

PLANET STORIES

10c

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS
— THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

REVOLT IN THE
ICE EMPIRE

by
RAY CUMMINGS



HERMIT OF
SATURN'S RING

by NEIL R. JONES

THE ULTIMATE SALIENT

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REVOLT IN THE ICE EMPIRE

By RAY CUMMINGS

**Frozen little Zura was a stellar Utopia, until
the Earthmen came to topple the rule of its gentle
queen with the cankerous weapons of revolt.**

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So much has been written into the permanent chronologies of science concerning our pioneer voyage to the little asteroid of Zura—facts and figures and sociological deductions, most of which are, of actuality, erroneous—that even now after these many years, I feel constrained to set down, as simply as I can, exactly what occurred. All my life I have shunned publicity; my wife has shunned it. Zura, weird little wandering world, has never returned. Why, after coming in from the realms of outer space at least twice and rounding our Sun upon an elliptic orbit, it should now have failed to reappear—I will leave that to the astronomers to imagine. But no one from Earth, quite obviously, will ever go to Zura again. Tara and I, so to speak, are sole survivors.

So at least I think I am qualified to tell what happened; to correct the Official Chronograph in its implications that Zura was a model little world, from which our Earth might learn much. As my grandfather might have quoted his grandfather saying, that is the bunk. When you put humans on a planet, you will get love—but also hate; honesty, but dishonesty; peace, but also war. The weird people of Zura were weird to us only because their environment had made them outwardly different from us. Like us they were human—and there could never have been Utopia evolved from them.

I am no philosopher, but at least I must have my say on this. Tara was misguided. She admits it now. Indeed, at heart she is more opposed than most of you who read this, to those crusaders here on earth who talk of revolutions and bloodshed so that some new Social Order may evolve and bring the world Utopia. The ideals are often sound, but always impossible of fulfillment. And those who sponsor them usually are intelligent enough to know it, advancing themselves upon the pitiful hopes of the ignorant, who think they are being led upward when in reality they are often worse off than before.

Do I seem prefacing some weighty analysis of mankind's frailties? That is wrong. I am prefacing what might better be called a love story. I am an old man now, but it colors my memory still with a warm glow like a sunrise spreading glorious colors on the drabness of a twilight sky. That, to my young life, was the coming of Tara....

I was just twenty, that spring morning of 1990 when Dr. Robert Livingston's message came to me.

"Strange good news, John. I have picked our destination, but it must be secret. Fly up and see me tonight."

Strange good news! There was a note of suppressed excitement in those three words which somehow communicated to me so that as I flew my little car up to the Maine woods that evening I was tensed to hear what it could be. My name is John Taine, as naturally you must have realized from my preface. There is nothing of me that can be of interest to this narrative previous to that spring morning of 1990. I quite imagine I was a drab enough sort of young fellow. Certainly my work as mechanic in the building of stratosphere ships had brought me little money and no claim to achievement.

But Dr. Livingston liked me; for a year now I had been working for him, building to his specifications that primitive little space ship with which he hoped to pioneer on an exploratory flight to some other world. Livingston was an inventor and scientist of very great genius. But unfortunately, being a dreamer, a gentle fellow and trusting—completely no businessman—he had gone through life impoverished.

We had been much pinched for funds in our work. Our little flyer indeed was now not finished, and I was on an enforced vacation, with our funds exhausted, waiting until Dr. Livingston might find some sponsor to refinance us. Strange good news? Assuredly I was hoping that he would have a few decimars in hand now—or even a few thousand gold dollars with which we might continue the work.

His pleasure and excitement were obvious when he greeted me in the laboratory of his isolated little Maine home, upon my arrival just after dusk that evening.

"Good news, John. It certainly is. I couldn't tell you before what I've been trying to do here while work on the *Planeteer* had to stop. But I've accomplished my purpose."

"Money—" I said.

"Money, yes. Oh, yes, indeed, John. And fame. The accomplishment of our desire—to make a flight into Interplanetary space, and come back again.

We've got it all within our reach now. Sit down, John—I'll tell you what I've done."

I had never seen Dr. Livingston so excited. He was a small man, forty perhaps, though he looked somewhat older with his thin face and his shaggy, longish iron-gray hair. He had no family; he lived here alone, with only one deaf old woman for his housekeeper. We were in his chemical laboratory now—a littered room on the ground floor of his home, which was a few miles out in the country from a small town of the Maine coast. We were building the *Planeteer* here, in a big impromptu frame hangar which was set on the wooded hilltop a hundred yards or so from the house.

But work on the *Planeteer* had ceased. Our two assistants who had been engaged with me now, like myself, were laid off. There was no one here tonight save Livingston and me and the old woman who now had gone to her room upstairs.

"We've got to be absolutely secret," Livingston said. He lowered his voice and flung a glance at the window oval where the moonlight was gleaming with a silver sheen. "There's big money involved in this. I'm going to trust you, John, but no one else."

"What is it?" I murmured.

A little half-smile of excited triumph was playing about his thin lips. "Let me ask you," he said, "have you ever heard of Xalite?"

"Well—just vaguely."

"The new element which was discovered a few years ago. I needn't explain its technical uses—"

"A germ-killer," I said. "I remember hearing a technological newscast—you bombard diseased tissues—"

"Exactly. To kill certain virulent germs without injuring the living human tissue. And they're thinking now they could use it in the new atomic engines—perhaps the one thing which would make them really commercially practical—"

"Except that Xalite costs about ten thousand gold-dollars a grain," I observed.

"Quite so. As a matter of fact, what little was discovered here on earth is now in use. No more can be found—and it's an unstable element. Within

another year we will have no Xalite." He paused, and then abruptly he added, still more softly,

"I've discovered an unlimited quantity, John. Xalite in quantity beyond anyone's wildest dreams—"

"Where?" I gasped.

"Not here on earth. Don't you see how it fits with our plans for the *Planeteer*?"

I sat silent, tense as he told me. There was, this year, coming in from the realms of Interplanetary space, a little asteroid. Astronomers for their charts had named it Zura—a dark, cold little world of perhaps five hundred miles diameter.

"It seems this is its second visit," he said. "Some sixteen years ago it first made its appearance—came into our Solar System, rounded the Sun and went out again. The elements of its orbit, sixteen years ago, were computed. A narrow ellipse, taking it in between Mercury and Vulcan, and out beyond Pluto."

In his laboratory here, Dr. Livingston had erected a small, but ultra-modern, electroscope. He took me to it now. The dark little Zura, he told me, already had cut the orbit of Mars and was fairly close to us. It was in the northern sky now, near the zenith. The night was clear, glittering with a myriad stars like gems profusely strewn on the deep purple velvet of the Heavens. I gazed at little Zura as he swung the high-powered little instrument almost to its full intensity of magnification. What I saw was a round, blurred, dark-gray disc, dimly mottled with heavy cloudbanks.

"What has this to do with us, and Xalite?" I murmured.

"I'll show you, John. If we can get a break in those clouds—it sometimes occurs—"

We waited perhaps an hour, with the spectroscope attached so that the vague reflected light from Zura was spread before us in its prismatic colors. And then, momentarily, a break in the swirling, turgid atmosphere of the dark little world, let us through to its bleak, blurred, dark surface. Light was coming from there; light inherent to the little world. On the spectroscope band I saw a new dark line.

"Xalite!" Livingston murmured. "You see it? Unmistakable. Deposits of Xalite exist there. Xalite in quantities which to us and our needs will be enormous. So that's the destination of our exploratory flight in the *Planeteer*! It's not a question of money with us now, John. The Anglo-American Medical Research Society—and the U. S. Government Dept. of Power—have financed us for all we need."

I could only gaze at him with excitement thrilling me, matching his own. All our money troubles ended. And a double purpose to our adventure now. The conquest of Interplanetary flight; and the giving to the world an element it so greatly needed.

Little Dr. Livingston was bending over me, gripping me. "You realize the need of secrecy?" he murmured. "You and I, if we get this Xalite, it will make us independently rich, of course. Enough for our life's needs. But beyond that, the world will have it. Xalite, to be cheap as old-fashioned petroleum." His voice had risen with his excitement, but suddenly he lowered it again.

"But John, suppose we were unscrupulous. To keep the price of Xalite up—to deal it out, only to the rich—to make ourselves fabulously wealthy at the expense of the poor—"

"I see," I agreed. I wonder why my glance, like his, strayed idly to our moonlit window oval, here on the ground floor of his home? I am not the least bit psychic; there is, of course, no such thing anyway.

"We'll finish up the *Planeteer* now," Livingston was saying. "Pete Duroh and Carruthers—that's all you'll need. And as we agreed, we'll take them with us. Four of us—that's enough to man the little *Planeteer*. But nothing must be said of Xalite. You understand?"

"Yes, of course."

"So far as the world will know, the *Planeteer* is starting merely on a trial flight into Space. We don't want any publicity anyway. And Duroh and Carruthers—they must know only that we're hoping we might reach this wandering little asteroid. Nothing about Xalite. That can come later. We don't want to take the least chance of this thing leaking out—"

He checked himself suddenly. We both heard it—the sound of what seemed padding footsteps, retreating from our laboratory doorway. Someone furtively slinking away in the house corridor.

"Why—good Lord—!" I gasped.

I dashed into the dim corridor. There was nothing; and then I heard a distant outer door close. The intruder had escaped from the house. And then, from the laboratory, came Dr. Livingston's gasp: "John, look—"

I swung back to him. In the moonlight at the laboratory window a face showed behind the filmy curtains—a man's face peering in at us. It was just an instant glimpse.... Staring, wild, red-rimmed eyes—the face wearing a bluish stubble of beard. By no chance could it have been the person who had escaped me in the corridor.

In that second, I dashed for the window. The face had gone. I got there only in time to see a dark blob scurrying away into the shadows of the moonlit woods.

II

"All ready, Dr. Livingston," I said.

"Eh? Oh, yes. Well, that's fine, John. We'll start at once."

"I checked the ventilators," Duroh said.

The big, beetle-browed Peter Duroh—dark-haired, handsome young giant who had been working for us nearly a year—stood beside me. It was the great night—our time of departure at last had arrived, with the little *Planeteer* glistening and ready.

To you who read this, familiar now with the great finned cylinders which the last half century has produced on earth for the conquest of Interplanetary space, our little space-ship was inadequate and queer indeed. Unlike modern vessels, Dr. Livingston had built the *Planeteer* in the shape of a huge bell-like globe. Huge, to us then. But its maximum equatorial diameter was a scant fifty feet.

Strange little ship indeed. Its interior was of three stories—the largest—the middle one—our several rooms of living quarters, ample enough for four of us. Below that, in the base, were the mechanism rooms. And the top level, fairly near the apex, was in effect a mere circular turret, with a glassite dome over it completing that segment of the outer shell.

It is not my purpose here to describe Dr. Livingston's pioneer mechanisms. All that is technological history in the chronicles of the development of

space-navigation. But I do wish to point out that Dr. Livingston, in his essentials of mechanism, has not been improved upon even in this last half century. The *Planeteer* was double-shelled, the six-inch space between the reinforced walls containing the swiftly vibrating, oscillating electronic current now known as the Erentz principle—the absorption of the outer pressure, translated by the swiftly flying electrons of the current into harmless kinetic energy. And we had, in segments, throughout the globe-shaped walls, gravity plates for the neutralization of gravity; its intensification; and the negative force of repulsion.

We had air-renewers—antiquated now, I admit—but still very serviceable to us; and ventilating and temperature systems. We had no electronic rocket-streams for atmospheric flight; that, as you all know, came much later.

It was, by earth-time, just midnight when we were ready to start. Dr. Livingston was excited, confused now that the time was at hand. But the other three of us, outwardly at least, were calm enough, eager only to be sure every preparation was in order.

There was no public celebration. Like Livingston, I had no close family, so that only a few of the family and friends of Peter Duroh and James Carruthers, our other assistant, were here on this momentous night in the little board hangar to see us off.

"Tell him to come in," Dr. Livingston was saying. "I want to start on the midnight hour."

The big, dark-haired young Duroh went to the incline that led down from the upper control turret room where we were now standing and shouted to Carruthers, who was still down, bidding good-bye to the visitors on the hangar floor.

"All right," he shouted up to us. "I'm coming." He came in a moment. He was Livingston's most competent technician, this James Carruthers. Like young Duroh, he had been with us almost from the start of the building of the *Planeteer*. He was an older man, rather a small, tight-lipped, sandy-haired fellow. Grim of aspect, usually silent, listening with alert, keen gray eyes.

"All ready," he said.

"Yes, bolt the door," Dr. Livingston agreed.

We waved our last farewells to the silent, awed little group of men and women down in the hangar, and I swung the big glassite bull's-eye door

closed, bolted it and admitted the Erentz current into it.

Departure from earth.... There was no one who could have seen that pioneer departure, much less be on it, without a surging thrill and a trembling. Certainly I felt it. Excitement—and fear. There is no one who can face the unknown without a little shudder, no matter how adventurous and reckless he may be. I recall that we four, in the dimly starlit little turret—starlight which came down through the open roof of the hangar and through our glassite dome—stood grim, silent and awed. Then Dr. Livingston flung the current into the base gravity plates set for the repelling negation.

The *Planeteer* trembled just a little; and then slowly, silently was rising....

Departure from earth.... And we were just the second party of all earth people in history who had ever seriously tried it. The first, as you all recall, had been sixteen years before. The ill-fated Blake expedition—six men, one of them the strange, humanity-hating George Simpson, joining the explorers at the last moment, declaiming publicly that he wanted to leave the earth forever! Vowing that if Blake landed anywhere in the Universe, he, George Simpson, would remain there in preference to coming back to earth!

Well, the fanatic Simpson certainly had had his way in that! The Blake ship—even more antiquated than our *Planeteer*—safely left earth's atmosphere and plunged away. And never was heard of again!

Dr. Livingston's clutch on my arm and his excited murmured words jerked me out of my roving awed thoughts. "We're starting, boy—good luck to us —"

I could only nod and try to smile as I swallowed the lump in my throat. Leaving earth. There was a jumbled prayer then in my mind and heart that the great Creator would take care of us and give us luck....

The little group of people down on the hangar floor were waving now, queerly foreshortened as in a second they dropped away. Then we were up in the starlight; mounting with the bleak Maine coast and its string of lights shrinking beneath us.... Swift acceleration. Soon we were in the stratosphere; and then in a great curving crescent—product of our repulsion and the tangential force of the earth's rotation—we were hurled off into space....

"Well, we did it, John—we did, didn't we?" Dr. Livingston said. "Now—do you want some rest? Go on down if you like." He was seated in his shirtsleeves by his little instrument table, with its humming bank of dials and levels. He mopped his dripping forehead with his handkerchief. It was hot as the shades of hell now in the *Planeteer's* interior—the friction of our rapid rise through the atmosphere, with which our temperature-controls were unable to cope. But we knew it would cool off quick enough presently.

"I'll stay here with you a while," I said. "I can't get used to it yet—wonderful, sort of frightening, isn't it?"

"And beautiful, John. Profitable, too—with the Xalite we'll bring back—turn it over to the authorities. And then, with our money, build another ship. A larger one. I'm going to devote my life to the development of space-travel. Why, John, can't you envisage—a big vessel, with passengers, bringing people from Mars maybe, if it's inhabited—"

Poor Dr. Livingston. His life was destined to be cut so short! How wise of the Creator that he so seldom gives us any hint of what is to come, so that at least we may dream....

We had said nothing to Duroh and Carruthers about the Xalite, fearing that they might be tempted to tell others, family and friends, and before our departure the secret would be out. When we reached Zura, it was our plan to tell them, of course. And from the beginning Dr. Livingston had always insisted that he would see they shared equally with him and me.

My mind went back now to that night when he had first told me our plans; that weird face at our window, and someone who simultaneously had seemed to be eavesdropping upon us from the corridor. We had been apprehensive—if our secret was known—that something might occur to stop our departure, that some other expedition might hurriedly be made ready to try and get to Zura. But so far as we could know, nothing of the kind had happened.

"You see, John, with what we know now of space-flying," Dr. Livingston was saying, "the whole realm of the Solar System will be open to us in another twenty or thirty years. Why, with real money at our command, you and I—"

A shout from the living compartments under us checked him. Then there was the sound of a scuffle, and big Peter Duroh's roar:

"Why, damn you, come out of there! Grab him, Jim!"

And Carruthers' grim, quiet voice: "I've got him—"

They came clattering up into the starlit turret, dragging a man between them. Numbly Dr. Livingston and I stared. The face we had seen that night, peering at us through the laboratory window—wild-eyed, pallid, with a stubble of beard! We saw now that it was a thin, youthful face, with rumped curly black hair above it. A boy, certainly no more than sixteen or seventeen. He was clad in tattered, dirty clothes, his whole appearance unkempt, his figure thin, almost emaciated as though he had been long without adequate nourishment. He cowered between Duroh and Carruthers, shaking with terror.

"Don't—don't kill me," he gasped. "I'll do what you want—I'll help on the trip. I just want something to eat and drink—"

"Cast him loose," I said. I swung on him. "Who in the devil are you—"

"Alan Grant," he gasped. "Oh, I guess you've heard of me, all right." He stood wild-eyed, trembling as Carruthers and Duroh let go of him. "Where are we? We've left the earth, haven't we? Well, that's all right—but don't you take me back. I'm not going to let anybody take me back—"

Alan Grant. We knew him then. For months televised images of the lad had been flung around the world. A wanted man—wanted for multiple murder—with a price of a decimar on his head for anyone who would take him, dead or alive!

III

"You think we should approach from this side, John?" Dr. Livingston said.

I shrugged. "How can you tell?"

"True enough. If only those damnable clouds would act decently and open up now."

Dr. Livingston and I were seated in the turret, bathed in the brilliant sunlight. Zura at which we were rushing broadside, so to speak, was now, even to the naked eye, a huge full-round disc, with the sunlight gleaming turgid in its sullen, swirling cloud-masses of atmosphere. By a queer mischance, we had had no break in the Zurian clouds since leaving earth. At which side had we

best approach? Our only purpose was to land near some deposit of the Xalite.

But there was so much that we did not know. Were deposits of the precious metal widespread over the little asteroid? Would it be found only in a gaseous state, perhaps, so that we could not secure it? This atmosphere—would we be able to breathe it; or would our air-masks be necessary?

So much that we did not know, but there were many things about the strange little world which already we had learned. Apparently it was of a very great density. Dr. Livingston had calculated that back on earth. Its gravity, despite its five hundred-mile diameter, was, he thought, perhaps not much less than that of earth. And we knew now that it was not presenting one side always to the sun, but was rotating on its axis. A swift procession of days and nights, each some three or four hours long.

It is far from my purpose to detail the trip of the *Planeteer* from earth to Zura. All that has been written many times—with embellishments—and space-flying today has lost its novelty. Ours was a swift, uneventful passage, save that to us it was awe-inspiring indeed. Alan Grant, the young outlaw-killer who had so unexpectedly thrust himself upon us, had been a problem. His own case has now become history; I need not detail that either, except to say that by my experience with him, one may be a murderer and still inspire pity.

It is really horrible how quickly one may plunge downward in life. Alan Grant was only a boy really. Jealous over a worthless woman, and befuddled by alcoholite, in ten minutes he had changed himself from a decent, self-respecting lad into a bloodstained, multiple killer. All in ten minutes—with all the rest of his life to pay the penalty.

To Dr. Livingston he was a problem. There were none of us willing to turn back to earth—even there at the start—just to deliver him to the authorities. It may have been his pleading; and Dr. Livingston's gentle, kindly nature. What would ultimately have been his fate, back on earth, was something which, as events transpired, never had to be decided. Certainly on the trip up to now, he had caused us no trouble—an intelligent lad, seemingly eager to do his share of work. We had told Carruthers and Duroh now about the Xalite. And Alan had heard it also. His thin, boyish face had had a queer look, or at least it seemed so to me.

The contamination of criminality! The thought had leaped into my mind, though Heaven knows I said nothing. One crime so easily to lead to another.

But I flung away the thought. With a human excuse, Alan had stained himself with blood. Somehow, knowing him through those days and nights of that awing trip, I did not think he would want to repeat the experience.

"You'll stay on watch?" Dr. Livingston said, now as we sat together in the turret. "I'm tired, John. If those clouds break, call me at once."

"Yes," I agreed.

He went down to his room. Duroh and Carruthers were sleeping; and Alan also. I was left alone in the turret. I drew the curtains to shroud the sunlight. Bathed in starlight from the other side, I sat staring out at Zura. Wild, sullen-looking little world. The sunlight shot into its gray-black clouds with turgid orange and green light. We were so close now that the huge cloudy ball was spread over much of the firmament, with the white gleaming stars prismatic in the black abyss of space around it. And with our still-rapid approach, the disc was almost visibly enlarging.

A step sounded behind me, I looked up. "Oh, you, Alan?"

"Can I sit with you?"

"Yes, sure."

He was a different-looking lad now. We had given him clean clothes; he was cleanly shaved; his face and his body, though still thin, had filled out a bit. A handsome, sensitive-looking young fellow. But in his eyes was the same hunted look.

"That's Zura," he said. "Looks quite a bit bigger now, doesn't it?" Then suddenly he swung on me. "I'm going to stay there, John—understand? You can't stop me—not any of you—because I won't go back."

Pathetic damn words to come from a boy—to give up his world, his people, everything to which he was born, because he had made himself, all in ten minutes, unfitted for everything.

"Zura may not be habitable," I said. "No food. Maybe you can't even breathe that air down there. We don't know."

"I don't care. I'm not going back to earth." And then he added, "I—I guess I'd rather be there even without food." He muttered it with a grim bitterness. "The only man in my world—I couldn't do anything wrong then, could I?"

For an hour after that I think we both sat almost in silence. I was busy with the electro-telescope, trying to see down into the swirling Zurian clouds. On the stool beside me, Alan Grant just sat brooding. And then suddenly, as though he had been struggling all this time to reach some momentous decision, he burst out:

"I've got to tell you, that's all. John, listen—"

I was absorbed with the telescope so that I hardly heeded him. It seemed that the clouds of Zura, in one place in the northern hemisphere, were breaking into a little rift. At Alan's words, I saw out of the tail of my eye that he had flung an apprehensive look at the little spiral staircase of alumite which wound down into the lower levels of the *Planeteer*.

"What?" I said idly.

He lowered his voice. "I can't help telling you. I don't want—again—"

What a fatuous fool I was at that moment! Queer how in life, things momentous may of actuality hang upon seeming trivialities! If only I had listened to Alan Grant then! But in that instant, as I peered into the eyepiece of the telescope, a rift in the clouds of Zura opened up. I must have muttered some exclamation.

"What is it?" Alan demanded.

"The clouds are breaking! We may be able to see the surface now. Wait, I'll swing it onto the image screen, so we can both see it."

I made the connections. The little flurescent screen glowed with an image of the atmosphere of Zura—turgid, green, yellow and black masses of clouds, whirled and tossed by giant storms.

"Good Lord!" Alan exclaimed. "Are we supposed to descend through that?"

"No. We'd have to have a rift. There's one coming there now."

Midway between the equator and the pole there was a widening opening. Then a segment of the dark surface was visible. I focused the electro-telescope, swung its controls to a smaller area with a greater magnification. The surface of Zura! What a weird, wild scene! The image gave us perhaps a square mile. There was a turgid twilight down there, through which the daylight now was slanting, broken by the haze which still remained in this clearer atmosphere.

The terrain was rocky—a bleak, desolate waste, barren and empty. Tumbled rocks, buttes and spires, all slate-gray, sleek and glistening like marble. A tumbled terrain, with fissures and cave-mouths everywhere; rifts, gullies and huge canyons. Was it rock, or metal? Extremely dense—it had that obvious aspect; a compressed little world, with its surface broken, mangled as though by some titanic cataclysm.

It was a frigid little world. White patches of snow and sleek blue ice everywhere were apparent. But it was melting ice now. Weirdly in places it drooped, grotesquely leprous where it had melted away. And in the hollows, there was water. Off to one side, a big bowl-like depression was a lake of water, scattered with melting ice. Frigid world, but now approaching the sun, warmth was striking down, melting the congealed surface. Masses of ice turning rotten. As I stared, a great frozen mass which hung like a white veil over a hundred-foot cliff abruptly broke away. Sunlight chanced to strike it as it came splintering down, so that it looked like fractured spun glass, a riot of prismatic color.

"John! Look! There, down at the lower corner!" Alan was tensely pointing to a corner of the image screen. What was this? I stared and caught my breath. It seemed that against a distant ice-spire which stood like a stalagmite on the weird melting landscape, a white figure was poised. It seemed to move a little.

"Someone alive down there!" Alan murmured. "Look—that figure moved!"

Zura inhabited! We had never given a thought to that, save to assume that it was not. My fingers were shaking as I fumbled at the telescope, shortening the focus still further, giving a greater magnification of a much smaller area. Our fluroscope screen blurred; then slowly clarified, with an area of only a hundred feet or so.

Numbed, we stared at a white figure which was against the ice-spire. A girl! A human girl? Heaven knows, it seemed so. Pale white in the weird Zurian daylight, she stood motionless, seemingly gazing out over the melting landscape. A girl the size of a girl on earth. A white garment, white fur perhaps, draped her breasts and thighs. Her long hair, white as a veil of frozen falling water, was tumbled over her shoulders.

Woman carved in white marble. Woman molded of sleek ice. If we had not seen her move, she could have been a strange statue of a beautiful earthgirl, frozen there. Then suddenly as the swirling clouds shifted, a shaft of sunlight fell upon her. There was a pink-whiteness, like a delicate flush, on her limbs, neck and face.

For that second Alan and I breathlessly stared. And then, as though the sunlight were something horribly frightening, her little body seemed to shudder. She turned, plunged into the shadows of a rock-rift and was gone!

IV

Within another day, we were close over it. Of necessity our velocity was much less now. We had tilted so that the asteroid was under us, with our base gravity plates in negation. Zura for twenty-four earth-hours had been repulsing us, retarding us, as we dropped upon it. Dr. Livingston had made careful calculations. The total mass of Zura, small as the asteroid was in size, he had figured to be nearly that of the earth. We confirmed it now, by the repulsing effect it had upon us.

Gradually we slowed, poised now midway in the northern hemisphere, Zura had a rotation on its axis of almost exactly four hours. That we had been able to check now—there had been six rotations in the span of an earth-day, as measured by our chronometer. A thousand miles up? It seemed now that we were no more than that. The Benson curve-rays, here in the turret, showed us on our tilted mirrors the full image of the little world directly under us. Its convexity long since had been apparent. It spread now like a huge cloud-enveloped ball, covering almost all the lower firmament.

"The clouds are lessening," Dr. Livingston said, as again he and I were alone in the turret. "We'll be able to descend easily through this atmosphere."

"Yes," I agreed.

There had been faint, though unmistakable, evidences of Xalite in many places. We had decided that our best course was to descend before the storms came back. Most of the moisture-masses seemed clustered over the southern hemisphere now. Here in the north, for six Zurian days it had been fairly clear. Swift alternation of day and night—days of gray, hazy light, with the sunlight often striking through. And nights of glittering stars. We

had seen all the surface of the northern hemisphere now. Everywhere it was the same—bleak, metallic-looking gray rocks, wildly tumbled; huge, fantastic ice and snow formations; strewn pools of water, choked with melting ice.

Alan and I had mentioned that weird vision we had had of a living girl, so strangely fashioned in human mold. Was she real—or had our fancy tricked us? Dr. Livingston had blankly stared. From the big, handsome Peter Duroh had come a laugh and a ribald expression of hope that we were right. James Carruthers had merely stared incredulously, with his thin lips smiling and a look in his alert eyes that somehow seemed predatory.

But whether we had seen something animal or human, assuredly it had been alive. This atmosphere then, doubtless would be breatheable to us; and the temperature down there, by daylight at least, must be around 40F.

Dr. Livingston was checking his instruments. Another hour had passed. "Only five hundred miles of altitude now," he said. "I think we may use a little less repulsion for a time, and then the final retardation must begin."

Awesome descent. It took us another eighteen earth-hours while the weird convex surface of little Zura came up at us. I was often in the turret alone. Queerly an ominous sense of disaster was upon me. I could not tell why. Fear that we might not land safely? Surely it was not that. Rather was it as though, here in the little *Planeteer* which had been our world, something was impending. Somehow I had grown to dislike Pete Duroh and Jim Carruthers. Just little things. That ribald laugh. A way they had seemingly of watching me, whispering together while I was at the spectroscope, checking what evidence I could find of the presence of Xalite on the asteroid's surface.

And young Grant, boyish multiple murderer, whom now I had come somehow to like—what was it that he had wanted to tell me? I had tried several times to see him alone to ask him; but obviously he was avoiding me now. Whatever it was, he had repented the impulse.

We were all five in the turret during the descent through the Zurian atmosphere. Only fifty thousand feet up now. It was night, with glittering stars above us, and below, that wild, tumbled, fantastic landscape spreading now off to the horizon, bleak and grim in the starlight....

Twenty thousand feet. Sudden daylight had come and then night again. We were moving with Zura now in her swift axial rotation, dropping almost vertically down, slowly now with a constant retardation. I did not mention it, but I realized that we were poised very nearly over where Alan and I had seen—or thought we had seen—that strange vision of a girl. She had not reappeared. Were there others like her here? A race of people so much like earth humans that one of them could be a beautiful young girl, so like a girl of earth that I had resented the ribald attitude of Carruthers and Duroh?

My thoughts seemed totally impossible, according to scientific logic. Yet Alan and I surely had seen her....

"This damn heat," Duroh said. He sat slumped on the control room floor, his lanky body in trousers and shirt. His black wavy hair was plastered on his forehead with sweat. He mopped it with his big handkerchief.

"You'll get it cold enough pretty soon," Carruthers laughed. "Take your time, Pete."

Carruthers was alertly watching Dr. Livingston as he shifted the gravity plates for a still greater retardation. "Going to slow us some more, Doc?"

"Yes. Yes, I don't want to take any chances."

Five thousand feet.... Then two thousand. Off to the right the great cauldron depression was like a mile-wide lake—black water choked with floating ice on which the starlight glistened prismatic. A great ramp of the gray metallic rock went up like a glacier to the left. Beside it, the foothills of distant mountains went up in great terraced tiers. Everywhere there were ice-filled gullies, with water pouring down out of many of them. Gullies, ravines and crevices; pits yawning with inky blackness....

And then I noticed that, weirdly, there seemed light inherent to these Zurian rock-masses. Some of the cave-mouths were not quite black—a little light appeared in them, glowing with a prismatic sheen.

A thousand feet. I was at the gravity control-board now, executing Dr. Livingston's swift murmured orders. Without our modern rocket-streams, the little *Planeteer*, I must admit, was unwieldy. We were dropping slowly, with a side drift. In a corner Alan sat staring at us, with his hands gripped between his knees, his fingers working nervously. Duroh and Carruthers were standing tense beside me.

It was a touchy few minutes. We were some two hundred feet above a broken ice-strewn plateau, with a side drift that was carrying us toward a

small cliff. I could see where Dr. Livingston intended to land now—a little shallow bowl-depression near the cliff, where the bottom seemed flat, with soft snow. The *Planeteer* was hovering upright, with a very slow, vertical axis rotation, so that as I used the cliff's repulsion to check our drift, I was shifting the current constantly in our side gravity plates.

Queer how one may think of two things at once! I was seated at the control table, with my fingers roving its gravity-plate shifting keys. Dr. Livingston was tensely peering through the side bull's-eyes, gauging our position, our downward and sidewise drift; calling out to me his orders. Certainly my mind had never been more alertly on anything than it now was on those gravity keys. But nevertheless, suddenly I was aware of an electric feeling here in the control room. Carruthers and Duroh exchanging glances. And over in the corner young Alan, with his hands between his knees, his fingers writhing, his dark gaze brooding on me.

"Base negation! Full—quickly now!" Dr. Livingston called.

We were almost over the snowy depression—hardly the height of the *Planeteer* above it. I flung on the base repulsion; held it only some ten seconds. Then gave attraction for an instant.

That may have been the first landing of any space-ship in the history of the Universe. I do not know, of course; but I will say we eased the little *Planeteer* down as light as a falling snowdrop. There was hardly a bump as we landed, with the base flat in the melting snow, and the globe of the *Planeteer* almost exactly upright.

"Good enough, John. We did it!" Dr. Livingston was triumphant. He swung toward me, his face flushed with pleasure. Jim Carruthers was close beside him. "Good work, wasn't it, Jim?"

"Yes," Carruthers said, with his thin smile. "You did nicely, Doctor." He was partly behind Dr. Livingston; I saw his arm raised behind Livingston's back. I had no more warning than that. The knife Carruthers was clutching stabbed deeply. I saw the smile fade off poor Dr. Livingston's face, with a dazed look of wonderment spreading there as he tossed up his arms and sprawled forward. He dropped in a crumpled heap almost at my feet, with the alumite knife-handle sticking from his back where a ghastly crimson stain already was spreading on his white shirt.

"Why—why, good Lord—" I gasped. I was on my feet; mind blurred, numbed with horror. My fists clenched as I whirled at Carruthers. "Why—why, you damned—"

"Easy there!" It was Peter Duroh's growling voice behind me. I swung to face him. His big lanky figure leaned nonchalantly against one of the side bull's-eye windows. Both his hands were at his hips—his hands gripping an old-fashioned bullet-projector and a Banning heat-gun, with muzzles leveled at my chest!

V

"So what are you going to do with me?" I demanded.

"Take it easy. Sit where you are." They had shoved me back into my chair at the instrument board. Over in a corner Alan still sat with his hands clasped between his knees, and his fingers working. Just a boy. He could not meet the glance I flung at him.

"Is Dr. Livingston dead?" I said. "If he isn't—Good Lord, are you going to let him just lie there?"

"Oh, he's dead all right," Duroh growled.

"You have no objection if I see, have you?"

"No. Go ahead."

"We'll go out by the lower door," Carruthers said impassively. "Keep your muzzle on him, Pete—I'm going down. Livingston said we'll use a portable spectroscope to locate the Xalite. It's in the base; I'll go rig it up."

"You better not open that base door too quickly," I warned. "If this atmosphere is wrong, in chemical content or pressure—kill us all here like rats in a trap."

"Don't you worry, Taine." From the head of the little incline stairway Carruthers grinned at me with his tight-lipped, ironic smile. "That's why you're alive. We realize you know more about a lot of things in this than we do."

Damnably cold-blooded villain. He waved his hand with jaunty irony at me as he vanished down the staircase. With Duroh's weapons alertly on me, I bent over the crumpled Dr. Livingston. He was dead, beyond question. For years he had been my best, almost my only, friend. There was a lump in my throat as I went back to my seat at the table.

"About this Xalite," Duroh said pleasantly. "In what form do we expect to find it? Pretty pure? Can you tell how pure it is with your instruments? If it's in a pretty pure state, we won't need so much, will we? Fifty pounds or so—to deal out to a panting world for all our lifetime and make us rich enough for any man's dreams."

"So you all three have decided to be murderers?" I retorted. "One of us I should have thought was enough—contaminating damn business—"

My bitter words brought a burst from Alan. "So what can I do?" he flung at me; but still he did not look at me. "You think I want to live here on this God-forsaken little world—and die maybe in a day? Or go back to Earth? Dr. Livingston would have turned me over—you know he would—"

One crime with such ghastly fecundity begets another! Heaven knows I could hardly blame the boy. He was only sixteen; pushed into desperation.

"What will he do?" Duroh grinned. "Why, that's easy, isn't it, Alan? He'll go back to earth—rich. When you're rich—you can bribe officials. Or, at worst, you can't be hunted like a sewer rat as he was before. Money buys hiding places, clothes and food. Easy to hide out, when you've got the decimars."

"And me?" I persisted. "You need my help now? All right—let's say I'll give it. And then what?"

"When we get back to earth we'll turn you loose," he smiled. "Why not? You can hunt us all you like. We'll be gone."

Was that their plan for me? I doubted it a great deal. But I could see no reason now to balk them. Certainly it was to my interest to find the Xalite, get it aboard and start back. With Alan to help me—or possibly even alone, for that matter—I could navigate back to earth. The landing there, on one of the big flying fields, would be far less difficult than here. Meanwhile, I would watch my chance. And get a word alone with Alan if I could. I was still convinced that he wasn't the same stripe as these other two cold-blooded villains.

Duroh was questioning me now, and I answered him freely. A fairly rich deposit of the Xalite should be somewhere near here where we had landed. It would exist, probably as a strata in the metallic rock—not recognizable perhaps with the naked eye, but identifiable with the portable spectroscope.

"And with a pick and shovel we dig it out?" Duroh said. "You damn sure better find it, Taine, if you know what's good for you."

"I will if I can," I agreed.

Carruthers came back. "Come on down and rig up this gadget, Taine. Then we'll get on some heavy clothes and make a start."

Docilely I let them shove me down past our dim living quarters, into the base storeroom. I saw now that Carruthers had a heat-gun clipped to his belt with his knife. Alan apparently was unarmed. Dr. Livingston, I knew, had brought some weapons. They were in his sleeping room—more than these cut-throats had taken—but I had no way of getting to them now.

In the base-room I rigged the small spectroscope, with its lenses, prisms and batteries. Duroh brought us heavy trousers, boots, mackinaws and heavy caps.

"Now," he said, "we're about ready, aren't we? If that air out there is no good, we'll have to go through the midsection air-lock, with air-helmets. That the idea, Taine?"

"That's it," I agreed. "And maybe with pressure suits, for all I know."

But none of that was necessary. Cautiously I admitted the air. It was at once apparent that there was no great difference of pressure. It came slowly hissing in, stopping our ears for a moment. It was cold and dank, heavy to breathe and momentarily oppressive. But the feeling soon passed.

"Very good," Carruthers said. "Open wide, Taine."

I swung the bull's-eye inward ... Zura. As my foot crunched into the moist, wet snow, a pang shot through me. Perhaps I was the first living thing ever to set foot upon an alien world. How different this landing was from what I had anticipated! Dr. Livingston dead; myself a captive in the hands of these cut-throats.

We had cut off the *Planeteer's* interior gravity, and had found that Zura was little different. As I walked now out into the raw, bleak night, a sense of physical lightness was upon me. I was conscious that if I took a leap it would be prodigious. Gravity perhaps was a quarter less; but the difference certainly was no greater than that.

"We're leaving everything to you," Duroh growled at my elbow. "Make it quick now, Taine, if you know what's good for you. All we want is a supply of the Xalite, and get back and get away in a hurry."

Duroh and I were leading. He kept his little bullet-projector with its muzzle rammed into my side. Behind us came Alan and Carruthers. I carried the small electro-spectroscope, with its batteries slung across my back.

"I have no idea which way to go," I said. "It's all a chance. Suppose we go a little way; then stop and make a test."

"Suit yourself," Carruthers agreed from behind me. "We're cut off, down here in this depression. Once we get up on the level, almost anywhere should do for a start."

It was a weird, fantastic night-scene, as in a moment we emerged up upon the lip of the little depression. Overhead the myriad stars glittered in an inky, frosty sky. Around us spread the wild, tumbled landscape. It was a queerly small area, viewed now from the surface level. The convexity of the little world was instantly apparent, with the horizon everywhere crowding close; the stars in the dark sky which were low at the horizon seemed hanging there, as though one might make a leap and seize them.

We were hardly more than a hundred feet from the ragged little cliff which towered now grimly over us. I flung a glance around. Everywhere great boulders and ice-masses were strewn, wildly tumbled. The starlight glittered prismatic on their tops. The shadows between them were black, yawning pits of emptiness. Everywhere a frigid desolation. But its congealed beauty was marred by the blight of warmth upon it. Veils of ice hung from the ragged, honeycombed little cliff—but they were leprous veils, their beauty eaten away by the blight of warmth, like some hideous disease rotting them. Everywhere water was dripping, running in rivulets, gathering into pools on which the starlight shimmered with a faint opalescent sheen.

"Stop here," Carruthers commanded.

We had picked our tortuous, sloshing way perhaps halfway to the little cliff. "Try the spectroscope here," Carruthers added. "Along the base of that precipice. If there's an outcropping there, it would be easy to get at."

His words struck me with apprehension. Carruthers seemed to know more about this thing than I had hoped. It was my plan now to locate the Xalite if I could. But somehow I feared to let them get their hands on it. With it safely on board the *Planetear*, it might easily occur to them that they could

successfully navigate back to earth. Their purpose in keeping me alive would be ended.... I could not forget with what cold-blooded nonchalance Carruthers had smiled at poor Dr. Livingston and then stabbed the knife into his back. I was alert every second now. If only I could get Duroh interested, with his weapon turned from me just for a moment. With half a chance I would risk a fight now, rather than cold-blooded murder later on.

"Now, let's hope—" Carruthers muttered, as I set up the little hooded spectroscope screen, and trained the instrument on the base of the cliff.

In a breathless moment the band spread out on the screen, glorious little splash of colors, diffusing from one into the next, with the thin dark lines of radiotronic emanations vertical streaks in the band.

Xalite! It was here, unmistakable. I glanced up from the hooded screen. Off there, where starlight was glittering at the ragged base of the little cliff, there was a narrow sword-slash of gray-white rock streaking the rock-face. It was visible now, where ice probably only recently had melted from it. Ore of Xalite! Dr. Livingston had described to me what probably it would look like in its crude state here on Zura. A hundred pounds of that ore would be enough for a lifetime of earth's needs!

"Well," Duroh growled. "What do you see?"

I had been standing silent, peering at the cliff. Had something moved off there? A sort of white shadow, quickly shifting. I had that vague impression. And out of the tail of my eye, vaguely I noticed a huge rock-cluster some ten feet from us. It was piled with fantastic ice-formations, blue-white in the starlight. But it seemed that there were white blobs there which had not been visible a moment ago.

"What's that screen show? Damn you, speak up." Annoyed at my silence, Carruthers prodded me in the ribs with his weapon. "Looks like Xalite—"

"That rock off there," I murmured. "Carruthers, look—"

Whatever vague sort of warning I had intended to give came too late. From beside us in the white, frosty starlight, weird white blobs materialized. Men? Were they? I had a vague glimpse of little white creatures, perhaps the height of my shoulder—white arms, legs, huge round heads, shining bald, slate-gray in the starlight. A horde of them in that second engulfed us.

The spectroscope went clattering as I fell, fighting, with half a dozen of them on top of me. Gruesome little creatures. To my grip their flesh was solid, sleek and cold.... I heard Alan give a startled cry, and then a groan as

he went down. Duroh's weapon cracked, with its weird yellow-red stab of flame as the exploding powder in the old-fashioned gun hurled its bullet. The lead slug must have found a mark. There was an eerie, blood-chilling scream—inhuman, like some weird, unnamable animal in its death-cry; and I was aware of one of the little creatures leaping a dozen feet into the air and crashing down.

But Duroh had no chance to fire again. The swarming, snarling little things bore him down. And Carruthers was down. I had tumbled to my back, with half a dozen of them on me. They were heavy; more solid perhaps than an earthman. They seemed to have no weapons; their little fists, small as a child's, were thudding at me like hard balls of ice. Frantically I lunged, but the weight of them held me. A white, furry garment seemed tied around their middle. One of the faces came down above mine; weird face with eyes like slits, holes for nostrils and a wide slit of mouth that jabbered at me with guttural, unintelligible syllables.

"Don't fight," I heard Carruthers shouting. "Better give up—don't goad them to kill us."

It seemed reasonable advice. They were jabbering like monkeys all around us, but now they seemed more eager to make us stop fighting than to harm us. I yielded suddenly, lying limp with their weight pressing me.

"All right," I muttered. "Damn you—get off me."

They understood at least my sudden limpness, and in a moment climbed away, and with a strength fully as great as my own, hauled me to my feet. Carruthers and Duroh now were up, with the little white Zurians gripping them. And I saw Alan, standing pallid and trembling, with blood streaming from a gash in his forehead.

"Got us," Duroh muttered. "Gosh, look at them."

There seemed a hundred or more of the little white forms materializing in the starry whiteness of the Zurian night. The protective coloration of nature. They were hardly visible except when they moved. The group that gripped us were fending off their crowding fellows now as they milled forward, wildly jabbering, peering to see these four strange beings which they had captured.

"Well, they don't seem to want to hurt us," I said. I peered down into the face of the one who was at my side, his small white hands, with long, thin fingers strong as little pincers, gripping my arm. "Take it easy," I said. "Let's be friends."

I tried grinning at him. Perhaps he vaguely understood the grin. The skin on his round white face was hairless, perhaps poreless, sleek as gray-white, polished marble. But it wrinkled with his grimace. I saw that he had no eyelids. The slits of the two sockets suddenly opened wide, so that I could see his huge round white eyeballs, with a very big purple-black lens in their center. It was a grotesque face, but suddenly I realized that it was not unintelligent.

Then we were being shoved forward. For an instant the big Duroh, towering head and shoulders over his little captors, made resistance.

"Don't be an idiot," I shouted at him. "Let them have their way."

The crowd milled around us as we were shoved along the base of the cliff. I could see Alan, pale, silent, with his bloodstained face; the grim, tight-lipped, pallid Carruthers; and Duroh, docile now. And it occurred to me then, as I caught a look of frightened appeal from Duroh, how different things may be, all in a moment or two. I had been captive of Duroh and Carruthers and Alan, just a moment ago. Murderous cut-throats, they would have dispatched me, no doubt, when I had helped them all they needed. But now they looked to me as though we four earthmen were allied here against this fantastic enemy. And it was apparent that, like many bloodthirsty villains, Carruthers and Duroh were terrified. Cowards at heart.

We were being separated in the crowd. "Take it easy," I shouted. "Don't anger or frighten them—they'll kill us all." Certainly I had no wish to have Duroh go into a wild panic, with the Zurians killing me as well as the rest of us. We were all four unarmed now. They had searched us. One or two of them were carrying Duroh's and Carruthers' weapons, carrying them gingerly, awed and puzzled by them.

Where were they taking us? We came to an end of the little ice-cliff, rounded it, and I saw a dark yawning hole, like a cave-entrance in the honeycombed cliffside. The little white Zurians who were leading us plunged into it. I was shoved forward more swiftly now, with the darkness engulfing me—darkness filled with jabbering little voices and the patter of their huge bare feet.

It may have been that at first my eyes were not accustomed to the greater darkness, and that presently, with expanding pupils, I began to see. That, of course. But now I was aware of that sheen of light, inherent to the rocks of this strange little world. A vaguely luminous, opalescent sheen which grew in intensity as we advanced so that it illumined the darkness with a weird, beautiful glitter.

I saw now that we were advancing into a widening tunnel. Already it was some fifty feet wide, with lifting ceiling so that presently I could only dimly see it, far up as it glistened in the opalescent light. Moisture was up there—a myriad tiny drops, glittering like opalescent gems in the eerie glow. Occasionally one would drop and hit my face.

Steadily the jabbering little crowd, with excited guttural voices, pushed forward. I had the feeling at first that we were descending; this winding, broadening tunnel going downward at an ever increasing angle. Then presently it was as though the tunnel were level and as we advanced, the whole little Zurian world seemed turning forward and up over us. All in the viewpoint. Up or down; top or bottom—they are meaningless terms except for comparison.

It was growing steadily colder now. The roof moisture seldom dropped. Ice formations were everywhere here. There was a place where the roof was suddenly much lower, so that I could see an intricate lacery of ice-clusters up there, prismatic with glorious colors. Like stalagmites here on the tunnel floor, the ice stood in great columns, crinkled, glittering with a myriad facets of sparkling sheen. There were other tunnels crossing us now. I tried to imagine how far we had gone. Certainly a mile.

Then I was aware, as we rounded a curve, that ahead of us the shining passage was opening up into some sort of apartment. The light-sheen there was more intense. The crowd of Zurians had fallen silent now; and as another passage crossed us at an angle, our immediate captors herded most of their fellows away. Silently we advanced, with three Zurians gripping each of us. It was as though now we were advancing into some sacred place, so that our captors were suddenly respectfully silent.

"What the devil," Carruthers muttered, as I was shoved close to him.

We came out of the tunnel. I had a quick glimpse of a big blue-white ice-grotto here—walls glittering with an opalescent sheen on hanging veils of

ice. And then I gasped; stared, numbed.

The Ice Maiden! The girl Alan and I had seen through the *Planeteer's* telescope! At the end of the grotto, perhaps a hundred feet from us now, on a small raised dais, she reclined on a pile of white furs. Her head and shoulders were raised on one elbow, her graceful pink-white limbs half revealed by the short white fur garment draped over her loins and breasts. Her hair, blue-white as spun ice, fell in profusion over her shoulders, framing her small oval face that was beautiful with a perfection of earth-beauty!

Our captors were all intoning now: "Tara! Tara! Tara!"

Then as we were hurriedly shoved forward, the girl's arm went up with an imperious gesture; and we were cast loose and flung at her feet!

VI

Tara! Quite obviously that was the girl's name. The little Zurian men were all intoning it with awed respect, as a gesture and a low, guttural word from her made them seize us again, stand us erect in a line before her. What weird, beautiful priestess was this? By what incredible science could it be that she was fashioned like a beautiful young earthgirl?

As we were stood upon our feet, with our captors at once withdrawing to line themselves near us, I saw that at each of the several door-openings which gave access to the grotto, other Zurians were peering in at us. And guards were here—men somewhat taller, with wide, powerful shoulders and smaller heads. Each of them held a long, pointed shaft of ice in his hand for a weapon, with his motionless figure tensed and his weird eyes alert upon us. Men who could with a single thrust of their powerful leg muscles hurl themselves in a bound half across the grotto.

For that moment we four stood silent, staring at the strange, beautiful creature reclining on the dais before us. Young Alan was numbed, blankly bewildered; Carruthers, seemingly less terrified now, gazed with a grim smile playing on his thin lips; and on the handsome, rough-hewn face of the giant Duroh, the panic of terror had gone. There was a look there now of open admiration; a bold confidence, an eager, predatory look.

Weird, transfixed tableau. It only lasted a brief moment, of course, while Tara stared down at us, calmly, musingly—a gaze of quiet, confident appraisal, her soft red lips gently curving into a questing smile and her cold, pale-blue eyes roving us. And then she spoke.

Amazing thing—it struck us numb, so that we could only stand and gasp.

"You look like earthmen," she said quietly. "Which is it, your language?"

English words, quaintly intoned, but English! Her voice was soft, with a queer limpid, liquid quality to it, in amazing contrast to the guttural way she had spoken to her Zurians. And her tone, her look, her gesture to us were quietly imperious.

"English!" Duroh gasped. "What luck! So you speak our language—well, that's fine. Blast me for a sleeping tower time-keeper but you're beautiful, whoever you are. Tell us."

"I am Tara," she said. The little smile that played on her lips was amused now as her gaze roved the six-feet-four figure of Duroh.

"Tara? Tara what?" he demanded. "You're an Earthgirl of course. You must be. Then how did you get here—"

It was dawning on me now; the only combination of possible circumstances which logically it could be.

"You are the leader of your men?" Tara said quietly to Duroh.

"I—" Carruthers began. But a look from Duroh checked him—Duroh's look of bold confidence that he could handle this girl.

"Yes, I am," Duroh said. "I brought them here, on an exploring expedition from earth. We're not going to harm your little world. I killed one of your men—what in the hell did they dare set upon us for? See here now, what we want is—"

"You do talk rather too much," she interrupted. Her gaze left Duroh and fastened on Alan. "You—the young one—what is your name?"

"Alan. Alan Grant," he stammered softly.

"You have a nice voice. You look like a nice young man. And you?"

"I'm James Carruthers," Carruthers said. "If you'll let me explain—"

"And you?" she gazed at me.

"John Taine," I said.

She sat up suddenly, with her shimmering hair tumbling in a white mass over her breast. Again her calm, blue-eyed gad impersonally roved us. "The big one lies," she stated. "Which one of you is leader here?"

"Our leader is dead," I burst out. "Murdered by these two—Carruthers and Duroh."

"You're a liar!" Duroh gasped. He took a step toward me, but thought better of it as the guard made a move forward.

Carruthers started to speak, but Tara's calm voice silenced him. "So even in your little expedition murder had to come." She seemed saying it not to us, but to herself. "Of course, what would one expect? Who was murdered?"

Her gaze was on me, and I told her what had happened and why we were here. There was a brief pause, and again she silenced Duroh and Carruthers.

"Zogg!" she called. "Zogg—come—"

From a glittering, blue-white vaulted doorway a figure approached—a big Zurian nearly my own height. The shining, opalescent light gleamed on his white bald pate. He looked a powerful fellow. A white fur-skin draped him. In his hand was a club-like weapon, seemingly made of the heavy slate-gray rock, sleekly polished to a knife-like edge.

"Zogg, take them," she said in her calm English.

"All of them, Tara?"

"No. All but this one." Her imperious gesture went to me. "With him I will talk more."

Zogg's weird face twisted into a grin. A bluish tongue, like the tongue of an animal, licked the pallid lips of his slit of mouth. That the girl had taught him English was obvious. He had spoken to her haltingly, mouthing the words with his guttural voice.

"Not—hurt them?" he demanded.

"No," she flashed. "Never will I have that here. Well do you know it." Her cold-blue eyes glittered with her sudden angry emotion, and before it, Zogg drew away. And then she burst at him in his own language. I could guess that she was directing him what to do with the three prisoners. Duroh tried

again to speak but was silenced. A dozen of the little side guards came pouncing forward.

"Easy," I warned. "Don't put up a fight, Duroh."

They were engulfed by the Zurians, shoved through the side archway, and were gone.

"Sit here by me," Tara said calmly.

At her gesture I sat on the side of the dais, with her calm gaze upon me as she questioned me. How shall I describe my first strange talk with Tara? Under her questions I described frankly our expedition, who we were, what we had come for, and what had happened. And then suddenly I began questioning her. I had thought that her beautiful cold-blue eyes would flash with the little lightnings as they had at Zogg. But instead she said quietly,

"I shall tell you about myself, because there is no reason why I should not."

I had guessed what at least the main circumstances of her history must be.... The Blake expedition, which had left earth some sixteen years ago and never returned, had landed here on Zura, when the little asteroid previously had come into our Solar System. Landed here, with its space-ship smashed in the landing.

"George Simpson was my father," Tara was saying. "Everyone is dead now, of that little group, except me."

I was myself only some four years old when the Blake expedition disappeared. But I had heard of George Simpson. A fanatic. An altruist. That was the best, undoubtedly, that you could call him. A crusader for ideals, he had thought that he could remodel the world, remake God's erring creatures so that hate and fear and jealousy and violence would be gone. And among nations—peace, amity—never a hint of war or aggression.

Nice ideals. Simpson undoubtedly was a genius. A remarkable orator; a fellow of indefatigable energy; a personality forceful, winning. For years, with fanatic fervor, he devoted his life to converting others to his own ideals. It was ironic, but inevitable, that he himself was always a storm-center. Pathetically sincere, frequently he became a lawbreaker; was in prison and out again. Until at last he was the frenzied hater of humanity—an outcast.

And with a wild burst of condemnation for earth and everything on it, he had joined Blake's expedition, vowing he would never return.

"And you were on that expedition too?" I said. "And your mother—I understood Blake took only a few men."

"He would not take my mother," Tara said. "So she hid herself on board. I was born here—a few months after they landed."

The rest of the story was simple enough.

Her mother had died about a year after Tara was born. Her father had brought her up, here on little Zura; had educated her. For fourteen years, until his death a year or so ago, she had been his constant companion. George Simpson was an educated man, a scholar. He had left earth, determined never to return, so that he had taken many books with him, with which Tara had been taught. And he had found here a strange, primitive little people. There were, I believe, since it is understood now that the Zurians were a dying race, no more than a few thousands, living here in these interlacing honeycombed grottos. The forceful Simpson, when he had learned their language, had come to rule them. His intelligence, much greater than their own, and his own ideas which seemed here, at least, possible of attainment, had enabled him to make himself the Zurian ruler.

I must state now that it is far from my purpose—even if space permitted, which it does not—to sketch the life-history of the tragic little Zurian people. I am no ethnologist. Nor can I detail the effect George Simpson had upon them—the practical working of his ideal economic system. Books have been written on it in the last half century, based on what Tara was able to tell the learned men who questioned her. And as I indicated in my preface, much nonsense has been written. I think that my own experience, with Tara there in Zura, will demonstrate fully what I mean.

"And so now," I said, "since your father's death, you are ruler here?"

"Yes, of course. I followed my father's ideals."

"And there is no crime here? Nobody does anything wrong? They obey you?"

"I make them obey me," she said; and again her eyes flashed with the little lightnings. "So I understand you came here to get what it is you call Xalite?" she added suddenly.

"Yes."

"Something that belongs to us—to me—not to you."

I withheld my smile. She was amazingly beautiful, reclining there so close to me. Her bosom, the contour of it faintly apparent beneath the white furry garment, rose and fell with her emotion. Her long snow-white hair glistened with a silvery sheen in the opalescent light.

"You're very beautiful, Tara," I said abruptly. "Your strange white hair—"

"My mother was like that. So you are a thief? My father would have expected it of any man of earth."

I had touched her hand, where it rested on the fur rug beside me. "You were taught to hate all earth-people, weren't you, Tara?"

"I hate thievery, and murder." Her beautiful moist red lips curved with her scorn. "Five of you—just five to represent earth's millions—and you are thieves and murderers. Everywhere on earth it is the same. Oh, I *know*—my father, he told me. Oh, he tried so hard for what is right—"

"I know he did, Tara. But he was doomed to fail."

"And your nations, too—thieves, murderers, just like you individuals." She suddenly seemed to realize that my hand was on hers. As though a viper had stung her she snatched her hand away. "You—Earthman! You would dare to touch me! Thief! Murderer—like all your miserable kind!"

She was abruptly sitting erect, quivering with her anger as she spat the words at me. I had drawn back. I was aware that from a nearby door-oval one of the little white Zurian guards was coming forward, but Tara imperiously waved him away. Her small white hand had gone to her furry garment, came back, clutching a small knife of polished stone. Little frozen volcano. But the tempestuous fires within her were seething now. For that breathless instant I thought that she was about to spring upon me with the knife.

"Tara—" I murmured.

Amazing little creature. Was it that subconsciously she realized the irony of her violence, and was ashamed that I should see it? Her hand opened and the knife fell to the rug at her side. Her flashing, steel-blue gaze like a little sliding sword clashed with mine. Then she called out an imperious

command in the Zurian tongue. From the shadows of the door-oval three guards came leaping at me.

"Tara—wait! Listen—"

Her furious commands drowned my protests. She was lying back, panting, staring after me as the guards roughly dragged me away.

VII

I was not killed, as momentarily I had feared, but was flung into a cell. You might call it that—a small cave-like recess off one of the smaller corridors. It seemed a level below the apartment in which Tara had been. My captors flung me into it, shoved a heavy stone into the door-slit, barred the stone with a metal fastening and withdrew.

More than ever now, the light inherent to the metallic rock-masses of subterranean Zura was apparent—a soft luminous glow. Left alone, I looked around me. It was somewhat warmer in here. The air was fresh enough. I saw that it was seeping in through many little rifts, an inch or two in width—tiny fissures in the honeycombed walls. There was a couch here, of white skins. I threw myself on it with the sudden realization that I was exhausted, and hungry and thirsty. The latter two needs I could not supply—but presently I had drifted into sleep.

I was awakened by the realization that the door-slab was being drawn aside. It was Zogg, Tara's guard who had taken Alan and the others away. He came in with food and water—food that was a fatty, uncooked animal flesh. I drank the water greedily—water different in taste from anything I had had on earth, but it was palatable. The blubbery animal-flesh at first was nauseous, but my hunger made me manage it. I was stiff with chill, but the food warmed me.

"Thanks," I said.

Zogg had been standing by the door, watching me impassively. I added: "Those friends of mine—what did you do with them? Kill them?"

"Near here. No hurt them," he said. Was that irony on his weird, grimacing face? A string of little ornaments hung on his chest now, dangling from his spindly neck. He gestured to them proudly. He was a dignitary here—one of

Tara's leaders, I surmised. Afterward I learned that for years, in fact, he had been Simpson's lieutenant—forcing Simpson's commands upon the primitive little people, with what autocratic violence I could only guess. A belt of sinew was around his waist, with crude weapons dangling from it.

His grimace widened. He swept me with a sidelong glance and again I had the feeling that this Zurian was far more intelligent than his weird, to me fantastic, aspect would suggest. His little slit eyes stared at me with a queer sort of cunning, and his grimacing mouth more than ever seemed ironical. It sent a vague shudder through me so that involuntarily I tensed as he came suddenly toward me.

"Tara send me for you," he said. "She wants see you now."

Silently I preceded him through the doorway. He followed, guiding me with his brief, guttural English words and with a knife-point prodding my back. We traversed the dim, glowing little tunnel, mounting steadily. I had expected we would emerge into the same apartment where Tara had been before, but we did not. Abruptly the tunnel ended in a huge glowing open space. The ceiling of this gigantic grotto must have been five hundred feet or more overhead; only a bluish opalescent haze was up there so that I had the feeling that I was outdoors. An ice and rock wall rose to one side of me, through big openings of which I could see the grotto apartment where I had met Tara a few hours ago.

And here, stretching before me in shining prismatic beauty, was her garden—a smaller, vaulted grotto to my left, into which Zogg at once led me. It was an amazing little place of glittering ice formations. From its arching roof, ice hung in great sparkling clusters, like stalactites, in places hanging down to meet the icy stalagmites of the floor, so that there were vaulted little corridors and aisles between them. In other places there were recesses shrouded with a white lacery of frozen moisture—great bridal veils, blue-white, intricate with nature's lacy patterns.

A little fairyland of ice. The opalescent sheen of the rocks sparkled on it everywhere with a riot of pastel colors—a soft, prismatic, breath-taking beauty.

"This way," Zogg said. "Tara waits you."

She was in a small ice glade where furs had been spread, and in a recess, half shrouded with frozen lacery, there was a stone bench fashioned in earth-style. She was standing by the bench. Zogg pushed me forward, and at her gesture, he withdrew. I caught a glimpse of his face; his grimace—ironical.

"Tara—" I began.

"Sit down—John Taine." She waved me to the bench and dropped to the pile of rugs. "You angered me," she said. "I am sorry about that. I am thinking I will have to decide what to do with you—and those men with you whom you say are murderers."

I could think of no answer. I could only sit staring at her beauty. The lacery of ice-veils behind her seemed to glorify her with its prismatic pastel glow.

"Tell me," she murmured, "of your earth-world. Is it now what my father feared that always it would be?"

"Yes," I admitted. "I'm afraid it is." I began telling her of the history of my lifetime. It is horrible, when you think of it, how the events which humans create may be translated into terms of lust and greed, and jealousy and hatred. And the motives of nations—aggression—banditry.

"But it isn't all like that," I tried to explain. "There is love, too. And friendship and self-sacrifice. And science to try and heal the sick—to raise the standards of living. Xalite will do that. Xalite which is apparently of no use to your people, Tara."

She was staring at me musingly. Heaven knows, looking back on it now, I can try to understand her. Something within her, frightening her as she talked here alone with me. The urge, hardly to be understood by her, to order me here—to be alone with me. The first young man of her own world whom she had ever seen. Emotions, frightening—mingling with the life-long teachings of her fanatic father—his hatred of mankind, so that now what she instinctively felt must have angered as well as terrified her.

I had shifted from the bench to the rug beside her. My own emotions were sweeping me. "Tara," I murmured impulsively, "I'm going back to earth—and you're going with me."

I think she hardly heard me. She drew in her breath with a little hiss at my touch and leaped to her feet. "I shall show you my people," she said. "You will see what my father and I have done here."

She led me through the fairyland of the little garden; out through an archway, so that again I seemed outdoors, with the ceiling of this giant grotto high in the luminous haze overhead. And presently we stood on a small rocky height, gazing down upon a primitive little city. It was a brief glimpse—my only glimpse—of the Zurian subterranean world. This group of habitations here—one of perhaps a dozen scattered throughout the vast system beneath the wild surface of the little asteroid—I saw as a scattered collection of white little mound-dwellings. Stone and frozen moisture, modeled so that families might have privacy. I saw the women there, with dangling hair and breasts; and children, playing in the doorways of the huts.

It had been, before Tara's lifetime, a much more numerous people. Perhaps once they had lived on the asteroid's surface. They were of a different bodily structure from earth-humans—cold-blooded, in comparison with ourselves. Then the Great Change had driven them in here—and killed most of them, so that now, so far as Tara knew, only these few thousand were left.

"The Great Change?" I said.

"It was when this world first came into the Solar System. My father has explained it to me. It happened at about the time of my birth when this world rounded the sun. Almost all of them died then. The heat was too terrible to them."

And that time was coming again! Zura now was heading to round the sun, close, between the orbits of Mercury and Vulcan. Already, as I well knew, the little asteroid was inside the orbit of Venus.... With the protective blanket of heavy atmosphere, and the fires which doubtless were at the core of the little world, Zura, even in the realms of outer Interstellar space, had been habitable. But that protective atmospheric blanket was not enough, inside the orbit of Mercury! The heat would melt these ice-grottos. Already it was melting the outside surface.

"And you have no crime here?" I murmured. I could not avoid a faint irony. "Nothing ever goes wrong? Everyone always does everything exactly right?"

We were back in the prismatic little garden, walking down one of its glowing blue-white aisles. She stopped and faced me.

"They would not dare do wrong," she said. Again her eyes were flashing.

"I see," I murmured. "But you have done well, Tara. You and your father." And then, some damnable little imp within me made me add: "On earth, Tara, our people sometimes resent that their rulers live in palaces, when they can have only a hovel. That room where I met you—and your gardens here—they're very beautiful—"

It stung her. I cursed myself for the words, almost as I said them. She leaped to her feet, backed away, panting, in a tumult of hurt and anger.

"So all you can do is let me talk and then jibe at me! I—I hate you! You and all your kind!"

"Oh, Tara—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Really, I'm sorry—"

"I hate you—"

The words died in her throat. Behind us, here in the glittering garden, from Tara's apartments a group of Zurian women came running. They were terrified, calling out to her in their guttural voices. Her personal servants. And now, with them, a dozen or more of the little guards appeared. They came from several directions, shouting for Tara; confused, panic-stricken, wildly jabbering and gesticulating as they gathered near us.

Tara's questioning glance crossed with mine. "Why—why, what—" she stammered.

There was a turmoil everywhere here. Tara's servants and guards gathering around her in terror. And now we could hear other sounds, coming in through the huge archway from the open grotto-space outside. Sounds floating up from the Zurian village down the declivity. A distant blended murmur of angry voices. A mob down there, mounting the slope, screaming defiance....

It was as though my words of a moment ago had been prophetic. Tara's people had risen now into sudden murderous revolt!

"Why—why, what is this?" she gasped. Amazement swept her face as she listened to the terrified words of one of her servants. And then her beautiful face contorted with anger, her eyes were flashing as she tossed up her head and squared her shoulders. "Why—why, how dare they—"

She whirled suddenly and dashed through the garden, with me after her, and the panic-stricken guards and servants gathering behind us. At the big archway, where we emerged upon a little ledge-like eminence with a ragged white slope down to the village spread below us, Tara paused, stricken by the tumult of the scene. A mob of a thousand or more, men, women and even children, were milling up the broken ascent. A frenzied, menacing mob. Most of them carried crude weapons—shafts of pointed ice, knives of polished stone; others primitive implements of agriculture.

At Tara's appearance on the little height, a great shout went up. Those in front, halfway up the slope now, momentarily paused, but the milling throng behind shoved against them, screaming threats, waving their weapons. A leaderless mob? And then I saw the tall figure of Zogg. Not in the front ranks, but a little farther down. He was shoving, shouting, inciting them forward. Then with a prodigious leap he was on a boulder, screaming up at Tara, wildly waving at the milling crowd, exhorting them forward.

The thought stabbed at me: Had the crafty Carruthers contrived this? Working upon Zogg, showing him how he could raise himself into power here in his little world by promising these people things which poor Tara had not been able to give them? Had Carruthers, Duroh and Alan contrived to be released? In that stricken moment I stared down at the frenzied, milling throng, expecting perhaps to see them down there. But I did not.

"Tara, good Lord—" I gasped.

An imperious sweep of her arm shoved me back. Then, with her little figure drawn to its full height, she stepped to the brink of the ledge, with her arms raised as she confronted the murderous mob!

VIII

For that instant the imperious, angry figure of Tara checked the climbing rabble. Their shouts rose higher, but as she grimly gestured, the shouts died into a low muttering murmur. And then she began speaking. For just a moment her imperious words in their own tongue held them. Most of them had stopped milling now, staring up at her, muttering sullenly. Her voice rose above it. Then from his rock, Zogg was shouting and the mob caught it up, mutterings that rose again into screams as the rear ranks again began shoving forward.

Poor little Tara. For an instant she tried to shout above the din. And then suddenly she stopped, dropped her arms and on her face was the pathos of disillusionment. Her father's ideals, bred in her, clattering down now like a house of cards upon her.

The mob, frenzied again, was surging up the slope now. A thrown missile came hurtling past us, a rock that crashed into a lacery of ice-veil above us and brought it down upon us. Then other rocks, stones, a variety of missiles showered us. Behind me I was aware that the terrified servants and Tara's guards had fled.

"Tara," I gasped. "No use—"

I gripped her, trying to draw her away; and she stared at me with eyes in which tears now were gathering. "Oh, John—"

"Come—run," I muttered. "You lead us—out to the upper surface—"

We started back into the garden....

"Here they are, damn them—"

It was Duroh's growling, triumphant voice! I whirled. He and Carruthers were here in the garden glade, with Alan behind them. Near them were two or three of the little white Zurian guards who evidently had released them. They stood confused as Carruthers, snarling, whipped out a heat-gun and leaped for me. Its sizzling violet bolt stabbed, missed me as I leaped under it; and I struck him with my lowered head. We went down, rolling, locked together in wild scrambling combat. Above us, as we lunged and struggled with flailing fists, I could see that Duroh had gestured at Alan to help Carruthers. He himself had leaped for Tara, seized her as she fought like a little wildcat, with a knife in her hand now, trying to stab him. Carruthers' gun had dropped from his hand with my onslaught. He was a damnably agile fellow. He twisted on top of me, his hands fumbling at my throat to strangle me.

The confused, terrified Zurians had decamped. I saw in that second that Alan, unarmed, was standing numbed. Duroh thought he would leap to finish me up, of course. But he did not. Suddenly Alan seemed to realize that Duroh's huge arms were around Tara, his hand twisting the knife from her, his leering, grinning face pressing down with a caress upon hers.

And then Alan swiftly stooped, seized a blue-white ragged chunk of ice at his feet, and leaped at Duroh. The huge ice-chunk crashed on Duroh's head

and he fell, with the raging little Alan upon him, crashing his head again and again. But the knife in Duroh's hand was stabbing....

"Got you—" Carruthers leered. His hands throttled me. He did not see what was going on above him as he sprawled down upon me while momentarily I lay limp. But he didn't have me. My sudden unexpected heave caught him off balance, broke his hold on my throat. And I tumbled him off. The little heat-gun was lying here and I seized it. Its bolt seared full into his face, shriveling, blackening the flesh with a ghastly stench. He was dead in that second, with his face a bubbling, pulpy mass of horror.

"John—he—he's stabbed—dying—"

Tara's voice called to me as I rose. Duroh, with his skull cracked, was dead, and beside him Alan lay with Duroh's knife buried in his chest, a ghastly crimson stain spreading over his shirt-front. His eyes were open, glazing. They seemed to focus on me, and his lips, on which bloody foam was gathering, twisted into a smile. Then he gasped faintly.

"I did something worthwhile—in my new world—didn't I? That's—good—I guess I'm—glad—"

A gush of blood from his mouth choked him. Tara was down beside him, her hand on his. He was trying to smile at her as the light went out of his eyes and he died.

"Oh, John—"

I was aware that the shouts from the oncoming mob were much louder now. Rocks were clattering into the arcade opening.

"Tara—we've got to—"

It seemed too late. In the opening three or four of the mob appeared, brandishing their weapons. My gun spat its sizzling bolt. One of the men screamed, leaped and fell. The others scattered as I ran forward. On the ledge, with Tara behind me, I stared down at the advancing mob. The first milling ranks of it were hardly more than fifty feet from the top. My bolt hissed again; another man fell....



"John—oh, please—my people—" Tara's hand checked me. But I could not be sure, if we tried to retreat, but that the frenzied throng would be able to overtake us. Then with sudden thought I adjusted the gun to a spreading heat-beam. The wave of heat leaped down—again and again—heat diffused over a wide area, not intense enough to kill. But before it the leaders of the Zurians staggered back, terrified, with their hands before their faces. The mob behind them wavered. Down at the bottom of the slope, others were pressing upward. In a moment it was a milling, scrambling crowd with panic spreading. And then the wavering ranks of it began rolling back until it was a rout....

"Tara, come—hurry—they'll be after us in a moment—"

White-faced, with sorrow in her eyes mingled with wonderment, as though still she could not believe this catastrophe, she nodded. She led me as we ran, plunging down into the maze of tortuous corridors. Breathless, panting, we ran; rested a moment in a dim, glowing passage—and ran again.

"Oh, John—"

"Don't talk, Tara—keep going—"

It seemed that we could hear muffled shouts far behind us. But presently we outdistanced them, and then at last, after an eternity, we came safely out onto the upper surface.

It was night; glittering starlight on this doomed little world, heading for the heat of our giant sun.

And there, quite near us, was the dark little globe of the *Planeteer*, with the starlight glittering on its glassite dome-top.

"Wait, Tara—just a moment—" Unexpectedly, here on the sloshing half-melted surface, I came upon the pickaxe, shovel and big canvas bags, which Carruthers had dropped here when we were captured. The sword-slash of gray Xalite ore was visible, a gleaming inlay in the cliff-face nearby. I ran there. It chipped out readily under the axe and then I shoveled it up, stuffed a hundred pounds or so of it into a bag and staggered away.

The *Planeteer*. Never was anything so welcome as that lower little door-oval. I tossed the bag into it. Barely in time. From over by the cliff, the first of the pursuing Zurians were pouring out.

"Hurry! Get inside, Tara—I'll close the door—"

Mutely she obeyed. The oncoming Zurians were led by a huge figure. Zogg. Grimly I leveled my gun, sizzled a bolt which struck him full, crumpled him. It checked the others for a moment as I slammed the *Planeteer's* door and with Tara rushed up to its upper control turret. The mechanisms hummed as they went into operation.

And then slowly, silently, we lifted. The Zurians were in a horde down there around the *Planeteer*, milling and scrambling. A few of them dropped off as we rose, up into the starlight with the strange little world sliding away beneath us.

"Tell me more of what I will see on earth," Tara said.

The *Planeteer's* journey was nearing its end. In the pale glittering starlight, Tara and I sat in the control room, watching the approaching earth, which was spread in a great crescent before us.

"You're too warm, Tara?"

"No, I'm getting used to it."

"The cold, on Zura—you never felt it?"

"I was born to that," she said. "My father, when I was a little girl, he did everything to make me fitted for it. But I will like earth's warmth."

Then again, as a hundred times before, I was telling her of earth—the things that we were going to do there together. She was seated now on a blanket on the floor-grid. Her knees were hunched up to her chin, with her hands clasping them and her eager little face over her rounded knees turned to me. Just an interested little earthgirl, making plans.

And presently I sat beside her on the blanket, with my arm around her, and her head tilted so that her cheek was resting against my shoulder. Then we fell silent as we stared out to the approaching crescent of earth.

Good or bad—our world.

[The end of *Revolt in the Ice Kingdom* by Cummings, Ray]