

# PLANET STORIES

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS  
—THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

20c

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## THE WAR-NYMPHS OF VENUS

A NOVEL OF EMBATELED WORLDS

by RAY CUMMINGS



J. R. FERN • ROCKLYNNE • KUMMER JR. • C. A. BAKER

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# **THE WAR-NYMPHS of VENUS**

**By RAY CUMMINGS**

**The voluptuous golden civilization of Arron was doomed. Licentious laughter echoed through the water-kingdom, unmindful of the relentless, clanking invasion of the Gorts. What fools, this handful of warrior-maidens led by a puny Earthman, to pit their thin strength against Tollgamo's iron army!**

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I was fishing for tarpon, lolling back in the stern of my small boat. The outboard motor, running at trolling speed, was a pattering purr in the drowsing watery silence. It was sunset of a summer evening of 1948. The Gulf of Mexico, out beyond the mouth of the little Florida bayou inlet across which I was heading, was a glassy expanse, blood-red in the light of the huge setting sun.

To the south lightning was playing along the orange sky. I recall that a vague uneasiness was upon me. Because a storm might be coming? Surely it was not that. I was within three miles of the small island where young Jack Allen and I were camping. It was my intention to head for there presently, especially as there had been no sign of tarpon. Allen had been too lazy to come fishing; he had said he would loaf and have supper ready for us at dark.

My name is Kent Fanning. Jack Allen and I were of an age—twenty-four, that summer. With our business in New York, we were here on vacation, having a permit to fish and to camp on the small, uninhabited island.

The intermittent lightning at the southern horizon rose higher. Faint muttering thunder was audible. A massive grey-white cloud was down there now, a thunderhead, coming northward with the storm behind it. I had decided to pull in my line and head for the island when suddenly I had a strike, the big reel humming as the line went out. A tarpon? I hooked it, shut off the motor, sat erect with my stout rod braced in the leather socket of my belt. I was prepared for a long struggle.

And then, two hundred yards or so from me, the water broke with a floundering splash. I gasped, stared numbed. A floundering, oblong pink-white thing was there at the end of my line. A slim white arm flailed up as the thing turned, swimming on the surface frantically away from me. Pink-white limbs gleaming in the moonlight. Streaming tawny hair, like seaweed—hair in which my hook seemed to be caught.

A girl! I had her at the boat in a moment, floundering in the moonlight, gasping, still trying to twist around and disentangle my hook from her long streaming hair. A small, slim figure, white-limbed yet flushed like moonlit coral. There was a brief dangling robe wetly clinging to her. It was of

gleaming lustrous green as though perhaps it was a fabric of softly woven metal, painted green by the sea.

An extraordinary yet very human girl.

Just a few seconds of my stricken amazement. I recall that I gasped inanely.

"Well—why good Heavens—"

Her gasping laugh rippled like the splashing water in the moonlight. "Sorry! I got some frightened to be confused."

English! Strangely intoned with little rippling liquid syllables. Like nothing I had ever heard before and yet my own language.

She had pulled my hook from the gleaming tawny tresses of her hair. Then she flung up a coral-white arm. I bent, seized her wrist, drew her up and she came with a nimble, skilled little leap and landed on her feet in the boat beside me!

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## II

I find myself now somewhat at a loss accurately and yet succinctly to depict that next hour or two. You who read this of course have heard much of the strange affair from newscasters and from the public prints. Garbled reports, some of them. Others pedantic with technical details of science. I am no scientist. It is my purpose here merely to give a factual account of the weird incidents which brought to me, Kent Fanning, a person certainly of no importance save perhaps to myself, a sudden prominence not in one world, but in two.

Queer that throughout my lifetime there had always been talk that some day, here on Earth, scientists would discover the secret of spaceflight; that then intrepid adventurers would journey out into space. But as you all know now, the reverse, so seldom anticipated, was true. Another world came to us, in the person of this strange Venus girl; came indeed by utter chance, or destiny if you will; to me.

Venus; the Earth. Of all known planets, the two most close, and most alike. There are things brewing in the Universe of which none of us can be aware, of course. A myriad things. And here was one of them. Unknown to us, Venus and the Earth already were intermingled, fused into the beautiful little

person of this strange girl—the blood of Venus, the blood of Earth flowing in her veins.

You had not heard of George Peters, doubtless. Nor had I! A research chemist and physicist, in New York City, about 1930. He was a young man then; I think, twenty-eight. He sought no publicity. A wealthy man. With some twenty companions, all of them scientists, some of them older than himself, he was working, not on the secret of spaceflight, but with a ray—a vibration—which he hoped might reach some distant planet, as a means of communication if there should be inhabitants there.

Ironically he did not know he had succeeded! And it was men from Venus—the villainous Tollgamo of whom now you have heard so much—who was attracted by his signals and came to him; abducting him and his companions so that all that was known, here on earth was that one morning George Peters' laboratory was found wrecked, and he and his companions were gone.

"George Peters, that is my father," the girl was telling me now as I headed the small open boat for the island where young Allen and I were camping.

And she had come to Earth—the first time in her sixteen years that she had been off Venus; stolen a small spaceflight cylinder from her father. Her Venus people needed help from the threat of Tollgamo. All that was good and beautiful on Venus and in her Arone world of love and music and beauty, was to be destroyed by the monstrous threat of this Dictator from his mechanized realm of the Gorts.

"Wait," I said, as she poured it at me, at times only half coherent. "You came here to Earth, for help? You came alone?"

"Yes. You have not, father thinks, yet discovered the secret of spaceflight. He was sending the cylinder, with drawings and scientific details of how spaceflight was accomplished by Tollgamo and his evil men. And so I came. We want that you should build a spaceship and come to Venus. Your men, and some of your weapons of war, to help us fight Tollgamo."

And she had dropped here into the Gulf of Mexico, wrecked the little one-man space-vehicle so that she barely escaped with her life. And it sank, with its secret of spaceflight obliterated by the sea, even if by some chance the little metal mechanisms themselves could be recovered.

I think that she had given no thought to that realization as she swam to save herself and suddenly found my trolling hooks entangled in her hair. Nereid

of the sea. Far more like her Venus mother than her Earth father, water was almost her natural element, since her blood did not need the replenishment of oxygen so quickly as ours, so that for ten minutes or more she need not breathe.

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I learned only fragmentary details of all this that Midge Peters had to tell, there in the boat as we headed for the island. Surely I must admit that the weirdness of it startled me, and for just a moment perhaps, it vaguely occurred to me that here was some trickster, or a mentality unbalanced. But to look at her, was to know that certainly here was no Earth girl!

I had to believe her. But I must admit, I gave little thought, there in the boat, to any menace to her world, or to the ironic fact that she had brought to Earth the treasured secret of spaceflight and already had lost it so that she was marooned here. Here was the amazing, beautiful little creature herself in the boat beside me, and what she was saying of Venus dwindled into insignificance with the stirring of my pulses as I stared at her. Slim little body, hardly matured, but fashioned with almost a normal earthly beauty. Yet there was a strangeness that made her different. The flush of pink coral to her flesh; her shimmering robe with moonbeams rippling on it like moonrays on green rippled water; her long tawny tresses, drying now in the wind.

But most of all, I think, the strangeness was in her eyes. The sea was there in the green depths of her eyes. Eyes that mirrored the soul of a strange girlhood; eyes that had seen things strange to me, reflecting now the thoughts, emotions of another world.

"You look at me so queerly," she said suddenly. "Why is that?"

"Well you—you—" Suddenly it was hard to say anything of my conflicting thoughts. "You—well, why wouldn't I be startled? A little sea nymph. You should have been named Nereid."

Again her laugh rippled.

"Nereid? Why yes, my father calls me that, though my mother named me Midge. That was when she learned English. So I am not like Earth-girls? My father has said it many times. But you—"



Her gaze at me was earnest, direct. "You do not look queer to me," she added. "You look much in the fashion of my father, grown younger."

Surely I have given only a vague picture indeed of that half hour in the boat with Nereid as the puttering little outboard motor drove us to the island where Jack Allen would be waiting for me. Half an hour, so crowded with my first jumbled impressions of what Nereid's weird Venus-world must be like.

"That is your island?" Nereid said suddenly. "Why—it looks very pretty."

The storm still was rising in the south—occasional bursts of lightning and rolling, reverberating thunderclaps. But the starlight and moonlight was over us. It silvered the island palms; it lay like white metal on the sand of the island's shore.

I headed us into the little cove. A small dilapidated dock was there. On a little rise behind the palmetto fringe, under the palm trees, a shaft of moonlight gleamed on the white of our tent. I thought that young Allen would have heard the putt-putt of my motor and be down at the dock now to greet me. But there was no sign of him.

I shut off the motor. Silence leaped at us.

"Queer," I said. "Jack promised he'd have supper ready."

The glow of campfire beside the tent was visible. In the silence I could hear the murmur of music from our little portable radio. Allen must have been here only a few minutes ago. I called,

"Oh Jack—Jack, where are you?"

There was only the roll of my words, echoing into silence. Very queer.

Nereid was in the bow of that boat. "Fend us off," I said as we glided to the dock.

This weird girl. Water, almost her native element so that suddenly she dove over the bow. Flash of coral limbs, green-sheathed little body and streaming tawny hair. There was hardly a splash as she slipped into the water and then was swimming backward against our gliding little boat. It slid to the dock, gently eased up, and Nereid was gone.

For a moment I held my breath, with my heart pounding. Foolish apprehension. Abruptly she appeared, out in the middle of the cove, head

and shoulders bobbing up as she shook the water from her tresses and flung up an arm to greet me.

"Come back here," I called.

The silent cove echoed with the ripple of her laugh. With weaving limbs, incredibly swiftly her body slid through the water; submerged again, and she came up laughing, like a dog shaking herself as she jumped to the dock.

"Some day we will swim together, Kent." Again she flung me that sidelong glance of coquetry. "And if you swim like my father, without much trouble I could drown you. You think so?"

"No argument on that," I said. Queerly I seemed to feel, just for that instant, almost a vague resentment. Resentment of a man at the superior prowess of a woman. Instinctive, of course.

She seemed to understand it, and she laughed again. "Our young men of Venus are like that," she said, "for they, too, cannot swim very well." And instantly her face clouded. "That, too, is part of the trouble of my world—the men who would have their mates kept from the water so that the man may be in everything the master. Our virgins do not like that."

She clung to my hand as we went up the palmetto-lined path to the camp. And suddenly she seemed frightened. An aura of sudden menace was here. I, too, could feel it. Allen had started supper. The things were out; food was in the frying pan, burning now in a charred mass over the campfire flames.

"Kent—something wrong—"

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We stood tense. Like animals abruptly scenting danger, yet having no least idea what it was, or from whence it could come.... And abruptly in the silence, the murmuring little radio here changed from music to a newscaster's flash.

"Nereid listen—news of you—" I murmured.

Something had been seen, late this afternoon, dropping swiftly from the sky—something, a meteorite?—the few eyewitnesses differed in trying to describe it. "*Mysterious missile drops into the Gulf ten miles off lonely Palmetto Key.*" The newscaster drew on his imagination, conjecturing what the round shining thing could have been, which two fishing boats had

reported seeing coming hurtling down from the afternoon sky, dropping into the glassy Gulf.

I smiled at Nereid as for a moment we stood listening. Her little falling space-cylinder already was causing comment. I could envisage the incredulous amazement of the authorities at Tampa when I took her there, told them who she was. The world would ring with it. Blaring newscasters: *"Stranded Venus girl! Marooned on Earth! Venus inhabited! Venus threatened with bloody revolution! Appeals to Earth for help! Daughter of two worlds brings secret of spaceflight to Earth, and loses it on her arrival!"*

And some would try to be humorous: *"Girl from Venus brings gift of spaceflight secret, and loses it before she can give it to us! Isn't that what you would expect of a woman?" "Kent Fanning and weird girl try to hoax scientists—"*

Somehow as I thought of it, resentment sprang within me at what this would do to the gentle little Nereid. Allen and I, tomorrow when the storm was over, would have to take her to Tampa, of course. Or perhaps we would take her to some scientific Society, with less publicity. And an effort would be made to recover her cylinder, with its precious secret.

It was my swift flow of thoughts as for that moment the newscaster droned on. And suddenly his voice changed. He had been describing the mysterious falling of what quite evidently had been Nereid's little vehicle. And now another Press Bulletin had reached him.

*"Mysterious airship descends from the stratosphere, lands in the Gulf near Palmetto Key, off west coast of Florida. At sunset tonight—"*

Nereid gripped me with a little gasping cry as we listened. A gleaming metal thing, flatly oblong with a turret globe at bow and stern, had been distantly seen by a tramp freighter which was heading westward into the Gulf, bound for Mexico. A metal ship—blood-red with the sunset on it—slowly floating down; rotating slowly, weirdly on its horizontal axis.... It had been seen to land on the Gulf surface. And then slowly submerge, heading shoreward like a plunging submarine as it vanished!

Nereid murmured, "Tollgamo, he has a ship like that! But my father has none! Oh Kent—"

A spaceship from Venus! Was it that? Following Nereid here to seize her; to prevent her from giving the secret of Interplanetary transportation to Earth!

The newscaster was saying something about U.S. Coast Guard Cutters being ordered from Tampa to investigate.

And from here on little Palmetto Key, young Allen had disappeared! The implication of that struck at me. For a second I stared at Nereid, the firelight gleaming soft and warm on her dripping little body; tinting her pink-coral face which now was stamped with terror.

But we had no more warning than that. The storm was at hand now, and the wind was lashing the upper fronds of the palms; purple darkness here on the island with a flash of lightning and almost simultaneous thunderclap. For that second the palmetto shrubs were whitely illumined by the electric glare. Fifty feet away a big, dark upright shape abruptly was visible. And another—and another! Men stalking us!

The glare died. There was only turgid windy darkness. I must have muttered something to Nereid; my arm went around her as we turned to run back to our boat in the cove. Too late! From the palm woods behind us a violet beam of light stabbed out. It caught us; bathed us. There was a guttural shout; the sound of a little pop and something whizzing with a whining hum through the air. I felt something strike my legs. A little blob which with its impact abruptly uncoiled, and then coiled again as it wrapped itself around my legs so that I crashed heavily to earth face down.

And another had hit my neck. Ghastly thing—quivering steel spring. It felt like that; thin quivering metal encircling my throat. Almost like a thing alive, gripping me with its metal fingers ... strangling me. I was aware that Nereid, too, had fallen. My groping fingers clutched at the strangling band; its sharp edges cut my fingers as futilely I tried to tear it loose. I recall that I lay threshing, lunging, with my legs pinned and my breath gone. Dark figures were standing over me now. Guttural chuckling voices mingled with the roaring torrent of Niagara in my ears. Then the dancing spots before my bulging eyes blurred the gathering dark shapes.

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### III

The roaring in my ears came first as my consciousness struggled back. My fumbling fingers felt my throat. The band was gone; the skin was swollen there. Then I knew that I was bathed in the cold sweat of weakness and was lying on the metal grid of a floor. The murmur of voices sounded around me;

and I opened my eyes to find myself in a dimly starlit, circular turret room. The control room of a spaceship. It hummed with a throbbing rhythm of its current. But save for that it was queerly still, vibrationless.

We were in space. Through the round, transparent turret walls I could see the blazing stars in a black firmament to one side. The other was shrouded with metal blinds, through the chinks of which dazzling sunlight was showing, so that I knew we had already left the giant cone of the Earth's shadow. Heading partly toward the Sun. Heading for Venus? It seemed so.

Men were here around me. Huge, burly, strangely garbed men—one at the controls, where banks of levers and dials with quivering indicators were ranged in rows with a line of little fluorescent globes diagonally across them. Two other men sat softly talking together; guttural, unintelligible words. Weird figures indeed. At first glance they could have been towering robots; wide, square shoulders, rectangular bodies, round tubular, jointed legs. The starlight glinted on their burnished, grey-white metal casements. Then as they moved, I saw that their garments were of flexible woven metal.

The one at the controls was bareheaded, a round bullet head of close-cropped black hair. His face was heavy; skin queerly grey-white. Weird features, with a protruding chin and long hawk nose so that the mouth was a greylipped slit, depressed between the projections of his nose and lower jaw. And he had deep-set, round dark eyes under shaven black brows.

Men of science. Humans whose life was of such efficient, mechanical rigidity that they themselves had the aspect of machines. Worshipers of precision; of mechanization. The aura of it was on them.

I saw that one of them was sitting impassive, stiffly erect in his metal garments with his gaze roving me like a guard. Strange, jewel-like little weapons were at his waist and in pouches of his metal jacket. On his head was a metal, peaked helmet—its peak fashioned in the form of a hawk-like bird, poised for screaming flight. Across the starlit circular room, another of the men was sitting, gazing out at the firmament. A man? I stared with a new amazement. The same square, jointed metal garments. But the hips were wider, the shoulders more narrow. A woman, of this mechanized race of Gorts. Her breast swelled beneath her mailed tunic. Her hair was black, long to the base of her neck, covering her ears. A shining black metal band was around her forehead, holding the hair from her eyes.

Strange, powerful Amazon. She was a good six feet tall; her face was hawk-nosed like the men, but with lips that were fuller, of a reddish tinge. Then as

I stared, the man at the controls called to her:

"Garga—"

She rose; moved to him. Her dangling weapons, and a huge metal ornament on her bosom, clanked as she walked. At the control table the leader gave her orders; guttural crisp words unintelligible to me. She nodded; went to a small table across the room, where with charts and computations she seemed figuring the course of our flight.

Garga, woman of the Gorts. Mechanized womanhood, with all that womanhood stands for in my own world submerged within her so that she was a mere female machine. And suddenly my mind, still dazed now in these first moments of my returning consciousness, swept back to Nereid. Strange world, this Venus, to hold two such contrasting types of female! What a gulf between them!

Where was Nereid now? Had she been killed in that attack upon us? Anxiety swept me. I had struggled up on one elbow. The watching Gort saw me; he muttered an exclamation and the man at the controls came clanking to his feet. A giant fellow, well over six feet. His slit of mouth widened with a grin like a gash between his nose and chin as he bent down over me.

"You—still alive?" he greeted. "What your name?"

I sat up, still rubbing my bruised throat. "Kent Fanning," I said. "So you talk English? There was a girl with me, back there on that island. Where is she?"

He gestured blandly. "She safe. Daughter of Peters. Tollgamo wants her not injured. He will like you too, I think perhaps. You have scientific skill of Earth science?"

I would be kept alive for the knowledge I might have. "Well, maybe," I said. "Where is Peters' daughter? I want to see her. Where are you taking us? To Venus?"

"You ask too much quick questions," he retorted. His grey knuckles rapped his mailed chest. "I am Rhool, second to Tollgamo. I talk with you some else time. Maybe you teach me more the English? Eh?"

"Where is Peters' daughter?" I insisted. I was on my feet, still dizzy; and as I staggered a little, I clutched Rhool's metal clothed arm. It angered, or perhaps startled him. With a sweeping gesture, incredibly powerful, his arm flung me aside. His guttural barking command brought the woman Garga with a pounce.

I have not mentioned that I am a bit under six feet in height; slim and dark. Not very powerful; but I have, my friends tell me, a temper somewhat flaring so that in a rough and tumble fight I usually can take care of myself. But the glare in Rhool's eyes warned me that this was a time when discretion certainly was better than valor. The woman Garga towered an inch or so over me; her fingers gripped my shoulders.

"So?" she muttered. "You think to cause trouble?"

I summoned a grim smile. "I do not. I want to be taken to Peters' daughter. Where is she?"

Rhool, back at his instrument table now, barked a command; and the metal-clad Gort woman shoved me. "You come with me. I take you."

To Nereid? I hoped so. Docilely I preceded Garga along a glowing humming little metal corridor of the spaceship. She said nothing more, but flung open a small metal door after unbarring its fastenings, shoved me in and banged it upon me.

I found myself in a small metal sleeping apartment. Brilliant starlight filtered in through its single bullseye pane. A figure was in the corner on a fabric couch.

"You Kent? Good Lord."

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It was Jack Allen. They had pounced on him, back there on Palmetto Key. I sat with him now, telling him of the weird things which had happened to me; telling him of Nereid.

He stared. "Good Lord, Kent—well, I understand it better now."

There were things that he had learned; and as he told them to me, Nereid's only half-coherent story began to clarify.

"That woman Garga," Allen was saying with his ready grin, "I get along fine with her. Pumped a lot of facts out of her."

Physically, Allen and I are of quite different types, which is perhaps why we are such friends. He says I have a romantic, sort of poetic look—from my mother, who was Spanish. And that, he says, goes with a bad temper. However that may be, certainly he was always the opposite. A giant, blond fellow; six feet four; rugged, sun-bronzed, like a young Viking. And he had

an almost unfailing good nature. A slow, quiet smile. Slow of movement; usually somewhat lazy. But there were times, rare intervals, when he was angered. His movements were panther-like then, and I wouldn't like to be the one to meet him in a fight.

"That Garga woman likes me," he grinned. He lowered his voice as he leaned toward me. "She looks like a machine, but still she's a woman. Get the idea? If we ever get out of this, that might be the way."

And then he told me what he knew of Nereid's strange Venus world. The realm of the Arones was in a lush forest, the tropic region. Compared to our Earth population, there were not many of the Arones. Half a million perhaps, in little Forest and Water villages, with twenty thousand in the chief city, known as Arron.... How shall I attempt even an outline of the ethnological history of Venus? I can give only the barest suggestion of it. In former ages doubtless there had been millions of humans on this, Earth's sister planet. A civilization rising to great heights of science, with all the planet's surface mastered by man. And then decadence had come. Mankind resting; then drifting backward. Dwindling in number; with science forgotten, put aside as a memory, a tradition. And slowly but inexorably the monstrous animals, insects, the weird vegetation again took primitive possession of most of the globe.

"So that's your Nereid's people," Allen was saying. "Decadent—soft now—trying to accomplish nothing."

Except human happiness. I recalled Nereid's words of her world, living for love and music and beauty. Strange how in all human affairs there are two sides of looking at everything! I said something like that to Allen, and he nodded.

"The trouble with science," he agreed, "is that it can be so easily perverted. Things to benefit mankind, turned into engines of death. That's the recent history of our own world."

And the Arones had gone to the other extreme. Science was banned. Men and women should live for human happiness, with no thought of conquest, or of personal power. And out of this, a few generations ago, had risen the Gorts. They had been for centuries a nomadic race of giants, mere savages roaming the barren parts of the planet. Few in number, and like the savages of our own Earth, apparently doomed to extinction. Banished criminals from the world of the Arones, generations back, had joined them, brought them science—stolen things of science.



And out of this sprang the Gort, Tollgamo. His father had started it: Tollgamo, the son, carried it on. He was a genius, of course. A genius with mad dreams. To mechanize his little world. There were only a few thousand of them now. Men and women making themselves into machines; fed by Tollgamo upon his own mad dreams of Venus conquest.

He had discovered the secret of spaceflight, which before him, on Venus, had never been known. Peters' Earth-signals had attracted him, and quietly he had gone to Earth, and seized Peters and his men; bringing them to Venus so that they might tell him all they knew of their science. It would be useful, that future day when he would attempt to conquer the Arones.

Most, perhaps all, of Peters' men were dead now; killed, possibly by Tollgamo, when their usefulness to him was finished. But Peters had escaped; gone to the Arones. And telling them their danger, had made himself the leader of the revival of their science. All Nereid's life, her father, with a group of men he had trained, had feverishly been working in the city of Arron, to build weapons with which to combat the attack when it came.

All that was known to Tollgamo, of course. He had spies in Arron. Queer how human nature is the same, wherever in the Universe the Creator has planted it! The fatuous, decadent, pleasure-loving leader of the Arones was unwilling to believe that the Gorts could be any menace. The efforts of Peters and his fellow scientists, even now were looked upon with disfavor. Peters and his men were distrusted, even accused of having dreams of conquest of their own. Thousands of the Arones thought it, so that there was an undercurrent of strife in Arron, fostered, of course, by Tollgamo's spies.

"And now Tollgamo seems to be about ready for his attack," Allen was telling me. "Peters probably has no weapons of any importance with which to oppose him. And so Peters made an effort to get help from Earth. Tollgamo found it out, and sent this ship to follow the girl so as to keep her from giving the secret of spaceflight to Earth."

The barred metal door of our little cubby suddenly opened. A Gort man stood there. Allen and I stared. Like the other Gorts, he was encased in shining mailed garments. But he was crippled, bent and twisted, with one shoulder higher than the other and a lump on his bent back. On him, the metal garments were grotesque. He came sidling in, grinning at us with his ugly, puffed and bloated grey-skinned face.

"I am Borgg," he said. "You will have food and drink soon. You hungry?"

"I want to see the Peters girl," I retorted. "Take me to her."

He shook his head. "Garga will take care of her. She is safe."

His glowing, dark-eyed gaze roved us. Out in the corridor there was a man's voice—one of the other Gorts passing. And the weird, shambling hunchback suddenly burst into guttural laughter. "So the Earthmen are afraid of me? Afraid of Borgg, who wants only to amuse people?"

He suddenly backed away from us, hurling what seemed a stream of invective at us in the guttural syllables of his own language. Then he backed through our door, slammed it upon us and bolted it.

We stared at each other blankly. "Well I'll be damned," Allen muttered. "What could that mean?"

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I can only sketch the weird events of that voyage to Venus. My first spaceflight. You who read this can anticipate taking one soon, of course. And you are naturally familiar with the glowing words of description the newscasters have used. With the mechanical details of Interplanetary traveling, the more scientific-minded among you must be thoroughly familiar. I think all that need have little place in my narrative. Human motives; human conflicts. The things of actuality which happened to me, to Jack Allen, to little Nereid—with those things only am I concerned here.

There were some ten men and five of the grim Gort women, here on the space vehicle. By Earth routine of living, it could have been five or six days. After the first time of sleep, Allen and I were given a fair freedom of movement. Much of it we spent in the control turret, with Rhool, the leader here. Tollgamo's lieutenant was well pleased with himself. He was bringing Nereid back. He had learned from her that her little space-cylinder was lost at the bottom of the sea on Earth. What Tollgamo had ordered, Rhool had accomplished, with efficiency which would bring him commendation. And he was bringing Allen and me back, Earthmen whom Tollgamo doubtless would very much want to question.

"You tell him much—he treat you well," Rhool assured us with his heavy leer. He was, I could see, far more impressed with Allen than with me; Allen who now was winning his confidence, pretending that there was much he could tell Tollgamo; hinting even that he and I would not be averse to joining the great Master of the Gorts in his schemes of conquest.

Nereid was unharmed. The woman Garga was caring for her; and on the third day from Earth, Allen persuaded Garga to bring Nereid to the turret. After that, Nereid was often with us, and her fragile, delicate beauty here among the grey, metal-clad Gorts made her seem ethereal indeed. She came to my side, with her face lighting up.

"I was afraid they had killed you," she whispered. "Bad time for us all, my Earth-friend. I—I did very badly on my adventure to Earth."

She told us then that her father had built the little cylinder, intending to send one of his men in it. But Nereid, who had learned its operation, had stolen it.

Then suddenly she was whispering to us, that the Gorts in the turret might not hear. "I have a brother—my twin—his name is Leh. Tollgamo does not know there is such a person." She shot a furtive glance around the turret. "For several years he has been living with the Gorts. Pretending he is one of them. From him, father has gotten much information of Tollgamo's plans. It would be death to Leh if who he is were known. And now I will tell you—Leh is—"

A guttural shout from Rhool at the control table checked her.

"He says, stop whispering," she murmured. "That other thing I will tell you later.... I speak the English," she said to Rhool. "You speak it too? Then we talk it here, so that these Earthmen may understand?"

Rhool laughed. His heavy dark gaze roved her. "You very beautiful," he said. "See—I talk English. Come sit by me. The starshine makes you beautiful, girl of Arron."

I tensed, with my heart pounding as I saw his darkly leering gaze rove over her again.

"Easy!" whispered Allen. "Don't start anything."

Then at last Venus had grown to a full-round, glowing silver disk before our bow. After the next time of sleep it was a monstrous ball, filling half the firmament, mottled with clouds so that its surface configurations were only vaguely apparent. Heavy, thick Venus atmosphere. Within another day of our living routine we dropped into it, sliding diagonally downward, with slackening velocity now and rocket streams of fluorescent gases to check and guide us.

With Rhool and Nereid I was in the starlit turret. It was night here, the Venus night of atmospheric fog. Rhool had been drinking from a little gourd at his

belt, and was flushed with his triumph and the liquor.

"A few hours," he said to Nereid. "Then I give you to Tollgamo." His arm went suddenly around her waist, drawing her against him. What he was muttering in his own language I had no idea; but as she cried out, struggling with him, I jumped.

"That's enough from you—let her alone!" I rasped.

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He cast her off, leaped to his feet. Rage darkened his heavy face so that it seemed to blacken. My lunging jab struck his mailed chest, but my swing at his face missed him. He jumped backward, with a hand going to a weapon at his belt. I have no doubt that I would have been dead in another few seconds. But there were shouts behind me; the woman Garga and Allen coming from the corridor. Garga's guttural remonstrance checked the angry Rhool. And then Borgg, the weird little hunchback, came shambling forward.

"Stop it!" Allen shouted at me. "Easy there, you idiot!"

Borgg grabbed me. As I fought, his mouth jabbed against my ear. His voice was a sibilant whisper. "Fight me—not too hard! I am Leh—her brother!"

Nereid's brother! Spy among the Gorts, for years masquerading in this grotesque guise of half-demented hunchback jester! I struggled with him now as he cuffed me, while Nereid stared terrified and Rhool laughed with coarse ribald amusement, appeased that I was being beaten.

And then Leh shoved me from the turret, dragged me down the corridor, slammed me into my sleeping cubby. Again his mouth was to my ear.

"Later tonight, I will try and turn you loose. And your friend Allen, and my sister."

In a swift whisper he told me his plans. At the ship's lower exit porte he had hidden a small anti-gravity platform, and three pressure suits. We could escape from there. He shoved the door upon me, barred it and was gone.

I sat tense in the darkness, those last hours. Through the bullseye window the Venus clouds were an opalescent haze of weird glowing luminosity, like phosphorescence in tropic water. It seemed inherent to the cloud-vapours;

but more than that I could see that it was radiating up from below. Venus-shine. Pale and weirdly beautiful light inherent to the planet herself.

And then our little ship sank below the clouds, and the surface of Venus lay spread some ten thousand feet below me. It was an amazing world of lush shining forests and gleaming, rippling opalescent water. We were near the country of the Arones; but for just a moment, beyond the shining sea, tiers of black metal mountains were visible which I knew to be the country of the Gorts.

The rasp of my door softly opening made me turn. The grotesque hunched form of Nereid's brother stood there, with a hand in a silencing gesture to his mouth.

"Most of them are in the forward control turret. You go down into the hull to the exit porte. My sister and Allen will join you."

He shoved me. Then he softly closed my door, barred it, and shambled forward toward the turret, grinning, mumbling an inane little tune. I ducked into a doorway; went down an incline ladder. The hull corridor was dark, with just a small hooded light of green glow. Tense, alert, I came to the pressure porte doorway. And suddenly a figure stirred in the shadows.

"Kent!" It was Nereid, crouching here, waiting for me. I gripped her.

"Where's Jack?"

"My brother said he would send him down. But he has not come."

Then we heard faint footsteps on the incline. And suddenly from up there in the dimness, came Allen's voice:

"Why—why hello, Garga. I didn't see you."

And the Gort woman's voice: "Where you go, Jack Allen?"

"Why—why Rhool said he didn't mind my moving around the ship. Come into the turret, Garga. I want you to show me your world. Don't you think I am going to like it?"

"Maybe. And if Tollgamo like you, Jack Allen—"

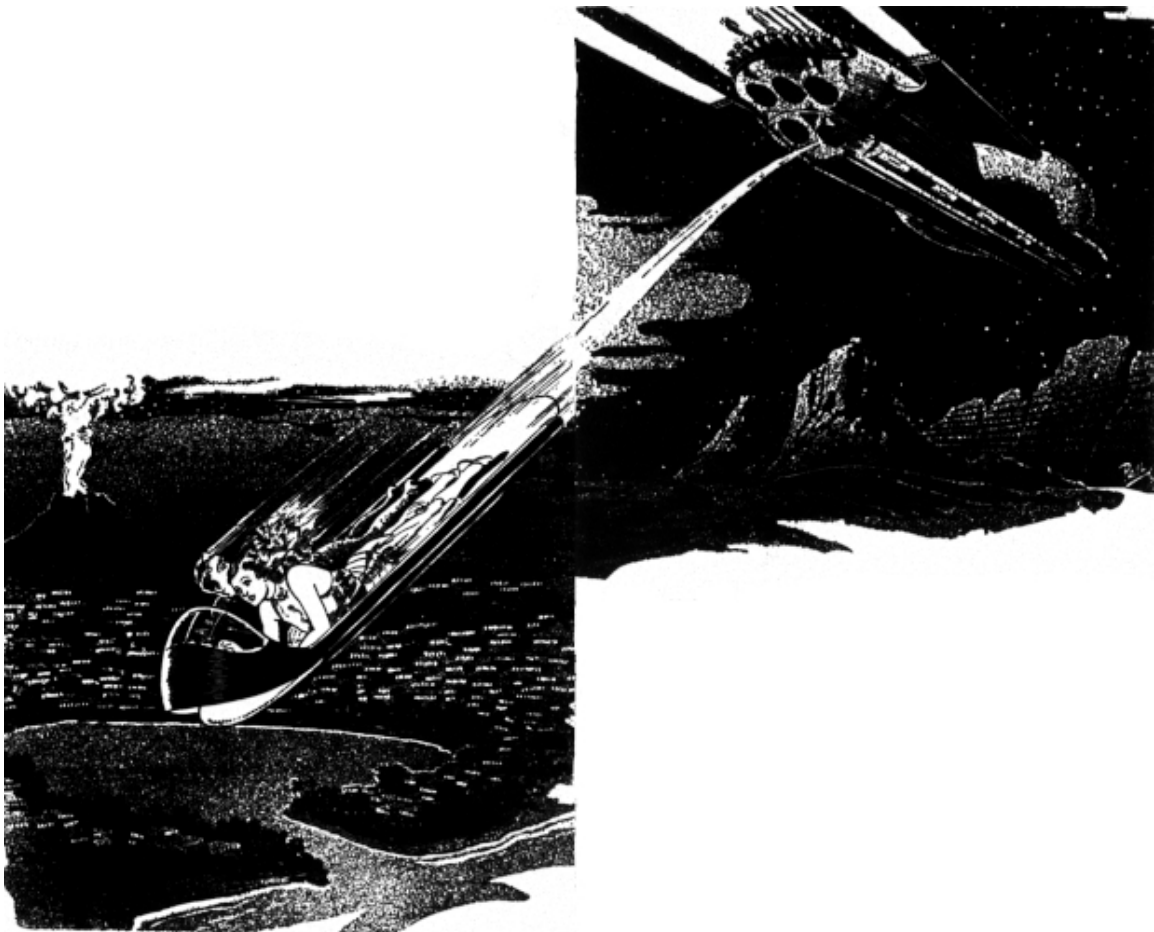
Their voices receded. Allen would make no attempt now to join us, that was obvious. With Garga eager always to be with him, his attempt would be futile.

I whispered it to Nereid.

"We are close to my country now," she murmured. "Too late for us to escape successfully, if we wait much longer."

We did not need the pressure suits which Leh had hidden here, thinking he might find an opportunity for us to disembark while still above the atmosphere. The anti-gravity platform was an oblong, raft-like metallic thing, with its mechanisms under a hood in its bow. Nereid understood its workings. She lay flat upon it as I slid it through the porte and jumped beside her.

We went like a sliding rocket, with a rush of wind that stopped our breath. But the hooded bow partially shielded us, so that presently we could breathe. Behind us, and over us now, the gleaming shape of the spaceship was seemingly sliding upward and backward. Beneath us the shining sea with a glowing shoreline off at the horizon seemed rocking with a crazy sway. And then at last we steadied.



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"Did it!" I gloated. "We made it, Nereid. Evidently they didn't see us rocketing off."

There was no sign of any alarm from the ship and presently it had dwindled high above us and was gone.

Amazingly swift, that downward glide. The wind whistled past us with a screaming whine. At five hundred feet Nereid leveled us as we headed for the glowing shoreline. I could see artificial illumination there now, a myriad little dots of colored lights. And then little colored beams were waving.

"My city—the city of Arron," Nereid said.

It was a few miles back in the forest, where a great shining lagoon opened. A riot of glowing, prismatic color burst upon us; and as Nereid saw it, she sucked in her breath with a little gasp.

"The love festival," she murmured. "Oh why—why would they have that in times like these? With Tollgamo so ready to attack us?"

I stared down with awed amazement at the scene of weird sensuous beauty spread now so close beneath us.

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Allen's first sight of the country of Gorts, as he afterward told me, was a line of terraced hills that rose steeply up from the shore of the placid sea. He was in the controlroom of the Spaceship with Rhool, and with the grim woman Garga beside him. It had been a tense time for Allen, when the escape of Nereid and myself was discovered. But he had been allowed a measure of freedom, whereas I was locked in my cubby. Allen was not suspected, nor, fortunately, was Leh. Two of the Gorts came in for Rhool's wrath.

"Tollgamo will deal with you," he said.

Then Allen spoke up, denouncing me as a traitor to him; claiming that I had agreed to join Tollgamo. "That Peters girl bewitched him," Allen said.

Whether it fooled the big, leering Rhool or not, Allen couldn't tell. Perhaps it did, for Allen now was taken more as one of them, than a prisoner.

The Country of the Gorts! To Allen, as he stared down through the turret window of the spaceship, those terraces of grey metal rock were as grim and

forbidding as the Gort people themselves. In the glowing night-sheen, the barren wastes near the shore seemed utterly without life. And then Allen saw weird vegetation in little patches; and occasionally roaming wild things with round eyes which stared up at the ship. Some of them incuriously stared; others, frightened, scuttled away.

The ship now was following a broad, gleaming inlet of the iridescent sea. Ten Earth-miles or so, to its head where lights gleamed on a terraced hillside. It was Tollgamo's little city. Allen had only a brief glimpse as the ship swooped down and settled into the rack of a metal landing stage. Rows of blue and green lights were strung in half a dozen rows on the terraces, one above the other to mark the streets, with metal ladders vertically connecting them. Metal and stone little houses, polished, grey-blue, lined the streets. At one end of the lower street, close by a promontory bluff where beyond a bridge-like metal ladder a smaller kiosk overlooked the inlet, there was a larger, square building, terraced into three stories. Round spots of dull purple light marked its four corners. On its roof, metal-garbed figures paced back and forth.

"Tollgamo the Master—that is his house," the woman Garga murmured to Allen.

Green-yellow, turgid smoke belched from a chimney-like opening in the cliff, where doubtless, partly underground, a factory was in operation. Figures moved in the grim weird glow of the bleak streets; apparatus was being dragged along one of them. Men and women working; and in the doors and windows of the cubical houses, the figures of children stood peering.

As the ship settled lower, Allen realized that both above and below ground it was a beehive of activity now. And presently he could hear sounds; the clank of metal machinery; the grind of gears; the voices of the workers.

Beside him Allen was suddenly aware of the grotesque, hunched form of Nereid's brother, Leh. Neither of them spoke; and then Leh, with a surreptitious gesture, indicated the shining inlet. Down on the opposite shore of it, a tunnel mouth showed, with a red-yellow glare back under the opposite cliff. A crowd of metal-clad workers, goggled against the glare so that they looked like huge beetle-eyed insects, were struggling with apparatus which they were pulling out.

Leh was tense. Then a moment came where he was able to whisper furtively to Allen. "I will try later to get us to that cliff. Do you see that Kiosk? If we



can get there, we will dive to the water. From there I have a way of escaping."

That was all. Allen had only time to murmur assent. The ship landed. With Rhool half guarding, half leading him, he was taken along the lower street. The workers stood grim, impassive, until they recognized Rhool. Then like machines they stood stiff, with a hand touching the metal insignia of their helmets until Rhool had passed. Even the children stood rigid, saluting. Little bodies drilled to efficiency; impassive childish faces. But in their eyes still there was childhood—excited, wondering childhood.

Rhool and Allen passed the guards at the entrance to Tollgamo's home. In the dim blue-green glow of a metal room Allen was told by Rhool to stand, and Tollgamo would come. Then Rhool was gone. Unseen eyes were watching Allen. He sensed it; and stood stiffly against one wall, awaiting the coming of the Master. It was a strange, square apartment. Blue-lit, so that its richly tiled floor and ceiling glistened like polished steel. The furniture was square, glistening in the light-sheen. At one end of the room a huge polished table with a single big chair at its end, held a variety of small apparatus, a bank of levers and little buttons as though for signalling commands. And there was a neat stack of what seemed to be charts and mathematical data.

A murmur outside the room brought Allen back from his contemplation of his surroundings. Men's voices; a guttural command. Then Rhool came in, walking with stiff, pseudo mechanical tread. On his heavy face was a grinning leer. Behind him there was a Gort man and woman. Allen recognized them; both had been on the spaceship and both were blamed by Rhool for the escape of Nereid and me. They came now marching stiffly erect. Their faces were impassive, but terror was in their eyes and in the tense set of their lips.

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And then at last came Tollgamo. Involuntarily Allen gasped at sight of him.

He was a giant figure of a man, six feet six, at least. Unlike the square, robot appearance of his menials, his garments of grey metal-fabric were soft, and clinging. A flowing tunic fell from his powerfully broad shoulders to below his waist, with a wide, glistening metal belt; trousers which sheathed his powerful, shapely legs; shoes with padded soles so that he moved soundlessly. He was bareheaded, and his black hair, closely clipped, came to

a peak at his forehead. His skin was the familiar Venus grey, but there was a saffron cast to it. His high-bridged nose was hawk-like, his chin protruding, but square—the firm jaw completely characteristic of determination and power.

His thin-lipped mouth, as he came quietly in and surveyed Allen with dark-eyed gaze, was faintly smiling. Allen, standing rigid, silently met the stare. It was then that he felt, far more than in Tollgamo's commanding aspect, the power of the man's personality. A dominant force seemed to radiate from him, so that no one could be in his presence an instant without feeling it. An aura of command that made Allen suddenly feel like a child. Helpless; and with a vague, indefinable shudder within him.

And then Tollgamo spoke. Suave, gentle voice of careful, cultivated English, meticulously correct, yet with a strange foreign intonation.

"So you are one of the Earthmen, Jack Allen?"

"Yes," Allen said; and then remembered Rhool's instructions, so that after a moment he added, "Yes, Master. I give you service."

Tollgamo's faint ironic smile broadened; his glittering dark eyes seemed to hold a twinkle of sardonic amusement, "You learn fast." His gaze darted away; went to Rhool, and then to the Gort man and woman from the spaceship who stood with terror in their eyes.

"I hear that you need punishment," he said gently. "This Earthman will learn from it." His tone, almost drab, was casual, with a slow finality.

With pounding heart, Allen stood watching the metal-clad man and woman as Tollgamo quietly confronted them. The terror leaped from their eyes to stamp their faces. And Tollgamo said quietly,

"That is bad to show fear. That forces the punishment to be worse."

At his gesture, a flick of his jeweled fingers, they bared their grey chests. Tollgamo's hands were at his ornamented belt, each of them leveling a little jeweled weapon. The weapons suddenly hissed, and from each of them a tiny violet pencilray of heat-light sprang. Allen gulped as the beams struck the chests of the two victims, and the grey flesh, turned red, then black as Tollgamo wrote a brand of punishment, an insignia of dishonor. The man stood firm, with a hand still at salute, his slit of mouth twisted as he pressed his lips together in an attempt to restrain his cry of pain.

But the woman involuntarily moaned. It was too much for Allen. He gasped,

"Stop that, you damned torturer! They're not the ones who are guilty anyway! They—"

Tollgamo had finished. He snapped off the tiny rays and slowly turned to where Allen had taken a step toward him. And the smile now was gone from his serene face.

"You are not yet trained," he said quietly. "I forgive you for that—so short a time." Another flick of his hand; and Rhool led the stumbling man and woman away.

The smell of the burning flesh drifted off; and Tollgamo, alone here now, fronted the shuddering Allen. Again he was gently smiling.

"You show weakness?" he said. "I am disappointed. So you know who released that Kent Fanning, and Peters' daughter?"

"No I don't. I'm sorry. That was just my desire to stop you doing that to that woman."

Amusement was in Tollgamo's eyes and twitching at his thin grey lips. "So? You would join me, and still try to lie to me?" His gesture dismissed it. "We will talk of that some other time." For a moment he stood pondering. "That girl—that Peters' daughter," he added. "Rhool tells me she is very beautiful. Is that so?" There seemed a twinkle in his inscrutable eyes.

"Yes," Allen agreed.

"That is interesting. I must see for myself. I think perhaps I must protect her from the things that will happen tonight."

Allen tensed inside. Did he mean that his attack upon the Arones would take place tonight?

"The woman Garga will give you supper," Tollgamo added abruptly. From a ring on his finger a silent light-signal sprang across the room and through a small arcade doorway; and at once Garga appeared there.

"Take him to my rest-room," Tollgamo said. "He is hungry. Give him food. I will send for him later."

"Yes, Master."

Then as Tollgamo moved away, lithe and silent as a great panther, with his padded soles soundless on the metal floor, he said quietly.

"Your thoughts are very transparent, Earthman. But I think you can be of use to me."

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In the small adjoining room, Garga brought Allen food. They ate it together.

"What did he mean by things that will happen tonight?" Allen suddenly murmured.

Garga had been sitting, staring at him with her slumbrous dark gaze. "The attack," she said.

"And Peters doesn't know that?"

"No." Her hand touched him. "I am trusting you."

"Of course," Allen agreed. He recalled how Nereid's brother, Leh, as the spaceship landed, had gazed down at the inlet, across which workers were bringing things from a tunnel to the edge of the water. Leh had sucked in his breath as though with startled surprise.

"The attack," Allen murmured. "Will it be upon the city of Arron?"

"Yes—naturally. And the imbecile slaves there—they think they are going to help." Her grim grey face lighted with a smile. "That will be amusing; those imbecile workers causing bloodshed, making it so easy for us, when we get there."

"Get there—how, Garga? By air?"

Allen felt that Leh now was trying to get just such information as this; and he and Allen would escape—get to Arron and warn Peters. But evidently haste was necessary. By what Tollgamo said, he would be attacking perhaps within a few hours.

"By air?" Garga echoed. "Oh no. By water." She leaned closer to Allen. A woman warrior. But the womanhood in her now was making her bosom rise and fall with her emotion at Allen's nearness. "Under the water," she murmured. "You see how clever we are? That is the last method of attack that the Arones think we will try. There are grottos beneath the city of Arron. Grottos with the sea in them. So that we shall come up that way, appearing all over the city at once." She chuckled. "They will not know there is to be any attack at all. Just trouble with the imbeciles. And suddenly we will be there among them!"

Allen had it now! All the information needed. More than ever now he wanted to connect with Leh, and escape out of here.

"Garga, listen," he murmured, "were you ordered to stay here with me, until Tollgamo sends for me?"

"Yes," she agreed. Her gaze clung to his. "That will not be—too hard for you?"

"No—no, of course not, Garga, but listen—" Abruptly Allen tensed. In a dark doorway nearby, beyond which Allen knew Tollgamo's guards were stationed, a dim blob of figure had appeared. Garga's back was to the door; she did not see the lurking shape. It was a hunched, misshapen silhouette. Leh, in his masquerade as jester, standing there listening.

"Listen," Allen quickly resumed. "There's no reason why you should not show me around a bit, is there? On that cliff quite near here there's a little kiosk that looks over the inlet. You and I—alone there, Garga?"

His hand touched her square, metal-clad shoulder; and at once her hand went up, gripping his. "Perhaps."

"I would like to have you show me what's going on," he urged. "And to sit there with you, just for a little time."

Leh heard it. His hunched figure in the doorway moved and his head nodded assent; and then he drew back, was gone.

"I will get you a cloak," Garga murmured abruptly.

She came with the cloak in a moment; a long, dark-grey garment of flexible metal. With this on, and with the helmet which Rhool had given him, Allen could pass for a Gort. Garga was eager, trembling, as she took him through a small side doorway. The nearby glowing city street bustled with activity. Garga and Allen were not challenged as they skirted the edge of the metal street; and presently came to a dark and narrow little bridge, a fifty foot catwalk-span over a chasm to the promontory head where the lookout kiosk stood dark and silent above the lagoon.

A new idea had come to Allen. As together they crossed the catwalk he murmured to Garga:

"The Master spoke of the Peters girl, and asked me if she is beautiful."

Garga smiled. "So? The Master is ironical always. He plays with you."

"Meaning what?"

"He has seen that girl many times. Ten years ago, when there was no threat of Tollgamo, he was in Arron. She was just a child then. He played with her."

And he has loved her ever since."

They came to the kiosk, entered its dark interior. It was merely a roof over a circular metal bench, with a waist high railing. Thirty feet down, the sea inlet was a black ribbon of water. The yellow tunnel at the bottom of the opposite cliff was dark now, but further up the inlet there were lights and activity.

Allen sat with a hand gripping Garga's mailed arm. Across the background of his mind he was trying to plan ... he could seize this amorous woman's weapons. But then what? Would Leh be able to come here now? Leh, who had mentioned diving from here, with a way of escape from the inlet.

"Tollgamo loves Peters' daughter?" Allen was murmuring.

"Yes. It is sure, although he would not have it known. And he is planning tonight, before we attack Arron, to—"

A dark figure near them suddenly materialized. For a second Allen thought that it was Leh. But it was Rhool! Rhool who doubtless had seen Garga coming here, and followed her.

In that tense second Allen was aware that Rhool was drawing a weapon. And Allen leaped, catapulted with lowered head. He caught Rhool in the stomach, knocked him backward. But the Gort's weapon had stabbed, a hiss of violet light. It missed Allen; struck Garga. She went down.

On the metal floor of the kiosk, Allen rolled with the giant Rhool. The Gort had no chance to use his weapon again. Allen in a second or two was on top of him, pounding his head against the metal floor. It cracked, and his big body quivered and lay limp.

Allen jumped up. He was aware of a commotion on the catwalk bridge. A running figure. And men back in the glare at the end of the street; men shouting, and then running forward. The figure on the catwalk was Leh. He came plunging into the kiosk. Allen was bending over the fallen Garga. She was dying, with bloody foam gushing at her mouth. But she was trying to smile, her eyes staring at Allen. Contrition swept him. This Amazonian woman-warrior.... Trained to be a cruel machine. But she had remained only a woman; and she was dying now; just a woman staring with her last wistful gaze at the Earthman she loved so that she might take the image of him with her into the Great Beyond.

Allen murmured: "Oh, Garga, I'm sorry."

She may have heard him, but then her breath stopped, the light went out of her eyes and she was gone.

Allen jumped up as Leh gripped him. Leh, with his face and figure changed now so that Allen saw him as a handsome stripling, with something of the look of Nereid.

"Come on," Leh gasped. "Get that helmet off, and that heavy cloak. Hurry!"

A shot came from the catwalk, a spitting electronic stab that sent a shower of sparks on the kiosk ceiling. From the rail Allen and Leh dove. Then they were swimming; Leh guiding him as shots stabbed down at them. Allen was aware that Leh was dragging him underwater through a small subterranean passage to emerge in a watery cave. A water-cylinder was here, a twenty foot little submarine, as one might describe it on Earth. Two small seats were amidships in it, with its operating mechanisms around them. A moment later, they were off.

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It was a weird underwater journey; some two hours, Allen guessed, while they sat in the dimness of the humming little cylindrical interior. Through the visor pane of the turret into which their heads projected, Allen had a dim vista of the turgid green-black depths, illumined by the small search-ray which preceded them. The vessel was propelled by a rocket-stream of disintegrating water as the electrolysis of backward gas-thrust shoved them forward.

Sub-sea world of Venus. Allen saw little of it then, but still enough to suggest its ramified weirdness. They sped out through the watery tunnel, down the inlet at a depth of perhaps fifty feet, and then into the open sea. Empty, black-green depths. Running at fifty feet submersion, Allen could see beneath them the vague vista of a slimy undulating bottom. Then it dropped away, with only occasional jagged spires of peaks. Tumbled, submarine world. Fishes flipped away, frightened by the light. Occasionally, there was a glimpse of monstrous things that quivered; shapes that hung suspended, watching with dull-green round eyes.

A submarine forest for a time was to one side, an intricate tracery of vegetation, with air-pods holding it upright as it slowly weaved and undulated like a thing quivering with life. A gigantic thing like a great squid

with weaving tentacles came wobbling from a forest glade. It lunged to attack, but the little cylinder avoided it and sped past.

Leh hardly spoke. He was tense, guiding their frail craft; and tense too with this emergency of haste to get to Peters. Leh had learned as much or more of Tollgamo's plans than had Allen.

Then at last they were nearing their destination. Allen had learned now that Peters and his men of science were not located in the city of Arron. They had laboratories, workshops and arsenal on a rocky island fortress. It was some twenty miles by water from Arron; within a mile or so of a partly submerged section of the forest, where a village known as the Water City was built.

Allen saw the watery foundations of the Water City as the cylinder sped past. Then Leh was slackening, to land at a sub-sea dock beneath the arsenal. The dock's weird dark outlines presently were beside them. With air-renewer mechanisms like a pack on their shoulders, and a round transparent glassite helmet, which had an elastic gasket tightly fitting their throats, they emerged through the cylinder's little pressure lock into the water. Heavy shoes made them able to walk, with a pushing swaying shove.

Leh, with a metal-tipped finger, touched a tiny metal plate on Allen's helmet. And Leh's voice, dim, muffled, sounded in Allen's ears.

"You follow me. There will be a guard where we emerge."

Allen swayed along a rocky path which was slowly ascending. The turgid, black-green depths here were dimly lighted by a glow from some unseen source. It was a tumbled, honeycombed submarine slope. Clumps of vegetation stood like black thickets to the sides. Ahead, the glow seemed brighter.

Then suddenly Leh stopped his advance; stood rigid. Within the round, wholly transparent ball of his helmet his youthful face was tense. And his voice murmured.

"Allen, look there!"

They had no more warning than that. From a clump of tawny submarine vegetation nearby, two human figures suddenly emerged! Figures that stood as though startled for a second, and then came plunging to attack!

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Festival of Love! On the swaying little anti-gravity platform I lay with Nereid, staring down at the strange, colorful scene that stretched beneath us. It was at the end of our escape-flight from the Spaceship, in time doubtless before Allen on that trip arrived in Tollgamo's mountain city.

What Allen saw of the grim little metal and rock city of the Gorts was in weird contrast to what I saw now of the riotous, colorful forest and water scene where the gay festival of Love and Music was in full progress.

There was only a brief glimpse at first, as we swooped down. We had already passed over the main city of Arron. It lay between the open sea and an area a mile or so inland, where there was a lagoon, little chains of lakes, threads of tiny streams and a myriad little dots of tropic islands. I had seen, down in the forest, lines of gay, pastel-tinted lights to mark the city streets. Then we came to the lagoon, where the festival was being held.

A watery fairyland of gayety. The lagoon, a circular spread of water of perhaps five miles, was rippled with a soft night-breeze. The ripples were stained with the opalescent night-sheen from the overhead clouds, and stained like a painter's palette with a riot of glorious tints from the strings of colored lights which connected the little islands.

One big island, a thousand feet in length, stood in the center. A pavilion was on it, from which soft exotic music flooded out into the night—music that blended on the tropic breeze with a vast murmur of excited voices. I could guess that there might be four or five thousand people disporting themselves here. The main island was thronged with people moving about, or crowding toward the pavilion where with the music there seemed dancing and perhaps some form of theatrical entertainment.

Boats were on the thread-like little canals between the islands. A barge crowded with young men and girls, all in gay-colored robes, was slowly approaching from the open lagoon. Little boats, mere six foot rafts, each held a girl and man; the man paddling, the girl fending off flowers with which she was pelted by young men on other rafts, or on the shore.

The laughing screams of girls floated up as they swam in the open lagoon, their voices calling jocular defiance to the men on shore to come out and catch them.

Nereid slid our little flying platform skilfully down. We landed on a small level island which was connected with the big island by an arcade bridge.

No one had seemed to notice us. Boats were tied up here along the shore. Others were arriving, disembarking the gay merrymakers. All were in holiday attire; a variety of motley costumes, indescribable as a fancy-dress costume ball on Earth. Some of them, men and girls, wore cloaks and hoods, with little gaily colored masks covering their eyes.

I stood for a moment with Nereid. "You're going to find your father?" I suggested.

"Yes. If he is here." She told me then of the Arsenal rock beyond the Water City, where Peters and his men most of their time were working. "He is there probably," she added. "I think he would not come here tonight."

"Then what would we do, go to him there?"

"Yes, of course. I will see our Ruler first. Jenten-Shah—he will be here. Over there on the big island, in the pavilion probably." Bitterness was in her tone. Nereid was thinking of the menace of the Gorts, with their engines of destruction. She and I did not know then, what Allen was just about now learning—that there was an urgency of haste since Tollgamo's attack would be made tonight. But as we threaded our way under the gay colored lights across the arcade to the main island, I somehow seemed to feel the undercurrent of menace here. Occasionally we passed little figures who were evidently onlookers. The imbecile workers, lower class who were almost in the position of slaves. They were weird little creatures, most of them no more than four feet tall, grey-skinned and powerfully built. We passed one who was standing on the shore gazing at a raft where a lone girl shrouded in blue-white filmy drapery was being pelted with flowers. The gnome-like imbecile stood impassive, gazing with vacant face. Then he was muttering to himself. A fragment of it reached us.

"Tollgamo is coming to help us workers. We won't have to work tomorrow. Then we can do things like this."

I gripped Nereid. "You hear what that worker said? No work for him tomorrow. Do you suppose—"

She tried to smile. "What an imbecile says never means much, Kent. But I must tell father."

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Occasionally now people were staring at us, at me. Some rushed at us, but Nereid with an imperious gesture scattered them; and in a moment, with their other diversions, they had forgotten us. Then we came to where there was a pile of cloaks. Nereid gave me a dark robe and hood; and found a long white cloak and white cowl for herself. Then from her green undergarment she produced a little golden star, fastened it on the breast of her cloak. Queer insignia, that star with a crescent moon above and below it.

The white cloak and cowl to signify that she was an Untouchable. Nereid's beautiful little face bore a faint twisted smile. "That is what some of them call us, Kent. That is a term of derision, because now, at a festival like this, there are things we do not like."

Love, music, laughter—all so admirable. But here in Arron, under the leadership of the wanton Ruler, Jenten-Shah, it was becoming license. There were some five hundred young Virgins here in Arron, who were trying at least for moderation. And trying to help Peters prepare for the menace of the Gorts ... Untouchables. Nereid was leader of them.

In our robes and cowls now, Nereid and I were attracting no attention save that occasionally there was a jibe at Nereid. Laughing young men, befuddled perhaps by some intoxicating drink with wanton girls clinging to them, would sometimes lunge at us with mocking laughter. But we pushed past them, shoving our way toward the big open pavilion. I could see now the jam of people under its low spreading roof.

We were still following the shorefront. From the pavilion a bevy of girls with flowing drapes came running and plunged into the water of the lagoon.

I gripped Nereid's white-cloaked arm. "That big figure in red—who is that?"

I had seen the giant figure here at an edge of the crowd, when we crossed the arcade bridge. A man in robe and cowl of red and black. Then he had vanished. He was visible again now, a huge fellow, six and a half feet, at least. He was standing a hundred feet or so ahead of us, on the pink-white coral sand of the shore. And then abruptly he moved away and was gone again.

Nereid stared, and then shook her head. "I do not know. I—" She checked herself; her face had a queer startled look.

"What—" I demanded. But we were in the pavilion now, with the jam of watching people pressing us.

"You will wait here, Kent?" Nereid murmured. "I will ask Jenten-Shah of my father."

I drew back behind a palm on which great orchid-like flowers were growing. I could see the dais where the gay fatuous ruler was seated with food and drink before him, with his young women favorites around him as they watched the platform where a barbarically voluptuous woman in flame-colored drapes was dancing with colored light-beams upon her.

I had a glimpse of Nereid importuning Jenten-Shah. It was brief; and then Nereid came back to me.

"Father is not here, Kent. He told the King not to hold this festival tonight."

"Did you mention that imbecile worker?"

She nodded. Her face was grim, frightened now. "He said, if any imbecile causes trouble there will be a hundred imbeciles killed as punishment. He is drunk with *marite*. He laughed at the idea that Tollgamo would dare attack."

Merrymaking on the brink of disaster and death.

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As though both Nereid and I were fascinated now, for a time we stood in the pavilion corner, watching the colorful scene. Half the people here were robed and masked, waiting a later time when a bell would give the signal for the unmasking. I saw several of the white-robed girls—the Untouchables. Then one of them, with a golden star on her breast, like Nereid's but without the crescent moons, came and joined us. Nereid had met her a while ago near the Ruler's dais. Her name was Venta. Under Nereid, she was commanding the little group of protesting Virgins.

She was very like Nereid, save that beneath her white cowl I could see that her hair was dark. She stared at me. "So? The Earthman?" She shook my hand with a quaint awkwardness. "You look in the same fashion as her father, the Meester Peters," she commented.

Then suddenly all three of us were stricken tense. There was a commotion across the crowded pavilion, where a scantily clothed young girl was struggling, terrified, in the grip of a thick-set, crooked little imbecile man. He was forcing his caresses on her and the girl was screaming.

The music suddenly ceased. In the hushed, stricken silence, the imbecile's crazy childish laughter mingled with the girl's screams. Then there was a rush as a group of young men nearby plucked the girl away, knocked the gnome-like worker down, beating him, slamming him until he lay inert.

It was like a spark in gunpowder. People were shouting. Somebody found another imbecile and attacked him. A wave of shouting spread beyond the pavilion. But it lasted only a moment. The music started up again. The dancing continued.

Nereid gripped me. "Out in the workers' village they will hear of that. And what they might try to do—"

Her words evoked a grim picture of powerful little men, with minds like children suddenly enraged to frenzy; and the half-drunken youths at the festival, ready enough to kill any worker, with the Ruler encouraging them.

And this was what Tollgamo wanted, of course; confusion here to make his attack easier.

The girls now were swiftly talking in their own language. We had shoved our way out of the pavilion, were standing near the shorefront; and the girls had drawn a little apart from me. I could see Venta nodding as Nereid gave her instructions. Then Nereid came to me.

"She will get our Virgins, Kent. She has ten other girls who will help her collect them all."

The Virgins—five hundred of them if Venta could locate them all—would come in surface boats, past the Water City to the Arsenal. Nereid and I would precede them, starting now. All to offer ourselves to Peters and his fighting men if Tollgamo should strike tonight. But how would he strike? That we did not know.

"And in the Water City," Nereid was hastily telling me, "many of the people living there have come here to the festival tonight. But some of our girls live there." Again her lips twisted with that wry little smile. "They will be there now. Some have brothers and fathers who work with my father in the Science Arsenal. But some do not, and I will send them here. If there is trouble with the imbeciles, they will help quell it."

Venta, ready to start on her mission, called goodbye. Then for just a moment Nereid ran after her to add something. Two other girls in the white Untouchable robes joined them, and stood talking about fifty feet away from

where I waited. The shore there had risen to a little grassy bluff about twenty feet above the glittering, light-bathed lagoon.

And suddenly I gasped. From a clump of vivid blue and orange palms which grew thickly beside the four girls, a figure suddenly emerged. A giant man-shape, in red and black robe. Then his robe and cowl dropped from him, revealing a towering powerful giant with dark close-clipped hair, dressed in a grey garment of woven metal with jeweled weapons at his broad belt. And in that second of my numbed gaze, I was aware that he had scattered the girls and had seized Nereid, holding her slim form against his huge bulk.

And one of the other girls screamed: "Tollgamo!"

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Tollgamo! My first sight of him. And like Allen, for just a second I stood numbed, awed by the power, the dominance that radiated from him. He was quietly smiling. His hand went up to wave the girls away.

"Tollgamo! Tollgamo!" The name went like a wave, back from the shore, so that the merrymakers gasped, stood stricken. For that second it was a tableau, with only the smiling Tollgamo in movement. Slowly he was backing, drawing the fighting, struggling Nereid with him. Backing toward the thick clump of palms.

Then I was aware that I was dashing forward, shouting. It was only fifty feet. From one of Tollgamo's hands, a spit of tiny blue light hissed at me. Missed. Then Venta and two of the other girls had cast off their white robes. Slim little creatures, like Nereid, greenly clad. Soon Tollgamo was struggling with all four of them. He flung them off, still trying to hold Nereid.

It was only a second or two as I plunged at them. Then in a group they went over the little promontory and hit the water with a splash. Almost simultaneously I dove. The green opalescent water closed over me. Somewhere near at hand I could see the blurr of the struggling figures. But I could not reach them. With all my strength I swam, but then I had to come up for air. I dove again. Accursedly helpless. Then on another try I met a girl coming up, then another and another—all four of them bobbing to the surface with me. All panting; unhurt, but angry that they had not captured Tollgamo!

Then Venta and the other two girls swam away on their errand. Nereid drew me forward as we swam, to avoid the commotion of gathered people on the bank. Tollgamo was gone. His plan had been, quite evidently, to dive into the water with Nereid here. Some twenty feet down, as the girls attacked him, he had tried to shove Nereid through a rock-rift, which obviously opened again to some cave where air was trapped.

"I got away from him," Nereid was saying. "A man, even Tollgamo, is so clumsy in the water, so quick to smother. I could have followed him but he blocked the little passage with a rock."

"And maybe he's trapped down there?"

She shook her head. "There are so many passages, and all lead out to the sea. Of course he had a cylinder-boat under there."

Together we swam out into the open lagoon, diagonally across it to where, beyond the lights of the festival, Nereid had a little surface boat in which we could get now to the Water City.

"My boat is about a mile from here. Can you swim so far?"

"Yes. I guess so." I had always counted myself a strong swimmer; a mile was not too much for me. But I was like a puffing tugboat now, laboriously splashing along. Nereid was laughing at my efforts; trying to tow me; then giving it up, swimming around me, under me.

Occasionally, while we were still in the light-glare, other girls came dashing up, with questions of Tollgamo; and of me. Once a group of them dashed at me, with shouts of laughter trying to seize me, but Nereid drove them off. Then we were swimming alone in the luminous opalescent night; and at last we reached the little boat. Nereid was already in it; waiting impatiently to haul me aboard as I came panting.

It was a narrow, canoe-like surface craft; some twenty feet long, of dull white metal. Its hooded mechanisms were in bow and stern—water electrolysis. Soon we had attained a considerable speed, silent, vibrationless. And then we were on the open sea, with the lights of Arron fading behind us.

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Venus night at sea. It was weirdly beautiful. The low-hanging curtain of heavy clouds was luminous with pale blue and silver sheen. The water, silver-rippled by a gentle night-breeze, was opalescent as our little craft

hurled up a bow wave, with a gleaming phosphorescent wake behind us. Off to the right, for a time, the faint blurred outlines of metal mountains were visible on a promontory near the land of the Gorts. Then we passed it; and the forest to the left had faded away to be just a blur.

Beside me, Nereid sat grim and silent, staring ahead as she steered our boat. The breeze tossed her tawny tresses against me. My mind went back to that other night, back on Earth when she had sat in my little fishing boat, with its outboard motor puttering. How long ago that seemed. And like that other night, my hand went now to a lock of her hair, beside us on the seat.

"Nereid, when this is over, this war—"

Her face turned toward me. She was faintly, whimsically smiling.

"I think my father will like you," she murmured.

"And you, Nereid?"

There was no impishness, this time. Her gaze met mine, shyly, and she nodded.

But a moment later we were again both thinking of Tollgamo. And we were wondering about Allen, and Nereid's brother, Leh. Had Tollgamo put them to death, in vengeance for our escape from Rhool's spaceship?

Then at last, to our left, the outlines of the lush forest shore were close at hand.

"The Water City," Nereid murmured.

It was built in what seemed a partly submerged area of the jungle. Tangled tree-tops projecting from the water, with little houses of thatch and wood built like birds' nests between them. Or queer little dwellings of woven blue rush, built on platforms that floated on the water and were lashed between the protecting tree-trunks. Narrow arcade bridges connected the houses; and the little balcony platforms where boats were moored.

There were a few dots of lights. Then we passed the first group of houses. Very queer. Nereid stared at me. Queer indeed. It was far into the time of sleep, but still there should have been someone attracted to the house doorways as we passed.

We had slackened now, with the houses, most of them dark, clustering all about us.



"There is Venta's home," Nereid murmured. "Her father and brother will be there."

We drifted under an arching bridge. The figure of a man was lying on it. Asleep? Nereid called softly to him, but he did not move. Then I was aware of a queer, acrid smell here. Choking smell. Nereid coughed suddenly.

The boat landed at a low platform dock of Venta's home. We jumped to the platform. Two men were here. Venta's father and brother. They lay in a heap, one half upon the other. Dead! The opalescent sheen of the glorious night was ghastly on their dead faces; mouths goggling with blackened, protruding tongue; eyes staring with the agony and death.

And from here we could see other house balconies. Inert forms on them. All dead.

In that stricken second, as we stood shuddering on the little platform with the sea lapping under it, a new horror suddenly assailed us. There was a tangle of vegetation here, tree branches overhead; air-vines with redolent flowers and pods on them, dangled, swaying in the breeze. And abruptly I realized that the dangling, rope-like vines were visibly growing! At an edge of the platform one of them was slithering like a serpent!

And Nereid gasped: "That smell! The gas of nitro-carbon in some terrible concentration!"

I stood numbed. Nitrogenous gas-fumes, sprayed here on the night-breeze by what deadly means I could not guess, had asphyxiated the people of the little Water City. Most of them asleep, they were quickly overcome by the insidious fumes. An intensification of the gas which was normally used by the Arones to stimulate vegetation growth, as we on Earth use fertilizer. Nitro-carbon—deadly to humans; stimulating to plant-life!

And the air-vines here were growing with a deadly acceleration!

In that same second, as we stood momentarily confused, one of the dangling, swaying vines, grown monstrous now to be as thick as my arm, struck against Nereid. Sentient vegetation! With the contact, the damnable dangling vine suddenly wrapped itself around her, its powerful sinuous blue feelers gripping her slender white throat, strangling her! And in the night-silence an imbecile was gibbering, with triumphant, maniacal laughter!

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## VI

For an instant I was stunned, with so great a rush of horror that the weird scene blurred before me. Then I leaped, tearing at the quivering vine-rope that held Nereid in its grip. Ghastly thing. I tore it loose, broke it—gruesome, squashing, flimsy stuff. But as I cast broken segments of it away, more seemed to come.

Weird, horrible combat. A slithering tentacle gripped my ankles. Another was winding itself around my throat. There was a terrible moment when I thought that Nereid and I would go down; and on the platform now at our feet, another leafy vine had come crawling, with lashing feelers and red pods that opened like little bloody jaws.

Then I tore Nereid loose. The whole platform now seemed cluttered with writhing vegetation. From overhead dangling things were swinging, reaching down at us.

"Nereid, our boat—which way?" In the dim luminous light I was confused. Nereid led me; and we staggered to our boat, tumbled into it. A vine-end like a rope threshed at us as we frantically shoved off.

And in the silence now, with only the leafy rustling of the growing vines, the gibbering, maniacal laughter of the imbecile still sounded.

"Kent, look—" Nereid touched my arm as she guided our little boat out into the open water. On a rock nearby, a hunched, gnome-like figure was crouched. Then I saw his face, goggled with great round eyepanes and nose-breather, with a pipe that led to a pack on his back.

Nereid steered us toward him; we stopped and I reached and seized him.

"You did this?" I demanded. "You turned loose the gas that killed these people? Who told you to do it? Who gave you the gas, and the mechanisms to spread it?"

His laughter turned to a terrified whimpering. Nereid murmured,

"That mask he's wearing—the workers use that, in our agriculture when they spray with the nitro-carbon. But we have no sprayers that could do a thing like this, nor gas deadly enough."

"You did it?" I shook him.

And then he was laughing again. And suddenly I realized that of course he could not understand English. I cast him loose. And Nereid flung questions

at him in her own language.

"Figures came up from the water," she said. "He happened to have his mask and saved himself."

We left him there on the rock, still laughing. Tollgamo's first attack! Would he try to loose this gas on Arron? Our little boat sped past the Water City. I could see now that the quivering, slithering vegetation everywhere was engulfing the flimsy houses. Its stimulated growth would persist, an hour or a day, and then subside.

Shuddering, we drove our boat onward. The great Arsenal rock loomed ahead of us now, a huge almost square lump of metallic rock rising sheer from the water to a height of two or three hundred feet. On all sides it was like that; its only access was from beneath where subterranean passages ran into its honeycombed, grotto interior. Impregnable fortress, save from beneath the sea.

Nereid tied our little craft to a metal fastener against the black, sleek rock-cliff. Then for me she produced the air-mechanisms and round transparent helmet with elastic gasket to fit around my throat. And heavy, metal-weighted shoes for us both.

But no helmet was needed for her. "We will be there in ten or fifteen minutes," she said. "I can see better without the head-covering."

We dropped into the luminous, opalescent water. Nereid held my hand as I floundered a little, trying to remain balanced upright while our weighted shoes carried us slowly down. It was a descent of some fifty feet, with the opalescent surface light fading into the black-green of the depths. Then slowly an undulating dark surface seemed coming up to us; and we landed, swaying on our feet. Weird, submarine world. The jagged slope to one side went on down into the depths. Beside us, swaying leafy vegetation stood upright in the water—a little thicket here, with what seemed a rocky path, ascending along the edge of the black abyss.

Through my transparent helmet I stared at Nereid. She was smiling, unbreathing, as much at home down here as on the land. She gestured that we were to take the ascending path; and held my hand to steady me as we started our swaying, shoving climb. I could see now that ahead of us there was a little tunnel into the cliff where we would emerge into air.

And suddenly I felt Nereid's hand tighten convulsively on mine. I saw the blurred figures in another second, two upright swaying blobs close ahead of

us as we emerged past the seaweed clump. Two men down here. Tollgamo's men? I shook loose from Nereid and plunged forward.

Then in another second I could see the faces in the transparent helmets. And one of them I recognized. It was Leh and Allen here, as startled as ourselves at the sudden encounter.

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I think now I need only briefly sketch that following hour or two while within the Arsenal fortress Allen and I met Peters and his men, and all of us hastily prepared for Tollgamo's attack. I found Nereid's father quite what I had expected—a quiet, grave-faced man of somewhat my own type, garbed like his fellow scientists in tight trousers and blouse of sleek black fabric. There was no time then to exchange more than the briefest of questions, as Nereid hastily told him what had happened to her since her little note had informed him of her furtive departure for Earth.

"You worried me very much, my daughter," he said quietly. And the same sense of humor which she herself had twinkled now in his grey eyes. "But I think this is no time for reproof."

Peters of course had known that Tollgamo's attack was imminent; and he was almost ready. Allen and I could help little here with everything so indescribably strange. Nereid's virgins were arriving now in little dripping groups that scattered through the workshop grottos with chattering voices that added immeasurably to the confusion. They were all like Nereid, most of them clad in the brief, shining sea-green garment, all of them with flowing hair and eager, excited little faces. But I could see now the evidence of Nereid's Earth heritage—these other girls, even more slim and frail-looking, with oval faces and pert little pointed chins. And their skin was distinctly less pink-white than hers.

Finally the departure for battle. Assembling of this weird little sub-sea army. I watched it with silent, awed amazement. There was but one type of sub-sea vessel here, the small underwater cylinders such as Leh and Allen had come in from the country of the Gorts. Most of them were that same twenty foot size, to carry two men; and a few of them were some thirty feet, with space for three. An underwater electronic ray armed them in bow and stern. Leh explained the weapon to me. It had an effective range of fifty feet, with a current duration of some ten seconds. It would kill any living substance at

that range almost instantly; and with duration would eat into the metal armour of Tollgamo's ships.

"My father has had no opportunity to build an underwater weapon of more range and power than this. It is all we have," Leh was telling us. And my heart sank, and Allen and I exchanged glances of dismay, as Leh added:

"Tollgamo has built them up to a range of three hundred feet."

There were about fifty of the small cylinder-boats; most of them to take two men. For battle tonight it was all Peters could assemble. But the cylinders were fleet as darting fishes. We had mobility, and courage, but with sinking heart I wondered if it would serve us.

And I also wondered what Tollgamo would have. Leh's information gave us little hint; and presently he, Allen and I took one of the larger cylinders.

We ran without lights. For a time all I could see was a turgid vista of dark-green depths. An abyss of water at times was beneath us. Then there were the tops of jagged mountain peaks, naked black needle spires rising in clusters out of the depths. Leh knew very well the oceanography here in this undulating terrain of seascape. We headed for the mouth of the inlet at the head of which Tollgamo's city was perched. But before we reached there, little lights down in the watery green haze suddenly appeared. An orange, blurred haze, separating in a moment into dotted points of light.

"Tollgamo's forces!" Leh murmured.

At perhaps a hundred feet of depth, we shut off our tiny rocket-streams of oxo-hydro fluorescence and hung poised. The three of us sat breathless, peering. Had our tail-stream been discovered? It seemed not. There was no undue movement of the Tollgamo lights. Just a slow-moving little string of them, ahead and below us.

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I could see the bottom now, a great undulating spread here of dark surface. Rock, doubtless, with slime and ooze on it. The moving dots of light presently disclosed the blobs of enemy vessels. Ten of them, crawling on the bottom in a slow moving line. Cubes and oblongs of metal. Dwarfed by distance they were like struggling little bugs, with lighted eyes and tiny searchbeams waving like feelers before them. Metallic vehicles, perhaps with caterpillar tread, crawling on the bottom.

We drifted closer; almost over them for a moment so that I could guess that each of them was a hundred feet or more in length. Turreted oblong vessels, armoured; and armed with the three hundred foot rays. How many men were in them? Of this Leh had little knowledge, save that he thought perhaps a total of two thousand. Men and women, crawling along in the ooze of this sea bottom, tense, with minds only upon the kill.

"They're heading for Arron," Leh murmured. "In those big ships they surely must have a vast apparatus for land attack."

To come up abruptly within the lagoons and interior waterways of Arron. Perhaps then, on the windward side of the city, to loose their deadly lethal gas.

Two hours, at least, for them to reach Arron. The lights crawled under us; and a vagrant ocean current drifted us away, so that presently we dared fling on our rocket-stream power and speed back to Peters. He was ready now, and his hundred men embarked in the fifty little cylinders. And the five hundred girls were ready, too. I saw them on the ocean surface, from the turret of our cylinder as we bobbed to the top. An amazing army of green-clad nymphs. Each of them had a ray-cylinder of our fifty foot projector. They lay, each of them on a six-foot little sub-sea sled, powered, like our cylinders, with the oxo-hydro gas-streams. In effect, a narrow, six foot long raft, with a hooded bow that housed the control mechanisms and protected the girls' faces from the rush of water. The girls' bodies had a weight of about the same as water. Specific gravity of 1. And the sled with its mechanisms was adjusted to be the same. Girl and sled—neither to float nor sink, but approximately to hang poised. And thus, with little tilting fins on the sled's sides, and lateral and vertical bow and stern rudders, the power would thrust them down into the depths and up again at will.

We started. Running at first on the surface, the largest of our little cylinders with Peters and two of his skilled men led us in a line. And behind us came the girls, in squads of twenty, each with a leader. They had often practiced it, for sport and for the possibility of such a time as this.

As we passed the Water City, we submerged to fifty feet. I turned to look back through our turret. Like darting fishes the girls came down, still holding their formation as we swept on through the green-black depths to battle.

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## VII

For a time we ran with short-range headlight beams preceding us, then, as we neared the area where we knew Tollgamo's ships should now be, we ran dark. But still there were the glowing, bubbling rocket-stream tails of our fifty little cylinder boats; and the rocket-streams of the girls' diving sleds. And our swift passage through the water left a phosphorescent wake so that the area all around us glowed, opalescent with a pallid, eerie light.

Leh and his father had arranged the tactics of battle which we hoped we could employ. He explained them to us now. Peters' larger cylinder was banded with white alumite stripes so as to be easily distinguishable. Its light signals would give us orders.

"There is a ridge," Leh was saying. "It crosses from the promontory head of the metal mountains across to the Arron forests. We think Tollgamo will follow it as his best method of approach."

It was a transverse ridge, lying at an average of not much more than fifty feet beneath the surface. A submarine plateau, in main extent some ten miles long and a quarter of a mile wide, with deeps on both sides of it where the bottom dropped sharply away, in places to unfathomable depths. If we could catch the Tollgamo vehicles in that area it was our best chance for a shallow attack. And that, we needed. The girls especially, could not dive into the lower, higher pressures.

Then presently ahead of us, Peters signalled and we all slackened, wheeling, gathering in a group.

"There they are!" Leh murmured tensely. "Just climbing to the ridge."

The shallower water here was bright with the upper light filtering down. Astonishingly bright; and suddenly I realized that the Venus night was over. Dawn had come to the world of air above us, penetrating the cloud-masses of the Venus atmosphere. It came down here with a faint ruddy glow, so that now we could see miles of the area before us. At first it was blurred and unreal. But in a moment I was used to it, my mind translating its distortion into the terms of its reality.

A dark abyss was under us here as we poised. Ahead, a thousand feet away now, the ridge was visible. A cliff was at one side of it, a honeycombed, submarine wall, a peak of which rose above the surface as a volcanic little island, with a tiny crater mouth, yawning faintly yellow from the fires of the earth which here must be close.

The slow-moving, struggling little line of submarine vehicles was just mounting to the ridge. Only a few miles from here and they would be under the city of Arron. We must turn them back here.

Slowly we approached, still out of Tollgamo's range. We had long since been seen, of course. The waving headlights of the ten huge black vessels turned our way. Monsters with searching, glaring eyes. And then a tentative shot came. In the blurred watery twilight it was a stab of thin violet light. Not instantaneous, but slow-moving as though for a second it was pushing its way at us. But it blurred to nothingness far short of us; and in a few seconds it died.

At Peters' signal we divided now, spreading fanshape between the leading Tollgamo ship and Arron; skimming close under the surface, still keeping three hundred feet or more away from the leading vessel. But we had to get within fifty feet for our rays to be effective! I could feel my heart pounding, and my blood seemed cold.

And then a puff of orange light from the bow of Peters' cylinder gave the signal for our first attack. Beside me I could hear Allen suck in his breath. My hands were on the small gun-firing mechanisms—my two small ray projectors on one side of the cylinder, Allen's on the other, with Leh's ranging in a quadrant of the bow and stern. In a slanting dive, we plunged forward and down.

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It was a chaos of blurred confusion to me, that first slanting plunge that took us close past the looming black side of one of the Tollgamo vessels, half circling it until in a few seconds we had fired our six little stabbing bolts and were past, rising again. I was aware that all the area of water suddenly seemed churned into silver phosphorescence through which shapes were diving. A bolt stabbed at us and missed. Then as we were mounting, one caught us. For a second it clung, with a bubbling red viscosity of fusing metal, glaring against my small bullseye pane. Would it eat through? Undoubtedly, if it clung too long, or if another were to strike in the same place.

But we twisted away from it: and in another second its built-up electronic power had discharged and it died. I realized then the advantage of our mobility with our five hundred and fifty agile little units against the ten huge



caterpillar vehicles of Tollgamo, at least we might have an equal chance. Their three hundred foot rays were thin as pencil-streaks. Not easy for them to hit a tiny, swift-moving target. And I saw too, that once we were close, there were many angles at which the rays could not reach us.

Leh, Allen and I each fired two charges in that first dive. I saw some of them strike against the looming black armoured hull of the Tollgamo vessel as we flipped past it, each hit marked by bubbling red pits of metal. Through the bullseye windows I caught a vague glimpse of crowded men and women Gorts inside.

Then we were back, almost at the surface, out of range again, wheeling, poising, with the enemy behind and beneath us. I stared down, and saw that the girls, like a school of plunging dolphins, were making their dive. And then I had my first sight of one as she was struck. She was a tiny descending silver streak; and the bolt darted up, caught her. For a horrible second or two it clung. I saw her waver; come loose from her sled. And then she was a twisted, blackened, almost shapeless blob, slowly drifting down, with crimson air-bubbles for a moment rising. Then on the black ridge bottom her inert form lay, with a little movement as the water made it weave, as though horribly she were still alive.

For five minutes we stared down at the swarm of attacking girls. They swarmed within the wide angles of the opposing rays. Some of them were at the hulls of the enemy ships, holding their rays close, trying to melt through.

Then at last they were rising; swooping back to the surface. Some of them! But others were wavering away. With broken mechanisms discarded, some were swimming free. And others were sinking. Broken, twisted little shapes, with the water tinted crimson as they sank.

Leh, Allen and I stared at each other, white-faced, as the girls came fluttering up, flipping on the surface to get air, organize into squads again; and to recharge their tiny projectors. The squads reformed. My heart sank at the pitiful gaps in the formations. We had lost more than a hundred and fifty girls in that first attacking dive. And two of our ten cylinder-boats were crippled. Air bubbles were oozing from them; then the exit escape porte of one of them opened as the little cylinder sank. The two men came out, with buoyant belts which all of us were wearing so that they floated away on the surface.

But we had done some damage. Two or three of the big Tollgamo vessels seemed to be in distress. The one leading the line had checked its advance.

Those behind seemed trying to hasten forward, so that now the ships were bunching. One of them, seemingly out of control, had slued sidewise, close to the edge of the abyss where the green-black depths went down perhaps a thousand fathoms. Perilously close, so that now as we stared it sagged drunkenly on the brink and seemed out of commission. And at the window portes of another of them, a dull-red glare was apparent. An interior fire.

"Not too bad," Leh was muttering. "We'll do better, next time."

Where was Nereid? My heart seemed to stick in my throat with apprehension as I watched the girls coming up. And then I saw her; still unharmed. She came close past our turret on her power-sled, her white arm waved at us as she flipped past and broke the surface for air.

And then Allen suddenly gasped,

"What the devil is that? What now?"

Tollgamo wasn't waiting for our second dive! His leading ship suddenly was starting ahead of the others. And then suddenly, from three or four of the enemy vessels tiny black dots were rising. Water bullets.... Needle-like, foot-long projectiles. They came hurtling at us. And then they burst with muffled, blurred sounds of little explosions. Some were near the surface, tossing up spouts of iridescent water.

It startled us into sudden confusion. Several of our girls were caught in the exploding puffs; and one of our cylinders. I saw it break apart in sluggish tearing fragments of metal and what had been its living occupants. A girl, caught at the surface, was hurled into the air.

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A chaos. And in the midst of it, Peters gave the signal for a general attack; sustained attack, this time. Again Leh plunged us into what now was a watery inferno. How long it lasted I cannot say. Ten minutes. Half an hour. An eternity of horror, with everyone for himself. There were times when I could see little of it. The shallow, fifty foot depth of ocean here was a glare of red and orange and opalescent light through which our cylinders dove and the girls plunged up and down like voracious little fishes.

There was an inferno of lights and muffled ghastly rumbles down below. And the surface now was strewn. Our broken cylinders sagging there; then sinking as the men tried to get out. Men and girls swimming, wounded, and

then sinking. Chaos of human wreckage. The rippled daylight surface now was tossed by crazy waves; water stained with blood; or orange and blue with oil and gas-fumes.

Then I saw that Peters' cylinder was gone. Only ours and two others left. Leh, Allen and I, now in command. Empty authority. The girls, down in the weird lurid depths, were fighting with utter desperation, heedless of the possibility of command.

An eternity of horror. But now, two of the Tollgamo vessels had slid over the brink, sinking slowly into the abyss. I saw another of them burst with interior fire. Muffled explosions, that spewed out Gorts and broken equipment. Then there was a time when one of the distressed vessels emitted an inky fluid as though it were some giant squid—a pall of black water, to hide the disembarking men. We fought through it, until presently it drifted away.

"Getting them," I heard Allen mutter once. "By Heaven, only two of those boats in action now—Tollgamo's and this other one."

We were plunging at Tollgamo's ship. Its portes were red with glare. The enemy rays now were lessening. It seemed that only one or two were left. And the battle now had changed its aspect. From the broken Tollgamo ships, many of the Gorts had safely emerged, with helmets and weighted shoes so that now they were walking, swaying on the rocky bottom. Five hundred or more of them. And the girls swooped down at them. Myriad hand to hand combats between the unweildy Gorts and the Arron virgins that plunged at them like darting hungry sharks.

The bottom now was strewn with the dead as the girls plunged and fought and we darted our cylinder among them, struggling to find opportunity to strike with our rays.

Where was Nereid? Again cold apprehension struck at me; it was so long since I had seen her. And now a new ghastly horror was entering the turgid scene. Attracted by the lights, the muffled roars and the blood, monsters of the deep were coming. Eaters of carrion. Sea vultures. Some came in little swarms, a thousand tiny silvery shapes, darting at the bodies, picking at them until only white skeletons lay here on the slimy sea bottom. Other shapes, huge with glaring round eyes like torches, came slithering from the deeps, searching for the dead, seizing the wounded.

"That Tollgamo ship is all that's left," Leh was saying. He sped us toward it. Quite obviously now it was trying to escape. Forty or fifty girls were

clinging to its hull; too close for its single remaining ray weapon to hit them; girls with close-held projectors eating with bubbling red electro-glare into the hull-plates. We had a glimpse into one of the bullseye portes—gas fumes and red glare in there; and the Gorts, trapped there, in a panic making ready to disembark. We lay close, firing our bolts.

Suddenly a wounded girl was drifting past our turret; she seemed struggling to get to our little pressure porte. Nereid?

Then I saw that it was Venta. She got into the porte; and I pumped out the water; threw myself in and bent over her. She was gasping, but still trying to smile at me.

"We—we have won, Earthman."

"Yes. Yes, Venta. You just lie quiet. Have you seen Nereid?"

"Yes. Here, just a little while ago. I don't know, now."

I stared out the porte bullseye. The Tollgamo ship was breaking; I could see its air coming out in bubbling puffs that caught our cylinder and shoved it away. That ship would be water-filled in a moment. And then I stiffened; tense with horror as I stared. A little side exit-porte of the wrecked vessel suddenly opened. A single huge figure lunged out. A dark-clad giant figure, with round air-helmet and weighted shoes.

Tollgamo! He was no more than fifty feet from me; a red sheen of light struck his helmet so that I could see his face with its quiet, grim smile. And then suddenly, in a leaping dive, he flung himself forward, and seized a girl who was clinging to the vessel's side, blasting with her ray-torch.

Nereid! In the glare, abruptly I saw her, as Tollgamo seized her, catching her by surprise so that she had no chance to escape him. And then her torch and her knife were gone, as he held her body against him and with swaying, shoving tread started away along the bottom.

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There were weighted shoes here in our pressure porte. I was only a moment getting Venta out of the porte into the main part of the hull. I slid its door; adjusted my helmet; admitted the water. And then I was swaying out on the rocks, with a knife in my hand.

Vaguely I could see Tollgamo, with Nereid struggling in his grip as he advanced with swaying tread toward where, near at hand, the honeycombed cliff of that little crater-island loomed here. I struggled after him. Then I saw that he had plunged into what seemed a water-filled little passage leading back under the island. I was there in a moment; tense, alert, cautious now that he might be crouching somewhere here in ambush.

The ten foot high narrow passage wound up an ascent until unexpectedly my head broke the surface. I twitched off the helmet. I had thought that Tollgamo knew that he was being followed, but evidently he did not. Neck deep in water, I was near the rocky shore of a subterranean lagoon ... a huge jagged grotto here in the depths of the honeycombed little island.

And then I saw Tollgamo. His helmet was off now. Carrying Nereid in his arms, he had mounted a broken rocky wall of the grotto, so that he was some fifty feet back and ten feet above me. I had kicked off my weighted shoes. I tried to dive, but I was discovered. Nereid gave a little cry; and as Tollgamo saw me, he suddenly checked his climb, set Nereid on her feet and held her against him. I had floundered forward, on the shore now; and dropped my knife, plucking a little ray-projector from my belt. Its fifty foot stab was ample here. Was Tollgamo armed?

Brief thoughts; brief tableau. For that second he and Nereid stared down at me. A red glare painted them, a glare that came from what I saw now was a glowing pit almost beside them on this little volcanic island. In the heavy subterranean silence I could hear the low muttering, hissing rumble of the fires deep in the bowels of the earth, and the grotto was heavy with their sulphuric smell.

A slow ironic smile was on Tollgamo's gray face, painted now by the red and yellow glare.

"So, the Earthman!" he said. "And he finds Tollgamo unarmed."

My little projector was leveled; but as he held Nereid against him I could not dare fire. He saw it, and his ironic smile broadened. Was he really unarmed? It seemed so. I could see the empty weapon-clips at his belt, from which evidently he had torn his exhausted weapons and flung them away. And his hands were both in plain view, gripping Nereid's shoulders. There was just a second when I saw his gaze flick from my leveled gun as he desperately measured his chances for escape.

And then he seemed to reach his decision. The quiet smile still plucked at his thin gray lips. I must have made a move with my leveled muzzle; and

suddenly it seemed to startle him.

"Don't fire, Earthman!" he said sharply. "You would kill her."

And then, with a twitch of his big powerful arms he swept Nereid, not further to shield himself, but behind him. And he added softly, to her:

"So you see Tollgamo has lost? That is too bad." His breath went out in a long hiss. "I had thought to conquer Arron, to share it with you." His soft voice was ironical; as though now at the last he was jibing at the futility of all human effort.

I stood numbed, withholding my shot as now he cast her away; and he stood alone on the red-yellow brink. His gaze turned to me.

"You see, Earthman, you need not kill me," he said gently. "I should not like anyone to do that—much less an Earthman."

Still his jibing irony. But there was tragedy in his smoldering dark eyes; the tragedy of failure, as now his dream at last was broken.

He was still quietly smiling, as he poised on the brink, staring down at the fiery abyss. Then slowly he leaned forward, toppled and fell. For a second his plummeting body was visible, and then the red-yellow glare swallowed it.

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I think that there is little I need add. I have no wish to picture the return of our pitiful little army to Arron. Victorious army.... How trite, but how true it is—in warfare, even the victor is vanquished! But surely, there is a better time ahead for Venus now. Jenten-Shah, degenerate ruler of the Arones, was killed that night by an imbecile worker. Peters was killed; and Leh is ruling. Surely he will bring order out of chaos, and minimize license in the lives of the pleasure-loving Arones, so that now there need be no rebelling young Virgins with the opprobrium of Untouchables.

Certainly that is what we all hope.

Nereid and I are married now and are very happy. My strange little wife, daughter of two worlds. I know that I shall have to take her back to Venus presently. Loyally she insists she likes our Earth quite as well as Venus. But as I recall the lush tropic beauty of the glowing Arron nights, and the soft iridescence of the water—well, I doubt it very much.

I want Nereid to like Earth. Our little home is in the tropics, by the palm-lined edge of a lagoon. We are secluded here, which is what Nereid wants. When people see her she is dressed always in Earth fashion. But when we are, alone, at night—

I wanted to finish this narrative tonight. I thought I could finish by dawn. It is bright moonlight. I thought Nereid was asleep, but just a little while ago she came from our bedroom to the veranda where I am writing. Nereid, with her tawny hair flowing, her beautiful body again in the shining sea-green garment.

Then she went past me, flinging me her impish, whimsical little smile as she ran for the lagoon. She is swimming down there now. Occasionally she calls up to me, daring me to come down.

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[Transcriber's Note: No heading for Section IV in original.]

[The end of *The War-Nymphs of Venus* by Cummings, Ray]