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Virgin Planet

a short novel by

POUL ANDERSON

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SCIENCE FICTION

VIRGIN PLANET

POUL ANDERSON 4

It was a daydream come true— a brand new world, like Earth but more beautiful, and Davis Bertram the only man among a million women. And holy Cosmos, he'd found it, and he wanted out!

World of the Future

A Man of the World LES COLE 70

A Woman of the World ROSE SHARON 75

The Dust of Death ISAAC ASIMOV 83

Hero at Work JOHN JAKES 94

Oh Father of Mine CHARLES BEAUMONT 104

The Girl Had Guts THEODORE STURGEON 108

Venturings THE EDITOR 130

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VIRGIN PLANET

by *POUL ANDERSON*

A planet of girls could be any young man's dreamworld.

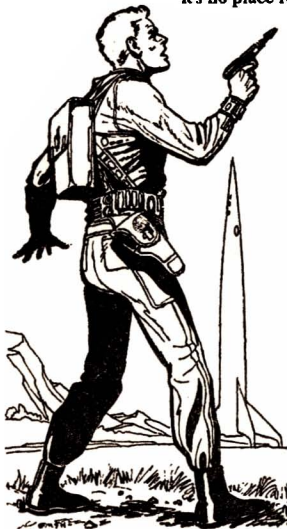
But a government of girls, a lusty fighting army of girls,

a swaggering roistering navy of girls . . .

it's no place for a man, even when the girls

are as beautiful as Barbara

and Valeria



CORPORAL Maiden Barbara Whitley of Freetoon, hereditary huntress, wing leader of the crossbow cavalry, and novice in the Mysteries, halted her orsper and peered through a screen of brush. Breath sucked sharply between her teeth.

From this edge of the forest, the Ridge mountains rolled away in a green blaze of grass to the wide floor of the Holy River valley. Tall white clouds walked in a windy sky. With midsummer approaching, both suns were

a short novel



visible. Ay was a spark so bright it hurt the eyes, following the great golden fireball of Bee down toward the western horizon. Minos was waxing, huge and banded, in its eternal station a little south of the zenith. The moon Ariadne was a pale half-disc. The other moons had not yet risen, or were drowned by daylight, but the six hours of night to come would be bright.

It was on the thing in the valley, five kilometers away, that Barbara focused her eyes.

It stood upright, like a lean finless war-dart, and she estimated its height as 40 meters. That was much smaller than the Ship of Father. But it was nearly the same shape, if the hints dropped

by initiates were truthful . . . and it had been *seen* this morning, descending from the sky.

A chill went along her nerves. She was not especially pious; none of the Whitleys were. But this was Mystery. They had always said it, they sang it in the rituals and they told it to children on rainy nights when the fires leaped high on the barracks hearths—

Some day the Men will come to claim us.

If this was the Men.

Barbara's hand strayed to the horn slung at her waist. She could call the others. Claudia, the Old Udall, had sent out the whole army to look for the shining thing, and there must be others within earshot.

The stillness of that big metal beast was unnerving. It could well be a vessel of the Monsters. The Monsters were half folk-tale, it was said they lived on the stars like the Men and had dealings with the Men, sometimes friendly and sometimes otherwise.

A stray lock of rusty-red hair blew from under Barbara's morion and tickled her nose. She sneezed. It seemed to crystallize decision.

Surely there were Monsters in that thing! The Men would arrive much more portentously, landing first at the Ship of Father and then at the various towns. And there would be haloes and other prodigies about them, and crea-

tures of shining steel in attendance.

Barbara was rather frightened at the idea of Monsters—she felt her heart thump beneath the iron breastshields—but they were less awesome than Men. If she merely went back to town and reported, she knew exactly how Claudia Udall would take charge—the army would move according to tactics which were, well, simply *rotten*, like the time when it had been led directly into a greendale ambush. And a mere corporal would be just nobody.

She checked her equipment with rapid, professional care: iron helmet, reinforced leather cuirass and kilt, boots, ax, knife, lasso. She cocked her spring-wound repeating crossbow and tucked it in the crook of her left arm. Her right hand picked up the reins, and she clucked to the orsper.

It trotted downhill at the swift rocking pace of its breed, the feathered head, beaked and crested, erect. The wind blew in her face, murmuring of the sea and the Ship whence it came. The object grew nearer—still not a sound from it, not a stirring. Barbara grew quite convinced that there were Monsters aboard. Men would have been out long ago. It was a less terrifying prospect. Monsters had unknown powers, but they were still mortal, limited creatures, but Men. . .

Barbara had never thought a

great deal about the Men. Now the songs and rituals came back to her. "The Men are the males of the human race. We were coming to join them, but the Ship went astray because of our sins. The Men are taller and stronger than we, infinitely wiser and more virtuous, and they have hair on their chins and no breasts . . ."

She came up into the long shadow of the—boat? "Hoy, there!" she cried. No answer. A flock of gray rangers went overhead, calling to each other, incredibly unconcerned.

Barbara rode several times around the thing. There was a circular door in the hull, out of her reach and smoothly closed, and there were blank ports. Not a face in any of them. Really, it was getting ridiculous! Fear vanished in a gust of temper.

The startled screech of the orsper jerked her back to reality. There was someone running from the west.

She spurred her mount forward. The person was approaching the boat . . . must have been looking around when she arrived. . . . Person? No!

It was strangely dressed in some kind of tunic, the legs sheathed in cloth, a small pack-sack on the shoulders. But the form of it was grotesque, inhuman. Broad shoulders—not unpleasing, that, but the hips were of an ugly narrowness. There was yellow

hair cropped short, and a lean face with too much nose and chin, altogether too much bone and too little flesh.

Barbara knew what all the 500 families looked like, and this wasn't any of them. She remembered from the old stories that Monsters had many shapes, but some of them looked like deformed humans.

"Hoy-aaa!" she yelled. "What are you doing here?"

The Monster drew a small tube from a holster and pointed it at her. Dashing close, Barbara saw that its crimson tunic was open at the neck, the chest was flat and hairy and there was thick hair on the arms—

Then she hardly had time to think. The Monster might or might not be peaceful, and she couldn't just shoot it down. But she knew better than to take unnecessary risks.

Her knees guided the leaping bird and her hands whirled up the lariat.

The Monster stood there gaping.

She heard words in a distorted, alien accent: "Holy Cosmos, what's going on here?" No human had so deep a voice!

Then the lasso snaked out, fell, and drew taut.

Corporal Maiden Barbara Whitley galloped in triumph toward Freetoon, dragging the Monster behind her.

II

DEFINITIONS AND REFERENCES

"DELTA CAPITIS LUPI: Double. [Coordinates given, indicating its distance from Nerthus as about 200 light-years; Nerthus is a Service base planet, ca. 300 parsecs from Sol.] Primary of type AO, mass 4 Sol, luminosity 81 Sol. Companion Sol-type, average distance from primary 98 Astronomical Units. Unexplored due to trepidation vortex in neighborhood . . ."

—*Pilot's Manual, Argus 293 Region (with much expansion of abbreviations)*

"TREPIDATION VORTEX: Traveling region of warped space, primary effect being that of violently shifting gravitational fields. Responsible for some planetary perturbations. Spaceships on hyperdrive encountering a vortex are thrown far off course and usually destroyed . . ."

—*General Encyclopedic Dictionary*

". . . Davis Bertram. Born in Sigma Hominis Volantis system, where father had grown wealthy. (Odd how anachronisms like private ostentation redevelop on the frontier, isn't it?) Basic schooling on Earth; astronomical training on Thunderhouse (the most notoriously slack academy in the

known Galaxy—must assemble data and file a complaint when I get the time). Having bought his own robotic cruiser, he came to Nerthus to start a career in stelligraphic survey by going to Delta Wolf's Head—alone! As far as I could gather, his preparations here consisted mostly of bottle hoisting, skirt chasing, and a little amateur landscape painting.

"I could not legally refuse him clearance, since he had the training and a sufficient goodwill quotient to protect any natives he might encounter. I checked the physiological data, hoping for an excuse, but somatically he is first-rate; I presume he makes himself exercise regularly to attract women, but the law does not make this any of my business. He is, in fact (or was), quite a large, good-looking young man of the vanishing Nordic type; his brain is excellent, if he only cared to use it; how can I extrapolate disaster on the basis of mere cocksureness and flippancy?"

"I warned him of the vortex, and that the Service did not plan to visit Delta until it was safely gone from the region, in about 30 years. He replied that it was probably safe as of now. I told him that if he did not come back, we could not hazard lives in a rescue party. He could not conceive that he might not return. What he wanted, of course, was the glory. If Delta turns out to

have intelligent autochthones or be an uninhabited, colonizable planet, he will go down in history with Carsten.

"In the end, then, he left, and his *At Venture* is now somewhere near the vortex. If he avoids that, and avoids hostile natives, wild beasts, poison, disease—the million traps a new planet lays for us—he will come back and have all the adoring females he can use. So much for Man's Starward Yearning. Or am I merely envious in this winter of my own lifetime?"

—*Diary of Yamagata Tetsuo, Chief of Co-ordination Service, Argus 293 Region, Stel-lamont, Nerthus*

III

Minos was full, drenching Free-ton with cold amber light, and the air had grown chilly. Barbara Whitley walked through silent streets, between darkened buildings, to the cavalry barracks. It formed one side of a square around a courtyard, the stables and arsenal completing the ring. Her boots thudded on the cobbles as she led her orsper to its stall.

A stone lamp on a shelf showed the snoring grooms—all Nicholsons, a stupid family used only for menial work—stirring uneasily on the straw as she tramped in. She nudged one of the stocky, tangle-haired women awake with

her toe. "Food," she demanded. "And beer. And take care of the bird."

Afterward, she undressed and washed herself in the courtyard trough. She regarded her face complacently in the water. The Minoslight distorted colors, ruddy hair and long green eyes became something else, but the freckled snub nose and the wide mouth and the small square chin were more pleasing than . . . oh, than that Dyckman build. Dyckmans were just *sloppy*.

The dying hearthfire within the barrack showed long-limbed forms sprawled on straw ticks. She stowed her weapons and armor, trying to be quiet. But Whitleys were light sleepers, and her cousin Valeria woke up.

"Oh, it's you. Two left feet as always," snarled Valeria, "and each one bigger than the other. Where did you park your fat rump all day?"

Barbara looked at the face which mirrored her own. They were the only Whitleys in Free-ton, their mothers and four aunts having perished in the Greendale ambush 15 years ago, and they should have been as close as relatives normally were. But it was a trigger-tempered breed, and when a new wing leader corporal was required, the sacred dice had chosen Barbara. Valeria could not forgive that.

"I took my two left feet and

my fat rump—if you must describe yourself that way—into the valley and captured a Monster in a star ship," said Barbara sweetly. "Goodnight." She lay down on her pallet and closed her eyes, leaving her twin to speculate. . . .

Bee had not even risen when there was a clank of metal in the doorway and Ginny Latvala shouted: "Up, Corporal Maiden Barbara Whitley! You're wanted at the Big House."

"Do you have to wake everyone else on that account?" snapped Valeria, but not very loud. The entire company had been roused, and Captain Kim was a martinet, like all Trevors.

Barbara got to her feet, feeling her heart knock. Yesterday seemed unreal, like a wild dream. Ginny leaned on her spear, waiting. "The Old Udall is pretty mad at you, dear," she confided. "We may have all sorts of trouble coming because you roped that Monster." The Latvalas were slim blonde girls, handy with a javelin and so made hereditary bodyguards in most towns.

"I was never ordered not to lasso a Monster," said Barbara huffily.

She let the barracks buzz around her while she dressed for the occasion: a short white skirt, an embroidered green cloak, sandals, and dagger. The air was still cold and the fields below the

town white with mist when she came out. A pale rosy light lifted above the eastern Ridge, and Minos was waning. The moon Theseus was a red sickle caught in the sunrise.

There were not many people up. A patrol tramped past, all of them husky Macklins, and the farmhands yawned out of their barracks on the way to a day's hoeing. The street climbed steeply upward from the cavalry house, and Barbara took it with a mountaineer's long slow stride. They went by the weavery, she glimpsed looms and spinning wheels within the door, but it didn't register on her mind—low-caste work. The smithy, a most respected shop, lay beyond, also empty; the Holloways still slept in their adjoining home.

Passing a window of the maternity hospital, Barbara heard a small wail. Must be Sarah Cohen's kid, born a few days ago. The sound broke through her worry with an odd little tug at her soul. In another year or so, she would be an initiate, and make the journey to the Ship. And when she came back, no longer called Maiden, there would be another redhaired Whitley beneath her heart. Babies were a nuisance, she'd have to stay within the town till hers was weaned and—and—it was hard to wait.

The stockade bulked above her.

great sharp stakes lashed together and six Latvalas on guard at the gate. Inside, there was a broad cobbled yard with several buildings: barracks, stables, sheds, the Father chapel. All were in the normal Freetoon style, long log houses with peaked sod roofs. The hall, in the middle, was much the same, but immensely bigger, its beam-ends carved into birds of prey.

Henrietta Udall stood at its door. She was the oldest of Claudia's three daughters: big and blocky, with sagging breasts and harsh black hair, small pale eyes under tufted brows, a lump for a nose and a gash for a mouth. The finery of embroidered skirt and feather cloak was wasted on her, Barbara thought. None of the Udalls could ever be handsome. But they could lead!

"Halt! Your hair is a mess," said Henrietta. "Do those braids over."

Barbara bit her lip and began uncoiling the bronze mane. It was hacked off just below her shoulders. *Spiteful blowhard*, she thought. *I'm barren if I do and barren if I don't. Come the day, dear Henrietta, you won't find me on your side.*

The death of an Udall was always the signal for turmoil. Theoretically, the power went to her oldest daughter. In practice, the sisters were likely to fight it out between themselves; a defeated

survivor fled into the wilderness with her followers and tried to start a new settlement. Daydreams of heading into unknown country for a fresh start drove the sulkiness from Barbara. If, say, she rose high in the favor of Gertrude or Anne . . .

"All right," said Henrietta as Bee rose. She led the way inside.

The main room of the Big House was long and gloomy. Sconced torches guttered above the Old Udall's seat. Servants scurried around, serving breakfast to her and to the middle-aged high-caste women on the bench below the throne.

"Well!" said Claudia. "It took you long enough."

Barbara had learned the hard way never to blame an Udall for anything. "I'm sorry, ma'm," she muttered, saluting.

The Old Udall leaned back and let her chambermaid comb the stiff gray hair. Elinor Dyckman had gotten that job; an Udall usually took a Dyckman for a lover.

Elinor was in her middle twenties; her baby was dead and she hadn't asked for another. Dyckmans had scant mother instinct. She was medium tall, with a soft curving body and soft bluish-black hair. Her small heart-shaped face smiled sweetly on the chief, and she combed with long slow strokes.

"You'll have to be punished for

that," said Claudia. "Suggestions, Elinor, dear?" She laughed.

Elinor blinked incredible lashes over melting dark eyes and said: "Not too severe, ma'm. I'm sure Babs means well. A little KP—"

Barbara's hand fell to her dagger. "I'm in the army, you milk-livered trull!" she exploded. "Dishwashing, by Father—!"

"Watch your language," said counsellor Marian Burke.

Elinor smiled and went on combing. "It was only a joke, ma'm," she murmured. "Hadn't we better get down to business?"

The Old Udall gazed at Barbara. *Trying to stare me down, are you?* thought the girl savagely. She would not look away.

"Enough," said Claudia at length. "Yes, Elinor, you're right as usual, we can't stop to quarrel now."

She leaned ponderously forward. "I've heard reports from the scouts who met you," she went on.

Barbara remained silent, not trusting her tongue. Captain Janet Lundgard had emerged from the woods with some troopers and taken charge: set a guard on the ship, slung the unconscious Monster on a spare orsper, and ridden to town with the rest of them for escort. She had reported directly to the Big House—but what had she told? The Lundgards were not as predict-

able as most families; that was one reason they were hereditary army officers.

"Apparently you attacked the Monster unprovoked," said Claudia coldly. "Father knows what revenge it may take."

"It had drawn a weapon on me, ma'm," answered Barbara. "If I hadn't lassoed it, maybe it would have destroyed all Free-toon. As it is, we have the thing a prisoner now, don't we?"

"It may have friends," whispered Elinor, her eyes very large. A shiver went through the hall.

"Then we have a hostage," snapped Barbara.

The Old Udall nodded. "Yes . . . there is that. I've had relays of guards sent to its ship. None of them report any sign of life. It, the Monster, must have been alone."

"How many other ships have landed, all over Atlantis?" wondered Henrietta.

"That's what we have to find out," said Claudia. "I'm sending a party to the Ship of Father to ask the Doctors about this. We'll also have to send scouts to the nearest other towns, find out if they've been visited too."

Both missions would be dangerous enough. Barbara thought with a tingling what her punishment would be. As a non-initiate, she couldn't go to the Ship, but she would be sent toward Greendale, Highbridge, or Blockhouse,

to spy. *But that's terrific! When do we start?*

The Udall smiled grimly. "And meanwhile, for weeks perhaps, we'll have the Monster to deal with . . . and our own people. The whole town must already be getting into a panic.

"We have to learn the truth about the Monster—yes, and all the people had better know the facts. We'll do it this way. The carpenters will set up a cage for the Monster, right in the plaza, and while everybody not on duty watches, someone will go into that cage and we'll see what happens."

"Who's going to volunteer for that job?" grumbled Marian Burke.

Elinor smiled gently. "Why, who but our brave Corporal Whitley?" she answered.

IV

Davis Bertram woke when the door was opened and lay there for a minute, trying to remember why his flesh ached in a hundred places. Then he got his eyes unglued.

There was a boot in front of his nose. He rolled over, cautiously, and sent a bleared gaze upward. Above the boot was a shapely knee, and above that a leather-strip kilt reinforced with iron bands; then a belt supporting a knife and pouch, a cuirass

of laminated leather with an iron bust bucket, a slim neck, a lot of yellow hair braided under a helmet, and a rather attractive sun-tanned face.

Cosmos! That girl on the nightmare bird, the lariat and—

"What's going on?" croaked Davis. "Who are you?"

"Father!" stammered one of the girls. "It talks"

She spoke Basic—a slurred, archaic form, but it was the Basic of all human-settled planets. She must be human, thought Davis groggily; no alien was that anthropoid.

A handsome wench, too, though a bit muscular for his taste. He began to smile through bruised lips at all ten of them.

"Gak!" he said.

The ten were identical.

Well, not quite . . . some leaned on spears and some bore light, wicked-looking axes, and some had a beltful of needle-nosed darts.

He shuddered and grew aware that he had been stripped mother naked. Between the cuts and abrasions, he started to blush, more or less all over. He scrambled to his feet. A jerk at the wrists told him his hands were tied behind his back. He sat down again, lifting his knees and glaring across them.

"I imagine Monsters would have learned the Men language, Ginny," said one of his visitors.

On closer observation, Davis saw that she was older and had a scar on one cheek. Some kind of insignia was painted on her breastplate . . . sunblaze, it was the six-pointed star of an astrologer's mate!

"It looks fairly harmless," said one of the others doubtfully.

"You, Monster!" The officer raised her battle ax. "Up!" She was tense as a drawn wire. Davis rose.

They marched him out of the shed. He saw a courtyard, rudely paved with stones, a number of primitive wooden buildings, and a high palisade around all. There was a catwalk beneath the stakes, and warriors posted on it with some kind of crossbow.

Beyond the gate, Davis saw quite a small army, alert for whatever he might try to pull. Some were on foot, some mounted on birds like the one he'd seen before: larger and stouter than ostriches, with feathers of blue-tipped white and cruel hawk heads. He decided not to pull anything.

A rutted unpaved street snaked downhill between big, clumsy houses. Outside town it became a road of sorts, wandering through cultivated grainfields. They covered a sloping plateau, which dipped off into forest toward the river valley. Behind the castle, the mountains rose steep and wooded.

Ignoring botanical details, this might almost have been Earth of some elder age. But not when you looked at the sky. It was blue and clear, yes, with towering white clouds in the west; overhead, though, were two crescents, dim by daylight: one almost twice the apparent size of Luna seen from Earth, the other half again as big. And there was the emperor planet, the world of which *this* was only another satellite. When full, it would sprawl across 14 times as much sky as Luna. Now it was a narrow sickle, pale amber. The morning sun was approaching it. That is, the smaller, Sol-type sun, Delta Capitis Lupi B, about which the giant planet moved. The primary sun, bluish-white A, had not yet risen; it would never seem more than the brightest of the stars.

Davis shook an aching head and wrenched his attention back to the ground. Be sundered if this was like Earth, after all, even with the women and children clustered around. Not just their dress—the civilians wore a short skirt, the kids nothing. Their *likeness*. Women and children—all female, the children—seemed to be cast from a few hundred molds. Take two from the same mold, like those gawping dairy-maid types over there, and the only difference was age and scars.

Cosmos, but he was thirsty!

At the farther end of a broad open space were some thousands of civilians, jammed together, craning their necks, held back by a line of guards. Their high-pitched, excited voices sawed on his nerves. In the middle of the square was a large wooden cage.

"In there," said the blonde captain. She drew her knife and cut his bonds.

Davis shuffled through the cage door. "Is this a zoo?" he asked. "Where are all the men, anyway?"

"Don't *you* know?" the captain asked acidly.

"Very well, Babs, let's see how you get out of this one!"

It was a new voice, pleasantly husky in spite of its jeering note. Davis looked through the bars and saw a redhaired girl among the cavalry. Holy Valdaoth, the same one who'd roped him yesterday!

Or was she? Her twin, also in armor, came walking slowly forth across the square. Davis stepped warily back as the newcomer entered. The blonde officer latched the door behind them.

The girl touched her dagger. He could have gone for her in better circumstances. Her greenish eyes widened, and she breathed hard. It would have been an interesting sight if it hadn't been for that iron bra.

"I'll fight if I must," she whispered.

Four women approached the

cage, all of the same unprepossessing genotype. The oldest wore a headdress of plumes. "Well, Corporal," she snapped, "question it."

"Y-yes, ma'm," said the girl in a small voice. "I . . . I am Corporal Maiden Barbara Whitley, Monster."

"The same who captured you," said one of the bags.

"Be quiet, Henrietta," said the oldest witch. With a certain fearless pride: "I am Claudia, the Udall of Freetoon."

"Honored, Citizen," said the man. "My name is Davis Bertram."

"Why . . . that could almost be a human name," said Barbara shyly.

"What else should it be?" asked Davis.

"Oh . . . oh, yes, the stories do say you Monsters learned the arts from the Mcn." She smiled, the least little bit.

"But I—Who said I was a monster?" He was not, Davis told himself, vain; but more than one woman had informed him she liked his face.

"You are! *Look* at you!"

"Blast it, I'm as human as you are!"

"With all that hair?" rapped Henrietta Udall.

Davis gave her an unfriendly glance.

"Look here," said Barbara reasonably, "we're not blind. I ad-

mit you have two legs and five fingers and no feathers. But you're bigger than any of us, and haven't got any more breasts than a ten-year-old."

"I should hope not!" said Davis.

"In fact—" Barbara scratched her neck, puzzledly, and pointed. "Just what is that? Do you fight with it?"

"It doesn't look prehensile," said the blonde captain.

Davis told himself wildly that he had not gone insane, that he really was here on the Earth-sized third satellite of Delta Capitis Lupi B I. But somehow it seemed to slip through his fingers.

He put his face in his palms and shuddered.

"Poor Monster." Barbara trod impulsively forward.

He looked up. She paled a little with fright, under the smooth brown skin, and made half a step back. Then her lips—unfairly attractive lips—stiffened, and she stayed where she was.

"We had no way of knowing," she said. "Some Monsters are friendly with the Men and some aren't. We couldn't take chances."

"But I am a man!" shouted Davis.

A groan went through the crowd. Somebody screamed.

Barbara clenched her fists. "Why did you say that?" she asked in a wobbly voice.

"Can't you see, girl?"

"But the Men . . . the Men are powerful, and beautiful, and—"

"Oh, Evil!" Davis took her fingers and laid them against his cheek. "Feel that? I haven't got much yet in the way of whiskers, but—"

Barbara turned faintly toward the Udall. "It's true, ma'm," she whispered. "There's hair starting to grow out of his face."

"But you captured him!" protested the blonde captain.

Davis took hold of his sanity with both hands. "Look, kenno," he began between clenched teeth. "Let's be reasonable about this. Just what the jumping blue blazes do you think a man is?"

"A Man is . . . is . . . a human male." He could barely hear the Barbara girl's reply.

"All right. Now, have you ever seen a human male before?"

"Certainly not." Her courage was returning. "You must indeed be from far away, Monster, There are no Men on all Atlantis."

"Oh . . . is that what you've called this world? But how do you manage—how long since—"

"Humans came here some 300 years ago. That is, by a year I mean the time Minos needs to go once around the sun Bee."

Minos . . . the big planet, of course. Davis had measured from space that it was about one Astronomical Unit from B, which had nearly the same mass as Sol.

So one Minos year was approximately one Earth year. Three centuries—why, they were barely starting to colonize then! The hyperdrive was newly invented and—

"But you have children," he said feebly.

"Oh, yes. By the grace of Father, the Doctors at His Ship can—I don't know any more. I've never been there."

Davis took a while to swallow that one.

Something came back to him. In the few hours he'd been on Atlantis, before this Barbara wench caught him, he had seen plenty of animal life: reptiles, fish, insects, flying and flightless birds. Some of the earthbound avians had been the size of buffalo.

But no mammals. In all those flocks and herds, not a mammal.

Excitement gripped him. "Wait a minute!" he cried. "Are there any . . . I mean, well, does Atlantis harbor any warm-blooded animals with hair that give live birth and suckle their young?"

"Why, no," said Barbara. "Except us humans, of course."

"Ahhh-ha. Mammals never evolved here, then. And they're the only terrestroid form where the males are . . . hm—" Davis blushed. "Obviously male. No wonder you didn't recognize—I mean, uh—"

"What do you mean?" asked Barbara innocently.

"This is ridiculous," barked the Old Udall. "It's well understood that the Men will come in all their power and glory. This wretch is a Monster, and the only question is what to do about it."

Another girl trod forth. Even now, Davis felt his eyes bug out. She was dark, throaty-voiced, with gold bangles on slender arms and red flowers in her long hair, high in the prow and walking like a sine wave. "Please, ma'm," she said. "I have an idea."

Claudia smiled at her. "Yes, Elinor?"

"It says it is a Man." Elinor wagged her eyelashes at Davis. "Let it prove it."

"How?" demanded Davis.

"By fertilizing the corporal," said Elinor with scientific detachment.

"What?"

Barbara stepped back, white-faced. "No!" she gasped.

"Corporal Whitley," said Claudia earnestly, "we've had our little differences, but now the future of Freetoon may depend on you. You won't fail your duty."

"Unless you're afraid, darling," murmured Elinor.

Davis saw Barbara flush red. She knotted her fists. After a very long minute, she looked squarely at him with an air of having but one life to give for her country.

"Yes," she said defiantly. "You may fertilize me, Davis—if you can!"

He looked at several thousand interested faces.

How did you explain the effect of social conditioning to a tribe which had never heard of such matters?

"Not now," he begged hoarsely. "Give me time . . . privacy, for Cosmos' sake . . . can't do anything *here*—"

The Old Udall lifted a skeptical brow.

"Oh, never mind," said Davis. "Have it your way. I'm a monster."

V

Barbara was not happy.

That sorry business in the plaza had won her a good deal of respect, but she didn't enjoy baiting captives, even Monsters. In the four days since, a growing moodiness had driven her to get permission to go out alone after game. It was not quite safe, but she felt somehow that a companion would be more of a hazard.

We Whitleys are a crotchety lot, she admitted. For once the reflection was less arrogant than gloomy. She had not, before, felt it a loss to have no sweetheart, not even a close friend, and to be forever at odds with her only kinswoman in Freetoon. But suddenly she wanted her mother back . . . Or someone. She couldn't understand the pull she felt, as if her thirteen-year-old self

were reaching across seven years of time to invade a body gone all soft and unsure. Ever since those moments in the Monster's cage . . . *Damn the Monster!* Had the thing psyched her?

She headed northward into the woods and steep of the Ridge, spooed a stamper herd on the second day and caught up to it on the third and shot one of the great grazing birds. She didn't have it cut up before dark, and wasn't sleepy even then.

And she saw that the night was cool, a bright mystery where dewed leaves sparkled gold beneath Minos, a scent of young blossoms, the High Gaunt rearing its stern stone peak among the stars. An irrational happiness lifted in her, she gathered armfuls of sweetbird and fernish, crooned, threw her arms about a slim white tree and rubbed a hot cheek against it and was near crying when a night-triller began to sing. There was a tingle all through her.

And this was not to be understood either. All at once she understood very much the harsh sweaty comfort of the barracks. The trail had arced, she could be in Freetoon tonight if she rode hard.

Sleep was no problem. Normally you slept about four hours out of the twelve between a sunset and a sunset, but huntresses could go for days on birdnaps. Barbara loaded her pack orsper, mounted the other, and started at Bee-rise.

She ate in the saddle, not stopping even for the holy time of eclipse, when Bee went behind Minos and the stars came out. Ay and Ariadne gave light enough for those ten-plus minutes, and a muttered prayer to Father met minimum requirements.

Shortly afterward she struck the Ironhill road. It was wider than most—all towns, however hostile, met at the mining settlement to trade. Jogging along in her own apprehension, she forgot all care. She rounded a bend and could have been shot by the Greendalers before realizing they were there.

A dozen of them, in full armor, riding toward Freetoon . . . Barbara reined in, gasping, and stared at the crossbows as they swiveled around.

The Greendale leader, a middle-aged Macklin with a broken nose, laughed. "We won't harm you today, darling, if you behave yourself," she said. "Freetooner, aren't you? We're on embassy."

Barbara nodded distantly and joined them. She felt no hatred, but war was as normal a part of life as the harvest festival. She had been in several raids and skirmishes since gaining her growth, and her kin were dead at Greendale hands.

There was a Whitley sergeant among them, about fifty years old. "I'm Gail," she introduced herself.

"What's your mission?" asked Barbara, rather snappishly.

"What do you think?" answered Gail. "You people ought to know better than to send spies our way when I'm on patrol duty."

"Oh . . . you bushwhacked them, then." Barbara felt a chill.

"Every one. Caught three of them alive. One, Avis Damon, got pretty much cut up in the fracas, and rather than bleed to death she told us what she knew."

It was bad news, very bad, but Barbara's first reaction was scorn. "I always claimed those Damons aren't fit for combat." Then, slowly: "So what do you think you learned?"

"A star ship landed in your country." Gail said it with care. "There was a Man aboard."

"A Monster," corrected Barbara. "We made it admit that."

"Mmm . . . yes . . . I thought so myself. You couldn't have captured a Man against his will."

A thin, dark-haired Burke interrupted softly: "Are you sure it was against his will? Maybe as a test of faith, he—"

That was the trouble with the Burkes. They thought too much. Barbara's hands felt clammy. "We've sent to the Doctors, of course, to ask what we ought to do," she said defensively.

"And meanwhile you have the Monster and its ship." Anger writhed across the Macklin's leathery face. "Do you think we're going to stand by and let you make an ally of the Monster?"

"What do you want?" replied Barbara.

"We're bringing an ultimatum," said Gail Whitley. "Your Udall has damned well got to turn the Monster over to a joint guard till we get word from the Doctors. If you don't—war."

Barbara thought about it for a while. She ought to make a break for it, try to reach Freetoon ahead of this gang . . . no, that would earn her nothing more than a bolt in the back. There was plaguey well going to be a war, no Udall would cough up a prize like the Monster. *Well, who says we can't defend our own fields? Hell and thunder, we'll toss them out on their fat cans and chase them all the way home.*

The battle would probably start tomorrow. It was about thirty hours' ride to Greendale, but the enemy soldiers must already have left and be bivouacked somewhere in the Ridge.

So be it! Barbara felt a welcome tension, almost an eagerness. It was a pleasant change from her eldritch moods of the past days. She chatted amiably with the others for the rest of the trip.

Bee and Ay were under the horizon when they clattered by the patrols up to Freetoon, but Minos, Ariadne, Theseus, and tiny Aegeus gave plenty of light. The embassy had dismounted in the courtyard and stamped into the Big House when Barbara realized

her usefulness was over. She turned her kill over to the servants and put the two orspers in the castle barn. Poor birds, they were so tired. Then she ought to go tell her barracks mates, but—

"Where's the Monster being kept?" she asked, before thinking.

"In the shed under the north wall, ma'm," said the Nicholson groom. "Didn't dare have him anywhere else, they didn't, though he ain't done no harm yet but you can't never tell."

"*He!*" said Barbara with a flash of anger. "Why call it 'he?'"

"Well, he says he's a male, ma'm, and, uh, well, he says—"

Barbara walked off. No reason why the Monster shouldn't be male. They were Man and woman, the wise happy people of the stars, and doubtless Monsters too — But why should the thought of this Davis creature's maleness be so odd, half frightening and therefore resented?

She grew suddenly aware that she had rounded the Big House and was in its multiple shadow looking toward the Monster's prison.

A door of wooden bars had been erected for the shed. It . . . he . . . Davis stood against the bars, flooded with cool Minos-light and moonlight. He showed sharp and clear in the radiance, and somehow the hollow cheeks and flat hairy breast and bulging muscles were no longer ugly.

They had given him clothes, kilt, cloak, and sandals, his hair was combed and a yellow beard was growing out on his face.

He was holding hands between the bars with a girl in a long feather cloak. Their voices drifted to Barbara—Elinor Dyckman, of all foul pests!

"Oh, I really must be going, Bertie. Those awful Greendalers . . . didn't you see them come in? Claudia will be just *furious*."

"Stick around, beautiful." The Monster's low chuckle was paralyzing, Barbara could not have moved after hearing it. "It's worth all my woes, just to get you here alone at last."

"Really . . . Bertie, let 'go, you scare me." Elinor tittered.

"Aw, now, macushla. I'm not going to eat you. Let me only feast on your silken hair, your starry eyes, your—" Etc., etc.

"You say *such* things." Elinor leaned closer against the bars. "Nobody says such things here."

"Ah, nobody is able to appreciate you, my little one. To think I crossed the stars and found you. Come here . . . lend me that adorable mouth—"

"Bert! I . . . I . . . mmmmm—"

The night blurred before Barbara. She wondered why, gulped, realized it was tears, and cursed herself.

"I *mustn't*, Bertie, dear! Why, you're a—"

"A man. And you're a woman."

"But you said—"

"I had no choice then." Davis leered. "But come in here and I'll prove it to you this time."

"Oh, I can't, Bertie, I just can't! You're locked in and—"

"You can swipe the key, can't you? Here, give me another kiss."

It was too much. And a Whitley was no sneaking spy like a, a, a Dyckman. Barbara strode across the yard, jingling her spurs as noisily as possible. "What's going on here?" she yelled.

"Oh!" Elinor squealed. "Oh . . . Babs, is it? Babs, dear, I was only—"

"I know what you were only. Get out before I knock your teeth down your throat!"

Elinor wailed and fled.

Barbara turned furiously on Davis. "What were you plotting?" she snarled.

The Monster sighed, shrugged, and gave her a rueful grin. "Nothing very evil," he said. "You again, eh?"

Heat and cold chased each other across Barbara's face.

"You know," went on Davis, "this is the kind of thing I used to daydream about in my teens. A brand new world, like Earth but more beautiful, and I the only man among a million women. And holy Cosmos, I've found it, and I want out!"

Barbara raised a fist. "Yes, so you can go home and call your friends to come raiding."

"Look," said Davis earnestly, "we want to help you—blast it all, we're not your kind of blood-thirsty pirate. And I *am* a man, as human as you. If you'd not come along, Elinor Dyckman would have found that out . . . nine months afterward, at most!" His smile grew altogether insolent. "Maybe you'd like to give me another chance? Honestly, you're one of the best-looking girls I've seen anywhere."

"Hell spit me out if I do!" Barbara turned her back.

"Don't go away," begged Davis. "It's lonesome as space here. All I've done is argue with that barrel-shaped queen of yours."

Barbara couldn't help laughing. The epithet was too good.

"That's better," said Davis. "Shall we be friends?"

"Why do you claim to be a Man?" she countered hastily. "You've already admitted you aren't."

"I had no choice then, blast it! You and . . . the other girl . . . only ones who might give me a chance to convince them. I tell Siz Claudia that I'm a benevolent Monster and if they'll let me at my boat—under guard, if they want—I'll go home and bring the Men. I mean it, too."

"But she doesn't dare," said Barbara slowly.

"Well, not so far. Can't really say I blame her. Say, have you found my blaster?"

"Your what?"

"My weapon. I had it in a hip holster, dropped it when you—No? I suppose it must be lying out in the grass somewhere. You won't find much in my pack. Medical kit, lighter, camera, a few such gadgets. I've offered to demonstrate them, but the old sow won't let me."

"What were you doing when I . . . found you?" asked Barbara. Really, she thought, he wasn't a bad Monster at heart.

"Just looking around. I analyzed basic surface conditions from space, then came down to let my robots check on the biochemistry, bacteriology, and ecology. That looked safe too, so I violated all doctrine and went for a stroll. I was just coming back to the boat when—Oh, Evil, I don't imagine you understand a word." Davis smiled gently. "Poor kid. Poor little Amazon."

"I can take care of myself!" she flared.

"No doubt. But come over here. I won't hurt you."

Barbara went to the door. He held her hands and pressed his face against the bars. What right had that hairy, jut-nosed, thin-lipped face to look beautiful? Her temples hammered.

"I want to show you something," he said in a grave tone. "Maybe that way . . . one kiss, Barbara."

She couldn't help it, she felt

bonelessly weak and leaned toward him.

The main door of the Big House crashed open. Torchlight spilled on the cobbles, Minos became suddenly wan. The Greendale Macklin strode angrily forth, her women bristling about her.

The voice jerked Barbara to awareness, she sprang from the Monster and grabbed for the crossbar slung at her shoulder.

"This means war!"

VI

Civilians and movable property were brought inside the stockade that night, and armed females streamed forth. But the fighting didn't start till well after sunrise.

Davis could just hear the horns and shouts and clash of metal. There was a good-sized battle on the edge of the forest, he guessed. He looked across a courtyard littered with women, children, and assorted dry goods and wondered what the desolation to do.

Claudia Udall tramped over to his jail, in full armor and toting a battle ax. Elinor Dyckman undulated in her wake, thinly clad and scared. Davis would rather have looked at her but thought it more tactful to meet the queen's eyes.

"Well, Monster, now a war has started on your account," said Claudia grimly.

Davis gave her a weak smile.

"It wasn't my idea . . . uh, ma'm. What do they want me for, anyway?"

"The power, of course! Any town which had you and your ship could conquer the rest in days. Now we'll have those Greendale pests chased away by eclipse. Then will you help us?"

Davis hesitated. Union law was unreasonably strict about one's relationship with primitives. You could fight in self-defense, but using atomic guns to help a local aggression meant a stiff sentence.

"Let me aboard my boat—" he began.

"Of course," beamed Claudia. "Under guard."

"Hm, yeh, that's what I was afraid of." Davis had intended only to light out for Nerthus and never come back. Let the Service disentangle this Atlantean mess. He gulped and shook his head. "Sorry, I can't use the boat to fight with. You see, uh, well—"

"Bertie!" Elinor wobbled toward him. Her white indoor face was beaded with sweat. "Bertie, darling, you've got to help us. It's death for me if the Greendalers take this place."

"Hm?"

"Don't you understand? The Greendale Udall already has two Dyckman lovers. They won't want a third . . . they'll see to it . . . *Ber-rtiel!*"

Davis got the idea. A queen's

favorite dropped the word to some unsentimental captain—

"Nonsense, child." Claudia glared jealously. "Monster, right now the Greendalers do hold the area where your ship is. Can they get in?"

Davis laughed nervously. "Axes and crowbars against inert steel? I'd like to see them try!"

Short of atomic tools, there was only one way to open that airlock. He had set it to respond to himself whistling a few bars of a certain ballad. And *The Jolly Tinker* was not a song which any lady ought to know.

"You won't help us?" Claudia narrowed her eyes.

Davis began a long, thoroughly mendacious speech about friends who would avenge any harm done to him. He was just getting to the section on gunboats when Claudia snorted.

If we can't have you, Monster, I might decide not to let anybody have you." She swung on her heel and walked off. Elinor followed, throwing imploring looks across her shoulder.

Davis sat down on the straw and groaned. As if he didn't have troubles enough, that sex machine had to slither around in a thin skirt and few beads . . . just out of reach.

Then he found himself wondering about Barbara Whitley. He hoped very much she wouldn't be hurt.

Eclipse came. It happened daily, at high noon in this longitude, when Atlantis, eternally facing her primary, got Minos between B and herself. An impressive sight: the planet, dimly lit by the remote companion sun, fourteen times as wide as Earth's moon, brimmed with fiery light refracted through the dense atmosphere . . . dusk on the ground and night in the sky. Davis looked hungrily at the stars. Civilized, urbane, pleasant stars! . . .

An hour later, the battle had ended and the Freetoon girls came back to the castle. Davis noticed that the warriors were divided into about thirty genotypes. When everyone in a single line of descent was genetically identical, a caste system was a natural development. And, yes, he could see why the Atlanteans had reverted to the old custom of putting surnames last. Family in the normal sense couldn't be very important here. For a moment the image of his father drifted across Davis' memory. He'd been rather a disappointment to the old man; it occurred to him that he had spent most of his life trying to justify himself in his father's eyes. But his chromosomes had never intended him for a solid citizen.

The armored lasses, foot and orsper (horse bird?) troops, clamored for lunch and beer. They had casualties and prisoners with

them. There weren't many dead or seriously wounded—couldn't be, with these clumsy weapons powered by female muscles—but some had been killed, by ax, knife, dart, bolt—

"Barbara!" Davis whooped it forth.

The tall redhead looked his way and strolled over through the crowd. Her left hand was wrapped in a wet crimson bandage. "Barbara! Cosmos, I'm glad to see you're all right!"

She gave him an unfriendly grin. "Mistake, Monster. I'm her cousin Valeria."

"Oh. Well, how is she?"

"No damage. She's helping mount guard on your ship."

"Then you did win."

"For now. We beat them back into the woods, but they haven't quit." Valeria gave him a hard green stare. "Now I know you're a Monster. The Men would fight."

"Why can't you tribes compromise?"

"Who ever heard of an Udall compromising?" laughed Valeria.

"Then why do you obey them?"

"Why? Why, they're the . . . the *Udalls!*" Valeria was shocked. "When I took arms, I swore—"

"Why did you swear? My people have learned better than to allow absolute rulers. You've got a whole world here. What is there to fight about?"

"A gutless Monster would say that." Valeria spat and left.

The day dragged. Davis was fed, otherwise ignored. Night came, and he tried to sleep, but the refugees made too much noise.

Toward morning he fell into a doze, huddled under his feather quilts against the upland chill. A racket of trumpets and hurrying feet woke him.

Another battle! He strained against the bars, into darkness. And wasn't it getting closer? The sentries were shooting and—

Elinor screamed her way across the courtyard. The multiple shadows thrown by Minos and the other moons rippled weirdly before her. "Bertie, you've got to help! They're driving us back!"

He reached out and patted her in a not very brotherly fashion. "There, there." When it made her hysterics worse, he shouted. After a struggle, he got some facts.

The Greendalers had returned with allies. Outnumbered three to one, the Freetooners were being hammered back through their own streets.

Newburgh, Blockhouse, and Highbridge banners flew beyond the walls. It was clear enough to Davis. Having learned about the spaceship, and well aware she couldn't take it alone, the Greendale Udall had sent off for help, days ago, probably. And the prize looked great enough to unite even these factions for a while.

"But now Claudia will have to make terms," he blurted.

"It's too late!" sobbed Elinor. She moaned and ran toward the Big House. Only warriors were to be seen, the artisans and helots had retreated into their sheds. Davis told himself to stop shaking.

The fighting didn't halt even for eclipse. At mid-afternoon the gates opened and Freetoon's army poured into the court.

Step by step, their rearguard followed. Davis saw Barbara at the end of the line. She had a round wooden shield on one arm and swung a light long-shafted ax. A red lock fell from under the battered morion and plastered itself to a small, drawn face.

A burly warrior pushed against her. Barbara caught the descending ax-blow on her shield. Her own weapon chopped for the neck, missed, and bit at the leather cuirass. It didn't go through; low-carbon steel got blunted almighty fast. The other woman grinned and began hailing blows. Barbara sprang back and threw her ax between the enemy's legs. Down went the woman. Barbara's dagger jumped into her hand, she fell on top of the other and made a deft slicing motion.

Davis got to his pot barely in time.

When he came back to the door, there was a lull in the battle. The Freetooners had been pumping bolts and javelins from the catwalk, discouraging the al-

lies long enough for the gates to be closed.

Presently Barbara herself came to him. She was a-shiver with weariness, and the eyes regarding him had dark rims beneath. There was blood splashed on her breast-plate and arms.

"How is it for you?" she asked hoarsely.

"I'm all right," said Davis. With more anxiety than a neutral party ought to feel: "Are you hurt?"

"No. But I'm afraid this is the end."

"What . . . what do you think will happen? To you, I mean?"

"I'll get away at the last if I can." Her voice was numb.

Davis told himself sternly that this mess wasn't his fault. He had seen from space that there were small towns and agriculture on this continent, and had landed to bring the gift of Union civilization to all its natives. The last thing he wanted was—

The *first* thing he wanted, he thought in self-abasement, had been the glory of finding a new inhabited planet. And the money prizes, and the lucrative survey commissions, and the adoring women.

"Cosmos curse it," he shouted, "I can't help your stupidity!"

Barbara gave him a blind, dazed look and wandered off.

At B-set the battle resumed.

Trumpets howled, and by Minos-light he saw Claudia hurry toward the gate.

Its wood groaned. The ladies from Greendale must be using a battering ram. Fire kindled outside, flame ran up and splashed the sky. Somehow a house had been touched off. The top of the stockade loomed black across the blaze, like a row of teeth; the warriors on the catwalk were silhouetted devils. Davis wondered crazily which of them was Barbara, if Barbara was still alive.

The main gate shuddered and a hinge pulled loose.

Someone galloped toward him on a frantic orsper, leading two others. She jumped from the saddle. "Barbara!" he whispered.

"Valeria again." The girl laughed with scant humor. "Stand aside, I'm going to get you out."

Her ax thudded against the bolt.

"But what—why—"

"We're finished," snapped Valeria. "For now, anyway. For always, unless you can help us. I'm going to get you out, Monster. We'll escape if we can, and see if you can remedy matters."

"But I'm neutral!" gibbered Davis.

Valeria grinned unpleasantly. "I have an ax and a knife, my dear, and nothing to lose. Are you still neutral?"

"No," gulped Davis. "Not if you feel that way about it."

Another orsper ran from the stables, with a rider who led a spare mount. Valeria turned, lifted her ax. "Oh, you."

"Same idea, I see," answered Barbara. *Of course*, thought Davis, *genetic twins normally think alike*. He saw that Barbara strove not to weep. It could be no fun to watch your country conquered.

"Put on your cloak, Monster," ordered Valeria between blows. "Pull the hood up. They won't bother with three people trying to get away . . . unless they know what you are!"

The bolt gave way. Valeria threw the door open. Davis stumbled out, got a foot in a stirrup and swung himself aboard. Valeria mounted another bird at his side, Barbara took the lead. They jogged toward the broken gate, where Claudia and a few guards still smote forlornly at a ring of enemies. The orsper's pace was not so smooth as a horse's, and Davis was painfully reminded that a mounted man does well to wear tight pants. This silly kilt was no help. He stood up in the stirrups, swearing.

Someone ran from the Big House. "Help! Ohhh—" Davis glimpsed Elinor's face, blind with terror. He leaned over, caught her wrist, and whirled her toward a spare orsper.

"Get that pantywaist out of here!" yelled Valeria.

Elinor scrambled up. Barbara

freed her ax and broke into a gallop. Willy-nilly, Davis followed.

A band of women stood before them. A bolt hummed maliciously past his ear. Barbara's orsper kicked with a gruesomely clawed foot. Davis' mount stumbled on something. Valeria leaned over and swung at a shadowy form, sparks showered.

Then they were out of the melee, on the street, into the fields and the forest beyond.

VII

Davis woke up after eclipse. For a moment he knew only one pulsing ache, then memory of his all-night ride came back and he gasped.

Barbara, crouched over a little smokeless fire, preparing a meal from what supplies and equipment had been in the saddlebags, smiled at him. "How are you?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. Oof!" Davis crawled from his bedroll. His legs were so sore from standing as he rode that he didn't think he would ever walk again.

Dousing his head in a nearby spring helped, and he looked around. They had come a goodly ways from Freetoon, into a tall country of ancient woods and steep hillsides. Northward the land climbed higher still, with snow on the peaks. The day was clear and windy, sunlight spilled across green slopes and Minos

brooded remotely overhead. Ay was a searing spark to the east, daily overtaking the closer sun.

"Bertie!"

Davis lurched to his feet as Elinor came from the forest, sleeking back her long hair. She fell into his arms and kissed him.

"Bertie, you saved my life, oh, I'm so grateful . . . do you know, Bertie, I believe you're a Man!"

"You might come slice your Man some bread," said Barbara acidly. "Why did you bring her, Davis? Of all the useless— And good women are dead back in Freetoon!"

Valeria strolled into sight, crossbow on her shoulder and a plump bird in one hand. "Hell," she drawled, "all we need to do is leave the Dyckman beast here. Let her make her own way back."

"I'll die!" screamed Elinor. "There are jacklins in these woods! I'll be killed! You can't — Bertie!"

"Keep out of this, Davis," snapped Valeria.

He blew up. "I'll be damned to Evil if I will!" he roared. "I've been pushed around long enough!"

In his present mood, he would have welcomed an excuse to clip that coppertopped hellion on the jaw, but Barbara intervened just as Valeria pulled a knife. "Enough out of all of you," she said. "We have to stick together. Davis, if you insist, we'll let this . . . Eli-

nor come along till we reach some town. Now sit down and eat!"

"Yes, ma'm," said Davis meekly.

The food was strengthening, it seemed to give him back his manhood. Now that he was out of that filthy jail, he ought to start exercising some choice. He would have given much for a cup of coffee and a cigaret, but neither being available, he opened the council. "What are your plans?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Valeria. Both Whitleys had calmed down as fast as they'd flared up, though Elinor remained tactfully inconspicuous. "Last night I only thought about getting away."

Davis tugged his beard. It itched. "Just what will happen at Freetoon?" he asked. "No massacres, I hope."

"Oh, no," said Barbara. "There've been conquests before. As far as the lower castes are concerned, it's only a change of bosses. And some of the soldiers will take a fresh oath to the new Udall—Dmons, Burkes, Hausers—" She snorted the names. "But families like us, who don't switch loyalties so easily, have to be killed. Though I imagine a lot of our sort got away into the woods. Outlaw life—" She shrugged, woefully.

"All right," said Davis. "But what do you want to *do*? Claudia and her daughters are most likely dead now. You haven't got any chief to be loyal to."

The cousins stared at him and

each other, as if suddenly bewildered. It was a moment before Valeria said savagely:

"Well, the powers of your ship aren't going to be used for Bess Udall of Greendale! Not after she killed barracks mates of mine."

Davis nodded, thinking his own thoughts. If Bess got her hooks on him, the situation would return to what it had been. He wouldn't lift gravs for her without a spear at his back and strict orders to destroy some town which Union law said he must die rather than bombard. He might well be tortured by way of inducement.

Therefore he must recapture his boat, somehow, despite all the guards the victorious allies would mount over it . . . big joke!

Barbara looked at the northern ranges. "We've scant hope of finding help this side of Smoky Pass," she said. "But nobody's crossed the mountains for, oh, generations. They say there are some strange folk living over there. If they'd help . . . we could promise them the loot from the enemy—"

"Wait a minute!" Davis' brain whirred. He was not forbidden by law to use violence against primitives, if it would save himself or rectify an obviously bad turn of affairs. But he doubted that a Co-ordinator board would see eye to eye with Barbara on what constituted rectification. "Look, look here," he stammered. "Wasn't

there a message already sent to this, uh, holy Ship of yours?"

"To the Doctors? Yes," said Valeria. "They would decide—"

"Ah, ha!" Whoever these mysterious Doctors were, they knew enough science to operate a parthenogenesis machine. He'd have a better chance of convincing them of the truth than anyone else. And they could order his boat returned to him!

"Let's go to the Doctors," he said quickly. "They have the final disposition of the case anyway, and we'd be safe there."

"We can't!" said Valeria, quite aghast. "Barbara and I are only Maidens. And *you*—the Ship is sacred to Father!"

"But I'm a man," argued Davis. "Or a monster, if you insist. The rules don't apply to me." He glanced at Elinor. "You're an initiate, aren't you?" She nodded eagerly. "All right. You can escort me through the taboo area."

It took a good deal of wrangling. Being roared down out of bigger lungs was a salutary new experience for the Whitneys. Eventually they agreed, reserving the right to find allies if the Doctors, who seldom mixed in politics, would not order Freetoon liberated. The meaning of "liberation" in such a context was vague to Davis, but the poor lost kids needed something to hope for.

"We'll have to continue north," said Valeria. "Over Smoky Pass

and down through the valleys on the other side to the coast . . . because the Holy River route, all this region, will be full of people hunting you, Davis. Once we reach the coast, we can maybe get passage with the sea-dwellers, back to the Ship at Holy River mouth."

The prospect looked strenuous, thought the man dismally.

At least it was summer. The Atlantean seasons were due only to the eccentricity of Minos' orbit, but he had gathered that hereabouts the variation of weather was considerable. A satellite always facing its primary: permanent tidal bulge, terrific mountains on the inner hemisphere and mostly ocean on the outer . . . oh, well.

He remembered an item. "Do you have a sewing kit?" he asked. "I'll need a, uh—" he blushed—"special garment."

"I'll make it for you," said Barbara helpfully. "Just let me get the measurements."

Davis' ears glowed cadmium red. "No, thanks! You wouldn't understand."

Elinor, who had picked up a little self-confidence, piped: "This trip will take just weeks, won't it? But the Freetoon couriers will have reached the Ship pretty soon. The Doctors will send word back. Why, we may meet one of their legates!"

"That's all right," said Valeria.

"Just so we don't fall into Green-dale hands." She drew a finger across her throat.

"Must you?" said Elinor faintly.

Davis glanced up at Minos. The big planet 5000 Earth masses, was almost half full, its amber face blurred by a crushingly thick hydrogen atmosphere, cloudy bands of dull green and blue and brown, dark blots which were storms large enough to swallow Terra whole. He shivered, It was a long, lonesome way home; the Service wouldn't visit Delta of its own accord for decades, and he didn't think he could survive that long. Why, missing his anti-geriatric treatments would alone cut his life down to a lousy century! *In short, me boy, you've got no choice. You're jolly well on the Whitley team.*

He looked at the cousins and then at Elinor; she smiled back at him. It could be a lot worse, he reflected. One man alone with three beautiful girls—if he couldn't make a good thing out of that, he didn't deserve to . . .

Some days later, Davis Bertram shivered on the heights of the Ridge with Elinor.

It had been a cruel trek, through the forests and then up over the glaciers to this pass. Davis wanted to help with the twins' pot-hunting, at least—he soon mastered the spring-powered repeating crossbow—but Valeria

told him coldly that he walked too loud. Maybe that had been the worst of the situation, the feeling of uselessness. He had always before taken the lead while women watched and made admiring noises.

However, as they rested atop Smoky Pass, in a mordant wind and whirl of dry snow, Elinor shared his ragged cloak.

The range dropped even more steeply on its north side than the southern approach. Davis looked across a downward-rolling immensity of green, veined by rivers, here and there the flash of a lake, and wished for his paints.

"I don't see any signs of man . . . uh, woman . . . down there," he said, "but there must be some. Haven't you any idea what the people are like? Seems you'd all meet at the Ship."

"Oh, no," replied Elinor. "You see, Bertie, each town sends its own parties to be fertilized. It's seldom that two groups are at the Ship at the same time, and even if they are, they don't talk to— Oh, I mustn't say more. But it's *thrilling!*" She clasped her hands. "And safe. Nobody would dare attack a party going to or from the Ship. If anyone did, why, the Doctors would refuse to fertilize that whole town forever after."

Which would be one form of excommunication that really worked, thought Davis. He gave Elinor a sidelong glance. Her nose

was frostbitten and peeling, she had lost weight, but she was still an interesting lesson in solid geometry. And he wanted a lot more information from her, whether it was taboo to non-initiates or not. He was going to enjoy persuading her.

Meanwhile, though, they had to get down where it was warm.

Later he remembered the next two days only as a nightmare of struggle. He could hardly believe it when they reached timberline and the nearly vertical descent began to flatten.

This was a conifer forest, trees not unlike jack pines though the smell was different, sweeter and headier. The ground was thick with brown needles, the orsper footfalls a muted *pad-pad*. They saw only small birds, darting red and gold between bluish-green branches, but there was spoor of big game.

Even Davis could see how worn the orsper were. No choice, they had to rest.

At the end of the day, they reached a king-sized lake. It blinked amiably in the low sunshine, reeds rustled on the banks and fish leaped in the water. "We couldn't find a better campsite," said Barbara.

"Skeeterbugs," said Valeria.

"Not this early in the year."

"Yeh? See here, rockhead, I've seen them when—"

There were no skeeterbugs that

night. This did not improve Valeria's temper.

In the morning, both Whitleys went out afoot after game. Davis and Elinor were to watch the camp and try for fish: there were hooks and lines in the saddlebags. It was a cool, sun-drenched day and a flock of birds with particularly good voices were tuning up nearby. Davis' grin spread.

"What are you so happy about?" Elinor looked grumpily up from scouring the utensils.

"At having you all to myself," admitted Davis candidly. He knew her type. "Let's take a stroll."

"Bertie! No!" Elinor pouted. "I'm so tired."

"As you wish." He sauntered off. In a moment she pattered after him. He took her hand, squeezing it rather more than necessary.

"Bertie! Bertie, be careful, you're so *strong*—"

Davis wandered along the lake-shore, eyes alert for a secluded spot. He was in no hurry: all day before him, and he was going to enjoy the fishing too.

"You're a brave little girl, Elinor," he said. "Coming all this way and—" he paused, took a deep breath, and prepared the Big Lie— "never a complaint from you."

"I could complain," she said bitterly. "Those awful Whitleys. Skin and bones and nasty red hair and tongues like files. They're just jealous."

It might have been profitable to agree, but for some reason Davis couldn't backbite Barbara. "I hope the worst is over," he said. "You ought to tell me what to expect when we reach the Ship."

"I can't, Bertie. I mustn't. Nobody who's been there is allowed to talk about it to anyone who hasn't."

"But I'm a Man," he argued. "You do believe that, don't you?"

"Yes . . . you must be . . . even if your whiskers *tickle*."

Davis stroked his short yellow beard patriarchally. "Well, then," he said, "since the Doctors are only filling in for men . . . I mean . . . Sunblaze!" He backed up and started over. "What are they like, the Doctors?"

"I can't—" Davis stopped for some agreeable physical persuasion. "I mustn't—Mmmmm! Bertie!" After a while: "I really *can't* say. They have this big beautiful town, with the Ship in the very middle. But I never saw a Doctor's face. They're always veiled. Bertie, please! I *mustn't* tell you anything!"

"I can guess. The, uh, fertilizing rite—it involves a machine, doesn't it? A lot of tubes and wires and things?"

"If you know that much," said Elinor, "yes."

Davis nodded absently. The picture was taking shape.

Three hundred years ago, the hyperdrive was new and coloniza-

tion more art than science. You couldn't trust an apparently Earthlike planet; chances were its biochemistry would be lethal to man. It was rare good luck to find a world like Atlantis. Therefore doctrine enjoined caution. First the planet was thoroughly surveyed. Then an all-male party landed, spent two or three years building, analyzing, testing in detail. Finally the women came.

Somewhere in the Service archives of three centuries back lay a record of a female transport with a female crew; you didn't mix the sexes on such a journey unless you wanted trouble. Judging from names, its complement had been purely North American. The ship was bound for a new colony, but vanished. A trepidation vortex, of course, perhaps the same one he had managed to avoid. That was back before anybody knew of such a thing.

The Ship had not been destroyed. It had been tossed at an unthinkable pseudovelocity across hundreds of light-years. The hyperdrive must have been ruined, since it didn't return home. It must have emerged quite near Delta Capitis Lupi, or it would have drifted endlessly at sublight speed till the women died.

Pure good fortune that Atlantis was habitable. But probably the ship had been wrecked in landing, because it seemed never to have lifted gravs again. And there

they were, cut off, no way to call for help and no way to get back.

They had little machinery, no weapons, scant technical knowledge. They did their best—discovered what the edible grains and domesticable fowl were, located mines and established crude smelters, named the planets and moons in classical tradition—but that was all, and their knowledge slipped from them in a few illiterate lifetimes.

But in the first generation there must have been a biochemist. The thought of aging and dying, one by one, with nobody to help the last feeble survivors, was unwelcome. Human parthenogenesis was an ancient technique, though little used. The biochemist had taken what equipment was in the ship to make such a machine.

The right chemicals under the right conditions would cause a single ovum to divide. Once that process was initiated, it followed the normal course, and in nine months a child was born, genetically identical with the mother.

"Three hundred years of virgin birth!" mumbled Davis. "An appalling situation. It will have to be remedied."

"What are you talking about?" asked Elinor.

"You'll find out," he grinned.

They had come to a little bay, with soft grass down to the water's edge, rustling shade trees, the mountains looming titanic above.

Flowers blossomed fiery underfoot and small waves chuckled against the shore.

It was, in short, an ideal spot for a seduction.

Davis planted his fishing pole in a forked twig, laid aside his weapons, sat down, and extended an invitational arm. Elinor sighed and snuggled up to him.

"Just think," she whispered. "The first Man in three hundred years!"

"High time, isn't it?" said Davis thickly.

"Ah . . . your kilt . . . what's the matter?"

"Never mind." Davis gathered her in. Their necking became furious. He fumbled at her belt buckle. She closed her eyes, breathing hard. His other hand slid up her thigh.

Something roared behind him.

Davis leaped a meter in the air from a prone position. Elinor screamed.

The thing looked like a saw-beaked, penguin-feathered seal, but bigger. It had swallowed his hook and was quite indignant. The flippers shot it up on the shore and over the grass at express speed.

Elinor tried to get to her feet. The fluke-like legs batted out. She went rolling and lay still. Davis clawed for his ax. He chopped wildly, saw blood run, but the damned soft iron wouldn't bite on that thick skull.

The seal-bird knocked him down and snapped at his face. Jaws closed on the ax haft and crunched it across. Davis got a hand on the upper and lower mandibles, threw a leg over the long sleek back and heaved. The brute roared and writhed. He felt his strength pour out of him, the teeth were closing on his fingers.

A crossbow bolt hummed and buried itself in the wet flank. Another and another. Barbara ran over the grass, shooting as she went. The monster turned its head and Davis yanked his hands free.

"Get away!" yelled Barbara.

Her bow was empty now. She crouched, drawing her knife, and plunged toward the creature. It reared up. She jammed her left arm under its beak, forced the head back, and slashed.

The seal-bird fell on her. Davis glimpsed a slim leg beneath its belly. He picked up his own bow and fired pointblank, again and again, hardly aware of what he did. Blood gurgled in the monster's voice.

Then it slumped, and the arterial spurting was only a red flow across slippery grass.

"Barbara—" Davis tugged at the weight, feeble and futile. His own throat rattled.

The leg stirred. Barbara forced her way out from under.

She stood up, gasping, adrip with blood, and stared at him. His knees gave way.



"Are you all right?" she whispered. "Bert, darling, are you all right?"

"Yeh." His palms were lacerated, but it was nothing serious. "You?"

"Oh, th-th-this isn't my blood." She laughed shortly, sank to her knees before him, and burst into tears.

"There, there." He patted the bronze head, clumsy and unsure of himself. "It's all over, Barbara, it's finished now . . . Sunblaze, we've got meat for the pot—"

She shook herself, wiped her eyes, and gave him an angry stare. "You fool!" she snuffled. "If I hadn't h-h-happened to be near . . . heard the noise . . . oh, you blind gruntbrain!"

"Guess I've got that coming," said Davis.

Elinor stirred, looked around, and started to cry. Since she wasn't much hurt, she got no attention. "Well!" she muttered.

Barbara swallowed her rage. "I never saw a thing like this before," she admitted. "I suppose you couldn't have known, Bert. You were giving it a hell of a good fight. And it is meat."

"Thanks," he said weakly. . . .

VIII

When Valeria had blown off enough pressure by a magnificent description of Davis' altogether negligible intelligence, she fin-

ished: "We'll start out again tomorrow."

"Oh, yes!" babbled Elinor. "Those things in the lake—"

"What about the orspers?" demanded Barbara.

"Ride 'em till they drop, child, and continue on foot," said Valeria. "It'll be quicker."

"Don't call me child!" exploded Barbara. "I'm only three days younger than you, and my brain is twenty years older!"

"Girls, girls," began Davis. Valeria's scarred left hand dropped to her dagger, and he shut up and let the twins argue.

Barbara gave in at last, against her better judgment . . . after all, if they camped longer, Davis and Elinor were sure to— Only why should she care? What was a Monster to her?

She regarded him with concern. He had seemed such a big coward, she reflected; and yet he had fought the lake bird to save Elinor's life . . . Damn Elinor! If Davis had died on her account— Maybe, she thought, his unwillingness to fight was only a different way of thinking. A Man wouldn't think like a woman.

But it was heresy to admit this creature barely two meters tall, who could sweat and bleed and be afraid, was a Man!

And yet, when you got used to him, he was a beautiful creature, beard like spun gold and blue eyes that crinkled when he laughed

. . . his hand brushed her knee, accidentally, and for a moment it seemed to burn and she got all weak and the world wobbled. What was wrong with her? She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Vague dreams chased through her head, she performed heroic deeds before his eyes, now they were together under a full Minos—

"Damn!" said Barbara.

"What's the matter?" asked Davis.

"Oh, nothing." His gaze made her want to squirm. "Leave me alone, will you?— No, I didn't mean that!"

All the next day, as they rode deeper into the valley, she churned over a new thought. Just suppose Davis *was* really a Man. What then? Yes . . . voice the thought, wait for Father's thunderbolt . . . when none came, Barbara's universe quivered and lost a few bricks.

He was at least a very dear Monster, with his songs and laughter, and he came from the stars. The stars! Man or no, he could bring the Men, and Atlantis would never be the same again.

Even if no Men ever came, she thought with sudden tears, her own Atlantis was dead. Let her return in triumph, driving out the enemy from Freetoon, return to the comradeship of the barracks and the unforgotten forest, Holy River below her like a dawn

knife and the remote lance of the High Gaunt wreathed with cloud ←for her, after knowing Davis, it would be too narrow and lonesome. She could never really go home.

She wanted to blurt her woe to him. It was not the Whitley way, but there would be a strange comfort, like having her mother back . . . only he would not hold her like her mother—

For lack of anyone else, she confided in Valeria. They were sitting up by the campfire while the others slept.

"It would be better if the Men came," agreed her cousin. "We've never lived as Father meant us to. We've just hung on, hoping, for three hundred years."

Barbara felt a smile tug her mouth. "It would be fun to have a Man-child," she murmured. "A kid like his father—like both of us mixed together—" Suddenly: "Val! I've been thinking . . . I almost believe Bert is a Man!"

"Rotten specimen of one, then," snapped Valeria.

Barbara felt puzzled. Her twin was an obstinate nuisance, yes, but so was she. They had never thought so unlike before now.

On the following day, the descent became so steep that they had to lead the orspers. Toward evening they found themselves on the stony floor of a large canyon. The river flowing through it was

broad as a lake, brown and swift, toppling in a kilometer-high waterfall over a cliff behind them. The air was subtropically warm, this was a much lower country than Freetoon's.

"These birds are about finished if they don't get a long rest," ventured Elinor. She sighed. "So am I."

"Maybe we can find someone around here who'll trade us," suggested Davis. "Look, whether you believe I'm a Man or not, I can sure as Evil act the part, overawe them, demand their help."

"It's blasphemy!" said Valeria.

Barbara looked down at her own tanned form, saw no signs of shriveling, and grew skeptical of Father with a speed that astonished her. "Are you afraid to try, Val?" she purred.

"All right, then!" snarled the other Whitley. "If this oaf can act like a Man, all right."

They were up before Bee-rise the next day, trudging downstream along the barren riverbank. The first dawn-glow showed the end of their search.

An island, some ten kilometers across, lifted sheer cliffs from the water to a luxuriance of trees on its crown. There was no access but a suspension bridge from the shore to the heights. Barbara's crossbow clanked into position. "So we've found somebody," she murmured.

"The question," said Valeria, "is

who, and what can we talk them out of? Go to it, Davis."

He advanced to the foot of the bridge, cupped hands around his mouth, and bawled: "Hello, up there! We come in peace!" Echoes clamored from the canyon wall. There was a waiting.

Then a slender girl clad in long brown hair and a few flowers stepped from beneath the trees to the bridgehead. She carried an arbalest, but didn't aim it. "Who are you?" she called timidly.

"She's a Craig," muttered Barbara to Davis. "At home they're all poets and weavers. Now why would a Craig be on sentry-go?"

Davis drew himself up. "Know that I am a Man, come from Earth to redeem the old promise," he intoned. Barbara smothered a giggle.

"Oh!" The Craig dropped her bow and broke into a tremble. "A Man—Ohhhh!"

"I come as the vanguard of all the Men, that they may return to their loyal women and drive evil from Atlantis," boomed Davis. "Let me cross your bridge that I may, uh, claim your help in my, er, crusade. Yes, that's it, crusade."

The Craig squeaked and fell on her face. Davis led his tatter-demalion party over the bridge. The timing was perfect: Bee just rising in a golden blaze over the great waterfall above them. On the other side of the bridge, there

was a downward path. The island was cup-shaped, holding trees in orderly groves, clipped grass, brilliant flowerbeds.

A few more women emerged from the foliage. They were as sleek, sun-tanned, and informally clad as the first one. And their reactions were just as satisfactory, a spectrum from abasement to awed gaping.

"More Craigs, couple of Salmons, a Holloway, an O'Brien," murmured Valeria. "Artist, artisan, entertainer classes at home—where are the warriors?"

A Holloway cleared her throat shyly and blushed. "We never thought there would be such an honor for us," she said. "We thought when the Men came, they'd—I mean—"

Davis puffed himself up. "Do you doubt I am a Man?" he roared.

"Oh, no, ma'm!" The Holloway cringed back from possible thunderbolts. Her voice, like that of all the islanders, had a melodiousness which betokened long training.

"Where's your Udall?" asked Valeria impatiently.

"Udall, ma'm?" The Craig they had first seen looked confused. "No Udalls here. Just us, ma'm."

No Udall! Barbara's mind staggered. But, but it wasn't possible!

"We'll take you to Prezden Yvonne Craig, ma'm," offered the Holloway.

"Do so." Davis beamed. "Inci-

dentally, 'sir' would be more suitable than 'ma'm'. And don't . . . I mean, be not afraid. Rejoice!"

Another puzzling alienness—the islanders needed no more than the Man's consent to start rejoicing! Like children! When they had walked through two kilometers of parkscape, the whole population swarmed out to meet them, laughing, singing, dancing, striking up music for them. Altogether they numbered about a thousand, including children, and all bore plain signs of good, easy living.

Their village was surprisingly large. Barbara decided dazedly that they didn't have barracks at all. Each of these simple grass huts was for no more than one woman and her children. The concept of privacy was so new it felt like a hammerblow.

She was led to a hut, and goggle-eyed girls brought her eggs, fruits, small sweet cakes, and sang to her while she ate. Only slowly did her mind stumble from the wreckage of its own axioms and wonder what Davis was up to. . . .

As a matter of fact, Davis, the past weeks catching up with him, had gone to sleep. He woke near sunset, donned the embroidered kilt, plumed headdress, and gold ornaments laid out for him, and strolled from the shack to find a banquet in preparation.

Valeria stood waiting for him

In the long mellow B-light. She had loosened her red hair and discarded armor for a kilt and lei, but the scarred left hand rested on her dagger. They started together across the green toward a dais draped with feather cloaks, where Barbara stood talking to a Craig who held a carved staff.

"We seem to have found the kind of place we deserve," he said.

Valeria snorted. "Oh, yes, they're friendly enough—but gutless. This island is *too* easy to defend. They fish, raise fowl, have fruits the year round, all the metal they need . . . spend their time on arts, poetry, craft, music—" She ended her list with a vulgarity.

Glancing at delicately sculptured wood, subtly designed decoration, intricate figure dancing, listening to choral music which was genuinely excellent, Davis got fed up with Valeria. Narrow-minded witch! Her own rather repulsive virtues, hardihood and fearlessness, would be as redundant here as fangs on a turtle.

"What's the place called?" he asked coldly.

"Lysum. There was a conquered town about a hundred years ago that a lot of its people ran away from. Up the river there's a settlement of nothing but Burkes. These people are all from the same class . . . Oh, here we are. Prezden Yvonne Craig, Davis Bert."

The woman stood up for him. She was in her middle thirties,

and given a stronger chin would have been quite pretty—though Barbara, in kilt and lei, was unfair competition. "Be welcome among us, Man." Now that the first shock had worn off, she spoke with confidence. "Atlantis has never known a happier day. Oh, we're so thrilled!"

Davis looked around. "Where's Elinor?"

"Still pounding her ear," clipped Barbara. "Want to wait?"

"Cosmos, no! When do we—I mean, let the banquet begin."

Rank, as the women of Lysum settled themselves on the grass, seemed strictly according to age. It was pleasant to be in a casteless society again. The food was delicious, and there was course after course of it, and the wooden winebowls were kept filled.

Suppressing a burp, Davis leaned toward Yvonne. "I am pleased with what I have seen here," he told her.

"You are so sweet . . . er, gracious," she trilled happily.

"But elsewhere there is devilment on the loose. I am only the vanguard of the Men. Before all of them can come, the wrongdoers of Atlantis must be punished."

Yvonne looked alarmed. Valeria, flanking Davis on the seat with Barbara, leaned over and hissed: "No help here. I told this featherbelly we'd want some spears to follow us, and she damn near fainted."

"Mmmm . . . yes." Davis felt a moment's grimness. He couldn't stay holed up here forever. No wonder Val was so down on the islanders. Not a bad girl, Val, in her waspish way. Davis tilted his winebowl. His free arm stole around Barbara's waist. She regarded him mistily.

"Strong, this drink," she said. "Not beer. Wha's it called?"

"A jug of wine, and thou," smiled Davis.

"Bubbles in my head . . ." Barbara leaned against him.

The Prezden gave him a large-eyed look. Minos-light streamed over sprawling feminine shapes. "Will you take your pleasure of us all tonight, sir?" she inquired.

"Yipe!" said Davis.

"Like hell you will!" Barbara sat straight up and glared at him.

Yvonne looked bewildered. Barbara was quite tight enough to start an argument, which would never do. Davis gritted his teeth and said: "No, thanks. Tonight I must, urp, think on weighty problems. I would be alone."

Yvonne bent her long-tressed head. "As the Man wishes. My house is his." Her dignity collapsed in a titter. "I am his, too, if he changes his mind. Any of us would be so *thrilled*—" She rose and clapped her hands. "The Man wishes to be alone tonight," she called. "All you girls scat!"

Davis gaped. It was not what he had meant. Too late now, of

course. A god couldn't say, "Hoy, wait!"

Valeria stood up, put an arm under Barbara's shoulders, and raised her tottery cousin. "I'll see her to bed," she said frostily.

Davis watched them disappear into one of the huts. "Death and destruction!" he said, and poured himself another drink.

He was tipsy, but there was no sleep in him. Presently he wandered off across a dewed sward, under the light-spattered shade of high trees, and stood on the island rim looking across a broken wilderness of stone and water and moonlight.

The fact is, me boy, and we might as well face it with our usual modesty, Barbara is in love with me. Maybe she doesn't quite realize it yet, but I know the symptoms. Well?

Well, so if they could only shake that Valeria hornet and that rather cloying Elinor, they could have a lot of fun. Only somehow Barbara Whitley wasn't a person you could simply have fun with. Davis grew a little scared. Cosmos sunder it, he didn't want to be tied down yet!

So, since he couldn't get away from her, he'd have to remove temptation by curing her of her feelings. In the absence of electronic psychadjusters, he thought woozily, he could do that by making her mad at him—say, by exercising his Man's prerogatives

with, yes, with Yvonne . . . who must be very disappointed in him . . . he grinned and started down toward the village.

As he emerged from a grove into the unreal light, he stopped short. A tall form approached him. "Barbara," he stammered.

She came to him, smiling and shaking the loose red hair down over her back, but her eyes were big, solemn, a little afraid. "Bert," she said. "I have to talk to you." She halted and stood with hands clasped behind her, like a child. Davis swallowed, because she was not at all like a child in other respects.

"Uh . . . sure . . . you got rid of that spitchat cousin of yours, I see," he began feebly.

"She's asleep. I wanted this to be between us two."

"Uh, yes, of course. Can't settle anything with Valeria around. Ask her a civil question and you get a civil war."

"Val . . . oh." Light and shadow flowed across the girl. Suddenly: "What do you have against Valeria?"

"She's just a natural-born shrew, I suppose," he shrugged.

"She means well. It's only that she—never quite knows what to say . . . we *are* of the same blood, I know her and—"

"Scuttle Valeria!" said Davis impulsively. "Come here, you!"

She crept into his arms, her hands stole around his neck and

he kissed her. She responded with an endearing clumsiness.

"I couldn't stand it, Bertie," she gulped. "You and all those other women—what's happened to me?"

"Poor little Babs." He stroked her hair. "Sit down."

They spent quite a while without words. He was delighted to see how fast she learned. Here in the shadow of the fronttrees, she was only a warm breathing shape close to him.

After a time, she blurted: "Do whatever you want, Bertie."

Davis reached for her—and pulled up cold.

It was one thing to seduce an Elinor or an Yvonne. Barbara was a different case entirely: too whole-hearted, it would hurt her too much when he finally left. And . . . and . . . oh, there were all the practical objections, a long dangerous road ahead and so on. At the same time—no he *could* not rebuff her or humiliate her into storming off.

"Well?" she asked with a hint of testiness.

"Well, this is a serious matter," said Davis frantically. "You should think it over . . . look here . . . but—"

"But nothing!" Small calloused hands closed on his wrists.

Davis talked. And talked. And talked. He wasn't sure what he said, but it included words like sanctity. At the end, sweating, he

asked her if she understood at all.

"No," she sighed. "But I imagine you know best."

"I wonder—never mind! Of course I do."

"There'll be other times, darling. Whenever you want to fer—"

"Cut that out!" groaned Davis. "Give me a kiss and go to bed."

She gave him a lengthy one. Then, rising: "There's one thing, dearest. The others in our party—you know it could make trouble—don't let's let on to *anyone*. Don't even talk to me about it unless I say the coast is clear."

"All right. That does make sense. Run along, sweetheart."

"Goodnight, Bertie. I care for you."

"The word," he said, "is 'love.'"

"I love you, then." She laughed, with a little sob, and sped off.

She ran like a deer, Davis thought. Evil, why couldn't she be trained for spatial survey? Married teams were common enough.

The girl stumbled. She spread her hands, regained balance, and continued.

Davis felt the wind go out of him. There had been a scar on her left hand. . . .

IX

Barbara woke up and wished she hadn't. What had she been drinking?

She rolled over on her stomach and buried her face in her hands. Foggy recollections came back, yes, Val had helped her to bed and then she passed out . . . Davis making eyes at that Yvonne trollop—Father!

A young O'Brien entered with breakfast, which helped. Barbara tottered out into the open. It was a little past eclipse, and the islanders were going leisurely about their business. Prezden Yvonne ran warbling to greet her, received a bloodshot glare, and backed off. Barbara smoldered her way toward a fruit grove.

Valeria came into sight, wringing out her hair. "O, hello, little one," she grinned. "I recommend a swim. The water's fine."

"What have you got to be so Father-damned happy about?" groused Barbara.

Valeria did a few steps of the soldier's ax dance. "Beautiful, beautiful day," she caroled. "I love this place!"

"Then it's too bad we're getting the hell out of here."

"Whatever for?"

"What reason is there to stay?" Barbara kicked miserably at the turf. "So Davis can make up to all the women in Lysum? I suppose he's still sleeping it off."

"Well, he did go to bed quite late, poor dear. But he just walked around, thinking." Valeria flushed at Barbara's look. "I couldn't sleep—sat up watching."

Quickly, she jumped after a red fruit and crunched it between small white teeth. "Look, Babs, we do need a rest. So do our orspers; there aren't any here."

"Don't you know?" said Barbara. "One of those yuts told me yesterday. This river runs straight to the sea. They have boats here, we'll take one and make the trip twice as fast. The Lysumites get to the Ship that way—buy passage from—"

"Oh, hell, Babs. Life's too good to waste. I say let's stay here a few more days, at least." Valeria wandered off.

Barbara drifted glumly to the bridge. She didn't like the idea. That Yvonne—ugh!

A swim did help. Seated again on the rocky bank, she found her head clear enough to hold the problem. Which was that she wanted Davis for herself.

Just what that would mean, she wasn't sure, but the thought made her hot and cold by turns. She no longer doubted he was a Man, but it wasn't just any Man, it was *him*. Hell fry her if she let anyone else get him!

Then the thing to do was sneak out tonight, find him and— It took more courage than facing a wounded stamper. But to know where she stood and what she meant to do about it was like a fresh cup of that wine drink. She put her kilt back on and returned almost merrily.

Davis was just emerging from his hut. He looked wretched. Barbara's heart turned over with pity, she ran toward him calling his dear name and wondered why he jerked.

"Bert, what's the matter? Don't you feel well?"

"No," said Davis hollowly.

Valeria joined them, walking in a new undulant fashion. Was everybody falling sick? "Lemme out of here," Davis muttered.

The musical winding of a horn interrupted them.

"Somebody's coming," said Barbara. "Over the bridge."

"It may not mean anything," said Valeria, "but let's get out of the way, just in case. Better collect the Dyckman."

Barbara nodded and ran off. Elinor, stretching herself languorously before a burly Holloway, found herself suddenly prodded up the slope at dagger point. Valeria and Davis joined them in a tanglewood stand on the rim. They stood peering through the leaves at a bustle down in the village, the Lysumites leaping to form ceremonial ranks.

"Father!" breathed Valeria. "It's a legate—messenger from the Doctors!"

The awe of a lifetime rose within Barbara. She had rarely seen a legate; now and then one had come to Freetoon to discuss such matters as the payment of annual tribute.

This was a tall woman. She wore a travel-stained uniform: hooded blue cloak, trousers and boots under a white gown, heavy veil. She was mounted on an orsper and led remounts and a pack-bird. As she stepped to earth, Yvonne prostrated herself.

Valeria snapped her fingers. "Of course!" she said excitedly. "Messengers from Freetoon to the Ship . . . remember? The Doctors must have sent to every town to inquire—"

"Well," said Davis. "Well, this is terrific! Our troubles are over, girls."

The veiled woman entered a hut. Her baggage was brought in after her, then she was alone. A party of women ran up the slope, calling: "Man! Man, the legate wants to see you!"

Davis smiled importantly and led the way down. He seated himself on the dais, much to the shock of the crowded islanders—nobody sat in a Doctor's presence!—and waited. Stillness lay thick.

When the legate finally emerged, Barbara's knees bumped together.

The woman had changed into ceremonials: green robe, gloved hands holding a metal staff, a plumed mask in the shape of an orsper head covering her own and making it coldly unhuman.

Davis got up. "Hello, ma'm," he smiled. There was no answer. He faltered. "I am the Man," he

stumbled. "You, uh, know about me?"

"Yes," said the legate. She had a low voice and a stiff accent. "The Ship and all Atlantis have awaited the Men for three hundred years. How many of you are there?"

"Just me," said Davis. "I need your help—the Doctors' help. Otherwise," he finished dramatically, "there won't be any Men coming for a long time yet."

The legate neither moved nor spoke. Davis looked disconcerted, but launched into his story. He warmed up to it as he went along, and clenched his fists to emphasize the main point: the Doctors could order his boat returned to him, and he would fetch the Men. Barbara thought he looked much too smug, but lovable all the same.

At the end, the legate asked coolly: "Have you any weapons?"

"No, I told you. Just this dirk here. But—"

"I understand."

She strode from him, toward the bridge guards who stood holding their bows in what Barbara considered a miserable approximation of dress parade. Her voice rang out:

"This is no Man, it's a Monster. Kill it!"

X

For a moment nobody stirred. The legate whirled on Yvonne.

"I order you in the name of Father," she cried. "Kill the filthy thing!"

Barbara had no time to think. She jumped, snatched a bow from a half paralyzed guard, and lifted it to her shoulder. "The first one of you to move gets a bolt in the belly," she announced.

Valeria's dagger flared directly before the legate. "And this witch gets a slit throat," she added. Her voice cracked across. "Hold still, you!"

In Freetoon the arbalests would have been snapping already. But these were a timid folk who had not known battle for generations. "Drop your weapons," said Barbara. She swiveled her own from guard to guard. Armament clattered to the grass. A moan went through the densely packed crowd.

Davis shook a benumbed head. "What's the matter?" he croaked. "I am a Man. Give me a chance to prove it!"

"You've already proved yourself a Monster by assaulting the Ship's own envoy," shouted the legate. "Prezden, do your duty!"

Yvonne Craig shuddered her way backward, lifting helpless hands. "You mustn't," she whimpered. "You can't—"

Through a haze of terror, Barbara saw Davis shake himself. He spoke swiftly then: "Unless you want to die, lady, you'd better tell these people to obey us."

Valeria emphasized the request

with a dagger flourish. Malevolence answered him: "So be it, then . . . for now! Don't think you'll escape Father."

Davis turned to the Whitleys. He was pale and breathed hard, but the words rattled from him: "We have to get out of here. Keep these people covered. I'll take charge. You, you, you, you—" his finger chose young, horror-smitten girls. "Fetch out all our stuff. And the legate's pack. And food, plenty of it. Elinor, pick up some bows."

"No—no, you Monster," she gasped.

"Suit yourself," he laughed harshly. "Stay here if you want to be torn to pieces as soon as we're gone."

Shaking, she collected an armful of weapons.

When the supplies were ready, Davis led his group up the path, a scared and sullen village trailing them several meters behind and staring into the Whitley bowsights. Once over the bridge, he cut the cables with a few hard strokes. The bridge collapsed into the water and broke up.

"How do we get back?" cried a young Holloway.

"You can swim out and let 'em lower ropes for you," said Davis. "Now, take us to those boats I heard somebody mention."

The burdened women trudged along the shaly bank while Yvonne stood on the cliffs and howled loyal curses. On the other side of

a bluff, jutting into the river, a score of long slim bark canoes with carved stemposts were drawn up. Davis told his prisoners to load one. "And set the others afire," he added to Barbara.

She nodded mutely and took forth tinder and fire piston from her pouch. Flame licked across the hulls. Her mind felt gluey, she didn't know if she could have moved without him to think for her.

"All right, said Davis when the job was done. "Scram, you females. Boo!" He waved his arms and the youngsters fled screaming.

Barbara took a certain satisfaction in binding the legate's wrists and ankles and tossing her among

the bundles. Elinor huddled near the captive, big help she'd be! They shoved the canoe into the river and climbed aboard. Davis demonstrated the use of paddles, set Valeria in the bow and Barbara in the stern, and said he and Elinor could spell them.

Ariadne rose above Ay-set, and Theseus was already up. It would be a bright night. Father! Barbara could have wished for clouds, she felt so exposed under the naked sky. There was a blotch on Minos like a great bloodshot eye glaring down at her.

No, she told herself, Father was a lie . . . at least, the stiff lightning-tossing Father of the Ship did not exist, or if he did



then Bert with his long legs and blue eyes and tawny beard was a stronger god. Merely looking at him made her want to cry.

He grinned and wiped sweat off his face. "Holy Valdaoth, I don't want to go through that again!" he said.

Valeria looked over her shoulder. "But we got away," she whispered. "Thanks to you, we got away."

"To me? Thunderation! If you two hadn't— Well, let's take the cash and let the credit go." He regarded the legate thoughtfully. "I wonder what's beneath that helmet," he said.

He lifted the gilt orsper head. Barbara, who had half expected halocs or some such item, was almost disappointed when the ash-blond hair and coldly regular features of a Trevor appeared.

Elinor covered her eyes and crouched shivering. "I d-d-didn't want to see, ma'm," she pleaded.

"You've fallen into bad company, child," said the Trevor. Then, to Davis: "Are you satisfied, Monster?"

"No." He ran a hand through unkempt yellow hair and asked plaintively: "What have you got against me? Don't you know I'm a Man? You must have *some* biological knowledge to operate that parthenogenetic wingding."

"You aren't a Man." The Trevor lay back, scowling in the light that spilled from the sky.

After a moment, Davis murmured: "I see. It's a common enough pattern in history. You Doctors have had it soft for a long time. You must always have dreaded the day when the Men would finally arrive and upset your little wagon. When I told you I'm alone and there won't be any others for a long time yet if I don't return—well, your bosses at the Ship must already have told you what to do if that was the case."

"You're a Monster!" said the Trevor. Dogmatic as ever.

"Even if you honestly thought I was, you wouldn't have ordered them to cut me down. Even a Monster could go home and call the true Men. No, no, my friend, you're a pretty sophisticated lot at the Ship, and you've just decided to rub out the competition."

"Be still before Father strikes you dead!" she cried.

"Legates sent to every town," went on Davis. "Orders to learn what the facts are—dicker with the Men if there really are a number of them or if they can call for help; otherwise kill them and deny everything."

"I'd like to kill *her*," said Barbara between her teeth.

"Babs, have you any idea who the Doctors are . . . how many, what families?"

She frowned, trying to remember. A child always picked up scraps of information meant only

for initiates . . . she overheard this, was blabbed that by a garrulous helot. "There are a few thousand of them, I believe. And they're said to be of the best families."

"Uh-huh. I thought so. Inferior types couldn't maintain this system. Even with that tremendous monopoly of theirs, there'd have been more conflict between Church and State unless— Yeh. Trevors, Whitleys, Burkes, that sort—the high castes of Freetoon, with the wits and courage and personality to override any local chief. Well."

Barbara shoved her paddle through murmurous moonlit waters. "But what are we going to do?" she asked in helplessness.

"I think—yes. I really think we can get away with it." Davis took a long breath. "The word from Lysum will be far behind us. Now, either of you two is about the size of this dame. You can pass for a legate yourself—"

Barbara choked. After a moment, Valeria shook her head. "No, Bert. It can't be done. Every child in the soldier families gets that idea as soon as it can talk: why not pass a Freetoon Whitley off as a Greendaler? There are countersigns to prevent just that."

"It isn't what I meant," said Davis. "Look here. How are the sea people to know you're not a genuine legate, bringing back a genuine Man? Only, on his be-

half, you requisition an escort and a lot of fast orsperers. We ride back to Freetoon, demand my own boat—oh, yes, our pseudo-legate can also order your town set free. Then we all hop into my spaceship and ride to Nerthus—and return with a thousand armed Men!"

Barbara thought dazedly that only he could have forged such a plan.

XI

Eighteen Atlantean days later, the canoe nosed into Shield Skerry harbor.

The enormous, shifting tides raised by the other great moons turned the coasts into salt marshes at ebb, brackish lakes at flow. But the local life had adapted, there were even trees and grass, and a few of the low-caste families lived here, sunken to a naked neolithic stage but available as guides. Valeria, impressive in robe and veil, commandeered their help.

Davis had tried to quiz the legate. Beyond the information that her name was Joyce and he was a Monster destined for hell's hottest griddle, she would tell him nothing.

For Davis, lack of privacy and the weariness of incessant paddling had its good points. It staved off his own problem. The notion that someday he'd face it again—maybe alone in space with two jealous

Whitleys, because he couldn't leave them defenseless against the Doctors' revenge—made his nerves curl up and quiver at the ends.

Unless he gave himself to a psychadjuster on Nerthus and had his own hankerings electronically exorcised—which he didn't want to do—he would have to pick one or the other. And now that he knew them both, he couldn't choose!

What have I done to deserve this?

Elinor had been very quiet on the trip. She made herself useful to Joyce, probably too scared of both sides to reach a decision. Davis felt sorry for her, in a patronizing fashion.

And then finally they were out of the marsh.

The chief Nicholson had told him in her barely intelligible argot that there were many many seafolk on many many islands, that Shield Skerry was only a port for the inland trade. Davis looked eagerly ahead. Behind him the swamps were a vaporous gray, low in the sea, a storm of shrieking birds made a white wing-cloud under Minos and the two suns—otherwise there were only the huge foam-flanked waves that marched out of the west. The water was a chill steely bluish-gray, the wind shrill in his ears.

The rock was nearly hidden by the stone walls erected on its

back: massive blocks cut square, a primitive lighthouse where oil fires behind glass burned in front of polished copper reflectors, two long jetties enclosing a small harbor. As they entered this, Davis saw that a good-sized ship—by Atlantean standards—was in. A capstan-powered crane was unloading baled cargo. Strong sun-tanned women bustled about, barefoot, clad in wide trousers and halters, their hair cut off just below the ears. Beyond the dock were warehouses and dwelling units. They were of stone, with shingle roofs, in the same uncompromising angular style as the town wall and the pharos.

The ship was carvel-built, with a high poop and a corroded bronze winged-fish figurehead. Davis guessed it had a deep draught and a centerboard, to maintain freeway in these tricky waters. There was no mast, but a windmill arrangement turned idly amidships. What off Earth—? Otherwise the harbor held only a few boats, swift-looking, more or less yawl-rigged.

"Highest technology I've seen here," he remarked.

"What? Oh, you mean their skills," said Barbara. "Yes, they say the seafolk are the best smiths in the world. It's even said their captains can read writing, like Doctors."

Davis assumed that the pelagic colonies were old, founded per-

haps before the final breakdown of castaway civilization. The sea held abundant food if you knew how to get it. "What kind of people are they?" he asked.

"We don't know much about them in the uplands," said Barbara.

"Well," said Davis, "we'll find out pretty quick." His stomach was a cold knot within him.

Work at the dock was grinding to a halt. Women swarmed from the buildings and hurried down tortuous cobbled streets. "A *legate*, another *legate*, and *who's that with her?*"

Valeria did not thank their guides, it wouldn't have been in character. She stepped haughtily onto the quay. Davis followed. Barbara nudged the wrist-bound Trevor with a knife and urged her after. Elinor slunk behind.

There was a crowd now, pushing and shoving. A few must be police or guards—they wore conical, visored helmets and scaly corselets above their pants. Davis noticed flamboyant tattoos, earrings, thick gold bracelets . . . and on all classes. A Nicholson stood arm in arm with a Latvala, a Craig pushed between a Whitley and a Burke, a Holloway carrying a blacksmith's hammer gave amiable backchat to a Trevor with spear and armor.

Valeria raised her staff. "Quiet!" she shouted.

The babble died away, bit by

bit. A gray-haired woman, stocky and ugly, added a roar: "Shut up, you scupperheads!" She was an Udall, Davis recognized uneasily. She turned to Valeria and gave a crude salute.

"Are you in charge?" asked the girl.

"Reckon I am, ma'm, being the skipper of this tub . . . *Fishbird* out o' Farewell Island, she is. Nelly Udall, ma'm, at your service."

Joyce Trevor opened her mouth. She was white with anger. Barbara nudged her and she closed it again.

Valeria stood solemnly for a moment. It grew quiet enough to hear the waves bursting on the breakwater. Then she lifted her veiled face and cried: "Rejoice! I have brought a Man!"

It had the desired effect, though a somewhat explosive one. Davis was afraid his admirers would trample him to death. Nelly Udall cuffed back the most enthusiastic and bellowed at them. "Stand aside! Belay there! Show some respect, you—" What followed brought a maidenly blush to Barbara herself, and she was a cavalry girl.

When the racket had quieted somewhat, Davis decided to take charge. "I am a Man," he said in his deepest voice. "The legate found me in the hills and brought me here. She knows you are a pious people."

"Bless you, dearie," said the Udall through sudden tears. "Sure, we're pious as hell. Any Father-damned thing you want, ma'm, just say so."

"But there is evil afoot," boomed Davis. "Before all the Men can come, you must aid me to destroy the evil in Atlantis."

A certain awe began to penetrate those hard skulls. The show was rolling. Davis turned to Nelly Udall. "I would speak with you and your counselors in private," he said.

She looked confused. "Sure . . . sure, ma'm. Yes, your man-ship. You mean my first mate?"

"Oh . . . no authority here, is there? Well where does the Udall of the sea dwellers live?"

"What Udall? I'm just me."

"Who is your queen, chief, president—who makes the decisions?"

"Why, why, Laura Macklin is the preemer, ma'm," stuttered Nelly. "She's at New Terra, that's the capital. Did you want everybody to come there and vote, ma'm?"

A republic was about the last thing Davis had expected to find. But it was plausible, now that he thought about it. Even under Atlantean conditions, it would be hard to establish despotism among a race of sailors. The cheapest catboat with a few disgruntled slaves aboard could sail as fast as the biggest warship.

"Never mind," he said majestically. "I'm afraid you misunderstood me, Captain Udall. Take us to a place where we can talk alone with you."

"Yes, ma'm!" Nelly's eyes came to light on Joyce Trevor's sullen face. She jerked a horny thumb toward the prisoner. "Enemy of yours, ma'm? I'll chop her up personally."

"That will not be required," said Davis. "Bring her along."

Elinor cringed back, looking at the Udall from terrified eyes.

"Awright, awright, clear a way!" roared Nelly. "Stand aside there, you bilge drinkers!" Her fist emphasized the request, but nobody seemed to mind. Tough lot.

Davis led his party after her, through a narrow street to a smoky kennel with an anchor painted on the gable. "We'll use this tavern," said Nelly. "Break open a keg of — No, you fishbrains! This is private! Git!" She slammed the door in a hundred faces.

Davis coughed. When his eyes were through watering, he saw a room under sooty rafters, filled with benches and tables. A noble collection of casks lined one wall, otherwise the inn was hung with scrimshaw work and stuffed fish. A whole seal-bird roasted in the fireplace.

Nelly fetched heroic goblets and tapped a brandy cask. "Now then, your maledom, say away." She leaned back and sprawled

columnar legs across the floor. "Death and corruption! A Man, after all these years."

Formality was wasted on her, Davis decided. He told her the same censored tale he had given Lysum.

"Heard of those wenches." Nelly snorted. "Well, ma'm . . . sorry, you said it was 'sir,' didn't you? What happened next?"

"This Trevor showed up," said Davis. "She was one of the agents of evil, the same who had whipped Greendale and the other towns into attacking Freetoon. She stirred up Lysum against me. I made her captive and we went down the river till we came here."

"Why didn't you see her gizzard, sir?"

"The Men are merciful," said Davis with a slight shudder. "Do you have a place where she can be held incommunicado?"

"A what? We've got a brig."

"That'll do." Davis continued with his demands: passage to the Holy River mouth and an escort to Freetoon, where the lady legate would give the orders of the Ship.

Nelly nodded. "Can do, sir. There are twenty good crewgirls on the *Fishbird*, and a causeway from the Ship over the swamps—"

"We needn't stop at the Ship," said Valeria quickly. "In fact, I'm commanded not to come near it till the rest of the Men arrive. And you understand, this has to be kept secret or we may have

more trouble with the, uh, agents of hell."

"Awright, ma'm. We'll just leave the *Fishbird* at Bow Island and get orspers and ride straight to Freetoon. There's a ridge we can follow through the marshes."

Davis frowned. Whatever legate had gone to Freetoon might have planted a story that he really was a Monster, to be killed on sight. Or no, probably not . . . that legate had no way of knowing he was the only male human on Atlantis; she'd have to ride back for orders. . . .

"The faster the better," he said.

"We'll warp out at Bee-rise tomorrow, ma'm," said Nelly Udall. She shook her head and stared into her goblet. "A Man! A real live Man! Father damn it, I'm too old . . . but I've seen you, sir. That's enough for me, I reckon."

After Joyce Trevor had been safely locked in the town jail, with the guard ordered not to speak to her or let anyone else do so, Nelly led Davis' party down to the dock, where he made a short but telling speech to the assembled women. The inquiries of the preceding legate as to whether a Man had been seen had paved the way for his arrival; no one disbelieved him.

Cloud masses piled blackly out of the west, wind skirled, and scud stung his face. He felt the wear-

ness of being hunted. "I would retire," he said.

"Yes, sir, this way, sir," said Nelly. She gave him a wistful look. "Sure you won't come down to the Anchor with us and fer—"

"Quite sure!" said Barbara and Valeria together.

The crowd trailed them to a long house reserved for ships' captains. Beyond a common room, there was a hall lined by small bedchambers. Elinor slipped into the first, then Valeria, then Davis, then Barbara . . . he closed the shutters against the gale, turned off the guttering oil lantern, and crept through a sudden heavy darkness into bed. Ahhh!

But it wasn't easy to sleep. Too much to think about . . . it would be good to be among men again . . . what to do about the Whitleys?—oh, blast, face that problem later . . . he'd be coming back to Atlantis, surely, to help these forlorn female devils through the difficult period of readjustment . . . *Hello, Dad! I seem to've been pounded into a sober well-integrated citizen after all . . . But nobody mated to a Whitley would ever get too sober—*

Drowsiness spilled from him when the door opened. He sat up. "Who's that?" Bare feet groped across the floor. His scalp pricked.

"Shhh!" The husky voice was almost in his ear. He reached and

felt a warm roundedness. "Bertie, I just had to come to you—"

Davis made weak fending motions. The girl laughed shyly and slid under his blankets. Two strong arms closed about him.

His morality stood up in indignation, slipped, and tobogganed whopping down his spinal column. "C'mere!" he said hoarsely.

Her lips closed against his, still inexpert, her hands shuddered their way along his back. Well, he thought with an intoxicating sense of release, if Valeria chose to enter his bed, why, Val was a wonderful girl and he'd make a more or less honest woman of her when he got the chance.

"Bert . . . Bert, darling, I don't know what . . . what this is, to be with a Man . . . but I care for you so much—"

"I told you the word was 'love,'" he chuckled.

"Did you? When was that?"

"You remember, Val, sweetheart . . . you didn't fool me—"

"Val!" She sat bolt upright and screeched the name. "Val? What's been going on here?"

"Oh, no!" groaned Davis. "Barbara, listen, I can explain—"

"I'll explain you!" she yelled.

Davis scrambled to get free. The blankets trapped him. Barbara got her hands on his throat.

The door opened. The tall red-haired girl carried an ax in her right hand; the left, holding a lantern, was scarred.

"What's happening?" barked Valeria.

To the untrained eye, a wrestling match is superficially not unlike certain other sports. Valeria cursed, set down the lantern, and strode forward with lifted ax. Barbara sprang out of bed, snatched up Davis' knife, and confronted her twin.

"So you've been mucking around!" she shouted.

"I wouldn't talk," answered Valeria from clenched jaws. "The minute my back is turned, you come oozing in and—and—"

"Now, girls," stammered Davis. "Ladies, ladies, please!"

They whirled on him. Something intimated to him that this was not just the correct approach. He got out of bed one jump ahead of the ax and backed into a corner. "It's all a mistake!"

"The mistake was ever bringing you along," snarled Valeria.

The wind hooted and banged the shutters. Above it, suddenly, he heard a roar. It swept closer, boots racketing on cobblestones, clattering iron, a mob howl.

The Whitleys reacted fast. Valeria whirred her ax, Barbara darted back to her room for a bow. The vague light threw their shadows monstrous across the walls.

Feet pounded down the hall. Nelly Udall burst into the chamber. There were gashes on her squat body, and the ax in her

hand dripped blood. "Hell and sulfur!" she bawled. "Grab your weapons! They're coming to kill you!"

A Macklin and a youthful Lundgard followed her. They were also wounded, hastily armed, and they were crying.

"What happened?" rattled Davis.

"I bolted the outer door," panted Nelly. "They'll break it down in a minute." A groan of abused wood came from behind her. "I believe you're a Man, dearie . . . that's how I got these cuts . . . but the Trevor— Why didn't you kill that snark when you had the chance?"

"Trevor!" Davis grabbed the Udall's shoulders. "Is she loose?"

"Yeh," said Nelly in a flat voice. "We was all down at the Anchor, drinking your health, and this Trevor walks in with that Dyckman of yours, says she's the legate and you're a Monster. Proves herself by running through the rites every mother knows are said at the Ship—challenges your Whitley to do the same—" Nelly shook her head. "It was quite a fight. We three here beat our way out o' the tavern and got here ahead of 'em."

"Elinor!" Barbara's voice seethed.

"She must have sneaked out," said Davis wanly. "Gone to the brig, told the guard she had new orders from me, set Joyce free.

. . . Oh, almighty Cosmos, what're we going to do now?"

"Fight," answered Nelly. She planted herself in the doorway.

There was a final crash, and the mob came down the hall. A Salmon leaped yelling, with drawn knife. Nelly's ax thundered down, the body rolled at her feet. A Hauser jabbed at her with a spear. Barbara shot the Hauser through the breast.

It dampened them. The women milled sullenly in the narrow corridor, the noise quieted to a tigerish grumble.

Davis stepped forward, trying not to shake. A scarred elderly Damon faced him boldly. "Will you call a truce?" she asked.

"Yes," said Davis. "Hold your fire, Barbara. Maybe we can—"

Joyce Trevor pushed her way through the crowd and regarded him over Nelly's shoulder. Ragged skirt and matted hair took away none of her frozen dignity. "I say you are a Monster," she declared.

"Elinor," said Davis, very quietly, still not believing it. "Elinor, why did you do this?"

He glimpsed her in the mob, thin, shaking, and enormous-eyed. Her lips were pale and stiff. "You are," she whispered. "You attacked a legate. The legate says you're a Monster."

Davis smiled wryly. "I was alone, and there were a lot of Doctors," he murmured. "That's why, isn't it?"

"Shut up, you Monster!" screamed Elinor. "You and those Whitleys kicked me around once too often!"

"This is a waste of time," snapped Joyce. "If that Whitley is a true legate, let her prove it by reciting the rites."

"Never mind," sighed Davis. "She isn't. But I am a Man. I can bring all the Men here. The legate lies about me because the Doctors don't want them. It would mean the end of Doctor power."

"I sort of thought that," muttered the Lundgard beside him.

"Let me go to my spaceship," said Davis. "That's all I ask."

Joyce whirled on the crowd. "Let him summon the other Monsters?" she yelled. "I lay eternal barrenness on anyone who helps this thing! I order you to kill it, now!"

Nelly hefted her ax, grinning. "Who's next?" she inquired.

Davis heard feet shuffle in the corridor, voices buzz and break, spears drag on the floor. And there was the sound of new arrivals, a few pro-Davis women stamping in and making their own threats. Women have slightly less tendency to act in mobs than men do; the crowd was wavering, uncertain, afraid.

He straightened, licked his lips, and walked forward. "I'm going out," he said. "Make way."

Barbara, Valeria, Nelly and her two companions, followed at his

heels. A handful of determined roughnecks shoved through the pack, toward him, to join him. Otherwise no one stirred. Joyce boiled under the menace of Barbara's cocked bow, Elinor hid her eyes. If nothing broke this explosive quiet—

The wind raved in coalsack streets. A lonely score of women tramped in a circle about Davis, toward the dock. He heard the crowd follow, but it was too dark to see them.

Barbara—he felt the hard stock of her arbalest—whispered venomously: "Don't think I'm coming along for your sake, you slimy double-face. I haven't any choice."

When they emerged from canyon-like walls, onto the wharf, enough light to see by trickled down from the pharos. Nelly led the way to her ship.

"I'm staking one hell of a lot on your really being a Man," she said desolately, into the wind. "I don't dare believe anything else."

The Shield Skerry folk swirled on the edge of darkness, still paralyzed. He had to get away before the shooting began. He crossed the gangplank to the deck. Valeria edged close to him and hissed: "Yes, I'll believe you're a Man too . . . and the hell with all Men! I'm only coming because I haven't any choice."

Nelly seemed to draw strength from the planks booming beneath her feet. "All aboard, you scuts!

Man the capstan! Look lively now!"

She went aft, up on the poop to a nighted helm. The other women scurried about, doing incomprehensible things with ropes and pulleys. The great windmill jerked, gears whined as they engaged, there was a white threshing at the stern. The *Fishbird* moved slowly out of the harbor.

XII

Morning was gray over an ice-gray sea, where waves snorted from horizon to horizon and the ship wallowed. Davis emerged from one of the little cabins under the poop to find the crew—mostly young women of the more warlike families—chattering happily. Barbara and Valeria sulked on opposite sides of the deck, elaborately ignoring him.

The windmill, facing into the stiff gusts, turned, driving a propeller through a set of gears and shafts. As he waited for breakfast, Davis tried to lose his gloom by admiring the arrangement—it made the ship independent of wind direction. Evil! Who cared?

Nelly Udall waddled into view. "Morning, dearie," she boomed. "Not seasick, I hope? No? Good—kind of hard to believe in a seasick Man, eh? Haw, haw, haw!" She slapped his back so he staggered. Then, seriously: "Come into my cabin. We got to talk."

They sat on her bunk. She took out a pipe and stuffed it with greenish flakes from a jar. "We can't go on to Holy River now, that's for sure, chick. That Father-damned legate's been preaching hellfire to 'em back at Shield. The boats must already be headed for the Ship to bring the glad tidings. With a wind like this, a yawl can sail rings around us. Time we get to Bow Island, even, all the country will be up in arms."

"Glutch!" strangled Davis.

Nelly kindled her pipe with a fire piston and blew nauseous clouds. "Sure you aren't seasick, duck? All of a sudden you don't look so good."

"We've got to raise help," mumbled Davis. "Somewhere, somehow."

Nelly nodded. "Figgered as much. I'm bound for Farewell, my home port. Got plenty of friends there, and nobody to conterdick whatever you say."

"But when they hear the Ship's against us—"

"I know a lot who'll still stick by us, dearie. Girls like our present crew. We've gotten almighty sick of the Doctors. We see more of 'em than the uplanders do, the—" Nelly went into a rich catalogue of the greed, arrogance, and general snottiness of the Doctors. Davis guessed that a mercantile culture like this would naturally resent paying tribute . . .

and then, generations of sexual frustration had to be vented somehow.

The Doctors could not all be villains. Doubtless many were quite sincere. But Davis knew enough Union law to be sure that anything he did to them would be all right with the Coordination Service. It was they who stood between Atlantis and civilization—more important, a normal family life.

The idea grew slowly within him as the Udall rumbled on:

"I reckon we can raise quite a few shiploads, then go far up the coast and strike inland toward your boat."

"Nol said Davis. Words poured from him. "Too risky. It'll be guarded too heavily; and they may have tools enough left in the Ship to demolish it. We've got to act fast. If you think your friends are willing to hazard their lives to be free—"

Nelly smiled. "Chick, with that beard and that voice you can talk 'em into storming hell gate."

"It won't be quite that bad," said Davis. "I hope. What we're going to do is storm the Ship."

The rebel fleet lay to at Ship city at high tide, just after B-rise.

Davis stood on the *Fishbird's* deck and watched his forces move in. There were about forty vessels, their windmills and sails like gull wings across waters muddy-blue,

rippled and streaked by an early breeze. At their sterns flew the new flag he had designed. His girls were quite taken with the Jolly Roger.

The rebels numbered some 2,000 women from the Farewell archipelago. There were more than that to guard the Ship, but less tough, less experienced in fighting—the seafolk were not above occasional piracy. The odds didn't look too bad.

Valeria stamped her feet so the deck thudded. "I'm going ashore," she said mutinously.

"No, you don't, *chicakabiddy*." Nelly Udall twirled a belaying pin. "Got to keep some guard over the Man. What's the bloody-be-damned use of it all if he gets himself skewered?"

Barbara nodded coldly. "She's right, as anyone but you could see," she added. "Not that I wouldn't rather guard a muck-bird!"

Davis sighed. In the three Atlantean weeks since they left Shield Skerry, neither of the cousins had spoken to him, or to each other without a curse. After the hundredth rebuff, he had given up. Evil take all women anyway! He just wanted to go home, go back and get roaring drunk and have the psych machine numb the pain which went with red hair and green eyes.

He twisted his mind elsewhere. The Ship must have been badly

crippled, to land here; probably it had come down where it could, on the last gasp of broken engines. The walls which now enclosed it had been built on a hill that just barely stuck out over high tide. Eastward lay the marches, a dreary gray land where a stone causeway slashed through to the distance-blued peaks of the Ridge.

There must have been heavy construction equipment in the Ship's cargo. A few thousand women could not have raised this place by hand. The machines were long ago worn out, but their work remained.

The city was ringed by white concrete walls five meters high, with a square watchtower at each corner. The walls fell to the water of high tide or the mud of ebb: inaccessible save by the causeway entering the eastern gate or the wide quay built out from the west side. Against this dock the rebel boats were lying to. Gangplanks shot forth and armored women stormed onto the wharf.

Davis let his eyes wander back to the city. He could see the tops of buildings above the walls, the dome-roofed architecture of three centuries ago. And he could see the great whaleback of the Ship itself, 300 meters long from north wall to south wall, metal still bright but a buckled spot at the waist to show how hard it had landed.

Barbara looked wistfully at the

yelling seafolk. She was clad like them: visored helmet on her ruddy hair, tunic of steely-scaled orcfish hide, trousers, spike-toed boots. The accessories included lasso, knife, ax, crossbow and quiver, she had become a walking meat grinder.

Davis, likewise armored, felt the same sense of uselessness. Not that he wanted to face edged metal, the thought dried out his mouth. But when women were ready to die for *his* sake—

Bee struck long rays into his eyes. Ay was so close as to be hidden by the glare of the nearer sun. Minos brooded overhead in the gigantic last quarter. There was a storm on the king planet—he could see how the bands and blotches writhed.

Horns blew on the walls, under the Red Cross flag. Women, lithe tough legates and acolytes, were appearing in cuirass, greaves, and masking helmet, all of burnished metal. Crossbows began to shoot.

There was no attempt to batter down the iron door at the end of the quay. A howling mass of sailors raised ladders and swarmed skyward.

"Cosmos!" choked Davis.

A Doctor shoved at one of the ladders, but there was a grapnel on its end. Davis saw her unlimber a long rapier. The first rebel up got it through the throat and tumbled, knocking off the woman

below her, they fell hideously to the ground.

"Let me go!" yelled Valeria.

"Hold still," rapped Nelly. Her worried eyes went to Davis. "I didn't think they'd have so good a defense, chick. We'd better get them licked fast."

He nodded. They had only a couple of hours before the tide dropped so far that any ship which remained would be stranded, in mud or the harbor locks, till the next high.

"So we stay," growled Barbara. "Isn't that the idea?"

"Yeh," said Davis. He drew hard on a borrowed pipe. "Only the Doctors must have called in a lot of upland warriors, to patrol between here and Freetoon. Now they'll send for their help. If things go badly, I'd like a way to retreat."

"You would," she agreed, and turned her back on him.

Axes, spears, swords clashed up on the wall, bolts and darts gleamed in the cool early light. The Doctor fighters were rapidly being outnumbered. One of them, in a red cloak of leadership, winded a horn. Her women fought their way toward her.

Davis gulped. It couldn't be that simple! Yes, by all creation, the Doctor forces were streaming down a stairway into their town. A slim young Burke cried triumph, he could hear the hawk-shriek above all the racket and

see how her dark hair flew in the wind as she planted the Jolly Roger on the city wall.

Now down the stairs! There was a red flash of axes. The last legate backed out of view, thrusting and slicing at sailor shields.

Nelly grabbed Davis and whirled him in a wild stomp around the dock. "We got 'em, we got 'em, we got 'em!" she caroled. Planks shuddered beneath her.

The man felt sick. His whole culture was conditioned against war, it remembered its past too well. If he could have been in the action, himself, taking his own chances, it wouldn't have been so gruesome. But he was the only one on Atlantis who could bring the Men. He had to hold himself back—

"Scared?" jeered Valeria. "If it looks like you might get hurt after all, we'll take you away where it's safe."

"I'm not going to retreat!" he said in a raw voice.

"Yes, you will, duck, if we got to," said Nelly. "If you get killed, what's for us?" Her seamed face turned grimly inland. "We've got to win . . . no choice . . . if the Doctors win, there'll never be another baby on the islands."

That was what drove them, thought Davis. Below all the old grudges and the glamor of his cause, there was the primeval mother urge. The seafolk had not

told it to themselves in so many words, but their instincts knew: a machine was too unsafe a way of bringing life into the world.

The iron harbor doors were flung open. So the west end of town was firmly held by his side.

The noise of battle was receding, the Doctors being driven back . . . So what? A victory where you yourself did nothing was no victory for a man.

Damn! His pipe had gone out.

"I think we'll have the mucking place before ebb," said Nelly. "But then what do we do?"

"We'll have the parthenogenetic apparatus," Davis reminded her. "Not to mention the prestige of victory. We'll own the planet."

"Oh . . . yeh. Keep forgetting. I'm growing old, dearie—*huh?*"

There was a shriek through the gateway.

Sailors poured out of it, falling over each other, hurling their weapons from them in blind panic. A couple of hundred women made for the ships.

"What's happened?" bawled Nelly. "Avast, you hootinannies! Stop that!" She went into a weeping tirade of profanity.

Barbara snatched her megaphone from the captain. "Pull in!" she cried. "We're going ashore now!"

The helmswoman looked ill, but yanked a signal cord. The ship moved across a narrow stretch of

open water and bumped against one of the docked schooners.

"Let's go," snapped Valeria. She leaped onto the schooner deck.

Barbara saw Davis follow. "No!" she yelled.

"Yes," he answered harshly. "I've stood enough." Blind with fury, he dashed to the wharf.

The mob was still coming out of the door and over the quay to mill on the ships. Davis grabbed a Craig and whirled her around.

"What's the matter?" he shouted. She gave him an unseeing look. He slapped her. "What happened in there?"

"We . . . street fighting . . . Doctor troop . . . flame, white flame and it *burned* our forward line—" The Craig collapsed.

"It's Father himself!" gasped a Macklin.

"Shut up!" rapped Davis. He felt sick. "I know what it is. They must have found my blaster up by Freetoon, and the legate took it back here. Maybe records in the Ship describe blasters." He shook his head numbly. "Chilluns, this is not a good thing."

"What are we going to do?" breathed Barbara.

Davis thought, in a remote part of his mind, that later on he would break out in the cold shakes. If he lived! But for now he had to keep calm—

"We're going to get that blaster," he said. "There's nothing su-

pernatural about an ion stream. And there's only one of them."

"You'll be killed," said Valeria. "Wait here, Bert—"

"Follow me," he said. "If you dare!"

They trotted after him, a dozen from the *Fishbird* and as many more from the retreat whose morale had picked up. He went through the doorway and saw an ordered gridiron of paved streets between tall concrete houses. The Ship rose huge at the end of all avenues. From two other streets came the noise of fighting. The battle had spread out, and few had yet seen the fire gun. They would, though, if he didn't hurry, and that would be the end of the rebellion.

"We went down this way," pointed a Latvala.

Davis jogged between closed doors and broad glass windows. Looking in, he saw that the inhabitants did themselves well, no doubt luxury existed elsewhere on Atlantis. He could understand their reluctance to abandon such a way of life for the untried mythic civilization of Men.

He skidded to a halt. The Doctors were rounding the corner ahead.

There were about twenty. A line of legates, their helmets facelessly blank, spread from wall to wall with interlocked shields. Behind them lifted swords and halberds.

"Get them!" shouted Nelly.

Three girls sprang ahead of Davis. One of them was a Whitley, he thought for a moment she was one of his Whitleys and then saw Barbara and Valeria still flanking him.

Over the shield tops lifted a Burke face. It was an old face, toothless and wrinkled below a tall bejeweled crown, and the body was stooped in white robes. But his blaster gleamed in a skinny hand.

Davis flung out his arms and dove to the ground, carrying Barbara and Valeria with him. Blue-white fire sizzled overhead.

The three young girls fell, blasted through. It could have been Val or Barbara lying there dead and mutilated on the pavement, thought Davis wildly. He remembered how he loved them.

He rolled over, into a doorway. His gang were already stampeded. Nelly stood firm in the street, Barbara and Valeria were beside him. Nelly threw her ax, it glanced off a shield, the legate stumbled against the old Doctor. Her next shot missed, and Nelly pumped thick legs across the street.

She hit the door with one massive shoulder. It went down in splinters. Davis sprang into a sybarite's parlor.

Two legates appeared in the doorway. Barbara's crossbow snapped twice. Valeria and Nelly

led the way through another door.

Davis followed and saw a stair. "Uncoil me your lasso, Babs," he said. "I have an idea." They pounded up after him.

A bedroom overlooked the street. Davis shoved up the window. The blaster party was just underneath. Barbara nodded, leaned out— her lariat closed around the chief Doctor.

"Help!" screamed the Burke. "I've been roped!"

Davis sprang into the street. He landed on an armored legate and both went down with a rattle and a gong. She didn't move. Davis jumped up and sent a left hook to the nearest jaw. Valeria's rope snaked from the window, fastened to something. She came sliding down it with her ax busy. Valeria and Nelly followed.

The old Burke snarled. She fought free and reached for the blaster. "Oh, no, you don't!" Davis put his foot on it. A rapier struck his scaly coat and bent upward, raking his cheek. He kicked, and the woman reeled off to trip somebody else.

Nelly had picked up an ax. "Whoopee!" she bawled, and started chopping. Barbara and Valeria stood back to back, their weapons a blur in front of them. Davis was still too inhibited to use whetted steel on women, but every blow his fist dealt shocked loose some of his guiltiness.

The fight was over in a few

minutes. Male size and female skill had outweighed numbers. Davis stooped for his blaster. "Let's go," he panted.

XIII

They went on down the street. There was a narrow passage between the Ship and the wall. On the other side lay a broad open square, lined with impressive temples. . . . No more sound of fighting. Odd!

A sailor troop emerged from behind one of the columned sanctuaries. "It's the Man!" squealed somebody. They ran toward him and drew up, flushed. The leader gave a sketchy salute.

"I think we just about have the town, sir," she puffed. "I was patrolling on the east end. Didn't see anyone."

"Good!" Davis shuddered his relief. He could *not* have used a blaster on women, the memory of the dead Whitley girl was burned too deeply in him.

"Get our people together here," he said. "Post guards. Round up all the Doctors left, herd 'em into one of these chapels . . . and don't use them for target practice! Set up a sickbay for the wounded, and that means enemy wounded too. Nelly, you take charge, I want a look around."

He walked through empty avenues. Behind him he could hear cheers and trumpets, the tramp of

feet and triumphal clang of arms, but he was in no mood for it.

Mnos was a thin sliver, with Bee sliding close. Nearly eclipse time . . . had all this only taken three hours?

The Whitleys trailed him. He heard: "I take a lot back, Val. You fought pretty good."

"Hell, Babs, you're no slouch yourself. After all, darling, you are identical with me."

The street opened on a narrow space running the length of the east wall. There was a doorway in the center, with wrought-iron gates. Davis looked through the bars to the causeway and the marshes. Mud gleamed on the ridge which the road followed, birds screamed down after stranded fish. The tide was ebbing, the ships already trapped . . . but what the Evil, they had won, hadn't they?

Hold on there!

The highway bent around a clump of saltwater trees three kilometers from the city. Davis saw what approached from the other side and grabbed the bars with both hands.

"An army!" he croaked.

Rank after rank poured into view, with war-cries and haughty banners; now he saw leather corselets, iron morions, boots and spurs and streaming cloaks. They were the hill people and they were riding to the relief of the Doctors.

"A couple of thousand, at

least," muttered Barbara. "The legates must have gone after them as soon as we attacked. They've been waiting around to kill you, my dearest—" She whirled on him, her visored face pressed against his side. "And it's too late to retreat, we're boxed in!"

"Not too late to fight!" shouted Valeria. Sea women on the walls lifted horns to lips and wailed an alarm.

Davis looked at the gate. It was locked, but it could be broken apart. His hand went to the blaster. Before Cosmos, that would stop them. No!

The rebel army pelted into the open space. Right and left, arbalesters swarmed up the staircases to the walls. *Hasn't there been enough killing?* thought Davis.

Behind him, Nelly Udall scurried along the ranks, pushing them into a semblance of order. Davis regarded them. Tired faces, hurt faces, lips that tried to be firm and failed; they would fight bravely, but they hadn't a chance against fresh troops.

Up on the parapets, crossbows began to snap. Orspers reared, squawked, went off the road into the mud and flapped atrophied wings. The charge came to a clanging halt, broke up, fought its way back along the road . . . it stopped. Leaders trotted between panicked riders, haranguing them.

Hill women dismounted. Their

axes bit at a roadside tree. It wouldn't take them long to make a battering ram. They would slog forward under fire, they would be slaughtered and others take their place, and the gate would come down.

"When they're in range," leered Nelly to Davis, "burn 'em!"

Bee slipped behind Minos. The planet became a circle of blackness ringed with red flame. Of all the moons, only firefly Aegaeus was visible. Stars glittered coldly forth. A wind sighed across the draining marshes, dusk lay heavy on the world.

Davis fired into the air. Livid lightning burned across heaven, a small thunder cracked in its wake. Screams came from the shadow army on the road, he fired again and waited for them to flee.

"Hold fast! Stay where you are, Father damn you!" The voices drifted hoarse through the gloom. "If we let the Monster keep the Ship, you'll die with never another child in your arms!"

Davis shook his head. He might have known it.

Someone clattered up the road. Four short trumpet blasts sent the sea birds mewing into the sudden night. "Truce call," muttered Valeria. "Let her come talk. I don't *want* to see them fried alive."

The mounted woman approached. She was an Udall. Barbara squinted through the murk

at the painted insignia. "Bess of Greendale!" she hissed. "Kill her!"

Davis could only think that the Doctors' desperation had been measured by their sending clear up to Greendale for help. The swamp and the upper valley must be alive with armies intent on keeping him from his boat.

"No," he said. "It's a parley, remember?"

The Udall rode scornfully up under the walls. "Is the Monster here?" she asked.

"The Man is here," said Barbara.

Davis stepped into view, peering through iron bars and thick twilight. "What do you want?" he asked.

"Your head, and the Ship back before you ruin the life machine."

"I can kill your whole army," said Davis. "Watch!" He blasted at the road before him. Stone bubbled and ran molten.

Bess Udall fought her plunging orsper to a halt. "Do you think that matters?" she panted. "We're fighting for every unborn kid on Atlantis. Without the machine we might as well die."

"But I'm not going to harm the damned machine!"

"So you say. You've struck down the Doctors. I wouldn't trust you dead without a stake through your heart."

"Oh, hell," snarled Valeria. "Why bother? Let 'em attack and find out you mean business."

Davis stared at the blaster. "No," he said. "There are decent limits."

He shook himself and looked out at the vague form of the woman. "I'll make terms," he said.

"What?" yelled Barbara and Valeria together.

"Shut up. Bess, here's my offer. You can enter the town. The sea people will go back to their ships and sail away at next high tide. In return, they'll have access to the life machine just as before."

"And you?" grated the Udall. "We won't stop fighting till you're dead."

"I'll come out," said Davis. "Agreed?"

"No!" Barbara leaped at him. He swung his arm and knocked her to the ground.

"Stand back!" His voice rattled. "I'm still a man."

Bess Udall stared at him through the darkness. "Agreed," she said. "I swear to your terms by Father."

The rebels shuffled forward, shadow mass in a shadow world. "Don't move," said Davis. "It isn't worth it . . . my life . . . Evil! The Men will be here in another generation anyway."

His blaster boomed, eating through the lock on the gate. He pushed it open, the hot iron burned his hands, and trod through. With a convulsive gesture, he tossed the blaster into a mudpool.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

Bess edged her orsper close to him.

"Move!" she barked. A few women surged from the gateway. She brandished her spear. "Stand back, or the Monster gets this right now!"

Minos was a ring of hellfire in the sky.

"Wait!"

It was a Whitley voice. Davis turned. He felt only an infinite weariness, let them kill him and be done with it.

He couldn't see whether it was Barbara or Valeria who spoke: "Hold on there! It's us who make the terms."

"Yes?" growled the rider. Her spear poised over Davis.

"We have the life machine. Turn him back to us or we'll smash it and kill every Doctor in town before you can stop us!" They faced the crowd defiantly.

A sighing went through the rebels. Nelly cursed them into stillness. "That's right, dearie," she cried. "What the blazes is a bloody machine worth when we could have the Men?"

The Whitley walked closer, cat-gaited. "These are *our* terms," she said flatly. "Lay down your arms. We won't hurt you. By Father, I never knew what it means to be a Man till now! You can keep the town and the machine—yes, the Doctors—if you want. Just let us bring the Man

to his ship to bring the Men back for us!"

Bess Udall's spear dropped to the ground.

"You don't know he's a Man," she stammered.

"I sure as hell do, sister. Do you think we'd have stormed the Holy Ship for a Monster?" She waited.

Night and silence lay thick across the land. A salt wind whined around red-stained battlements.

"Almighty Father," choked Bess. "I think you're right."

She whirled her orsper about and dashed down the road to the army.

Davis heard them talking in the orsper host. It seemed to come from very far away. His knees were stiff as he walked slowly back toward the gate.

Several riders hurried after him. They pulled up and jumped to the ground and laid their weapons at his feet.

"Welcome," said a voice. "Welcome, Man."

The sun swung from behind Minos and day burned across watery wastes and the far eastern mountains.

Davis let them cheer around him.

Barbara knelt at his feet, hugging his knees. Valeria pushed her way close to lay her lips on his.

"Bert," she whispered. He

tasted tears on her mouth. "Bert, darling."

"Take either of us," sobbed Barbara. "Take us both if you want."

"Well, hooray for the Man!" said Nelly. "Three chee—whoops! Catch him there! I think he's fainted!"

XIV

It had been a slow trip up through the valley. They had to stop and be feasted at every town along the way.

Davis Bertram stood in tall grass, under a morning wind, and looked up the beloved length of his spaceship. He whistled, and the airlock opened and the ladder descended for him.

"I'll be back," he said clumsily. "Inside a hundred of your days, the Men will be here."

And what would they say when he walked into Stellamont wearing this garb of kilt, feather cloak, and warbonnet?

The Freetoon army was drawn up in dress parade a few meters off. Sunlight flamed on polished metal and oiled leather, plumes nodded and banners fluttered in the breeze. More of their warriors had survived the invasion than he expected. They came out of the woods to worship him as their deliverer when he ordered the town set free.

Gaping civilians trampled the

meadows behind them. Davis wondered how many of their babies he had touched, for good luck. Well, it beat kissing the little apes . . . not that it wouldn't be nice to have a few of his own someday.

Barbara and Valeria stood before him. Under the burnished helmets their faces were drawn tight, waiting for his word.

His cheeks felt hot. He looked away from their steady green eyes and dug at the ground with his sandals.

"You're in charge here," he mumbled. "If you really want to make Freetoon a republic—and it'd be a big help, you folk have a difficult period of adjustment ahead—at least one of you has to stay and see the job is done right. There has to be someone here I can trust."

"I know," said Valeria. Her tone grew wistful. "You'll bring that machine of yours to . . . make her forget you?"

"Not forget," said Davis. "Only to feel differently about it. I'll do better than that, though. I'll bring a hundred young men, and you can take your pick!"

"All right," said Valeria. "I pick you."

"Hoy, there!" said Barbara.

Davis wiped sweat off his brow. What was a chap to do, anyway? He felt trapped.

"It'd be better if you both stayed," he groped. "You'll have a

. . . a rough time . . . fitting into civilization—"

"Do you really want that?" asked Barbara coolly.

"No," said Davis. "Good Cosmos, no!"

After all, he was a survey man. He wouldn't be close to civilization for very long at a time, ever. Even a barbarian woman, given spirit and intelligence, could be trained into a spaceland.

And a few gaucheries wouldn't matter. A Whitley in formal dress would be too stunning.

"Well, then," said Valeria. Her knuckles tightened around her spearshaft. "Take your choice."

"I can't," said Davis. "I just can't."

The cousins looked at each other. They nodded. One of them took a pair of dice from her pouch.

"One roll," said Barbara.

"High girl gets him," said Valeria.

Davis Bertram stood aside and waited.

He had the grace to blush.

VENTURINGS . . .

● Speaking of science-fiction—as *VENTURE S F* proposes to do frequently—we believe that in “Virgin Planet,” **POUL ANDERSON** demonstrates beautifully his talent as a teller of exciting stories with sound and richly creative backgrounds. The following is a quote from a recent note from Poul (pronounced, by word of the man himself, “mid-way between ‘pole’ and ‘powl’ ”)—a quote which accurately describes both his own work and a guiding principle of *VENTURE S F*: “To me, there are two primary requirements of a good story: accuracy and entertainment. Known facts should never consciously be tampered with (though of course in science fiction one usually postulates additional areas of knowledge) and the psychology of the characters and logic of the plot should ring true. No matter how serious its purpose, a story should not be dull to read.” . . . One final note on “Virgin Planet”: it was written before this magazine had decided on its name; it seems a particularly happy confirmation of its rightness for this first issue that Davis Bertram’s ship should have been named *At Venture*. . . .