the undertaking, there was no levity.

And on the deck, overlooking the incredibly long stretch of carefully-secured lead containers that lined the enormous surface of the carrier, Burt Holrood and his wife Jessie were also in a solemn mood.

"We shouldn't have come," Burt said. "There wasn't any need to come, Jessie."

"I wanted to, Burt. It would have been worse for me on shore, waiting." She turned suddenly fearful eyes on him. "Oh, Burt, what if it doesn't work? What if the radiation doesn't destroy Akumu?"

"It'll work. Nothing will be able to survive. All those giant undersea things, all the fish for miles around, all the humans that live down there . . ." He pulled her to him. "Thank God they sent you to the surface, Jessie. Thank God for that . . ."

She clung to him.

"I wish it were over, Burt . . ."

But it wasn't over.

Half an hour later, forty minutes before the dumping of the atomic waste was scheduled, Burt and his wife met Dr. Nichols in the fore-castle.

He greeted them with forced cheerfulness. "Another few minutes, and the job will be done. The Admiral's calling all officers into the ward-room for a final briefing. Let's go below and sit in."

They went down a series of tortuously - winding ladders, until they came to the small meeting room. It was filled with high-ranking naval personnel, and four civilian scientists. Only one officer wasn't in attendance.

When Colihan walked in, he frowned at his audience and commented on the absentee.

"Where's Crofter?" he said. "I thought I saw him on deck."

"Crofter!" Burt said to his wife. "That's the guy we met in Washington, the Navy oceanographer. The one who thought we were having pipe dreams—"

The door opened, and the lean figure of the Lieutenant-Commander entered. His sharp-featured face was flush-

ed, and he grinned at the assemblage.

"Come on, come on," Colihan said impatiently.

"No hurry, Admiral," Crofter grinned back. The insolence in his voice jarred the others. "No hurry at all."

"What are you talking about?" Colihan's small face was hardening. "You forget yourself."

"No, Admiral. I remember myself. I remember myself very well."

Now they were all staring at him.

"Something's wrong," Burt whispered.

Crofter stepped in front of the Admiral and raised his hands.

"I'll address my remarks to you all, so that everyone has a clear idea of what's happening—"

"Sit down!" Colihan thundered. "That's an order!"

"Orders be damned. You'd better listen and listen carefully, Commander. Or when the bomb hits, you'll be a very surprised man."

Nichols jumped to his feet.

"What bomb? What are you talking about?"

"Ah, Dr. Nichols." He grinned at the scientist. "My dear colleague. My dear Akumu . . ."

"You're drunk!" Colihan snapped. "Place this man under arrest—"

The officers in the room moved towards him uncertainly. There was something authoritative about Crofter now that had nothing to do with rank.

"You really must listen," he said easily. "If you wish to save your lives, you must pay attention. *The radioactive substances must not be dropped.* The ship must be turned about and taken to San Francisco immediately. The atomic waste can be disposed of in any manner you wish. But it must not be dropped in Marracott Deep."

"Akumu!" Burt said quietly. "He is one—"

"Of course." Crofter looked in his direction. "Just as your lovely wife is Akumu, Mr. Holrood. Only I'm not a turncoat Akumu—I'm happy to be loyal to my homewater . . . to do what I can for it."

"The man's mad," Colihan said. "Arrest him at once; we have work to do—"

"Wait," Nichols said. "Hear him out."

"Thank you, Akumu," Crofter bowed. "It's a wise decision. But I'm here to tell you that the moment the first lead container is dropped over the side of this carrier—

the *Dragonfly* will be destroyed."

The room was filled with shouts of anger and disbelief and fear.

"It's the deadly truth. There are Akumus waiting below this ship, ready to explode a nuclear weapon at the first signal. That signal is the splash of the first lead container into the sea. If you wish to avoid this tragedy, I suggest you give orders now to turn this ship homewards."

"It's a damned lie!" Colihan shouted. "A trick! You would dare to blow up the *Dragonfly*—that would be certain death for you and everyone down there. The radiation waste would descend just the same—"

"That is the situation, Admiral. If you wish to sacrifice the life of your officers and men to prove that I'm not bluffing—you're welcome to go ahead."

"Jake," Nichols said uneasily. "Think this over—"

Colihan whirled on him. "You expect me to take advice from *you*?"

The words hit Dr. Nichols like a blow. His friend looked instantly contrite, and then his shoulders slumped wearily.

"There's no proof. It's all a bluff . . ."

"It's no bluff," Crofter said. "Look out the porthole, Admiral. You'll realize I'm telling the truth."

Colihan strode across the small room and peered out of the tiny round glass in the hull. He gasped, and Nichols and Burt came to his side.

The waters of the Pacific were no longer unruffled and unbroken blue. There were visitors encircling the giant aircraft carrier, hundreds of naked swimmers bobbing in the sea, dozens of strange aquatic creatures rising from the surface. Giant squids and stingrays and jellyfish, and an enormous octopus with tentacles almost thirty feet in length, clinging to the side of the hull with its disc-shaped suckers.

Admiral Colihan stared at this fantastic encirclement, and every muscle in his small face seemed to jerk.

"What can we do?" he said, only to himself.

"We must have time," Nichols said. "Time to think it over!"

"It will be nightfall in three hours," Crofter snapped. "I'll give you until then."

He turned and stalked out of the wardroom.

When he was gone, Colihan

cleared the room of everyone but his senior officers.

Burt took Jessie's arm and led her back to their quarters. She appeared white and faint after Crofter's announcement, and asked to lie down.

"Sure, honey. I'm going to try and find Nichols—see what he says about all this."

He went out, but Nichols was nowhere in sight.

For two hours, the Admiral and the ship's officers argued, but found themselves at a stalemate.

Admiral Colihan stood adamantly by his proposal to scuttle the carrier, but the others seemed solidly lined up against him. It wasn't a question of courage or sacrifice, they said. It was only common sense. There would be other opportunities; they would be better prepared next time—

"Perhaps there won't be a next time," Colihan said blackly. "Perhaps they're planning to make their moves now, right now . . ."

With half an hour left, and with darkness settling around the great ship, the decision was yet to be made.

Burt returned below and went to the wardroom. His knock gained him admittance.

"All decided?" he asked.

The officers looked at him wearily.

"I've been looking for Dr. Nichols. I couldn't find him on deck, so I—"

He stopped when he felt someone behind him. He turned and looked into the grinning face of Lieutenant-Commander Crofter.

"Only a few minutes left, gentlemen. I hope you've reached your decision. My friends in the sea are getting anxious."

The Admiral growled at him. "There's still time, Crofter. Don't rush us."

"Of course. But you must know by now that you have no alternative. The carrier must turn back; it's the only sensible course."

A communications light flashed in the wardroom. An officer picked it up, and then turned to the Admiral.

"It's the radio room, sir. Message from the cruiser."

"Probably want to know what's delaying us—"

"No, sir. It seems that the message is for Mr. Holrood."

Burt blinked at him. "Me?"

"Yes, sir. They say it's very important."

Crofter grinned at him. "I haven't seen your beautiful wife around, Holrood. You must be grateful to Akumu

for producing such a lovely woman."

Burt frowned, and pushed past him, heading for the radio section.

The operator looked up, his face puzzled.

"I must be crazy. But I could swear I heard that guy say your *wife* wants to talk to you—"

"My wife? You *are* crazy. My wife's asleep in her quarters for the past couple of hours. I left her there and told her not to leave—"

He sat down, and the operator pulled a switch on the board.

"Burt . . . Burt . . ."

"*Jessie!*" The sound of her faint voice on the wireless sent the blood rushing to his head. "Jessie, for God's sake! How the hell did you get on the cruiser?"

"Burt, listen—"

There was a crackle in the equipment, and the operator spun a dial, his eyes wide and curious.

"What's happened, Jessie? How did you get off the ship? This doesn't make any sense—"

"We swam," his wife's voice said, "Dr. Nichols—" She seemed to be gasping for breath. "It was the safest thing—we couldn't return to

the ship—they suspected us—”

“I don’t understand—” Burt’s voice was wild. “Why did you leave? What for? And where’s Nick?”

“He wanted to come with me—he thought it was only right when I told him what I wanted to do— Oh, Burt, he’s dead! I—I tried to bring him in, but he couldn’t make it— his bad heart—”

“Jessie, take it slow!”

“I wanted to find out—to go beneath the ship and see if what Crofter said was true—to talk with the Akumus.”

“Oh, my God . . .” he moaned.

“It was the only thing I could think of, Burt! I felt so —responsible for all this.”

“But what happened?”

“We . . . we slipped over the side of the carrier into the sea . . . we went below . . . they didn’t suspect anything at first . . . they thought we were part of the Akumu task force . . . there were even other women in the water.”

She stopped, fighting for control of her voice.

Then: “I—I spoke to one of them . . . it was so hard . . . it was a language I hadn’t had on my tongue since I was a child at home . . .”

“What did they say? What did you learn?”

“There is no bomb, Burt! It was all a bluff—they didn’t dare to use explosives . . . it would have the same effect as the dumping, and cost them their own lives . . . we’re not all martyrs, Burt . . .” She began to sob openly now.

“Dr. Nichols,” she said at last. “He’s dead, Burt . . . he couldn’t make the cruiser . . . he couldn’t hold out . . .”

“Jessie, listen! I’m going to report this to Colihan immediately. We’ll radio again soon.”

“Be careful, Burt! Please be careful!”

Burt went to the wardroom.

They stopped their conversation when they saw his eyes.

“Dr. Nichols is dead,” he told them. “There isn’t any bomb below the ship. We can dump the cans . . .”

“It’s a lie!” Crofter shrieked. “It’s a damned lie!”

He told them the story. They left the room quickly, to start the process of unloading the deadly cargo they carried.

Burt went to the porthole, and saw the nose of the cruiser outlined against the dark sky.

On the deck, he heard the first splash that signalled the end of life in Marracott Deep.

THE END
FANTASTIC