

PLANET STORIES



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When Kohonnes Screamed

By GARDNER F. FOX



And, as he came, Randolph was destroying the towers of changel

Kohonnes breathed out across his little world and made the waters back up and the stones crawl and the trees writhe abominably. Why couldn't he distort men's souls also?

THE SPACESHIP WAS CHANGING shape all around him. The curving walls sloped inward at crazy angles, and the glassine windows bulged like giant bubbles. The floor was an unending series of little waves, and the ceiling melted to drop liquid pellets.

"This is it!" exulted Grim Thorrsen, slamming the levers of his control board, striving to slip his ship into the tug of the little planet looming through the starboard window. "Whatever kidnapped our trading vessels, whatever happened to the Fleet cruisers sent after them—here it is."

His tawny hair, long uncut, looped over his hard blue eyes as he stared at the instruments in front of him. Even the hard steelisicite cones and rods were altering subtly, their shapes fading to reform in different, twisted patterns. Grim felt a quick stab of fear. Sudden pain changed his grin to a spasmodic grimace of agony.

"Pirates I don't mind," he gasped, his body jerking suddenly as the force that bent his spaceship reached inside his body. "I—I'd take on Black Randolph as quick as down a cup of *yassallet* right now. But this thing—"

His head whipped back as spasms tore his chest. Laboring, sweat standing out on his high forehead, he thought, 'Matter isn't matter here—not as I know it. A ceiling starts crying steel tears and a heatlite floor develops a permanent.'

The force was tearing him apart with pain. It came like iron fingers in his belly and across his ribs. It bent him over so that his face went purple.

No wonder the Trader Unions lost their big Caravans, packed to their rivets as they were with priceless radium and korse-210 from Tanit and the other planets of the suns Deneb and Achernar! The Council thought at first that it was Black Randolph looting, so the Unions Council ordered out the cruisers from the Interstellar Fleet to hunt him down. The cruisers, like the big Caravans, never came back.

Then they sent for Grim Thorssen.

The big Viking throwback was the spot trouble-tripper of the Fleet. He'd been decorated—and paid in credits—from Antares to Kruger-60 for a brash bravery that ran close to the margins of foolhardiness. But what looked like recklessness in some men was planned daring with the blond Nordic. He could think faster and shoot straighter than any other three men in the Fleet. He had the highest I.Q. that the books provided for, and black spots on his chest from friendly duels with his fellow officers using black disintegrator charges. He was smart and he was crazy and his brother Commanders loved him. They said to each other, "If anybody can do it, Grim will. He'll find out what grabs the Caravans and the cruisers."

Well, now he knew. Tortured and strained, bent in a thousand positions in a matter of minutes, he was sobbing out the thought that he wished he hadn't. There wasn't anything you could do to a force that turned your ship into a fantastic nightmare and cut you in two with lancets of agony.

The planet loomed in the forward window. A faint light hazed its outlines, as though a private sun of its own shone beyond it. Grim bit his lip until it bled, fighting the nausea and the throbbing in him. He had to land his ship. He had to find out what the force was, and what it wanted. He had to fight the tough luck that had hounded the Trader Unions ever

since old Jasper Jones had retired. He had to—

The spacer grated on a ledge of rocks; its keel cracking and folding back and ripping off on the underside of the hull. A gigantic thin needle rising from a boulder towered before him. Grim yanked back on the power-brakes, but it was no use.

The blunt rock cliff loomed up. The nose of his vessel went ploughing into it with a force that snapped his leather safeties and skyrocketed him into the forward port . . .

THERE was a sun! Grim felt it beating hot into his closed eyes. Muscles ached and pain pounded through his big frame. His eyes came open to what was left of his ruined Corsair.

There was only one half that was recognizable. That was the front section accented against the black cliffside. The back section was queerly warped and sculpted into a caricature of a gaunt, metallic tree. Grim shook his head dazedly and lifted his eyes.

The landscape was riotous, mad. Things that looked like trees and bushes lifted branches bent and swollen attached to trunks that looped in bulbous curves. Tiny animals with seven horns and eight legs loped past. A gigantic beast with the hairy head of a mastodon, but with three long trunks, stared at him over the top of a blue bush; trumpeted, and was gone. And high above, a great yellow orb blazed heat and light.

Grim pulled himself up onto a gnarled rock. He squinted upward under a shading hand. He grunted, "Looks synthetic. Something about it—"

Leather rasped on rock, above him. Grim whirled, right hand going for the orris-nut handles of his disintegrator.

A girl stood on a ledge above him. Both hands were raised to the mass of rich black hair tumbling about her cape-hung shoulders. She was almost as tall as Grim, her long legs encased in tight golden skirts, her midriff bare below an ornate bolero that hugged her breasts. Seeing him, she brought her arms down fast, slant dark eyes widening.

Grim chuckled. "If I thought you could understand me, I'd ask you what kind of a crazy place this is."

The girl went back two steps, still staring at him. Her brow wrinkled. She said, "I do not understand you. Please—go away! If you are one of Althaya's men—"

Grim stared in amazement. He had spoken in the space *patois* that was used by the Fleet and the Caravan crews from Mars on outward. But the girl had spoken to him in the pure, almost archaic mother tongue! He had to stop and recall the idioms and phraseology that men still used on Tellura. Grim, like most others of his breed, had never been on the Earth. They were born and bred among the stars and there they usually died.

"What is your name?" he said haltingly, remembering lessons in the Fleet school. "What is this place? And what in the name of Hades makes all—this?"

He waved his hand at the distorted trees, at the little animals, at the oddly humped ground. The girl did not look at his gesturing hand. Her sloe eyes were fastened to his face; in fright, he thought.

She whispered, "Where is Althaya? Where is the Red Priestess?"

Grim said gently, "Look, honey. I'm a stranger here myself. You're the first normal looking thing I've come across—and even you are several shades above average." He let his eyes drift over her, and she straightened angrily.

"I am the Black Priestess of Kohonnes. I am Tlokine."

"Okay, okay. Don't get sore. Come on down and let's be friends."

Something in his amused blue eyes decided her. She let a smile turn up the corners of her wide red mouth and came down gracefully.

"That's better," Grim chuckled. "Tell me all about this place."

"This is Stormland. The god Kohonnes made it by sending out his breath and creating it. And when he is angry he sends his breath again—and his world reshapes itself nearer to his heart's desire."

Grim stared at her oddly. "You cribbed that from Omar. Shows you *do* know something about the Earth. And the sun? And Kohonnes, what is he?"

"Kohonnes is the creator of Stormland. He made me and Althaya and her people. He made the sun, too. His breath goes out and reshapes everything. If you want to avoid the anger of Kohonnes, you stand

within the red markers. He never harms anyone in there."

G RIM looked where her finger pointed. On the lower edges of the rock cliff he could see bright crimson splashes as though paint had been slapped on the stone. The red band formed a huge oval. He saw the tall needles lifting from the cliff. It was not rock as he had thought before the crash. It was a metal spire ending in a globe of interlaced wires and metal ribbons.

"Looks like an energy broadcaster," he muttered. Then he turned toward the girl. "Where can I see this Kohonnes of yours? What's he like?"

"He is All. He guides his people and shows them the way to a better, easier life. But some of his people do not want to wait—they want to be as powerful as Kohonnes before they are ready. And Althaya—the Red One—she is worse than any of them. Even now she is in special favor with the All. She knows somehow *before* the breath-storms come. She can walk freely across Stormland, I and others like me must run between the markers, for we are never sure when the god may breathe again."

Grim felt he was in the middle of a surrealistic nightmare. He wondered if he were dead, still crumpled up in his wrecked spacer. Or better, dreaming. He looked at the obscenely humped ground, and shook his head.

"Honey, you have a plenty mixed-up man on your hands. If I could see this Kohonnes, talk with him—"

Tlokine smiled and nodded. "I will take you to him. I feel sure he will be glad to see you."

"I hope," whispered Grim under his breath.

* * * * *

It was gloomy in the black-walled Temple. The girl with the red hair fanning down across her naked back shuddered. She could never quite overcome that stab of superstitious fear—

"I am displeased, Althaya. I had counted on better things from you."

"Your will is the Law, Kohonnes."

"See to it, then."

The girl bowed low until her crimson

hair fell down over her head to the basalt floor. She seemed subservient, but there was a ruthless smile on her hidden lips.

* * * * *

Grim Thorssen found this world a land of magic. Twice now, in his journey to the god Kohonnes, he had sought refuge within the red ovals with Tlokine. He had seen shapes rear up from loamy ground, assume fey forms and dissolve, as a sea-wave rises and breaks against a cliff. Trees enchanted themselves before him; became tall, towering rods of wood; became thin, twisting things crawling along the grasses. It was like watching a world in its birthing birthpangs. It was beautiful and eerie and frightening, all at once.

"They used to tell tales of magicians to me when I was a boy," he said to Tlokine. "I feel as though I'd been transplanted right into one of those stories."

"It is Kohonnes' breath," answered the girl, putting a hand on his shoulder to get to her feet. "But hurry now. We must go fast. Althaya may be riding with her men in this region."

They went fast and lightly. They ate of red fruit hanging from round branches, and drank from silvery brooks gurgling among dark rocks.

On the morning of the fourth day, they heard hoofbeats growing into a thundering tattoo behind them. Tlokine and Grim turned and looked at the same instant.

A lovely girl with red hair waving in the breeze rode a big white stallion at the head of ten men clad in leather armor, with needle-like longwords dangling at their waists. Their horses' hooves pounded them up to the man and girl waiting tensely on the ground.

The redhead reined in her horse, laughed mockingly down at the black-haired Tlokine. She cried, "I warned you, black one. I told you Kohonnes favored me."

Grim saw despair on Tlokine's face, and fright beneath it. Althaya whispered, "Now I will give you back to the Breath . . . on one of my own altars!"

The redhead looked past Tlokine; saw Grim, and stared. Her puzzled green eyes raked him from the soles of his space-boots to his thick, tawny hair. Grim saw her eyes fill with curiosity over the gold and black Fleet uniform, over the stars-

and-bars emblazoned in gold thread on his chest and sleeve.

"Who are you?" she asked suddenly.

"Grim Thorssen. Commander in the Interstellar Fleet."

She shook her head. She said, "I don't know what to do with you. Perhaps Ran—" Althaya paused and looked frightened. Biting her full lower lip, she looked quickly around her. Then she waved a hand at Tlokine and Grim, saying to her men, "Take them."

Grim would have fought, but the odds were too great. He shrugged his shoulders philosophically and let his wrists be bound. Then he swung up behind one of the men-at-arms on the broad croup of his horse.

THE SUN drew golden glints from the smooth dun walls of the tiny castle on the black rocks. All around the base of the cliff was splashed the red color that denoted a zone of safety from the change and the storm that swept the countryside around it. The little cavalcade pounded across the wooden drawbridge that extended across the little red-splashed gully and into the dark cobblestoned courtyard beyond.

Althaya looked at Grim as he slipped from behind the saddle. She said, "Come with me, man." Obediently he followed her beneath a broad archway, along a cool corridor and into a small room.

She turned and walked up close to him. Her deep brown eyes were disturbing under the long red lashes. She saw his perturbation and smiled. She said, "You like Althaya?"

Grim chuckled, "Any man would like you, gorgeous. But why the buildup? You're too pretty to need a sop for your vanity."

She looked around her, came even closer so that Grim was assailed by her perfume and smooth white arms. She said, "There is a man living in my castle, a man called Black Randolph—ah, you know him?"

"He is a pirate. I've followed him for eight years and never caught up with him."

She looked at him oddly. "He was wrecked on Stormland. I rescued him from the storm. He stays here, seeking the secret of what causes the Change to come across my world. With it he says he can go out

into his own land and be a king. He wants me to help him."

"And?"

Althaya shuddered. "I am afraid of him. He is hard. Ruthless. I have watched you. You can be a hard man, too. If you and I were to learn the secret of the Force—instead of Black Randolph—"

The Viking throwback laughed. "What you mean to say, beautiful, is that you think I'd be easier to manage than Black Randolph—once we got to be kings."

She slapped him hard across the face, and her face writhed in passion. She whispered, "For that you'll go to my torture knives, you *passat*!"

Grim laughed, "Don't play it so thick, Red. A woman only gets as mad as that when a man turns her down because she isn't intriguing enough—not because he won't go spacebad with her."

Althaya laughed harshly. Her green eyes approved him. Her bare shoulders lifted casually.

Grim said, "But while we're on the subject, what is the force that makes the change?"

"Kohannes does it. He is the god of all this world."

"Is he a man? A beast? What?"

She shook her red head. "Kohannes is made of metal. He has a thousand eyes that glow. He—"

"A machine," mused Grim. "But what kind of a machine does what this one will? And—who operates it?"

"Kohannes. I do not know what a machine is, but Kohannes is the All. He—"

Grim laughed, "How do you intend to steal a god?"

Althaya looked troubled. She said, "Black Randolph will know...and that reminds me. He will want to see you."

BLACK RANDOLPH went hysterical when he saw Grim. He threw back his head and roared. He slapped his hand against his thigh, making a sharp, flat sound. Tears of mirth sprang from his deep-sunk eyes.

He came across the tiled floor of the room to stand spraddle-legged before Grim. His hands slammed into lean hips. His thin lips twitched amusedly.

"So you found me at last, Thorssen!

You've come to the end of your eight-year trail. Congratulations! Too bad you aren't going back to Unions Council. You could tell 'em you're the only Fleet man ever to meet Black Randolph face to face."

Fury and hate seethed in the man's face. He brought his hard palm flat against Grim's cheek. "For eight years you've hounded me, Thorssen. You never caught me, but you smashed my empire. One by one—from Antares to Betelgeuse—you got my best men. But you'll suffer for it. Oh Lord, how you'll suffer!"

Black Randolph's eyes flickered when they brought Tokine in. He grinned at her, running his eyes over her lissome body. He chuckled, "Too bad she has to go on your altar, Red. I could use that myself."

Althaya went white. She whispered sibilantly, "My patience is strained already. See that you don't test it further."

The pirate laughed, slid an arm around her waist and drew her against him. He laughed, "Once we get that force in our hands, Red—I'll make you a goddess as I promised. What about that, Thorssen? Imagine Black Randolph with that force all his own—free to roam between the stars, in the spacelanes—dictate my own terms to Unions Council or smash their ships! It was my lucky day when I spacewrecked on this planet."

Grim laughed coldly, "You can't kidnap a god, you scum."

"A god! Bah! I've lived here long enough to learn things. Haven't you wondered where all these people came from? Why they speak archaic English? Look at this!"

His hand on Althaya's shoulder slid the short jacket down to bare a tattoo mark on her white flesh. He grinned as she angrily shrugged the jacket into place. "Medical cases. Amnesiac spaceshock. Memories gone. Speech centers sound. Body normal. Perfect specimens to populate a new planet."

"Who brought 'em here, Thorssen? Not a god!"

The pirate laughed huskily. "Althaya and I—we're making them into our people. People to attack Kohannes and get his secret. It's really too bad for you. You might join us instead of spending a week on her altar under the best torture-knives

she owns. You'll be begging for death before the first day is over. And there'll be seven more of 'em, Thorssen—a day of agony for each of the years you've hounded me. Eight years, eight days."

Althaya clapped her hands. Big men, naked to their waists that were covered with twisted loin-clothes, padded in on bare soles. Althaya said, "Take them to the cells. Tomorrow at dawn, bring them to Kohonnes' altar. We will make a sacrifice to the All."

THE rising sun was tinting the flat onyx altar with red stains when they put Grim on it. His ankles and his wrists were lashed so tightly that the skin was puffy and swollen around the cording. Staring upward, the Viking throwback saw an outcropping lip of blackish basalt hanging like a seawave caught in stone right above him. A weirdly bent tree dropped wire-like branches toward him, from which hung triangular red leaves.

Beneath the altar, and all around this rostrum of stone, was a scarlet marker. By craning his head beyond Althaya and Randolph, who stood rubbing his hands together and gloating, Grim could see the crimson band.

"I hope your voice is in good shape, Thorssen," chuckled the pirate. "I want to hear you yell loud and long. I've waited a long time for this!"

Althaya clapped her hands abruptly, and a big man with a broken nose flat against his face and tiny eyes that glittered cruelly stepped forward. A thin knife, curved and barbed, was in his right hand. The redhead said, "They are bringing Tlokine now. When she is here—commence, Tagat."

They crowded around the altar, waiting. Grim could see the tense, excited faces. Randolph craned forward, a muscle in his cheek dancing with eagerness. Althaya licked at her crimson mouth with her tongue. And beyond them, among the leather-jerked men-at-arms, Tlokine stared with horrified eyes from her pale white face.

Tagat grinned and brought the knife down. Almost tenderly he placed the razor-like edge to Grim's naked ribs. He looked slyly up at Althaya.

Randolph cried hoarsely, "Hurry up!

Waiting is as much torture to me as that knife is going to be to him."

Althaya said dryly, "Begin, Tagat."

The knife moved—
"Wait!"

Althaya stood rigid, looking down at Grim. He saw her green eyes widen dreamily. She whispered, "Kohonnes is sending his breath out across the world. Soon now the Change will come."

"So what?" rasped big Randolph, hands working furiously, his fingers opening and closing. "We're all on this red-marked island. It won't hurt us."

Althaya shook her head. "Not while the god is breathing. No. We can wait!"

The black sea-like curve of rock above Grim was altering. It lost its concave outlines; shimmered, and grew thin and tall, like an ebony finger pointing skywards. And the tree on it was a tree no more, but a green vine clinging to its sides and drooping white blossoms across its black edges.

Althaya and Randolph withdrew from the altar; went higher on the rockside. Grim stared at the changes working all around him. Not far away was another red-marked island. Between the altar island and that other, the ground lifted and fell restlessly.

Tlokine came toward the altar, her guards drawing back and away from the change.

Grim whispered, "Can you stand pain?"

"Pain? No, I hate it. When the knife touches me—"

"I don't mean that. I have an idea. I'm going to be tortured anyhow, but I'd rather make a break for freedom than—"

Tlokine laughed incredulously, "They would shoot you down, even if you were free to run. And you're not. You're bound."

Grim laughed harshly, "No time to argue—follow me!"

He rolled off the altar. He hit the sloping rock beneath it with a thud that jarred his bones, but he kept on rolling. He went down the slope to the red marker—

He went by the marker, and the Change caught his ropes and twisted them into upright snakes that writhed in queer formations. It bent him forward, knotted his insides into lumps.

But he was free.

He tried to run, and could not. He overcame the agony in him to crawl, one arm and one leg after another, dragging himself along. The island came nearer and nearer. He expected disintegrator pellets to thud into him before he realized that Black Randolph wanted him to die slowly. He imagined the pirate was laughing insanely, watching the Change almost tear him apart.

Grim put a hand over the red mark and the relief from pain was so great he almost fainted. His teeth dug into his lip and forced him forward. Going over the marker, he crumpled into a ball.

"Grim! Grim Thorrsen!"

Tlokiné lay many feet from his safety zone, twisted and huddled, the Change having its will of her. He knew she couldn't take that any longer—and live.

He felt sweat break out all over him. He had to go out there and bring her in. Grim closed his eyes and ran for her. The Change caught him, shook him, tortured him. Grim fought with his body and his will; put a hand on her and dragged. He brought her in as a wolf might bring in the carcass of a deer; slowly, inch by inch.

Tlokiné was almost dead when she crumpled inside the marker. Grim worked over her frantically. The Change was subsiding.

She opened her slant brown eyes. Grim cried, "They'll be coming for us. The storm is almost over. We have to run for it."

Tlokiné whispered, "The stables. We'll need horses."

THEY made a dash before the Change was through. There was pain, but nothing compared to what they had undergone. Grim saw Randolph on the edge of the marker, howling with rage. He was quivering with the eagerness to set out after them, but the Storm deterred him.

Inside a huge oval of red splashing that stretched as far as he could see, the white-walled stables stood. Grim threw open the low oak doors and ran inside. He hunted for the horses he wanted. He scanned their back and chests, sought the not too muscular neck of the racing horse.

He went swiftly, making his eyes perform snap judgments.

He drew out a chestnut and a bay. He saddled them, helped Tlokiné up.

Seizing a quirt from the stable wall, he drove the other horses ahead of him, out beyond the red markers where the world of Stormland once more brooded quietly, its landscape new and more spectacular than before.

* * * * *

The Thing that they called Kohonnes was dead. Its metal sides and glassite screens were polished and bright. Moments before it had been living, humming and glowing with the energy that fed it, bringing the Storm and the Change across the world that held it.

A man moved his hand on the last dial. Inside the machine something clicked. The man turned away and went slowly down the marble steps. . . .

* * * * *

Crouched low on the withers of the bay, Grim rode for his life. A little ahead of him, Tlokiné pummeled her chestnut with sandalled heels. Grim turned in the saddle and stared behind him. There was no one in sight—yet.

Tlokiné cried, "We could make better time if we knew when the storms would come. Not knowing, we have to stay close to the islands, instead of cutting across toward the Dark Temple."

"And Althaya—she knows! She can come straight for us. The warning that she gets comes in time for her to go toward an island and make it before the Change comes. Is that what you mean?"

Tlokiné nodded. Grim muttered, "Our lead doesn't mean much, then. They'll round up the horses we scattered. They'll catch us before we can get to the Temple."

They urged their mounts to a faster pace. They clung to sweat-wet necks and manes as the horses flashed their hocks above the roughly humped ground. They went by one tall, metallic needle-tower after another. The towers stood like rigid fingers against the horizon as they went on and on.

Grim brooded above the whipping mane of his chestnut, "If the thing that sends the change is a machine, then it would

need the towers to broadcast its force. It's limited in range, itself. The towers give it a wide radius of effectiveness. Now the question is—what operates only in a limited range?"

He thought of radio waves, but the ionized heaviside would throw them around the planet. He shook his head, whispering, "Some sort of wave-radio or energy."

Grim lifted his eyes to the next tower and scanned it. He growled, "If I still had my disintegrator I'd try a potshot at those interlacing wires on top of it. I bet that'd stop the Change. But without that—"

His mind raced as did the hooves of the chestnut. A scowl came and sat on his face. Then, after a while, his eyes brightened. He whispered, "It might work, at that—"

He reined in the chestnut; called to Tlokine, and headed for the nearest tower. She stared at him as he swung down from the horses and began to climb the tower, sliding fingers and toes into the tiny slots between the interslanted metal beams. He went up and up until he reached the round ribboned globe with the tiny wires inside it. It was fastened to the tower by slotted bolts.

Using his belt-buckle as a screwdriver, he unthreaded the bolts, found that the globe came away easily from the tower. It was composed of thin alumisteel ribbons and wires of spiderweb thinness. He tucked it under an arm and went backwards down the tower.

Tlokine said, "What are you doing?" when he knelt and fumbled at the wiring setup.

He grinned, "This thing must broadcast vibrations of some sort. In some manner, they cause the Change. If I could jam those vibrations in the same way that a radio broadcast can be jammed—maybe there wouldn't be any Change to slow us down."

Tlokine looked back along the path they had come. She said, "Althaya and her men will soon be here. You are wasting time, Grim Thorssen."

He shook his yellow-thatched head. "Not the way I figure it. Soldiers marching in rhythmic steps across a bridge have been known to smash it. That's why they

break step all the time. It changes the pulse of the vibration on the bridge. It jars—but does not destroy.

"Same way here. Ultrasonic vibrations can't be heard, but they can do plenty of damage. They can kill frogs and tiny fishes. They can cause heat and put out a flame—oh, and a hundred other things. But—if the vibratory rate of those ultrasonic waves can be damped by other wave-impulses — their usefulness is destroyed."

Tlokine didn't understand him, but she came closer and watched as his agile fingers toyed with the thin wires. He smiled, "This globe is tuned to the master vibrator. It picks up the waves and amplifies them. I want it to do that—but to change the wave-pulse to a different rhythm!"

Grim worked blindly, guessing. He knew his only chance for a real test would come when the Change swept across the world. He couldn't wait for that. Althaya and Black Randolph would have hunted them down by that time.

Setting the globe across the pommel of his saddle, Grim held it carefully as he thumped his heels into the horse's side. They rode swiftly out across the plain.

And then, as Tlokine turned in her saddle, she saw them.

ALTHAYA and Black Randolph rode before a dozen men, stooped low over the necks of their straining mounts. They could hear the pirate's bellowing, triumphant laughter.

"No use," whimpered Tlokine. "They'll catch us now."

But Grim saw Althaya point toward a needle-towered island, heard her call out imperiously. The Viking jabbed his heels into the chestnut. He yelled, "The Change! She senses that it's coming!"

"We're too far from the islands! It will catch us—kill the horses, then us!"

Grim fiddled desperately with the wiring of the ribboned globe. He whispered prayers as he recircuited.

It was no use.

The pain came and crumpled him up and toppled him from the saddle. He struck the ground and rolled, but his hands held to the globe. Lying flat on his belly, teeth drawing blood from his lips

with the pain that wracked him, he drove his fingers into the meshed wires and tugged and rearranged them.

A hump of ground rose between his hands; flung the ribboned globe from him, sent it rolling like a rubber ball on the trough of seawaves. Whimpering, Grim went after it, dragging himself along.

He caught it, held it close to his chest. His hand grabbed a wire—

The pain was gone. Grim lay panting, grinning. Tlokine knelt, staring, whispering, "The Change—it's all around us—but where we are, there isn't any Change!"

There was a radius of thirty feet where the ground lay frozen in its strange formations, an island in the midst of the hub that was the globe. Grim got to his feet. He held the globe in hands that shook weakly with the reaction. Tlokine went to the horses, soothed and stroked them. After a while the horses got to their legs.

They mounted. From the distant island where they watched, Althaya and Black Randolph screamed their rage. But Grim only laughed and waved an arm. With the globe in his hands, he rode the chestnut over the motionless ground, while all around him the earth rocked and bubbled and thrust itself upward into terrible contortions.

"It's like a magic symbol," whispered Tlokine, staring at the ribboned globe.

"People would have called this a magic land, once," said Grim. "But it's sheer science that makes the Change—and sheer science that knows the key to counteract it."

They went straight across the magic land, riding without fear of the Storm that swept outside the circumference of their enchanted circle. As they moved, the circle of safety moved with them, with the globe as its hub. The faster they went, the faster moved the circle.

Grim flung a hoarse laugh between his white teeth. He said, "At this rate, we'll leave Randolph so far behind, he'll never get us."

He turned in his saddle to look behind him—

AND saw the pirate and the redheaded priestess scarcely five hundred yards away, flying after them. Black Randolph held a disintegrator in his hand. As he

came within the radius of a needle-tower, he took careful aim at it and blasted the ribboned globe atop it into drifting powder.

Tlokine cried out, pointing, "The path to the Dark Temple!"

Huge rock cliffs loomed up before them, towering like a giant's twisted playthings where he might have dropped them. Spires and points of sandstone, ridges of granite and volcanic tuffs, rimrock and crumbled talus; they made fantastic colors where the sun caught them. And running straight between the boulders was a crimson road, smooth as placid water.

Grim cried, "Go on ahead. I'll hold them off. If that Kohonnes of yours has any power at all—tell him this is the time to use it!"

Grim brought his foot against the bay's rump, sent it racing terrified onto the scarlet road. Clinging to the reins, Tlokine had no time to cry her refusal to leave Grim. The bay took her away fast, leaving Grim alone.

Randolph shouted, "I have you now, Thorssen. Don't hope for a blast of my disintegrator, either. You're going back to that altar. Eight days I said—and eight days it still is!"

Grim kicked his feet free of the stirrups and leaped to the rock. Putting his hands flat on the stone, he swung himself to the first ledge, then to the second. With booted toes and clinging fingers, he pulled himself straight up the face of the cliff.

Randolph howled; threw himself like a madman at the cliff. He came after the Viking, rasping spaceoaths beneath his breath. Grim caught a blurred glimpse of Althaya spurring her roan along the scarlet roadway, closing the distance between Tlokine and herself.

Rock shattered above him. Grim stared at a boulder coming loose under the blast of a disintegrator pellet; came bouncing downward. Grim flattened himself, hearing Black Randolph cry, "It'll knock you down to my level, Thorssen."

The boulder struck on a lip of stone and went bounding beyond him. Grim drew a breath and climbed faster. He came to a flat section that topped the surrounding bluffs. He scrambled onto it as a blast from Randolph's disintegrator caught the rocklip that he was on and sent it flying.

He lay dazed, knowing the pirate was

climbing after him, but unable to do anything about it. He opened his mouth and gulped in air, hearing a steady roaring in his ears. He knelt, stood up; and still the roaring swelled and grew. He finally recognized it as a waterfall.

Black Randolph swung over the edge of the cliff and came charging across its flat top, head down. His fists were balled into great clubs. Grim shook his head, got to a knee and then to both feet, waiting.

The pirate's charge was irresistible. It lifted Grim up and threw him backwards. He pummeled at the pirate, drove hard knuckles into his jaw and chest. But Randolph laughed in his throat and hammered back.

For one instant they stood locked, knee to knee. Their fists drove pain and agony into each other's ribs and bellies. Then Grim weakened. The long ride, the space crash, the wild flight took their fee. His legs buckled under the weariness that laid hot bands around them. He toppled, went down—

Black Randolph came for him in a low dive.

Grim closed his hand on a solid rock hump and lifted his feet. He threw them up in the manner of the ancient savatte. His foot caught Black Randolph in the chest and lifted him up and flung him high over him.

The pirate screamed. Grim turned; knelt on the edge of the cliff wall and saw the pirate falling, turning and twisting, into a deep gorge where a wide river flowed like a blue ribbon between crumpled rocks, fed by a tumbling waterfall.

Grim drew a deep breath and got to his feet. Far beneath him, at the end of the narrow crimson road, he could see a great black temple, with a door like a gaping mouth. Tlokine was in that temple, and Althaya — and the thing they both called Kohonnes.

Grim began to run.

* * * * *

The two women faced each other at the foot of the bulking black machine that was their god.

"Here now you will die," breathed Althaya.

"Kohonnes will not let me die. He will

save me. It is you—who have been traitress to him—who will pay by going back to the breath..."

And above them, above the black hair and the red, the hundred eyes of the machine began to glow, and the muted throbbing went out from its bowels and touched its metal sides; and the god Kohonnes came to life.

* * * * *

GRIM slipped and staggered the last twenty feet down the side of the sheer grey rock. He landed on the crimson road, fifty feet from the mouthlike entrance to the Temple. He went at a lurching run, forgetting his weariness, thinking only of a lovely girl with white skin and green eyes and hair the color of a raven-wing.

He swung into the dark, cool interior; was dimly aware of slender black onyx columns lifting a hundred feet toward a dark ceiling.

Grim stopped. A voice reverberated in the Temple.

"You have disobeyed, Althaya. You—"

"Don't threaten me, Kohonnes! At this moment my people are coming. They will attack when I give the word. They will come in here and kill the girl and make you yield your secret to me. Then Althaya will have power unimaginable. Black Randolph—"

"—is dead," said Grim. "He fell into the gorge."

Grim stared upward. A black machine bulked huge and dark in the shadows. From a hundred facets, green bulb-lights glowed. Grim heard the machinery moving, saw the bulbs grow brighter as power poured into the thing.

"Who are you, Kohonnes?" he cried out in space *patois*.

"Eh? What's that? Who's out there? ... It isn't—can't be! Grim Thorssen?"

Grim laughed. He knew that voice anywhere.

"You old spacedog! What're you trying to do—ruin the Unions Council?"

"The Council? What have I to do with them?"

"The force this machine applies escapes into space. It bends the Caravans and the Fleet cruisers. It smashes them—sends them flying on into the void like so many

wrecked planets. They'll go on and on—until they find a planet to crash on or make an orbit around."

There was a pause. Althaya cried out harshly; whirled and fled toward the mouthlike door where light filtered in in grey beams.

The machine stopped humming. A door opened in it. A man with white hair and a smooth, shaven face stepped onto the floor of the temple. He grinned at the Viking, threw both arms high into the air.

Grim said, "Jasper Jones! I knew you'd gone into retirement—but I never thought you'd set yourself up as a god."

The old man laughed, keen blue eyes dancing. "I was always interested in sound, Grim. I had some theories, theories that my colleagues said were crazy, impractical. So when I retired I came to this little planet that I'd discovered a long time ago—and set myself up in comfort.

"I took amnesiac men and women from the space hospitals and gave them a new life. I let them build a new civilization for themselves, a new life. Where they would have had to spend the rest of their useless lives in sanatoriums, I gave them freedom, fresh air and a new world. Was that wrong?"

Grim said dryly, "Not the way you put it. But you could have established dams—something to keep that hellish force in place. And while we're on it—what in the name of the Empire is the thing?"

Jasper Jones waved at the machine. "Let's go inside. I'll tell you about it as we go. Come, Tlokine.

"I said I was interested in sound. Perhaps I should say, vibratory impulses. You know Tyndal's experiments—sand figures on a vibrating plate, the motion of the plate along a nodal line. The sand on the plate rearranges and groups itself into regular patterns. Some of them are beautiful."

"You mean the method devised by Chladni? Where sand is put on a thin metal plate and a violin bow is scraped across its side?"

"Exactly. The sand is tossed away from the vibrating sections of the plate. It collects in areas of calm, undisturbed by the vibrations."

"You mean to tell me that's what this

entire planet is—a vibrating plate?" wondered Grim.

"A hundred years or more after Chladni, Dr. Fredericka Blankner advanced the theory that all life, all matter in the universe, followed a pattern somewhat similar to the dancing sands on a Chladni plate. Even human bodies vibrate at a certain impulse.

"I studied for years on that theory. Then when I found this planet, I fitted it out during my vacations. When I retired and brought the spaceshock cases here—I was ready to follow and prove those theories."

A deep, sullen roar grew into a thundering volcano of sound, beyond the Temple gateway. Grim cried, "Althaya and her people. They've come to learn your secret, Jones. Quick, man—some weapons! We can hold them off easily enough if—"

Jasper Jones smiled and shook his head. "Outside of the vibration machine, I have no weapon. And that is not a weapon. I have used it—sending the Changes and the Storms across the planet—to check on reactions and nodal results."

Grim laughed harshly. "Man, you've unleashed something with that machine. The redhead is desperate. Black Randolph gave her ideas. She won't know where to stop if she gets hold of the machine. We have to stop her."

"With what? The people have learned that the calm areas on the planet exist inside red markers. We can't catch them napping."

GRIM grabbed the old man and shook him. He rasped, "Maybe you don't mind getting a couple of barbed knives stuck in your hide, but I do. Where are your plans for this—this machine?"

Jones led him to a *selassi*-metal desk, pressed a stud; a thin, flat drawer slid into view. Grim drove his hands into the mass of blueprints and specifications. He dragged them out and spread them on the floor in front of him. He ran his grey eyes over print after print.

He grinned, "Maybe we can stop them at that, Jasper."

"Sound is no weapon. Oh, it's been used against frogs and the lower vertebrate forms, but—"

A shower of arrows made a clanking noise against the face of the machine. Grim could hear Althaya screaming, "It is only a *man* inside it. I heard his voice. He knew the golden-hair. Break the god, my people." Something thumped into the machine; shook it wildly.

Jasper Jones screamed. "They will smash the bulbs if they keep that up!"

Grim grabbed him, shook him. "Listen to me! I don't want to hurt your people...but we have to stop them. We must rewire the machine—reduce the frequency of the vibrations into audible pitch—step up the decibels to two hundred or more."

"But that would be intense sound—painful!"

"You bet it would. It would give those howling babies out there the sweetest case of what used to be called "shell shock" or "battle fatigue" you ever saw. But—it's our only chance!"

Jones stared at him, touching his lips with a dry tongue. He whispered, "Yes. Yes, I see what you mean. But—"

The battering ram thumped the machine. The floor under their feet shook. Jones nodded hastily. "Yes, I'll do it. I'll hurry."

He went to a round opening in the floor, caught a metal rod protruding through it, and swung himself down. Grim caught Tlokine and drew her to the *selassi*-metal table and hunted in its drawers. He found cotton and tore loose several strips. He crumpled the cotton into tiny balls.

"I'm going to put these in your ears, Tlokine. You won't be able to hear much, then. Just sit still. Jones and I—we're going to do our best to stop those babies outside. When we do, things are going to happen in a hurry. I want you to be prepared."

He put the cotton tabs in her ear, whispered, "I love you, darling," and caught the sliding rod in his hands and swung down.

Grim walked the cat-walks between the throbbing engines in the dim light of myriad bulbs set in plastic casings. He saw the enclosed dynamos that forced the incredible vibrations outward to the needle towers that picked them up and threw them around the planet.

On a metal floor below him, old Jasper Jones was disconnecting terminals and re-

hooking them. Grim joined him. It was close, hot work inside the huge machine. Sweat dripped down Grim's forehead and ran into his eyes and mouth. With the back of his forearm he swabbed at his face and worked on.

He heard the boom of the improvised battering ram thud into the metal wall; saw the great tubes shake and flicker. The metal floor quivered under his feet.

A woman screamed. Grim came to his feet, incredulous, hearing Tlokine cry, "It's Black Randolph! He's coming through the back way—"

Grim whispered, "He's dead. I saw him fall from the cliff."

He leaped; came up short as Jasper Jones clawed at his arm with aged hands. The old man babbled, "The machine is our only chance."

Randolph was roaring in triumph, "I have your girl, Thorssen. Come out of there or I'll give her a disintegrator pellet. Ha! You didn't watch me long enough, Thorssen, I missed the rocks—went into the water. It carried me under the temple, to stone steps. They led me—here! You hear me, Thorssen? Come out of there!"

"I hear you. I'm coming."

Instead he turned and looked at the wiring terminals where Jasper Jones toiled, his hands a blur of movement and his white hair wet with sweat. The old man's panting made a harsh sound in the fetid air.

"We almost through?" Grim whispered.

"Almost...just these, now...another turn to tighten them—there!"

A switch with a glittering red handle was a foot above Jones' bent head. Grim went for it in a flying leap. His hands came up and the switch went down and—Hell broke loose.

SOUND welled up, pitched high and keening and almost inaudible. What was heard, was jarring and maddening. It took a man's nerve-ends out and scratched on them until his entire body was dancing. Grim stood shivering, trying to lift his hands to shelter his eardrums; discovering this his arms were jumping free of his will.

He whispered, "I can't do it. I can't turn it off." Something rolled against his leg. It was old Jasper Jones, eyes rolling

in his head, a bubbly white froth at his mouth.

Grim's knees shook. They went in different directions and he pitched to the metal floor. His body danced a weird saraband against the metal. He thought, 'If something doesn't happen, we'll all go mad!' He knew that sound could crush them; that this sound that was jumbling their brains was enough for that, given the time to build itself.

His hands shook. His body quivered. His brain throbbed, and blackness swept down and blinded him.

THE SOUND was gone. Someone was shaking him by the shoulder, urgently. Grim opened tired eyelids. Tlokine bent over him, fright making her red nails dig deep into his shoulder.

Grim said words, but he did not hear them. He put hands to his ears, found them plugged with cotton. The sound came through, a little, but it was muffled, ineffective.

He got up and took the wad of cotton that Tlokine still held and forced two balls of it into old Jasper Jones' ears. After a while the old man sat up and looked at them.

Grim said, even though he knew they could not hear him, "I'm going up and tie up Black Randolph for once and all. Then we'll turn this thing off and parley with the others."

The pirate was in even worse state than Grim had been; he had been nearer to the vast loudspeakers, had felt the numbing shock of those sound-waves. Like a man in water, close to an explosion, his brain and lungs had hemorrhaged. His chest was bloated, swollen. Grim covered him, turned to the lovely Althaya; covered her quickly, too.

He turned off the machine and stood in a silence that was almost as dreadful as the sound had been. Jasper Jones and Tlokine came up the floor opening, removing their earplugs.

"They got it the worst. They were right on top of the high pressure waves coming from the speaker," Grim said, gesturing at the covered bodies. "The others, outside—they were further away, as we were. They'll be all right, in a little while."

Jones said, "It was horrible."

Tlokine whispered, "It did not bother me. I was too far away. But when I saw Black Randolph and Althaya bend over, clutching at their stomachs—what was it, Grim?"

"High pressure waves, that hit anything in their path with terrific impact. It's sound, but not sound as we generally think of it. After the first wave a section of air follows, acts as suction. Repeated high pressure and suction waves—well, they rip out tissues and smash blood vessels."

Jasper Jones looked at him. He licked his lips with a dry tongue. He wavered, "This is the end of my experiments, then? I can't go on. You'll make your report and—"

"I'll report a natural phenomena. Build sound dams, old timer. After all, it's a pretty destructive thing you've built. If Tlokine hadn't been a good distance from that speaker, she'd be as Althaya and Black Randolph are. And speaking of Althaya—how did she know when the Change would come?"

Jones said, "I operated on her while she was in the amnesiac hospital. She was a violent case. Brain surgery helped her. I put in a thin slip of metal foil. Later I discovered that the foil caught the sub-sonic rhythm of the machine as it warmed. Its vibrations told her what was coming."

"Good enough. Give half the planet to the amnesiac men and women. Let Tlokine rule them. Keep half the planet for your own experiments."

Jasper Jones grinned slyly, "I'm an old man. My planet needs new blood. Tlokine as queen would need a king."

"I've been thinking the same thing myself," chuckled Grim, watching Tlokine flush red. "After I make my report I'll be back." He bent and lifted the girl in his arms. "We're going to talk over the future, Jasper. I'll let you know what Tlokine thinks of the idea."

Jasper Jones grinned. The white arms around Grim's neck and the red lips pressed to his gave the old man his answer. He sighed. It would be nice, having toddlers around the place. There was so much he could teach them about sound.

Jasper Jones sat down and began to plot his space-dams.