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The two Venusians threw Laura's struggling figure over the edge of the brimming inferno . . .

TWO AGAINST VENUS

By Craig Browning

It seemed the only way to get at the secret of this planet's superstitions was to let its natives turn you into stone . . .

CARL STEVENS sat precariously with his feet on the desk, the chair resting on two legs. His hands were cupped at the nape of his neck. His lazily serene blond head was one to bring out the desire to possess in women.

The older man across the desk, although resembling Carl in most physical respects, had none of his calm.

"Men are too scarce here, Carl," he said. "You've got to pitch in. We—I need you here. The natives are getting uneasy. Unless we keep them in hand they'll desert—and that would mean ruin to me. My whole fortune is tied up in this contract to put a tunnel through the Corscoteh Ridge."

"But, Dad," Carl objected mildly. "I'm not an engineer. I know a little of the Venusian lingo—enough to get along with a co-operative native; but frankly, I haven't the least idea how to meet the problems of this job of yours. I'd be a handicap."

"You'll learn fast enough," John Stevens said confidently. "And anyway, the natives know all that is needed about the technical aspects and running the machines. That isn't what you're needed for."

"Then what *am* I needed for?"

"Morale," John said. "You must have read how the natives' lives are governed by superstition and their peculiar religion."

"Yes, of course," Carl murmured disinterestedly. "But what has that to do with cutting this tunnel? It's just a job."

"It's more than that," John Stevens said slowly. "This Corscoteh Ridge is a sort of natural wall dividing the domains of the god of the hot side and the god of the inhabitable continents."

"Say, that's right!" Surprise made Carl drop his feet to the floor. "Maybe you do need me, Dad. I sort of hate to give up my vacation, though. I'd wanted to sort of explore so that I would have material for my Doctor's. How far is there left to go?"

"Not more than fifty feet," John replied. "But when that's done there's still the building to put up; and the temperature out there is around two hundred. Even the natives will have to wear refrigerated suits—if they stay and work."

"If," Carl echoed. "O.K., Dad. I'll stay."

"Thanks, boy," his father said

gruffly. There was a silence. The older man broke it on a ruminative note. "I wonder sometimes about these natives of Venus. Science says they can't possibly be an offshoot of the human race—something about convergent evolution. They cite examples of convergent evolution back on Earth—two completely unrelated species having very nearly the same appearance. They say that's what humans and Venusians are. The few offspring of mixed parentage have never been able to reproduce, you know. Even though they have been able to grow up into normal people who look quite a bit like a white Venusian with lots of purple birthmarks."

"Everybody wonders about it," Carl said, taking out a cigarette. "It's pretty conclusive though that it is convergent evolution, and that there has never before been any contact between Earth and Venus. I've read a couple of pretty good books on the subject, showing details of structure of the two species, man and Venusian. Similarity of shape is about all they have in common. If the Venusian nose had a bridge in it instead of looking like the nose of an ape, their shape would be identical with ours—though of course they are an average of a foot and a half taller than we are. But their indigo colored skin is different under the microscope, and they have never had any hair. One book argues that since the two skins are different the Venusian and human brains are different in some way, since the brain develops in the embryo from skin on the back."

"I doubt that about the brains being different," John said. "They're more like us in the way they think than some Earth races."

The phone on the desk jingled. John Stevens scooped up the re-

ceiver. His attitude changed abruptly at what he heard.

"Come on, Carl," he said, rising and going to the door. "The tunnel's through. It was less than we figured."

HE SPOKE over his shoulder as they hurried along the corridor to the main shaft.

"Fortunately we sealed off the bore about a hundred feet back from operations," he said. "That way we were prepared for any unexpected break through. That was Laura on the phone. It's her shift at operations."

"A woman?" Carl exclaimed.

"A girl," John corrected. He chuckled. "Mighty nice girl, too. I was going to let you meet her as a last resort to convince you to stay and help me out. She's my secretary, and volunteered to help out by taking one shift every other day with the natives. They work harder for her than for any of the men, too."

The thunderous screech and rattle of ore cars drowned out voices. Carl and his father climbed into one of the slow moving cars and hung on. Ten minutes later the string of cars stopped against the dead end of a huge circular wall that looked vaguely like the circular door to a bank vault.

There was a platform here on either side of the tracks, its floor even with the tops of the cars. Neatly ordered lockers, piles of equipment, and two almost naked seven-foot Venusians were on the platform.

The two Venusians evidently didn't know yet of the break through. They welcomed "Boss man" and "Boss boy" with wide grins that disclosed perfectly formed white teeth. Their skins were a richly glistening indigo filmed with moisture.

"I'll see if I can get Laura on the

phone," John said. He went to the phone nailed to a vertical plank against the bare granite side of the tunnel. His conversation consisted of yes, and a couple of O.K.s.

"Laura says the atmospheric pressure is sixteen point eight," he said after he hung up. "That's nearly two pounds less than on this side. That's about what we figured. Lucky we did or we wouldn't have put up a double partition for a lock."

"What makes the difference?" Carl asked.

"The wind," John explained. "It blows toward the hot side. At the top of the Ridge the wind velocity is about seventy miles an hour. Down at this level on the leeward side that makes a vacuum."

"I see," Carl said.

"Put on a suit," John ordered, reaching for one of those hanging along the wall at the end of the row of lockers.

They were, Carl saw, very much like the standard space suit on all interplanetary liners, except for the bulging refrigerating pack on the back—more bulky than the standard heat pack of a space suit.

The natives helped them into the suits, screwing in the transparent helmets with smooth twists of glistening dark hands whose backs were deep indigo and whose palms were a lighter shade that blended into pale blue.

Almost at once it was comfortably cool. Carl sighed with relief at the unexpected comfort.

He followed his father to a door in the barrier, discovering as he walked that the suit seemed to weigh almost nothing. It was constructed so that its rigid frame took most of the weight away from the body.

Carl followed his father through the door, a sealing hatch-cover affair. There was another similar barrier

fifty feet farther on. When they reached it John Stevens opened a large valve. There was a sucking hiss that died swiftly. Then that door was open and they were inside.

HERE an almost impenetrable fog filled the bore, with rivulets of steam trickling down the crystalline surface of the walls. Lights were faint foci of incandescence here and there, and obscured gray figures moved about.

One approached as they stood in indecision.

"Am I glad you're here," a feminine voice said with relief. "They've been determined to quit work and get out. If they do that they'll take every one of the natives with them."

"Laura," John said. "This is my son, Carl."

Carl looked curiously at the girl under the spherical glass helmet. Laura returned his gaze with one equally frank. John Stevens left them and went over to the group of natives who were standing near the place where the steam seemed to be entering.

"I never expected to find a girl up here when I decided to pay Dad a visit before seeing the rest of Venus," Carl said. He held out his hand and smiled.

Laura took it. They both looked down, startled, as they suddenly realized their hands were encased in insulated gloves that were an integral part of their suits.

"What does it look like outside?" Carl asked.

"Come and take a look," Laura said. He followed her to the break.

The break was a jagged opening. One of the rock borers had tumbled half way through it and was lying on its side. Rocks had fallen, partly covering it, but making the opening larger so that it was possible to climb

over the machine and out into the open.

The scene that met their eyes as they emerged was one of cosmic fury unleashed—and alien. At their feet bare rock, sterile and washed by eternally condensing and evaporating steam, dropped swiftly to disappear into a seething wall of boiling vapors.

Above, where the relatively cool winds from the other side of the Ridge whipped over, clouds came and vanished with unbelievable speed.

As they watched, it seemed they were the focus of a concerted attack by white, billowing enemies that some strange force was driving back at times, and at others weakening to allow sudden surges that threatened to succeed in engulfing them.

There was no color—only whites and grays and the lifeless washed rocks. And the heat. It radiated through their helmets and made itself felt against their faces in spite of the refrigeration inside.

Carl discovered Laura drawing closer to him.

"Do you realize this is something no human being has seen before?" he heard her say, subdued.

"All this work of driving through a tunnel to look at this wall of steam!" Carl answered. "What good will it do?"

"I don't know," Laura said. "Maybe none; but it will at least give us a point of observation of weather phenomena at the edge of the sun side of Venus—with a hasty retreat to the safety of the other side of the Ridge."

"Wait!" Carl said suddenly, pointing. "What's that?"

TWO HUNDRED yards down the slope was something darker than the surrounding rock.

"I thought I saw it move," he said. "Let's go down and see what it is."

"No," the girl said. "Wait. Those rocks may be treacherous. It can't be anything alive, anyway, in this heat."

"It moved again," Carl said excitedly. "And it's the color of a native. You know the standard for priests these natives set. A priest gains his rank by visiting the sunward side and bringing back proof he's been there. Maybe this is one that ventured too far over and couldn't make it back."

"We'll have to risk the danger then," Laura said. "If he's still alive there may be a chance to save him. Let's go."

"Take my hand," he said.

They made their way down slowly, stepping from one loose rock to another, stumbling and picking themselves up again and going on. Long before they reached him they knew it was a Venusian.

It was impossible for him to be alive in the near boiling point heat, yet he was, feebly crawling over the blistering rocks, upward toward the Ridge on whose other side lay the coolness of life.

They reached him and dropped down beside him, trying to pick him up. He seemed not to feel their touch, but kept crawling as if his muscles were working after his cooked brain was unable to tell them to desist.

"Great priest of the Sun God," Laura said in the Venusian language.

The great body jerked as at an electric shock. The hairless head paused, then slowly lifted. Sightless eyes peered at them—sightless and cooked-white. Eyes twice as large as a human's, protruding from indigo sockets in a grotesquery of sculpture.

For a breathless minute Carl and

Laura stared at those sightless orbs. Then, slowly, the Venusian toppled over on his side, cooked skin scraping loose as he settled in death.

It was only then that they noticed the bag hung around his neck by a native hemp cord. A bag of the native priest-cloth. The orange colored bag was large as a woman's handbag. It contained some object that was heavy as Carl tentatively lifted the bag.

"He's dead," Carl said. "Let's take this bag and try to hide him with a few rocks—at least so he can't be seen from the tunnel."

He took the bag from around the dead neck and handed it to Laura, then hastily built a low wall of rocks to hide the body.

"Let's go," he finally said, straightening up. He took the bag from Laura. "Probably nothing in it but some rocks," he muttered. "But we might as well take it along and look into it when we get back to the office."

WHEN THEY climbed back over the borer into the tunnel they heard the voice of John Stevens and the excited, deep voiced mumbling of several natives talking at once. This kept on until they had stepped into full view in the tunnel.

Suddenly one of the natives let out a shout and pointed at the orange bag in Carl's hand. At once the natives became silent. Too late Carl realized they would recognize what the bag meant.

The silence grew intense, then abruptly changed into a thunder of voices. Carl understood what they were saying.

"No!" he shouted, holding the bag behind him. "Great Sun Priest gave it to me, his white brother. He is dead now. His word is a command."

The thunder settled into low

mutters. The natives were debating among themselves whether to go out and look. Three of them reluctantly separated from the others and went to the break, vanishing outside.

"Let's go to the office and find out what's in here," Carl said softly. Laura nodded.

"Go ahead, you two," John Stevens said. "The next shift will be here in a few minutes. I'll stay until they come. Somebody'd better remain here with these natives."

Carl and Laura turned to leave. One of the natives came up to them and bowed, speaking hesitantly in the native language.

"If you please," he said. "We can tell you what is in the bag, if you but care to listen."

"And what is in the bag?" Laura asked, smiling.

The native turned and glanced at his fellows, who nodded their consent for him to speak.

"It is the living stone," he said. "It will look to you as other stones, yet it can be shown that these stones live and have life and are not as other stones, just as the living creature is not as the dead creature."

"Would you come with us, man-of-wisdom, to explain more?" Carl asked slowly, hesitating over the Venusian words.

Once more the Venusian turned to his fellows, who gave their consent.

As the three left the blocked off head of the tunnel and rode the ore cars back to the office Carl was carefully concealing his inner excitement.

He had read of the stories of Venusian gods of living stone, able to step out of the stone and assume flesh, and who, whether in stone or in flesh, were the real rulers of Venus.

The native had said it could be shown that these stones lived. If that were so in any sense of the word, then he had his fingers on something worth presentation for his doctor's thesis.

His thoughts turned to the dead Venusian who had been carrying the bag. He must have picked up the stones—if stones they turned out to be—not far from where he had been found. He certainly couldn't have traveled far over rocks hot enough to cook flesh. So if it turned out that there was anything unusual about the contents of the orange bag, it should be simple to find the spot where it came from, and get more.

Carl felt of the objects in the bag as the cars jogged along. They were hard like rocks. There seemed to be two of them, one smaller than the other.

They reached John Stevens' office. The native held out his hand for the bag. Carl hesitated, then gave it to him. The native made a rapid motion in the air with his fingers as if going through some religious routine, and opened the bag.

His hand reached in and drew out one of the objects, handing it to Carl.

It was undoubtedly stone. It was a soft pink in color, a pink that seemed to shine through a white surface from inside.

CHAPTER II

CLYDE MASTERS sat at his desk scanning the reports that had been turned in by his various operatives. As chief of the trouble-shooting department of Venus-American he was more important than the President of the United States, and almost as important as the least of the vice-presidents of V-A. That was understandable when you con-

sidered that the capital stock of V-A was worth more than three times as much as the United States, and better than seventy-five percent of the Government's income came from taxes on V-A and dividends on V-A stock owned by the Government.

Clyde was fully aware of his relative importance in the scheme of things; but he was equally aware of the precariousness of his position. One major blunder and he could conceivably be through. Done. Washed up.

Since he never wanted this to happen he spent long hours each day studying the reports of his operatives, who in turn spent long hours each day gathering the material for the reports.

He wouldn't have thought of himself as a superman, but he knew all his operatives personally—and there were over two thousand of them. He wouldn't have thought of himself as a financial wizard, but one of his many responsibilities was to see that the par value of V-A stock and the market value stayed about the same.

He had a habit of never overlooking any bets. He had a habit of estimating the potentialities of unimportant details. Sometimes an insignificant little thing would send him tearing off to Venus—and almost invariably that insignificant little detail would become a very big thing by the time he got there.

The report he was reading at the moment said, "Carl Stevens, son of contractor on Corscatch Ridge bore, reports finding two strange stones in bag about neck of native found dead on hot side of Ridge. He further reports that a native claimed the two stones to be 'alive'."

Clyde Masters, his frowning eyes re-reading the report, reached out and picked up the telephone.

"Put me through to Venus, honey," he spoke into the receiver. "And while I'm on get me reservations on the next ship."

He hung up and continued reading reports. Venus was nearly behind the Sun. In a geodesic trajectory, spaced about two million miles apart, were the V-A space ships going to Venus—and from Venus back to Earth, as regular in their schedules as passenger trains between any two large cities in the United States. His telephone call would be relayed on tight beam along this string of ships, stepped up through each relay station, so that, aside from the ten minute interval of time between planets that made conversation a long drawn out affair, the call would be as clear and undistorted as a local call.

In twenty minutes the phone rang. He picked it up. It was the Venus operator.

"Your party is being rung," she said. "You may begin your message. If he does not answer by the time it arrives we will record it for him."

"This is Clyde Masters. I'm coming to Venus on the next ship to leave here. When I get there I want Carl Stevens and those two stones, the native who claims they're alive, and all others connected with their discovery. Have them ready for me. I don't want any time wasted when I get there. Also, have all Venus reports sent both to my ship and to my office here. That's all."

He dropped the receiver back on the hook and continued reading reports. The efficient switchboard operator took care of the routine task of calling Clyde's houseboy and telling him to have things packed and at the spaceport, making sure the reservation for passage went through smoothly, and sending out the inter-

office memo announcing that Clyde Masters was leaving for Venus.

THIRTY-SIX hours later, as the ship he was on neared the Moon's orbit, Clyde received the first report in response to his orders. It read:

"Instructions received. Stones in our possession. Wish permission to turn them over to Research for tests. Carl Stevens and Laura Wilde agree to be on hand. Native who made statement about rocks cannot be found."

It was signed Fred Nelson, O.Q.C. .

Clyde thought it over and sent an O.K. for the stones to be turned over to Research. Forty-eight hours later a second report came.

"Stones exhibit remarkable properties very similar to life. One stone left intact, other used for tests, and broken into small working specimens. On standard tests the specific heat of material seems to be infinite, and its temperature stays at 100.03 degrees. Sample weighing five grams absorbed two hundred thousand calories without change of temperature. Second specimen weighing three grams gave off five hundred thousand calories in refrigerated medium of temperature minus twenty degrees F. in ten hour period, then suddenly dropped its internal temperature and became ordinary matter, with specific heat of 17.32 and chemical structure similar to quartz. More elaborate tests being devised on basis of unusual properties."

Clyde read the report a second time. Then he went to the ship's library and searched through one of the several books on Venus and its inhabitants. At last he found what he was looking for: "The normal body temperature of a Venusian native is slightly higher than that of an Earthling, being 100.03, approximately one and four tenths degrees

higher than for humans."

He whistled in amazement. Was it coincidence that the mysteriously constant temperature of the "living" stone was exactly the same as the normal body temperature of a Venusian?

He thought over the idea of suggesting a few further tests, then decided against it. After all, Research had some of the System's best scientists. They would not only think of everything he could, but also probably find or point out what was wrong with his suggestions if they were haywire.

So, instead, he hunted up the ship's captain, George Walters, an old friend of his, and talked over the mystery of the living stone with him.

"I think I have a possible explanation," Captain Walters said thoughtfully. "That native called it 'living' stone. We all know that Venusian has many subtle twists to its meanings that we can't understand. In this case maybe he merely meant that it was a stone that kept the priest alive while in the hot zone."

"But how could it keep him alive?" Clyde asked.

"Well," George Walters said. "Suppose you strapped two flat pieces of this stuff to the bottoms of your feet. Where it came in contact with your skin it would maintain the temperature of your skin at the Venusian normal of 100.03 degrees, no matter how hot or cold the stuff you were walking on. If it can keep its properties when ground up into a powder, it could be made into a paste and painted over the skin, and keep the skin a normal temperature regardless of how hot the atmosphere. So a native could travel in the hot zone with perfect immunity simply by wearing stone sandals and painting himself with a paste made of the stuff."

"I see," Clyde Masters said softly, surprised at the thought. "Then the stone itself is not 'alive' in any sense, but merely has some new physical property. I wonder how it can store up such vast quantities of heat? There's possibilities there."

"Possibilities, yes," George Walters said dryly. "But maybe we'll never find out what they are. My guess is that the natives'll never tell us how to turn ordinary stone into this new stuff. Their educated class, the priests, consider us a bunch of fools who are on the wrong track in our science."

"Yes, I know," Clyde said. "They say we missed the boat when we accepted an external world outside the mind. I find myself studying what they mean by that every once in a while." He chuckled dryly.

"I just thought of something else," George said. "The stones tie in with the stories about a secret temple where there are four statues of living stone, shaped in the images of the four gods of Venus."

"Yes, it does, doesn't it?" Clyde said. "But that story claims that those four gods actually live in their stone counterparts, and sometimes step out and become flesh-and-blood Venusians. But on that basis the native really meant the stones were living—alive."

"Perhaps he did," George agreed. "But that wouldn't affect my theory of the use the stone is put to in going into the hot side of the planet. You know, it would be very enlightening to find out how high a temperature the stone can withstand."

"Maybe the next report will give us that information," Clyde said. "That is their next obvious line of study, now that they know it can stand only so much cold before it loses its stable-temperature property and 'dies'."

AND in a small room in one wing of the sprawling Research building of V-A that was exactly what they were doing. A ten gram piece of the rock was inside a complex furnace setup, and the various instruments connected to the parts of the setup were clicking off the calories of heat being absorbed by it. The figure was already fabulous.

"Where does all that heat go?" Dr. Evard Smith asked in amazement as he read off the figures.

"We'll have one possible answer shortly," Dr. Jimmy Hope said. "If the heat energy is being transformed into mass we'll be able to detect an increase in mass of the specimen according to the equation, E equals Mc^2 . According to our figures the specimen should weigh half a gram more than when we started, when we take it out two hours from now. If it doesn't, then we've at least proven that the energy absorbed is not transformed into mass."

"If it isn't transformed into mass, then what?" Dr. Smith asked.

"Well," Dr. Hope said, shrugging his shoulders. "In that case we have two possible explanations. One, it may be transformed into some type of radiation that is departing from the specimen at light speed—some frequency that we may be able to detect. The other, that we at last have an entering wedge into something long suspected, but never detected; hyperspace channels of energy."

"Hyperspace?" Dr. Smith echoed incredulously.

"Maybe not the hyperspace of mathematics," Dr. Hope said. "But there's been a lot of study that led to the belief that life was in some way different than ordinary matter. The experiments performed on insects by several scientists back in the middle twentieth century disclosed energy appearing that couldn't be accounted

for by ordinary laws of chemistry and physics. They were, remarkably, very similar to the results we're getting on these stones. And that specimen that 'died' did so in a way perfectly analogous to living matter.

"Even if this specimen has gained enough mass to account for the energy absorbed, we still have to find out in what way it was accomplished. And regardless of how it took place, we have the distinctly new phenomenon of energy of motion being changed directly into mass."

"What's happening now?" Evard Smith asked. The meter showing absorption rate was clicking off zeros. Dr. Hope studied it uneasily. The dial showing the temperature of the stone showed it to be still at 100.03.

"Evidently it's stopped absorbing heat," he said. "I don't like that. I think I'd better take it out of the furnace now, before something happens."

Suiting his actions to his words, he pulled the switch that would shut off the furnace. It was his last act before the wave of searing, explosive force swept through him, leaving nothing but a tottering mass of carbon and calcium.

The blast wrecked the whole wing of the Research building and left the rest of the structure dangerously cracked.

CLYDE MASTERS re-read the report from Fred Nelson, O.I.C.. It read, "Explosion wrecked wing of Research building where experiments on rocks were taking place. Everything destroyed except rocks themselves, which were found intact. Experts state that explosion was similar to atomic kind, but with no evidence of radiations or radio-activity present. Seven men killed, including Dr. Hope. No clue as to type of experiment that caused explosion."

He hunted up George Walters, the captain, and showed the report to him.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded.

Captain Walters studied the report. "What's your own opinion, Clyde?"

"I don't know what to think," Clyde Masters said, frowning. "Considering that Hope was almost certainly trying to 'kill' a sample of the rock with heat, it seems likely that he raised it to a critical temperature where it exploded."

"That might be the case," George Walters said thoughtfully. "But there's another possibility. Suppose instead of raising a specimen to a higher and higher temperature, he was pouring heat energy into it at some constant high temperature. Considering that he probably switched to high temperatures at least twenty-four hours ago, that seems the more probable."

"You mean there might be some critical energy-density at which the stuff explodes?" Clyde asked. "Yes, that's more likely to be it—or a combination of the two, temperature and energy absorbed. A breakdown, releasing all the stored energy like a condenser will release its charge by arcing when a certain electrical potential is reached that will force an arc to a ground. Too bad no record of what he was doing is left. We know now that the stuff can be dangerous, though. Can't you speed up this tub a little and get there sooner?"

"Can't be done," Captain Walters said. "We're still a little over ten days away from Venus. You'll just have to have patience."

Five hours later another report arrived. It read, "Carl Stevens and Laura Wilde reported missing. According to Stevens Sr., they were in refrigerated suits in hot zone, and

are now over the safe period of operation of refrigerating units. Impossible to search for them."

"And I have to be cooped up in this tub another ten days!" Clyde groaned.

CHAPTER III

"YOU KNOW, Laura," Carl said, pulling a blade of the tough Venusian slope grass and sticking it in his teeth. "I keep thinking that dead native couldn't have come far before reaching the spot where we found him."

"I feel the same way," Laura said. They were sitting on the ground not far from the tunnel.

The ground dropped away at their feet. A thousand feet below began the Venusian jungle that covered most of Winkum, the major continent. Another thousand feet the other way, upward, was the almost flat ceiling of clouds that stretched unbroken to the horizon. And at their backs the steep slope of the Corscatch Ridge rose into the clouds.

"What do you say we put on refrigerated suits and do a little exploring and see if we can't find where the native got that bag of rocks?" Carl suggested. "We could probably cover all the ground he could have been over in a couple of hours, and the suits are good for ten times that before the power pack for the refrigerating unit gives out."

"Your father stands a good chance of going broke on the tunnel, doesn't he," Laura said. At Carl's nod she continued. "The fact that one of the big V-A men came all the way up here to get those stones, and made us promise to be here when an even bigger official came from the Earth, makes those stones seem pretty valuable. If we could find a large deposit of them—"

"Say! You've hit it!" Carl exclaimed. "It's obvious. That native was a prospector, and those were samples. There has to be a large deposit of that stuff not far from where we found his body. We can stake out a large claim under the New Territory Acts, and Dad can recoupe his losses on the tunnel."

"That's what I was thinking," Laura said. "We haven't anything else to do—unless your father can get another crew to build the observatory building at the hot end of the tunnel, and that doesn't seem likely right now."

"We'll have to plan this so we don't get lost," Carl said. "We can plant a red searchlight at the tunnel opening to act as a beacon. We can take a couple of the hand generator flashlights with us. They'll stand the heat."

"Let's go get it all ready now," Laura said eagerly. "Then we can get an early start right after we sleep, and be able to do a lot of exploring in just a few hours."

THE BODY of the dead Venusian wasn't pleasant to look at now. Carl and Laura kept their eyes away from it, circling in an ever widening arc in search of some sign to indicate from which direction he had come.

The stones under their feet were smooth and treacherous, the largest less than a foot across. None of them had the appearance of the stones in the bag.

As their circling spread out it occasionally took them into the fog. Then the red light at the tunnel became an eerie disembodied thing.

But still the flashlights were not necessary. The light of the sun, refracted and reflected through countless fog particles, gave a uniform light sufficient to see everything at near them.

They were holding hands as they explored, now, so as not to get separated. Constantly they looked back at the red beacon light, to make sure they didn't wander too far.

The rod was lying between two slightly separated rocks. They saw it at the same time. It was six inches long and half an inch thick, and too straight and too round to be other than artificially made.

Carl lifted one of the boulders out of the way and picked it up. It was made of the same kind of stone that had been in the native's orange colored bag.

Laura and Carl studied it excitedly. Carl held it in his gloved hand between their transparent dome helmets so they could see it together.

Laura's foot slipped on a rock. She swayed against Carl. The rod touched the surface of his helmet. Instantly he heard words in the Venusian language. A mere fragment of speech before the rod lost contact in his effort to catch Laura and keep her from falling.

"Did you hear that?" Carl asked, looking around. "I thought I heard a native calling."

"No," Laura said, puzzled.

Carl frowned at the rod, remembering that it had touched his helmet while he had heard the voice. He raised it and placed it against his helmet again. At once the voice became audible. He touched it against Laura's helmet. She heard the voice too.

She took the rod from Carl and placed one end of it flat against her helmet and listened. Then she turned slowly, pausing when the rod pointed directly away from the red beacon light.

"It's directional," she said. "The voice sounds louder in this direction."

"Let me see," Carl demanded eagerly. He tried it and found she was

right.

"But how does it work?" Laura asked, mystified. "It's nothing but a rod made of that stone!"

"It's not as mysterious as it seems," Carl said. "Of course, the fact that this type of stone has three properties is something unusual; but the principle is understandable. The rod has a definite resonance wavelength. A radio wave of that wavelength reinforces itself and results in physical vibration. All other wavelengths of radio waves dampen themselves and die out. So if there's a radio transmitter of the right frequency it will cause this rod to vibrate at a radio frequency, and the strength of the vibration can be modulated by audio-frequency waves, so that audible sound will be produced. In other words, this is a directional radio receiver of the ultimately simple type."

"I think I read somewhere that some types of metals have that property at near absolute zero temperatures," Laura said slowly. She looked up, startled. "But that means that there is a radio transmitter somewhere near here, doesn't it?"

Carl nodded. "I was coming to that," he said. "The length of the radio wave must be somewhere around six inches. Unless it's designed along lines similar to this receiver rod, it means that there is a radio tower near here, so close that if there weren't any fog we could see it from where we are standing."

Laura peered uneasily into the fog. "But that would mean metals and radio tubes and—and—" She stopped, confused.

"And people," Carl completed the thought. "Venusians, rather. That poor devil we found the bag of stones on must have been carrying this rod, and dropped it when he got too weak

to know what he was doing. No doubt he was using it as a sort of compass, since it's directional."

"Then we can use it too!" Laura said eagerly. "We won't have to stay within sight of the beacon light."

"But that transmitter may be fifty miles from here!"

"Then how did that native cover the fifty miles?" Laura asked. "No. I think we'll run onto something before we go a mile."

"Guess you're right," Carl gave in. "Let's try it and see. But don't forget our main purpose. Let's keep our eyes open for rocks like those in that bag we had."

WITH LAURA holding the rod against her helmet and Carl holding her hand to steady her, they began the tedious descent of the rocky slope, slipping often, but never falling onto the hot stones.

Occasionally gusts of wind would tear at them. Now and then the fog would miraculously vanish about them, and the colorless landscape would be revealed for fifty yards in every direction. Then, as abruptly, the air would again assume white translucency that seemed to hold them suspended in a formless and directionless universe—directionless except for the almost intangible directional property of the monotonous native voice speaking in the rod of stone.

Neither Laura nor Carl could make sense out of what the voice was saying. After a time they realized that it was saying the same thing over and over again in exactly the same tone. Less than half of the words were familiar, and not enough of them to get a clear meaning.

Carl took the rod and placed it against his helmet after the first half hour.

"I'd say the voice is a recording," he said finally.

"That's what I thought," the girl agreed. "And I've been thinking something else. The natives don't have mechanical science—at least not that we know of. Do you think some secret group of humans could have a headquarters over here on the hot side? There might be other things besides the living stones over here. Maybe jewels or Uranium."

"I don't know," Carl said. "But should they keep it secret? I'm beginning to think maybe the native population of Winkum isn't all the population of Venus. We may discover a highly advanced scientific civilization here on the hot side."

"It would have to be, to be able to live where the temperature is so high," Laura said. "They would have to have sources of tremendous power to maintain refrigeration for any place large enough to hold many people."

"Unless it was underground. There could be underground caves, with tunnels leading from the other side of the Ridge. Cool winds could blow through those tunnels and provide the natural cooling system. Sometime in the past the natives could have found those openings and followed them."

"Then why did the native try to get back to the cool side of the Ridge by walking over blistering rocks?" Laura objected. "And why are the natives so afraid of this side of the Ridge? They claim it's ruled by a different god than Winkum."

"I don't know," Carl said. "But maybe we'll find out before long."

They walked on in silence. Only the rod made any sound, and that only when it was held against a helmet as a sounding board.

Finally they came to the transmitter.

THERE WASN'T much to it. It consisted of a large tombstone affair made of the living stone, with two flat discs of the same material on top, each about an inch thick and four feet in diameter, set so they were six inches apart, facing each other. It was obviously the transmitter, because the rod gave off the loudest sounds when pointed at it.

"Those two flat stone discs could serve as an antenna," Carl said. "I don't know how, but if they were made of metal, and were insulated, they would make some sort of short wave antenna. I wish I knew more about radio. There must be some sort of connection between the fact that those discs are six inches apart, and this rod is six inches long. But maybe even if I knew a lot about radio I wouldn't be able to figure it out. It's native, and the Venusians seem to have a different slant on science than we have. Maybe they've discovered principles we don't know anything about."

"What do we do now?" Laura asked. "Go back?"

"I don't know," Carl said thoughtfully. "There ought to be something around close. Maybe an opening to a cave or something. It wouldn't make sense to just have this transmitter stuck up here for no reason."

He placed the rod against his helmet again, idly. At once he heard something. It was a native voice, but it was now speaking in English.

"You are correct, Earthling," the voice spoke. "The transmitter also acts as a receiver of sound waves when someone is near it."

"Hey!" Carl said. "Listen to this!"

Laura took the rod and listened. She nodded excitedly and gave it back to Carl.

"We hear you," he said, placing it against his helmet again.

"At the base of the transmitter you will discover a hole into which the rod fits," the voice went on. "When you place it there it will cause part of the ground to drop slowly and reveal an opening."

"What about it?" Carl said to Laura, repeating what he had heard. "Maybe we're getting into something we shouldn't. I think we ought to go back and tell V-A what we've discovered. Then when we come back we'll have some support behind us. This way, if we get stuck no one will ever know what happened to us."

"I think you're right," Laura said. "We don't know what we'll be getting into. Let's go back. Anyway, the power packs on our suits won't allow us too much leeway for further exploration. We can call up that V-A official and tell him about it, then come back tomorrow."

"I'm afraid you won't have that opportunity," the voice said dryly. "You see, you are dependent upon the voice of the transmitter to guide you back the way you came. Without it you will become lost. That voice is now shut off, and will remain shut off. But you do not need to be afraid. You will not be harmed—if you do as I have told you."

Worriedly Carl explained to Laura. She took the rod.

"He's right," she said. "Without the voice we can't get our directions, and we can't see the red beacon from here."

"We could chance it," Carl suggested. "I don't like the idea of getting you into this. I wish now I'd come alone."

"Nonsense! I wouldn't have missed this for anything. Let's do as he suggested. After all, the natives aren't hostile."

"They can be mighty dangerous, and they're more subtle than an

oriental," Carl said. "Remember the history books? The natives almost succeeded in wiping out the first colonizers by 'neglecting' to warn them about the white, flesh-eating grubs that used to come up out of the ground every so often?"

"Even so, there's less danger in going ahead than there is in getting lost and getting cooked when our power packs give out."

"O.K.," Carl said reluctantly. He squatted and searched for the hole in the base of the transmitter. It was not hard to find. He slid the rod into it. The rod stopped with only an inch still protruding.

EVEN BEFORE he took his hand away from it he was aware that the transmitter was rising in front of him. It was an illusion. The ground on which he and Laura stood was sinking down. It was an elevator with a camouflaged floor. It sank ten feet and came to a stop. There was the opening of a dark tunnel in front of them, leading off toward a rectangle of light in the distance.

Carl and Laura stepped onto the smooth floor of the tunnel and began walking toward that distance light. The walls on either side of them were of black obsidian, radiating a heat that penetrated their suits uncomfortably, driving home the fact that they were at the mercy of the unseen owner of the voice that had spoken to them through the transmitter.

But now there was a wind blowing down the passage from ahead, forcing them to lean forward into it.

Carl turned on his flashlight. It bathed the dark passage with light, revealing the details on the walls, the the chisel marks on the walls, the worn unevenness of the floor produced by the passage of countless

feet over its surface.

As they progressed along the passage the rectangle of light seemed to stay the same distance away from them. Finally Laura remarked about this.

"I think the passage must curve a little," she said. "And what we see is a reflection on the wall far ahead of an opening even farther away."

"It slopes down a little, too," Carl added. "And we are going farther into the hot zone."

"It can't get much hotter," Laura said. "The water keeps the temperature around the boiling point even in the hottest part, doesn't it?"

"I don't know," Carl answered. "We won't have to worry about that though. What's this?"

He played his flashlight ahead. There was a niche in the wall. A ten foot tall native stood erect within the niche. His face was turned toward them. There was a smile on his lips. But there was something strange about him.

"Hello," Carl said in Venusian.

The native made no answer, and as Carl and Laura came nearer they realized he was not a living Venusian, but a lifelike statue! So perfectly formed was the statue that even when they stood close they seemed to feel the aura of life emanating from the erect form.

They looked up at the giant figure. How long had it been there? There were little differences between it and the normal Venusian. Its shoulders were a little more massive, its bearing somehow kinglike, even godlike. And yet...

"The nose!" Laura gasped. "It has a bridged nose, like we do!"

"So it has," Carl said wonderingly. "I looked right at it and never realized. And have you noticed that the stone the statue is made of re-

minds you of that pink stuff that is supposed to be alive?"

"Yes," Laura said. "And it has exactly the same shade of indigo as the natives. How can stone have the same color exactly?"

"You'd almost think a real live Venusian could suddenly separate from that statue and step down." Carl laughed nervously. "Come on. Let's go."

They turned to leave. Blocking their way were several shapes. Carl turned his flashlight on them. They were Venusians; but unlike the natives Carl and Laura had seen before, their faces were completely human. Instead of having noses like apes, their noses were bridged and straight, like that of the statue.

"Come," one of them said in Venusian. The others stepped forward and formed a guard around Carl and Laura.

"Is this a welcoming committee?" Laura asked Carl nervously.

The one walking beside Laura seemed to understand her words. He stared down at her from the height of his seven-and-a-half feet.

"Our god is angry at your coming," he said somberly. "We take you to his high priest."

"You mean," Carl said, stumbling over the Venusian words, "that we are to be sacrificed to your god?"

"Sacrificed?" echoed the native. "No. Not slain. You will be made into gods. What greater punishment can be given a mortal?"

CHAPTER IV

IT WAS Captain Walters who hunted up Clyde Masters a few hours after the report of Carl's and Laura's disappearance. He found him in the library of the ship, deeply immersed in books on Venusian subjects.

"I've been looking for you all over," Walters said. "I've been doing a lot of thinking about things."

"And I've been doing a lot of reading, George," Clyde Masters said, looking up. "It hasn't gotten me anywhere, though."

"Well, look," Walters said, sitting down. "Those stones are still intact, aren't they? Why not carry on the experiments? I've thought of several lines. One is, grind up some of the stuff into a fine powder and mix it with some kind of paint, and paint a hollow box with it, with a thermometer inside. See if the stuff keeps the interior of the box at 100.03 degrees regardless of outside temperature."

"Sounds like a good idea," Clyde said. "Got any more?"

"Yes. Microphotographs of its structure, tests of its electrical conductivity—that should be interesting, especially if the stuff does conduct a current. I wish I had some of the stuff to experiment with. I'd gladly risk blowing myself up to find out more about it. Can it be stabilized at any other temperature than that of the normal body temperature of a Venusian? It stands to reason it can. It stands to reason that its temperature isn't a cosmic standard, but one incorporated into the substance by whoever designed it."

"Say that again," Clyde said, sitting forward.

"I merely said," Captain Walters said, "that that temperature of 100.03 degrees is not a cosmic standard, but incorporated into the substance by whoever designed it."

"That's what I thought you said," Clyde said. "It gave me a flash of inspiration. You've heard of Wood's metal? It's an alloy with a melting point low enough to melt at the touch of a flame from an ordinary

fire. Here's something else: ice that is melting stays at 32 degrees regardless of the temperature around it, *so long as it remains ice*. And it absorbs a lot of heat in freezing, and gives off a lot in melting."

"But this substance doesn't seem to change its state," Walters objected.

"How do we know it doesn't?" Clyde asked. "And how do we know what state it's in—except that it's solid—and 'alive'."

"I see what you mean," Captain Walters said excitedly. "And here's something else to support that theory. Sulphur has different states in which it behaves differently. Drop molten sulphur into cold water and it becomes rubbery and plastic instead of crystalline."

"Right," Clyde agreed. "So maybe we can get a picture of what happened to the stuff that caused the explosion. Let's start on the hypothesis that 100.03 degrees is a critical temperature for the stuff. That is, in order for it to gain in temperature it must change its state. Also, for it to drop from the critical temperature it must change state. And to change state it must give off or absorb a tremendous amount of energy in the form of heat."

"Then we have the report on the stuff changing its state from freezing," Captain Walters said. "When that happened it became ordinary quartz—or maybe quartz with some special impurity in it that hasn't been analyzed yet."

"Like plastic sulphur becoming crystalline sulphur," Clyde said. "O.K. That's comprehensible. Now we come to the other change—produced by pouring more and more heat into the stuff until it changes. Most substances melt when that's done, but this stuff produced a gigantic explo-

sion, and then was found unchanged. From the reports it wasn't even cracked by what happened. How would we account for that on the basis of our theory?"

"Well," Captain Walters said thoughtfully, "I think we must recognize that the nature of that change is tied in with the nature of the state the stuff is in at 100.03 degrees. We can bring in the concepts of kinetic and potential energy very nicely. We can say that kinetic energy of the heat absorbed is transformed into potential energy in some way. That disposes of it without changing the temperature of the stuff at all. The mechanism of storage doesn't matter right now. It could be analogous to that stored in a watch spring when it's wound up—tension and stress rather than molecular activity: perhaps even a form of nuclear tension not yet known to our science. Then suddenly—bingo! All the stored up potential energy is released, maybe as radiant energy—a searing blast radiating outward and raising the temperature of everything in its path, while the components of the stuff sort of relax back to normal."

"You know something?" Clyde Masters said. "That sounds almost exactly like a description from a physics book on how an atom emits its energy-packet. I wonder..."

He became lost in thought. After awhile he shook himself. "I'd better get off some orders," he muttered.

FRED NELSON, O. I. C. of V-A troubleshooters on Winkum nodded his head sympathetically at John Stevens' account of the disappearance of his son and secretary, the two missing special-built suits with refrigerating units in them, the red spotlight installed at the hot end of the tunnel, the fact that they had

been gone forty-eight hours, and the power packs on the suits that were good only for ten hours, or twelve at the outside.

The contractor's lips trembled a little in spite of his self control. Nelson felt very sorry for him, but hid it. This was the time and place for expressions of hope, not pity.

"I think you're worrying about something there's no need to worry about, sir," he said. "Consider what facts we have. The dead native obviously couldn't have gotten where he was from this side of the Ridge, since he was already there when the breakthrough occurred. Therefore he must have come from some place over there where it's possible to live. That means there must be caves or something cool enough to live in.

"We can safely conclude that unless your son and secretary met with a fatal accident they would have been back before their suits gave out—unless they discovered these caves, or whatever they are, and have shut off their suits and are exploring them. When they get through exploring they will simply turn their suits on again and come back. Don't you think that sounds reasonable?"

John Stevens examined the short, pudgy figure and keen intelligent eyes of the dark-haired operative with a new respect.

"The way you put it," he said with new hope, "it sounds like that's what must have happened. I know Laura is a sensible, cautious girl. Carl is inclined to be overly enthusiastic about his ideas and activities; but Laura would have served as a restraining influence to keep him from venturing too far to get back. Maybe you're right."

"You bet I'm right," Fred said with an air of confidence he did not feel inside. "I came up in my coptor. I

have some men coming up in a truck with some equipment. We're going after those two. I'll bet a year's salary we find them alive."

"You've given me new hope," John Stevens said gratefully. "How soon will the truck get here?"

"It should be here any minute now," Fred said.

Half an hour later it arrived. There were six men on it. They drove the truck up as close as they could get to the track where the ore cars came out of the hole in the hill and started loading searchlights and power cables into the cars.

Fred and John watched the loading.

"Those are infrareds," Fred explained. "And we have special goggles. We'll be able to see a long ways into the fog. When we get set up we may be able to see where they went right away."

Two hours later one of the infrared searchlights had been set up at the tunnel opening on the other side of the Ridge.

John Stevens, and everyone else in the party, had put on the red-sensitive goggles before donning their refrigerated suits.

"If this spot doesn't reach far enough," Fred said. "We can string out a hundred yards of cable and put up a second one."

The light went on. It seemed to bore a hole in the fog that went in and in until it ended against a circle of boulder-strewn ground.

John Stevens pointed out where the dead Venusian lay, and the man who directed the spotlight sent it in explorative journeys from that point into the fog-enshrouded distances.

"They'd have very slow going across ground like that," Fred commented. "But so much the better. That means we will probably be able

to see where they wound up." He looked at Mr. Stevens and added hastily, "It will be a cave opening or some sort of structure. I'm positive of that."

But the spot explored every square foot until it was reaching nothing but fogginess at the end of its beam, and nothing but boulders had been revealed.

"I'd say we penetrated half a mile," the man guiding the spotlight said. "We'd better set up another farther in."

"You talked yourself into a job, Joe," Fred said. "All of you get on it. I'll guide the spotlight so you can see where you're going."

IT TOOK an hour to carry the heavy reflector over the round rocks and string out the power cable. When it was done Fred fixed the first light directly on the second, and he and John Stevens picked their way across the rough terrain after the others.

Fred stopped at the dead Venusian and examined him and the neighboring ground while Mr. Stevens waited with averted eyes. They both felt a little sick as they walked on. In both their minds was the question: would they find Carl and Laura like that—cooked so thoroughly that overdone flesh was falling away from whitened bones?

The excited shouts of the men reached them soon after. They hurried their steps, peering through the fog until they could make out what the men had discovered.

Almost at the limit of penetration of the second spotlight could be made out something shaped like a tombstone with a round shape perched on top.

"What is it?" one of the men asked. "That's for us to find out," Fred

said, "It's man-made, so that's where Carl and Laura went, though how they could find it in this fog with just a couple of ordinary flashlights is something I can't figure out. You'd better go back, Mr. Stevens. Joe, you come with me. One of you return to the first spotlight, and the rest of you stay here by this one. Joe and I will signal you in some way if we think we need you."

"I'd like to go with you," John Stevens said.

"No," Fred said, almost harshly. "Come on, Joe."

He started out, Joe behind him, while John watched them go, a bewildered expression in his eyes.

"Why'd'ye have to treat him that way?" Joe asked. "He's a nice guy."

"I know. I know," Fred said. "What do you want me to do? Explain to him that his son is probably in the hands of outlaw natives and may be dead in some religious sacrifice by now? I only hope he doesn't get the implication of that man-made tombstone thing—that there are natives living out here—though God knows why!"

Joe cursed. "Of course," he added. "I'm dumb." He looked at the eerie structure now barely three hundred yards away with a light of foreboding in his eyes.

"I wish we had some guns," he muttered. "I've got a strong hunch we'll need them."

"Nuts," Fred snorted confidently. "Guns would just get us in trouble. I'll bet you a week's pay some of these indigo devils out here know me by sight. We'll all be buddies in no time, and they'll hand back those two kids with apologies."

"And if they don't?" Joe sneered.

They had reached the stone monument affair now and stood looking at it.

"Let's suppose they don't hand Carl and Laura over," Fred said. "Let's suppose they take us too, and refuse to let us go. In a few days we'll be presumed to be dead. By that time Clyde Masters will be here to take over. He won't monkey around. He'll give the priests of Winkum just so much time to produce us. At the end of that time he'll declare the treaty ended. Or maybe he'll do something subtle—like setting off a few of the newest atom bombs around this area where we're standing now. In fact, we could get some real information about the weather cycle that way." He chuckled. "No. We don't need weapons."

"Say, Fred," Joe said. "Look at this rod sticking out down at the base of the thing." He reached down and twisted it experimentally. The ground on which the two men stood began slowly to sink.

CHAPTER V

CARL and Laura were beginning to tire in spite of the balanced construction of their refrigerated suits. Carl estimated to himself that they had traveled two miles underground.

The natives remained silent, walking with easy strides, pressuring the Earthlings to walk faster and still faster.

The wind had stopped. Carl wondered if that meant that the elevator that had dropped them to the mouth of the tunnel had gone up again. If it had there would be no way for anyone to ever find out where they had gone.

Ahead, the rectangular area of light was directly visible now, drawing nearer. Laura's hand gripped Carl's. He turned to look at her. Her eyes were wide. She was holding her

lower lip in her teeth to keep it from trembling.

"Keep your chin up, honey," he said softly.

She turned her head toward him and saw the look in his eyes. She smiled and relaxed.

A few minutes later they stepped from the tunnel. They were in a gigantic cavern whose arched roof was supported at regular intervals by thick columns of granite.

The walls and roof, and even the floor of the cavern, Carl saw, were of the same pinkish stone they had found on the dead native.

But Carl's eyes observed something even more remarkable. At regular intervals in the roof of the cavern were circular areas, perhaps ten feet across, that seemed a part of the rocks, but which emitted a subdued glow of white light. These luminous disc-like areas were the source of light that made the scene bright as day.

But now something else jerked the Earthlings' attention away from the awesome wonders of the cavern. The natives had come to a stop with them. Now, one by one, they were reaching up and taking off their bridged noses. In the bright light it was easy to see that the noses were merely some sort of mask fitted over the normal Venusian, ape-like nose.

"What was the purpose of wearing those things?" Laura asked timidly.

"They cool the hot air," one of the natives replied, speaking in his own language. Then, frowning in concentration, he translated into English and added, "You can take off your refrigerated suits now."

Carl didn't need a second invitation.

"We'd better," he said to Laura. "If we ever get to go back where we come from we'll need every ounce of

power left in the power packs."

The air was very warm, but quite bearable. There was a smell to it faintly like that of a foundry where molten steel and burning coke cauterize the atmosphere.

Carl carefully stood both suits against the wall of the cavern beside the tunnel opening. Then once again he and Laura were being hurried along by the natives, this time directly toward the distant center of the cavern.

It was impossible to estimate the full size of the underground world. The massive columns that supported the roof hid the distance. Shortly the floor of this vast place became a jungle of vegetation. Carl recognized plants that Venusians used for food and realized that they must be grown expressly for that purpose.

Here and there were the native huts. The dark indigo natives could be seen working in the fields. And overhead, now a hundred feet above, were the sun-like discs of light, regularly placed between the thick columns supporting the roof.

THEY WERE approaching a forest of tall trees similar to the ones in the jungles of Winkum. Flabby white branches held thick meaty leaves which drooped heavily. Pale mosses and brilliant orchids adorned the unholy growths. And over this area there were no sun-like discs.

The natives led Carl and Laura into the jungle. They sped along in the gloom, hearing the faint rustle of mysterious movement in the trees and in the thick undergrowth on either side of the path.

Abruptly they came to the edge of the jungle and found themselves in a clearing that covered perhaps ten acres.

All about them were orderly beds

of strange flowers. Here and there a Venusian, draped in a cloak of orange cloth, bent over the plants, working, or walking slowly with bent head, apparently deep in thought. None seemed to be aware of the presence of the newcomers.

Their guides and captors led the two Earthlings along a straight path between beds of beautiful flowers in full bloom toward a stone building in the center of the clearing. As they neared it they could discern a tall orange-robed figure standing before an arched doorway, waiting, his eyes on them.

As they came near, Carl saw that the robed figure was that of an old Man—incredibly old. His almost black indigo skin was a network of deep wrinkles covering a skull devoid of flesh. The large, hypnotic eyes were sunk far back, seeming to lurk in their hiding place, glowing with a deep fire of intelligence.

The natives dropped to their bellies and crawled toward this Venusian. They were intoning in hushed tones some chant that was unintelligible to Carl and Laura.

"I give you welcome," the robed figure said. Both Laura and Carl gasped. It was the voice that had spoken to them through the rod of living stone. The words were clear and precise English without a trace of accent.

"Does that mean we aren't prisoners?" Carl asked. "If so, I would just as soon go back the way we came."

"The way you came?" the Venusian echoed. "But you did not come any way. The past does not exist. There is only the present—and you are here. The rest—" He spread his hands in a gesture of dismissal of the whole of past time—"is just a phantasm of memory created to provide an answer to existence."

"The way you say that you almost make it sound true," Carl said uneasily. "I take it you're the high priest of the god of the sunward side of Venus."

The robed native bowed his head in agreement. "That is so," he said. "I am the keeper of the Flaming Gateway through which lies unending life. I am the guardian of the inner shrine of the god of the hot side. I am the first of the four high priests of this planet you call 'Venus.'"

There was an air of majesty about him as he spoke. An aura of power seemed to descend over him. Against his will Carl felt himself wanting to drop to his knees before this eight-foot Venusian.

"I am Ra, high priest of the Sun god," the priest concluded.

HE CLAPPED his hands twice. The natives that had brought Carl and Laura squirmed backward until they were ten feet away, then rose to a stooped position and retreated, still facing Ra. When they were well away they straightened and turned, trotting off into the jungle.

Ra watched them until they had vanished, then turned to Carl and Laura with a smile.

"But you are tired and hungry," he said. "Permit me to give you nourishment from my stores. Please relax on these seats while I summon my servants." He pointed to several large seats of the pink stone, exquisitely formed for comfort and appearance.

"I am tired," Laura said. She dropped into the nearest seat. Carl sat down beside her. They found the seats cool to the touch and strangely relaxing.

As Ra vanished into the building

Laura said. "You know, Carl, I can't believe anything is going to happen to us."

"I wonder what that native meant when he said we would be made into gods?" Carl said thoughtfully. "He made it sound like something horrible."

"But there is nothing horrible about it, my boy," Ra's voice sounded behind them. He had come out unnoticed. Giant robed figures brought out trays of food and a table. Ra said no more until the attendants had left, then he continued. "To live forever, to be adored by all Venus, what could be so horrible about that? Of course, from mortal eyes it might seem horrible, to become as stone; but eventually as with all others of the gods, you will develop the ability to step down from your stone dwellings and walk among the living."

"You mean we are to be turned into stone?" Laura asked, slow horror in her eyes.

"Let us say, rather," Ra, the high priest said, "that your spirit will be transplanted into lifeless stone and given life. For where else could the living stone gain its life, if not from the living?" He looked down at them from his great height, smiling benignly. "But you must eat, and then sleep. There is much in store for you after you have slept."

Carl and Laura looked at him numbly, feeling to the full their helplessness. Suddenly they felt very hungry. They ate eagerly until they were full.

The hypnotic eyes of Ra, priest of the Sun god, watched until their heads fell forward in sleep. Then he signalled with an imperious hand. Two lesser priests came out silently and carried the two Earthlings into the temple.

CHAPTER VI

"CHEER UP, Masters," Captain Walters said cheerfully. "You look as though you'd like to do something drastic."

"I would at that," Clyde Masters said. "My O. I. C. on Winkum is gone with one of his best men. The report just came in an hour ago. Fred took some of his men with him to go after Carl Stevens and that girl. They found the entrance to a cave. Fortunately Fred had sense enough to order the men he left behind not to follow him, but to stay there and be ready to show us where he got in."

"And he didn't come out?" Walters asked.

"He's been gone forty-eight hours without a trace," Clyde said bitterly. "He'd better be back by the time I get there or there's going to be some native heads chopped off. I hope the natives realize what they're getting into. Some of the vice presidents would welcome an excuse to abrogate the treaty."

"Well," Captain Walters sighed, "How about that stuff? Anything more discovered about it?"

"That's something else," Clyde said, frowning. "The new scientists assigned to it insist its temperature is a constant 163, and that it is luminescent—gives off light."

"Maybe they're right," the captain said. "That would tie in with the theory of change of state. The stuff released a terrific amount of energy in that explosion. Maybe it altered its structure. You remember, one of the things we discussed was the possibility of it getting rid of the energy it absorbed by radiating it off at some frequency. Maybe now that frequency is in the visible spectrum."

"Sometimes I think you missed your calling," Clyde said with a

twinkle. "You seem to figure out more about the stones than the scientists working with it. If Dr. Hope had had your ability he wouldn't have been caught in the explosion. He would have handled the stuff by remote control behind ten feet of concrete."

"What I'd like to learn," Walters said, ignoring the compliment, "is how did ordinary matter get that way. It must have been ordinary matter to start with."

"What makes you think so?" Clyde asked quickly.

"Well," the captain said slowly, "for one thing, if it occurred in nature we would have run across it someplace before this. Of course, that isn't certain. We could have missed it, especially if it is found only on the sunward side of Venus. But the main thing that points to it being artificial is the fact that the piece that 'died' became ordinary matter. I've been toying with the idea of the special properties of the stuff being due to some molecular structure that arises only under very special conditions."

"Such as?"

"I don't know," Walters admitted. "After all, we know practically nothing about the basic working of nature. Take radio-activity, for instance. At one time it was thought that the energy of disintegration came from destruction of mass. Then more refined measurements proved that it couldn't, and a sort of cosmic energy was invented to account for it. That idea of a universal cosmic energy fits in nicely."

"Let's suppose the rocks don't store up energy, but radiate it away," he continued. "Like they are doing now. Then where did the energy released with the explosion come from? Let's

suppose it was released cosmic energy, and that while the stuff was changing its state or structure it triggered this energy release."

"Where does that get us?"

"It gets us this," the captain said. "Then we could assume that no matter how long the rocks absorbed energy they wouldn't explode, for the simple reason that they would be radiating it away as fast as they absorbed it—acting as transmitters, taking all kinds of heat energy and transforming it into one special kind—maybe even one special frequency—and transmitting it harmlessly away, perhaps as radio waves."

"Then what would have caused the explosion?" Clyde asked.

"That's what I don't know," Walters said. "But then it would be something Hope did at that particular instant. Maybe we'll never know—unless the Venusians tell us. Maybe even they don't know. But I think they do, because they know how to make the stuff stable at the temperature of their bodies. That means they have the secret of how the stuff is made to be the way it is."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Clyde said. "You write down your recommendations on what experiments to try. I'll have them sent to the scientists at Research."

FRED, the O. I. C., and Joe walked cautiously along the black-walled tunnel.

"Carl and Laura must have come this way, don't you think so?" Joe said nervously.

"Of course," Fred said. "There doesn't seem to be any other way for them to have come."

He played his flashlight along the walls.

"Look at those tool marks," he said. "Those natives must be something to

be able to carve out a passage in solid rock with a temperature near the boiling point."

"Maybe they had some way of cooling it," Joe suggested. "This wind isn't hot. Say! The wind's stopped!"

"Probably because the elevator went back up," Fred said. "That would shut off the draft."

He played the beam of his flashlight ahead. It came to rest on the statue of the ten-foot native with a spasmodic jerk.

"God!" Joe gasped. "Look at the size of him! But what's he standing there grinning about?"

The two men advanced warily.

"It's a statue!" Joe muttered. "But even now I'd swear it was alive. What's it doing here, anyway?"

"I was just wondering the same thing," Fred said. "Is that some kind of a doorway it's standing in?"

"Just a niche in the wall."

"That doesn't make sense," Fred said. "Keep your eye on the thing. I don't want a kick in the seat of my refrigeration suit."

He squeezed around the statue and disappeared. A moment later the wall behind the statue swung back.

"Just as I thought!" he said triumphantly. "There was a rod down next to the floor. I twisted it."

He squeezed back out, a grin of triumph splitting his face.

"Well, Carl and Laura didn't go that way," Fred said. "We'd better keep on down the tunnel. Wait a minute. If we keep in the tunnel they may be waiting for us. This way maybe we can sneak up on them."

They went through the opening. Inside they found another stone rod in the wall. Fred touched it and the stone slab slid back into place.

The tunnel they were now in slanted steeply downward. Joe began to

look worried. "Do you think maybe we made a mistake, Fred?" He asked finally.

"Maybe," Fred admitted. "But I've been thinking. Those indigo devils wouldn't expect us to find that side opening behind the statue. I think it's highly probable they took Carl and the girl this way, and expected any rescue squad to follow the obvious path. So we'll just keep on this way for a couple hours and see where we come out."

HALF AN hour later the tunnel leveled off. The black stone walls changed to a fleshy pink. Without telling Fred, Joe shut off the refrigeration in his suit to see how hot it was. Five minutes later it was still not uncomfortably hot inside the suit. He told Fred what he had done.

"That means I was right," Fred said. "It is cool enough to live in here. We can go ahead without having to worry about our power packs giving out."

They walked on. The walls about them seemed alive with soft lights in their depths that danced and played, darting ahead of them, dropping behind, changing from pink to blue to turquoise, and all the time seeming sentient and playful.

"I feel like we were walking a bunch of frisky pups," Joe growled good-naturedly. "Wonder how this place would look in the dark. Shut your flashlight off for a second."

In the darkness the cavorting shadows of luminescence seemed more vivid and alive than ever.

"Where does the light come from?" Joe asked uneasily.

"Probably from way ahead," Fred said. "These walls can carry reflections a long ways."

"Then why don't the lights stand

still?" Joe objected. "You'd almost think they came from a fire, the way they dance around."

Fred turned his flashlight back on. They walked in silence. There were no side tunnels. There were occasional twists and turns. They had long ago lost track of direction.

"I'm gettin' worn out," Joe said suddenly. "Let's sit down and rest awhile."

"Let's go a little ways further," Fred said. "I'm tired too, but I want to see what's around that bend up ahead there."

When they rounded the bend in the tunnel the path straightened out. Far ahead they could see an almost blinding light that seemed to waver and vary.

They went toward it, cautious for any sign of life. The tunnel ended, to be replaced by a wide path along a ledge that was cut in the side of a cliff.

They were in a natural gorge, deep underground. The faces of the two cliffs rose up to be lost far overhead. When the two men crept cautiously to the edge of the ledge and looked down they saw a spectacle beyond description.

A thousand feet below, it seemed, was a seething cauldron of fire—and yet not fire. A lake of bright light was there, its surface a seething inferno of explosiveness. Great globules of fiery radiance shot upward, driven by explosions below the surface of the lake, to drop down slowly like luminous bubbles. Giant waves of liquid fire beat against the sides of the cliffs, subsiding, to rise again and again.

"Take off my helmet, Joe," Fred said, drawing back from the edge and standing up.

"What for?" Joe asked. "That stuff down there is white hot." But he

unscrewed Fred's helmet.

Fred crept to the edge again and looked over.

"It's just as I suspected!" he exclaimed. "That stuff down there is cold."

"Cold?" Joe said. "That's impossible."

"See for yourself," Fred said, standing up and taking Joe's helmet off.

"You're right," Joe admitted after a moment. "The air coming up from down there isn't much more than sixty or seventy degrees. It's cool. Hey, look!" He pointed to a large bubble of fire that was rising higher and higher instead of dropping back as all the others. Caught in an updraft, it had already been born very close to the two men on the ledge.

THEY WATCHED as it came closer. It was even with the ledge, poised as if in indecision. Its filmy surface shone with intense brilliance, and in its depths something seemed to look out at them.

They retreated until their backs were against the cliff wall. The bubble drifted toward them until it was no more than six feet away.

A high, melodious humming was coming from it, rising in intensity and dying away until it was a bare whisper.

Without warning it broke. Its film dropped to the stone ledge, leaving an area of wetness.

Fred and Joe knelt down and examined the wet spot. It seemed to be soaking into the rocks, and slowly the rocks changed to a fleshy pink in color.

"So that's what it is," Fred said, almost in a whisper. "It's the stuff that turns stone into that stuff we got from Carl Stevens. What the natives claim to be living rock!"

"Good lord!" Joe said explosively, straightening up.

"What's the matter?"

"Remember that statue of a native outside the door to this tunnel?" Joe said. "He was too lifelike to be a statue. Don't you see what happened to him? They poured some of this stuff on him and it turned him into stone—living stone. God! I had a feeling he was alive. I could almost see him thinking and knowing we were there, behind his motionless, yet alive, face."

Suddenly Fred grabbed Joe's arm.

"Quiet," he whispered, pointing along the ledge in the direction they had been going before they stopped.

Across the narrow gorge a hundred yards along the cliff two giant natives had appeared. Between them they held the motionless form of a girl. Her clothes were stripped from her. Her long black hair hung over her bare shoulders, accentuating the whiteness of her skin. Her eyes seemed to be open, but she didn't resist. She seemed drugged.

The two natives carried her to the edge of the abyss. An orange-robed figure, a head taller than the two that carried the girl, appeared from the opening in the cliff.

"A priest!" Joe whispered. "And that must be Laura. Can't we do something to stop this?"

The priest lifted both arms upwards and outwards as if in supplication.

The two natives picked up the lax figure of the girl and tossed it over the edge. It turned over and over as it fell, the long black hair streaming away from the head. The fiery lake reached up hungrily and drew the lovely form to its bosom.

The two natives vanished into the cliff, but the orange cloaked priest remained, in his attitude of supplica-

tion.

Fred and Joe, as if hypnotized, held their eyes rooted to the spot where Laura had disappeared in the seething cauldron.

The wild turmoil of the lake of fire seemed imperceptibly to alter and take purpose. It seemed to gather over the spot where Laura had gone down.

Then her head appeared briefly for an instant as the boiling seemed to still. Then it was above the surface. But it was large now—larger than even the head of the huge priest, and growing rapidly.

It grew and expanded until every feature stood out in full detail. Her body rose and grew until her giant head was even with the ledge upon which the native priest stood.

About her marble white gigantic body the lake of fire seethed and bubbled like champagne in some alcoholic's dream of heaven. Her eyes, huge seas of blue, looked into those of the priest. Her red lips held a smile. Her black flowing hair stood up in flowing waves as though some strong wind from below had caught it.

And neither Fred nor Joe could tell afterwards how many hours or days or weeks they stood there, paralyzed with the grandeur and the unexpressible horror of what they witnessed.

CHAPTER VII

CARL STIRRED and opened his eyes. He lay there for several minutes, between waking and sleeping, with the feeling that never before in his entire lifetime had he been so comfortable and relaxed.

After awhile his mind began to dwell on that strange comfort. What caused it? The answer came in response to his questioning. It was

some quality of the bed he was lying on, something refreshing to the touch and seeming to reach under the skin and soothe the muscles.

He turned over onto his side. Slowly, gently, the surface on which he was lying changed its shape to conform the new contours of his body. It was as though he were lying on a mass of slow molasses with an unsticky, unbreakable surface film. And yet he had the firm conviction that the slowly yielding substance was stone!

He placed the flat of his hand against it and was aware of its coolness—a coolness that was exhilarating and restful.

The strangeness of it made something click in his mind, and suddenly full memory of everything that had happened rushed over him.

He sat up and looked wildly around. He expelled a breath of relief at the sight of Laura, still asleep, on a bed similar to his. She looked very small and helpless curled up like a kitten on the vast expanse of the "stone" bed that was at least twelve feet long and half as wide. His own was as large. Both were obviously designed for the Venusians. There were six other such beds in the great room, and forty feet away a large arched opening broke the continuity of the wall of brownish cement blocks.

Escape! Carl weighed the possibilities. His and Laura's refrigerated suits were gone—back by the tunnel mouth. It would be impossible to get that far without being seen. No Earthling was able to match his strength against that of a Venusian. There was no use even in trying.

The situation was hopeless from the standpoint of fighting a way out. What else was there? Bluff? Subterfuge? The Venusians might

believe that nothing outside their awareness existed, but from all Carl had read and seen he didn't think he could outwit a Venusian. Their intelligence was a smoothly functioning force, the same as their bodies.

Carl grinned wryly at his thoughts. He realized that if the Venusians had bridged noses and a white skin he would feel very inferior to them. He became aware of Laura's eyes upon him. He smiled and jumped off the bed, crossing to her.

"How does it feel to be a solitary potatoe in a ten acre field?" he asked jokingly.

Laura surveyed the huge bed quizzically.

"What a wonderful sleep I had," she said. "There's something about this bed... And what a dream I had!"

She passed a hand over her forehead, frowning slightly.

"I dreamed that I was so huge that that priest, Ra, was a pigmy no bigger than my nose," she said. "I was standing in a stormy lake of living fire that seeped into my body and made it grow and grow and—but I couldn't move. It—it's still vivid. I can close my eyes and make it seem I'm actually back in my dream—but now Ra is gone—and there are two little Earthlings in space suits."

"That's just a nightmare conjured up by what Ra said about turning us into stone," Carl said comfortingly. "Forget it. Personally I think he was just pulling our leg."

Laura shuddered at the vividness of her thoughts.

"I'm afraid, Carl," she said. "I feel as if that nightmare is going to come true. But—in the dream it wasn't a nightmare. It was—was wonderful. But I don't want to be turned to stone."

Carl looked at her uneasily. Her eyes stared into space as though at

something she could see far away through the walls. He bent over and took her hand and pulled gently.

"Get up, Laura," he said. "We've got to figure out some way to escape."

"Escape?" Laura echoed, not seeming to understand the meaning of the word. "Oh. Escape. Yes, we must try to escape, Carl. I think I know a way out of here. Yes, I'm sure I do."

CARL OPENED his mouth to speak, but as Laura rose from the huge bed and started toward the doorway with obvious purpose in her stride, his lips closed and he followed her, a puzzled, light in his eyes.

She seemed to have forgotten him by the time they reached the exit to the large sleeping chamber. Once through it she turned to the left without hesitation.

Carl looked about uneasily. No one was in sight. He followed her down the wide hallway and turned through another large arched opening.

They were in a square room twenty feet across each way. In its four corners were four statues, each perfectly formed, of giant native figures. One was the normal indigo color of a native. A second was white as alabaster. A third was a black so deep that it seemed the figure was a three-dimensional shadow rather than a solid thing. And the fourth figure was glowing with a white radiance like the sunlike discs in the roof of the cavern outside the temple area.

Each of these giant statues had about it an aura of living power, and each faced toward the center of the large room.

In that center was a pedestal, gracefully formed, and from the center of its flat top rose a flame of blue

fire. It seemed to hover over the pedestal rather than rise from it. The ovoid bottom of the flame was at least an inch from the pedestal top. No trace of smoke or burned gases rose above it.

Laura looked neither to the right nor the left as she crossed this room to another doorway. Carl hastily surveyed the room as he hurried to keep up with her.

They were in another wide hall. Abruptly there were steps leading downward. Laura descended these steps, faster and faster, as though being pulled by some force outside her.

"Laura!" Carl called. She seemed not to hear. He caught up with her and took her arm. She shrugged his hand away and kept on. Full of doubts as to the wisdom of letting her have her way, he followed, his eyes searching ahead for the first sign of trouble.

They were now in a tunnel hewn through solid rock. Far ahead there seemed to be a dancing, wavering light, its reflection covorting in the blackness of the tunnel walls.

And Laura was a fleeing wraith ahead of him, running now, her feet barely touching the floor, her long black hair streaming out behind her.

Carl was close behind her. He intended to stop her, but as fast as he ran, he could not overtake her.

The light ahead was a brilliant reflection at a sharp bend in the tunnel. Carl was ten feet behind as Laura reached this bend. His breathing was hoarse, his pulses pounding at his temples.

Still running, Laura's body seemed suddenly to be bathed in fire. It circled her, enwrapped her, each licking tendril of light seeming a living thing. Then abruptly she had paused.

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She half turned, her hand went up to her mouth and a shrill, agonized scream broke from her lips. Her eyes were wide, glazed.

Then he was beside her, his arms around her, protecting her, while an unspeakable horror tore at his mind, threatening to engulf his reason.

He felt again that strange sense of aberration and visual magnification he had felt the first time he had seen a ten-foot Venusian, as the eyes bring the immensity of the being, while the mind tries to reject its size. He felt a strange splitting of his awareness, as if he were in two places at once, viewing the same thing from two vantage points. And he felt an embarrassment that made him wish to turn his head, while a powerful fascination held his gaze..

There before him, looking at him, was Laura—but Laura a hundred times magnified—a living head of stone! He walked slowly forward, his numbed feet carrying him to the edge of the cliff. He looked downward past the breasts alive with the movement of that giant body breathing—down and down to where she stood in a lake of fire that beat in slow, breaking waves against her ankles.

He felt his eyes drawn again to the face, the eyes large as a normal sized head. He looked into them.

Then he became aware of a repeated sobbing sound at his back, monotonous and soulless. He turned. Laura lay in a crumpled heap on the ledge, her face contorted with emotions impossible to define.

He went to her and picked her up. The curve of her jaw was white and graceful. For an instant he hesitated with doubled fist, as calm as a surgeon in an operating room. Then he

struck a sharp hard blow, catching her as she crumpled..

CHAPTER VIII

“THE RADIO operator just informed me that you had received a very lengthy report from Venus,” Captain Walters said eagerly, coming into Clyde Masters’ stateroom and crossing to a lounge chair. “What did my outlines of experiments produce? Anything definite?”

“Before we go into that,” Clyde said with a broad smile. “I have good news. My two operatives and Carl Stevens and Laura Wilde are back safe. Miss Wilde and young Stevens are in the hospital suffering from shock, but the doctor’s report says they will be O. K.”

“That’s wonderful,” Walters said. “But somehow I expected as much all along. The natives can’t afford anything that would give us an excuse to start hostilities against them. Now. What about the experiments?”

“Just like that you brush off the saving of lives!” Clyde said. “Well, all right. I’ll tell you, since that report also came in. That other report on the stones right after the explosion was erroneous. Not all the stones glowed. Only the piece that had been in the furnace, evidently. The others still had their original properties, and they did what you suggested and found out they radiate on a wavelength of sixteen centimeters, with considerable radiation outside that wavelength, but all within the sixty-four centimeter waveband.”

“What about the luminous chunk then?” Walters asked eagerly.

“That has them puzzled,” Clyde said, still smiling. Its spectrum analysis shows only the lines of the
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known elements making up the stones, but there's no trace of infrared radiation. There's something about that stuff that makes it either not radiate at all or radiate only in the visible spectrum."

Captain Walters nodded his head vigorously. His eyes were very bright.

"The technicians don't know what to make of it," Clyde added. "But they seem to think you must have some pretty definite idea, or you wouldn't have been able to outline such specific experiments."

"It was just an idea," the captain said modestly. "But now it seems pretty certain my idea was right. Did you ever hear of nuclear induction, Clyde?"

"Of course," Clyde said. "Who hasn't?"

"Then you know the theory it's based on?" Walters asked.

Clyde Masters shrugged. "In a hazy way, is all," he admitted.

"According to that theory," Walters explained. "A molecule or atom will spin like a top, and in spinning it will radiate at some definite frequency, depending on the nature of the impulse generating the spin, and the structure of the molecular or atomic unit."

"That sounds all right," Clyde agreed. "But what's it got to do with this?"

"Simply this," Walters went on. "In ordinary matter that spin goes on all the time, but under random conditions. In the nuclear induction setup this set of random conditions is unified into a definite pattern by the imposed high frequency magnetic field produced in the space where the substance or sample is placed. Then the spins of most of the units generated by the push and pull of the imposed

magnetic field are acting all at the same time."

"Sure," Clyde said. "I know that. But what—?"

"I reasoned this way," Walters interrupted him. "Those rock samples seemed to behave like matter in the induced field in the nuclear induction setup. At least, it seemed that no matter what type of energy went into the samples, a different type came out. Was it a definite type? That's what I wanted to find out. It was. It follows that some unknown factor has fixed or crystalized all the atoms and molecules of those rock samples into a very fixed system. It's like—like having a pendulum that swings at a definite rate no matter how it is hit, and the energy of impact of any external force merely varies the amplitude, not the frequency of the swing. Get the idea?"

"Yes. I think so," Clyde said slowly. "But what could produce such a rigid state of affairs?"

"I think I have the answer to that, too," Walters said. "Meson matter. As you know, there are now sixty-five different known mesons. They range from about four times the mass of an electron to better than twice the mass of the Hydrogen atom. Practically nothing is known about them other than their mass. I reasoned: suppose mesons were something like matter? Suppose they can in some way interpenetrate matter, so that mesons and atoms can become a sort of crystalline complex different than ordinary matter? Suppose in some way mesons of certain types could be collected as one fluid in a container or something? Assuming they could, then, being very fine in structure, they might soak into a chunk of rock, say, dipped into the

stuff. Predicating that, we would have exactly the results we seem to have with this 'live' rock."

Clyde pursed his lips in a silent whistle. He looked down at the sheets of the report on his lap and thumbed through them.

"Read this," he said, handing Walters one of the papers. "It's about a lake of cold fire my operatives report."

Captain Walters glanced worriedly at his wristwatch.

"I won't have time now," he said. "We hit the atmosphere of Venus in six more minutes. Mind if I take it with me?"

"Go ahead," Clyde said. "And as soon as we land, if you can get clear for an hour or two, I'd like for you to go with me to see my operatives and that girl and boy."

LAURA LAY motionless, her long black hair sweeping upward over the pillow, the carelessly covering hospital sheet exposing her smooth white throat and the slow curve of firm breasts.

Her eyes were open, staring unseeing at the ceiling of the sterile room. Her red lips moved slowly, mumbling barely audible words.

"She's been that way ever since this morning," the nurse whispered. "She doesn't even blink her eyes."

"Catalepsy," Clyde murmured to Captain Walters. "The doctor said it was induced by shock, and from what Fred said about her seeing a huge stone image of herself, I don't wonder!"

"In that lake of cold fire," Captain Walters said in a hoarse whisper. "That meson-matter lake!"

"Yes, Ra, high priest of M-S'Ah," Laura intoned softly, her lips bare-

ly moving. "I am to forget. I am to live in peace, not knowing. Until I am ready to die I will not remember. It is the commands of M-S'Ah, god of the hotlands. I—will—forget."

Her words, and the way they were spoken, so softly and yet with such a strange quality they seemed thunderous, sent a chill through the nurse and the two men.

As her voice stopped, time seemed briefly to stop also. Then, cavernously, from deep within her firm white breast, life seemed to flow into her face. For a long instant after her awakening she was still. Then her eyes blinked rapidly several times and she turned her head. Her eyes looked at the two men. Her lips parted in a tired smile.

"Who are you?" she asked weakly. "Where am I? Is this a hospital?" Her eyes surveyed the bed and the room, settling on the nurse. "Was there an accident? There must have been. The last I can remember is the bore breaking through and the hot steamy air coming in... But that's wrong—I met Carl right after that?

Where's Carl? Please bring him to me. I want Carl. Please."

"Of course, my dear," the nurse assured her. "I'll go get him."

She nodded an unspoken message to Clyde Masters as she went to the door. Laura had recovered.

* * *

And on the ledge overhanging the lake of cold fire deep under the surface of Venus, Ra, High priest of the god, M-S'Ah, god of the sunward side of the planet, gazed inscrutibly into the enormous eyes of the statue he had molded from the form of Laura once she had risen from the lake of fire and expanded according to the properties of the clay of Creation. As he gazed, he saw the light of her soul depart at the bidding of his will.

When he turned away there was a tear in his aged eyes, for it was written on the scroll of Time that when She returned M-S'Ah would be her slave—and henceforth the Earthlings would rule all Venus...for as long as the planet should endure.