

STARTLING STORIES

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SAM MERWIN, JR., Editor

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The WOMAN

A Novelet by LEIGH BRACKETT

CHAPTER I

Ahrian

WHAT a great day it was for everybody, when David came home from deep space. It was a day that will remain for a long while on the calendar of the McQuarrie family, marked heavily in red.

We had driven down to the spaceport to meet him—myself, and Bet, who was David's and my sister, just out of college, and David's fiancée, a Miss Lewisham. The Miss Lewisham had family but no money, and David had both, and that was as far as it went. She was one of these handsome, shallow-eyed babes as perfectly machined as a chunk of bakelite, and just as human. Bet thought she was terrific. She had spent hours getting herself up to be as like her as possible, but it was all in vain. Bet's hair still behaved like hair, and blew.

The spaceport was swarming. Interplanetary flight had long ago ceased to be a thing of breathless wonder to the populace, but star-ships were still new and rare, and the men who flew them

were still heroic. Word had gone out that the *Anson McQuarrie* was due in from somewhere beyond the Pleiades, and there were thousands of people backed up behind the barricades. I remember that there were flags, and somebody had prepared a speech.

"Isn't it wonderful!" said Bet, around a lump in her throat. "And all for David."

"There are some other men on that ship, too," I said.

"Oh, you always have to be so nasty," she snapped. "David's the captain, and the owner, too. And he deserves the reception."

"Uh huh," I said, "and what's more, David himself would be the last to disagree with you."

Officials were opening a way for us, and I shoved Bet along it with the Miss Lewisham, who headed like a homing duck for the TV cameras. At about that moment a feminine voice hailed us, and Bet whirled around, crying out, "Marthe!"



From ALTAIR

Ahrian was a fragile creature—yet beneath her feminine softness lurked the steel purpose of bitter dedication!

Her world revealed itself to me in sudden bright flashes as I plunged through space



An extremely attractive young woman detached herself from a group of obvious reporters and joined us.

"I'm going to be quite shameless," she announced, "and presume on an old school friendship."

I liked the way she grinned and practically dared me to throw her out of the family circle. I should have done so, but didn't because of that cheeky grin, and that's how Marthe Walters came to be mixed up in this mess. I wished so desperately afterward that I had pushed her face in. But how is one to know?

Bet was offering explanations. "Marthe was a senior when I was a freshman, Rafe. Remember? That was when I was going to be a journalist." She rushed through the introductions, and memory clicked.

"Oh, yes," I said. "You're the Marthe Walters who does those profile sketches for *Public*."

"It's honest work, but it's a living."

"You've come to the right place. My brother has the devil and all of a profile."

SHE cocked her head on one side and gave me a peculiarly intelligent look. "Yours isn't so bad. And come to think of it, I've never heard of you."

"I'm the forgotten McQuarrie," I said. "The one who didn't go to space."

All this time we were being assisted onward to the place that had been reserved for the family. Bet was burbling, the Miss Lewisham was being statuesque and proud, and this bright-eyed intruder, Marthe, was thinking questions and trying to devise a politic way of asking them.

"You're David's older brother?"

"Ancient."

"And you're a McQuarrie, and you didn't go to space." She shook her head. "That's like being a fish, and refusing to swim."

"It's not Rafe's fault," said Bet, with that touch of womanly pity she could get in her voice sometimes. "How soon

will he land, Rafe? I just can't wait!"

I was trying to figure out what color Marthe's eyes were. I got them pegged for blue, and then there was some change in the light or something, and they were green as sea-water.

"Surely," she said, "you didn't wash out."

"No, it was noisier than that. I crashed. It was a light plane, but it came down heavy."

"He was on his way to the spaceport from the Academy," said Bet sadly. "He had his papers and everything, and was going out on his first voyage as a junior officer. The disappointment nearly killed Father, Rafe being the oldest son and everything. But then, he still had David."

"I see," said Marthe. She smiled at me, and this time it wasn't cheeky, but the sort of smile a man would like to see more of. "I'm sorry. I thought that walking stick was pure swank."

"It is," I told her, and laughed. "I think that's what really disgusts the family—I'm healthy as a horse. I only carry the thing to remind them that I'm supposed to be frail."

They were in radio communication with the *Anson McQuarrie*. The reports of position kept coming in, and an amplifier blatted them out. Men ran around looking harried, a million voices chattered, necks craned, the tension built up. The towers of Manhattan glittered mightily in the distance. Marthe and I talked. I think we talked about her.

A great roar went up. Bet screamed in my ear. There was a perfect frenzy of sound for a few moments, and then there was silence, and in it the sky split open like tearing silk. A speck of silver came whistling down the cleft, growing rapidly, becoming a huge graceful creature with tarnished flanks and stardust on her nose, and pride in every rivet. Oh, she was beautiful, and she settled light as a moonbeam on the landing field that had been cleared of any lesser craft. The *Anson McQuarrie*

was home.

I noticed then that Marthe had not been watching the ship at all. She was watching me.

"You," she said, "are a rather puzzling person."

"Does that bother you?"

"I don't like a book that has the whole story on the first page."

"Good," I said. "Then you won't like

my brother, with all the best points of the McQuarrie stock. I think he was a little annoyed when Bet flung herself up the steps and onto his neck. She mussed his collar badly.

I waved. The Miss Lewisham mounted to the platform, showing her splendid legs. She held out her arms graciously, prepared to grant David the dignified kiss due a hero from his future

Alien Challenge

PERHAPS the most inscrutable challenge confronting science fiction is the alien. We all wonder, granting the premise of life on other worlds, what forms such life will take. Will its existence be based on carbon, on silicon or on some molecular arrangement that does not as yet register any band on our spectra?

Or, if humanoid in form, what will be its nature, its purposes, its fears, its weapon, its habits, its hobbies, its ways of making love? These questions and countless others loom before every science fiction author constantly—and every so often every science fiction author seeks at least some of the answers within the speculative frame of a story.

Actually this is a challenge that must forever remain inscrutable—for no man has yet been possessed of sufficient wisdom and understanding to interpret himself fully, not to mention interpretation of his fellows. And certainly none of us has succeeded in depicting with full accuracy such everyday aliens as the cats, dogs and horses with which we are diurnally familiar.

But, being human, we keep trying. And occasionally, as in the present instance of the bride from Altair, one of us succeeds in creating a credible alien. Ahrian may be far from the true denizens of the planets of that distant star—but she is a credible, tragic and utterly fascinating creature. Thank you, Miss Brackett.

—THE EDITOR.

David. Come along. And oh, yes, any time you want to catch up on your reading—"

"There he is!" shrieked Bet. "There's David!"

The barricades were keeping back the crowds, and officials were forming a second line of defense against the mob of reporters. We, the family, were allowed to be first with our greetings. The under-hatch had opened in that vast keel, the platform was run out, and a tall figure in absolutely impeccable uniform had emerged onto it. Bands played, thousands cheered, the TV cameras rolled, and David lifted his hand and smiled. A handsome beggar,

wife. But David gave her a horrified look as though he had forgotten all about her, and his face turned six different shades of red.

He recovered magnificently. He caught those outstretched hands and shook them warmly, at the same time getting her off to one side so smoothly that she hardly realized it. Before she could say anything, he had spoken, to the world at large, with boyish pride.

"I have seen," he said, "many strange and precious things on the worlds of other stars. And I have brought back with me the most wonderful of them all. I want you to welcome her to Earth."

Here he turned to someone who had been waiting inside the hatch, and handed her out.

I DON'T think that any of us, least of all the Miss Lewisham, caught on for a moment. We were too busy, like everybody else, staring at the little creature who was clinging to David's hand.

She seemed incredibly small and fragile to be a grown woman, and yet that is what she was, and no mistake about it. She wore a very quaint drapery of some gossamer stuff that shimmered in the sunlight, and the lovely shape of her beneath it was something to wonder at. Her skin was perfectly white and beautiful, like fine porcelain, and her little face was pointed and fey-looking, with eyebrows that swept up toward her temples like two delicate feathers. Her hair was the color of amethysts. There was a great deal of it, piled high on her head in an intricate coiffure, and the lights in it were marvelous, as though every conceivable shade of that jewel had been melted and spun together and made alive. Her eyes, slanting under those sweeping brows, were the same color, but deeper, a true purple. They looked out in great bewilderment upon this noisy alien world.

"She is from Altair," said David. "Her name is Ahrian. She is my wife."

The reactions to that last simple statement were violent and more than a little confused. Sometime before the shouting died, and while Bet was still staring like an absolute idiot at her unexpected sister-in-law, the Miss Lewisham departed, with every hair still perfectly in place. Where her temper was, I don't know. The reporters stampeded, and no one and nothing could hold them back. The TV men were in transports when David kissed his little bride from Altair. I looked down at Marthe.

"I suppose," I said, "it wouldn't be any good asking you to go away now."

She said it wouldn't be. She was

shivering slightly, like a wolf that has found a fat lamb asleep under its nose. "A woman from Altair," she whispered. "This isn't a story, it's a sensation."

"It's certainly a surprise for the family!"

"Poor little thing, she looks scared to death. Whatever you feel, don't take it out on her." Marthe glanced up at me, as though a sudden thought had occurred to her. "By the way," she asked, "is your brother quite right in the head?"

"I'm beginning to wonder," I said.

Up on the platform, the focus of the excitement, the new Mrs. David McQuarrie trembled against her husband and stared with those purple enigmatic eyes at the alien hosts of a world that was not her own.

CHAPTER II

Stranger on Earth

G RIMLY we set off on the ride home. I had managed to get Bet on one side and threaten her with bodily injury if she didn't keep her mouth shut. David himself, what with the exultation of homecoming and the sensation he had created with his dramatic announcement of marriage, was flying too high to notice any of us too much. He held Ahrian in the circle of his arm as if she had been a child, and talked to her, and soothed her, and pointed out this and that interesting thing along the road.

As she looked at the houses and trees, the hills and valleys, the sun and the sky, I couldn't help being sorry for her. In my younger days I had gone, as supercargo in my father's ships, to Venus and Mars and beyond the Belt to Jupiter. I knew what it was like to walk on alien soil. And she was so far away from home that even her familiar sun was gone.

She glanced at us now and then, with a kind of shy terror. Bet sulked and glowered, but I managed a smile, and Marthe patted Ahrian's hand. David had taught her English. She spoke it well, but with a curious rippling accent that made it sound like a foreign tongue.

Her voice was soft and low and very sweet. She did not talk much. Neither did we.

David barely noticed that we had a stranger with us. I had said vaguely that Marthe was a friend of mine, and he had nodded and forgot her. I was rather glad to have her along. There are times when families should not be alone together.

The McQuarrie place is built on top of a rise. The house is large, and was originally built almost two centuries ago, when old Anson McQuarrie founded the family fortune with a fleet of ore carriers for the Lunar mines. There are old trees around it, and a thousand acres of land, and it is one of those places that exude from every pore a discreet odor of money.

Ahrian looked at it and said dutifully.

"It is very beautiful."

"Not quite the sort of place she's used to," David remarked to us. "But she'll love it."

I wondered if she would.

We all piled out of the car, and Marthe hesitated. She had been so completely absorbed in studying Ahrian that I doubt if she had thought of her own position at all. Now the sight of our rather hulking house seemed to daunt her.

"I think maybe I better go back now," she said. "I've imposed enough, and I've got a lot to go on. I'd like to really interview them both, but this is hardly the time for it."

"Oh, no," I told her emphatically. "You're staying. Bet's got to have somebody to yak to, and it isn't going to be me. You're her old school chum, remember?"

MARTHE took a good look at Bet's furious countenance and muttered, "I have a feeling I'm going to hold this against you, Mr. McQuarrie."

She was so right. Except that I held it against myself, the other way round.

Suddenly Ahrian, who was a little distance up the walk with David, let out a quivering scream. David began to yell angrily for me. I went on to see what was the matter.

"It's only Buck," I said.

"Well, get him out of here. He's frightening Ahrian."

"She might as well get used to him now," I said, and took Buck by the collar. He was a very large dog, and one of the best I ever had. He didn't like Ahrian. I could feel him shiver, and the hair on his back bristled under my hand.

David was going to get ugly about it, and then Ahrian said, "It is that I have not before seen such a creature. It means no harm. Only it is uneasy."

She began to talk to Buck, in her own soft liquid tongue. Gradually his muscles stilled and the hackles flattened and the ears relaxed. His eyes had a puzzled look. Presently he stalked forward and laid his head in her hands.

Ahrian laughed. "You see? We are friends."

I looked at the dog. There was no joy in him. Ahrian took her small white hands from his head. Abrutly he turned and went away, running fast.

Ahrian said softly, "I have very much to learn."

"Just the same," said David, glaring at me, "you be careful with your confounded livestock." He swept Ahrian on up the walk. The door had been opened. David did the inevitable thing. He picked Ahrian up in his arms and bore her with a courtly flourish across the threshold.

"All I've got to say is," Bet snarled, "I hope they can't— I mean, I just couldn't bear it to have a little nephew with lavender hair!"

She stamped on into the house. I took

Marthe firmly by the arm. "Bet can fix you up with suitable garments."

"What for?"

"We are having a dinner tonight, in David's honor. Formal, of course. There will be many people."

"How delightful," she said, and groaning, followed Bet.

That dinner may not have been delightful, but it certainly was not dull. The drawing rooms teemed with what Daisy Ashford would have referred to as costly people, all quite ill at ease. Ahrian, sitting at the table in the place that was to have been the Miss Lewisham's, was a little figure fashioned in some Dresden of Fairyland, dressed in a matchless tissue of pale gold and crowned with that incredibly beautiful hair.

The women didn't know how to deal with her, and the men were fascinated, and all in all it was not a successful social occasion. Late in the evening David made her sing. She had a curious stringed instrument from which she drew soft wandering music, and she sang songs of her own world that were sweet and very strange. Some of them didn't have any words. They told of the things that lie hid beyond mountains, and of the secrets oceans know, and of the long, still thoughts of deserts. But they were not the mountains or the deserts or the seas of Earth. Toward the end there came into her eyes two great crystal tears.

Soon after that I noticed that she had disappeared. David was holding the center of the stage with some thrilling recital of events beyond the stars, and it seemed to be up to me to look for her.

I found her at last, standing disconsolate on the steps that lead down from the terrace into the garden. There were many shadows in it, and the shrubs rustled in the wind, so that it must have seemed a frightening place to her. There were clouds, I remember, veiling the sky.

She turned and looked at me. "Why did you come to me?"

"I thought perhaps you might be lonely."

"There is David," she answered. "Why might I be lonely?"

I could not see her face, except as a small blurred whiteness in the gloom. "Yes," I said, "you have David. But it's still possible to be sad."

She said, "I will not be sad." I could read nothing in the tone of her voice, either.

"Ahrian, you must try to understand us. We were upset today, because we hadn't expected you, and—well—" I tried, rather lamely, to explain how things had stood. "It wasn't anything personal. You're part of the family now, and we'll do all we can to make you welcome."

"The little one—she is full of anger."

"She's just a kid. Give her time. A month from now she'll be wanting to dye her hair to match yours." I held out my hand. "We have a custom here of clasping hands as a token of friendship. Will you take mine, Ahrian?"

SHE hesitated, a long, long moment. Then she said gravely, as if it were something I must remember, "I do not hate you, Rafe." She put her hand in mine, a fleeting touch as light and chill as the falling of a snowflake. Then she shivered. "It is cold on your world when the darkness comes."

"Is it always warm on yours?" We started toward the house, and looking down at her beside me, I thought I could understand why David had not been able to let her go.

She answered softly. "Yes, it is warm, and the moons are like bright lamps in the sky. The spires and the rooftops glisten, and there are dark leaves that shake out perfume—"

She broke off, too quickly, and said no more.

"You must love David very deeply to have come all this long way home with him."

"Love is indeed a great force," she murmured.

We went inside, and David claimed her again.

For several days I did not see much of Ahrian. I handle the financial end of the McQuarrie business, not because I like it but because I have to do something to justify the money I spend. David had brought back an invaluable cargo, some of it from worlds that, like Ahrian's, had never been touched before. I think we cleared around a million dollars on it, over and above the cost of the voyage.

I was so busy that I hardly had time to see Marthe. Strange, how important it had become to see Marthe, so quickly and without anything being said about it. She had left our house, of course, in high spirits over the inside stuff she had got for her articles. I had said, "When will I see you again?" And she had answered, "Any time." That's how it was—any time we could possibly make it.

One night, when by chance the family were all together at dinner, Ahrian said shyly, "David, I have been thinking—"

Instantly he was all attention. He really did seem to adore her. I will admit that I had a few sneaking suspicions, or perhaps it was only a puzzled wonder, since David so far in his life had had only three loves—star-ships, himself, and the McQuarrie name, in that order. But his manner with Ahrian appeared to show that he had found the fourth.

"In my home," said Ahrian, "I had a small place that was my own, in which I found much pleasure in fashioning little gifts for those I loved. Only a very small place, David—might I have one here?"

David smiled at her and said that she might have anything there was on Earth or the other planets, except the ugly clothes that might be all right for Earthlings but were not for her. Ahrian smiled back, asking, still with that shy hesitance, for some gem stones of small value, and some fine wires of platinum and gold.

"Diamonds," said David. "Emeralds. All you like."

"No. I will have the crystal and the zircon. Uncut, please. I wish to shape them myself."

"With those tiny hands? Very well, darling. I'll have them here tomorrow."

Ahrian thanked him gravely and glanced across at me. "I am learning very quickly, Rafe. I have seen all your horses. They are a wonder to me, so large and beautiful."

"If you like," I said, "I could teach you to ride."

"Perhaps on that very little one?"

I laughed and explained to her why a three-week foal was not suitable for that. David said fiercely that he was not going to have Ahrian trampled to death by one of my lubberly beasts, and forbade anything of the sort.

After dinner I got Bet alone and asked her how she was making out with Ahrian.

"Oh, I suppose it isn't her fault, but she gives me the creeps, Rafe! She goes drifting around the place like a funny little shadow, and sometimes the way she looks at you . . . I get the feeling she's studying me—way deep inside, I mean. I don't like it—and I don't like her!"

"Well, try to be as nice as you can. The poor little critter must be having a hard enough time of it. Remember we're as alien to her as she is to us."

"She wanted to come," said Bet, without pity. I left her, and went off to keep a date with Marthe. . . .

CHAPTER III

Gifts of—Love

DAVID fixed up a wonderful workshop for Ahrian, where she could make pretty trinkets to her heart's content. She would remain there for hours, humming softly to herself, letting no

one, not even David, in to see what she was doing. She worked for weeks, and then one evening she came in to dinner with the pleased air of a child who has done a nice thing. I saw that she was carrying some light burden in a fold of her gown.

She was wearing a kind of tiara that went very well with her masses of amethystine hair and her curious little face. It was a delicate thing, exquisitely wrought of mingled wires of platinum and gold woven into a strange design of flowers and set with a flawless crystal that she had cut herself in a way that I had never seen a crystal cut before.

She strewed her small burden glittering on the tablecloth. "See! I have made a gift for everyone. You must wear them, or I shall be so unhappy!"

They were beautiful. For David and me she had made rings—for, as she said, we did not wear jewels as the men of her world did, and so she had had to be content with rings. For Bet there was a necklace, of a sort that no girl could resist if the Devil himself had given it to her.

There was a chorus of astonished comment. David told Ahrian that she could make a fortune for herself if she would make and sell these things to the world. Ahrian shook her head.

"No. These are gifts and must be fashioned with a meaning from the heart. Otherwise I could not make them."

The stones were all most curiously cut.

It was exactly eight days after that giving of gifts that the thing happened.

David was away on some business in the city. Marthe was spending the week end—Ahrian seemed an odd kind of chaperone, but we thought she would serve—and we had been taking a stroll in a wood that there is north of the house.

All of a sudden we heard the sound of someone screaming.

We started to run back toward the house. A scream has no identity, but

somehow I knew this one came from Bet. Marthe got some distance ahead of me, and then she began to scream, too. There were other sounds mixed with the screaming. I made all the speed I could. Where the wood ended, there was a wide stretch of turf, with the house way at the back of it and here and there apple trees that were part of an old orchard.

Bet had got herself up into one of these old thorny veterans. Her clothes were torn and there were dabbles of blood on her face and dress. Her cries had ceased to have any meaning. In a minute she was going to faint.

MY BIG DOG Buck was under the tree. He leaped and sprang, and his teeth flashed like knives in the sunlight, snapping shut no more than a short inch beneath the limb Bet huddled on. He moaned as he leaped, a strange and dreadful sound as though he were being tortured and were pleading for release.

I shouted his name. He turned his head, gave me one pitiful look, and then he went back to trying to kill my sister. I was carrying the heavy blackthorn stick I used when I walked in the country. I hit him with the knob of it. Poor Buck! He was dead in a minute or two, as quick as I could make it, and he never tried to defend himself. I caught Bet as she tumbled out of the apple tree, and Marthe and I between us got her to the house.

Ahrian was there. She gave a little cry of horror and bent her head, and I remember the flash of crystal on her forehead in the dim hall. Servants came and took Bet. Marthe ran off somewhere to be sick, and I called town for David and a doctor.

For a while I was busy with brandy and restoratives. Presently Bet came around, more terrified than hurt. Her scratches had come mostly from climbing into the tree. She said she had been looking for Marthe and me, when suddenly Buck had appeared out of nowhere and, for no reason at all, tried to tear her throat out.

"I never did him any harm," she whimpered. "I like him, and he liked me. He must have gone mad."

I was glad when the doctor came and put her under for a while. Buck was taken away for autopsy. He was not rabid, nor was there a sign of any other disease. I had that stick burned up. I couldn't forget the way Buck had moaned, the way he had looked at me before he died. David had some bitter words to say, and I nearly hit him, which was unfair under the circumstances.

Anyway, the dog was dead, and Bet was all right. In time everybody's nerves calmed down, and even Bet got tired of talking about it. David had a birthday coming up. Ahrian made great preparations, asking us all incessant questions about how things should be done according to our customs, and adding a few of her own.

David liked lavishness, so there was another big dinner and a lot of people. Ahrian had gained confidence, and everybody had had time to gossip themselves out about her by now. It was a much more successful occasion than the first. Even some of the women decided not to hate her.

Marthe and I retired into the library for a little quiet love-making. Between times we discussed getting married. Through the closed doors we heard Ahrian singing for a while, not the long-ing heartsick things she had sung before, but something gay and wicked. When she stopped, there was only the usual buzz and chatter of people.

Some time went by, I don't know how much. Without any warning a terrible racket arose of horses squealing, and of yelling, and I remember thinking that the barns must be on fire.

I got outside in a hurry. The guests were beginning to pour out onto the veranda and peer curiously into the darkness to see what the trouble was. Among them, I noticed Ahrian with a cloak around her.

The stables and the big open paddocks

are some distance from the house. Half-way there I saw Jamieson, my head groom, running toward me.

"It's Miss Bet," he gasped, white-faced and shaking. "Hurry!"

I hurried, but there was a cold, sick feeling in me that told me hurrying was no use.

There was an old brood mare, gentle as a kitten, long past her usefulness and pensioned off. She was Bet's especial pet, and old Hazel would muster up a stiff-legged canter from wherever she was to come and snuffle over her for sugar-lumps.

All the big floodlights were on. There was a confusion of men and horses and noise. Old Hazel was pressed up against the paddock fence, her coat dark with sweat, trembling in every muscle. There was blood on her legs. Bet was dead. In her long white party dress and her silver sandals she had come all the way down there and gone into the paddock, and the old mare had trampled her. It didn't make any sense at all. I kneeled there beside her in the dirt, and the necklace of zircons that Ahrian had given her glittered among the splashes of blood.

The men had got ropes on the mare now, and she began to thrash and scream like a crazy thing. Somebody handed me a gun, and I used it, all the time knowing that the poor old beast had no more killing in her than Buck had had.

It made no kind of sense. But Bet was dead.

It was a fine ending to a gay evening.

You know how it is with a kid sister. Sometimes she's a pest, and sometimes she's ridiculous, and she always talks too much, but even so— And it was such an ugly way to die.

David was going down and shoot every horse in the place. When I stopped him, he turned on me. There was a bad scene. They were my animals. One had tried, and one had succeeded, and that made me practically a murderer. I let it go, because he was hard hit, and

so was I. But from then on there was a wall between me and my brother, and the hate he had against me over Bet's death seemed to grow day by day. I couldn't understand why. It seemed almost insane, but whatever shortcomings David had, insanity was not one of them.

We buried Bet, and no one wept more bitterly than Ahrian. She was David's loving comforter, and for the first time I was genuinely glad she was there.

CHAPTER IV

Star Dreams

IN THE night after the funeral I began to dream.

At first the dreams were brief and vague. But they got longer and clearer, until my days became nightmares and my nights an unbearable hell. Sleep became a torture. I dreamed of space.

The McQuarries are spacemen. From old Anson down the sons have flown the ships, and the daughters have married men who could fly ships, and the McQuarrie flag has been carried a long, long way. As far as I know, we never did anything more sinful than to get there first, but the McQuarrie ships have gained and held the richest cream of the trade between the worlds, and now they are breaking the trails between the stars.

I was a McQuarrie, and the oldest son to boot, and I had to go to space. That was a thing as inevitable as sunrise, and as little questioned. I went.

Now I dreamed of space. I was caught in it, quite alone, between the blackness and the blaze, with nothing above or below or around me but the cruel bright eyes of far-off suns to note my fall. I fell, through the millions of silent miles, turning over and over, voiceless, helpless, and when I had done falling the stars looked just the same, and it

seemed I had not moved. I knew that I was going to fall forever and never be allowed to die, and at the end of forever the stars would not have changed.

They were ghastly dreams. Opiates only made them worse. I spent whole days riding, until both my horse and I were weary enough to drop, so that I might sleep. It was no good. I tried drinking, and that was no help either.

There was guilt in those dreams. One part of them recurred over and over—myself, knowing about the unending doom that waited for me out there beyond the sky, and running away from it, running like a hunted hare. Everywhere I turned, there was my father with his arms stretched wide, barring the way. His face was turned from me, and my fear lest he should suddenly see me and know the truth was as great in a different way as my fear of space. So I would creep away, but in the end there was no escape, and I was falling, falling down the timeless universe.

I didn't see Marthe. I didn't have the heart to see anybody. I began to think of death. It seemed preferable to a padded cell.

David relented enough to be worried. Ahrian hovered over me sweetly. I didn't tell them anything, of course, except that I was having trouble sleeping.

Then, curiously enough, Ahrian got mixed up in my nightmares. Not Ahrian herself, but her world, the world of Altair she had left for David.

THAT was strange, because she had spoken very little about her world. She had, in fact, refused to talk about it. David had not discussed it either, except from the standpoint of trade. Yet here I was, seeing it in detail, in sudden bright flashes that came without reason in the midst of my horrible plunging through space. I could see every leaf and flower, each single turret of a pale and gleaming city of which I knew the streets as well as I knew my

own woods. I saw in detail the quaint shapes of the roof-tops with the carving on them, and the wide plain of some feathery grass, the color of blue smoke, that sloped away toward an opalescent sea. I knew the separate colors of the several moons, and the particular perfume that came on the wind at the sinking of Altair.

This was so extremely odd that I mentioned it to Ahrian, not, of course, telling her that I had had other dreams as well. She gave a little start and said, "How strange!"

I went on to tell her some of the details, and suddenly she laughed and said, "But it is not so very strange, after all. I have told you all those things."

"When?" I said.

"Some few nights ago. You had had a number of drinks, Rafe, and perhaps you do not remember. I talked to you, thinking that it might help you to sleep, and it was of my own world that I talked."

That seemed as good an explanation as any; in fact, the only one. So I let it drop, and after that I dreamed no more of Ahrian's world.

I felt wretched about Marthe, but this wasn't a thing you dragged someone else into, especially someone you cared about. I put her off, and fought, not very gallantly, a fight I knew I was losing. I began to have blank periods during my waking hours. Once I found my horse on the edge of a cliff, with the dirt already sliding from under him. Another time I was looking at the sharp blade of my big pocket knife that had drawn a tentative line of red across my wrist.

I stopped riding. I stopped driving my car. I locked up all my guns and made Jamieson hide the key. I knew I ought to die, but I wasn't quite ready, not quite. . . .

Marthe came one day, unannounced and uninvited. She came into the house and found me, and politely shut the door in everyone's face. Then she came and stood in front of me.

"I want the truth, Rafe. What's gone wrong?"

I said something about not having felt well, assured her I was all right, thanked her for coming, and tried to put her out. She wouldn't be put.

"Look at me, Rafe. Is it because you don't love me?" She made me look at her, and presently she smiled and said, "I didn't think so."

I caught hold of her, then. After a while she whispered, "There's something evil in this house. I felt it when I came in the door. Something wicked!"

"Nonsense," I told her.

She clung to it, though, and cried a little, and swore at me because I had worried her. Then she stepped back and said flatly:

"You look like the devil. What is it Rafe?"

"I don't quite know." Suddenly, perhaps because of what she had said, I wanted to be out of that house. Irrational? But I wasn't being rational then. "Let's take a walk. Maybe the air will clear my head."

We didn't go far. The last few weeks had worn me down badly, and every crack and jar I had in my frame was plaguing me. By the time we made it to a grassy knoll well away from the house and sat down, Marthe was looking genuinely frightened.

I hadn't meant to tell her anything. I had determined not to tell her. And, of course, I did tell her. I don't know what she made of it, because it wasn't very coherent, the dream part, but she got quite white and flung her arms around me.

"You need a psychiatrist," she said, "and a good doctor."

"I've had a doctor. And a psychiatrist isn't any good unless you're hiding something from yourself. I'm not."

"But there must be some reason for the dreams."

"It isn't any buried guilt. Listen, Marthe, I'll tell you something, and that will make two people in the world who know it. Maybe you won't think much

of me after you hear it, but I'd have to tell you sometime and it better be now. That time my plane crashed, on the way to the spaceport. I crashed it myself. Deliberately, intentionally crashed it."

HER eyes widened. Before she could say anything, I rushed on.

"I never wanted to go to space. When I was a little kid, and my father would talk to me about it, I didn't want to go. I liked Earth. I liked dogs and horses and prowling in the woods. Above all, I resented being forced into a set mold that didn't fit me, just because generations of McQuarries had been poured into that mold. My father and I had some bitter words over that, when I was little.

"When I got older I still felt that way, but I'd discovered it wasn't any use to fight. Besides, I liked my father. You know how some men are—pride, family tradition, all that business. Space was his life. It meant more to him to have me be a spaceman than it did to me not to be one. So I went. I didn't like it. I hated it, as a matter of fact. But I kept my mouth shut. Then, coming back from Mars on that first voyage, we lost a man.

"He'd gone outside the hull to repair something, and his magnetic grapples didn't hold, and he drifted off. I saw him through the port, growing smaller and smaller as we left him behind, until he disappeared. You know how fast a spaceship moves at full acceleration? Even by the time we got the boats out it was too late. He's still there. He'll always be there.

"After that, I had a horror of space, the way some people used to have for the-sea. It wasn't that I was afraid of getting killed, it was the emptiness, the dark and the cold and the silence, and the *waiting*. I hate being cooped in, and the ship was like an iron coffin. I tried to fight it. I made two more voyages, and I was sick for months after the second one. I didn't tell anybody

why. Finally I went up to the Academy to get my ticket, and my father was proud and happy. Blast people's pride and their ideas that their children have to love just what they do! He gave me a berth on his flagship.

"I couldn't tell him the truth, and I couldn't go. I didn't have any right to— to ask men to depend on me and then maybe— So I crashed my plane. If I died, I wanted to do it decently and alone. If I didn't, I figured I'd get smashed up enough so that I couldn't pass a space-physical, and that would be that, with everybody's honor still intact. I guess God was on my side. Anyway, I judged the impact just right. After that, David carried the torch, and my father died happy."

We didn't talk for a while. I sat turning round and round on my finger the ring that Ahrian had given me. Presently Marthe said, "That explains it."

"What?"

"The look I saw in your face when David's ship came in. No regret, no envy. You didn't want to be where he was. But you were as proud of him as Bet was."

"He likes to strut a bit," I said, "but the son-of-a-gun is just as good as he thinks he is. Maybe better. I've talked to his men. . . . Well, what about me?"

She said some things that did me more good than any psychiatry, and for the first time in weeks I began to think perhaps there was some hope in the world. We made up a little for all the time we had lost, and then Marthe became thoughtful again.

"Rafe, you started once to say something about Ahrian. Where does she come into this?"

"Nowhere, really." I told her about seeming to see Ahrian's world. "Turned out she'd described it to me, and imagination did the rest."

"I wonder."

She sat still and intent, and then she questioned me about those particular dreams, what Ahrian had said, what I

had said, what I remembered. Finally I demanded to know what she was getting at.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Rafe, that all this trouble has come onto you since Ahrian came? All the tragic things there are no real explanations for—Buck, and the old mare, and Bet going down into the paddock in her white formal, a thing no woman in her right mind would do, and at that hour of the night! And now these nightmares that are driving you to—to—Oh, you didn't tell me that part of it, but I can see it in your face! It's all wrong, Rafe. It's all without reason."

"But what on earth could Ahrian have to do with it? That's just wild talk, Marthe."

"Is it? How do we know what the people of her world can do, what powers they may have?"

"But she loves David! Why would she want to destroy his family?"

"How do you know she loves him? Did she ever tell you so?"

"Yes." Then Ahrian's words came back to me, and I corrected myself. "No, come to think of it. She only said love was a great force. Hang it all, though, she came with him, didn't she? All the way to Earth."

FOR some reason, this talk was disturbing me deeply. It oppressed me, in that open empty place, and gave me a sense that someone was listening and that Marthe had better not say any more—for her own sake.

"That's all nonsense," I said roughly. "People can't send dreams on each other, or make people do things, or—or kill by remote control."

"People like us—no. But Ahrian isn't—people. I'm afraid of her, Rafe. She's strange, inside. Bet said the same thing."

"Woman talk."

"Maybe. Or maybe sometimes we're nearer the truth than men because we aren't ashamed to rely on the instincts God gave us. She's evil. She's filled the

house with death."

Marthe shivered as though a cold wind had struck her, and suddenly she reached out and tore Ahrian's ring off my finger and threw it far away into the deep grass.

"I don't want anything of her about you. Nothing!"

Then it was my turn to shiver. Because the minute that ring was gone, so were the oppression and the vague fear, and my screwed-up nerves began to slacken off again.

Still I would not believe. I knew the power of suggestion, and considering the state I was in, none of my reactions would be worth a plugged nickel anyway.

"I still say this is all nonsense, Marthe. Ahrian's never shown the slightest sign of having any special 'power.' She's never been anything but sweet and friendly, and she follows David around like a spaniel. And there just isn't the shadow of a motive."

"I know how we can find out."

I stared at her. "How?"

"Those dreams you had of Ahrian's world. She couldn't have described all the details to you, and you couldn't have imagined all the rest of them exactly right. Someone who had been there would know. If the dreams were wrong, then Ahrian told the truth and they were nothing worse than dreams. But if they were right—all right—then they weren't dreams but memories from Ahrian's own mind, mixed in with the awful things she was sending to torture you."

I remembered that I hadn't had a single glimpse of that world since I mentioned it to Ahrian, which seemed an odd coincidence.

"Even so, how could she know how I felt about space? How could she— Oh, all right. We'll go ask David."

"No, not David! Not anyone who has anything to do with her. Besides, if she has some deep reason to hate David, *he* wouldn't be likely to tell us, would he?"

"So that's it. Don't you think may-

be your reporter's mind is running away with you?"

"I'm trying to save your neck, you stubborn fool!" she snarled, between rage and tears.

I got up. "Come on, then. There's Griffith—he's observer on the *Anson McQuarrie*, and I know him fairly well." It occurred to me suddenly that Griffith hadn't been around since the night of the *Anson McQuarrie's* landing, and I wondered why, since he had always been a good friend of David's. For some reason, that unimportant fact made me as curious as a woman to know why.

Marthe's car was in the drive. Ahrian called to us from the terrace, looking very lovely with her filmy skirts blowing around her and her hair full of those incredible purple gleamings in the sunlight. Marthe said she was going to take me for a drive, and Ahrian said it would do me good. They both smiled, and we drove away.

"Does she always wear that tiara?" asked Marthe.

"I don't know. She wears it a lot. Why?"

"It's extremely bad taste in the daytime."

"Part of her native costume, I reckon."

"She didn't have it when she came."

"No, she made it— Oh, who cares!" I yawned and went to sleep. I slept like a baby and never dreamed of anything. I was still asleep when Marthe stopped at the address in the city I had given her and only woke when she shook me half out of the car.

CHAPTER V

About Altair

GRIFFITH was home. Spacemen are usually home between voyages, with their shoes off and their feet up,

getting acquainted with their wives and kids. He seemed glad to see me, but not too glad. He asked how everything was, and I said, "Fine," and he said he'd been meaning to come up but he'd been too busy, and we both knew that neither statement was true. Then he said awkwardly that he was sorry about Bet, and I thanked him. When he couldn't think of any more ways to stall, he asked me what he could do for me.

"Well," I said, "my fiancée is wild to see the pictures you shot on the last voyage. New worlds, and all that." I explained to him who she was. "She's thinking of doing an article—how a special observer works, how the records are turned over to the government and the scientific bodies, and so on. I thought, as a special favor, you might be willing to show her the reels."

"Oh," he said, almost with a sigh of relief. "Sure, I'll be glad to."

He took us off to a small building at the rear of the house, where he had his photo lab and a projection room. He found the reels he wanted while chattering about some fine astronomical stuff that he'd been given an award for. Marthe asked him all the questions she could think of about his work, taking notes in a business-like way. The projector began to hum. We watched.

The reels were magnificent. Griffith knew his job. Interstellar space came alive before us. Nebulae, clusters, unknown Suns, glittering star streams, swept across the tridimensional screen in perfect reproduction of color.

We watched strange solar systems plunge toward us, and then the slow unveiling of individual planets as the *Anson McQuarrie* sank toward them. Some were dead and barren, some furiously alive, and some were peopled, not always by anything approaching the human. Each had its spectrum analysis and an exhaustive list of what ores and minerals might be found there, also atmosphere content, gravity, types and aspects of native flora and fauna.

In the fascination of watching, I al-

most forgot what I came for. Then—

It was there. The world, the country of my dream—Ahrian's world. Each leaf and flower and blade of grass, each shading of color, the gleaming city with the curious roofs, the plain that swept toward the opalescent sea.

I felt very sick and strange. I'm not sure what happened after that, but presently I was back in Griffith's house and Marthe was feeding me brandy. I asked for more, and when I stopped shaking I turned to Griffith, who was much upset.

"That was the second world of Altair," I said. "The home world of my brother's wife."

"Yes," said Griffith.

"What happened there?" I got up and went close to him, and he stepped back a little. "What happened between my brother and Ahrian?"

"You better ask David," he muttered and tried to turn away. I caught him.

"Tell me," I said. "Bet's already dead, so it's too late for her. But there's David—and me. For God's sake, Griff, you used to be his friend!"

"Yes," said Griffith slowly, "I used to be. I told him not to do what he did, but you know David." He made an angry, indecisive gesture, and then he looked at me. "She's such a little thing. How did she—I mean—"

"Never mind. Just tell me what David did to her. She didn't come with him of her own free will, did she?"

"No. Oh, he tried to make out that she did, but everybody knew better. To this day I don't know exactly what the deal was, but her people needed something, a particular chemical or drug, I think, and they must have needed it badly. The ship, of course, was heavily stocked with all sorts of chemicals and medical supplies—you know how useful David has found them before in establishing good relations with other races.

"If it isn't their kids, it's their cattle, or a crop blight, or polluted water, and they're always grateful when you can

fix things up, especially the primitives. Well, Ahrian's people are far from primitive, but I guess they'd run out of the source for whatever it was. David was mighty secretive about the whole thing."

He hesitated, and I prodded him. "What you're trying to say is that David gave them the chemicals or drugs they needed in exchange for Ahrian. Bought her, in fact."

Griffith nodded. He seemed to feel a personal sense of shame about it, as though the act of service under David had made him a party to the crime.

"Blackmailed her would be closer to the truth," he said. "The ugliest part of it was that Ahrian was already pledged . . . At least, that's what I heard. Anyway, no, she didn't come of her own free will."

I THINK, if I had had David's neck between my hands then, I would have broken it. How evil a mess could a man make? And where were you going to put justice?

Marthe said to Griffith, "Did her people have any unusual abilities? It's very important, Mr. Griffith."

"Their culture is very complex, and we weren't there long enough to study it in detail. Also, there was the language barrier. But I'm pretty sure they're telepaths—many races are, you know—though to what extent I couldn't say."

"Telepaths," said Marthe softly, and looked at me. "Mr. Griffith, do the women there wear a sort of tiara, shaped like—" She described Ahrian's headgear minutely, including the oddly cut crystal. "Habitually, I mean."

He stared at her as though he thought it was just like a woman to worry about fashions at a time like this. "Honestly, Miss Walters, I didn't notice. Both sexes go in for jewelry, and nearly all of them make it themselves, and nobody could keep track—" He halted, apparently struck by a sudden memory. "I did see a marriage ceremony, though, where

little crowns like that were used as we use rings. The man and woman exchanged them, and as near as I could figure the words the rite was called something like the One-Making."

"Thank you," said Marthe. "Thank you very much. Now I think I'd better get Rafe home."

I said something to Griffith, I'm not sure what, but he shook hands with me and seemed relieved. I sat in the car, thinking, and Marthe drove, not back toward the house, but to her apartment. She told me she'd be back in a minute and went off, taking the keys with her. I sat thinking, and my thoughts were not good. Marthe returned, carrying a small suitcase.

"What's that for?" I demanded.

"I'm staying with you."

"The devil you are!"

She faced me, with a look as level as a steel blade and just as unyielding. "You mean more to me than propriety, or my good name, or even my own skin. Is that clear? I am staying with you until this business is finished."

I roared at her. I pleaded with her. I explained that if Ahrian were out for me, she would be out for Marthe too, if she got in the way. I told her she'd only make it harder for me, worrying about her.

All the time I was roaring, pleading, and explaining, Marthe was driving out of town, immovable, maddening, and wonderful. Finally I gave up. I couldn't throw her out of the car. Even if I had, it wouldn't have prevented her coming.

She spoke at last. "Of course, you know there's a simple solution to all this—simple, logical, and safe."

"What?"

"Go away out of Ahrian's reach, and let David take his own consequences."

"He deserves it," I said savagely.

"But you won't go away."

"How can I, Marthe?" And I began to yell at her all over again because *she* wouldn't go.

"All right, that's settled. Now let's

start thinking. Obviously, we can't go to the police."

"Hardly." It was frightening to consider what a hard-boiled cop would make out of a woman who had lavender hair and performed witchcraft. "You believe that tiara Ahrian wears has something to do with her—well, her power over other people's minds?"

"Possibly. I don't know. That's just it, Rafe—we don't *know*, and so we have to be suspicious of everything."

I remembered the unexplainable sensation I had had when Marthe threw that ring away. Could it have been a contact, a sort of focal point to concentrate the energy of her thought-waves which were, perhaps, amplified and controlled by the aid of that mesh of gold and platinum wires and that strangely faceted crystal? I remembered also the necklace of zircons that glittered on Bet's throat, the night she died.

These gifts must be fashioned with a meaning from the heart . . .

"I don't know what we're going to do, Rafe. Do you?"

"Face them with it, I suppose. Face them both. Drag it out in the open, anyway."

Marthe sighed, and we drove on in gloomy silence.

CHAPTER VI

The Last Magic

IT WAS dark when we reached the house. Ahrian welcomed us with little cries of delight.

"I am so happy you have brought Marthe back with you. It has been too long since we have seen her."

"She's staying for a while," I said.

"How very nice. Since the little one is gone, I am lonely with no woman to talk to. Come, I will see that all is well in the room of guests."

"Where's David?" I asked.

"Oh, he has gone into the city and will not be back tonight. And my heart is sad, for I think that he has gone to talk of another voyage."

She took Marthe away. I followed, on the pretext of making sure that Marthe had everything she needed, and stayed until the arrival of the maid. Then I went and changed for dinner, cursing David.

I got a word alone with Marthe before we went down. "We'd better wait," I said. "I want to tackle them together. It's the only way I know to put David on his guard."

"Has he mentioned another voyage to you?" Marthe wanted to know.

I shook my head. "But then, he seldom mentions anything to me any more."

"Ahrian's doing."

There didn't seem to be any doubt about that. David and I had never exactly loved one another, but there had certainly never been any real ill feeling between us, either. Since Bet's death, all that had been changed.

Ahrian put herself out to be nice to Marthe. If we hadn't know what we knew, it would have been a delightful evening. Instead, it was rather horrible. All the time I was remembering how I had felt out there on the hill and wondering how much Ahrian knew, or suspected, and what she might be going to do about it.

All at once she cried out, "Oh Rafe, you have lost your ring!"

I told her some reasonably plausible lie. "I'm awfully sorry, Ahrian. You must make me another some time."

She smiled. "There will be no need for that. Wait." She ran off. Marthe and I looked at each other, not daring to speak. Presently Ahrian came back, presumably from her work room, carrying a cushion made of silk.

"See? I have made these for you both—a betrothal gift."

On the cushion were two rings, identical in design, one large, one small. The

zircon made a pale glittering, like two wicked eyes that watched us.

"Will you not exchange them now? I should be so happy!"

Marthe was going to say something violent. I gave her a look that shut her up and thanked Ahrian profusely. It was one of those things. If she knew we suspected her and her gifts, that was that. But if she didn't know, I didn't want her to find out just yet.

"But," I said, "they are too beautiful for mere gifts. We'll save them for the wedding, Ahrian. We were planning on a double ring ceremony anyway, and these will be perfect. Won't they, Marthe?"

"Oh, yes," she said.

AHRIAN beamed like a happy child, and murmured that her little trinkets weren't worthy of such an honor, and in that moment I began to doubt the whole crazy story again. No one could look so guileless and innocent and sweet as Ahrian did, and be guilty of the things we thought she was.

Marthe must have seen me wavering, because she said, "Rafe, darling, put them away where they'll be quite safe. I wouldn't want anything to happen to them before the wedding."

I took them up to my room and hid them in the farthest back corner of a bureau drawer under a pile of shirts. While I was up there alone, the most awful temptation came over me to put the big one on my finger—just to look at it, to admire the sparkle of the queerly cut stone and the wonderful filigree work of the band. What harm could there be in a ring?

I guess it was the very strength of that compulsion that saved me. I got scared. I slammed the drawer shut, locked it, and threw the key out the window. Then I turned around to find Marthe standing in the doorway.

"I wouldn't have let you put it on," she whispered. "But you see, Rafe? You see how right we were!"

I began to shake a bit. We started

downstairs again, and Marthe said in my ear, "She knows. I'm sure she knows."

I agreed with her, and I was afraid. It shamed me to be afraid of such a frail little creature, but I was.

Marthe and I were both relieved when it came time to go to bed. It freed us from the weird necessity of making conversation with Ahrian. I had no intention of sleeping, but it was good to be away from her. Marthe's room was down the hall from mine, farther than I liked but plenty close enough to hear her if she called me.

I told her to leave the door open and yell like the devil if anything—anything at all—seemed wrong to her. I left mine open, too, and sat down in a chair where I could see the lighted hall. I wished I had a gun, but I didn't dare leave Marthe for all the time it would take to rouse out Jamieson and get the key. I picked out the heaviest stick I had and kept it in my hand.

The house was quiet, and nothing happened. The huge relic of a clock that stood on the stair landing chimed peacefully every fifteen minutes, and every hour it counted off the strokes in a deep, soft voice. I think the last time I heard it was half-past two. I didn't mean to sleep. I had purposely drunk nothing but black coffee all evening. But I had been so long without sleep!

I remember getting up and walking down the hall to Marthe's door and glancing in at her, curled up in the big bed. After that things got dim. I don't believe that I slept very deeply, or very long, but it was enough. I dreamed with a terrible vividness of Marthe. She was standing in the garden, wrapped in a plaid bathrobe, and she was in danger, very great danger, and she needed me.

Starting up out of the chair, I listened for a moment. The house was silent, except for the clock ticking gently to itself on the landing. I ran down the hall and into Marthe's room. At first I thought she was still there, and then I saw that the shape in the bed was only

a mockery of tumbled blankets. I called her. There was no answer. Calling, I ran down through the house, and there was no answer at all until I came out on the terrace above the shadowy garden. Then I heard her say my name.

She was standing in a patch of moonlight with the plaid robe wrapped around her, and her face was white as death. In a minute I had my arms around her and she was sobbing, asking if I were safe.

"I must have been dreaming, Rafe, but I thought you were somewhere out here, hurt, maybe dying."

She was in a terrible fright, and so was I. Because I knew who had sent those dreams—easy dreams to send, without any aids to telepathy, since with each of us the thought of danger to the other was right on top of our minds, conscious and screaming.

I wanted out of that garden.

WE WENT up the steps together and onto the wide terrace, in that clear, white, damnable moonlight. From the long doors that opened into the library David stepped and barred our way. He held a heavy double-barreled shotgun, and at that range he couldn't miss.

David.

He hadn't gone to town. He had been in his room all this time—waiting. His eyes were wide open, empty and bright, reflecting the cold fire of the moon.

Ahrian was with him.

I made some futile gesture of getting Marthe behind me, and I cried out, "David!" He turned his head a very little, like a man who hears a sound far off, and his brow puckered, but he did not speak.

Ahrian said softly, "I am sorry that it must be so, Rafe and Marthe. You are blameless, and you have been kind. If only Marthe had not sensed what was within me . . . But now it must be finished here, tonight."

"Ahrian," I said, and the twin black barrels of the shotgun watched me, and the stone of David's ring sparkled

against the stock. "David did a wicked thing. We know about it—but does it give you the right to kill us all? Bet, and Marthe . . ."

"I made a promise to my gods," she whispered. "I had a mother and father, a brother, a sister—and more than all of them, though I loved them dearly, there was one who would have been my other self."

"I'll take you back," I said. "I'll send a ship out to Altair—only let Marthe go!"

"Could I go back as I am, as he has made me? Could I find my life again, with the blood that is already on me? No. I will take from David everything that he loves, even space itself, and in the end I will tell him how and why. Then—I will die."

"All right. All right, Ahrian. But why Marthe? She can't stop you. If David kills me, that's enough. He'll be tried for murder, the whole story will come out, and that will be the end of him whether he's convicted or not."

Ahrian smiled, a tender thing of ineffable sadness. "Marthe is speaking within herself, words that you should hear. Her body wishes much to live, but her heart says, 'Not without him,' and her heart is stronger. No, Rafe. If she lives, she will slip David out of the cage I have built for him. Now let us stop torturing each other!"

Her face contracted in a spasm of pain. She turned her head toward the motionless effigy of a man who stood beside her, and I saw the gun go up, and I knew this was the finish.

I shouted his name once more, pure reflex, and shoved Marthe aside as far as I could. David was twenty-five or thirty feet away. I bent over and began to run toward him. I didn't know why. It was hopeless, but it was all I could think of to do. The distance looked like thirty miles—and then I heard him moan. He was moaning the way old Buck had moaned that day, and his head was pulled back as though he were straining away from something. I knew

he didn't *want* to kill me, even then.

Ahrian whispered. The crystal glowed in the moonlight, and there was in her face a magnificent and awful strength. David gave a low wail of agony. The cords stood out on the backs of his hands. The eyes of the woman from Altair blazed like purple stars. The gunstock settled into place, and David's finger curled in on the trigger.

Someone sped by me, off to one side and going like the wind. Someone in a plaid robe, headed not for David, but for Ahrian.

There was a scream, I don't know whose. Maybe mine. The gun let off, both barrels, right above my shoulder, and the hot metal seared my hand where I shoved the thing up at the last second so that it hit nothing but the tree tops. David groaned and let it drop, and so did I. I reeled around, and there was Marthe leaning over the stone balustrade, shivering, sobbing, triumphant, holding in one hand the crystal tiara.

I CARRIED Ahrian into the house. Her body, light and frail as a bird's, was broken. It was a long fall into the garden, and she had hit hard. Her hair had come loose and hung over my arm in a long thick pall, dark purple in the moonlight.

I laid her on the couch, as gently as I could. She looked up at me and said quite clearly, "The beasts I could force against their will. The human mind is stronger. With all my skill and care—a little too strong."

She was still a while, and then she whispered, "I am sad, Rafe, that I must die so far away from home."

That was all.

The shot had roused the servants, who began to straggle in from the far wing of the house. I told them that David thought he had heard prowlers and fired at them, and in the excitement Ahrian had fallen from the terrace. They believed it. Why not? David was still sitting out there, doubled up on the cold stone, looking at nothing. Some-

how I couldn't speak to him, or touch him. I sent the servants to get him in, and told them to call the people who had to be called. Then I took Marthe up to her room.

"It'll be all right," I told her. "It was an accident. Let me tell the story. You won't even be named."

"I don't care," she said, in a strange harsh voice. "All I care about is you, and you're alive and safe." She put her arms around me, a fierce and painful grip. "I'm sorry I killed her, I didn't mean to, but I'd do it again, Rafe, I'd do it again—she wanted to kill you!" She caught her breath, still clinging to me, and then she began to cry. "You fool, oh you fool, rushing David like that to make him fire at you instead of me." She said some more things, and then her voice got faint. I put her on

the bed and made her take a sedative, and presently she was asleep.

I left the maid with her, and went downstairs. There were things I had to say to David.

That was how the McQuarrie tradition came to an end after two hundred years. Even the house is gone, for none of us could bear it any longer. David will never go to space again.

"I'm glad. What did it gain the McQuarries? What has it ever gained men? Have men ever brought back more happiness from the stars? Will they ever?"

Well, it's too late now to wonder about that. It's been too late, ever since the first skin-clad barbarian stared up at the moon and lusted for it. If Marthe and I have sons, I am afraid that McQuarries will go to space again.