

A NOVEL OF THE FUTURE COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE!

STARTLING STORIES

JUNE

15¢

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

Give
MAGAZINE

FEATURING
WINGS OF ICARUS
An Amazing Complete Novel
By **RAY CUMMINGS**
THE IDEAL
A Hall of Fame Classic
By **STANLEY G. WEINBAUM**



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: Wings of Icarus

Date of first publication: 1943

Author: Ray Cummings

Date first posted: February 25, 2015

Date last updated: February 25, 2015

Faded Page eBook #20150254

This ebook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Mary Meehan & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

WINGS OF ICARUS

By

RAY CUMMINGS

First published June 1943 in Startling Stories, Vol. 9, No. 3.

*Charlon, Ruler of the Bat People of Neptune, Puts Tremendous Obstacles in the Way
of Three Spaceteers of Earth—and Jeopardizes the Destinies of Two Planets!*

Table of Contents

[CHAPTER I: Disaster from the Moon](#)

[CHAPTER II: Disaster on Neptune](#)

[CHAPTER III: Scourges of Neptune](#)

[CHAPTER IV: Wings for the Helpless](#)

[CHAPTER V: Vengeance for Wrongs](#)

[CHAPTER VI: Traitors in Camp](#)

[CHAPTER VII: In Enemy Hands](#)

[CHAPTER VIII: The Room of Torture](#)

[CHAPTER IX: Evil Queen of the Gars](#)

[CHAPTER X: Diabolical Machines](#)

[CHAPTER XI: Treachery Redeemed](#)

[CHAPTER XII: Plans to Escape](#)

[CHAPTER XIII: A Martyr to Duty](#)

[CHAPTER XIV: Battle in the Air](#)

[CHAPTER XV: Tara Makes Her Choice](#)

[CHAPTER XVI: A Struggle for Life](#)

CHAPTER I
Disaster from the Moon

It all began one evening last Summer, in July, 3042. I was at home when my audio-visual buzzed. It was my boss, Jonathan Edwards, Director of Raw Materials, Branch 2.

“Pleasure, or business, Chief?” I asked him.

“Business. Sorry. Your holiday is cancelled.” I’d never seen him so grim before; ordinarily he’s a smiling sort of fellow.

“I want you to look up Navigator 1410, Interplanetary Transport Service. Evans. He’s a friend of yours, isn’t he?”

“Chick Evans? He sure is. But I haven’t seen him for ages.”

“He’s in the city,” the boss told me. “On holiday. But that’s over. I’ve drafted him. I want you to report with him at once. This is important, Alan.”

Nobody would question my boss when he was in a mood like this. So I made inquiries.

“I’m to bring him to Federal Supply Building?”

“Yes, right away,” said Edwards.

The instrument clicked off. Fortunately, Chick was at home. His pug-nosed freckled face, with the shock of tousled red hair above it, was clear on the mirror-grid.

“Well, how are you, Alan? Glad to see you. I just got in on holiday.”

“That’s cancelled,” I said. “My boss, Jonathan Edwards, has drafted you. We’re to report at once. I’ll fly right over.”

Chick Evans was not a bit pleased and he did not mind saying so. He is a belligerent little fellow, three years younger than I am. I am twenty-six. My name is Alan Frane. As persons know from the Government newscasters who have given this Neptune affair plenty of publicity, I am Junior Technician in the Raw Materials Division, producing the Nullo-grav units—the electronic counter-charged metallic plates which nullify gravitational force.

Chick Evans did not like laboratory work. He went in for Navigation and got a job on the Earth-Moon run handling one of the ore-freighters which take food and supplies to the Moon-colonists and bring back cargoes of the semi-refined ores.

Evans was waiting for me when I flew over.

“This better be good,” he observed as he climbed into my roller. “I don’t like being drafted.”

He was getting himself all worked up to give my boss a piece of his mind. But he did not. There was an air of grim tenseness in Edwards’ little office-cubby. One could not miss it.

Edwards sat at his big oval desk with a sheaf of teletyped flimsies before him. Just one other man in the room remained in the room with Edwards, a small hunched fellow with a shock of white hair. He was Peter Green, Chief Advisory Chemist. Green nodded at me and shook hands gravely with Chick Evans. Then he spoke to the boss.

“You’d better isolate us, Edwards. We’ve got to talk plainly.”

Chick Evans and I exchanged startled glances as the barrage-current went into the metal walls of the room with a faint hiss. Not until then did Green venture to speak.

“Do you young men know enough to keep your mouths shut?” he inquired.

Edwards answered for us.

“They do,” he said.

Green’s fingers riffled the sheaf of teletyped flimsies.

“This is what I’ve got to tell you. Here are the latest reports from our mines in the Andes and from the Moon. We’re faced with a drastic raw materials shortage. Our supply of Uradonite is giving out.”

Uradonite. Nobody had to tell Chick Evans and me what that would mean. The whole space-flying industry was dependent upon the volatile-active element Z-470. Nullo-grav units had made vessels weightless. But that could not provide propulsion. Then came the Mansfield cyclotronic engine, a power unit by which the immensely heavy atoms of Z-470 were broken down into electronic streams, the rocket-streams by which all space-flyers are propelled.

“We’re using too much Uradonite,” Edwards was saying. “The rapidly expanding Space-transportation Industries need

more all the time. The Moon as you know is our chief source of supply—and the veins there are drying up—”

“Drying up?” the little chemist Green exclaimed. “They are almost dry now. Take a look at Macdonald’s latest report. This shipment of semi-refined ore that just came in today from him—the lowest grade he’s ever sent. What am I supposed to do with stuff like that? Refine down a ton of it to get a pound of commercial Uradonite?”

Chick Evans and I could only stare at each other, numbed. The news certainly hit Chick between the eyes. He was a space-flyer.

“Why, good grief,” he murmured, “Without Uradonite we’d be grounded—Earth-bound. If we can’t send flyers to Venus, Mars, the Moon, how are our colonists going to make out?”

Now that this thing is over, the truth may be told.

When Venus, Mars and the Moon were first explored and colonized, scientists were surprised to find Earthmen seemingly were the only human beings in the Solar System. On Mars only did living things approach the genus known as homo sapiens. We have some fifty million people abroad now. Most of them were born in the colonies. A dozen generations had passed since their ancestors had migrated from Earth to those other worlds.

“Fifty million persons,” Chick Evans groaned. “Great Scott! we couldn’t bring them back home. That would take ten years and we’d have to triple the number of space-flyers.”

“And thus need that much more Uradonite,” Edwards agreed grimly. “That’s the danger now—our colonists will be marooned.”

“And no more Uradonite to fly them,” growled Edwards, in grim tones.

We stared at each other in consternation. It was Green, the scientist, who broke the silence.

“Our colonists will be marooned,” he said. “What can they do without medical supplies or tools with which to work? If they don’t have these things from us they’ll die. Then again, what will the Earth do? We must have their botanicals, their ores and the myriad things they send to us. Vast industries will collapse. It means economic disaster. What a catastrophe!”

Evans and I continued to stare at Edwards and him, white-faced.

Earth-bound. What an ignominious end to man’s achievements. Like the waxen wings of Icarus, which melted in the sun, ours too seemed destined to vanish.

Finally Chick Evans spoke up hoarsely.

“What do you want us to do?” he asked.

“This situation took us entirely by surprise,” said Edwards. “We thought we had enough Uradonite to last for centuries. Suddenly, without warning, the diggings on the Moon have dried up. We’ve sent exploratory vessels out beyond Mars to several of the alien-world Moons and the planetoids. Some came back, some didn’t. And they found nothing.”

“And now you want Alan and me to take up the search?” asked Chick Evans.

“You’re the best Navigator available, Evans. And you, Frane, are our best technician. Here’s the proposition. The Interplanetary Research Society has been building a new-type flyer. There’s a fellow named William Boyle in charge of it. A fairly small ship, but with immensely powerful cyclotronic units. We hope it will develop ultra-velocity as he claims. Boyle has volunteered for the trip.”

“The trip?” I echoed.

“We want three volunteers. A last chance, with the future of the space-flying industry and the welfare of millions of our colonists at stake. More Uradonite must be found. Out beyond Mars, Jupiter or Neptune are likely places, but keep looking until you find Uradonite. Well, how about it? Will you go?”

Chick Evans and I pondered. Despite the stirring appeal we could not help it. This proposition from a routine commercial flight. We would take an untried, new type of ship, hurling ourselves into the vast unknown and keep on searching. Maybe we would get back but, more likely, we wouldn’t. There are too many chances of meeting some kind of hideous death.

But I guess I nodded agreement, for Chick Evans grinned.

“You give us the ship, Mr. Edwards, and I’ll navigate us to Pluto and beyond,” he said.

“What better adventure could I have on my vacation?”

The Society For Interplanetary Research certainly rushed that little ship to completion in a hurry.

We went down to the Montauk shop the next day. The ship lay in its cradle in the center of the big room, and workmen were swarming all over it.

We also met William Boyle. He was a big fellow, as tall as I am, which is something over six feet, and more heavily built. A man of perhaps thirty, he had a shock of wavy black hair and a rugged, heavy-featured face. Quite a handsome fellow. He seemed likeable enough, efficient, with a complete knowledge of details here.

Our first sight of the new spaceship startled Chick Evans and me. Evans had been used to the big commercial Earth-moon transports. He stared, crest-fallen.

“By Jupiter,” he murmured. “So that’s our death-trap. Why there’s hardly room to die in it decently.”

The ship had a glistening, green-black alumite cylinder, certainly no more than seventy feet from its broad fin-tail to its stubby nose. The middle of it bulged unduly. The fins were thick and narrow. A small glassite turret reared up just behind its nose.

It was astonishingly small, but in its squat heavy lines conveyed an unmistakable aspect of power. The Nullo-grav plates lined its hull top and bottom. The rocket vents were in triple banks along the hull, with clusters of them for acceleration at the sides of the tail, and others for retardation in the bow.

“Just about all power plant,” I observed.

“Exactly,” Boyle agreed. “That’s all we need—power to get where we’re going.”

“How about getting back?” I asked.

He laughed.

“Well, yes, that’s necessary, isn’t it?”

We trudged around it, and then he led us into the lower exit port. There was a small cat-walk here, dim with shaded tube-light. The interior resounded with the thumps and hissing torches of the workmen.

“I’ll say, you’ve sacrificed everything for speed,” Chick Evans commented. “There is a place for us to sleep, I suppose?”

“Speed and safety,” said Boyle. “Every mechanism is up to commercial standard, pressure, ventilating and power units, all based on the assumption that we’ll attain ten times commercial velocity. We have a new development of the standard Mansfield engine. A double disintegrating time-rate. Rocket-stream pressure is built up and then released. In effect, that’s a series of high-pressure electronic explosions, instead of the normal, steady-flow principle.”

“Well, I hope it works,” said Evans.

The immense power plant was on the center of the hull, forty Mansfield units, banked twenty on each side. Gleaming, sleek engines, every part as carefully made as the bearings of a chronometer. Beyond the middle-bow cubbies for the interior workings of the ship there was a small instrument and supply room. Three tiny sleeping cubbies, with spiral stairs which led up into the control turret.

We mounted the spiral.

“Very neat,” observed Evans as Boyle showed us the banks of dials and instruments. Quite obviously every device of modern Interplanetary transportation was here. And there were several new instruments, which Boyle now explained.

“If this vessel lives up to its laboratory calculations, we’ll certainly have no trouble getting out to Jupiter, at least,” I declared.

“We will attain a maximum velocity of eleven times normal,” said Boyle.

I stared at him.

“How can you predict that about an untried ship?”

“I have made careful calculations,” he answered and turned away as though that ended the subject. Evans and I grinned at each other.

But I will say the more we examined that little ship, the more confidence we had in it. We were around the shop most of the time during the week that followed.

At last the *Nomad*, as we had named it now, was ready. Then came the night of our departure. There was no

celebration, just the gathering of a few grim-faced officials.

At the runway, as we were ready to go aboard, Jonathan Edwards shook hands with us.

“Do your best.” That was all he said.

Then the porte closed. Up in the turret, Chick Evans took the control seat, his slight body hunched down as, with skilled fingers, he caressed the levers.

“Well, here we go,” he grinned. “Good luck to us.”

The Uradonite gas-streams hissed into action. The *Nomad* quivered, slid upward along its short roller-bearing runway. The weightless vessel lifted from the downward thrust of the rocket-streams. We had just a glimpse of the waving group of officials.

And then we slid upward into the starlight.

CHAPTER II

Disaster on Neptune

Many weeks later we arrived at Neptune, twenty-eight hundred million miles out. The eighth, and except for Pluto, the outermost planet of the Solar System at last lay beneath us. That powerful little *Nomad* had certainly lived up to expectations. At its fullest acceleration, we had attained a velocity of more than eleven times that of any commercial vessel. But even so, Neptune now was our last chance. Despite the immense velocity, the passing weeks—those were interminable weeks to us three, believe me—had consumed a dangerous amount of the Uradonite fuel we had brought with us. The new-type Mansfield units gave speed, but they were wasteful, more wasteful than we had anticipated.

Jupiter proved to be about what we had expected, a viscous, semi-liquid surface upon which we could not possibly land. Saturn and Uranus were far on the other side of the Sun. Thus they did not figure. And now, here was Neptune. We went down through heavy, swirling, green-yellow cloud masses, and at some twenty thousand feet burst out to have our first look at the planet's surface.

Chick Evans scowled at the panorama.

"Nice hospitable-looking place," he sneered.

Below us we could see a stretch of wild greenish naked rocks, tumbled as though riven by a monstrous cataclysm. There were jagged peaks and spires, deep canyons and great pits of darkness. On this sphere hardly an Earth-acre of even semi-level land could be found.

"Only a bird could get anywhere," declared Evans, as we sat in the turret, staring down in awe. "And we're not birds, either. Climbing up and down those cliffs, one couldn't go a mile a day."

"But that's the sort of rock for Uradonite," I said.

"Let's try it," suggested Boyle. "There's only enough Uradonite-fuel to get us back to Earth. If we don't land here, what would you suggest?"

We had no argument to that.

"All right," agreed Chick Evans. "If I can spot level ground I'll set the *Nomad* down."

Small as the ship was, finding a landing place did not prove easy. Neptune has the most forbidding landscape I have ever seen. Occasionally the sun peered through the clouds, just a little dull dot in the firmament. A dull, yellow-green twilight lay soddently upon the wild Neptunian peaks, painting them into a dull drab monochrome. We knew Neptune revolves upon its axis in something over two Earth-days but that sunlight here was negligible. It seemed obvious this same weird twilight prevailed always, a blending of reflected starlight through turgid clouds, and perhaps a little glow inherent to the ground itself.

But this air should be breathable.

"Test some, will you?" I suggested to Boyle.

We had dropped down, now to about ten thousand feet. He could let some into our vacuum pressure-lock and test it easily.

Boyle came back presently. "Resembles Earth air," he reported.

Then we cut off our artificial, interior-gravity from the tiny testing-lock in the bow. Neptune's gravity pull proved to be somewhat less than that of Earth—porous rock masses; a globe less dense than ours, with a lesser total mass.

"Well, that's a comfort, anyway," smiled Chick Evans, "I'm sick of Moon-travel under glassite and light gravity ... There! See it? That's where we land. Sort of a rock shelf?"

Now a small level area, with pits of darkness on both sides and a precipitous cliff at one end, came into view. We were going down nicely, when abruptly, at a thousand feet, something went wrong.

Boyle gripped me.

"Look at that altimeter needle. We're dropping too fast. You, Chick Evans! Watch yourself!"

It wasn't Chick Evans' fault. He'd calculated the proper nullification but Neptune's gravity had suddenly changed. It had increased.

Only for an instant did Chick Evans seem flurried. How could you blame him?

Frantically he reached for the adjustment levers. Then he let go of them and flung on the rocket-streams to put upward

thrust under the hull.

That seemed to do it. At least, we thought so.

The level areas opened out underneath.

“Easy,” I murmured. “Be careful, Chick.”

Gosh, it seemed strange. Despite Chick Evans’ last-instant efforts, it turned out to be a crash landing, after all.

The yellow-green rock spires came sliding up. Then the bow of the *Nomad* struck first—hard! A shuddering thump!

The shock knocked all of us to the floor. The lights went out. Then silence. Only the full green-yellow Neptunian twilight came filtering in through portholes. None of us was hurt. Chick Evans was the first to scramble to his feet. “By Jupiter,” he gasped. “What a navigator I am.”

“Let’s get out of here,” suggested Boyle. “There’s chlorine gas escaping.”

The ventilating system had quit working. We could smell the choking, acrid chlorine. It did not take long to follow Boyle’s advice. Within half a minute all three had scrambled along the hull cat-walk and into the lower vacuum lock. The Neptune air came into it slowly, hissing heavily. That air smelt queer. But it proved breathable, more breathable than the chlorine fumes which had us choking by now. Then Chick slid back the exit door and we jumped to the rocks.

So this was Neptune. Awed, I stood swaying, gasping a little until my lungs grew accustomed to the new atmosphere. The temperature here reminded me of Earth on a tropic night. The porous rocky ground seemed radiating heat as though from the planet’s molten interior.

We had not had time to bring along any equipment—but had tumbled out of the wrecked ship in the clothes we were wearing, tight flexible knee-boots, tight dark trousers and long shirt-blouses. All of us were bareheaded.

For a minute we stood gazing. That landscape was just the opposite of inviting. All one could do was to look at it, and then wish to be somewhere else.

“This dump will take some tough exploring,” was Chick Evans’ comment. “It beats anything I’ve bumped up against so far.”

For a few hundred feet the ledge on which we stood extended in a reasonable manner. Then it ended in nasty precipices, straight down into green blackness. At the two ends of the ledge, rock-spires went straight up. A mountain goat, even an abnormally adventurous, optimistic one, would have been nonplussed.

At this moment Boyle emitted an oath and gripped me by the arm.

“What’s that?” he cried. “Look off there, over that peak.”

A dark speck had appeared in the sky. It seemed to have wings and to be flying toward us. Could it be a bird? That there should be anything at all living on this bleak, barren world came as a shock. But there it was and approaching us, too. In a moment the speck had enlarged to be a queer, slim oblong object with a great spread of rhythmically flapping white wings, bigger than those of an albatross.

“Flies like a wounded bird,” I observed to my companions.

“Something is sure the matter with it,” agreed Chick Evans. “Look at it flopping along. Must be in trouble.”

The approaching object had drawn quite near. It had passed the ragged edge of one of the rock spires now, and seemed to be heading toward us. Then Boyle let out a gasp of surprise.

“By George, that’s not a bird,” he exclaimed. “It’s human. Boys, am I crazy? It looks like a girl!”

And that’s what it was, too. A winged girl.

In another moment we could see her clearly, a slim little body, white-limbed, with a bluish drape that fluttered in the wind and long golden hair.

On motionless pinions she soared past the peak. Her wings were broad, white-feathered and gracefully arched. Then she flapped them back again desperately, as if in danger of falling. To me it seemed as if the girl were exhausted. She made another effort and managed to land, upright, on the ledge a short distance away.

In the dim twilight I noticed something else peculiar. As her feet touched the rocks, sparks flew from them. Then she stumbled and fell in a little quivering heap.

For a moment we just stood staring.

“It’s a bird-girl,” yelled Chick Evans. “Let’s see if we can help her.”

He spoke too late. Already I had started running toward her. Boyle and Evans followed me. Though level for a few hundred yards, the ground was strewn with jagged boulders and crags. It proved to be tough going. But at last we managed to reach the girl and stood for a moment, gaping.

She was certainly human, all right. Except for those wings, it could have been a slim, blonde young Earth-girl lying there. Her ten-foot wings were spread out and quivering, under her. We saw they were not artificial, but as much a part of her body as those of a bird.

She did not seem to be wounded, either, just exhausted and breathless. I felt sure of that when she raised herself to her elbow and looked us over.

This girl might have been seventeen or eighteen years old and even by Earth standards she was undeniably beautiful. But it was a strange beauty. Her golden hair had the same opalescence which is seen in sea shells and her eyes had an Oriental slant.

“Well, I’m a tower-watchman if she isn’t a little beauty.” Then he spoke to the girl. “What’s the matter, sister? Are you hurt?”

My arm swept him back.

“Take it easy,” I cried. “Can’t you see you’re frightening her?”

The girl sat up and caught a good glimpse of us. She seemed surprised for her little hands went to her face in a terrified gesture. To quiet her I stepped back, instead of forward.

“Look here,” I said. “Do you speak an audible language?”

She did. Her face dimpled into a bewitching smile and from her red lips tumbled soft, liquid, unintelligible syllables. Of course we could not understand them until she pointed at herself.

“Ahla,” she said. “Ahla. Ahla.”

I knew what that meant. It was her name. So I put one finger to my chest.

“Alan,” I said. Sure enough, she understood me.

She seemed to have recovered her strength, now, for she arose to her feet. It gave me an odd sensation to see the tips of her folded wings touch the rocks, rattle the pebbles and to realize they were part of her slender, graceful body.

At this moment I heard a gasp and Chick Evans spoke into my ear.

“Take a look to your left, quick,” he suggested. “There are more of them coming.”

All three of us Earthmen turned around and gazed in the direction Evans indicated. He had spoken the truth. In the purple twilight several tiny figures flapped into view from behind a tall spire. They came rapidly—although awkwardly—in our direction. Now we could see them plainly. For a moment with beating wings, they gathered above us, like a dozen half-human hawks. Then they swooped down and hit the shelf nearby with a series of heavy thuds.

We gazed at each other in mutual astonishment. My feelings were hard to define. Apparently, all of the inhabitants of Neptune had wings. Four or five girls were numbered among the newcomers and, like the men, were small of figure. They were clad in either brown, green or black robes. The brown hair of the women was parted in the middle and draped down their backs in between the wings, but the hair of the men rose up above their foreheads, in short unruly shocks.

After observing us, they hurried to the side of the golden haired girl as if to make certain she was all right, and then once more turned to gaze at us, the three strange Earth men. They moved closer, surrounding us.

“Take it easy,” Boyle warned them, in sharp tones. “We’re friends.”

Ahla spoke to them again, possibly assuring them we were harmless. She must have mentioned the wrecked *Nomad*, for they turned to glance at it. But it was obvious to me they did not understand either the use or meaning of rocket ships. When the girl finished speaking, the men pressed about us, jabbering in excited voices. Our lack of wings seemed to confound these inhabitants of the planet. One of them tore open my shirt and examined my shoulders, as if in search of scars. He appeared to think some horrible mutilation had deprived us of our wings and seemed surprised to discover no proofs to back up his theory.

Then it seemed to dawn upon them we were born that way, and their contempt and pity had no bounds. Shortly afterward they held another conference, as if discussing some plan of action. When they had come to an agreement, four of the men leaped into the air and flew away. To me that was one of the strangest things of all. Back on Earth I have

seen pigeons take off in just the same manner.

Boyle watched them disappear among the spires. Then he turned to me.

“Where have they gone?” he said. “I wonder what is up?”

“Suppose we wait and see,” I suggested. “In the meantime we can try to understand their language.”

But it was no use. We soon found that out. Our Earth tongues and vocal chords are totally incapable of mastering those odd, rippling accents which flowed from Ahla’s lips. On the other hand the flexibility of her throat seemed to lend itself to acquiring our language. In a little while she had not only memorized our names but several other words, as well. Furthermore, she appeared to remember them and to know what they meant, too. Later, when I learned the extraordinarily retentive power of the Neptunian memory, I felt less surprised.

Within thirty minutes I noticed something else. Other inhabitants of the planets were arriving in groups of threes and fours. Soon the ledge actually began to grow crowded.

In about an hour the four men who had left came back. They brought with them four hastily contrived baskets made of yellow-green withes. Bound to these baskets were long handles.

“Flickering Saturn, take a squint at those litters,” cried Chick Evans. “They mean to carry us away somewhere.”

“That suits me fine,” I answered. “Two of us can go, and one of us remain here to watch the ship. Which one shall it be?”

Evans, Boyle and I had an excited dispute, much to the amazement of the Neptunians who couldn’t seem to understand what all the shouting was about. Finally we settled the matter by drawing straws. It was Boyle who was finally elected to stay.

So Evans and I turned to the winged men, tapped ourselves on the chests and nodded our heads in agreement. Then we pointed at Boyle and tried to register a plain and emphatic negative. To us the whole pantomime seemed clear enough.

But these winged men did not get the idea at all. Grinning broadly they advanced, seized us all with powerful grips and started to load us into the baskets.

“No, no!” I yelled in protest. “All three of us can’t go. One must stay here with the ship.”

But the men of Neptune paid no attention to our shouts. They merely tightened their hold and tried to boost us into the cradles. We commenced to resist. A fight started, and soon we were battling for all we were worth.

I sent one of the winged men sprawling over on his side and shook off two more. For a moment I almost won free. Around me I could hear and catch glimpses of similar flurries. Evidently my companions likewise were putting up a tussle. But there were too many of these Neptune men around and our resistance had been hopeless from the start. What can three men do against a hundred?

Then reinforcements surged forward and overwhelmed us. They yanked our hands behind our backs and tied them. Then our feet were lashed together. Next we were tossed roughly into baskets and warned to be still. By this time we felt quite willing to quit struggling.

During the disturbance Ahla had been fluttering around, wringing her little hands and calling out soothing words. She was trying to reassure us that we would not be harmed. These Neptune people did not understand it was strictly against regulations of Interplanetary Transportation Force for fliers to leave their ship deserted in a case like this.

Our resistance seemed to change the whole atmosphere. I had never realized how quickly these men could turn into sinister and grim looking captors. The glances which they now turned upon us were vindictive enough to curdle the blood. With no more ceremony than butchers waste upon chunks of food, they hurled us into the baskets. Then they seized the handles of the litters—eight to a cradle—and took off from the ledge.

Just as we left the landing place, I heard Evans call out my name.

“Live chicken, trussed up good and tight, bound for the market,” he yelled. “What are they going to do with us now, Alan? Cut off our heads?”

It was just like Evans, to joke at such a time. As for me I did not feel like joking. Prospects did not look so good. Captives on Neptune! What could we do now?

CHAPTER III

Scourges of Neptune

Despite the fact they were burdened with the heavy baskets the men of Neptune managed to carry us along at a fair rate of speed. Yet even at the time I noticed a certain awkwardness, an air of uncertainty, which seemed strange to me at the time. It struck me that men like these, who had literally been born with wings like birds, ought to fly better and to make speedier progress.

Underneath the baskets the landscape began to change. It grew more wildly mountainous, although it had been rough enough before. At certain spots I noticed small areas where the soil had been gathered, as if for the growing of food.

We rounded a mountain peak, came in sight of a small city built in the side of one of the crags. Under the yellow glow of twilight as we approached I had a glimpse of fantastic crystal houses, built on terraces. The mountain itself was flat topped, and beyond the shining city, in the distance I could see a black looking lake, and a forested island, far out. Later we learned the city was called Aerita.

On the top of the mountain, in the center of a fantastic spindly forest, stood a single large crystal building. We swooped over near it and came down.

Then our captors let go of the handles of the baskets, produced sharp pieces of crystal, and cut the withes which bound our hands and feet.

Evans, Boyle and I stood up and began to stamp and rub our wrists to restore the clogged circulation. Then I noticed another thing. Upon restoring us to liberty the Neptunians seemed to have lost their surly dispositions. They were smiling and cheerful once more. Perhaps they had not really been so angry as they had pretended. It may be these men merely wished to show us they meant business and would stand for no foolishness on our part.

Ahla also reappeared once more. She seemed much relieved to see we were no longer tied and that we had come to no harm. She waved her arm.

“Arton,” she said. “Him, Arton.”

We turned and caught sight of a shriveled man, with white hair, advancing toward us. He was very old. Even his wings seemed moulted with age. Walking beside him was a younger man, tall, with long, wavy black hair. His white feathered wings were tipped with black. By Neptunian standards he might have been called handsome, for he had a high-bridged nose and deep-set eyes.

“Him, Charlon,” explained Ahla. “Charlon.”

Charlon reached for Evans and twisted him about to inspect the Earth man. Evans flung off Charlon’s hands with a snarl.

“Keep your paws to yourself, my bucko,” he warned.

“Easy,” I said, in the flier’s ear. “No use of starting more trouble. Once was enough.”

“I don’t like him,” growled Evans, with flashing eyes. “I’ll end up by taking a poke at him.”

The old leader had advanced to look us over and decide what to do with us. At this moment a sudden commotion broke out. Everyone whirled and began to gaze at a green-yellow blob in the sky. Another group of flyers were arriving. Presently I could see that the group consisted of eight of the Aerite men. And they were bringing in a prisoner. More Neptune inhabitants appeared until the crowd numbered about eight hundred.

Grim men with the captive landed, and again those sparks flashed from their feet. At the sight of the sparks a murmur of dismay arose from the Neptunians near me. Queer! I had thought of course the sparks were a natural thing. But it did not seem so.

The excitement over the arrival of this captive turned my attention to him. He was a gray-black, sinister looking man, obviously of a different breed from everybody else here. He wore a black garment of woven flexible metal and his wings were bound with rope. Furthermore they were not feathered wings; they were black, greasy, shiny membrane. Wings like those of a huge bat. I had a glimpse of his defiant face as he lay on the ground, his bullet head of close-clipped black hair, and oval face. A pointed chin with a hawk nose and arched brows, gave him a villainous appearance.

“Him, a Gar,” Ahla said.

He certainly did not seem popular. With angry cries a half dozen of the winged girls fluttered forward, trying to maul the man on the ground. But the old leader and Charlon waved them back.

“Wonder what it all means,” said Boyle. “They sure seem to hate that bat-winged fellow.”

That remark was never answered, because at this moment the winged men conducted us into the crystal palace and began to act the part of hospitable hosts.

They fed us and gave us a room under a roof of saffron glass. It was old Arton’s dwelling, where he lived with half a dozen or so of his Counselors, some servants and others. Ahla signified she lived here also. And so, evidently, did this fellow Charlon. The building was a big, two-level affair, divided into corridors and many rooms. The one we had was furnished with three couch-like affairs, and low reclining chairs with sides, but not much back, where our wings should have projected.

After being in it for a while we found we certainly did not like this room. We rolled and tossed on the couches. Occasionally I could hear Boyle’s complaints.

“This light,” he groaned. “How can anybody sleep in a place like this?”

Trying to sleep on a flood-lighted stage would have been easy compared to this. The whole crystal city of Aerita was built of crystalline blocks. Whether they are radioactive or not I do not know. Weird, luminous transparent slabs. They glowed with a vivid yellow radiance. After a while it got you. There are mines of this luminous stuff off in the mountains, we later learned, and the Aerites cut out the slabs and laboriously cart them to the city.

It could be a refined and neat form of torture. But the Aerites did not mean it that way. I tackled Ahla about it when she brought us our breakfast, consisting of various vegetables resembling mushrooms in taste.

Several miserable days and nights passed. We felt like prisoners in that glaring room. Then Ahla came and led us proudly out across the city roof.

Here we found three shacks, standing near each other, one-room affairs built of dried, woven vegetation. There was a cabin room for each of us.

How many days went by now, like this, I have forgotten. Although we were not considered to be prisoners, usually an Aerite guard watched us when we roamed around the city garden to make sure we did not fall off the cliff or hurt ourselves.

These things made Chick Evans bitter.

“I thought we came here to get Uradonite, Alan?” he complained. “How can you even begin looking for it unless some of these people carry us around?”

Boyle had fallen into sullenness. He did not talk much but did suggest we persuade them to carry us to the *Nomad* so we could try and repair it.

“That’s my idea exactly,” I agreed: “They’re learning our language fast. We’ll be able to make some plans in a little while.”

Old Arton came to see us nearly every day. So did Ahla, of course; and several of the others. Charlon came also, with his contemptuous smile.

Soon we learned something about these Aerites, and about their enemies, the Gars. It came to us bit by bit, as Ahla and Charlon and the others learned our language.

Then we discovered an enigma. The Aerites were the dominating race of Neptune. They were not advanced in science but seemed to go in for the arts. Like the Golden Age of Greece. There were several of these crystal cities, of which Aerita here was the largest.

The Aerites had the best region, the best land of Neptune.

“Gosh,” Chick Evans exclaimed when Ahla told us that. “If this is the best, what must the rest of it be?”

“There are Black Forests,” Ahla said. “But in them, no human can live. And there is the land of the Gars. The Gars live underground.”

Except for savages that flew—and nested in nomadic style on the distant metal deserts, only one other race existed—the Gars. So far we had seen only one Gar, the bat-winged fellow. The Gars were a less numerous people, but far more scientific than the Aerites. Their main city, called Mok, was far up in the mountains, built entirely underground.

“Well, what’s wrong?” Chick Evans demanded of Ahla, “You people are in some sort of trouble. We saw that the first night we got here. You’re afraid, of the Gars?”

She smiled her whimsical smile.

“No, it is not that. We are now having trouble to fly.”

“Trouble flying?” Chick Evans echoed. “That would be a catastrophe here, sure enough. Was that why you fell on that ledge, the night you found us?”

She nodded. “Yes. We feel so heavy in the air now. For one of your Earth years we have grown heavier. Soon our wings will not carry us.”

“An intensification of gravity,” I said.

“That’s what hit us when we were trying to land the *Nomad*,” Boyle agreed. “Some phenomenon of nature.”

Now we had the explanation of those sparks, when the flyers’ feet touched the ground. What a weird enigma. Certainly it was a thing of menace ... Wings of Icarus. The phrase occurred to me. Just as the Spaceships of Earth were becoming useless, so here on Neptune these harassed Aerites were in much the same plight.

“Now that we do not fly so well,” Ahla said, “the Gars have begun to raid us.”

We had heard about those raids. Several times during the time of sleep, small parties of the Gars had come. Food concentrates and several of the young Aerite women had been carried off. They had been isolated, small raids so far. There had been talk among the Aerites of reprisals, but nothing had come of it. Old Arton, we could see for ourselves, was a peace-loving, impractical fellow.

What was worse, so far as we could learn, the Aerites apparently had no weapons.

Our own weapons—just a few of the Pierrot-type, oscillating-current flash-guns—were in the *Nomad*. They would be de-charged by now, useless unless the chargers which we had in the *Nomad*’s little workshop had not been damaged by the fall.

“Do you think the Gars will try and conquer you?” I asked Ahla. “It’s dangerous to be without weapons.”

We were in the garden outside my hut. Charlon had come to join us. He had been sitting silent, with his great white wings, black-tipped, spread out behind him.

“Never would the Gars do that,” Charlon put in abruptly. “Such talk of danger does not make sense.”

“That’s what I think,” Boyle agreed. I noticed his gaze now upon Charlon, filled with admiration and awe for the supercilious Aerite.

Boyle certainly seemed to like Charlon.

“Anyway,” Boyle added, “when you start reprisals, you get into more trouble.”

“Maybe. Maybe not,” Chick Evans put in. “Maybe, if we let the Gars alone, they’ll get to thinking they can do anything to us they like. Then there’ll be trouble for a fact.”

A cold sneer curled Charlon’s features. “You Earthmen are just cripples,” he said. “Cripples do not live long here.”

This comment sent a ripple of fear down my spine. What did Charlon mean by that?

CHAPTER IV
Wings for the Helpless

Just cripples. That angle of it was getting into me more and more.

Then a startling idea occurred to me. Something I might be able to accomplish, if Ahla would arrange to have us carried to the *Nomad*. So far, old Arton had refused and I wondered if Charlon had had a hand in that. Perhaps Arton thought if we repaired the *Nomad*, we would depart, and he would lose all our scientific information. Ahla thought it was something like that.

“Promise him we won’t go,” I told her. “Not at once. We want to find some Uradonite, if it exists here on Neptune.”

“If you give your word not to depart I think he will let you go back to the ledge,” the girl said.

A few hours later Arton sent us permission and twelve Aerite men carried Chick Evans, Boyle and me back there in the cradles. Ahla flew with us. We found the little *Nomad* lying askew among the crags on that ledge of rock just as we had left her. We had made preparations to remain at the ledge several days.

“Old Arton needn’t have been afraid but what we’ll be here when they come back for us,” observed Chick Evans, as he gazed at the precipices, “once here, we’re marooned.”

A quick inspection of the *Nomad* told us we would need at least a month to repair the wrecked mechanisms. But that was not what had brought us now.

My plan was to quit being an Earth-cripple ...

We worked hard for three days, cooped up in the tiny workshop on the *Nomad*. Boyle and Chick Evans were asleep when I put the finishing touches on the apparatus. I went up to the cubbies and routed them out.

“Finished it. Come on, let’s see if it works.”

My plan was to apply the principles of the Nullo-grav units, which made the *Nomad* weightless, to an apparatus in the form of a belt. You might think that a simple proposition but it was not. The Nullo-grav plates of the *Nomad* were not damaged and I had no trouble getting out three small sections. If you put one like a shield, under your feet, it cut off gravity, so that your body, above it, was weightless. But that was not a practical device in this case.

I had to contrive a different application of the magnetic forces involved. In effect, I created looping lines of force, something in the fashion of an old-style electro-magnet. These lines of force, streaming out from the belt-plates and looping back again to the opposite poles of the Nullo-grav units, took on the nature of a magnetic field of sufficient area completely to envelope the human body which had Nullo-grav units placed at its middle.

Swell theory, but would it work? I put on one of the belts. “We won’t be Earth-cripples after this,” Chick Evans exulted. “Take it easy now, Alan. Don’t go up too high.”

We stood on the dim rocks, outside the *Nomad*, I switched the current into the belt which I had strapped around my waist. Then I jumped gently upward. It worked all right. I sailed up about fifty feet, turned part way over and hung poised. “Swell,” Evans called up. “We did it! Easy now, Alan. Desensitize it slowly.”

I let the current-pressure partially out. Slowly I came down, landed with quite a bump, but I was not hurt.

“Good,” Boyle said. “Now, the wings. Shall I try them?”

“Let me.” Chick was like an excited child.

For wings we had stretched an air-proof fabric upon light frames. With one of the three small, immensely powerful Mansfield motors, from the *Nomad’s* ventilating system, I had constructed a mechanism, which could be strapped behind our shoulders, to flap the wings, and to hold them rigid for soaring. With completely weightless bodies to propel through the air, the wings and the Mansfield seemed adequate for the job.

Evans tried them first. He went up, flopped for a time like a wounded bird, or a fledgling just learning to fly. Then he came down again.

“Absolutely grand,” he enthused. “All we need is a little practice and we’ll outfly any of these Aerites.”

With weightless bodies, and mechanical, untiring power, we certainly would.

“They’ll have to respect us now,” Boyle said. His dark eyes gleamed. “What an Earthman says will have some importance, now.”

Ahla and the Aerite men came back for us a few hours later. We did not tell her what we had done but she could see

everything was all right by our looks of triumph.

“Tomorrow we’ll show you something,” I told her.

Ahla flew beside my cradle as we winged back for Aerita. It was after the evening meal, before the time of sleep. I noticed that the sky looked different, great wheeling dark clouds, shot through with orange-green glare.

We landed on the dim city roof. I unloaded the three precious Nullo-grav belts, the folded wings and the tiny mansfield motors and stowed them in the darkness of my one-room hut.

“That sky has the look of a Black Storm,” Ahla said, as she was leaving us for the night. “These storms come slowly, but perhaps it will be over by tomorrow.”

“If we can’t demonstrate tomorrow, we will get busy the next day,” said Chick Evans.

A Black Storm. We had heard about them, but had never seen one. They brought the Neptunian rain. Neptunian rain, we had heard, was peculiar stuff. Heavy, and sticky. But after it hit the ground it absorbed air, thinned out into water.

Puffs of wind rustled the spindly trees when Ahla left us for the night. Chick Evans and Boyle went into their huts. We were all of us pretty well exhausted by the hours of work, back there at the *Nomad*.

Though exhausted by work, I could not sleep, for a while. Then I dropped off.

What awakened me was a distant sound, but faint, like a Titan groaning.

The Black Storm had arrived. The grumble, up in the sky, rose suddenly into a deafening scream. Then after a second or so it moaned away into silence.

The storm was coming, sure enough. The trees of the garden outside my door rustled with puffs of wind. I could hear little plops of a rain-flurry. How long I had been asleep I couldn’t guess, though it seemed quite a while. Lifting myself to an elbow, I glanced at the open door of my hut. A weird orange glow filled the sky outside.

Suddenly my nerves grew tense. Something was moving here in the darkness of my room. Next I heard a thump as if someone had stumbled and made out a shadowy form in the corner, bending down where I had stored the Nullo-grav belts and the wings.

Leaping-erect, I lunged forward. Too late. The figure straightened, dropped the Nullo-grav belts and jumped to escape. A winged figure; I saw that much. And at the doorway, for a second the wings, head and shoulders were silhouetted against the orange glow.

Charlon!

“You dirty crook, I’ll fix you,” was my shout.

But Charlon was gone. From the doorway I thought I saw his skulking, jumping figure. Then a blob rose into the air, winged up between the waving trees and vanished.

For an instant I stood there, quivering with anger. Somehow Charlon had found out about our belts and wings, and had tried to make away with them.

The city roof-garden glared with orange-green light from the sky. Up above, funnel-shaped clouds wheeled, riven by a darting orange lightning, followed by mighty thunder.

The Black Storm swooped down. I started for Chick Evans’ cabin to tell him about Charlon.

Then from across the garden came a woman’s scream.

“Ahla—Ahla!”

That galvanized me and I forgot about Chick Evans. I dashed for Arton’s palace. Winged figures burst from its front entrance, half-running, half fluttering, and gathered by something on the ground. An Aerite man. His body lay crumpled between his still-quivering wings. He was a ghastly sight. Around his neck coiled a thin wire like a tight-end spring, cutting into his throat so that the blood had spurted. His purple-black face goggled up at us.

About twenty feet or so away we found another dead Aerite, slain in the same manner. Wild turmoil reigned around me.

Chick Evans came dashing up. Off under the trees I could see Boyle approaching.

“What’s the matter, Alan?” asked Evans.

One of the Aerites pulled at my sleeve. He turned out to be one who could speak English.

“The Gars did it,” he yelled. “They raided us.”

Shoving into the front entrance of the crystal palace I tackled another group of terrified Aerites for more information. A dead girl was lying there, her wings still tied together with a green wire. Her throat had been cut with wire.

I seized another girl whom I knew had learned a little English.

“Where is Ahla? Which is her room?”

She proved to be quick-witted for she did not waste time asking questions. She turned and motioned for me to follow her. Down a corridor, we came to Ahla’s room. Drapes at one of its big windows had been torn away. Yet despite the storm, through the crystal walls seeped enough of the orange glare to afford mute evidence of what had happened.

Ahla was gone!

CHAPTER V

Vengeance for Wrongs

Horror at what had happened seized the city during the next few minutes. The whole populace seethed with excitement. Figures fluttered up the mountain until the garden and Arton's house here were jammed. The attack had come a short time before. One of the girls had heard the raiders. She said a party of Gars had tried to break into a vault where Arton kept the city weapons. One of the Gars had been killed down there.

Several girls had been abducted. Among them was Ahla.

All of these facts I learned a few minutes later when I rushed out of the palace. Chick Evans and William Boyle were standing there with the old ruler, Arton, watching the Aerites trying to fly. They had been calling us cripples. Now if I had been vindictive, I could have hurled the same taunt back at them.

The Black Storm now was raging in all its fury. Gigantic gusts of wind were rushing around the nearby mountain peaks. Overhead flared the incessant flashes of lightning. Arton's wrinkled face was a picture of consternation as he watched winged man after winged man hurled to the rocks when he tried to take off.

As for me my mind was working fast all the time I was observing these things. Our weapons in the *Nomad* were useless and de-charged. That we had learned during the last few days. It would take a long time to restore them to good condition. But we must do something about Ahla—quick!

I nudged Evans and Boyle to attract their attention.

"Come on back to our huts," I yelled above the howl of the storm. "I have an idea."

Then I raced away, without a backward glance. But I was safe in doing that. I knew they would follow.

The three of us reached our huts in jig time. We dashed inside of my living quarters and I saw that the belts and wings were still there. Then I remembered what Charlon had tried to do and told them the facts. Evans was angry but Boyle refused to believe it. He certainly admired Charlon. A quick examination convinced me that the winged man had not succeeded in injuring the equipment. Possibly I awakened too soon. We donned the contrivances and ventured forth in the shrieking wind once more. No one from Aerita was there to witness proceedings. So much for the grand triumphant demonstration we had planned.

Turning current into the Nullo-grav belt I leaped into the air and started the Mansfield motor. The wings began to flap. Evans and Boyle followed my example. Gusts of air tore at us.

"Into the wind," yelled Evans, above the gale. "It's our best chance."

Above the tree-tops the wind proved to be steady. We soared into it with locked, motionless wings. Our entire practice consisted of about sixty minutes back there at the *Nomad*.

"Down lower," called Boyle. "If the Gars have been forced down like the Aerites, we may see them."

Our flight was a wild one, a phantasmagoria of orange-green glare from the sky, the wind tossing us, and beneath the tumbled rocks. The storm-glare painted them yellow and wind howled past the rock-spires.

How could the Gars, carrying their captives, stay aloft in a wind like this? It seemed obvious they could not. But as I stared down upon the wild bleak terrain, my heart sank. There were a million places where humans could hide.

The city was a dull glow in the murk off to one side. For a time I managed to stay near Evans and Boyle.

Soon I realized the wind was carrying me backward. Next I lost my balance. Weightless, whirling end over end, I was blown away. Then dizzily I had righted myself once more. It seemed I had heard Chick wildly calling at me, his voice faint in the roar. Soon I lost both Evans and Boyle. Later I noticed the city glare had fallen far behind me.

I suppose in that blur of chaos several minutes had passed while, like a feather in a gale, I was whirled along after that. The Mansfield still thrummed. Nevertheless I realized that I was flopping. One of the wings had broken and collapsed. Yet the Nullo-grav belt held me aloft. Then I missed the mountain spires and staring down noticed a grey expanse a couple of hundred feet beneath.

It was the Black Lake. As far as the eye could reach the sullen expanse of water stretched away. Rain began to pour down, Neptunian rain, weird, sticky, thick. It seemed to be something like heavy water. Soon I realized the weight of it was bringing me down. The weight of it was like the ice which used to form on the wings of ancient Earth airplanes. The next instant I had splashed into the lake.

The lake water was normal stuff, not heavy. When I popped to the surface I managed to get rid of the Mansfield which I

tossed away. Then I clung to the wings. The Nullo-grav unit hissed and bubbled but kept working. Thus for some time I drifted along, propelled by the gust of wind until finally I felt ground under my feet. Far off in the murk I could see a dark spread of spindly forest and a white line of surf.

Then I realized where I was. Often the Aerites had told me about the Island of Yügs, enough for me to recognize certain features at a glance. So I worked my way up into the shallows and managed to crawl up above the waves upon a beach of metallic sand.

That sticky rain made breathing so difficult I might have smothered to death if I had not found a rock recess and crawled into it. For a long time I lay there, listening to the roar of the storm and watching the flashes of orange lightning.

A blob of black, moving near the edge of the jungle, finally attracted my attention. For a moment I thought it was one of these unkillable Neptunian slugs I had heard so much about, but upon peering at it more carefully I recognized it as a Gar. Then I saw another blob. There were two of them.

They were dragging something in white after them across the sands. With a leap of pulses I stared at that white object. It was the captive Aerite girl, Ahla.

A gust of anger brought me lurching to my feet and sent me toward them. As the metal grains rattled under my feet they sent out flashes of blue light and that betrayed me to the Gars. As one man they let go of the girl and turned.

The shrill shriek of Ahla rose high above the storm.

“Alan, save me!”

This appeal seemed to turn me into a madman. Lowering my head I charged at the nearest of the two Gars. My training, received from the interplanetary patrol, stood me in good stead, for I brought a certain wrestling trick into play. The next instant the Gar sprawled lifeless upon the ground with a broken wing and a dislocated neck. Instantly the other of the bat-winged men closed.

He proved to be a vicious fighter and he meant to kill. But my heavier weight and better science won out. I seized him about the middle and applied certain leverages. Something snapped. When I tossed him to the ground he was dead.

The girl had remained kneeling upon the sand, with her hands clasped in an attitude of appeal, watching. I sprang to her side.

“Ahla, dear, are you all right?”

She nodded her head, still numbed by the shock of her experience. Then I saw that her wings were fastened together like those of a trussed pigeon. It was a matter of only a second or two for me to free her and lift her to her feet.

Then I guided her beneath the sheltering branches of an eck-waz tree, out of the sticky rain. Within a few minutes she was able to talk. And by that time, the rain had stopped, too.

Then in trembling tones she told me how she had been abducted by the marauding Gars. Soon she had regained her cheerfulness.

“The rain has stopped, Ahla,” I said, at last. “Let us take a look around this place and see if we can’t get back to the city.”

Seizing me by the arm, the girl emitted a terrified scream and pointed.

Turning, I caught sight of what had frightened her and my heart seemed to stand still. Slithering out of a forest came a monstrous gray thing, about one hundred feet long. Raising its forked head, it glared at me out of its ring of eyes, and then glided toward us.

“Watch out, it’s a terrible Yüg,” shrieked Ahla. “They are unkillable. If you value your life don’t let it touch you.”

But I needed none of these warnings to make me sheer off. One look at the fearful creature had me scared stiff. The only reason I stayed there was because of the girl.

But I had forgotten Ahla could fly. Seizing me by the hand she gave a little hop and took off from the ground, still holding tight. Game girl. She managed to drag me up fully twenty feet above the metallic beach before I recovered my wits. Then I switched on the Nullo-grav belt, decreased my weight. If I had thought quicker we might have been all right.

But under the circumstances I had acted too late. The monster slug lifted its gigantic head and struck. So I snatched out one of the Neptunian circular hand saws which was attached to the tool-kit of the belt and went to work on the Yüg.

And all the time Ahla was striving to help me.

Her wings were wildly beating as she struggled to lift me higher. As the monster lunged at us, I managed to get the blade of the saw whirling.

Whir-r-r!

That whirling blade cut into the gray head like a trowel slashes into wet mortar. The saw-knife, my hand, my arm, all sank deep into that foul head and throat. It was nauseous. The horrible slug-flesh opened up like gluey pulp and greenish blood spurted. The flesh fell apart, but it clung to me. The monstrous slug squealed as my blow ripped its throat apart, silenced it. Ahla, too, was screaming.

Then I realized how wildly her wings were flapping and how frantically her hands were pulling at me. It was a blurred chaos of horror. The huge head of the giant yug fell to the beach below but the hideous thing refused to die. The mighty coils still remained, as dangerous as ever. As the head tumbled down, and I brushed the gluey green pulp from my face, a gray loop lashed out and dragged us back to the beach.

“Ahla, fly out of range,” I yelled, using the saw for all I was worth.

Surely she could break loose and get away? But even while fighting I became aware she also had been engulfed by the pulpy, snake-like rings. The tenuous, flimsy stuff separated easily into writhing segments. But always fresh coils came back. Truly the monster seemed to be unkillable. Suddenly I discovered the pieces which I had flung away were coming at us again.

Although no longer one hundred feet long, another head appeared and reared at us. A dozen smaller newly-formed segments, with heads and yawning sucker mouths, now came plunging into the fray. A sucker-mouth fastened for an instant upon my arm. Its eyes glared. In another instant that sucker mouth would have been drawing my blood had I not slashed it off and cut it into bubbling, viscous pulp.

For a fantastic moment I thought the end had come. Ahla scrambled erect beside me. She was gasping, with her wings feebly flapping. Strings of gray stuff were like a tangle upon her. And all around us other heads, eyes and looping, lashing gray segments were plunging at us!

“Alan, yank loose so I can lift you,” she called out.

Her terrified cry spurred me to renewed efforts. Lift me? How could she lift me out of this horror, exhausted as she was. Then I remembered the Nullo-grav belt. I could make myself light as a feather. So I switched the hissing current into the belt. Then I had staggered free, and gave a jump that carried me several feet into the air.

A coil whirled at me like a monstrous lariat and missed. One of Ahla's beating wings struck me and knocked my almost weightless body sidewise. But I had caught at her robe and let out a yell.

“Ahla, try flying now,” I shouted.

The noisome flesh of the slug still clung heavy upon her. My feet touched the rocks and I shoved for all I was worth. The impetus helped to launch her into the air. Then we broke free and I looked down. Beneath us was a nest of leaping, writhing little slug-segments, a horror of darting heads trembling with eagerness to get at us.

Shuddering, we rose above the black spindly tree-tops, as Ahla winged laboriously along with her body almost horizontal and my body dangling under her as she clung to my hand. Fifty feet up we climbed, then a hundred.

“Alan,” she called out suddenly. She was gazing down at me, puzzled. “Alan, there is no weight to you.”

“No, this device I'm wearing does away with weight,” I shouted above the howl of the storm. “It is called a Nullo-grav belt.”

“Are you joking?” asked the girl.

She could not understand it, of course. She could only stare at me as though I had performed some miracle.

“No, I have no weight now,” I insisted. “A short time back I had wings, too, Ahla, but the storm ruined them. I had wings and a little more, and I could fly. I will fly again, better than any of the Neptune people. You'll not call me an Earth cripple, then Ahla.”

Over the island the full force of the wind hit us. I saw the black fantastic tree-tops of the island sliding backwards under us as we were blown away from Aerita. Once, vainly, Ahla tried to wheel and head into the wind.

“No use,” I warned.

“I have not enough strength,” the girl admitted. Panting, as she struggled on, she gazed down at my Nullo-grav belt. “That was what saved us from the Yúgs, Alan? Never have I heard before of any human escaping from them, if once they had caught him.”

“Yes, the Nullo-grav belt saved us,” was my reply.

She struggled on, towing me, but I could not help her. My only alternative was to dangle like a feather in the wind. The island presently disappeared behind us.

It was impossible for me to help her. Never before had I felt so helpless as I did at that particular moment. Beneath us stretched the sombre waters of the great Black Lake. Under the lash of the gale we could see the spray whip away from the top of the waves and disappear in the gloom. Although it was not raining I dreaded that it might begin again at any moment, and that would have meant disaster. I shuddered to think what the added weight would have done to this frail girl.

Ahla was panting, exhausted. Surely she could not keep on like this much longer.

“Air-heaviness—very bad here,” she managed to gasp. “I feel so strangely heavy.”

“Just try and keep from falling. Let the wind blow you. Do I make it more difficult?”

“No. You are nothing.”

“Keep going,” I said. “I believe there’s land ahead.”

I was holding on the edge of her drape now, just enough to keep us from being separated in the wind. Then despite her efforts I saw the black surface of the sea draw nearer. She was losing altitude. But the storm, at least, had lessened. Fewer flares of orange lightning lanced the sky. Already the tossing waters had begun to subside.

At this moment, just as my hopes were soaring, the girl’s strength gave out completely.

She gave a hysterical gasp and began to flop wildly.

“Alan, I think I’m going to faint!”

As she spoke her wings fluttered, folded and she began to fall like a stone, dragging me after her.

CHAPTER VI
Traitors in Camp

Now I must go back to tell what was happening to Chick Evans and William Boyle, as Chick later told it to me. Evans saw me lose control, as the three of us fought the wind over the city of Aerita. He saw my winged body go whirling away like a driven leaf. Evans shouted. He even made an effort to turn into the wind and follow.

“Careful,” shouted Boyle. “Watch yourself.”

Evans almost snapped his wing-struts as he struggled not to lose his balance. That terrified him, and as Boyle soared at him with another warning, he steadied and kept on into the wind. He dared do nothing else.

It was a chaos of horror to Chick Evans, there in that storm.

Next came the rain, ghastly, gluey stuff. A gob of it struck Chick Evans’ face, and nearly suffocated him. Next he became aware of the heavy rain bringing him down. At a little distance he saw Boyle’s body flop down also. Both of them were falling.

There was an uprushing vista of black-green rocks and then he crashed. The wings crumpled, smashing under him. For a horrible second he rolled on the rocks, with the spluttering Mansfield motor racing at his shoulder blades. Then the wind flattened him motionless.

“Chick Evans, are you all right?”

Boyle was calling from nearby, where he also was lying with smashed wings. Chick shut off the Nullo-grav belt and crawled over to Boyle.

Evans noticed a cave nearby and pointed it out to Boyle. They crawled toward it and then Chick Evans found the wind was sucking into this opening as though there were a vacuum inside. It was a maelstrom of roaring wind.

“Not here,” Chick Evans gasped as he gripped Boyle. “This suction is too strong.”

Too late. The vacuum caught them. Somehow they managed to cling together as they were pulled into the darkness. For a time they slid downward on a smooth metallic surface. Then they shot into a denser blackness of a subterranean grotto. On its smooth floor wild wind-currents tossed them around like leaves. Then at last, bruised, dazed, only half conscious, they were able to clutch a rock and hold themselves steady.

For another nameless time, they must have huddled silent, panting.

“Less wind,” Chick murmured at last.

“Yes. Seems so.”

There was more light here and by it Chick Evans saw that they were in a tunnel near a larger grotto. They crawled toward it.

Now they tried to plan what they ought to do. They resolved to make their way back to the surface and return to Aerita. But how? Their wings were smashed and the Mansfield motors were gone. But they still had the Nullo-grav belts. If the storm was over, from the surface rocks they could leap into the air. Perhaps the Aerites would see them and come to the rescue.

“Chick, look there,” suddenly exclaimed Boyle.

As he spoke Evans noticed an oval blob on the rocky grotto floor. The pilot stared at it with startled horror. Twenty feet away was what looked almost like a human eyeball, a little round thing, with veins on it. It rested on the rock-ground, becoming more luminous every moment. The eyeball glared at them menacingly, and soon they saw it was supported by tiny crooked legs. Then slowly, with jerky, hitching steps, it marched toward the two Earth men.

“See, Boyle, there are others,” cried Evans.

Like lights winking on, abruptly the dim grotto was full of the little glaring eye-creatures. There seemed to be a thousand of them.

The two men became aware of another danger. It was the roar of an advancing flood. The eye-creatures evidently heard it too for their myriad glaring gazes wobbled. They seemed confused.

The roar grew louder. It seemed to be coming from the oval tunnel entrance. Bubbling viscous liquid came pouring into the grotto. Chick Evans saw it first. It was a torrent of that heavy-rain water. Hissing it poured from the opening, spreading out like glue upon the rocks of the grotto.

Now the eye creatures took alarm. They scurried away, bouncing on their crooked legs ...

“Quick, we must escape,” yelled Evans to Boyle.

“We can’t,” answered Boyle. “We’re cut off.”

Chick Evans whirled and saw another torrent of the heavy-water was pouring into the cave from another opening.

Chick Evans and Boyle gazed wildly about. The grotto was filling rapidly. Then to the left, he noticed a tunnel exit which the water had not yet reached. He grasped Boyle.

“See there,” he shouted. “We might be able to get out that way.” Both men jumped for the exit.

That little tunnel opening was a blur in the turgid, roaring dimness. Evans fumbled at his belt. “The Nullo-grav will render us weightless,” he gasped. “We’ll break out of here somehow.”

He sent a current into his belt. As he felt his body lighten, he bent his knees and leaped. Like an arrow his body sailed through the choking fumes, struck a ledge up by the opening where he clung, panting. A moment later he heard a thud as Boyle joined him.

“That was a narrow squeak,” Boyle managed to gasp.

The lava-like stream, as it progressed through the darkness, seemed to thin out as it absorbed air. Rapidly the gluey quality disappeared—and it turned into normal water. Chick Evans dipped his hand in some and noted the difference.

Then the two men noted that the newly formed water was rising more rapidly than before. Desperately they turned to escape. But this move came too late. Hardly had they stumbled more than a hundred yards through the dark tunnel when, with a renewed roar, the water rushed in after them.

Roaring, the flood snatched them up and hurled them onward like helpless chips. Overhead the dim roof was visible as they were carried forward. Next the passage made an abrupt turn and they were dashed against the rocky walls. After that the two men lost consciousness.

When Chick Evans regained his senses, he realized the stream had carried them into the open air. Boyle and he were lying in a little pool of water a few inches deep. A dim dark vista of wet rocks showed around them. Overhead, the sky was visible, speckled with wheeling, yellow-green storm clouds. But the fury of the storm evidently had passed. There was no rain, no wind. Beside him Boyle shivered.

“All right now, Boyle?” murmured Evans.

“Yes, I guess so,” Boyle faintly responded. “Thought we were gone. Thanks for what you did.”

For a time they remained silent, still shaken by their experience. Chick Evans sat up. “Where are we?”

The same type of wild, precipitous Neptunian landscape surrounded them. Chick Evans’ heart sank. They seemed to be nowhere near the city of Aerita. Those distant, looming black mountains—Chick was positive that he had never seen them before. How far had the subterranean torrent carried him and Boyle? He tried to guess at it, but could not.

Their wings were smashed so the two men took them off, cast them away. They also disconnected the now-useless Mansfield motors.

“Well, that’s the end of that,” said Boyle bitterly. “Just Earth-cripples again.”

For a few moments Boyle fell into moody silence. “I was thinking, Chick. Wouldn’t you like to be somebody important, here on Neptune?”

Chick stared at him.

“What do you mean?”

“These Aerites seem to be losing their ability to fly,” said Boyle. “The Gars, on the other hand, don’t seem to be bothered in that way. If they keep on they’ll be the dominant race of Neptune. We can’t furnish Nullo-Grav belts to all the Aerite race and we’ll soon have to make some kind of a choice. Back on Earth, all my life I’ve wanted to be someone important and the smart guy is the one who gets on the winning side.”

“What are you driving at, Boyle?” asked the astonished Chick Evans.

“You saved my life back there in the grotto and I’m grateful. I’ve been thinking I could show you a real opportunity to ___”

Boyle never had a chance to finish the sentence. From among the rocks close at hand came the faint sound of a moan.

It was a human voice.

“What is that?” cried Evans, leaping to his feet.

The sound came again. Then in a rock shadow they saw something was moving. A form tried to rise up and then fell back again. The two men hurried forward and discovered an Aerite girl. She had evidently been lying unconscious. She was moaning faintly now—seemed to be dying. Her white wings were bound.

“She must have fallen from the air,” gasped Evans, in horror.

Her little body was broken, weltering. She saw Chick Evans and Boyle bending over her.

“You are the Earthmen,” she murmured faintly.

It was a friend of Ahla’s. Evans recognized her. As he bent down, she gasped, “You—be careful. The Gar city of Mok—that red glow so near—” Evans glanced in the direction she indicated and noticed a ruddy radiance glowing in the sky.

“So this is Gar country and that is the city of Mok?” Evans asked her.

“Yes. And you tell our leader Arton—”

The faint words stopped. “Yes?” Evans prompted gently. “Yes, Jara. What do you want me to tell Arton?”

“Tell him—the Gars—they are going to—to—”

Blood was welling at her mouth. She choked a little. Then her breath stopped and she was gone.

Chick and Boyle stared mutely at each other.

“That red glow is the city of Mok,” said Evans.

“Yes, I know it,” replied Boyle.

“You know it?” The words died in Evans’ throat. Boyle stared at the distant dark mountains and the brighter sky above them. And abruptly, out in the darkness a faint violet pencil ray of light was flashing. Its source seemed to be from a point in the air perhaps a mile or so from where Evans and Boyle were standing. It flashed toward Mok, a little waving beam.

A signal!

“Well, what now?” muttered Evans. “That must have been a flying Gar, signalling to the Mok City.”

Beside him, Boyle suddenly uttered a cry.

“No, that’s Charlon,” he said.

Boyle reached into his pocket. Chick Evans stared, amazed, as Boyle produced a tiny cylinder. He waved it. A narrow beam darted from it. He had given an answering signal. The little beam in the sky waved again, and then snapped off suddenly.

Evans seized Boyle’s arm.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “What’s the idea?”

“That’s Charlon,” grinned Boyle. “We have a plan. Take it easy and I’ll explain.”

The flying figure was closer at hand than Evans had thought. He could see the winged blob in a moment. It had turned when Boyle signalled and now it was coming this way. Evans recognized Charlon. And he was carrying a girl. A wounded girl? Chick thought so, and Boyle muttered something like that. Then Charlon descended. He fluttered down on the nearby rocks, putting his burden on the ground.

A wounded girl? But then Chick saw that her wings were bound! Chick Evans really had no chance to get his wits at all...

Betrayed by a friend!

It dawned on him so slowly that for a moment he stood there like a confused child, incredulous. The big figure of Charlon joined them with a fluttering pounce.

“Good,” Charlon exclaimed. “So you only could trap one of them, Boyle? The other, that big Alan Frane, where is he?”

In another second the small form, of Chick Evans stood bristling between Charlon and Boyle. He had the general idea of it now. But realization had come too late. A weapon that glowed with a hissing glare was in Charlon’s hand. Evans ignored it. He stared at Boyle.

“You traitor!” he snarled.

“Why—”

He would have leaped, with flying fists, had not Charlon seized him from behind.

“You’re turncoats, both of you,” raged the little pilot.

“Easy,” said Boyle.

By a sudden effort Evans broke free from Charlon and sprang at Boyle. They struggled.

“Let him go,” rasped Charlon. “You stand away, Boyle, and then I will kill him!”

“No, take it easy!” Boyle panted. “No need to kill him.”

Against his two much bigger adversaries, Evans did not have a chance. They threw him down on the rocks and then the gloating Charlon seized a chunk of stone.

“Charlon. Wait, there’s no need for that.”

In the scuffle, Evans heard Boyle’s protest. Then the rock in Charlon’s hand crashed on his head. The whole world seemed to split into a blinding roar of white light, followed by blank darkness.

CHAPTER VII

In Enemy Hands

As Ahla dropped like a plummet pulling me after her, I, Alan Frane, gave myself up for lost. The power of the Nullo-grav belt was not strong enough to bear us both up in the air, as it had been injured during the fight with the slugs. One of the wires had become disconnected. So all seemed over.

The next moment we hit.

But not the ground. The wind had blown us over a projecting spit of land and we crashed into the queer spindly branches of the Neptunian trees. They proved to be springy and as soft as cotton, and they broke our fall. It took me only a few minutes to switch off the belt, find the trunk and descend to solid rocks with the unconscious girl. For I had clung to her tightly. If I had let go of her she would have been dashed to pieces.

When I had stretched her out flat she soon regained her senses and opened her eyes. Then I glanced about us. We were in a narrow forest glade.

“You’re all right now, Ahla?” I said. “Great. You certainly did your part.”

She smiled lugubriously.

“Flying is so hard now.”

For a time we were silent as she panted beside me, recovering her breath, resting.

“I’m better now, Alan.”

“Yes. Thank heavens for that.”

“When the storm is over I can take you back to Aerita.”

“I suppose so.” I tried to grin cheerfully at her. “Pretty tough, having an Earth-cripple on your hands. But when we get back, I can make other wings.” For a time we sat there talking. I told her briefly all that had happened, about the discovery of the raid on Aerita and our new wings. The girl seemed delighted to learn we three Earth men would not be cripples here on Neptune much longer. Then we discussed the general situation.

“Ahla, when the Gars captured you, did you see Charlon?” I asked her.

“Charlon? Oh no. Did they kill him there in the palace?”

“Not much chance, worse luck,” I declared grimly. “He wasn’t around, not a sign of him, dead or alive. I’d like to get my hands on that fellow.”

“What is it you mean?” she asked in surprise.

I told her then how Charlon, just before the storm broke, had come to my hut, trying to steal the Nullo-grav belts and wings.

“That must have been just while the Gars were making their raid,” I explained. “He’s one of them, of course—a spy. What puzzles me, Ahla, is how he knew about those Nullo-grav units, our wings and Mansfields? No one knew about them except Chick, Boyle and myself. Not even you.”

Queer how with the obvious answer to a puzzle right in front of you, still you don’t see it. Boyle of course had told Charlon. Chick Evans, by now, could have easily explained that to me.

Charlon, rather than risk himself by helping the Gars as they killed the Aerite guards, had planned to steal my apparatus. Then Boyle would have flown off with him. When he failed in that, during the excitement of the raid, he had evidently met Boyle, and they had planned that Boyle would lure Chick Evans and me into the Gar country so that we would be caught....

I did not learn this until afterward, of course, but that was the general idea of it....

“The storm, almost it is gone now,” said Ahla presently. “Then we will start for Aerita.”

She stopped, stricken with alarm. We both saw the flying blobs at once. Three Gars were overhead, just above the tree-tops when we discovered them. Then they saw us. For an instant they gathered in a group and one of them shouted. Next like plummeting birds they darted down.

“Ahla, get going,” I yelled at the girl. “If you stay here, they’ll catch us both.”

“Alan, I won’t desert you,” objected the girl.

Precious seconds being wasted. “They’ll fly after you and forget me,” I gasped. “It’s our only chance.”

That persuaded her. With flapping wings, she darted up. I crouched back into the thicket where we had been sitting. If the Gars came down at me, here on the ground at least I might put up a decent fight. And I really thought, desperately hoped, the flying Ahla would get away from them. Ordinarily, I knew, a Gar could not fly as fast as an agile Aerite girl.

But they caught her for she had delayed too long. I stared up, my heart sinking with horror. All three of them darted at her. They had spread apart, and as she went up between the tree-tops, I could see that she had a moment of indecision.

She wheeled, started in one direction, saw a Gar diagonally above her, and changed her mind.

That instant of indecision was fatal. Before she could attain any velocity, another of the Gars, like a darting vulture, was upon her. Then she was seized—one of them holding her and the other two flapping beside him. They were only fifty feet or so diagonally above me—the blobs of them silhouetted against the sullen grey of the sky. From where I crouched in the thicket, I could see them plainly, but perhaps they did not see me.

They hovered for a moment, seemingly undecided what to do.

I did not consciously plan anything. In emergencies such as that, one acts by instinct. My saw-knife was gone but while talking with the girl I had repaired the Nullo-grav unit. Although unarmed, I shoved at the lever of the belt and as the current went into it, I made a running leap. By luck rather than skill, I must have timed it perfectly.

Weightless, my body sailed diagonally upward, a fifty foot glide with arms outstretched.

The startled Gars had no time to flop away. I heard their rasping, guttural yells and an outcry from Ahla. Then my arms and head struck them.

Surely that was a weird aerial combat. One of the Gars made a pass at me with a spluttering white-hot knife. I knocked it from his grip and it fell, a trailing sliver of light dropping down through the trees. Then my fist drove into his face. The Gar screamed, his wings flopped and he went down, turning end over end.

His body broke through the spindly tree branches and he landed in a forked limb where he hung, lifeless.

All this happened in two or three seconds. The Gar holding Ahla had fluttered away a few feet and with beating bat-like wings was hanging poised. The other pounced on me like a vulture.

“Alan, pull them to the ground,” screamed Ahla.

The same idea flashed to me. By switching off the current of the Nullo-grav unit and sinking to the ground I would have a better chance. But it was a futile thought. A hissing knife struck my shoulder, ripping the flesh a little.

The Gar fluttered away, came back at me. It was like fighting with a monstrous bird.

Then I managed to seize the pouncing figure. For instant I flailed with my fists, but could not connect. The Gar’s talon-like fingers closed around my throat. I was finished and I knew it. Ahla screamed words in her native language. The Gar’s ugly grey-black face was close over me. The glare of the red-hot knife in his hand painted his grinning, contorted features. Something Ahla said must have decided him. He twisted his wrist and hit my head with the heavy butt of the knife. It was a terrific blow.

That crushing blow was enough. The black night burst into spluttering stars and I floated off into a vast soundless abyss....

Later, when I regained my senses, I dimly realized I was bound hand and foot lying on the rock floor of a large cavern which was lighted by braziers. They gave forth a red glow, these metal fire-pans were mounted upon shelves in the cave.

Around me moved the figures of many Gars.

As my mind cleared I pretended to be in a stupor. If Ahla was near, I wanted a chance to speak with her. But I did not get that opportunity.

A figure stooped over me and removed my Nullo-grav unit. From beneath half-raised lids I saw it was Charlon. Then Charlon and two or three of the others led Ahla away. Two of the Gars picked up my bound body and carried me along a tunnel corridor. Bars clanked as the Gars opened a door and rolled me in. Then the door closed, the bars clanked and they were gone.

I opened my eyes. They had left me in a cell equipped with a grilled window and metal furniture. Against one of the rocky walls stood a low couch. Upon the couch sat a man who stared silently.

As the door closed, he jumped to his feet.

“Alan Frane,” he exclaimed. “So they caught you also?”

It was Chick Evans.

There was water in the cave-cell. Chick Evans bathed the dried blood from my hair.

The blow had been vicious but had left only a crack, but it was just a scalp wound.

“This stuff on your face, what is that?” he asked.

“I guess they drugged me,” I said.

He wiped it off. My shirt was burned. The flesh of my shoulder was ripped.

I told him then what had happened, that Ahla had been caught and was here. “Charlon’s in this place also,” I said.

“He’s a traitor, Chick.”

“I know it,” said Evans. “You don’t have to tell me.”

We turned our heads as the bars of our door clanked. It opened and two Gars came in. They stared as they saw me sitting up, with Chick washing me.

“He’s all right,” Chick said. “Get out of here—we don’t need you.”

Evidently they did not understand our language. Impassively they searched me and went out again, barring the door.

Then Chick Evans told me what had happened to him and Boyle. He also told me that Boyle had betrayed us. I stared.

“Well, I can understand it,” I said at last. “Boyle was always a queer, moody fellow. Never could make him out. You always seemed to like him, Chick.”

“Yes. I have been a fool.”

Again we heard footsteps out in the corridor. The bars clanked, the door opened. Three men entered.

Their leader was our erstwhile companion, William Boyle.

CHAPTER VIII
The Room of Torture

Yes, it was indeed William Boyle. And with him came two Gars, dark-faced sinister looking figures with their folded bat wings and dangling weapons. Suddenly I realized they were body-guards—there to protect Boyle if Evans and I tried to attack the traitor.

“Well, Boyle, you see we’re both alive,” said Evans. “You brought guards? Good idea. You better keep away from me, Boyle. If I ever get a chance at you, it’ll be too bad for you.”

“What do you want, Boyle,” I demanded.

“Take it easy,” said Boyle. “I want to talk with you.”

“Talk away,” growled Chick Evans. “We can’t stop you.”

Boyle stood there, trying to brazen things out but only succeeding in looking sullen. He was on the defensive for he could not meet our gaze.

“You remember what I said to you after we escaped from the grotto?” he said to Chick Evans.

“Sure I remember,” Evans retorted. “The one who picks the winner and rides with him, he comes out on top. Be on the winning side even if you have to double-cross somebody.”

“And you think the Gars are on the winning side?” I suggested. “Is that it, Boyle?”

“Of course they are,” snapped Boyle. “There are ways you can help Charlon and me, so I don’t mind making an offer to you and Frane.”

“So you think we would double-cross the Aerites?” sneered Chick Evans. “After living with them three months, accepting them as friends, and taking everything they can give us. Then you believe we’d kick them in the eye for this murderous bunch of Gars. You can go to blazes, Boyle—”

“All right,” Boyle retorted. “If that’s the way you feel about it.”

“And I saved his life!” Chick Evans said contemptuously. “Remember those eye-creatures, Boyle?”

“The *dryns*,” said Boyle. “Yes, Charlon has told me about them. Frightening little things, I’ll admit. One of the peculiar forms of life here. They sure had us fascinated in the grotto.”

“And if they’d gotten you—” Evans began.

“They’d have finished us up, you and me, if they’d gotten us,” Boyle agreed. “They weren’t eye-balls. Not exactly that. Luminous ball-bodies, which made them look that way in the darkness. Charlon says they’d have fastened themselves on us, sucked our blood, and torn us up, like giant ants. When that flood came, they scurried into their holes—like crabs.”

“Shut up, Chick,” I interposed. “Let me talk to him.”

This Boyle was not too smart a fellow, that was obvious. An inferiority complex, probably.

“I won’t shut up,” retorted Chick Evans. “This is my chance to tell this rat what I think of him, and maybe I won’t get another.”

“All right, you play it your way and I’ll play it mine,” Boyle flared. “We’ll see who comes out on top.”

“What do these Gars think they’re going to do, Boyle?” I interposed mildly. “You say we can help you.”

“He’s an ass,” Chick sneered.

Chick Evans’ extreme contempt was understandable to me. He had always liked Boyle, trusted him.

“You and Charlon think you can force us to help you?” I suggested.

“You don’t want to be killed, do you?” countered Boyle.

“We certainly don’t.”

“Well, you’d have both been killed already, if it hadn’t been for me.” Boyle had recovered himself now. His swagger came out. “Don’t be a fool, Frane. You might as well look facts in the face. Charlon didn’t like the idea of you having Nullo-grav belts and wings. But now that he’s got those, and you, he’d just as soon kill you as not. He’d rather, in fact.”

“But you wouldn’t?”

“No. Why should I want to kill you? You can’t hurt me, and if you can’t see things my way, that’s your fault, not mine. Matter of fact, you can be of use to me. So if you don’t try to make trouble, Charlon doesn’t care.”

“Be of use to you? How?”

He sketched it for us then. I kept Chick Evans quiet, and listened, leading Boyle on. It was what I had thought, what I had told Ahla. The Gars were planning a conquest of Aerita, of all the Aerite country. Charlon was commanding them. An aerial army had been prepared.

The Gars had weapons of their own modern design. The Aerites were decadent, although more numerous than the Gars, but sadly unequipped for war. Ruled by old Arton, who hated violence in any form, the Aerites had let their own weapons rust away underground. And the Aerites, all the time now, were finding it more and more difficult to fly. “They won’t have a chance,” declared Boyle. “So when Charlon put it up to me to join him, wouldn’t I be a fool to pass up an opportunity like this? Charlon is going to do a lot for me. He’s promised. I’ll be a great man, here in Mok, in Aerita too, when we conquer it.”

A naive fellow, this Boyle. But human enough, I suppose. He glowed as he told us what a great man he would be here on Neptune. Earthman, with miraculous Nullo-grav belt, and wings with mechanical power so that he could outfly any Aerite, or any Gar.

“And you, Frane,” he said, “I’ll be honest with you—I don’t know how to renew the Nullo-grav units, and they wear out after a hundred hours or so of use. They do, don’t they?”

“They do,” I agreed. “And the Mansfield motors do also. So I’m supposed to keep you equipped to be a flyer, Boyle?”

“Exactly.”

“Sort of general physician to the crippled conqueror,” Chick Evans put in sarcastically.

“Shut up,” I interposed. “And in exchange for that?” I added to Boyle.

“I’ll see no harm comes to you and Chick,” Boyle declared. “And, Frane, I have other ideas. When this thing is over—it certainly won’t take us long to conquer the Aerites—why couldn’t you build me a Nullo-grav platform? There are plenty of Nullo-grav plates in the wrecked *Nomad*.”

He pictured it enthusiastically. A weightless platform, with flying girls to propel it, which would carry him in regal state wherever he wanted to go.

“Fair enough,” I agreed. “It’s a bargain, Boyle. So you better make sure no harm comes to us.”

“Don’t worry about that,” he declared. “If you don’t make trouble, I’ll get you out of here soon. You can have your freedom around these corridors and rooms in Mok. Montoh is planning to see you.”

“Montoh? Who is Montoh?” demanded Evans.

“He’s the Gar ruler. The king, you might call him. A middle-aged fellow.”

“I thought Charlon was the leader,” I said.

Boyle grinned slyly.

“He is, only old Montoh doesn’t know it ... Montoh is a weak old fool. He has no particular stomach for this war. He’s still talking about compromise.”

He explained to us then that Montoh, and perhaps most of the Gar people, were not in favor of a murderous war against the Aerites. But there was a clique of scientists here—and Charlon and others with the scientists, who were dominating the Gar ruler ... And then Boyle told us something which explained Charlon fully.

“He’s really Montoh’s unacknowledged son,” Boyle explained. “Charlon’s mother was an Aerite woman, captured and brought here many years ago. She escaped later.”

“What have you done with Ahla?” I demanded abruptly. “See that no harm comes to her, Boyle.”

A queer look came over his face. He straightened, and his dark eyes flashed at me. For once, at least, Boyle looked like a man. “She was brought here because I ordered it,” he said. “Not that it’s any of your business, Frane,—but there’s no chance any harm will come to her.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I said. “Where is she?”

“Here in Mok.” He waved his arm toward the door where the impassive Gar figures were still standing eyeing us. “Her apartments are just down this corridor. I’ve made her serving maid to Tara. It’s a nice job.”

“And who is Tara?” Chick Evans demanded.

Boyle grinned. “You’ll meet her, probably. She’s quite some woman. She’s Charlton’s sweetheart. She’ll be Queen of the Aerites some time.”

Suddenly I had an idea. It struck me that Boyle through associating with the Gars, might know something of a problem which had been bothering me for days.

“Boyle, have you learned anything about the new air heaviness on Neptune?” I asked him. “Have you learned why the Aerites are losing their power to fly?”

“It’s been very handy for the Gars,” he retorted. He grinned with a foxy look. “You think I’m a fool, don’t you, Frane? Well let me tell you, what you don’t know about conditions on Neptune won’t hurt you. Charlton, Tara and I have plans. Old Montoh’s a stumbling block now, but he won’t be for long.”

“What do you mean?” I demanded.

“Nothing. Forget it. You live up to your bargain with me, Frane. You and Chick do what you’re told.”

He turned and swaggered to the door. He was evidently highly pleased with himself and with his interview with us. At the door he turned.

“I’ll come see you again soon,” he said. “Take a sleep—you look as if you needed it.”

Then the door closed after him and again we were alone once more.

Evans and I sat talking over what Boyle had told us and trying to make plans. All I could suggest was acting docile, pretending to cooperate with Boyle. Then if we could get our Nullo-grav belts and release Ahla, she might be able to tow us back to Aerita.

“Mighty lot of ifs,” said Chick Evans gloomily.

At best, I had to agree, the thing looked just about impossible.

Food was brought to us by a grim silent Gar, who dropped it down in front of us and stalked out, barring the door after him ... We ate in silence. There seemed nothing worthwhile saying.

Then for a time we stood at our single barred window, staring out at a little segment of this weird underground city of Mok.

It was a fantastic scene. From our window, sleek black rock-wall dropped sheerly down into darkness, a thousand feet or more. The wall of its opposite side, facing our window, was about a hundred feet away. Small openings, on different levels, were windows.

The seemingly bottomless canyon was a city street. Fluttering figures of Gars occasionally flew past. Landing ledges, like little balconies, and doorways in the cliffs could be seen. Also we could see figures sprawled on the ledges, women, and the small, naked figures of Gar children.

The whole scene was lighted by a dim red glow from far down. A hum of underground activity was wafted up from there.

“Nice place,” Chick Evans murmured. “Without our grav belts, we wouldn’t do much roaming around this city—even if they cast us loose. How would you get across just this one street? Quite a jump.”

As Evans made this remark, a window across the ravine lighted up. This window was big enough to give us a sizeable view of the cave room behind it. We stared.

That room seemed to be of fantastic type of scientific laboratory. Apparatus of globes, discs and wires stood in a crescent. Facing it there were a dozen small metal couches; wires connected them in series.

Between them and the globes and discs two square metal chairs, high-backed, stood side by side.

A dangling mechanism of what looked like circular prisms hung over the chairs. There was something gruesome about those two high-backed chairs. Flexible metal straps dangled down. These straps had cables running along the floor, with branching wires up to the hanging prisms and running to each of the small couches.

All the apparatus was dark, inert now. But there was about it somehow an aspect of deadly power—as though with

current in it, that whole weird room would spring into ghastly activity.

“Great Jupiter,” murmured Evans. “Looks like a torture chamber.” Then a swaying shadow crossed it and a figure came into view. Both of us gasped. This was by all odds the strangest human we had yet seen on Neptune. He was a crooked little man, with dark flexible metal garments, a body not much bigger than a child, bent gnome-like legs, and with a huge head. He seemed to be aged, for the hair on his head was a stringy white, almost gone, with areas of pink-shining pate showing on his gigantic skull. A Gar?

The old man pattered around the apparatus. As he moved across the room we saw his back. The familiar membrane batwings of the Gars came to view. But his wings were small and shriveled, surely not powerful enough to enable him to fly.

At first we had only a dim sight of him; the dull saffron light in the room had kept him largely in shadow. Then as he bent down over part of the apparatus, a violet glow leaped out and strung itself like a rainbow over to the central, dangling prisms.

That glow showed us the weird little man much more clearly. Both Evans and I sucked in our breaths with astonishment. The old man’s ears were huge, with grids apparently fastened on them. His face had a monstrosity of a long flexible nose with some mechanical device fastened there. Then, too, over his bulging eyes were clamped telescopic—or perhaps microscopic—lenses, grotesque inverted cones.

“One of the scientists that Boyle mentioned,” I murmured.

The clank of the bars of our door made us turn. Two Gar men, huge, grey-black fellows, came in. Two others stood at the open door.

“Well, what is it?” Chick demanded. Evidently they did not understand our language. They gripped us, started shoving us toward the door.

“Easy,” I warned Chick Evans. “No use resisting. Maybe Montoh has sent to interview us. Boyle said he would.”

We were shoved out of the cell and along the corridor. At intersections other Gars were standing guard.

Next a dark red brink opened before us, the canyon-like city street. Chick mumbled something. Then I found myself clinging to one of the stalwart Gars as, with an arm around me, he flapped across the red abyss. Another Gar carried Evans over also. As the pilot’s captor dropped him into the corridor entrance side, Evans spoke to me.

“Say Alan, do you suppose they’re taking us to that torture chamber?”

We did not have much time to theorize. In another minute we were shoved into the entrance of that very room. Both of us began to struggle but we did not have a chance.

The whole place now glared with multi-colored lights. Currents hissed and sputtered.

Chick Evans yelled protests. But nothing did us any good. I was shoved into one of those high-backed chairs. The struggling Chick was thrust into another one beside me. Metal bands clanked onto my ankles. My arms were strapped down, seemingly with electrodes. And then a helmet was pulled down over my forehead, a grisly thing which had wires coiling upward. Dangling prisms sent blinding rays of violet light above Chick Evans and me.

Into this scene now stepped Charlon. He moved out of the shadows and stood before us, grinning sardonically.

CHAPTER IX
Evil Queen of the Gars

With some men a wicked moment of triumph is the supreme thrill of their lives. And so it seemed to be with Charlon at this particular moment. His handsome face was distorted into a scowl and his white teeth gleamed with a diabolical smile.

“You flinch, Earth men,” he sneered. “You are afraid and that pleases me. You do not know what is going to happen to you—yet. I am tempted to keep you in suspense.”

“No need,” I snarled back at him. “You’re going to torture us. So the suspense part of the program is out. As to being scared—why sure, we’re frightened. Who wouldn’t be, with all this fiendish looking stuff around. I’m not ashamed to confess I’m scared.”

Charlon burst into a laugh. His mirth was genuine.

“You guessed wrong, Earth man,” he answered. “This time there will not be any torture, that is to say—deliberate torture. Perhaps that may come later, if you’re stubborn. But at the present time we Gars are in search of information. We wish to learn the English language. Those helmets on your heads are devices to delve into your subconscious minds.”

Then I became aware that the small gnome-like old man was advancing to my side. He made some adjustments with the controls and then walked over to Chick Evans and did likewise with his apparatus.

Then into the room filed at least two score of other gnome-like men, strangely like the first man in appearance. They sat down in easy chairs and adjusted helmets connected with ours by means of wires. Charlon walked out of the room.

After this began one of the strangest experiences of my career. These Gars had discovered the electrical transmission of knowledge. Sound records were also made simultaneously.

The first ordeal lasted for hours, until Chick Evans and I were exhausted and nearly fainting. And the following day the process was repeated, and the next and the next, for nearly a fortnight. As Charlon had said, the torture was conducted in an impersonal manner, yet it caused us excruciating suffering, nonetheless. Toward the end Chick Evans feared we would go mad.

But at last the scientists obtained all they wished to know and then we were left pretty much alone, again. The Gars even gave us some freedom. The doors of our cells were left open. Within certain limits we were allowed to roam up and down the corridors. But although I explored diligently I caught no glimpse of Ahla.

Rarely Boyle paid us a visit. But he did not get far with either Evans or myself. We made vague promises to Boyle, and nothing else.

Fifteen days after our capture Chick Evans and I had an interview with Montoh, King of the Gars. We were conducted into a lavishly draped grotto. Large phosphorescent worms, dangling on wires from the ceiling, furnished the light. There was also a crescent shaped window.

The Gar king sat on a throne of red crystal. He was an elderly man with a rather silly looking face. Charlon stood at his right hand.

Montoh asked us many questions regarding Earth and our customs there. Charlon exhibited little interest, not even deigning to speak. Just before the audience with King Montoh ended, however, an important incident occurred.

Through a door I caught a glimpse of Boyle conducting Ahla along a corridor. With a cry I sprang toward her and she turned. An instant later she was gliding into my outstretched arms.

“Alan,” she cried. “Thanks to the Soul of Neptune, you are safe. I asked, but no one would give me any news.”

With a muttered curse Boyle sprang after the girl and pulled her away from me. His expression showed both anger and jealousy.

“You let Ahla alone, Frane,” growled Boyle. “I told you not to meddle with her. I’m taking care of her. Now go back and talk to Montoh.”

Fury rushed over me and I stepped toward the traitor with clenched fists. But Boyle read my purpose and waved his hand. Four Gar soldiers appeared as if by magic and stepped in between us. They laid heavy hands upon me and held me firmly until Boyle had forced the struggling girl into a nearby room and closed the door behind him.

Then the guards took me back to the throne and watched me closely until the interview was finished. Apparently the

king had not noticed this little flurry.

But someone else had—someone I did not notice until it was time to leave the royal chambers.

As Chick Evans and I neared the doorway a curtain in one of the alcoves moved and I caught a glimpse of a woman. She was clad in flowing red robes and was reclining upon a sumptuous couch. Sparkling jewels gleamed upon her arms, her throat and around her brow. Her hair was inky black, her lips the color of scarlet roses and her eyes dark and intense.

It was a handsome, proud, wilful face, lovely and fascinating. Yet for all its beauty, wicked and unscrupulous. I recognized her at once. She was Tara.

Just a glimpse as the curtains opened and then Evans and I were out in the corridor. But I never could forget the face of the beautiful Tara.

At the time I doubted that I ever should see her again. Yet in this I proved to be mistaken. For that night guards came to the cell Chick Evans and I had occupied since we had been living in the City of Mok and moved all my belongings out. Although they could speak broken English, they refused to explain the purpose of this. They merely indicated that hereafter Evans and I were to occupy different cells. Then they locked Evans in the cell and took me to another, several corridors distant.

This second stone room was much like the one I had left. It had a draped couch, several chairs, a metal table, wall brocades of red and black and a fabric rug on the floor. Then the guards walked out, barring the door behind them.

The room was dimly lighted from the red glow outside the window. This change of quarters puzzled me but I felt so weary I decided to put off worrying about it until morning. So I threw myself on the couch, and dropped off into slumber.

I did not sleep long.

A clank of bolt fastenings awakened me. With pounding heart I sat up. In the dim red glow of the window I could see the door stealthily opening. Instantly my thoughts reverted to Charlon. Was he coming here to murder me?

“You are Tara?” I said at last.

“Tara—yes. You have heard of me then?”

“Yes. I have.”

“And you saw me, perhaps, when from you I was taking your language?”

“No.”

Her voice was throaty, with a liquid contralto quality. “I saw you also in the throne room today,” she said. “I listened when you talked to Montoh ... Stand up, Alan Frane. Stand here beside me.”

The way she ripped out the order was startling. A rasp to her voice, of a woman accustomed to be obeyed. I climbed to my feet. I was a head taller and suddenly realized how small she was.

“Yes,” she said musingly. “You are tall and handsome. Are many Earthmen so powerful?”

I recalled how my fist had smashed into that Gar’s face, cracking his skull like an egg. “Perhaps,” I smiled.

“And no wings? That is unfortunate. It looks odd.”

“We’ve found it awkward.”

She had seated herself on the couch. I stood up before her. “I like you,” she said abruptly. “That is strange—but it is true. I am wondering why, because you are so different from Neptunian men. And I could do much for you, here in Mok.” I pretended not to comprehend her.

“I don’t know quite what you mean,” I replied.

“Do you not?” She straightened herself imperiously. “With Charlon I rule the Gars. Do you know that?”

“I have heard it.”

“Old Mentoh is nothing,” she said scornfully. “I have shown Charlon the truth of that. The Gar people like old Montoh but he may have an accident and die.”

So that was it. I had thought as much.

“I see,” I murmured.

“It may be I have told you about Montoh,” she added, “perhaps I am telling you too much. If you should trick me, Alan Frane, it would be unfortunate for you.”

“I know that,” I said, trying to draw her out. “What you say is interesting. Tell me more.”

“If Montoh should die, Charlton and I would rule the Gars. Then perhaps Charlton also would die suddenly. I do not care much for Charlton; he is too bossy.”

“Ah, yes,” I murmured. “Go on.”

A faint smile curled her lips. “If I were a widowed queen I might want a handsome, powerful man for an adviser. The difficulty is all Earth men are cripples.”

“Have you seen our Nullo-grav belts, Tara?”

Triumph leaped into her eyes.

“I was thinking of that,” she said. “With wings I have heard you fly better than anyone on Neptune.”

“Yes. With proper equipment.”

“Now I am thinking of this girl Ahla,” said Tara. “If I should send her back to Aerita, would you think it a good idea?”

“Indeed, yes,” I said too eagerly. It was not clever of me, betraying such emotion when she mentioned Ahla.

Tara’s eyes narrowed. “I see. I think I understand. I have talked with the little Ahla.” She stood up. “I will go now.”

I stopped her with a question.

“Tara, there is something that puzzles me. The Aerites are troubled by air-heaviness. Do you know anything about that?”

Her smile grew tantalizing. “If you and I should make plans together, Alan Frane, there is much I could tell you. But not now. I will see you again. Good night.”

She went out, closed my door, but did not lock it. I waited until the sound of her gliding footsteps had died away before starting down the dim corridor in search of Chick Evans. There were quite a few things I could tell Evans. No Gar guard was visible in this section of the corridor. I unbarred Evans’ door.

“Well, Alan, what’s the idea?” Evans asked me.

“Lots to tell you. That woman, Tara, came to talk to me, Chick. We can make some plans now. I’m going to try and get her to—”

A murmur in the distance checked my words. Evans and I stood listening. Then we went out into the corridor. From further along came the sound of women’s voices, raised and angry.

“That’s Ahla talking,” I told Evans. “Come on. Let’s investigate this.”

We crossed several corridors until we came to the door of a cell. The voices were those of Ahla and the Tara. They were speaking the Aerite language, but we knew Ahla was protesting and Tara was angry, accusing.

Through the open door, Evans and I could see the two women. Ahla seemed frightened. She had backed against the wall, with her wings drawn close behind her, while in front of her stood the enraged Tara.

The situation grew clear to me. Tara had become jealous of Ahla. Suddenly the Gar woman’s spite turned to a murderous frenzy.

“Look, Alan,” cried Evans, gripping my arm. “She means to kill Ahla.”

One of Tara’s hands came into view, holding a small, jeweled cone-weapon. As she turned on the current the cone hissed and a tiny red ring of fire popped into the air. It hung for a split-second, whirling and expanding. Then it lunged at Ahla!

CHAPTER X
Diabolical Machines

Uttering cries of alarm, Chick Evans and I rushed into the room. The red electronic ring went over Ahla's head as the terrified Aerite girl dropped to the floor. Murder bent, Tara glided forward. Shoving the cone-weapon back into her belt, she drew forth a stiletto blade. It turned white hot. I leaped and caught her. My hand twisted the blade from her grasp.

But it was difficult to stop Tara. With a moan of fury she slid past me, trying to get at Ahla.

"Quit it," yelled Chick Evans. He managed to intercept her and hold her helpless.

For a while confusion reigned. The red ring of fire hissed and crackled against the rock-wall of the room. It fired a drape there which went up in flame, and fell to the floor. Ahla was screaming. Outside in the corridor I heard shouts and oncoming footsteps. There would be plenty of Gars here within a moment.

Tara broke free from Chick Evans and staggered back. In her anger her bat-wings grew stiff, outstretched behind her. Her face was contorted with passion. Again she reached for her belt.

I leaped at Chick Evans.

"You coward," I shouted. "How dare you interfere with Tara."

A blow from my fist knocked Chick Evans backward. He gasped and fell. I followed him up, pummeling him. Poor little Chick. He did not have a chance against me. For an instant he tried to protest and fend me off.

I hit him again, a nasty clip. He gasped, cursed, and fought back at me. There was an instant, as we clinched, when I was able to hiss at him: "Got to do this!"

My blows were real enough, Heaven knows. Then Chick clipped me a hefty one as Gars came crowding in from the corridor. They would have rushed me, but Tara checked them. Certainly it pleased her to see me beat up Chick Evans. And I did a good job of it, reviling and cursing him, for it was the only way to save his life. Twice I knocked him down. Then he had the good sense to stay down, so that I did not have to follow it up. Next I turned on Ahla.

"Vile Aerite girl, you caused this," I shouted. "You have fooled too much with Chick, with me, with all us Earthmen."

"Enough," said Tara.

Panting, I let my appearance of frenzy quiet down. "All right, I am sorry," I muttered.

"What goes on here?" came Charlon's voice.

I swung around. Charlon and Boyle had entered the cell. Then Boyle did the best thing for my plans he could have done. He jumped for Ahla. "What happened, Ahla dear?"

"The Earthmen fight?" Charlon said.

"The little one seized me," said Tara in sweet tones. "So Alan Frane punished him."

Charlon stared. Boyle had left Ahla and was bending over Chick. Poor Evans. His face was swelling, and bleeding from my blows.

"Why were you here with Ahla?" Charlon demanded suspiciously of Tara. "What caused the trouble?"

Chick Evans had the good sense to keep silent. So did Ahla. Tara answered Charlon.

"Do not bother about it, Charlon. We must think of more important things." She was standing beside him. Her jeweled hand reached out with a snake-like gesture and caressed his hair. "Send the Earthmen away, Charlon. They bore me."

The Gar guards had seized Chick Evans and me. They bound Evans and hustled him away. It occurred to me then maybe I had carried the thing too far. Tara murmured dripping sweetness to Charlon. She contrived it so he was leveling black, murderous looks at Evans as he ordered the guards to lock him up. I then realized whatever I planned, must be done in a hurry.

Certainly Chick Evans must not be murdered.

I could also see something of importance was going on here in Mok during this time of sleep. Charlon and Boyle had been together. Doing what? I could not guess. But at any rate, they went back to it now; and as my guards led me away, back to my room-cell, I could see the dark, sinuous figure of Tara lurking in the corridor shadows. When the guards had left, again she slid open my door and came in.

What I had hoped for happened now. She came in and stood before me, triumphant. She felt positive her woman's lure

had conquered me. She was convinced of that at last.

“Tara,” I said, “you will have to make the plans for us. I know so little of what is going on here.”

“I can show you some of it,” she said. “That is what you tried to ask of me before, is it not, Alan Frane?”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“Come. I will show you.”

She planned it out loud as I listened. Charlon and Boyle were busy up near the surface of the city. She would get a cloak disguise and take me down to a laboratory workshop. There was something there for me to see.

“Tara, will you get my Nullo-grav belt for me?” I held my breath waiting for her answer. “Do not keep me an Earth-cripple, Tara.”

“I will get it,” she said.

She left the cell. For a full hour I sat tense, waiting. It seemed an eternity. Almost I had given up hope when she came gliding in.

“Here is the belt, Alan. My Earth man, no longer shall you be a cripple. But you must be careful never to use it until our plans are fulfilled.”

“Of course,” I assured her.

I put on the belt. She had brought a long black fabric-cloak. I drew it over me.

“If you always wear the cloak no one will notice the belt,” Tara murmured. “Charlon always has a black cloak like that.”

I nodded. “All right. I’ll wear it that way.”

We stole into the main city corridors. Occasionally a Gar saw us, but no one challenged us. Then we descended a steep incline near a red pit. I saw then what caused the red glare which lighted most of the weird city of Mok. Below us burned gas-flames from the inner fires of Neptune which, here at Mok, had in many places broken through these subterranean caverns.

“This is the grotto-laboratory workshop,” Tara murmured.

We walked through an oval doorway into a big grotto. Greenish light glowed. Around us stood queer apparatus. The place was not in use for most of the machines were dark and quiescent, except one affair of coiled wires which wobbled drunkenly as electrons sizzled and crackled through it.

Before it sat three big-headed, goggling scientists. Tara led me forward, her hand pressing my arm with a warning to keep my head hidden beneath the cloak collar. She spoke to the scientists in her own language and dismissed them. Getting up they hobbled out of the place.

“This is what I want to show you, Alan,” said Tara. “It will win victory over the Aerites. You will see.”

My attention centered on the walls of the laboratory grotto. They glowed. That glow somehow seemed familiar. Next I noticed familiar looking streaks in the rock.

Uradonite!

The precious metal which our Earth lacked so badly, the treasure which had brought us here to Neptune. The walls of this grotto were packed with Uradonite deposits. Also from this mechanism before us wires ran to the wall, to a line of electrodes there.

What was being done with it here?

“Tara,” I murmured. “What is that?”

Tara’s smile grew ironic. “The poor Aerites have wondered about their air-heaviness. This causes it.”

Then the new air-heaviness was not a natural phenomenon of Neptune. A diabolic scientific device of the Gars was to blame.

I carefully answered Tara’s smile. “How clever,” I said. “So you are causing it, with this device here? How does it work, Tara? That’s what we call Uradonite. Let me go look at it, and those electrodes over there.”

I prowled around, while she proudly explained it to me. A huge deposit of Uradonite streaked the rocks. Erosion had let moisture into it, increasing its radioactivity. The Gar machines reversed the poles of magnetic force and sent a spreading ray diagonally outward into open air. When a flying human body encountered that force, the body was

supercharged and drawn downward. A charge of grav-force discharged when the flyers' feet touched the ground. Hence those weird sparks we had noticed in Aerita.

"We Gars have shielded it off so that its effect was only in the direction of Aerita," explained Tara. "That is why we are not troubled by the magnetic ray. We wear specially insulated clothing."

"And this mechanism here, does that?"

"Yes. For the Aerites air heaviness will steadily get worse. Soon they will not be able to fly at all."

Carefully I studied this villainous mechanism of the Gars. I saw the insulation-shields which directed the rays specifically against the Aerites. Then Tara showed me how the device could be turned on and off.

"See here," Tara said. "Here is the image-grid so our operators can see the surface-world around Aerita."

The hooded finder into which I stared, like a television, showed now a dark spread of the wild Neptunian terrain. I shifted it, sweeping its scope of vision to other areas.

Then with Tara watching me, I bent over the main mechanism, studying it. It was very ironic. Here the presence of Uradonite caused the Aerites to lose the use of their wings. On Earth the lack of Uradonite was causing much the same trouble.

I soon understood these mechanisms. Uradonite, the working of it, with it, with Earth-mechanisms, all that was familiar to me.

Then Tara's murmured words brought a new shock to me. "We must make our plans now, Alan. I will want you to lead our conquering army, you, and I. We will fly with the army. It is now almost ready."

"Almost ready?" I gasped. "Why, old Montoh gave me to understand you would not be ready to conquer Aerita for many months."

"In what you call a few hours we will be ready," insisted Tara. "Charlon and Boyle are up at the surface finishing final preparations."

So that was why it was so quiet down here, and in the lower city corridors. Everyone was out on the surface, with the Gars' aerial army. I sat tense. Despite my former plans, I would have to act at once. Should I smash this mechanism? Could I do it without Tara knowing what I had done?... And if I could, then what? Get away from the murderous Tara, release Chick and Ahla. Then the three of us could try and warn Aerita the Gars were coming....

With my mind filled with these vague plans—suddenly I made a new discovery!

It was an amazing accident. I stared down at the Uradonite-mechanisms with which my fingers had been toying. Then I stared into the device by which an imaged outer view of the landscape could be seen. For a long minute I watched a segment of dark Neptunian wildness.

Again I experimented with the mechanism.

"What is it you are doing?" Tara murmured.

"Just trying to understand the cleverness here," I said. "Back on Earth, you know, I am a scientist.... Yes, it is a very clever mechanism. With this, the Aerites will be almost kept from flying at all. We shall beat them easily, Tara."

"Yes, of course we shall."

My fingers were making adjustments. I tried a little experiment, with a tiny section of the current. By the vision mirror I had proved my own invention, adapted to use here, would work. It would be something the Gars did not know. How could they? I had just found it out myself.

To smash this apparatus now would be needless. This new plan of mine was much better!

CHAPTER XI
Treachery Redeemed

Once again I must go back to explain what was happening to Chick Evans at this same time. As he told me later, although he knew that I had beaten him up for some good purpose, naturally he was not very pleased with me. "It better be a doggone good reason," he told himself bitterly. "It sure better had."

The Gars had bound him, carried him back and slammed him into his cave-room, barring the door after them. Chick Evans lay on the floor. The rope with which he was tied held him into an inert bundle. He could not get on to the couch. Also he was bruised—his face swollen and bleeding. For a long time he lay there, wondering what was going to happen to him next. He had seen those darkly murderous looks from Charlon....

Then his door opened, a figure slipped in, and slid the door closed.

"Who's that?" Chick demanded. "I can see you. Who is it?"

"Take it easy. I didn't come to hurt you, Chick." It was Boyle's voice. He moved forward out of the shadow, into a ruddy shaft of light from the window.

"Boyle," said Evans contemptuously. "Well, get out of here, I don't want to talk to you. What's the idea anyway?"

"You'd better be willing to talk to me," retorted Boyle. "I've come to let you escape."

"Me?"

"Yes—you." Boyle was bending down, unwrapping the ropes with which Chick was lashed. "I don't want you murdered."

"Who's going to murder me?" With the ropes loosened, Evans staggered to his feet. Then he sat down on the couch, rubbing his stiffened legs.

"Charlon," Boyle said. "Or Tara." Again there was that queer defensive, half-sullen look from Boyle. Chick Evans could not miss it. "No, I don't want you to be murdered."

Boyle was wearing a long dark cloak. He reached under it now, produced a Nullo-grav belt, a little Mansfield motor, and a folded pair of artificial wings!

Chick Evans stared at them. "A Mansfield? And wings? Where'd you get them?"

"Mine. The scientists here repaired them. You take them, Chick. I want you to go back to Aerita."

"You're a strange fellow, Boyle."

"Am I? I don't think so. You can't interfere with my plans, whether you go back to Aerita or not. So you might as well save your own life."

"What about Alan?"

"I'll release him. I'm getting another pair of wings fixed."

Chick Evans figured the idea of releasing me was a lie. Evans had no concrete plan of action. But he let Boyle buckle the Nullo-grav belt on him, the Mansfield and the wings.

Evans thought perhaps he might slip away from Boyle and get in touch with me. If so this equipment would be just that much to the good for us. But Boyle guessed his intentions.

"You're going to save yourself, whether you like it or not," said Boyle abruptly. Pulling out a cone-weapon he leveled it at Chick. "Come on now, get going. Here's another cloak. Put it over you."

Seemingly Boyle was determined to force Chick Evans into what Boyle hoped would be safety, whether Evans liked it or not.

"Where are we going?" Evans demanded as he pulled the cloak over him.

Boyle told him. There was a corridor branch near which led to an outer exit, a place where Evans could take wing. Boyle knew the route back to Aerita. He told Evans the main landmarks ... "You can't miss it," said Boyle. They had left Evans' cell. Two furtive cloaked figures, they glided along branches of the corridor. "You'll have no trouble getting to Aerita with that Mansfield for power."

They came to what seemed an inner ledge, a rocky pathway along a subterranean cliff, one of the city highways. At the moment it was deserted.

“Watch yourself, Boyle,” cautioned Evans. “Falling off here wouldn’t be so nice. Remember, you aren’t wearing a Nullo-grav belt.”

To the right of them the ragged, rocky cliff rose up sheer; to the left, yawned that scarlet abyss. A few distant figures, like giant bats, fluttered around in the red glow.

“Almost everyone is up on the outer surface,” explained Boyle, “I’m letting you out what you’d call a side exit. Your movements will be hidden by a mountain peak.”

“And why is everyone else where they are?” demanded Evans.

“The Gars are going to invade Aerita.”

“Invasion now?” For the first time Evans heard of that. He gripped Boyle, staring at him.

“In a few hours. Yes. Back there you’ll have as much chance for your life as any other Aerite. But if you stay here you’ll be murdered sure. You see? It’s the best I can do, Chick.”

What Chick Evans might have tried to plan, or tried now to do under these new circumstances he never had a chance to discover. He became aware of a faint glow around them. It was not the lurid red from the pit beside them but consisted of violet and pink rays.

“What is that light, Boyle?” he asked Boyle.

As Evans spoke he realized the glow had been on them for several minutes, following them as they moved along. Boyle had not noticed it, but he saw it now. He stood and stared at his companion. Then his face turned pale.

“That’s a Gar eavesdropper,” he whispered. “Somebody around here has put a ray on us and is listening to what we say.”

As he spoke, the pink light vanished. Then from behind a cluster of rocks, near at hand, a man, with bat-wings, rose up.

“Boyle, where are you going with the little Earth man prisoner?”

“Charlon!” Boyle gasped.

Chick Evans was unarmed. Boyle had put away his cone-shaped weapon. Now he had no chance to draw it.

Like a great angry bird Charlon pounced upon them. The brief scuffle which ensued on the red brink became a fragmentary blur to Evans. He jumped sidewise as Charlon swooped at Boyle.

Evans had no chance to help Boyle after that. Locked in each other’s grip the two antagonists, the winged Gar from Neptune and the man from the distant Earth, reeled heedlessly to the brink of the great red abyss. Here they struggled desperately.

“Watch it, Boyle!” shouted Evans. “Don’t let him toss you over.”

The Gar had gripped Boyle around the middle. But his other hand remained free. This he wrenched upward and for the first time Evans saw that he was armed with a red hot knife. Before Evans could shout the weapon plunged in and Boyle gave an involuntary cry and flinched. He stepped backward and went over the brink of the chasm.

Evans thought it was all over then. But Boyle was still holding tight to Charlon and he pulled the bat-man with him. The two of them fell out of sight, Charlon flapping his wings madly.

Yet in the air the Gar’s knife struck again and this time Boyle let go his hold. His body went down into the hole like a plummet, while Charlon, with another wild cry—this time of fear—went flapping away in the direction of the mountain peak. He landed in the street of the city and once there began to yell at the top of his voice, giving the alarm.

But Chick Evans was not watching him now. Flat upon the ledge he was lying staring down at the spot where Boyle’s body had landed. The injured man lay upon another ledge, about two hundred yards below. At first Evans thought he was dead. Then he saw the figure move, trying to crawl.

Now Chick Evans remembered he was wearing a Nullo-grav belt and Mansfield-powered wings. He clicked on the current and took flight. Like a giant bird he fluttered down and landed beside Boyle.

“How goes it, old fellow?” he said. “Are you much hurt?”

Boyle gave a hollow groan.

“I’m done for, finished,” he gasped. “Quick. Escape while you can.”

But that was not Chick Evans way, to leave a comrade in distress.

“Let me pick you up and carry you to Aerita,” he suggested. “They can doctor you there.”

“No,” answered Boyle with a grimace. “It would be too painful. I couldn’t stand the trip. Perhaps I’ll feel better if I lie here for a time. But you mustn’t wait Chick. Escape while you still have a chance.”

But still Chick Evans would not hear of that. Despite the injured man’s protests, he dragged him off the ledge and hid him in a nearby opening. He managed to do this not a moment too soon, for Charlon had given the alarm and the Gars were flying toward them at top speed.

They heard the winged men calling to each other as they spread out to hunt, and the shrill tones of Charlon as he urged them on. There seemed to be about forty of them in the party. For a time they seemed to be puzzled by the disappearance of the fugitives. Their efforts became more systematic.

Nearby a stone rolled and Chick Evans peered out around the angle of a rock and saw two dim figures approaching. At the same time also they caught sight of him. One of the winged forms fluttered aside but the larger one gave a tremendous jump toward Evans.

His fist lashed out at Chick Evans’ face.

CHAPTER XII

Plans to Escape

At this time, with Tara beside me, down in the silent laboratory of the Gars, I bent over the Uradonite device, still wondering if this mechanism would work the way I planned. Certainly it seemed so. Then I sat back.

“Yes, it is a clever contrivance,” I told Tara. I squeezed her hand affectionately. “Tell me all your plans, Tara.”

She cast aside all restraint. “Yes, I will reveal them to you now, Alan Frane. After we have conquered Aerita we must kill Charlon and the little Earth man, Chick Evans.”

“Wretched little coward,” I commented. “I used to like him, Tara, but that is all changed now.”

After she had explained her plans to me—and they were diabolical ones, too—we decided to leave the underground laboratory. Again we passed through the corridors without interference from the Gars and halted at the door of my cell.

There I stopped her for a last word.

“You say Boyle has equipped two of the Mansfield motors with wings, dear?” I inquired.

“Yes,” she answered. “I shall order servants to bring them to you at once.”

“Be sure they are ones you can trust,” I cautioned her. “Now, goodnight, darling.”

Then I made a bluff at entering my cell as she glided away. As her footsteps died away, I peered out, made certain she had departed and then hurried down the tunnel in the direction of Ahla’s apartment, the one where Tara had tried to kill her with the cone weapon.

It was not far away, just around an angle of the rocks. As I neared the doorway, a Gar guard stepped out of a niche and challenged me. It proved to be the most unfortunate action he ever was destined to make.

As he spoke I hit him with all my might. The bony framework of Neptunian men is sligher than ours on Earth and again I cracked a skull. He went down like a loose bag. Then I jumped forward and began to pound on Ahla’s door.

Her door opened. She smiled as she saw me and motioned for me to enter. As the door closed behind us I took her in my arms.

“I killed the guard out there, Ahla, so it’s now or never,” I said to her. “We must find Chick and get out of here. Did you know the Gar army is almost ready to attack Aerita?”

The glimpse of the Nullo-grav belt brought an expression of hope to her eyes. “Oh, Alan, how fortunate. That belt means I can tow you to Aerita through the air.”

I gripped her by the shoulders. “I’m not going to Aerita,” I said. “Ahla, don’t try to question me. We haven’t time to argue. You must do as I tell you. Understand?”

“Yes, Alan.”

“I’m going to give my belt to Chick. I won’t need one here. You must take Chick back to Aerita. Then warn the Aerites so they can oppose the Gars. Just remember one thing, though, when you tell all this to Arton, back in Aerita. He must be sure to fight the Gars over the metal mountains, between here and Aerita. Try and lure the Gar army out over the Black Lake. Can you remember that, Ahla? Metal Mountains and Black Lake?”

Too startled to speak, the girl would only stare at me with astonished eyes.

Then she shook her head in an emphatic negative.

“I refuse to do it,” she said. “Alan, you must be losing your mind.”

I laughed grimly.

“No danger of that. Perhaps I’m just getting it to working right. Anyway, I’ll explain it all to Chick. He’ll want to be the one who stays here. That’s his style. But, as a matter of fact, I don’t think staying here is any more dangerous than going. The Aerites are going to win that battle, Ahla!”

That perhaps surprised her more than anything else I had said.

“The Aerites can win?”

“Yes, of course they can win. And when they do, you’ll find me here—safely hidden.... Come on now, let’s get to Chick.”

Back in the corridor, we passed the fallen Gar I had killed and prowled to the angle. Every moment I expected that we would be discovered. Such an alarm we could not prevent and it would have about wrecked everything for us. But none came. We reached Chick Evans' door. It was fastened on the outside so I slipped down the bars, and slid open the door.

"Chick, Chick, it's Alan!" I called out.

But Evans did not answer. Then the red glow through the barred window disclosed that Chick Evans was not here. The ropes which had bound him lay in one corner of the room. My heart sank. Had he been taken out, to be killed?

In that instant it seemed all my hopes had met disaster. Certainly I had made no provision for this. It had never occurred to me that Chick Evans would not be there. With Ahla beside me, I stood frowning gloomily at the ropes.

"Gone," I murmured. "Well, that seems to be that."

Ahla suddenly clutched at me. "Listen. Something is happening outside."

Coming in from the canyon street—I heard the distant sound of Gars shouting.

"We must go," murmured Ahla. "We'll be caught if we stay here."

True enough. "Do you know the shortest way to the outer surface, Ahla?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Well, come on. Let's get started."

She would have to return to Aerita alone.... We ran from Chick Evans' room, and down the corridor. At a crossing, a group of Gars came fluttering, half-running, half-flying. All of them chattered excitedly. Ahla and I ducked into a recess of the ragged rock-wall, and they went past. Then Ahla had led me downward to another level, a rock ledge on the edge of an abyss. We crouched as more Gars fluttered by.

"That sounds like Charlon's voice," Ahla murmured. "He seems excited."

So many things could have occurred. Wild conjectures flooded me. Had Tara already tried to kill Charlon? And perhaps made a mess of it? Perhaps he had killed her? I knew he suspected her of treachery.... Also, what had happened to Chick Evans? So much that I didn't know—and all my plans hanging upon these answers....

The alarm, whatever it was, seemed to be dying away into the distance. "Well, perhaps that's the end of it, Ahla," I said. "I wish I knew whether to start you for Aerita now, or to wait for a while."

Words died in my throat. My foot had sent a rock rolling along the ledge. Something moved in the shadows near us. Then a figure rose up—a winged man's figure—wings that stood stiffly out sidewise as he prepared to leap at me. Shoving to one side, I jumped closer. My fist drove forward.... Into a Gar's face to smash it like an egg? But this figure nimbly ducked and I collided with a solid, wiry body. Arms went around me. And then I was recognized.

"Alan! Are you trying to beat me up again?" said Chick Evans.

It was Chick, all right, with Nullo-belt, Mansfield and fabric wings. On the ground, here in the shadows, the figure of the wounded Boyle lay huddled, with smashed legs. His contorted, pain-racked face stared up at Ahla. To me he offered a twisted, rueful smile.

CHAPTER XIII

A Martyr to Duty

In spite of his desperate injuries, William Boyle was lying there on the ground arguing with us. A strange contradiction of character, this man had turned out to be. At one moment a traitor; the next a hero. For he insisted he was the one, by logical choice, who ought to remain in the mountain city of Mok. He firmly insisted on this when I revealed my plans.

"It's the best chance I'll ever have to redeem my treachery," Boyle said. "Furthermore, I couldn't escape, even if I wished. There's no help for it. I'm the one for the job."

Chick Evans and I gazed at one another. Dared I trust Boyle again? Chick Evans read my thoughts and nodded.

"I'd stake my life on his loyalty, Alan," he said.

"It's my opportunity," pleaded Boyle. "So far I've made a mess of things."

I had my Nullo-grav belt and Chick had both belt and wings. With Ahla helping us, once we left, we might be able to get back to Aerita.

"At the present time there are three, or possibly four, of the Gar scientists down in the laboratory," I told my companions.

"For you and me to tackle, now," said Evans. "We'll get rid of them at once."

"Carry me down there," pleaded Boyle. "I'll do my part when the time comes. I promise it."

"Oh, he will—he will," insisted Ahla, warmly. Her eyes glowed like stars.

"Correct, we'll do it that way," I decided.

"And we better start at once, too," suggested Evans. "Charlon's after Boyle and me and those Gars may come along here any minute."

Also Tara might conceivably have gone back to my room and found me gone... It was as though we were all on a powder barrel, with sparks sizzling and threatening to explode at any moment.

"Come on, Chick," I murmured. "Ahla, you stay here with Boyle. We'll be back when we've cleaned up the laboratory —"

We moved swiftly. Like shadows we hurried through corridors, down to the subterranean grotto where the Uradonite deposits glowed. Once more the Gar ray-projectors met my gaze.

"Easy now," I whispered to Evans. "Let's be sure what we're up against."

We crouched down on a ledge-balcony of rock about thirty feet from the floor. Below us the glowing laboratory was spread out beneath us. Most of the silent room was dark but we could make out the outlines of the groups of apparatus. There were a dozen units—huge, cubical skeleton structures, some ten feet cube—glistening, pallid skeleton-frames strung with wires on which the little vacuums hung like pods.

In effect, I knew these were transformers; augmentators, we would have called them in an Earth-lab. The cables connecting them one with the other lay like huge pythons on the floor.

Augmentators, by which the central power-rays were built up, stepped up in ohmic pressure and voltage-intensity, to be discharged through a series of big interlocking projector grids. We could see the main grid over in one corner, pointing diagonally upward toward the grotto wall and rocky roof.

Grav-rays, which like many such rays known to Earth-science, penetrated the rock-masses here as though they were non-existent. Grav-rays, the intensity of which—and the direction of which—could be controlled at the will of the operator here.

And this was what had so harassed the flying Aerites for many months now. This was what, in any aerial battle, the Gars were sure would bring defeat to their enemy... The central "brains"—the electronic nerve-center of it all, was that smaller mechanism in the center of the room. All the wires converged outward from it. This was where so brief a time ago I had sat with Tara, this was the mechanism with which I had experimented, making adjustments, changes of operation. These mechanisms recalled to my mind the discovery I had stumbled upon ...

A glow and faint hissing of current from that central device attracted my attention. The grav-rays were radiating toward Aerita, as they had been doing for months. From where Chick and I crouched on the side ledge, we could see the wizened figures of three of the scientists. They sat there in a little group, murmuring together.

Chick Evans put his mouth almost to my ear.

“Not a sound now,” he whispered. “Ears like microphones, telescopic eyes.”

I nodded. “Nobody else here,” I whispered.

“No. Guess not.”

“Ready now.” I pressed my arm. “Good luck to us. When you drop, drop hard and with good aim. Then we’ll smash them.”

A flick of our hands sent current into our Nullo-grav belts. Weightless, we poised, and jumped, sailing out like huge floating feathers into the center of the room. As momentum carried us from the wall, I signaled to Evans. Together we cut off the currents from our belts and dropped downward.

With a scuffle the gnome-like scientists tried to jump away. Then we landed upon them. The drop proved to be more violent than Evans and I had figured and it all but knocked the breath from us. One of the little men was crushed under us. Another tried to dash away, but I caught him and smashed his bloated head with a single blow. A third yanked out a cone-weapon and sent a crackling violet puff at my companion. Fortunately the ray went and sizzled harmlessly against the wall.

The remaining scientist took refuge behind a nearby skeleton-frame. In another ten seconds I have no doubt he would have produced a dozen deadly vibrations.

Desperately I plunged for him. And Chick Evans had the same idea. We both struck him at once. A pink haze of light seemed to be enveloping him. We sailed toward him. We went through that haze and his grotesque little body quit struggling under the impact of our weight and flailing fists.

The pink fire vanished. Our clothes had been charred, our hands and face blackened a bit, but that was all.

“Alan, look at him,” gasped Evans.

The scientist was burning up, consumed by the pink flames of the supercharge he had used.

For a while Chick Evans and I crouched, hiding and waiting. Had the commotion we had made been heard up in the city grottos? Would the Gars come to investigate?

But nothing happened. For a time, the burning super-charger painted the laboratory with a flickering pink sheen. Then the flames burned out.

“All right, Chick,” I murmured at last. “We’d better hide the bodies.” We dragged the dead scientists away and concealed them.

After this we lost no time in hurrying upward along the corridors to the place where we had left Ahla and Boyle. We found they were still there, safe and undisturbed. The girl was crouching over the wounded man, holding his head in her lap, with her wings spread out behind her.

“Everything is all clear,” I told them. “How goes it, Boyle? Not in too much pain?”

Of course he suffered horrible pain but he refused to admit it.

“Try to be careful when you carry him,” murmured Ahla. “I’m afraid movement will make him worse.”

“Just get me down there, that’s all I ask,” gasped Boyle. “I’ll do my part—see if I don’t.”

Chick Evans and I tried to carry him carefully. At last we reached the dim lower grotto. The quiet laboratory showed few signs of what had transpired there. The small central mechanism glowed, but all the units stood like inert ghosts in the gloom.

We let down the adjustable control seat and stretched Boyle out in it. I shifted the little periscope gadget so he could watch the outer landscape of Neptune as he operated the other machine before him. The image now showed that familiar sweep of ragged, precipitous mountains, by the shore of the Black Lake. Ahla recognized the spot, a point midway between Mok and the city of Aerita. We experimented, showing Boyle now how he could scan all that distant terrain and the air above it.

“Yes,” he murmured. “I understand.”

“Are you sure?” I insisted. “From here you must observe the progress of the battle. We’ll lure the Gars to the shore of the Black Lake. Understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” murmured Boyle.

“When we have them there no Aerites will be near them, none within range. Then you know what to do?”

“It will be my big chance,” he agreed. “Don’t you worry, I’ll take it.”

There was no doubt but that he understood me. “We must leave you now,” I said. “But when it’s over we’ll come back here, Boyle. It will only be a few hours.”

“I’ll be here,” gasped the injured man. Again he gave me a twisted smile trying to hide the physical pain which tortured him. That was a brave smile.

Before we left I took a final glance around. The shadows concealed him as he sat there in the control seat of the mechanism. From the entrance of the laboratory a casual glance revealed nothing wrong with the place.

As we made our way upward to the surface levels, again I noticed how deserted the subterranean canyon streets of Mok had become. It was lucky Ahla was with us. Otherwise we might have lost our way. But she seemed to have a good sense of direction and to know her way about this strange place.

We emerged into a narrow lane, a mere slash in this underground honeycomb. Then we took off, into the murky air. Ahla and Chick were equipped with wings but I had none, so they were forced to drag my weightless body behind them. Thus we fluttered upward from the street. As we passed various levels we saw ledge-balconies. Occasionally we observed figures sprawling there. Almost all of them proved to be little Gar-children.

Soon we emerged into the open. About one thousand feet from the top the region of habitations ended. Still towed by Evans and Ahla I was drawn upward. There was no alarm as we emerged. No one seemed to notice our three flying figures, winging off into the pale darkness of the Neptunian night.

The reason was obvious. High above us I could see the roof of the city of Mok, a broad upper plateau surface, ringed with needle-spires. Further on, thousands of dark figures fluttered as they assembled into an army.

Satanic scene ... As though here were Hell, red-splotched.

Bat-winged creatures churned there in turmoil, limed by the red glow from the abyss. Groups of Gars beat the air and then settled down. On every precipitous pinnacle bird-like figures had clustered. Their voices made a blended blur of sound. From a red street a group of figures appeared struggling up with a huge apparatus. Others came up with sections of some mechanism to be assembled at some suitable place.

Chick Evans called at me.

“They look pretty well organized up there,” he yelled. “We better hurry.”

With Ahla and Chick Evans towing me, we slid away over the dark, serrated ranks of the Neptunian mountains, heading back for Aerita. Indeed there seemed need for haste!

CHAPTER XIV

Battle in the Air

In preparation for the battle, the inhabitants of the shining city of Aerita buzzed with confusion as the Aerite army hastily assembled. All were eager to fly out and oppose the oncoming Gars. The news we had brought that unless the Aerites could check them, the murderous Gars would arrive within a few hours, had thrown old Arton into a panic. He had done nothing toward reconditioning the electronic weapons which for so long had lain idle in vaults beneath the city.

And now it was too late. It seemed Arton never really thought the Gars would attack. Somehow he believed by ignoring war, war could be avoided. Queer how history of Earth coincides with events here.

A pitifully small, ill-equipped aerial army was thrown together for battle. Already we had had news the Gars were coming. Aerite scouts whom I had sent out, returned to say they had seen dark lines of Gars, circling over the distant mountain passes, or streaming down above the serrated terraces of the high mountains. The enemy collected in groups of one hundred each. They numbered about five thousand in all.

This sounded like bad news. Chick Evans and I gazed at each other in dismay.

"Quite a lot of them," Chick Evans commented. "Five thousand. We'll be badly outnumbered."

"They have weapons of science also," one of our scouts said. "We could see big platforms in the air, with hundreds of Gars flying around them."

"But that isn't exactly the worst of it," I declared. "They're coming through the mountain passes. It will be difficult, Chick, for us to lure them, too great a distance."

Luring them over Black Lake was our job. Of course Evans and I had no time to explain our plans to all the Aerite flyers. They only knew they would take orders from us and from Ahla, orders which must be quickly, implicitly obeyed.

At last, after desperate haste, we were ready. I had been able to equip myself with other wings, powered by another Mansfield which we had previously brought from the wrecked *Nomad*. Evans had his wings and motor, and we both wore Nullo-grav belts.

Those Aerites, with this wholly unexpected crisis falling upon them in the middle of the time of sleep, certainly were not lacking in courage. I could have mustered thousands more of them, men and girls, and even half grown children if I had wished. But this would have been just an untrained, wholly unequipped flying mob, however eager and courageous. I decided against it. They would have been fluttering to their death against the deadly weapons of the Gars.

I selected about six hundred strong-flying young men, and a few young girls whom Ahla knew were exceedingly agile in the air. They were equipped with such small weapons as we were able to procure.

When they were ready, I circled them for a moment over the shining rooftop garden of Aerita. Looking down I could see the garden jammed with people, silently staring up at us. They were grim, those people who had to stay here and wait. A few of them flapped their wings and waved their arms.

Then with the little army strung out behind me, we headed out over the wild terrain. Naked canyons and cliffs and rock-spires lay under us and above, the lurid Neptunian sky, with great wheeling clouds bathing us in the green glow of night.

Chick Evans, flying nearby, called: "Is this about right, Alan? Shall we land here?"

"Yes," I agreed. I spoke to Ahla. "Land now. Tell them." I said.

We had passed over the top of a huge rocky spire, with ragged cliff sides. To the right the tumbled terrain rose in tiers, dotted with spires like this one, and gashed with ravines and canyons. To the left, far away in the dull-green distance, the dark surface of the Black Lake lay dimly visible.

Ahla gave the command in her native language. A dozen of her appointed lieutenants relayed it. Like a flock of frightened birds six hundred of us scattered, circled the spire, and then fluttered down, landing at six hundred different places. For an instant I could see the scurrying figures on the jagged cliff face. Then they were hidden.

We had not yet sighted the Gar columns. But from information received, they should be almost in this region now. They were not coming by direct, swift flight. Our scouts had noticed that swift-flying groups had been held back by the slow progress of the mechanism platforms—the heavy apparatus which at intervals of a few miles would be landed, while the Gars carrying them rested.

Chick Evans and Ahla were beside me now where we crouched, part way up the cliff face of the spire. Again I noticed how pitifully few were our weapons. Every Aerite, both the men and the girls, had only small electric knives. In a close-range scuffle, at grips with an opponent they might be handy but of no use in long-range aerial combat.

We had an electric device by which a sharp disc could be flung—rapidly rotating—with a considerable accuracy for a thousand feet or more. These charged floaters would be attracted in their course by any nearby human body.

Except for flexible fabric-shields of insulated material supposedly capable of warding off any hostile rays these things comprised our weapons. Old Arton had felt proud of these devices. Defense. His mind always had run on that. For me, I always think in different terms. The man who puts all his energy and brains into defending himself, will never win in any sort of conflict. How can he?

“There they come,” murmured Evans. “See them?”

The first of the Gar columns popped into view off over the mountains near Black Lake. The invaders, a line of little dots, were rising out of a dark canyon ten miles or so away.

“They have been resting with one of the big platforms,” said Ahla.

“See it coming up?”

The blob of the platform was rising. Then another line of flying figures showed further away, wheeling to join the others.

“Just about where we figured they’d be,” I said. For a moment we watched them. We were not between them and Aerita, but several miles to one side. I had calculated it carefully. My plan must be put into operation. The Gars must be lured out over the Black Lake.

“Well, we’ll make the first jump now,” said Evans. “If we don’t, they’ll pass without even seeing us.”

True enough. At my signal the six hundred fluttering Aerite figures darted up from the shadows of the spire. We rose a few hundred feet and hung poised. That was a tense moment. Would the Gars ignore us and keep on their straight route for the Aerite city which was their goal? Or would that huge mechanism flash now, with a deadly intent to strike us down at this distance?

Chick Evans fluttered at me. “They’re coming. About one thousand of them maybe.”

The big platform moved straight ahead, but a line of the Gars wheeled in our direction.

“Hold where we are,” I shouted to Ahla.

Steadily the Gars came, two strings of them. At a distance of a mile, they rose to a higher altitude, wheeled and gathered in a group, a thousand feet diagonally above us. And behind them other lines were coming.

I did not dare wait any longer. At my signal each of us launched a whirling disc, flung it upward and outward, a little cloud of rotating bits of metal. They floated up at the still-distant Gars.

The Gars fired their first fusillade. From their cone-weapons pink fire rings sailed out and expanded. But these missiles were aimed, not at us but at our whirling discs. The discs burst into fragments of fused metal.

Yet some of the fire rings reached us, too. A pink ray hit my shield and mushroomed, radiating heat, but I managed to fly away from the menace. A few Aerites, caught unawares however, dropped out of the air, engulfed in flames.

Realizing the deadliness of weapons used by these Gar invaders, I turned to Ahla.

“Quick,” I shouted, “tell everyone to head for Black Lake.”

Like frightened birds we shot diagonally away. Sounds of the pink light-rings were reaching us now crackling, hissing, popping little reports. Most of our discs had been destroyed, but I could see a few that got through, whirling tiny blades, bending their courses toward the Gars’ bodies. One of the knives cut into a Gar’s flimsy body, sailed through him and on to seek another victim. That Gar, gruesomely severed, fluttered and fell. Then another, and another went down, amid flares of pink light and trailing smoke from their own exploding weapons.

All this happened in a few seconds as we scattered to land on a rock-slope in the direction of the lake. Now the Gars fired their second round, this time directly at us, a ghastly volley. To some extent the shields warded off the pink rings.

As I dropped, I could again feel the impact of force waves hitting my shield. A shower of heat and sparks enveloped me. Then I went through it. But around me Aerites were falling. A fluttering Aerite girl, with her drapes burning, went past me. Ahla? For an instant I thought that it was Ahla, but it was not.

But we had not planned the encounter like this. We had had no conception of the ferocity, the recklessness with which the Gars would come after us. A hundred of the Aerites already must have fallen. It seemed for a second or two as though flaming, dropping forms were all around me.

By my orders, the rest of us attempted to land on a rock-slope which descended toward the shore of the lake. The slope was strewn with crags and boulders that would have given shelter. Once in shelter and scattered, I had thought we would be on even terms with whatever squads of the enemy came within range.

We had no time for that now. A flying line of the bat-winged shapes had encircled us. We were still high over the rock-slope when the fight turned into a general mêlée.

Words cannot do justice to what followed. It became a deadly pyrotechnics in the midst of which fluttering bodies clashed in midair, sometimes falling in flames together. I caught a glimpse of Chick Evans desperately fighting two Gars. I whirled to aid him, and his two assailants darted away. Then one came at me. My shield warded off a shower of pink sparks, and my whirling hand-knife cut through the flimsy Gar figure.

Next I heard Evans give a shout.

“Look, there goes Charlon.”

The Gars were flinging bombs of glaring light now, dazzling white light. In the midst of them, I saw the figure of Charlon. His flash stabbed into an Aerite girl, and then he was gone, his great wings flapping as he rose into the smoke-filled gloom.

Next Tara went past me. Fluttering figures, some of them flaming, came between us. But she must have recognized me, the bomb-glare painted her beautiful face staring at me with a look of venom. Then she, too, was gone, rising up as I dropped to the rocks.

CHAPTER XV
Tara Makes Her Choice

From out of that hideous turmoil Chick Evans appeared, alighting on the slope beside me. In the darkness we crouched, panting. Air-heaviness proved to be a great handicap. All the Aerites had struggled against it from the moment we had left the crystal city.

“Been fighting Gars and need a rest,” gasped Evans.

Smoke-fumes settled down around us. Overhead, it seemed the Gars momentarily were withdrawing. Dimly in the orange-green gloom we could see them circling off.

“There weren’t more than a few hundred here,” muttered Evans. “When the main body of them get after us it won’t be nice.”

But the Aerites had done their best. Only three or four hundred of us seemed to be left. We had been grievously punished. Most of our puny weapons were gone. The situation looked grave.

In the smoke-filled twilight now, I could see what was left of my little army still carrying out orders. Figures of Aerites were fluttering over the slope, scattering, scurrying away. “Where was Ahla?” I asked Chick Evans.

“Don’t know,” he said. “Haven’t seen her.” Then he gripped me. “Alan, look there. It’s just about what we wanted.”

Out over the mountains toward Mok the main columns of the advancing Gars became visible, lines of flying figures, with the mechanism-platforms among them. They had changed their course and were circling past us in a crescent sweep out toward the dark surface of the Black Lake.

Charlon’s purpose seemed clear at last. Seemingly he had decided to by-pass us, to spare his men from hand-to-hand encounters.

“That would be his best move anyway,” I murmured to Chick Evans. “From the shore of the Black Lake, a few miles above Aerita, he’d have no mountains to obstruct him and could set up his big, long-range projector. By this means he hopes to reduce the city to ruins at no risk to his men.”

“If Boyle is only on the job,” fumed Evans. And then he gave a cry. “Alan, look up there.”

A few figures still fluttered in the smoke above us. Now a pair of them came wavering down, two figures, interlocked. One of them was Ahla. She had brought down another girl, wounded, in her arms. They touched the slope within a few feet of us.

“Ahla, I thank the stars you’re safe,” I cried.

Feeling relieved of my greatest worry, I jumped for her. She was stretching the wounded young woman out on the rocks. But her companion was not an Aerite girl. That slim figure, encased in sleek, flexible woven metal with Gar bat-wings that quivered on the rocks, was familiar to me.

It was Tara. She had been wounded, high in the air as she was making off with the Gars. Ahla had caught her and lowered her to safety. Now she lay here panting; and then I saw that one of her wings was broken and a portion of the other burned away.

“Alan Frane, so it is you,” Tara murmured faintly. “You see, I am injured. Come sit by me, Alan.”

Filled with pity I could not refuse this request. I moved to her side.

“You loved me, Alan,” she murmured.

“Tara—”

“I thought you did.”

“Tara, I’ll do what I can for you now. You’re wounded, so when this is over, you’ll have every medical attention.”

“When this is over.” She seemed to ponder it. Her lips curled into a smile. “But it is over now. What could there be left, for me?”

Her gaze hardened as she looked at Ahla.

“You’ll be all right,” I said gently.

“Yes. Of course. That is true. Come closer, Alan.”

As I bent over her, her hand flicked to her wide metal belt and came out again like a striking snake. I heard Ahla scream as a glowing needle-point of metal stabbed at my chest. But warned by Ahla's call, I swayed backward and caught Tara's wrist. A quick twist sent the glowing blade tinkling to the rocks.

With a groan the Gar girl sank back flat.

"Even that to be denied me," she whispered.

"Tara—" I began.

Then a simultaneous cry of warning from both Ahla and Chick made me jump to my feet.

An amazing occurrence followed. Again Tara's hand had touched her belt. Beneath the shining robe the narrow metal strips on her legs turned ruby red. Her breastplates began to glow. Under the warrior's headdress her black hair stirred and rose.

"Farewell, Alan Frane," she said. As she spoke she waved one of her jeweled hands. The fingers crackled with sparks.

"You would not dare touch me now, Alan Frane," she smiled.

I understood then.

"Tara!" I gasped. "Turn that thing off."

For a last time Tara smiled at me, mockingly.

Ahla and Chick Evans pulled me backward, away from her. Then the building current consumed her before our eyes. Pink flames leaped in melting metal wreckage and her body was engulfed.

Puffs of brown smoke arose, thickened, hiding her from view. Then it thinned out again.

Fascinated with horror, we stared. Where Tara had been, before us on the rocks lay a misty incandescent pile of slag.

A cry from my companions aroused me from my stupor of pity.

"Alan, the Gars are coming."

I whirled, to find Evans and Ahla staring out toward distant Black Lake. Unpredictable Charlon. His main army had gathered in the sky near the water. Now thousands of his men, with the platforms in their center, were winging toward us. Although no Aerites were visible, Charlon must have seen us land, scatter and hide on this rocky slope. So he had no intention of by-passing us and heading for Aerita.

One of the Gar engines sent a narrow orange ray sizzling toward us. It struck far above, hitting a pinnacle overhead. For a moment it clung to the summit and then like a giant fountain, the peak spouted flames into the air. A geyser of fire arched up for a thousand feet. Molten lava came tumbling down.

"Alan, let's pull out of here," gasped Chick Evans.

We had no need to give Ahla the order. From the rock shadows of the slope, the Aerites fluttered up in flight. The orange ray vanished and I stared up. The cliff top was gone, melted away.

The fountain of fire had missed us and the ray was gone, but from the top molten lava-streams came seething down with clouds of turgid smoke gushing from them.

Charlon's ray had touched the mountain top for some ten seconds. I shuddered as I pictured what he was planning—a bombardment like this of the shining city of Aerita.

We could not stop him now, that seemed obvious. Only three or four hundred Aerites were fluttering here. So Chick Evans, Ahla and I flew up and led them off to one side of the flaming mountain top.

Charlon had driven us from cover. Now his flying hordes came speeding toward us.

This was Boyle's chance. My mind returned to that weird subterranean Gar laboratory, under the city of Mok. The wounded Boyle would be lying where we had put him, in the control seat, with his little periscope image-grid beside him. Boyle would have been waiting and conditions were right for him now. We had tricked the Gars from the mountains to the edge of the lake and they were within range of Boyle's Uradonite radiance at last. And no Aerites were mingled in combat with them.

Boyle had the opportunity he craved. My heart was in my throat as I stared at the cloud of Gars, coming now to overwhelm us. I shouted at Ahla:

"Tell everyone to wait. Let none move."

Just a moment longer. Then if Boyle did not act, we would have to scatter, defeated, hunted by Gars. The main Army would sweep on, triumphant, to smash the golden city of Aerita as they had smashed this little mountain top.

Too late a qualm of apprehension assailed me. Had I been wrong to trust Boyle? Would he redeem himself, or would he fail us again? Was he dead? Had he fainted?

Then at this supreme crisis I saw a wonderful thing happen. Out there over the dark lake surface, the leading string of the flying Gars seemed luffing up into the air. They appeared confused. They fluttered madly. The line of them was rising a hundred feet above where it had been. Then two hundred. Their struggling figures now tried to fly downward. They failed. Against all their efforts they continued to soar aloft, still higher.

Then the weird invisible force hit all of them at once. The huge platforms were rising, too. The Gars carrying the scaffolds had lost control.

The platforms turned over in the air as they were carried higher. The whole Gar army grew panic-stricken as it soared steadily into the sky. Soon the tiny specks, scattered, tumbled, churning masses of desperately flying figures, struggling to fly down against the force which was hurling them skyward.

Boyle had come through. He was doing his part, down there in the Gar laboratory. This had been my simple, but revolutionary discovery, when Tara had shown me the little apparatus which was the nerve-center of the big Gar mechanisms. I had applied to the Gar mechanism some of the principles of the Nullo-grav use of Uradonite. By a reversal of its electromagnetic poles, the Gar apparatus, instead of being a gravity intensifier, became gravity-repellent. Beneath the struggling, flying Gars now, the upward-streaming rays of anti-grav, inexorably were thrusting them away from Neptune's surface.

The idea had worked. All the Gars out there now were helpless waifs, lost in the sky, flung out from Neptune. They would continue to sail through the stratosphere, out into Space.

Soon they would be dead things, breaking apart in the vacuum, flung into Nothingness ...

Later I grew aware as I stared, awed and triumphant, with my wings flapping and the Mansfield motor humming, that a crazy wind was tossing me. I heard Chick Evans laughing.

"We did it. It's all over, Alan. Pretty swell finish."

A crazy wind was tossing our little poised band of Aerites here, an abnormal wind which had sprung up suddenly as the air around us rushed into the up-flung currents where the Gars had been. I found myself struggling against it. Where was Ahla? Then I saw her—a thousand feet away perhaps, out toward the dark surface of the lake. She was struggling to fly back.

I let myself go in the wind, flying toward her.

"Ahla, can you make it?" I called out.

"Yes, I think so," she panted. A few other figures could be seen around us in the gloom, Aerites who had been blown here, too, and who tried to buck the wind.

Also I saw one or two Gars, making off in terror.

I reached Ahla and gripped her. As she clung to me, for a moment the powerful little Mansfield drove my wings to support us both. I held us level in the roaring wind. Ahla recovered her breath.

"All right now, Alan. Let me go."

I launched her and she started back toward the shore, with me following.

Then out of the turgid gloom a bat-like figure appeared, huge and menacing. Like a malevolent demon it pounced at me and seized me in an iron grip. Our wings interlocked and the assailant let out a diabolical yell.

It was Charlon.

"I have you at last," screamed the Gar leader. "Alan Frane, you shall die!"

CHAPTER XVI
A Struggle for Life

So quick and resolute had been the attack that I had no chance to dodge. Charlton was agile in the air, for it had always been his natural element. For a native of Neptune he was immensely powerful and his arms enclosed mine like steel bands.

My Mansfield-motored wings continued to flap and I heard one of the struts snap. Loose fabric fell down over my shoulders. Charlton emitted a laugh when this occurred. The expression on his handsome features was that of a fiend.

By a sudden effort I managed to free one of my hands too and to grasp him by the wrist. He let go of the cone weapon he held and it whirled away. Then we began to fight.

The wind swept us further out over the Black Lake. The surface of the water boiled, lashed to fury by the gale. Boyle long since had snapped off the anti-grav radiance. There was just the crazy storm here, a maelstrom of clashing air-currents that tossed us up and then whirled us down again as we struggled.

Once we broke apart. With my Nullo-grav belt still operating I was weightless. But with one broken wing I sagged, flopped—and the frenzied Charlton came pouncing at me again.

“I’ll make an end of you, Frane,” he panted. His fingers, with amazing strength in them, gripped me by the throat. My fist clipped him in the face. But he was not like a Gar; he was solid as an Earthman. His head snapped back under the blow, but he kept grinning and his grip tightened on my throat.

Treetops swept by under us. Desperately I tore his fingers loose and gulped in air.

“Charlon, you fool; the island means death to both,” I warned him. Our struggling bodies crashed through a spindly treetop, tore through leafy branches and then we hit the ground.

A thrill of alarm ran through me. That squishing, mashing sound beneath us told me we had crashed upon the coiled body of a monstrous slug! It screamed and its head with glaring myriad eyes swayed up over us. Charlton failed to take heed.

“I’ve got you, Frane,” he gloated.

Charlton was thinking only of killing me. We continued to roll in a writhing gluey mass, scattering the coiled slug as we fought. How well I remembered slugs. Ahla and I had struggled with one once before. Gluey flesh engulfed us.

But Charlton was not thinking of that. Perhaps he did not realize what it was. We were rolling, threshing. And I was aware of the breaking slug, with new heads springing into being upon all its slashed segments. A dozen sucker mouths had appeared. Forked heads were pecking at us, weird throats were screaming at us as we fought each other, heedless of the monster’s gluey coils.

Charlton continued to grip my throat, clawing at it, then trying to pound my face with his other fist. Then abruptly I went limp. He promptly climbed on top of me. My free hand, fumbling beside me, gripped a thick sticky mass of slug-pulp. I raised it up and shoved it into Charlton’s face.

He tried to scream an oath but gasped and choked. His grip loosened as he wildly wiped at his face trying to remove the horrible mass that blinded and choked him. Heaving his body off I got to my feet. Charlton rolled nearby with the quivering pulp of the mashed slug writhing upon him.

Again my mind flashed back to that other time when I had fought these horrible slugs. The Nullo-grav belt had saved Ahla and me then. I had leaped and pulled her out of the writhing mire when she could not free herself. I could escape but Charlton could not.

Once again using the grav belt to make me weightless, I leaped into the air. The force of the jump pulled me free. Strings and viscous chunks of the pulp clung to me and at normal weight, with that heavy mass added, my spring would have been futile. As I soared into the air I strove to shake off the entangling strings of flesh.

Ten feet under me Charlton still tried to rise, with his wings wildly beating. A segment of pulp, dropping from me struck him as it fell.

He went down again. He began to scream. Then as I tore through the tree-tops, I had a last glimpse of Charlton down on the ground as the tumbling, unkillable grey pulp engulfed him. For an instant one of his wings remained visible. Then it was sucked down and nothing remained.

Above the tree-tops I found Chick Evans fluttering, calling at me in anxious tones. The storm had blown itself out and

Evans helped me with my broken wing. Then Ahla and some of the others came to assist me also.

That remnant of our Aerite army, about three hundred and fifty of us, in easy flight, because there was almost no air-heaviness now, winged its way on into the city of Mok.

I need not give the details of that entry. The news of the strange annihilation of Charlon's army already had reached there. Many persons sullenly watched us arrive but others of them welcomed us, the conquerors. And old Montoh, whom Tara fortunately had not yet murdered, was glad enough to surrender. He had never liked this affair anyway. He said so now to me bluntly, and I could well believe him. And he believed me, too, when I assured him we would work a compromise so that in the end the Gars would benefit. That would end all thought of war on Neptune.

And then Chick Evans, Ahla and I went down to the underground laboratory, to find Boyle. I recall how all of us were smiling, eager to tell him how well he had done. Now we could give him medical attention, fix up his smashed legs.

The pallid lab was just as we had left it. There had been, quite evidently, no alarm here. From the doorway we could see Boyle's figure still stretched in the control chair.

"Boyle, here we are," I called out. "You certainly did it perfectly. Well done, Boyle."

Gayly we rushed in. Then we stood before him, silent and numbed. He lay stretched there, with his dead eyes staring. But on his white lips there was still lingering a smile of satisfaction as if he gloried in the fact he had kept faith.

I think that's about all I need recount. We were able to repair the *Nomad*, and Chick Evans already has gone back to Earth, back with the news. He will bring Earth-freighters and mining equipment here to get the precious Uradonite. Earth needs it badly, and we do not need it on Neptune.

I am staying here on Neptune. There is much to do: the political adjustments between the Aerites and the Gars and the mining of the Uradonite.

Ahla and I have a little home in Aerita. There are times when it is filled with golden light and other times with restful darkness.

I am busy, and happy. Happiness comes with having work to do and doing it with prospects of success. And I have Ahla.

I think I am singularly blessed.

[The end of *Wings of Icarus* by Ray Cummings]