

Anderson

A.M.C.

SUMMER
1948

20c

PLANET stories

For 1,000,000 years she slept, Nuala of the Nekalad,
roused at last to join the Outworlder against

the **WERWILE OF THE CRYSTAL CRYPT**

A Startling Novelet

by GARDNER F. FOX

PILLAR OF FIRE

by RAY BRADBURY



SIMMONS — KNIGHT — BRITAIN — KIRCHHOFF

PLANET STORIES



T. T. SCOTT, Pres.

MALCOLM REISS, Gen. Mgr.

PAUL L. PAYNE, Ed.

TWO EXCITING NOVELS

- Z-DAY ON CENTAURI** By Henry T. Simmons 4
 Erupting from hyper-space in the teeth of startled DIC patrols and readying all hands for a crash-landing, adventurer Fletcher Pell could still wonder which he dreaded more—the U-235 in the hold . . . or the strange girl by his side.
- PILLAR OF FIRE** By Ray Bradbury 38
 We cannot tell you what kind of a story this is. We simply cannot present it as we present other stories. We are very glad—and proud—to share it with you.

TWO NOVELETTES OF UNKNOWN WORLDS

- IN THE SPHERE OF TIME** By J. W. Pelkie 76
 Proud Prince Toka had faced—and outwitted—death and disaster before. Yet in this weirdly glowing underworld of Kosanna, peopled by the soft, silvery-eyed ones, there waited a thing he could not defy—destruction of his soul!
- WERWILE OF THE CRYSTAL CRYPT** . . . By Gardner F. Fox 106
 His black science threatened the whole cosmos. Against him frail Princess Nuala thrust her ancient knowledge—but he sneeringly smashed that. And space-toughened Clark Travis stood by helplessly. Of what use here was a pair of ready fists?

FIVE GRIPPING STORIES

- THE THIRD LITTLE GREEN MAN** By Damon Knight 27
 He was unnecessary. The first two had already convinced Shoemaker the only thing to do was to get the hell away from space-ships and onto a nice red wagon.
- MURDERER'S BASE** By William Brittain 60
 They played a ghastly game on that lonely asteroid. Killer and victim-to-be danced and fainted between space beacon and ship. Only the stars knew the winner.
- DAY OF WRATH** By Bjarne Kirchoff 69
 The men of the Norgan System had a tough decision to make concerning the planet in A-93. Yet there was no hesitation. Can you blame them?
- GOMA'S FOLLICLES** By John and Dorothy de Courcy 96
 New planets—new conditions . . . unforeseeable, difficult and dangerous. Still, who'd have thought a haircut on Procyon IV could be a matter of life and death?
- TASK OF TAU** By J. Harvey Haggard 103
 Tau was metal, chemical, electrical. Yet Tau could face death like a man.

AND PLANET'S REGULAR FEATURES

- THE VIZIGRAPH** 2
P.S.'s FEATURE FLASH 37
BIG EYE A conception by Alden McWilliams. Lettered by Wurtzel. 59

Summer Issue 1948



Vol. III, No. 11

20c per copy

PLANET STORIES: Published quarterly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1948, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Entered as second-class matter, October 2, 1944, at the Post Office, at New York 1, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Yearly subscription rate \$4 in advance. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.

WERWILE OF THE CRYSTAL CRYPT

By GARDNER F. FOX

His black science threatened the whole cosmos. Against him frail Princess Nuala thrust her ancient knowledge—but he sneeringly smashed that. And space-toughened Clark Travis stood by helplessly. Of what use here was a pair of ready fists?

HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN better. He admitted that, now. Listening to the spacemen in Trixon and Cleg would have saved his skin. They told him that Flormaseron was a hellhole where Creation had run mad. The only thing was, even they hadn't known how bad it was. Clark Travis worked the walnut stud of his *stil* disintegrator hopefully, but when it sputtered he gave it up.

The arklings were coming for him. Through the opening in the stone traceries of the ancient doorway, he saw the red aura that floated over them as they came up the stone ramp. Clark turned and ran along the sloping floor, down into the black, labyrinthine windings of the ancient city. His spacebooted feet made soft, slapping sounds. His beamlight cast a white brilliant glow ahead of him. He ran past several intersecting corridors before he skidded around a corner into one.

Clark Travis lost himself in the ruins. He went down into the bowels of this city that was in its glory before the Earth had been more than a spinning ball of fire in space. He saw odd animals carved in the walls, queerly human things at work on ships and weapons, tall men and lovely women etched in bas-relief in the marble.

The deeper down he went, the more he was putting himself in the arklings' power. They were familiar with this rotting pile of masonry, where the tunnels were dark strips out of Hades. Their red aura lighted the winding passageways. Clark only had his beamlight for the blackness.

He snapped off the power, stood waiting. His breath came softly. The tunnels were black, as black as space itself; as black as Martin Kent's eyes had been

when he first told him about Flormaseron and the sleeping goddess of the crystal crypt.

"She isn't a goddess, of course," Kent had said seriously. "She's the last remnant of the first race that ever came into existence. The product of a million generations of culture and scientific knowledge. When the disaster struck at her people, the chief scientists encased her in a block of crystal and hid her somewhere on Flormaseron. She's still there—and still alive.

"Think of it, Clark! A woman with the knowledge of such a race. Before they enclosed her, they thought-fed her brain with knowledge, and so arranged the crystal that during all the years of her interment, she would learn! A brain like that—why it would revolutionize our own culture. The Earth'd go millions of years ahead in science, if we could only find her—and bring her back to life!"

Travis had said, "If she's entombed on a hellhole like Flormaseron, how'd you ever hear of her?"

Martin Kent took Travis by the arm, led him out the door of his office and into the museum corridor. Here in Solar Museum, Mars Division, Kent was absolute ruler. Behind him he had the billions of credits that Earth and Mars and Venus poured into their cultural endeavors. From all over the solar system Solar brought stuffed animals, crumbling bricks from ancient cities, rusted weapons that experts studied and reconstructed in glittering *stil*.

They walked past a panoramic window of a Venusian sea-bottom and into a narrow room that held a safe inset in its east wall. Kent put the flat of his hand on the lock, and waited. A deep humming throbbed



"I—I—underestimated him!"

Illustrated by MEILINK

from behind the glistening metal wall. The huge door swung open.

Kent reached in and brought out a tiny vial of green metal. He unscrewed the lid, withdrew a folded scroll. "It's all here, Clark. Stylogrammed on flexible metal. It's ages old. One of our field parties came across it in a dried sea-bed on Clex. It puzzled us a long time, until Fielding came across a key to the writing, and translated it."

Travis turned the metallic paper over, looked at the queerly graceful writing. He looked at Kent inquiringly.

Kent smiled, "Well, what do you say? I'd go myself if I were younger. And, if it didn't cost so much, I'd send a field party. But it's a gamble, and the Board probably wouldn't agree to spending credits on it. But one man could go. One man—like you."

Travis grinned. He was tall and saturnine, brown with the heat of many suns. His body had been hardened on the deserts of Proxima Centauri, and under the seas of Venus.

Kent went on, "You're the best archaeologist I knew. You've been in tight spots before. You can fight, if you have to. A thing like trouble is an old friend to you."

Travis remembered the polyps in the Venusian water-caves where he'd almost lost an arm before he got past them to bring the museum the only specimen of the primal undine race of Venus ever seen above the sea-mists. He had found a petrified boat on Sirius' third planet, to prove that at one time there had been seas on that baked potato of a planet. But for the last six months he had moped around Mars Port, studying alluvial deposits, wishing for something to take him and his equipment out into the star-paths again.

"I'll go, Mart. And if you'd only shaved this morning I might kiss you for the chance!"

Kent laughed and waved a hand. "Order what you need. I guess the museum can afford a few thousand credits, considering your record—even on such a gamble."

TRAVIS took his spaceboat out from Mars to Titan, and then on to Proxima Centauri. He asked questions in taverns and study halls. He heard of the *arklings*, of the ruined cities and temples.

He heard of the *arklings'* hate for strangers. But Travis didn't scare easily. He checked his weapons and equipment, tossed in an extra case of *safusas*-wine and waved a farewell.

In the darkness he tried to grin and failed. He could hear them coming, at a distance. Their queer *slip-pat* footsounds carried a long way. He couldn't tell just how far away they were.

Travis went on, into the darkness.

The light came suddenly, as he rounded a bend in the tunnel. It was milky-red, like the ancient ko-yao porcelains, delicately flushed and tinted. It shook as a veil might in a breeze. It bellied and leaped. It sent its streamers into the blackness and lighted up the tunnel.

There was a queer menace about the light a beating like the breath of an angry Sindri, Venus-god of fire. It came in little pinkish puffs. There was no heat, only that overbearing menace. Through the pink light, Travis thought he saw queerly shaped forms standing still and brooding. There was a series of cones, and huge globes that seemed to float in an orbit—

He did not hear the *slip-pat* until too late. A hairy body landed on his shoulders and he pitched to his knees on the eon-old stone floor. As he fell he whirled and brought his *stil*-gun up. It was empty, but the long, ringed barrel sideswiped the *arkling's* face and knocked him away.

Travis got to his feet as the others hurtled at him. Giant hands that were smooth-palmed and hairy-backed hasked at his arms and leather space-harness. He slammed fists at the faces revealed by the floating red aura over them. He tried to use footwork, but the space was too narrow. It was kill or be killed, and he just didn't have the strength to stop them.

A palm caught him on the ear and sent his head ringing like a carrillon tower. A fanged mouth fastened on his thigh, biting deep. Another hand raked at his naked arm and gouged out flesh.

Travis leaped for them, hoping to run over their bodies and go back up the tunnel faster than they could follow. But a big *arkling* rose up from the pack and swung a flat hand. The blow caught him on his chest, sent him reeling and sickened, back and back—

The *arklings* cried out just as the pink

light swept up all around Travis. The menace was unbearable as he fell back and into the pale barrier. It bathed him and whispered to him and threatened him with queer and maddening ways to die. It caught him in its tenuous folds and held him there, cradled, as the voices told him of a water-death that took eleven years, each year more painful than the last; they gloated over a spit and a fire of red coals that cooked a man over a space of months; they whimpered, themselves scarcely daring to think of the barbaric tortures of Rudra the eternal. . .

A cool something touched his forehead. Travis tried to focus his eyes through the subtle distortions of the pink mists. He saw the twin blue pools at first, and then the yellow shower of hair graced with the triangular headgear blazing with jewels. The blue pool were her eyes, and they were wide and open, and filled with a wisdom that made Travis shudder deep in his guts.

And yet, there was a *fear* in those blue eyes, too.

She wore a transparent film with a slender golden thong looped at her middle. She murmured, "You are Clark Travis, an Earth-thing. You came to kidnap me. Yes. And the *arklings* have harmed you."

The woman turned and stared toward the tunnel. A white hand fumbled at her girdle, drew out a pencil-thin rod of metal. She went away from Travis and stepped into the tunnel. Travis tried to watch her, but the pain of his wounds, and the ringing in his temples bothered his eyes. There was a terrific green flare that tinted the pale pink light—

And silence.

Travis knew the *arklings* were just so much powder drifting from tunnel ceiling and wall.

The woman came back, seeming to float through the light. She brooded at him with her wise eyes. Travis could read the fear in them more distinctly, now.

SHE put out a hand and closed her warm fingers on his. She led him through the beams of pink light and into white brilliance, into a room that he had beheld briefly through the pink mists from the tunnel. The cone-towers were there, grouped by threes around the room. And

the globes that rotated lazily overhead in orbits were fiery with golden luminescence. They warmed Travis as they floated.

In the middle of the room lay a huge crystal, scooped hollow by some long-dead artisan. It had indentations and mounds in it. Travis realized it was carved with exact care to fit a reclining body. From the walls of the crystal calyx stemmed thin golden wires, reaching across to the cones. And against the wall, humming and throbbing, were the dynamos and engines that fed the cones.

"I am Nuala," the girl said in her silvery voice. "I am of the Nekkaalad, the first humanoid race in our universe. I have been encased in the calyx for eons. Unrememberable eons. I have seen the rise and fall of your planet, and the fall of others. I have seen—"

She broke off, shuddering.

Travis said wonderingly, "You look so young. If it weren't that Martin Kent told me about you, I'd—"

She let him look at her, standing with her eyes lowered. Travis had seen the *landuli*, the dancing girls raised by the princes of Orion-3; had seen the white-tressed houris of Venus; had seen the golden women bred for men's pleasure by the Kafars of Proxima Centauri. He had never seen anyone as lovely as this first woman. Her legs were long and white, her hips gently rounded. The high arch of her breasts were poetry.

And then she raised her lashes.

Her blue eyes were ancient as space itself, as filled with nameless knowledge, with wisdom beyond Travis's understanding. They had beheld all things, from the slug that came out of a borning world's ocean bottom to the scribblings of the universe's mightiest scientist. Her ears had heard the songs of Sull and the symphonies of Bach and Lyrn.

Travis was aware of all that staring into her eyes. He whispered, "But—how?"

She gestured at the calyx and the wires. "Those machines feed me energy that I need to stay alive. They also feed me the intellectual stimulation I need to stay sane.

"Man's thoughts can be recorded. You know that. Therefore they give off some electrical flow. I will not go into the whys of it. You would not understand. But those

electrical flows never die. They fade and fade, almost to nothingness—but not quite. The dynamos here pick them up, amplify them.

"Here in the crystal calyx I have been fed all thought since the Werwile smashed Flormaseron. I spent years with a being called the Discoverer—before he disappeared into some strange twisting of the space-time continuum. It was he who warned me of Rudra, the Werwile. He said he was stirring—about to come again."

Travis muttered, "The Werwile?"

The girl laughed softly at his puzzled face. "The Werwile, yes. The eternal one. He who never sleeps. He who knows all things. Your race calls him Devil. . . . a race-memory of the first beginnings of the humanoid cell, of the one who smashed the first race just when it was rising to its glory. All your legends, all the legends of all men contain mention of him. The Rebel. Loki. Venus's Badal. Cygni's Daldal."

"You mean, there is someone like that? An actual person?"

"Why not? Your race has dreamed of immortality. So has every race. The Werwile found it."

Travis hooked his thumbs in the metal loops of his space-harness and waited. Nuala walked about the big chamber, touching a glittering cone, staring up at a whirling golden globe.

She went on, "He found it, smashed his own people in a holocaust of destruction, and went into another cosmos. Now he is coming back. The irony of it is that he hollowed out this crystal crypt himself—and it was here he built his own evil knowledge. My people put me here, thinking he would never return. . . ."

Travis chuckled, "What can one man do to worry you?"

She looked at him, and her contempt was as tangible as a slap across the face. "You are a child. Just a baby. You don't dream of the sciences that Rudra will employ. He can sweep your Earth-empire ahead of him as a breeze takes a dry leaf. Look about you. See the cones, the globes, and ask yourself—can your science duplicate them? And then ask, if Rudra, the Werwile, smashed a civilization that could produce all this, what will he do against Earth?"

The fear in the blue eyes touched Travis then, under the leather of his belt. His stomach tightened. Nervously, he licked at his dry lips. He thought of Mars Port, of New York Terminal, of the giant spacers that plied the starways throughout the System, of the jewels and food and riches they carried in their holds. He thought of his Iowa home, of his parents. He visualized that culture, those people, all smashed.

He whispered, "What can we do?"

Nuala shrugged white shoulders. "Nothing. If Rudra smashed the Nekkald, what can your Earth-people do?"

"We can fight!" Travis grated.

She was amused. "How?"

"We could attack him, before he suspects. He does not know that we know. A little surprise might turn the trick."

The pain of his wounds made him dizzy, but it seemed to Travis that Nuala opened her eyes in surprise. She gloomed at him long moments, a white-fingered hand toying with the golden hemp of her girdle. She murmured softly, "Surprise? Yes, a sudden attack might work. If we could get past the barbarians who guard him, there is something we might do."

Her face grew blurred in his eyes. He saw her as through a mist. He was falling away from her dropping. She cried out in alarm, ran toward him. Her soft hands caught him, but could not hold his big body. He hit the floor and lay still.

THERE was perfume in his nostrils, and a faint murmur of sound. Travis opened his eyes, lay staring up at the white ceiling of the crystal crypt. He turned his neck, saw Nuala with oddly-shaped jars set before her on a long, flat tabletop.

She was murmuring, "If only I were sure of the cell formation, it would be easy. Not like ours, yet different from that of the *arklings*. This . . . yes, this might be the right one."

She came toward him a blue jar grooved and opaque in her hand. Smiling at him, she unscrewed the top and dipped her fingers inside. She brought out a reddish jelly that she smoothed gently into the bite in his thigh, then into the torn flesh of his arm. There was faint pain, a tingle of nausea.

"It will pass," said Nuala. "The red jelly is *celluvalin*. It is—you might call it plastic flesh. It has the cell formation of blood and sinew, and will knit and unite with the torn sections of your body."

Travis lay still. The pain was going swiftly. Tentatively he flexed his leg. It moved easily. He grinned, "You could make a fortune with that on Earth or Mars. What the Fleet wouldn't give for plastic flesh. Whew!"

Nuala sighed and replaced the jars. "If we defeat Rudra, I will return to the calyx. There is no place in the world for me."

Travis saw the blue eyes and the tiredness, the wisdom and knowledge behind them, and bit at his lip. She was right. Earth and Mars, even Cyngi and Lalande-80 would be boring to her. She knew too much to be happy with anyone less intelligent than she. And that meant everyone—except the Werwile.

Travis swung his long legs in their torn spaceslacks off the table. He ran his hands over the broad leathern belt that held his *stil*-gun and holster, over the leather-and-cloth jerkin with the ripped sleeves.

"Guess I'm ready to go. I feel good again. But I'd like to stay that way. Do you have another of those pencil-things?"

He pointed at her girdle. She drew out the weapon and smiled, "You mean the displacer. It forces the electrons of an object out of their orbit. Turns them into other orbits, and makes them dust."

She went to a drawer, drew out three of the pencil-guns, and handed them to him. "You will be safe with these."

Nuala went to the pink barrier and beckoned to him. "Hurry. The sooner we surprise Rudra, the better."

The *arklings* left them strictly alone. They went up through the tunnels, past the carven walls to the ruins of the Nekkalad temples. Sprawled across acres of the barren, pitted surface of the planet, the white towers and jagged walls of the once-massive buildings were like huge play-things scattered by a child-giant in petulant anger.

Nuala breathed, "Before Rudra came and smashed them, they were the loveliest things in all the universe."

The silvered hull of Travis's spacer lay a hundred yards from the crumbled wall,

on a bed of powdered black rock. Nuala walked around it, frowning. She shook her head, her long yellow hair fluttering about her shoulders.

"It will never make the trip. There are things to be done to it."

She looked at him, troubled. She asked, "Do you know what a Calakin curvature-annihilator is? Or a Wilwal warping-beam?"

Travis shook his head.

Nuala said, "I will have to make them, then. You do have a workshop, I know. I read your thoughts as you came toward Nekkalad. Even before that, in Mars Port with Martin Kent."

She went up the metal ladder into the ship. She walked with calm assurance toward the repair room. Travis came after her, wondering, a little rattled. It was odd to see a woman so familiar with his life, with his own inner thoughts. He thought of Jonquilon, the red-headed dancer at Mars Port. Cheeks red, he settled himself on a bench, and watched her.

NUALA was murmuring, "We'll need a speed-up job on your rockets to get them through the Break. And a super-blaster to add to your own space-warper. Hmm . . . wires all right. Sheet metal not too strong, but it'll do . . ."

Her voice droned on. Travis found himself lost in contemplation of her. She looked like any girl you might see in the Chez Saturn or Planetary Park. She might be fussing over a jalanadon steak instead of a space-warper. If it weren't for her eyes . . . so blue . . . but so filled with that frightening knowledge, with wisdom, she'd make a guy a swell wife. He wondered how she kissed.

"Now you must help me," she said, turning to him. She saw his abrupt change of expression and brooded at him. She shook her head suddenly and held out a small engine rigged with wheels and wires, with armatures and generator. "Attach it to the drive shaft, ahead of the combustion chambers."

She showed him how, and explained its working. Travis didn't get the whole thing, but he understood enough to know that even the Chalmers rockets would be improved with this contraption. It smoothed the blastings of the jets, built them up on

their own power. The ship would be like a bullet that, once shot from the gun, would receive another firing every ten feet. It was speed added to speed.

Nuala smiled at his blank look, "Don't bother about whys and wherefors. Just let me handle things."

TRAVIS grumbled under his breath, cramped under the jets and installing the super-blaster. It fretted his male pride to feel that a woman—even such a woman as Nuala—knew more about the workings of his own space-ship than he knew himself.

He hit a Litson wrench against a fitting in anger. "All this talk of Rudra. The eternal werwile! Blah! How do I know there is any such person?"

The thought stopped him. He lay there in the cramped space between jet-sheathing and baffles and grinned at his own stupidity. "How do I know she's the one I came out here to find, even? I never saw her in the calyx!" Deep in the heart of him, he knew that Nuala was—Nuala. Her eyes told him that. He muttered, "Just the same, I don't have any proof about this werwile!"

He crawled out of the rocket-room and stood up in the narrow corridor, wiping sweat from his eyes. Under his feet the floor quivered as the rockets thundered into life. Travis put a calloused hand on a wall-rail. The rockets blasted faster, turning the corridor into a maelstrom of sound.

The ship was lifting, leaving the blackened planet and the ruined temples far below it. There was a sudden weightlessness to his body that told him they were out in space, now, slipping along with vertiginous speed.

He clanked the lock on the rocket-chamber door and went to find Nuala.

She was bent over the control panel, moving her white fingers across the dials. She did not look up when he came to a stop beside her. She merely said, "I'll have to take this all apart. Your wiring system is only 87 per cent efficient."

"That's pretty good," Travis rasped, "On the first trampers that went to the moon, 35 per cent was hot stuff."

Nuala sniffed and reached for a kit of tools. Travis put out a hand and closed it

on her wrist. She looked up at him from under long yellow eyelashes.

"How do I know there is a Rudra?" he said harshly. "How do I know you aren't just using me for . . . for . . ."

"For what?" she asked serenely, not moving to draw her wrist away. "Where in all your worlds would I want to go? I know everything there is to know about them—and you."

"Even—Jonquilon?"

She let amusement reach up through the blue of her eyes. She mocked him gravely, "I know about that weakened you spent with her, when you let the museum get scooped on the canal-men bones on Mars."

Travis let her hand go. He grumbled, "It was worth it."

Her laughter was like silver droplets. She mocked, "What do you know about women? Have you ever seen the water-girls on Tasselas, or the bubble-women that float in the Magellanic cluster? I could show you ways of—"

She broke off and shook herself. She said dryly, "I'm letting my emotions run away with me. I can't do that with the werwile. And, speaking of him—you ask proof, do you?"

Nuala shrugged. "I really can't prove him to you except by showing him. Trust me for three—four days. Then you will have your proof." The fear was back in her eyes as she whispered, "You will have it then. By Grock, you will have it!"

THEY hit the Break a thousand light-years from Van Maanen's star. Travis could see it through the thick, curved window: an oval of darkness somehow shades deeper than the black of space. The pointed prow of the spacer steadied, then sped on. The slit grew larger.

"Pray Grock that Rudra is amusing himself with some new form of life," Nuala whispered, white hand gripping the lever of the speed control. "If he suspects we're entering his little world, he'll scatter our remains across the cluster."

Travis prowled restlessly around the small room. He felt useless beside Nuala. He glanced at the dials and levers she had improved, at the racked disintegrators that the girl, with a hellish cunning, had out-

moded by making them into larger replicas of the pencil-guns. His hard palms slid down his leather jacket, restless, eager to come to grips with something.

The Break was on them, and they were in it. Darkness shrouded the ship, but the rockets thundered through the insulation-sheets. Travis upped the lights with a flip of his hand. Even at full brilliance, he saw Nuala through a pale haze.

"The Break is a barrier that Rudra threw up around his worlds after he smashed Flormaseron. He has three planets all to himself. One is his laboratory, one his armory, one his palace. We'd have no chance at all by attacking the first two. Only on his palace-planet—where he retires to his kinds of pleasure—can we surprise him."

The darkness went away and they were back in space again. Far ahead of them a star glittered with blue shimmerings. Faint and distant from the star, tiny gray balls in space, were three planets.

Nuala touched a stud on the steel wall. "A force-sheath," she smiled. "We'd never get close enough to the planet to land if we didn't have it." A whiteness swept up before the windows, hiding the star and the three planets. Nuala moved forward, past Travis. With a touch of her finger, she slipped on the automatic pilot.

"There. Now we can do nothing else but—wait."

They did not wait long. The humming alarm of the warning buzzer drove Nuala to the controls. With speeding hands, she upped the force sheath stud, depressed the landing lever. Travis was at her side, staring down at rolling grasslands, at the distant peak of a snow-topped mountain. He muttered, "It looks like Earth!"

The spaceship rode on its belly across the grass. Travis went to the curved door and flung it open. Sweet cool air drove inside the room on the wings of a breeze.

Something clanged against the metal doorlock. Hooves drummed on the grass. Another pellet dented the hull of the ship, blew into a thousand splinters. Travis got his face out of the way just in time. His hand dropped to his holster, came up with the ringed *stil*-gun that had been changed over by Nuala. Horsemen were approaching, fast.

He slammed a finger down on the trigger. Green flame blasted from the muzzle, swept like a cloud across the grasses.

The horsemen came up the side of a hill, heading for the ship. Before the green light reached them, Travis had a quick look at the heavysset, white-skinned men who kneed their mounts, long tubes at their shoulders. They looked like barbarians, but they held those queer tubes in their hands.

Nuala screamed, "Atholiners! Quick—jump for it!"

She was at his side, clutching at his hands. "Those little pellets—they'll eat everything they hit. Quick! By Grock . . . be quick!"

Travis had a confused glimpse of her flashing eyes, of a gaping hole rapidly spreading along the smooth, metallic side of the ship. His legs tensed, and he was jumping. Ahead of him the green light was bathing the horsemen in its verdant flame. A man screamed. The scream gurgled, died abruptly.

He landed and rolled. He came to his feet, *stil*-gun in hand. The horsemen were just particles of lazily floating dust. Travis turned to his ship, saw it eaten before his eyes, as though an invisible beast were champing on it, taking huge mouthfuls.

Then the ship was gone, and he and Nuala stood alone on the grassy knoll.

"Some surprise party," he said, and laughed harshly. "We have one gun—which doesn't mean a thing, if Rudra is anything like you think he is."

"Rudra? Yes, we must think of him. He may or may not know we are here." She looked about at the windswept knoll, at the gnarled pine trees standing straight and tall, bleak and stern. She glanced away, toward a tier of flattish rocks. "Sometimes his horsemen take care of—intruders. Sometimes he lets visitors—wander. Never has he let them escape him for very long."

Something of the menace of the man beat at Travis, as though a col wind moaned above the pines and blew past his ear with mocking words. *Rudra will get you if you don't watch out. Rudra has never let a visitor escape him for very long.*

He put his hands on his *stil*-gun and stroked its rounded grip. "We can't just

stay here. We'd starve to death in these wilds." His hand indicated the windbent oaks below, the gaunt pines, the rolling grasslands that lifted toward distant hills.

Nuala brooded at him. Her red mouth quirked, almost angrily. She snapped, "I've been thinking! We still can surprise him if we could get into Kovokod, the main city."

"Why not go disguised as some of his people?" Travis wondered. He grinned, "You could be my wife—"

Nuala sniffed her contempt. She lashed at him, "I am above emotions. I am almost pure thought. Don't distract me from my planning."

Travis chuckled, "A couple of barbarians. We'd look pretty good as nomads, wouldn't we? Well, what do you say? What's to stop us?"

Nuala snapped, "Our features! They are too delicate, too finely formed. Rudra hastened the evolution of his people speeded up their ascent in time. They are still brutish, thick of nose, of lip."

"If we had some of the celluvalin. I could do a pretty fancy job on our faces. I've moulded life forms in clay often enough for Solar Museum."

Nuala eyed him wonderingly. "You are a young race, but you Earth-things do come up with some good ideas. There will be medical centers on Rudraline. If we can find one, there will be celluvalin there."

They set out under the pines, walking for the windbent oaks, side by side.

FOR three days they moved southward. Here and there were farms, sprawled across the land. Travis walked with his eyes on them, studying the architecture, the terrain. Already, he told himself, he could do a few panoramic windows for Solar—if he ever got out of this thing alive.

Once Nuala caught him by the wrist, dragged him back to the shelter of a dwarf bush. She whispered, "A caravan. The Rudradians are taking their produce to market at Kovokod!"

Travis watched, fascinated. The horse-men in plain leather harness rode with the ease of Cossacks in the saddle, far ahead of the slower-footed pack-animals, giant sloth-like creatures in rich trappings. They

bore ornate palanquins on their backs, or pulled huge wagons by gilded reins. In the middle of the caravan rode the nobles, draped in cloth-of-gold, glittering with jewels.

Nuala shook his shoulder. She hissed. "We can't waste time. Quickly, now. They are almost past—"

They scrambled unseen onto a wagon. . .

They found a medical station in the dawn of the fourth day. There was a nurse inside, asleep at the table. Nuala crossed the room with long strides, bent over her from the rear, did something to her at the base of the skull with her fingertips. The nurse pitched forward, sprawled along the edge of the table.

Travis scooped handful of *celluvalin* from an earthen jar and went to work on his face before a mirror. With steady fingers he altered his nose, broadened and widened it, gave it a snoutish look. He modeled his mouth to brutish slackness. He lowered his forehead. When he was through he was a step above the ape.

Nuala was watching him with wide eyes. She whispered, "I do not like you—like that."

He stood over her, toweling his hands. He said, "I feel different, too. Almost like a—beast."

She was near him, blue eyes uplifted, red mouth quivering. He put his hands on her arms, lifted her against him. He bent and kissed her. For a single instant she yielded to him and her mouth was a honeyed fire. Then she thrust him away, stood panting. Her anger crackled in her eyes, in the rise of her pointed breasts.

"You are a beast! You—"

Travis chuckled, "I just had to do it, honey. I wanted to see what it was like."

He scooped *celluvalin* in a hand and slapped it down on her cheek. He worked swiftly, moulding and shaping the cell-jelly before it hardened and adhered to her skin. By the time he was finished, her rage was spent. He stepped back, eyed her calculatingly. He nodded. "You look just like the nurse, now. Not a bad job, if I do ring my own alarm-bell."

Nuala lifted the mirror and looked into it for a long moment. Once she lifted her eyes and stared enigmatically at Travis. Then she casually lifted a hand and undid the fastenings of her translucent gown.

Calmly she stepped from it, ignoring Travis's sudden, "Hey!"

She lifted the white uniform from the prostrate nurse. Deftly she hooked it about her and stood back. "Now the resemblance is complete. I will be a nurse. You—my amorous Earth-thing—will be my patient. A mental deficient. You look the part perfectly."

Travis went, "Ouch!" and followed her out into the sunlight.

Toward noon they were overtaken on the broad highway by an advance guard of horsemen for another caravan. One of the horsemen shouted at them. Nuala screamed back. Not understanding their language—Nuala had always spoken spaceenglish to him—he said, "What'd they want to know?"

"If my *babuvol* was too poor to buy me a horse," she snapped.

"*Babuvol?*"

"Husband to you. Mate. I told them you weren't my husband." She added sweetly, "I said you were crazy, that you suffered from the delusion of having glass toes, among other things."

Travis scowled at her as she swung along blithely. He thought of a remark, but ignored it.

The caravan crept up to them, engulfed them. Travis stared rudely at the sleek horses, at the handsomely wrought designs on saddle and stirrup. He eyed the monstrous pack-sloths carefully, making sure that he was nowhere near the flat, gigantic paws when they tromped down on the road. He caught sudden glimpses of foodstuffs, of silver jars, of priceless tapestries.

Once a nobleman reined in his mount and spoke to them. Nuala did not raise her eyes but she murmured, "He is a feeble one, lordship. There is a sickness in his mind. If you could hear him speak—"

She nudged Travis with an elbow, hissed into his ear, "Say something for the man, idiot!"

Travis babbled, "Intry-mintry, look so sly—spaceman, spaceman, in your eye!" from the words of a song currently popular on Mars.

The nobleman made a pitying sound with his lips, ignoring Travis's glare. He tossed a ring to Nuala. "The protection of the Lord Railan, nurse."

Nuala hid the ring in a pocket. Eyes straight ahead, she said to Travis, "It was a happy thought, your passing as a lunatic. It is a part that comes easily to you."

The ring was a talisman that hired mounts, servants. The engraved seal on the circlet opened men's eyes, and when Nuala whispered suavely, "The Lord Railan will pay double . . ." the charm was complete. Soon they left the caravan and went on ahead.

THE twin towers of Kovokod were banded white and black. They dozed in the sunlight above the walled city. Outside the walls were sloped launching cradles for stratosphere fliers and spacers. Like toys, pilots and passengers moved from stationhouse to ladders, crossed back and forth. Occasionally a police flier spiralled slowly over the ramped buildings and arched levels of the city. Travis could see tri-wheeled vehicles speeding back and forth on the raised streets.

Nuala gestured and Travis saw a huge gate swarming with men and women on foot, on horse, or seated luxuriously in the tri-wheelers. "We'll mingle with the crowd. That way, and with the ring, we can get in easily enough."

Travis gawked at the throngs. Nuala spoke occasionally, and Travis knew she was calling attention to his mental state. She was mocking him, but Travis added to her words by singing ribald ditties that were famous from Earth to Centauri. He even made up one about Nuala. Only her sudden hiss and pinch brought remembrance that she could speak any tongue.

The guard at the gate eyed the ring and Nuala. He licked his lips at her words and let them through. They faded into the crowds, Nuala walking swiftly, not giving Travis a chance to stare at the straight, many-windowed buildings, the ornate balconies, the several roads that were like lattices linking the city together.

"We must get into one of those towers!" Nuala hissed. "They are Rudra's laboratories. There he houses his discoveries, the rarest weapons, the finest engines."

"Maybe the ring—?"

"Not for the towers. I know this world, from the crypt. I have spent too many years spying on Rudra."

Travis rubbed his knuckles thoughtfully. He murmured, "I wanted something to come to grips with. Maybe I can get you into the tower."

The tower entrance was like a halved egg, bulging out from the straight wall of the black-and-white structure. There was no visible means of entry. It seemed a sheer rounded oval of stone. Travis stared at it uncertainly, walking past.

"Are you sure?" he asked Nuala. "That doesn't look like a door to me!"

"What do you know of doors?" she snapped. "It opens to vibratory impulses. Walk close enough and it will open—and a blast of power will turn you into smoke."

Travis fingered his jaw. "If I walk toward it and just as the thing opens I dart aside . . . it might miss me."

"A crude approach," observed Nuala, but her eyes were thoughtful.

Stung, Travis snarled, "Sometimes you accomplish more by crudeness. If the other guy isn't expecting it."

He would not have done it, if he hadn't felt so helpless and useless beside Nuala. He knew it was foolhardy, even as he ran, right hand going for the *stil*-gun. In a soberer moment he would have waited, have let her figure out the answer, as she had figured out the other answers.

His dark hair whipped in the wind that came up the street when he slid to a halt. The egg-shaped adit was lifting, disclosing black depths behind it, glittering metal, a running figure.

Nuala screamed, but Travis moved before he heard her. The *stil*-gun belched green mist into the darkness. Travis was sliding, scrambling aside.

Light—dazzling, blinding light—shot out of the glittering metal engine just before the green mist touched it. The light was hot. Crouched against the wall, face turned away from its brilliance, Travis felt the heat of it. His brow beaded with sweat. The black hairs on his forearms stank where they crisped.

Nuala went by him, crying, "Now! Now!"

Staggering, he followed her. She went into the blackness, was a pool of whiteness for an instant. He came low and fast on her heels. The closing doors scraped his leg, it was that close.

The engine that spit the light beam was

gone. There was just a gaping hole in the metal floor, a bent armature pulled loose from its housing, a glob of red flesh . . .

Nuala was on the staircase, going up. Travis saw a Kovokodan face leer at her, saw a tube lifted. He showered the face with green mist, watched it explode, blow into powder. Then he was beside her, thrusting her back.

"I'll take the lead," he growled.

He used the *stil*-gun twice more before they reached the big chamber at the top of the tower. Facing death, taking risks, using the muscles of his space-hardened body, Travis felt the elixir of battle pound in his veins. He was a person again, not just a thing dragged along by the last woman of the Nekkald.

Nuala went by him as he stood in the doorway. She raced to banks of buttons spread across the western wall of the room. Her fingers slammed down, played like the digits of a Venusian pianist across the complicated keyboard.

She was just in time. The floor shuddered under their feet as the tower rocked. But the floor held. And the tower stood. Nuala threw back her head, flung wild and eerie laughter at the flat ceiling.

"By Grock, I've won! I've won!"

She put trembling fingers to her face, clawed at it, tearing strips of flesh away. Travis opened his mouth, closed it. Bit by bit, she pulled the *celluvalin* loose and cast it from her. She swung about, faced Travis. Once more her face was lovely, mouth warm and kissable.

"You helped me, Earth-thing. You helped me get here! I'll reward you for that!" She lifted her arms, did a girlish pirouette.

Travis growled, "What about Rudra?"

She laughed. It was like tuned glass tinkling. "Rudra himself discovered the warp-sheath. I've pulled this tower into another dimension. He can't harm us because he can't find us! Oh, Travis, my dear . . ."

Her hands touched his nose and mouth. Gently she removed the *celluvalin*, cleansed his cheeks until he stood tan and grim-lipped, the Clark Travis she first had seen in the pink barrier outside the calyx chamber.

"Now, Clark Travis (a) (b) (c) you may kiss me!"

He stretched out his arms, caught her warm and soft against him, bent his mouth—

"Charming," sneered a cold voice. "Of the *kovokodans*, this I would have expected, but you two are from a higher race—"

HE STOOD in the center of the room, tall and lean; his height and spareness emphasized by the black cloak he pulled about him as though against the cold. His thin lips sneered. The narrow brows above black eyes were upraised to form two living insults.

Nuala whimpered. She thrust a hand to her mouth. "Rudra!"

The dark man moved forward. Now Travis could see a circlet of tiny stars, revolving and shimmering, coruscating light, that swung like a fallen halo about his head. As the man went, so went the ever-turning stars.

"You know me? But you must, to be so familiar with my sciences. I do not know . . . you. Or do I?"

The black eyes touched Travis, slid away. Travis growled low in his throat at the blank dismissal of those eyes. He was less than a slug, not given as much courtesy as a canal-minnow. Nuala was shrinking back against his chest as the eyes drove into her.

Rudra whispered, "But—you! You are familiar. Something from out of the past . . . the dead past . . . centuries . . . eons . . . ages ago. A woman—a queen—Nuatha of the Yellow Hair. Queen of the Nekkalah!"

"I am Nuala. Her daughter."

Rudra looked interested. Nuala went on, "Before you smashed Flormaseron, my parents and the Nekkalah scientists imprisoned me in your own crystal crypt. They fed me energy . . . and the thought-waves of all living things. I know of you, Rudra, of your plans . . ."

The dark man laughed. "By my beginning! I am knowing the first interest I've had in a thousand million centuries. You've set yourself up against—me? Against the eternal one? The Werwile?"

Nuala moved her white fingers in a queer pattern. They seemed to blur before Travis's eyes, become faint and shadowy. Her hand disappeared. Rudra moved sud-

denly, swore by a long-forgotten god. He said abruptly, "You'd pull my heart into a different space-time, would you? Leave me locked forever in some blackness?"

His own hands moved, but Nuala was quicker. Her body swayed, twisted in odd manner. She disappeared. Rudra cried out. He brought his hand back to view again. There were teethmarks and blood on it. Nuala formed, laughed softly beside Travis; blood on her ruby mouth.

"Am I a fit opponent, Rudra—not-long-to-be-eternal?"

Rudra nursed his bitten hand in the black cloak. His black eyes glittered dangerously above the beaked nose, the ruddy mouth. Travis thought he looked like a cornered Saturnian vampire at that moment.

Rudra laughed. It was, surprisingly, a pleasant laugh. He bowed, and there was no mockery in it.

"You are a worthy opponent, Nuala. None that I know of could have done that to me—but you. You say you know my plans? Good! You know my thoughts, my sciences? Good again. Two equal opponents—you with that creature beside you to aid you, me with my *kovokodans*. Let us see who will turn the tide. . . ."

"I had the Lord Railan and others ease your way to me. I was—curious. Now I am glad. I will enjoy our duel, Nuala. Good—hunting!"

He was gone.

The silence was cold, as though his passing had taken a fire from the room. Nuala shivered, looked dubiously at Travis. He said tactlessly, "I thought you said you'd won."

"I—underestimated him. I'd forgotten that Rudra smashed Flormaseron, that he has all the science that ever was at his fingertips. I thought that by taking his tower into another dimension I could strike at him before he knew where we were. Strike and annihilate! Now . . . I do not know."

There was doubt in the blue eyes, and the old fear. Only the fear was stronger, now. It was a curiously tangible thing, beating out and around the room, running chilled tentacles down Travis's back.

He shook himself, said savagely, "So we can't surprise him. Then let's slug it out, toe to toe. It's him or—us!"

"But he has so many sciences . . ." she wailed.

"Sciences you know just as well!" Travis snapped. "And before we're over it'll be the first law of nature all over again. The survival of—the fittest!"

"If I only knew what he meant to do—"

Travis choked. He put out a hand, vised it on her arm. "The crypt! By the eternal! If you could move this tower into another dimension—move it to Flormaseron! Enter the calyx! Tap his mind! Checkmate him!"

Hope dawned in the blue eyes. Hope stilled the shudder rippling down her back. She cried, "Yes, yes. That's our chance, our one big weapon—the calyx!"

Nuala moved her hands in that queer, flowing motion. Her eyes were wide and staring. She whispered, "It is easier to move the warping controls—this way. The distances in the dimensional flows are shorter."

There was a faint dizziness as the tower reeled. Travis had an odd instant of vision, where he saw whirling clouds of elfin dust, heard the discordant music of distorted space. In mind's eye, he glimpsed the tower as it swung through a blackness striped with red traceries. There was a jar, a sudden shock—

A WALL of the tower shone with iridescent nacre. Through the pale pearl glitter, Travis saw the chamber of the calyx, the cones and globes circling endlessly and shedding their soft light, the great sculpted-out hollow of the crystal.

"Step quickly," whispered Nuala. "Step through . . ."

She was a blur of movement, leaping for the nacre. Travis clutched for her hand and found it warm and soft as he hit the shimmer with her. A moment of cold, then they were inside the crystal crypt. Nuala went to the crystal, lay down within it, attached wires to grips, rested her golden head against the oddly wrought headpiece that was wired to the dynamos.

Travis watched her hands lift and blur as a faint, nauseous color came seeping up through the very stones of the floor. Travis knew that some light-colors could affect people physically, but this was sickening, overpowering. Much of that color, and he would go mad. His brain reeled. His stomach writhed—

The light went away, but Nuala's hands were still invisible, as she worked the forces hidden within the captured tower. Travis knew she was hitting back at Rudra, reading his mind, searching for and finding the counter-agent, the necessary checkmate. Her eyes opened a second, looked into his. She whispered, "Watch the screen, Travis. The screen . . ."

He could see now what she was doing. The west wall of the tower that appeared through the nacre light was a giant visiscreen. In it the tower of Rudra in his city of Kovokod stood like a blackened giant above the ruins of the leveled city. Stone buildings were tossed and flattened. Smoke eddied upward in huge billows from charred and stark stumps of buildings. A woman fled with clothes ablaze along the upended stones of what had been a broad street. From the black and sullen sky red and fiery balls rolled and thundered, broke and splashed, devouring, on the city. The balls toppled walls, exploding; ate up wooden buildings with flaming tongues, caught and engulfed human beings, burning.

Sickened, Travis turned away—

It caught him, then. Bent and flung him back. Staring, he saw Nuala half out of the crystal block, rigid and writhing, twisted and distorted by some queer force. Her red mouth drew back in agony, screams gurgling in her throat.

And bent and twisted in her likeness, straining until their molecules whined, were the dynamos and cones and globes.

"Magnetic . . . flux . . . by Grock! Grock!" she screamed. "I can't hang on. It's got me. Grock . . . good Grock . . ."

Travis dove to yank her free—and ran into it. He felt it in his fingers, first. It was a maddening wrench that bent them as if they had been boneless. He leaped sideways and the thing caught him in the middle. On hands and knees he crawled away, crawled toward the only spot that offered safety.

He slid into the nacre coldness, dropped onto the stone floor of the captured tower. Sobbing, he lay there, listening to Nuala scream.

This is the end of it. There is no way out—

No way out. Only death from torture. Or—maybe not death. Just torture for

Nuala. He remembered the pink and menacing girdle that secured the crypt from the *arklings*. The unseen voices, recorded somehow by the first humanoid race, had told of tortures—*Nuala, stop screaming! God, I can't stand it!*

Nuala, screaming. And Rudra—gloating!

Rudra!

Travis lifted his tanned face. His eyes burned savagely, staring across the tower toward the dials and levers that controlled those forces that only Rudra and Nuala understood. Travis moved his hands, getting to his feet. He looked at his hands, balled them into hard fists. He whispered, "I wanted something to come to grips with. I needed something to put my hands on, to hit, to batter!"

Travis snarled, "Rudra!" and slammed his hands on the levers. He had watched Nuala move them. He knew how to move the tower through the dimensional paths Nuala had guided it.

Under his feet the tower swayed, reeled sickeningly.

And then—

The two towers met with a jarring crash. Travis was already in midair, leaping through the gap. Stones met and tumbled. The roof of Rudra's blackened tower was caving in. Travis swept through the air, aimed for a crumbled section of roofing. His hands went out to fasten on smashed tile. Through the rent, he saw Rudra at his visiscreen, laughing at the twisted, helpless thing that was Nuala in the calyx—

TRAVIS went mad. He leaped for Rudra, leaped from the roof. His fist caught him beside the cheek, drove his head back. His knees hit the man's chest as he fell, toppled him backward. Sobbing, Travis went for him even before he hit the floor.

They rolled across the tiling, bounced off the metal leg of a table, rammed into the base of the great visiscreen. Travis fought with the strength of a hundred men, thinking of the crumpled loveliness of Nuala. His fists were as ten. His endurance seemed drawn from a bottomless well of energy. He fought and hammered and sobbed, a red haze of fury floating before his eyes.

And Rudra weathered the storm. The stars that circled about his head glowed brighter and brighter. Strength grew and grew in Rudra's body. He broke free of Travis, thrust him back with a vicious kick: laughed at him. He moved his hands in the fluid motion and there was blind, stabbing pain in Travis's guts, an agony that lanced red-hot needles from the roots of his hair to his toenails.

Travis rolled on the floor, clutching his broken body. He saw legs, hit them. Rudra fell over him.

Travis summoned all his strength, tore loose from the pain inside him, fell on Rudra. The revolving stars cut his lip, blinded him with their brilliance.

It was a voice whispering inside him, like Nuala's voice. "*The star-girdle is his weakness. Break the stars and you break Rudra. Without the stars, Rudra is—nothing!*"

Travis lifted his hands and closed them on the stars. Rudra whispered. For the first time, Travis detected fear in the man's eyes. He tried to wrench free, brought his hands back from inside Travis, scrabbled for his wrists.

Silently they struggled there. The pain was gone and Travis knew that this was it. He had to win now, or not at all. Now . . . now . . .

The stars came free. They whispered sibilantly, loosening in their orbit, shooting wildly across the room. They stung and bit into Travis's hands. They whirled, exploding into puffs of silvery dust. The dust showered down on Rudra, on Travis. It stung the nostrils, the eyeballs . . .

"Rudra!" whispered Travis.

There was no Rudra, only a widening glob of black wetness, melting away as wax melts from a candle in fierce heat. Travis rolled free, slapped at the blackish stains on spaceslacks and jacket.

The blob of jelly loosened rapidly, went to liquid as a breeze swept over the ruined city and into the blasted tower. The liquid ran freely, went down the cracks, dripped wetly on the rafters and the stones far below.

Ancient! Ancient! So old the tongues of men had no word for it. From the beginning he was, and was no more

Travis turned away from the stench. He stumbled across the room toward the con-

trol levers on the wall. With trembling hands he shut them off.

IT WAS EASY, going back. Through the nacre curtain, as the tower settled down, Travis saw Nuala standing beside the shattered calyx. Both hands were plunged in her thick golden hair. Her blue eyes were blank and staring.

Her memory is gone, Travis thought,

running toward her. The pain and the magnetic flux did it. She isn't Nuala of the crystal crypt any longer. She is only a girl.

His dream of Nuala cooking a *jalanadon* steak in his little apartment at Mars Port would come true. This Nuala he could marry.

Travis caught her in his arms. Her lips were sweet as he bent and kissed her.
