

The Hell Fruit

LAWRENCE F. ROSE

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THE HELL FRUIT

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Lawrence F. Rose

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The year A.D. 2200, and in the main a world and Solar System at peace—for no other reason than that men had discovered that weapons had become so incredibly destructive as to make war impossible.

Control of the elements, travel between the inner worlds—as opposed to the still-unexplored giants of the System—the mastery of mind control over the body in the place of archaic medical and surgical remedies, abundant food, regulated employment, long life. . . . Man had all these hard-earned amenities, and it was into this era of calm prosperity that there came one Earmar Brown, half Earthman, half Martian, the only living interplanetary half-breed on Earth.

His father had been Robertson Brown, wealthy owner of the Inner Space-ways, and his mother a delectable Martian of high caste—courteous, immensely intelligent, as became her race, far advanced beyond Earth, even at its highest attainable peak. Earmar Brown was indeed unique. Interplanetary law, about the time of his birth, had commanded that the offspring of all interplanetary marriages should be exterminated, chiefly because the progenitors were usually rocket-men, scum of the space-ways, and low-born Martian women. Rather than clutter up the faultless social orders of Mars and Earth, the ruthless edict had gone forth, and been carried out.

Not so with Earmar Brown. The wealth of his father and the affection of his mother had kept him hidden until he had reached the age of five, and was consequently beyond jurisdiction. Now he was thirty; his parents were dead. He had his father's wealth and doggedness and his mother's charm. . . . He was a shining light in a society from which crime had been outlawed. . . .

Or so the majority believed. . . . The fact that this was not entirely true was first signalled when the FG/86, a meteor-scarred old space-freighter, touched down at London's commercial space-port on June 9th, 2200. Commander Holden, bearded, taciturn, square-shouldered, promptly made his way to the big administrative building to declare his cargo. Nobody spoke to him as he entered the big room. Stern and unapproachable, there were few who liked him—and even the check clerk's genial banter was met with a flinty stare of ice-blue eyes.

"Get these filed and give me my clearance pass," Holden requested briefly, and threw a bundle of advice notes and manifests on the broad desk.

The clerk nodded and went into action with his red pencil and rubber stamp.

"Three tons of tacos weed," he muttered, "eighteen tons of West Venusian tobacco, sixteen tons of milnothite fuel, seventy-two cases of Venusian Tropica cherries. . . . Yes, everything seems to be in order."

"Naturally," Holden said brusquely. "What else did you expect?"

The clerk gave him a surprised look. He knew from experience that Commander Holden was a short-tempered man, but on this occasion there even seemed to be a nervous tension in the sting behind his words. He was plainly disturbed over something, constantly glancing about him and shifting his feet restlessly.

"Have a bad trip, Commander?" the clerk asked, writing out the clearance pass for the Interplanetary Customs.

“No. And hurry up, can’t you? I’ve no time to waste. I’m behind schedule as it is. Just time to unload, re-fuel, give my boys a few hours’ Earth-leave—then back again into space.”

“There’s certainly no thrill any more in flying through the void,” the clerk agreed, handing over the pass. “My wife was saying only this morning——”

Holden was not even listening. He as good as snatched the pass and strode from the room—back across the wide, metallic take-off ground, and so to his freighter. Passing through the airlock, he snapped on the microphone.

“Okay, boys, get her unloaded. Fast as you can!”

The crew instantly went to work, all except the navigator and first mate. Their positions were intellectually above the man-handling of cargo.

“Any trouble, Skip?” the first mate asked, as Holden turned from the microphone.

“None. Why should there be? Who’s to know the difference between Venusian Tropica cherries and kurna berries? They look identical.”

“Until somebody tastes ’em,” the navigator grinned.

Holden shrugged and looked out of the port on to the busy loading and goods bays, ablaze with cold, unquivering light.

“Nobody here will bother tasting them,” he said. “If I’d believed that possible I wouldn’t have taken the risk. And it is a risk,” he added grimly. “You realize that, I hope?”

“Smuggling always is,” the first mate responded. “But the pay makes it worth it. Not that I fully understand what the idea is back of it.”

“Not our place to question that,” Holden told him. “All we know is that Anziba of Venus is paying us something close to a fortune to deliver these kurna berries to Earth in the place of the usual Tropica cherries which have the blessing of the Earth and Venusian Governments. . . . We know what we have to do when the berries are safely through the Customs. Notify the people Anziba told us about and let them handle the distribution.”

The first mate was looking puzzled. “All that we know, Skip—but what does Anziba get out of it? That’s what I don’t see. He doesn’t even ask for the money return on selling these damned berries, and even if he did he wouldn’t be able to use it. As an outlaw he’s been kicked out of Venusian society and lost all civil rights. Or have I got the idea wrong?”

“You have it right,” Holden answered. “And keep it to yourself. Nobody is ever to know what we’re doing; nobody must ever know that agents of Anziba contacted us on Venus and got us to handle this smuggling job. Don’t forget that the penalty for smuggling is to be outlawed to the penal settlement in the lunar catacombs.”

This sobering thought brought silence down on the first mate and navigator. It had been one thing to accept the illegal offer of the Venusian insurgent: the thought of the penalty was something very different. Those outlawed to the penal settlement within the moon never returned. They finished their lives in the artificial light and air-conditioned catacombs, mining the valuable minerals of which Earth, owner of the moon, had constant need.

Brooding to himself, Holden turned again to the airlock and watched his men at work. Altogether it took them three hours to unload the cargo, after which they lined up for pay and were given eight hours’ Earth-leave. Then again they would be at work, loading up quite legitimate cargo intended for Venusian colonists; but on the return trip more illegal kurna berries would be brought in, alongside genuine Tropica cherries, one of the most delectable fruits the torrid equatorial regions of Venus could produce.

Commander Holden spent his own few hours of Earth-leave in completing the details of the mission entrusted him by Anziba’s agents. He contacted many men and women whom he

had never seen in his life before, most of them in the questionable dives fringing the edge of the great commercial space-grounds. He suspected that some of them were Venusians who had reached Earth on faked passports. Being not unlike Earth-people, except for a dead whiteness of skin and slit-pupil eyes like those of a cat, which they could hide with tinted glasses, they could manage to get away with it. In any case, Commander Holden was not interested in this aspect. He merely handed on the distribution instructions he had received, and left it at that, though here and there he did have an uneasy moment as he wondered what exactly was behind this peculiar business of the little-known kurna berries.

Once he had completed his business he retired to a spaceman's hostel to sleep, then, as dawn was breaking over the mighty city, he was on the move again, refreshed, and ready for the sixty-million-mile hop which was more or less a part of his life.

And from the distribution centres where the kurna berries had been taken there went transport after transport, loaded with the cases, the purveyors being under the impression they were getting their usual consignment of Tropica cherries. . . . In all parts of the city, and indeed throughout the country, in the fruit markets, stores, and higher-class restaurants there appeared the counterfeit cherries—and, as of yore, they were bought by all those who could afford them. Where peaches and grapes had once taken the fancy of the masses, it was now Venusian cherries, and had been for nearly ten years. So stable had the market become that the Interplanetary Customs never even thought of the possibility of pseudo-cherries. In fact, hardly anybody knew there were berries on Venus which exactly duplicated their luscious cousins in everything except substance.

Four days after the kurna berries had been eaten the head of London's Department of Public Affairs was a much-worried man. Anything appertaining to the health of the community had long been abolished, so completely had the mind-healers got man's various fleshly ailments in hand. Yet here were reports of mounting trouble, of hundreds of men, women, and children mysteriously thrown off balance by eating Tropica cherries. The thing did not make sense. The Tropica cherries had been consumed for years and were renowned for their nourishing properties.

A victim of the "fruit poisoning" was selected and subjected to voluntary examination by the experts, and the result was surprising. The man seemed to be semi-intoxicated, and yet he had complete control over his limbs and other reactions and could walk a toe-line when asked to do so. The outstanding features of his "complaint" seemed to be his intense reaction to high-pitched sounds and his declaration that he could hear things denied to him in the ordinary way. . . . All of which set the scientists and mind-experts a pretty problem. Naturally they investigated the so-called cherries, but failed to detect anything vitally wrong with them, chiefly because the plant chemistry of Venus was so much at variance with that of Earth, otherwise they would have recognized certain rare drugs which reacted powerfully on the brain-centres.

Then came the next phase. The pseudo-cherries produced the most desperate craving. Those who had eaten them had to have more—and more—and still more, in much the same fashion as drug addicts of old had sold themselves and their possessions for opium and heroin. All of which was very gratifying to the distributors, but a deadly puzzle to the authorities.

In the main the affair was hushed up for fear of vilification concerning incompetence in high quarters—but certain newspapers and televue stations with an axe to grind did not hesitate to scatter what little information they could obtain. And one of those who heard the garbled details was Earmar Brown.

He took no immediate interest in the situation, even though on past occasions his specialized knowledge of science and profound understanding of Venus, Mars, and Earth had made him an invaluable consultant to the forces of law and order. At the moment he was full of schemes for the exploration of the outer planets of the System, for they had got to be conquered one day and used to extend Man's ever-growing dominance over the wastes of space. With Vanita, the ash-blonde who was presumably his confidential secretary, though some averred that she was his wife even if only for reasons of propriety, he was in the Starlight Café when the matter of the Venusian fruits came directly to his notice.

His reason for being in the exclusive night-spot was quite legitimate. His plans for exploration of Jupiter were complete: he and Vanita were at the end of many weeks of hard mental planning and arranging. What more natural than to take a night off before plunging into the unpredictable hazards of investigating an unknown and gigantic planet? There was also another reason. Earmar Brown loved gaiety. From his mother's bright, intelligent make-up he had inherited the love of brilliant lights, scintillating music, costly wines and foods, exquisite clothes, sophisticated conversation. And to the best of his knowledge only Vanita was capable of making his evening complete. Though entirely a woman of Earth, she had the highest intellectual faculties combined with a subtle humour, which to Earmar Brown was entirely satisfying. Those who believed she was his wife were incorrect. Because he was a being of two worlds, Earmar Brown considered himself a confirmed bachelor, even a man without a world, since neither would agree that he belonged exclusively to them.

"To us, Vanita," he said, smiling, and raised a glass of sparkling sapphire-blue wine. "Blue as your eyes, and blue as my spirits would become if you ever leave me."

The girl smiled, raising her own glass of Martian essence, the costliest drink in the System, but calculated to make one feel life could be everlasting.

"I'll not leave you, Earmar—not as long as you continue to pay me such a thumping salary."

"So that is the reason? I was egoist enough to think it was because of my looks."

The girl drank without comment. Earmar Brown had justification for his remark, but Vanita did not consider it her place to say so. A man is worth the approval of any feminine eye, surely, when he stands seven feet in height and has the carriage of an emperor? Such a stature had Earmar Brown, from his Martian side. In features he had the best derivatives of both parents—abysmal blue eyes, space-black hair, and the hooked nose, arrogant chin, and humorous mouth of his father. This, coupled with his high intellectual attainments, had made Earmar Brown one of Nature's specialized children.

Most men liked Earmar Brown, and those who did not were afraid of him. Actual enemies he did not seem to possess: he was too genial to incur anybody's wrath. As a rule it was Vanita at whom the men looked—with her softly rounded figure, her merry smile, her frank blue eyes, and tumbled masses of pale gold hair which no beautician had ever yet managed to cluster into any semblance of order. Vanita was not beautiful in the accepted sense, but she was immensely attractive. Just the same, no man except Earmar Brown ever claimed her attention. There was between these two the indissoluble bond of understanding, and mental, if not physical, matehood.

"Is dancing on the agenda?" Earmar asked presently, holding forth his cigarette case. "I sincerely hope not. For one thing, I always feel like Gulliver when on a dance-floor; and for another, it seems to me an intolerable waste of time and energy. However, if you——"

"Earmar Brown, or I'm a comet!"

The voice was quite distinct over the foot-tingling rhythm of the dance orchestra. It was a hard, commercial-sounding voice, as though it spent its existence driving bargains. And in a sense it did. It was owned by Carlton T. Meadows, one of London's greatest food distributors.

Earmar closed his eyes for a moment, then, with a resigned glance at the girl, he rose to his feet majestically and stood towering over the loud, pot-bellied little man who always seemed like a throwback to a species of mankind long extinct.

"Where've you been putting yourself, eh?" Meadows demanded, giving Earmar a playful dig in the midriff. "You're too much of a show-piece to hide yourself, Earmar! Or have you forgotten who I am?"

"That would hardly be possible," Earmar murmured. "I recall I aided you in some scientific analysis or other——"

"That's it! About a year ago. You found a new sort of bug was eating the insides outa that consignment of Martian pears I got. I'll never know how you did it, but you certainly saved me a packet. . . . You and the young lady."

Carlton T. bobbed and blinked at the girl, and she smiled rather woodenly.

"Not interrupting anything, am I?" Carlton T. asked, as though the possibility had just dawned upon him. "I just saw you as I was crossing the room, and I thought I should pay my respects."

"Very appreciative," Earmar Brown approved.

"Not doing anything about this cherry business, are you?"

Earmar's expression changed slightly. "You mean the illness which appears to have overtaken everybody who ate the cherries? No, I haven't done anything about it. Many other things on my mind, sir—many other things."

"Just keep 'em there, then." Carlton T. winked and delivered another nudge to Earmar's midriff. "Once you start solving what's wrong with those cherries bang goes the chance of making a fortune, if you see what I mean?"

"The connection escapes me," Earmar confessed.

"Why, it's straight, plain, and simple. The demand for these cherries is staggering—positively staggering. I've got tens of thousands of cases on order, and I'm not the only one, either. Point is, the folk who eat these cherries get one helluva craving for more of 'em—and up go the sales!"

"Are you sure," Vanita put in, "that the Government will allow any more cherries to be imported? From what I saw in the news-scanners this morning there's talk of banning them until it is discovered what is peculiar about them."

Carlton T. chuckled. "Don't you believe it, miss! If the folks who've had cherries don't get more they'll go crazy, or die, or something. No Government can risk that possibility. . . ." He reflected for a moment. "The only uncomfortable possibility is that somebody extra smart, like you, Earmar, may be asked to investigate—— But you haven't been approached yet?"

"Not yet, Mr. Meadows. Nor am I much interested."

The distributor rubbed his hands gleefully. "Just let it stop that way, sir, and everybody in my line'll be happy. Now I must be going. Sorry if I upset a taty-taty."

He winked and grinned again, and then went on his way, leaving Earmar Brown gazing in some wonder after him.

"Extraordinary person," he commented, seating himself again. "With all the civilizing influences of a modern community he still remains vulgar. . . . Just the same, Van, he has started me thinking."

“About the cherries?”

“Yes. There’s something more than passing queer about the way they have affected people _____”

Earmar broke off his conversation and looked about him in surprise as a sudden commotion burst forth from the rear of the exclusive establishment. That such a thing could happen in so highbrow a place was enough to make the manager drop dead. But happening it was. The surprised diners had a brief glimpse of a man in a big overcoat hurrying from one of the rear doorways, blundering into tables in his desperate effort to get away. Suddenly he right-turned—a lean, frightened-looking man, hatless, his skin pale and sweating with exertion.

“What on earth’s going on?” Vanita asked in bewilderment.

Earmar did not reply. He waited until the man came tumbling past, then he shot out one of his long legs. Immediately the man tripped, reeled sideways, and finally collapsed on the floor. At the same moment the rear door opened again and there came in view two plain-clothes men and a uniformed inspector of police.

“Stop that man!” came a shout from the Inspector.

Earmar stood up, raised the struggling man, and held on to him. The man hesitated, then seemed to give up all idea of trying to escape the grip of the seven-foot giant rearing over him.

“Good work, Mr. Brown,” the Inspector gasped, coming up. “He gave us the slip.”

“So I gathered.” Earmar handed over his charge. “And how are you, Inspector? Quite a time since I’ve seen you.”

“I’m worried—damned worried!” The Inspector watched the two plain-clothes men take the man firmly between them and lead him towards the back regions from which he had escaped. “I just don’t know whether I’m coming or going at the moment. Four murders in one night! Can you beat that?”

“I don’t know,” Earmar reflected. “I never tried murder.”

The Inspector glared. “This isn’t funny, Mr. Brown! And I’ll stake everything I’ve got that that fellow you stopped for us is another cherry man!”

Earmar exchanged a swift look with the listening Vanita.

“See you again,” the Inspector growled. “This is no place to talk, anyhow. Too many people gaping——”

“A moment.” Earmar caught at the Inspector’s arm as he turned to go. “You’re getting me interested, Inspector. Where can I have a word with you? About cherries, I mean?”

“Come to the ante-room with me, if you like. Private enough there. I wouldn’t advise you to bring the young lady. There’s been a murder, and the body’s in there.”

“Murder by our pasty-faced friend, you mean?”

“No doubt.”

Vanita rose to her feet. “If you’d seen some of the ghastly things Earmar thinks up in his laboratory, Inspector, you’d realize that a little thing like murder can’t shock me—and in any case I have to be present as secretary.”

The Inspector shrugged and led the way across the great room, ignoring the stares which followed him and the genial giant and eager girl in the rear.

“This may be something interesting, Van,” Earmar murmured, bending from his immense height.

“Maybe—but don’t forget we’re leaving for Jupiter tomorrow. Don’t start burdening yourself with assignments. Cherries are beneath your notice, surely?”

“Depends . . .” There was a thoughtful gleam in Earmar’s dark blue eyes as he followed the girl into the ante-room—and at a corner table of the café a dough-skinned man wearing tinted glasses raised a micro-radio set from the artificial flower in his buttonhole.

“Zilfa?” he questioned. “Nujas speaking. I’m in the Starlight Café, and I don’t particularly like the way things are going, either. One of the killers has been caught.”

“You mean three,” murmured the voice at the other end. “I have seen two caught myself. Nothing to worry about. They are too dazed to give a rational explanation.”

“That isn’t the point.” Nujas’ face was grim. “Earmar Brown has come into the picture. Once he starts he’ll root out everything. I’ll keep tabs on him and let you know what happens. At all costs he’s got to be stopped.”

Nujas switched off and returned the radio to his buttonhole; and in the ante-room back of the café Earmar was looking under the big tablecloth which covered the corpse lying on the sofa.

“I recognize Richard Walton Denning,” he said. “A famous politician and very much connected with the Organization for Venusian Settlement.”

“Right,” the Inspector acceded, his square face grim: then he looked at the pale, frightened man between the two plain-clothes men. “Well, you murdered him. We got the tip off just in time to see you do it. What’s the explanation?”

The man was silent. There was even something vaguely pitiable about the vacancy in his face and the hunted-animal light in his eyes.

“Tip off?” Earmar enquired. “You knew this murder was going to happen?”

“Yes. There have been three others tonight. In two cases the murderers—men like this one here—were caught, and one escaped. In the pocket of one of them was a list of those down for ‘elimination’, and Richard Walton Denning was one of them. We found his whereabouts, but were too late. From all accounts he got a fake visiphone call and was asked to answer it here in the privacy of this ante-room. This man was evidently hiding in here. We arrived just as he was pulling out the knife with which he’d stabbed his victim to death.”

“And he nearly got away?” Vanita asked.

“He probably would have, but for Mr. Brown’s intervention.” The Inspector meditated for a moment, then, “I think the whole thing is some kind of political intrigue. Each man who has been killed tonight was a well-known member of the Organization for Venusian Settlement, though what the devil that is I’ll be hanged if I know.”

“It is quite a worthy movement,” Earmar assured him, “and has the backing of both the Earth and Venusian authorities. Put in its simplest terms it refers to the allocation of various land areas of Venus for the settlement of colonists from Earth. Many Venusians are also included in the settlement, of course. Certain factions on Venus, however, object to the idea, and for some time past have been causing quite a deal of trouble. This would appear to be a concerted effort to eliminate the main men at the back of the movement.”

The Inspector shrugged. “At least it gives us motive. . . .” He turned back to the silent killer. “I’m giving you a chance to defend yourself, my friend. If you’ve any statement to make, make it now. It may help you at the trial.”

There was no answer.

“I’ll gamble he’s got cherries in his pocket, same as the other killers,” the Inspector muttered. “Have a look, Davis.”

One of the plain-clothes men complied, and from the killer’s overcoat pocket produced a dozen or so cherries and rolled them significantly in his palm.

"I'll take them," the Inspector said. "I suppose they'll be used as a grand excuse by the defence counsel for testifying that the killers acted without being conscious of what they were doing."

"That may be more true than you think, Inspector," Earmar remarked. "May I? Just a couple?"

He held out his big hand, and the Inspector passed two of the cherries over. In thoughtful silence Earmar studied them, then finally he pulled the stalk from one of them and sniffed at where it had been.

"Very interesting," he commented. "You may quote me, Inspector, as saying quite definitely that these are not Venusian Tropica cherries, but a deadly fruit almost identically resembling them—as alike in appearance, indeed, as the Earth mushroom is to the toadstool, and with correspondingly different effects on the human system. These are kurna berries, a product of the inner forests of Venus."

"How do you know?" the Inspector asked suspiciously.

"By the aroma they give off at the stalk root. A smell like cloves. The normal cherry of Venus' tropic regions has no smell whatever. Not that one can blame the distributors: they would not know what to look for. I happen to know the flora of Venus extremely well, thanks to my extensive travels."

The Inspector frowned. "Then—then some bright baby is importing these infernal things instead of the genuine cherries?"

"I would imagine they are being sent *with* the genuine cherries, so as to get past the Customs. In what percentage we don't know."

"But what's the sense of it? Who'd want to poison the human race like this?"

"We cannot be sure that they do poison," Earmar replied. "They seem to produce some kind of mental metamorphosis, not death from poisoning. And of course there is the craving to continue consuming them, which is presumably why each murderer has been caught with some in his pocket. . . . All very fascinating. I've never tried the effect of these berries, but maybe I should to completely analyse what they do."

"Don't forget Jupiter," Vanita murmured. "You've no time to be eating cherries, Earmar."

"My dear Van, I have time for anything interesting, and I am sure Jupiter can wait for awhile. He's been there for some myriads of years, so a slight delay in exploring him will not signify. These cherries—or rather berries—fascinate me."

"All of which means what?" the Inspector asked. "That you are going to investigate officially? I know you've given a hand now and again in the past, but——"

"Nothing official, Inspector. Just for the fun of it. I feel there is significance in the fact that each murdered man was a member of the O.V.S. Also significant is the fact that the kurna berries come from the interior Venusian jungles, to which soul-frying region a certain vindictive Venusian by the name of Anziba was outlawed about a year ago. He was the leader of a band of insurgents who resented the new colonization laws and, as I recall, no mean scientist either." Earmar smiled thoughtfully. "I'd quite welcome a brush with Anziba: he has always impressed me as being a particularly foul piece of living matter."

The Inspector glanced about him, then at his watch.

"Nothing much more I can do here, anyway. I'll take my man in and see if we can make him talk. You'll keep in touch with us, Mr. Brown?"

"Certainly," Earmar promised, wrapping the berries in his handkerchief and putting them in his pocket. "If things are going the way I think they are the Government and Customs may

both have to take sweeping measures.”

II

In ten minutes the Inspector and his men had departed with their captive by means of a rear exit, whilst Earmar and Vanita went back to their table in the café, watched intently by the dough-skinned man with tinted glasses, secluded in his corner.

“More wine, my dear?” Earmar asked genially, but the girl shook her head. She was looking reproachful.

“You’re not playing fair, Earmar. You promised that after all the hard planning and arranging we’d done nothing would stop us setting off for Jupiter tomorrow.”

Earmar poured wine for himself. “And why this desperate desire to leap into the outer deeps and endure all the dangers they contain?”

“That’s just it! The danger! The thrill of never knowing what is going to happen next. I was quite looking forward to it after long months of drab, uninteresting work—and now you’ve gone and spoiled it!”

Earmar finished his wine and eyed the girl whimsically.

“For your information, Van, there are dangers on this old Earth just as imminent as any we might meet in space. Believe me, this kurna-berry business isn’t just some fantastic idea to corner the fruit market, or to give the human race a pain in the tummy. There’s something deadly at the back of it, and right at this moment you and I are being watched as intently as though we were specimens under a microscope.”

“Oh?” Vanita looked about her.

“You are well trained enough not to try to discern an enemy and give yourself away,” Earmar reminded her. “Back of me, at a corner table, is a flabby-skinned man with tinted glasses. He’s a Venusian. And he is watching us.”

“How do you know?”

“I can feel the intensity of his gaze on the nerve-centres at the back of my head.”

Vanita gave a vaguely uncomfortable smile. For the moment she had forgotten this inherited sensitiveness from Earmar’s Martian mother.

“Are you quite sure he is a Venusian?” she questioned.

“Quite sure. I noticed as I passed him that he is wearing two jackets, one within the other, and also two evening-dress waistcoats. Even in here the poor devil is cold, which points to him originating in the Venusian hinterland. In the hinterland exist the insurgents under the dictates of Anziba. . . . Simple, isn’t it? To be finally conclusive, he wears the tinted glasses to hide his cat’s-eye pupils and has the shiny wetness of skin typical of all Venusians. Now, do you feel any better with danger breathing down your delectable back?”

The disappointed look left Vanita’s face. “Mmmm, maybe there is something in this cherry business, after all. But why should our Venusian friend keep his eye on us? What have we done?”

“I fancy the attention is directed mainly towards myself,” Earmar answered. “I have made something of a reputation when it comes to solving scientific puzzles—and I am hardly the friend of the wrong-doers—so possibly our Venusian is wondering if I fit into the picture. Since I do, we are liable to encounter him in the future, and for that reason a detector reading of his aura might prove invaluable later.”

From the pocket of his dress waistcoat Earmar withdrew what looked, from a distance, like a watch. Actually it was a stop-watch affair, its dial nearly obliterated with microscopic numbers and hair-fine lines. One of his own inventions, it operated magnetically and, in stop-watch fashion, gave a reading of any particular person's bodily energy. Since no two people had ever been known to have identical energy, any more than identical fingerprints, the instrument was foolproof.

Earmar adjusted it, then thrust it in his trouser pocket. He rose to his feet.

"Back in a moment, my dear," he told the girl, and strolled away across the room, casually dropping his hand into his trouser pocket as he did so.

When he reached the Venusian's table he went past him without so much as a glance, but his thumb depressed the instrument's button within his pocket. Afterwards, purely for the sake of pretext, he went down one of the rear corridors to the manager's office, turned before he reached it, and re-entered the café by a different door.

"Get it?" Vanita asked, as he came up.

"I imagine so." Earmar took the instrument from his pocket, glanced at it, then returned it to its normal waistcoat pocket. "Everything's perfect, Van. And now I think it time we were on our way. I want to get to the lab. and try these cherries. . . ."

He eased the girl's wrap on to her slender shoulders as she rose to her feet, and within a few moments they were making their way through the elaborate foyer to the outdoors.

"Don't look now," Earmar murmured, adjusting his overcoat, "but our flabby-skinned friend is not so far behind. If he requires a run for his money he shall have it."

"Your car, Mr. Brown?" the commissioner inquired, and Earmar nodded, looming gigantic beside the girl as his brightly plated, atom-driven land cruiser was brought from the parking ground and halted at the steps.

"Thank you, George," Earmar murmured. "Here, go and buy yourself a bowl of cherries."

"Not if I know it, sir! And thank you, sir. . . . Good night."

Earmar saw that the girl was comfortably settled in the front seat, then he dropped down beside her and drove swiftly out of the driveway and into the main intersection road which led to the heart of the huge, glittering metropolis. The night was warm and still, thanks to the weather machines—all a June night should be—but since Earmar's super-car reached ninety miles an hour within twenty seconds, there was need for him and Vanita to be wearing overcoat and cape.

"As you say, if our friend needs a run for his money he is having it," the girl laughed, watching the overhead lamps flicking past so rapidly they seemed like a continuous streak of brilliance.

Earmar did not reply. He was watching the rear mirror, and presently he gave a start. Two spots of light were following in the distance, and becoming slowly larger. Reaching out to the complicated dashboard, he pressed a button. Immediately telescopic lenses operated through the mirror and brought the following car to within an apparent few yards. The number plate was plainly discernable.

"Eight J. six," Earmar commented. "That's not a police car, then, chasing us for going over the lawful eighty m.p.h. mark. . . ."

Vanita twisted her head, the wind threshing back her flaxen hair. She gave a little gasp of surprise.

"Whoever they are, Earmar, they're gaining—and that I just can't believe, not with this car of yours."

“The obvious reason being they mean to overtake.” Earmar studied the great five-mile-long vista ahead which led to the heart of the city. “All right; we’ll play games too.”

He depressed the accelerator, which increased the power of the current from the atomic motor. The 90-mark on the dashboard clock was left behind. 100—120—140— Vanita held her breath, listening to the scream of the tyres on the road’s metallic surface and the dull roar of the wind against the curved windscreen—but even this high speed did not throw off the pursuers. They were rapidly gaining, and must have been making at least 170 miles an hour.

“They have an atomic motor too,” Earmar commented. “That would suggest scientific brains in the background somewhere. How far away are they?”

“Quarter of a mile about, and fast gaining.”

Ahead loomed the Tenth Traffic Level, the 200-foot high viaduct which spanned the Thames and gave ingress to the city proper. At the moment it was deserted. Earmar calculated that he could probably get across the viaduct and into the city traffic before he could be overtaken, after which it would be easy to lose the pursuers. If pursuers they were. They might be a party of speed maniacs seeing what they could do towards breaking their necks. This possibility struck Earmar as unlikely, since the city regulations prevented cars operating above 150 m.p.h., which was the enforced limit of his own vehicle.

Making up his mind, he flattened the accelerator pedal to the limit, and the extra ten miles an hour gave Vanita the impression she was flying. The viaduct ahead, with its two-way traffic channel high over the Thames, brilliantly lighted, was still empty.

“Two miles of this and we’re clear,” Earmar said briefly, with a glance at the rear mirror.

But it was not as easy as that. With a sudden tremendous burst of speed the pursuing car began to rapidly catch up. When it was no more than twenty feet away there stabbed from one of its open windows the familiar deep violet beam of a heat-gun, usually only used by militia and police. Vanita gave a cry of alarm and ducked—only just in time. A piece was shattered out of the top of the windscreen. Had she had her head in the way, nothing could have saved her.

It came again, tearing and liquefying part of one of the rear doors. Earmar swore, but dare not glance behind him at the speed at which he was moving. . . . Then came disaster. Evidently the beam had been trained on one of the wheels, for abruptly Earmar found the steering completely crazy in his fingers. He released the steering-wheel as it spun out of control—then the low guard rail of the viaduct came flashing towards the radiator.

The impact was tremendous. Going at its high speed the great car smashed through the rail and sailed out into space—then down and down, to hit the Thames with a resounding splash and terrific concussion. Vanita, half smothered by her billowing cape and struggling to free it from her neck, went deep under the water.

Earmar was more fortunate. He struggled free of the imprisoning driving-seat as the car began to sink. Swimming clear of it, he looked about and above him. The pursuers, whoever they had been, were evidently satisfied with their handiwork, for their car was out of sight and the attack was not being followed up—then in the reflection of bright lights on the swift-flowing waters Earmar caught a glimpse of ballooning green silk, which could only be Vanita’s evening-dress skirt.

Instantly he swam towards her and dragged her up beside him, tearing free the fur cape, which had entangled itself around her head.

“All right?” he questioned quickly, supporting her.

“Yes—I can make it. Remind me never to wear a fur cape again when we’re on business.”

Earmar kept his hold upon her, and together they swam hard broadside to the current, finally dragging themselves up the further muddy bank.

“Enough for one evening, I think,” Vanita said, wringing the wet out of her voluminous skirt.

“Little doubt that our pasty-faced friend was back of the attack,” Earmar responded. “Just as well I took his aura: I shall need to have words with him before long, to say nothing of recompense for the loss of a ten-thousand-pound car. I hope by now, Van, you are satisfied that one does not have to go to Jupiter to get excitement.”

The girl gave a little shiver in her clinging garments.

“This is no place to stand talking, Earmar. Let’s get moving.”

They ascended the bank to the top and then had to flounder through muddy regions for half a mile before they came to the city end of the viaduct. Earmar went to the nearest telephone, leaving a wet trail behind him, and summoned a taxi. When it arrived the driver looked surprised, but his inquisitiveness remained ungratified. He was paid extra for the wet his passengers left in his vehicle, and that was that.

Half an hour later Earmar was changed and in his laboratory, annexed to his central London home. Vanita had gone to her own apartment, two blocks distant. When she reappeared all traces of her adventure had been obliterated, except for the indignant gleam in her blue eyes. When she entered the laboratory she came straight to the point.

“What about those killers? When are you going after them?”

“Tonight,” Earmar responded. “I was only waiting for you. I’ve got a line on our friend, anyway.”

The girl looked at the bench. Upon it lay the aura detector, unharmed from its water immersion, since it was completely sealed. Next to it there now stood an object rather like a compass, a thin, magnetic needle swinging gently on a central pivot.

“Perfect reaction,” Earmar said. “I have the compass tuned to Pasty Face’s aura, as given on the detector, and you observe that the needle moves every time he does.”

Though she had seen this uncanny instrument at work on other occasions, it never lost its fascination for Vanita. For a moment she studied the delicate oscillations of the needle, then she asked a question.

“How far away is Pasty Face? Obviously he’s due south of here, but at what distance?”

“From the energy reaction I’d say about five miles—and south of here are the poorest quarters of the city, the freighter space and loading grounds, the maritime docks, and all the rag, tag, and bobtail of the void and the ocean. Be that as it may,” Earmar finished, “that is the direction in which we are going.”

“And the cherries are going to wait until later?”

“Yes. I must grab our murdering friend before he perhaps gets out of reach. There are the cherries, by the way—or rather berries.”

Vanita looked at them hanging on a small hook over the bench, drying out after their immersion in the Thames.

“You really wish to come with me?” Earmar questioned, turning to the laboratory door. “It’s long past midnight, and this doesn’t promise to be a friendly session. If violence develops, as it probably will, I’d rather you were out of it.”

Vanita shook her head firmly. “I’m coming. You don’t expect me to toddle home to bed like a good little girl after that dive into the Thames, do you? I want to see our friend suffer—and I want to know what all this cherry business is about.”

Earmar did not argue any further. In a few minutes he and the girl were in his private helicopter, the emanation-compass firmly viced to the edge of the control board, and they took off swiftly into the night sky. Thereafter they hovered their way over the chasms of light which formed the metropolis, all the time travelling in the direction indicated by the compass needle. When eventually it pointed downwards instead of obliquely to the south, it would be time to descend.

Throughout the journey Vanita noticed that Earmar had lost his usual geniality of expression. There were hard lines about his purposeful mouth and a danger glint in his dark eyes. She knew the signs, and thanked her stars she had the many-mooded half-breed as a friend instead of an enemy.

“Not far now,” he said presently. “The needle’s dipping.”

Vanita nodded and gazed below. The main mass of the city was to rearward now. Almost below them were the beacons of the air- and space-ports, abutting on to the space-freighter and ocean-freighter regions. Here there were countless huddles of small dwellings, abode of the spacemen and the sailors’ families. Cheap, ancient property which had missed the ubiquitous brush of progress.

Silent, Earmar watched the needle, and at length it was pointing directly below. He cut off the helicopter’s motor and allowed the craft to sink gradually, it making no noise beyond the faint whirring of its air-controlled levitator blades.

“Good spot below there, back of those granaries,” Earmar said, and accordingly he finally brought the machine to rest in that region.

Stepping out of the vessel, he lifted the girl down beside him and then again studied the compass. The needle was once more horizontal, pointing northwards. Watching the needle intently, Earmar began walking. When deep shadows from the granaries blotted out the nearby airport lights the magnetism of the needle itself made it faintly luminous. So, implacably, Earmar twisted and turned down dark alley-ways, the girl right beside him, until at last he realized he had reached his destination. The needle was steady, pointing directly to a cheap rooming house. Late though the hour was, some of the inmates were evidently not asleep. Lights were gleaming from several of the uncurtained windows.

“This is it,” Earmar said. “Ready for action, my love?”

“Whilst I’m with you I’m not scared of a thing: it’s when I’m alone that I go to pieces. Incidentally, did you bring any weapons?”

“No use for them,” Earmar answered brusquely. “If I can’t rely on my physique and mental accomplishments I deserve to be snuffed out. All right, here we go.”

He tested the front door of the tenement house, and as he had anticipated, it was unlocked. With the compass in his hand as though it were a crystal ball, he led the way into the dimly lighted hall, Vanita creeping behind him. The needle said upstairs, so up they went. On the corridor the needle pointed to door Number 7. Earmar gave a grim smile to himself and handed the compass to the girl.

Very gently he tested the door-knob and pushed, but there was no sign of yielding. There was the normal way of knocking, which would alert the Venusian whom the compass infallibly declared was within the room, but that was not what Earmar wanted. So he put his vast shoulder against the door, braced his feet, then exerted all his strength.

There was a creak, then another, and under the continued unyielding force the screws were ripped out of the doorlock and the portal swung wide—revealing beyond a puzzled-looking,

white-faced man lying in a shoddy bed. He was just reaching for the heat-gun in the light of an old-fashioned candle.

Instantly Earmar hurtled across the room and snatched the gun up. Then he handed it to the girl.

“For you, Van. Maybe you won’t go to pieces so often when you have that to protect you.”

The man in the bed sat staring. With his glasses off the slit pupils were plainly visible, immensely distended in the dim light. His skin gleamed with that curious dampness common to all Venusians. But the most noticeable thing about him was his look of stunned surprise, not only at the fact that the two he had believed drowned were here in his bedroom, but that they had been able to locate him so easily.

“What the devil’s the idea?” he demanded. “Or don’t you know it’s against the law to come barging into a man’s bedroom like this? Get out, the pair of you! Couple of half-drunk revellers, I suppose.”

“You’re not doing it very well, my friend,” Earmar commented, looming like Colossus in the candlelight. “You know exactly whom we are, and at the moment are doubtless trying to understand how we come to be here. Your little scheme to kill the pair of us didn’t quite come off—and just to make sure you don’t try anything like that again I’m here to, shall I say, take care of you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! I’m a spaceman, and if I can’t sleep in peace I _____”

“Spaceman you may be. Venusian you certainly are—and you know perfectly well that I am Earmar Brown. Now . . .” Earmar hooked up a solitary chair with his foot and motioned the intently watching Vanita to be seated; then he himself perched on the edge of the bed and considered the Venusian pensively.

The Venusian waited, and hard though he strove, he could not eliminate the fear from his expression. With good reason. He knew Earmar Brown’s record intimately, and he also knew his inherited Martian characteristics.

“I gather,” Earmar said presently, “that that gangster-like pursuit on the viaduct tonight was not entirely a solo performance on your part? You had others with you?”

The Venusian set his ugly mouth defiantly; then he lurched back on to the soiled pillow as the flat of Earmar’s hand struck him with blinding force across the face.

“Well?” Earmar asked calmly.

“Yes . . .” The Venusian held his cheek. “There were two others.”

“I thought so. Nobody could operate a heat-gun and travel at that speed all in one operation. And the car? Provided, I take it, by your master, or masters?”

“It had a special super-atomic engine.”

“I see. Super-atomic engines are a product of the more advanced Venusians, which helps to tell its own tale. . . . However, that is not of immediate interest. My concern is mainly with cherries—or, to be more exact, kurna berries from the Venusian hinterland.”

The Venusian gave a little start.

“I observe my information surprises you, my friend. Let us come to the point, shall we? For whom are you working, and what is the idea behind these imported hell fruits?”

“It’s no concern of yours,” the Venusian retorted.

“On the contrary. When four very famous men are murdered in one night it becomes very much my concern. Partly because I owe allegiance to Earth authority, and partly because I believe laws are made to be obeyed.” Earmar gave the Venusian a chance to speak—which he

failed to accept—and then added, “You are under the orders of Anziba, are you not? The insurgent who is outlawed by all decent Venusian authorities and who has sworn to try to destroy the men and women responsible for the partitioning of Venus?”

“I’m an agent for the kurna berries, yes,” the Venusian admitted, evidently realizing that the safest course was to talk. “But I don’t know who’s back of the scheme. Maybe it is Anziba. I wouldn’t know.”

“And the purpose of the scheme? I know there have been murders, but how does the consumption of kurna berries by the general Earth public bring those murders about? What is the connecting link?”

The Venusian shrugged. “I don’t know. Now will you get out of here?”

“Yes, I think I might as well,” Earmar assented, “but I certainly do not intend to leave you lying around to attack my secretary and me and go on distributing hell fruit. Sorry, my white-skinned friend, but you leave me no alternative.”

Knowing what was coming Vanita turned away. The Venusian, *not* knowing what was coming, crouched back in the bed and waited—and gradually the whole room seemed to be composed of Earmar Brown’s dark blue eyes. Such was the effect to the Venusian’s ravaged mind. In the depths of the eyes there dwelt unholy fires, relentless hypnotic force from Earmar’s Martian mother, who had herself been a perfect exponent of the art.

With Earmar there was none of the gentleness which his mother had brought to her hypnotic gift—only cold, implacable annihilation, the force of a mind which, by inheritance, had an intellectual power two thousand years ahead of Earth’s own.

The Venusian writhed, he struggled, he sweated, but his gaze was pinned to the dark blue pools. At length he felt that his senses were reeling and that his heart would burst under the frightful physical and mental impacts which were killing him. And kill him they did. He relaxed at last, motionless, like a dummy made of putty.

“A most necessary evil,” Earmar sighed, dropping back into his normal manner. “Sometimes I wish my dear mother had not handed her gift to me. It is so insidious, so thorough.”

Vanita turned to look at him in the candlelight, and for just a fleeting moment was nauseated by her association with this enormous man with the over-riding intelligence—then, as he smiled at her whimsically, she realized once again that for all his alien traits he was, deep down, the only partner she ever really wanted.

“Shall I leave my visiting-card or not?” Earmar asked, removing one from his wallet and considering. “Yes, maybe I should. When others of this low-down Venusian set get to know how their ringleader has fared—if ringleader he was—they may exercise more prudence.”

He placed his card edgewise beneath the Venusian’s chin. It was a queer card, and said simply: “With Compliments, ½.”

“And just how much have you gained from this?” Vanita asked, rising from the chair.

“Quite a deal, my dear. We know that the business of the berries is no half-hearted attack on the populace of Earth, but something really big—and I still remain convinced that Anziba of Venus is back of it. Also I have eliminated at least one agent and paid the account for our ducking in the Thames tonight. . . . Now, if you are ready?”

The girl nodded and followed Earmar silently from the room. They left the building without being apprehended and soon regained the helicopter. They were floating high over the metropolis, returning to Earmar’s abode, before he spoke again.

“Next on the list is to find out just what the berries do, Van. But that will be tomorrow morning—or I should say *this* morning, since it is nearly four o’clock now. We’d better rest before doing any more. I’ll take you to your apartment.”

“If you think I could sleep after nearly being killed and seeing that Venusian mesmerized to death, Earmar, you’re crazy!”

He smiled. “Poor little Vanita! Just can’t cultivate a water-tight mind, can you?”

“I’m not like you, if that’s what you mean. You think only of what you are doing at the moment, and let nothing else disturb you—not even taking life.”

“Destroying a Venusian is very much like stamping on a particularly filthy insect,” Earmar responded. “I hate them intensely, even the educated ones responsible for progress on their planet and co-operating with Earth. Don’t blame me too much, Van. I’ve inherited powerful racial prejudices. . . .” Abruptly Earmar threw off his introspective mood. “Home you go, young lady, and join me when you’ve had a good sleep.”

III

A refreshed and somewhat chastened Vanita presented herself at Earmar's home towards eleven o'clock in the morning, to be admitted by the mysterious process of photoelectric beams which Earmar himself operated from his laboratory. She found him in the midst of examining the two berries with analysing equipment, but he turned with a welcoming smile as she came in.

"Well, light of my life, better for a sleep?" he asked.

"Uh-huh." Vanita donned her laboratory overall. "Sorry if I said too much last night. Maybe I was over-tired. What you did was right, of course. That Venusian was really a murderer many times over through being mixed up in the berry business."

"I stand vindicated," Earmar smiled; then he motioned to the notes beside the analysing equipment. "File those away, Van. They contain my findings concerning the berries. When the law wishes to make the whole thing public they may be glad of those facts."

Vanita did as requested, opening a special dossier for the problem of the berries, and meanwhile Earmar stood thinking.

"I suppose you've heard that there have been two more murders in the night?" she asked, glancing at the "public" loudspeaker, which by law was always in action so any important announcement would not be missed.

"Yes, I heard," Earmar assented. "Two more members of the Organization for Venusian Settlement."

"And this time the killers got away with it! Inspector Bradbury *will* be pleased."

"The mystery to me," Earmar said slowly, "is how perfectly ordinary members of the community, after they have eaten the berries, become killers and know exactly whom to kill! Why are they so infallible? I could understand them running amok and killing *anybody*, but that doesn't happen. Each time it is a member of the O.V.S. who receives attention. Whence come the orders that pierce these deranged minds?"

Vanita shrugged and waited for the next.

"Plainly, the only way is to try these two berries and see what they do to me." Earmar picked them up and studied them; then he eyed the girl. "If anything happens to me, sweetheart, my will is in the safe. I've left everything to you."

Vanita looked at him anxiously. "Don't joke about a thing like this, Earmar! If you're liable to kill yourself, for heaven's sake leave the berries alone."

"That these berries may kill me is distinctly a possibility," Earmar stated seriously. "But the risk of death is subservient to my curiosity to see what happens. I shall rely entirely on my mastery of mental and physical conditions to keep myself alive and under control."

With that he put the berries in his mouth, chewed them, and finally swallowed them. Vanita was as motionless as a statue beside the filing cabinet, watching him. He, too, watched her, and presently the first effects of assimilating the hell fruit made themselves noticeable upon him. His vision blurred and the muscles and nerves of his legs seemed as though they would lose their power. By sheer mental effort he overcame the physical weakness and held tightly to the bench, prepared for what might happen next.

Certainly he did not expect the curious blasting effect which was produced on his mind. All natural consciousness of the laboratory and his surroundings faded out, and instead he

became the prey to the most horrific illusions and debased promptings. He knew Vanita was somewhere near, but the respect with which he normally held her was gone now. She was a woman, and that was all that concerned him.

He lurched, looking dazedly around for where she might be. Actually, scared by the change in his appearance and expression, she had hidden herself behind the filing cabinet, and stood ready to dash from the laboratory if Earmar got completely out of hand.

Not seeing her, his basic, primeval impulses became less insistent, and instead he dwelt on the unexpected glory of destruction. He was dominated by the longing to kill, a longing punctuated by flashes of razor-keen intuition which made him realize he could formulate a plan of attack if he chose. . . . And there was something else—a monotonous voice speaking to him softly, compelling.

“You will seek out the members of the O.V.S. and destroy them, one by one. They must all die. Plan among yourselves so no two of you will single out the same victim. All in the O.V.S. must be obliterated!”

Earmar stood listening. It pierced the veil of his mental chaos that the voice was coming from the public loudspeaker on the wall, and even as he comprehended this fact the same order came forth again in exactly the same words. The insidious tone which was used was almost sufficient to send Earmar forth immediately, bent on the destruction of the first member of the O.V.S. he came across.

Then he caught sight of Vanita as she edged towards the doorway. In three strides he had reached her, caught her arm, and whirled her tightly against him. For a moment she struggled against his iron strength and massive frame; then, abruptly changing her tactics, she became passive and spoke quietly:

“Get a grip on yourself. This is Vanita you are holding—and I am not afraid of you! You understand? I am not afraid of you. . . .”

It took the limit of the girl’s courage to say that, knowing she was completely powerless against him. As steadily as she could, she looked into his distraught face, his inflamed eyes. . . . Then very slowly he began to get a hold on himself. He found that intense mental effort mastered the relentless voice speaking in his ears. The bestial promptings faded and the laboratory slowly returned to normal.

Vanita found herself released. Breathing hard, she stepped back a few paces and watched Earmar clap two hands to his forehead, as though he were in pain. When at length he lowered them again and looked at her, he was smiling crookedly, but at least it was a smile she knew and could understand.

“Whew!” he ejaculated, giving himself a shake. “That was a tough one whilst it lasted, sweetheart. . . . Thanks for speaking the way you did. I think I’d have lost control of myself otherwise.”

He moved unsteadily to a chair and sat, recovering himself by degrees. Vanita poured out a glass of restorative and handed it to him. Her own fears were now fast subsiding. Earmar was practically normal again, though obviously suffering from violent reaction.

“There couldn’t be a more diabolical agency than that hell fruit,” he muttered at last, clenching his fist. “Fortunately for me I have considerable mental powers, and therefore was able to bring myself back to even keel. Also I only ate two cherries—or berries, rather—whereas most people must have eaten at least a dozen or more, I suppose.”

“I gather you found your mentality overwhelmed?” Vanita asked.

“Completely. My impulses were directed solely towards the lowest animal instincts and desire for murder. . . .” Earmar glanced up at the silent loudspeaker. “Tell me something, Van. Whilst I was in the grip of that horror was this loudspeaker in operation?”

“The public one, you mean? Why, no. Not a sound.”

“And yet I heard a voice—gentle, cultured, yet infinitely persuasive—talking to me. Giving me orders. . . .” Earmar snapped his fingers. “Now I begin to understand! Most of the victims of the hell fruit who have retained enough intelligence to explain themselves have declared that they can hear sounds normally denied to them! That is just what happened to me. I’ll gamble that voice is still talking over the radio, but neither of us can hear it. If we ate some of the berries, we would.”

Vanita looked puzzled. “You mean that somehow the berries make people able to hear sounds normally inaudible?”

“Is that so unusual? Various drugs produce various effects. Some sharpen the vision, some stimulate the action of the heart. Others produce double vision and blindness. Why should not a poisonous drug so sharpen the auditory nerves that the ears can detect sound above the fifteen thousand vibrations a second which is the normal limit of the human ear?”

“Like—like some animals?” Vanita asked quickly. “Dogs, for instance. They can detect sounds inaudible to us.”

Earmar nodded. “Animals have a higher range than us, yes. The fact remains I heard a voice giving orders. . . .” And he explained in detail exactly what he had heard. “It sounded to me like a perpetual electrical recording, giving the same orders over and over again. Imagine its effect on all those under the influence of the hell fruit! Those people hear the orders, and the voice is hypnotic in its intonation. It explains why hell-fruit victims have sought out members of the O.V.S. and murdered them. I was perfectly willing to do so myself until you forced me back to my senses.”

Earmar got to his feet actively, and the girl watched him set up some of his scientific equipment. It consisted of a parabolic horn, which he turned to directly face the ever-operative loudspeaker, an electrical amplifier, and then a hetrodyner. This latter, when he switched it on, produced a constant vibration of a given frequency.

“What’s the idea?” Vanita asked curiously.

“I am imposing one vibration—from the hetrodyner—upon another, which is presumably coming from that loudspeaker. We may not be able to hear it in our normal state, but the coincidence of these two vibrations will be ‘heard’ on this detector here. The coincidence produces a given ‘beat’, and since the frequency of the hetrodyne vibration is known to me, the inaudible vibration can easily be calculated, and confirmed on the detector.”

Which proved to be the case. By the time he had concluded his experiment in ultrasonics, Earmar was smiling tautly. He motioned to his figuring on the scratch-pad and then to the detector.

“There we have it, my dear! From that speaker is coming a vibration of twenty thousand to the second, far transcending normal hearing range. A very clever, cunning idea.”

“So it seems,” the girl acknowledged, still puzzled. “You mean that whoever is back of the hell fruit is issuing these orders all the time, in a hypnotic voice, knowing that the only people who will hear them, and act on them, are those suffering from hell-fruit influence?”

“Exactly; and the cleverest idea of all is to make these public speakers the means of communication because they are on all the time, an absolutely open door to the Voice.”

“Then all we have to do is track down the Voice, and put a stop to the whole thing?”

Earmar smiled. "I would it were as easy as that. However, since we have got this far we may as well see if detectors can show us where the radiation is coming from. Obviously a radio wave is being generated in order to carry the Voice, so we'll see if we can trace its source."

Turning, Earmar set to work again with his apparatus, but it was close on an hour before he had come to the end of fruitless probing with the instruments. Vanita, now seated on one of the high stools beside him, had seen the various electrical displays on the reading-screens and been suitably impressed—but evidently Earmar was not satisfied. When at length he switched off he was frowning.

"Nothing but violent solar reaction," he said at last. "You saw the sprayings of solar energy on the screens, Van? That is as near as we can get to tracing the source of the Voice."

"Then I don't understand it! Tracing a radio wave to its source is one of the simplest accomplishments of science, Earmar. Why, the police used to do it way back in the twentieth century, so why can't—"

"The Voice," Earmar interrupted patiently, "is not on Earth, my dear. That is what makes detection difficult."

Vanita started. "Then where is it?"

"Where I expected it would be—at least, I think so. And that is Venus. I've ranged over all the Earth and received no impulse, which definitely rules out the possibility of the Voice being on this planet. The next best possibility is Venus, where the hell fruits come from, and also where Anziba resides. The terrific solar static drowns everything else out, chiefly because Venus is so close to the sun. Possibly the Voice is aware that solar disturbance will make it impossible for the source of his radio wave to be detected—at least from Earth here. Or, more likely, he believes himself perfectly safe. It is only one such as I who am able to be influenced and then recover to question the source of the influence."

"Which reminds me," Vanita said. "Do you feel the craving for more berries, like the others who have eaten them?"

"Yes, but I shall master it. I'm thankful I did not consume more than two berries."

Earmar put his apparatus away and stood thinking. Then he said, "There are one or two moves the Government of this country can make to help themselves fight this berry menace. They can order all public loudspeakers to be stopped for the time being and use other means for the transmission of vital news, if there should be any. They can also stop the importation of all so-called cherries, pending their analysis. Finally, they can closely guard all the remaining members of the O.V.S., which may serve to save them from being murdered."

"Stop the berries, and what happens to those who can't live without them?" Vanita asked seriously.

"They will die: it is as simple as that. They represent a small proportion of the population as yet, and they are incurable. Berries, or death. Preferably death rather than have them permanent mental and physical slaves of a heinous dictatorship some sixty million miles away."

The girl sighed. "I hope the Government see your viewpoint, Earmar. Personally, I don't think they will. For one thing, they don't comprehend the real nature of the danger; and for another, they'll object to letting people die."

"Then let them try curative treatment if it makes them any happier. The fact remains, the cherries must be stopped as long as kurna berries are likely to be amongst them. I think I'll let our friend the Inspector know my views and let him handle it."

“And the business ends at that?”

Earmar laughed shortly. “By no means! The whole business has to be stamped out, root and branch. Just stopping it by lawful expedients on Earth here doesn’t make certain that it can never happen again. Our job is to trace the villainy to its source and smash it. I think the best thing we can do is intercept the next freighter from Venus, in mid-space, and see if we can learn anything that way. Since the agent I killed did not seem to be aware of his master’s identity, we might have better luck with the commander of a freighter possibly carrying hell fruit. Yes, that’s it!” he decided. “We’ll be on our way the moment I’ve told the Inspector about——”

Earmar paused as the warning light on his master switchpanel proclaimed that somebody was at the front door of the residence. Depressing a switch, Earmar looked into the television view of the front door’s exterior.

“Talk of the devil!” he exclaimed. “The Inspector himself and two policemen. What next?” He snapped on the microphone. “Come right in, Inspector, down the hall to the laboratory.”

Earmar depressed the requisite buttons to give admittance to his home, and in a few moments the Inspector came slowly into the laboratory, the two uniformed constables behind him.

“Morning, Inspector,” Earmar smiled, extending his huge hand. “The very man I wanted to see——”

“This isn’t a social call, Mr. Brown,” the Inspector interrupted, ignoring the hand. “I wouldn’t have my men with me if it were. I’ve a warrant for your arrest on a charge of murder.”

“Life is full of surprises,” Earmar murmured, lowering his hand. “Or are you referring to a particularly loathsome individual upon whom I left my visiting-card?”

“I am. Loathsome or otherwise, he was a registered citizen, and since you killed him, that makes you a murderer. I was called to the place where he lived first thing this morning, by the landlord. That area is in my jurisdiction. The moment I saw your card on the corpse I didn’t have to start wondering whom to arrest. . . . Damned silly idea, leaving your card, Brown.”

“I am rather surprised that you recognized it as belonging to me. I thought only wrong-doers were familiar with it.”

“I have seen your card in possession of wrong-doers many a time, Brown. ‘With Compliments’, and then a half sign. I take it that means half Earth and half Mars?”

“Your perspicacity amazes me, Inspector.”

The Inspector gave a grim glance. “If you wouldn’t mind coming along, Mr. Brown? Here’s my authority.”

Earmar looked at the warrant extended towards him. Vanita looked also, then turned abruptly to the Inspector.

“You’ve got this whole thing in the wrong light, Inspector! That man was a Venusian, and even if he was registered on Earth, he was still a Venusian citizen, and therefore——”

“Murder is murder,” the Inspector interrupted. “I have no authority to ask any questions of you, Mr. Brown, nor am I entitled to record any statement you might make, so if you’ll come along with us to headquarters.”

Earmar shook his head. “So sorry to disappoint you, Inspector, but I positively cannot spare the time. I have taken unto myself the task of destroying the menace of the berries, so I cannot spare the time to——”

“Dammit, man, don’t you realize that I’m *arresting* you?” the Inspector demanded. “Come along immediately, before I have to use force.”

Earmar smiled infuriatingly. Big though the Inspector and his two constables were, they were quite a head shorter than Earmar.

“Before I take leave of you, Inspector,” Earmar resumed, as though he had never been interrupted, “I would suggest you advise the Government to do three things—stop the public loudspeakers, have all cherry consignments blocked at the goods distribution centres, and finally have every member of the Organization for Venusian Settlement closely protected.”

“You’re in no position to give orders,” the Inspector retorted. “For heaven’s sake, Brown, why make my job so infernally difficult? I’m not arresting you for the fun of it, but because you’ve deliberately broken the law.”

Earmar turned swiftly and in one stride reached his master switchpanel. Before the Inspector or his men could make a move they discovered that all strength seemed to have gone from their arms and legs, and yet they were standing as before and fully conscious.

“So sorry,” Earmar apologized. “I have induced a form of paralysis which will last about thirty minutes. During that time you will find yourselves incapable of movement, but you will not fall down. Now remember what I told you concerning instructions to the Government. I have a date in space with a freighter, so you must excuse me. Come, Vanita.”

The girl hastily tugged off her overall and whipped up her dustcoat; then she followed Earmar from the laboratory and left the dazed Inspector and his men staring blankly after her.

Earmar had reached the roof and his helicopter before the girl caught up with him. She clambered ahead of him into the control cabin, then gave a serious glance as he started the machine drifting over the city towards the space-grounds.

“That funny business with the law isn’t going to do you any good, Earmar,” Vanita commented presently.

“What did you expect me to do? Cool my heels in prison? We have work to do.”

“I know, but we want the law on our side, and that’s just what it won’t be from now on. You should never have left that card of yours on the Venusian.”

“Maybe you’re right there,” Earmar admitted. “What I had intended as a warning to the Venusian’s colleagues backfired into my face. . . . However, the law holds no terrors for me. I make my own laws, and none can stop me.”

So Vanita did not argue any more, and in a few more minutes the space-port had been reached. Earmar went immediately to the private hanger where his own fast space-machine was housed, leaving the locked helicopter on the parking ground.

“Do you know that a freighter is due from Venus?” Vanita asked, as she sealed the airlock.

“Not for certain, but we’re bound to pick up something. The freighters ply regularly, though at long intervals. Stand by for the take-off.”

The girl nodded and braced herself as, with underjets spouting sparks and gases, the machine took off almost vertically through the opening where the hanger roof had been. The act of closing the hanger doors had set the roof rolling to one side.

Swift as a bird the machine darted to the heights, and for the next few minutes Earmar and Vanita were both immovable with the frightful pressure of the acceleration; then, as they lifted out beyond Earth’s atmosphere into the total vacuum, Earmar eased off the velocity very slightly. Gradually the machine turned, until its nose was pointed directly at the distant brightly glimmering point of Venus, sixty million miles across the gulf.

Finding she was able to move again with a fair margin of comfort, Vanita settled at the subsidiary outlook port and surveyed the void. She was so accustomed to it, like the rest of her generation, that it occasioned no particular thrill. The black of space, the flickerless glitter of the stars, the incredible glory of the sun with his prominences and corona. . . . Yes, all these things were familiar.

“See anything interesting?” Earmar asked, busy at the switchpanel.

“If you mean in the shape of a freighter vessel, no. I never saw the void quite so empty — My mistake, there’s a passenger liner in the distance there. Earth-Mars express, I think.”

“Of no interest to us,” Earmar responded. “We’d better head for the freighter lanes: they’re two thousand miles off the passenger ships’ course.”

The hurtling vessel, travelling now at a speed which made the floor gravity about equal to Earth-normal, turned gradually in its course until it had intersected the region of space exclusively used for freighter traffic. Earmar looked about him, but the void was empty.

“Be something, I expect,” he said, putting in the robot control and rising to his feet. “Meantime we’d better have lunch.”

This they did, and thereafter the usual boring procedure of a space journey was ahead of them. Endless, apparently motionless travel, with the hosts of the stars for company. Nothing exciting beyond the deflection of an occasional meteorite. And so it went on for fifteen Earth hours, during which time they had both slept in turn and travelled beyond the orbit of the Moon in their steady journey towards Venus.

Until at last Vanita spotted something through the telescope. It was the fourth time she had searched the abysses with the instrument, previously without success. Now the keen lenses picked up a solitary speck ahead—still thousands of miles away, but intensely sharp, due to the absence of atmosphere.

“A freighter!” she exclaimed in delight, glancing up, and immediately Earmar deserted the switchboard and peered through the eyepiece. Even in those few seconds the distance had narrowed enough for the commercial number to be dimly apparent on the vessel’s scarred prow. It was the FG/86.

“They’ll be level with us in ten minutes,” Earmar said, crossing back to the switchboard and setting the forward jets in action to check the vessel’s silent onrush.

“And when that happens, what do we do? They will hardly stop because we ask them to, will they?”

“Hardly. We’ve got to get aboard without them seeing us; then we can enter their vessel by the safety-hatch.”

“And leave our own ship?” Vanita looked alarmed. “That’s asking for it, isn’t it?”

Earmar smiled. “You should remember the law of mass, my dear. Our little ship will tail along behind the big fellow, held by his superior mass.”

“I must be crazy not to have remembered that,” Vanita muttered, annoyed with herself. “I’ll get the space-suits ready. . . . And what happens if they guess who we are? We are way off our appointed course as private fliers.”

“No law against it: we may be prowling around in space just for the fun of it. Certainly we won’t be recognized. There is nothing about this vessel to show it belongs to Earmar Brown.”

Satisfied, Vanita pulled two heavy space-suits from the locker and began to don one of them. Earmar was still busy with the forward jets, now increasing them to maximum power so that the speed was decreasing with every passing second. He spent a further few minutes

computing the vessel's course and making sure it would pass beneath the freighter when their paths crossed. This done, he rose, donned the remaining space-suit, then glanced at the girl.

"Ready?"

"Uh-huh," she assented. "And though you've no weapon I'm taking this proton gun. I haven't got a thousand-horse-power brain like you have." And her helmet snapped shut on its hinge.

Earmar grinned, dropped his own helmet in position, and then led the way to the vessel's emergency lock in the roof. In fact there were two locks—one in the control-room ceiling, then a pressure chamber, and finally the lock proper, which opened outwards into space, and had clamps working in unison outside and inside, a necessity on all space-machines, so that exterior repairs could be effected when necessary.

Up the small ladder, closing the first lock behind them; then Earmar pushed open the second lock and clambered up to the vessel's roof, lifting the girl's bloated figure up behind him. They stood looking about them, two specks in eternity, the vessel their only source of gravity. Accustomed though they were to space, there was always a stupefying feeling of awe at beholding endless space on all sides of them—bottomless, depthless, eternal.

Vanita switched on her Radiophone. "What happens when that freighter reaches us?"

"We pretend to be making an external repair. That will satisfy those on the freighter that we're just a couple of explorers in difficulties. If they decide to slow down and take us aboard, all the better. Save us a lot of trouble. But I don't think they will, especially if they have illicit cargo aboard. If they keep going we wait for the identical moment when they sweep over the top of us. Then we leap upward with all the strength we've got. The superior mass of the freighter will lift us, and we'll finish up on its underbelly, where nobody can see us because we'll be below the angle of vision."

"At what height will they pass over us?"

"According to my mathematics, about a hundred feet. Now start getting ready," Earmar added. "They're nearly upon us."

He adopted a crouching attitude which made it look as if he were examining the plates of the space-machine. Vanita kneeled beside him, both of them hanging on to the vessel's out-jutting rivets with their gauntleted hands. Intently they watched the soundless onrush of the battered old freighter, moving at some thousands of miles an hour. By this time Earmar's vessel—for the forward jets were now switched off—was doing little more than cruise idly along at perhaps two hundred miles an hour, an infinitesimal speed compared to most spacial velocities.

For a second or two it looked as though the freighter was going to ram the little machine, and Vanita felt her heart nearly stop beating. Then the angle became steeper, and she saw that Earmar's mathematics had been correct. The freighter was crossing overhead, prow lights blazing, at a height of about two hundred feet.

"Get ready," came Earmar's tense voice through the radiophone.

Vanita tensed her legs. The black underbelly of the freighter was blotting out the stars overhead for a few brief instants.

"Leap!" Earmar ordered, and threw all his huge strength into the effort.

Actually, vast effort was unnecessary, for the mass of the little ship was slight compared to the big one, and its zero velocity made it that it had little gravity at all. In consequence, Earmar appeared to fall upward into space at a prodigious speed, and by infallible law he was compelled to hit the underside of the freighter. Seconds afterwards Vanita also arrived, her

metal-shod boots clinging with apparent magnetism—though actually it was the gravity-mass of the freighter—to the vessel’s underplates.

“Made it,” Earmar murmured. “There’s our little friend above us, following dutifully.”

Vanita could not fully grasp the situation. The little space machine definitely seemed to be overhead. Then it dawned on her that in space there is neither up nor down, as such. The freighter was now their “world”, and they could no more fall off it than they could off the Earth itself. Yet in relation to their former little flyer they were upside down.

“Mighty confusing when the ground becomes the sky,” Vanita commented. “So what happens now?”

“Walk round the vessel to the emergency hatch. And don’t make any more noise than you can help.”

“Noise! Earmar, you’re slipping! Even *I* know that you can’t make sounds in a vacuum.”

“Clever girl!” came Earmar’s dry response. “But the *inside* of this ship has air, and the sound may be heard through the plates. Take it easy.”

Walking from the underside of the vessel to the topside was incredibly simple, like walking on a planet with an extremely foreshortened horizon. The only unnerving part was the mind-numbing emptiness that yawned to eternity in every direction. So presently they came to the huge emergency hatch, its massive clamps jammed firmly into their forged steel lips.

“Everything we hoped for,” Earmar commented. “Unified interior and exterior clamps. We ought to take our friends by surprise.”

“With what? I’m sure you need this gun of mine. We may be blown to bits before we can even speak.”

“Since you have the gun, it is for you to see that we are not. . . . You know my methods—mind and physique—and I will not depart from them. Here we go.”

The clamps moved back under Earmar’s gauntleted hands. In a few moments he had them all out of their slots. Then he raised the five-inch-thick lid, braced it on its bar, and dropped silently into the pressure chamber beneath. The girl followed him, closing the lid down after her and fastening it on the underside.

The inner lock was designed identically to the outer, but Earmar was much more cautious in releasing the clamps, since he did not know what lay below. When at last he raised the cover very slightly he beheld the customary metal ladder and an empty catwalk corridor.

“Okay, out of the space-suits,” he murmured. “We can’t move freely in these things.”

They slipped them off, then Earmar lifted the cover completely and silently descended the ladder, helping the girl down after him. She kept her gun in her hand in readiness.

“There’ll be men in the rocket-holds, and in the control-room,” Earmar murmured, glancing about him. “Those are about the only likely places—excepting the sleeping quarters and the galley. Let’s see what we find.”

He crept silently forward in the direction of the control-room door. Here he paused for a moment, and then flung it wide open and smiled disarmingly.

Immediately the commander, a bearded, square-shouldered man, turned in amazement, as did the first mate and navigator.

“Your indulgence, gentlemen,” Earmar apologized, moving to the centre of the room and pausing beside the power plant.

The Commander still stared, then his ice-blue eyes switched to the girl, looking quite commonplace in her slacks and silk wind-cheater. His jaw tightened at the sight of the heat-gun firmly gripped in her right hand.

IV

“Well, Mr. Brown?” the Commander asked at length.

“So you recognize me? That saves the trouble of introduction.”

“Certainly I recognize you, and this young woman with the gun. To save further time I would add that I am Commander Holden, and that you have no possible right aboard this vessel.”

“In difficult circumstances one must take a chance,” Earmar responded. “You must have seen that we were having difficulties with our own vessel as you passed over us. I am surprised you did not obey the space code and stop to help us.”

“I’m in a hurry,” Holden retorted. “And that doesn’t explain what you’re doing here, or why this woman needs to point her gun like that.”

Earmar smiled. “Just nervousness on her part, Commander. The weapon won’t go off—at least, I hope not. As for us being here, it was unavoidable. Superior gravity. You snatched us from our vessel.”

“I see.” Commander Holden did not look particularly convinced. “That was hardly my fault, was it? Just natural law—and it does not give you the right to creep in here like a couple of killers.” He glared at Vanita. “Put that gun away!”

Vanita shook her head. “I’m more comfortable with it in my hand, Commander. . . . And stop being courteous, Earmar, and come to the point.”

Holden glanced from one to the other. “That sounds more like it. I could hardly imagine you being here, Brown, without a very special reason. I happen to know that you spend your time making a nuisance of yourself.”

“Only to the wrong-doers,” Earmar smiled.

“Meaning you think I’m one?” Holden asked dryly.

“That depends on your cargo. All right, Commander, I’ll take off the kid gloves now that we have become cosily acquainted. I am investigating the matter of kurna berries, which is my reason for being here.”

“And what have kurna berries got to do with me?”

“Maybe nothing; maybe something. I am inclined to suspect the latter, otherwise you would have stopped when you saw us apparently stranded in space. The fact that you didn’t makes it obvious you don’t wish strangers aboard. The only course was to investigate for myself.”

Earmar straightened up from beside the power-plant and Vanita still kept her gun levelled. The Commander’s lips tightened, and the mate and navigator looked sharply at one another. After a while Holden seemed to make up his mind.

“You are plainly and simply a snooper, Mr. Brown, and since you do not officially represent the law, I have no reason to explain myself to you. You will oblige me by returning to your own vessel, which I assume is tailing our gravity. I will see that you have every facility for departing.”

“Kind of you, but I’m not going just yet. You should be fully aware of the fact that back on Earth Venusian Tropica cherries have been adulterated with a percentage of deadly kurna berries. They are causing a good deal of havoc. The only way the berries can reach Earth is by

a freighter like this. If you have consignments of cherries aboard, all I ask is that I may have a look at them.”

“You ask in vain. You do not represent the law.”

“Not officially, but I am helping the authorities. And I can enforce my wishes.”

Holden laughed shortly. “You’re not making sense, Brown.”

Earmar’s dark blue eyes opened a little wider and the smouldering pupils distended in the most unholy fashion. Holden could not take his gaze from them. They seemed to completely dominate the control-room to the exclusion of all else.

“I feel sure you will let me see your cargo?” Earmar asked gently.

The Commander made an effort. “I—— Very well. It’s against regulations, but I’ll comply, if only to be rid of you. Mr. Bristowe, fetch samples from each of our fruit crates.”

The first mate turned to go, but Earmar raised his hand, still keeping his eyes on the Commander.

“You have no need to disturb your first mate’s vigilance at the switchboard, Commander. We will go together to the storage hold. May as well do the thing properly whilst we’re at it, don’t you think?”

Holden’s look was vacant. “Yes. Yes, if you wish. Come with me.”

“Stay here,” Earmar told the girl. “If you have to use your gun, do so.”

She nodded and remained beside the doorway, the weapon pointed unwaveringly at the two grim-faced men. Earmar gave them one glance, then he followed Holden’s broad-shouldered figure down the catwalk and so to the big storage hold. As the iron door was opened the lights came up. Here, piled in orderly fashion in the belly of the ship, was the cargo from Venus. Not all of it was Tropica cherries. These were confined to perhaps twenty-four big crates.

“Open the nearest,” Earmar commanded, and because he could do nothing else, the Commander obeyed, wrenching off the lid with a crowbar provided for the purpose. Earmar glanced at the well-packed cherries within.

“Eat a couple,” he ordered, and the Commander hesitated.

Earmar knew exactly why. There was evidently the possibility that kurna berries might be eaten by mistake, and this fact was causing the law of self-preservation to come into force. Not even hypnotism could operate if it demanded of the victim that he endanger his life.

“You can go to hell!” Holden said curtly, abruptly getting a grip on himself as Earmar relaxed his hypnosis. “I’ve shown you my cargo, and that’s only because you’re a damned mesmerist. I’ll do no more. These are genuine cherries, every one of them.”

“In that case you should not fear eating one to satisfy my curiosity.”

“And explain it afterwards? Every one of these fruits is counted.”

“One or two cherries wouldn’t be missed, and you know it! Start sampling them.”

Holden glanced towards the open doorway behind Earmar, but he did not attempt to reach it. He knew he would stand no chance against that tremendous frame. The one thing puzzling him was the relaxation of the hypnosis. He could not know that Earmar had deliberately discontinued his effort, knowing he was powerless against the law of self-preservation.

“I’m waiting,” Earmar said deliberately. “The sooner we get this business done with the sooner I’ll leave you in peace. I mean to get at the truth of these cherry consignments, my friend.”

Cornered, Holden picked up a cherry at random and ate it. Then he took another. A few moments passed and he gave a shrug.

“I hope you’re satisfied,” he said sourly. “When we get to Earth I’m going to report this matter in full—and I’ll make you smart, Mr. Inquisitive Brown!”

Earmar took no notice. He selected a couple of the cherries from the crate, tugged out their stalks, then sniffed at them. He handed them over.

“Try these, Commander.”

It was obvious from Holden’s expression that he was familiar with the clove-like perfume of kurna berries at the stalk root. He threw them down savagely.

“I’ve done all I’m going to, Brown! This business has gone far enough——”

What else he said Earmar did not know, for at that moment something crashed with fiendish force at the base of his skull. His senses exploded into starry darkness, and the next thing he knew he was lying on his back in the control-room, his ankles and wrists bound with steel wire. Near to him Vanita was also sprawled out, similarly secured. At the switchboard the mate and navigator were standing by, and Commander Holden was near the doorway, grinning through his beard.

“All my fault,” Vanita confessed, as Earmar looked in her direction. “The vessel took a sharp turn as it avoided a large advancing meteorite. I wasn’t ready for it and lurched. After that I was finished.”

Earmar compressed his lips. In the storage hold he had not noticed the vessel’s movement, possibly because he had been so intent upon the Commander.

“Well, Mr. Brown, it is time to deal with the unwanted guests,” Holden commented. “You have satisfied yourself that kurna berries are in our cargo, but the information isn’t going to do you or this woman one scrap of good. You’re taking a trip to the Graveyard, one place where your bodies will never be found, so awkward questions can be asked afterwards.”

Earmar was still silent, knowing that the “Graveyard” meant the planet Mercury, the erratic little world close to the sun upon which countless exploratory machines in the early days of space-travel had crashed, drawn irresistibly by the terrific gravitation of the central luminary.

“Ordinary killing isn’t good enough,” Holden explained, obviously extracting a sadistic satisfaction from the situation. “Your bodies have to be obliterated, so Mercury is the only place. No use throwing you off this ship, because your corpses would tail along in the rear and make things difficult to explain.”

“So you’ll dispatch us in an emergency projectile, I take it?” Earmar questioned.

“Exactly. No other way.” Holden motioned. “Lift them up!”

He was obeyed, then he gave orders for the ankle wires to be removed.

“This way,” Holden snapped, and, compelled to obey, Earmar and the girl followed him along the catwalk and into the area of the vessel where two emergency ships—the equivalent of lifeboats to a seagoing liner—were in their ejector cradles ready for instant use.

“Just room for the pair of you in one of these things,” Holden snapped. “Get in!”

Earmar went first, with difficulty, scrambling through the small airlock and then lying flat on the floor—the only possible method, since the machine was so small. Vanita followed him and likewise lay down, trying vainly to free her tightly fastened wrists from behind her back.

“I’ve had the controls on this projectile pre-set,” Holden said, peering through the airlock. “Once ejected from this vessel this projectile will travel straight to Mercury. When it comes within a hundred miles of it the recoil jet at the front will operate and permit you a safe landing on Mercury, after which you will either fry or freeze, depending on which side of the planet you land. I could have disconnected the jet control and allowed you to crash on

Mercury, and obliterate yourselves into dust, only I don't want you to have so swift and absolute a finish. For the trouble you've caused me you deserve something lingering, and you'll get it!"

The airlock slammed shut with a metallic clang and there was the sound of the exterior clamps being moved into position. Seconds passed, then, under electrical stimulus, the ejector apparatus operated and the projectile was hurled from the freighter through a tube, much as a torpedo leaves a battleship. To Earmar and Vanita, lying side by side on the floor, their faces nearly touching the bowed observation window, the view changed from darkness to a vision of space, the freighter falling away rapidly beneath them. They could faintly hear the small atomic motor driving the projectile onwards, and after a moment or two, operating on its pre-selector, it began to turn gently until it was facing the sun, the blinding glare from which dazzled all view of Mercury, the actual destination.

"Any ideas?" Vanita panted, jerking her eyes away from the flaming sea of light ahead in the void.

"First, get rid of these wires from our wrists," Earmar replied. "Nothing very difficult about that; then we'll decide what to do next. Turn on your side—back to back."

With something of a struggle Vanita managed to do as bidden, thereafter remaining passive as she felt Earmar's strong fingers at work on her wrist wires. After perhaps three minutes, during which the wires became searing hot to the skin, they parted abruptly and Vanita drew her hands thankfully up in front of her and chaffed her wrists. To release Earmar afterwards was but the work of a moment, then they lay on their faces again and surveyed infinity, narrowing their eyes against the effulgent grandeur of the sun.

"Decidedly an unpleasant prospect," Earmar commented finally. "How much do you know about Mercury, Van?"

"Just enough to give me the creeps. I know it is called the Graveyard because of the number of machines which have crashed there—and it looks as though we are going to add to the pile."

"Mercury," Earmar said gravely, "is definitely a hell world. One face to the sun, and only about thirty-eight million miles from him. On the sunward side metals boil like milk and all rocks must be in a state of plasma. On the night side there is frost so intense that it splits solid granite and marble. No air, of course. The only place on the planet where human life could remain for a brief spell within a space-ship or a pressure suit, is on the Terminator Line, the mountainous division between night and day. We're not likely to enjoy Mercury one bit."

"Which means you accept it as inevitable that we're going there?"

"What else?" Earmar asked. "With these controls present we can't help ourselves."

Vanita looked at the small but well-devised switchboard.

"Can't you do something to wreck that board?" she demanded. "Or perhaps stop the power-plant from working? I can hear it buzzing away in the tail of the ship."

"So can I, but wrecking either the board or the plant would not avail us anything. We've reached a velocity now, and there is nothing between us and Mercury. In fact, we'd be worse off by tampering. It would mean we'd hurtle at random through space and probably finish up by being drawn into the sun. . . . Better to land on Mercury and then think again."

Vanita became silent, too appalled at the prospect of the hell planet to pass any comment. She made herself as comfortable as she could in her lying-down position, turning her head and face into the shadow of the metal wall in order to escape the deadly intensity of the sun. Earmar did likewise, and thus they remained perforce throughout the fast journey across the

void. At times they slept, then at length hunger made further repose impossible. Earmar searched the inset lockers as well as he could, but there was no trace of food anywhere. Fortunately there was water, operated from a pet-cock which connected with the jet-cooling system.

So the heat increased and the intolerable sun swelled in size, pouring forth his unimaginable Niagara of light, radiations, and mass into the void. Towards the close of the journey it was practically impossible to do anything but give a brief glance through the window, so paralysing was the glare outside. In these glimpses Mercury was finally sighted, pursuing his erratic orbit, and so perfectly had the projectile's pre-selector been set that the vessel was heading unerringly towards him.

Weariness, hunger, and the intolerable heat had made both Vanita and Earmar half-conscious by the time they realized that the journey had ended. The forward jet had worked perfectly, and now the vessel was still, its power plant silent.

Earmar stirred out of his stupor and looked about him. There was blinding sunlight pouring through the single window. Heat was apparently about the same as it had been in space, beating through the insulated walls. With an effort he dragged himself forward and looked outside, slitting his eyes as he was met with the vision of a plain, smashed into chasms by the heat, except for regions where apparent mud was bubbling turgidly. Behind the plain loomed a jagged mountain range, saw-toothed against the starry, airless sky.

"You still alive, Van?" he whispered, and shook the girl gently.

She stirred, then with infinite languor dragged herself forward to the window and peered outside.

"Those mountains belong to the Terminator Line," Earmar explained. "Beyond them is the night side. That area of mud to the left there is boiling metal. In here we are somewhat protected by the insulation: out there the heat has been raging for millions of years, a heat great enough to melt solid iron."

"Wonder we don't melt as well," Vanita whispered, fighting hard to keep her senses. "It's no use, Earmar, we can't survive this. Flesh and blood can't stand it. Why don't we open the lock, let the air go out, and finish the job?"

"Because we're not dead yet," Earmar answered, his glistening face incredibly determined. "It occurs to me that since dozens of machines have crashed on this little world, both on the night and day side, there may be some—especially on the night side—which still contain provisions in a perfect state of iced preservation. May be others with fuel. Still others which can perhaps be patched up and used. . . . No, we're not finished yet! There are two space-suits aboard this projectile—as there usually are on an emergency vessel—which Commander Holden either forgot about or didn't attempt to remove, thinking they couldn't serve us much anyhow. . . . I noticed them when we were looking for provisions. . . ."

Earmar stopped talking. Vanita's head was drooping in deadly sleep. He caught hold of her shoulders and shook her back to life.

"Hang on to your senses, Van! We've got to make a last mighty effort to save ourselves."

"Yes . . ." she whispered. "Yes, of course."

Earmar squirmed and struggled away from her, presently reaching the locker wherein lay the space-suits. After which there was the struggle to get into them. Lying down, and both of them close to exhaustion, it was a severe task—but at least it had the effect of thoroughly awakening them. When the helmets were in place and the radiophones switched on, Earmar made a comment.

“Once we open the lock, Van, the air will go out—and from the look of the cylinders there certainly won’t be enough to bring us back to full pressure if we have to return. Nor would we last indefinitely in these space-suits. So I’m afraid it is a one-way ticket. You willing to take the gamble?”

“No alternative,” she replied listlessly, and then watched as Earmar forced back the interior-exterior clamps with his heavily gloved hands.

The moment the last clamp was back the cover shot open and the air sucked out into the vacuum, dragging both Earmar and the girl with it and depositing them in the midst of a dense carpet of scorching ash. They could not feel it through the outer asbestos of their suits, so got to their feet, thankful that Mercury’s extremely light gravity did not pin them down.

“This way,” Earmar’s voice came in the radiophone. “Stick by me.”

Fighting dizziness and inanition through lack of food and overpowering heat, they made their way through the ash carpet, taking care to never once glance towards the devouring luminary which loomed gigantic in the black, star-ridden sky. Their shadows were cut bright and hard on the ashy ground as they went, and ever and again they were compelled to detour round a lake of boiling metal.

But inevitably, with occasional pauses, they reached the foothills of the mountain range. Here they sought the nearest pass and went through it—to instantly come into a different world entirely. The sun had vanished, and, there being no air, there was no diffusion. The darkness was absolute, except for the starshine. And that battering heat had gone. Though the insulation of their suits kept them at a fairly normal bodily temperature they could now sense the razor-thin coldness of infinite zero where formerly they had felt the searingly high temperature of the very-near sun.

“May revive us a little,” Earmar commented. “We want to get up to that ledge, if we can, where we can have a clear view of this plain.”

Vanita’s head nodded inside the helmet, then, with Earmar helping her, she struggled up the acclivity which led to a higher point of the foothills. After what was probably half an hour of gruelling effort they had reached the point Earmar wanted and here settled amidst the frost-encrusted rocks.

Vanita, her eyes closing again, relapsed into a half sleep. But not so Earmar. By this time his eyes had recovered from the intense glare of the sun so that the plain stood out before him quite clearly in the starlight, every fraction of it inches deep in frost, which showed that here, on the night side, a vestigial atmosphere of sorts evidently still remained.

So, by degrees, he singled out the wrecks of space-machines. There appeared to be half a dozen all told, some half buried and others horizontal and deserted. On the sunward side those which had fallen had probably been melted, or else been covered by the everlasting creeping tides of molten metal and fluid rocks.

Finally Earmar made up his mind. He glanced at the sleeping girl, then rose and left her, heading down the nearest declivity to the plain. He was away nearly an hour, and found the girl still sleeping when he returned. His persistent shaking of her shoulder finally awakened her.

“Luck’s with us, sweetheart,” came his elated voice. “There is one vessel amongst the six crashed relics out there which can still be used. Only thing wrong with it is a smashed prow, which evidently happened suddenly and out went the air. The position of the skeletons in the control-room shows that they didn’t have the ghost of a chance to save themselves. . . . And there is food too! About a hundred tins of concentrates and liquids. . . . You ready to move?”

“After that I’ll get there if it kills me,” Vanita answered; then, as she struggled to her feet, she asked, “But what about the hole in the prow? The vessel won’t be airtight.”

“It will before I’ve finished with it! You’ll see.”

Earmar did not explain himself any further, so Vanita asked no more questions. With his assistance she managed to make the trip to the vessel he had selected, discovering it to be one of the fairly modern types of fliers, with comparatively roomy quarters. In fact it was apparently in good order except for that gaping fissure in the nose, which had obviously spelt death to the crew. Their broken skeletons now lay where Earmar had thrown them on to the plain, all that remained of brave men who had by some mischance been caught in the sun’s merciless field of attraction.

Within the control-room, lighted only by the dim starlight at the moment, Vanita clawed her way to the wall bunk and sank thankfully down upon it. She had a dim vision of Earmar moving about, and at length he had opened a tin and brought some food concentrates in his gloved hand.

“These will fix you,” he said. “Eat them . . .”

She took them, pushed them through the vent trap in the breastplate of her suit, and so manœuvred them up to her mouth. Within a few minutes of eating them, and adding liquid restorative tablets which Earmar also gave her, she was commencing to feel strength surging once more through her veins.

“I’ve work to do,” Earmar told her, at the end of his own concentrated meal. “Just take it easy. . . .”

He moved away, and she could see him busy at the bulky power-plant. He spent nearly an hour checking it over in the poor light, testing this and fiddling with that; then finally he moved to the switchboard and snapped a button. A glow came in the roof-bulbs—weak yellow but none the less serviceable.

“Good enough,” he commented. “The batteries are nearly flat, but they’ll pick up when we get the plant operating. Far as I can tell everything’s in order, and the jets are okay outside. Here’s where we experiment.”

He secured the airlock, which seemed to the girl an odd thing to do, with the fissure in the vessel’s nose, and then slowly applied the current which should activate the power-plant. And it did, though very feebly. There was a faint buzzing instead of the normal roar of power, but at least it was something.

“In about ten minutes, running like that, the batteries will be nearly up to normal,” Earmar said, turning. “Then I’m going to seal that gap in the nose.”

“How?” Vanita looked at him in the slowly brightening roof light.

“I’m going to lift the vessel into the air and keep it on a very low altitude and then deliberately plunge its nose into that molten metal lake near the mountain foothills. The metal is plasmic, so it will cloy over the fissure in the form of a paste. After that—out into the void, with the nose turned away from the sun, of course. The cold will instantly solidify the metal, and there it is. Risky, but necessary, because we can’t remain much longer in these space-suits: the air cylinders will run out.”

There was nothing Vanita could say or do, so she waited for what would happen next. Earmar looked about him, studying the meters on the switchboard and then glancing up at the now white light in the roof. After perhaps fifteen minutes he was evidently resolved to get started.

He transferred the power of the now stoutly humming plant to the underjets of the vessel, and to his relief they reacted normally, raising the frost-encrusted machine a hundred feet from the plain. Earmar kept it at this height, using the rear jets in combination for the forward thrust. Thuswise, at as slow a speed as he dared, he headed for the mountain range, rose over it with ease, and then came into the bewildering glory and raging heat of the sun.

His eyes slitted behind his helmet-visor, he searched out the lake of molten metals, and then began to drop towards it as slowly as possible. Vanita had risen from the bunk now and was watching anxiously through the port.

Earmar's judgment was superb. He drove obliquely nose first into the molten metal, then at the identical second gave the under and rear jets their full power. In consequence the vessel "scooped" its way through the deadly mass, but was not immersed completely in it. Through the fissure, covered with the deadly, bubbling plasma, monstrous blobs of liquid metal dropped down into the control-room and boiled, sizzled, and then hardened on the metal floor.

Keeping the jets at high pressure, Earmar swept the machine ever upwards, leaving behind the sunlit side of the hell world, and at the same time exerting enough accelerative current to counteract the frightful drag of the sun.

Farther and farther the vessel moved away, hurtling with now crushing speed into the void. The plasma in the fissure creaked and cracked under the interstellar cold, then at length its underside had hardened into the consistency of forged steel. Earmar still made no tests. He was not yet out of the sun's pull: only when he was three million miles from Mercury, and flying in the direction of Earth at a prodigious speed, did he allow the robot control to take over.

Reaching to one of the many heavy tools in the rack, he slammed it hard against the sealing metal in the gap. The tool rebounded with a metallic clangour.

"Looks like you managed it," Vanita exclaimed, her blue eyes bright. "That plunge into the metal certainly made my heart skip a beat."

"Switch on the air cylinders," he told her. "We must make sure of our air pressure before removing these suits."

She did as bidden, after which there was a long wait until the pressure gauges showed the requisite fourteen pounds to the square inch. And there the pressure remained, unwavering, as the thermostatically controlled air and purifying system came into operation.

"All safe," Earmar said, and thankfully pushed back his helmet on its hinge. In five more minutes he and the girl were both rid of their suits, thankful for the freedom from the cloying, rubbery folds.

Vanita looked back at fast-receding Mercury, then ahead towards the orbit of Venus, which had to be crossed before Earth could be reached.

"And the next move?" she asked.

"The next move, my dear, is to stop our criminal friend Commander Holden from getting away with it. I don't suppose the Inspector back on Earth handed on my instructions: he'd be feeling too sore, so the only thing to do is radio Earth myself once we're clear of this solar field. Then we go to Venus and track these infernal berries to the source, if we can. I've no longer any doubt but what Anziba is back of the whole business."

Vanita nodded and asked no further questions. She set out a meal from the ample provisions and again she and Earmar refreshed themselves. After which, whilst Earmar checked the controls, the girl surveyed the wastes of space through the telescopic equipment. At first she had to clean it up thoroughly, so dirty had it become in the time it had lain idle.

When finally she had the eyepieces adjusted to her satisfaction she was both surprised and pleased to discover how powerful the lenses were.

By this time Venus was looming comparatively near through the telescope, for the flyer was moving at high velocity—but it was to the home world of Earth to which Vanita directed her attention.

Earmar took little heed of her. He was busy checking over the radio equipment and making certain that it would be up to the job of transmitting a message to Earth, once the stronger solar fields around Venus had been by-passed.

“Earmar!” the girl exclaimed suddenly, excitement in her voice. “Come and take a look! I believe I can see Holden’s freighter, the FG eighty-six.”

“That isn’t possible,” Earmar objected, glancing up. “He must have reached Earth long ago.”

“He’s there all right,” the girl insisted, and turned away from the instrument as Earmar came across to her.

There was no doubt that the girl was right. For a long time Earmar gazed through the eyepieces, the distant vision of the old freighter distinct and clear in the airless void. At a rough guess he judged her to be about a million miles distant, and much nearer to Venus than she had been at the time he and the girl had boarded her.

“Hardly moving,” he said presently, “and from the look of things they have our own vessel lashed down with cables. Now, why didn’t they continue to Earth, I wonder? They were halfway there when we were ejected into space.”

“Breakdown?” the girl suggested.

“Could be, yes. In which case the most superior field of gravity would draw them. If they were nearer to Venus than to Earth’s gravity when their power failed they would of course drift back towards Venus. Quite unexpected—and maybe it will save us a lot of trouble.”

Earmar straightened up from before the telescope and stood thinking. Then his eyes travelled to the single defensive weapon with which this machine was equipped. It was not of the ultra-modern or heat variety, but an armour-piercing projector, capable of hurling a penetrative shell at terrific velocity.

Earmar began moving, checking the gun over carefully. In a very short time his examination was complete and he turned to Vanita as she waited enquiringly.

“This gun seems to be all right,” Earmar said, “and in the rack here are a dozen armour-piercing shells. I think we owe Commander Holden quite a debt for the way he treated us, apart from the fact that we want to stop him reaching Earth with that hellish cargo of his.”

“You mean wreck his vessel?”

“I do. Give him no warning. Attack the moment we are in range. Half a dozen well-placed shells will go through that armour plating and let the air escape, which should be the end of everybody aboard that vessel.”

Being accustomed to Earmar’s ruthless decisions when the mood prompted him, Vanita did not question his wisdom.

“In about an hour and a half, or less, we’ll be within firing range,” he added, his eyes gleaming. “This is a wonderful chance to get our own back. Only thing I’m wondering about is why they’re drifting there and what the trouble is. Wonder if the radio can tell us anything? If they’re sending out calls for help?”

He switched on the apparatus and waited for it to warm up. Then a sudden thought seemed to strike Vanita.

“Maybe they’ve been to Earth in the meantime, rid themselves of their cargo, and are nearly back to base—but stalled. In that case we’re too late to warn Earth too——”

“They haven’t been to Earth,” Earomar interrupted, “otherwise they wouldn’t have that ship of ours lashed to them. It would give too much away——”

He paused as the radio came into life, and at the same time strong signals were coming forth in the universally used space morse.

“. . . eighteen two, north-east position,” Earomar translated, as he listened thoughtfully. “Magnetic attraction too far to the seventh deflector. Will signal again when exact contact established. Vessel must be removed at all costs. Stand by for further instructions.”

“Now I understand!” he exclaimed, turning quickly to the girl. “Fortunately we happened on the right part of the message. It means that that vessel of ours is an embarrassment to them, and they can’t get rid of it because of mass attracting mass. Evidently they don’t possess weapons powerful enough to completely volatilize it, and obviously they dare not go to Earth with it attached to their ship because of the questions that would be asked. It would be traced to being my property. So they’re signalling to some point on Venus for magnetic attraction to be used to draw it away—and so far the attraction is evidently not dead in line.”

“Seems logical. Why don’t they take the vessel down to Venus, ditch it, and then start their journey again?”

“Probably because of the difficulty. There are authorities on Venus, too, you know, who might question the arrival of a freighter with a pick-a-back vessel. If it was seen—and the telescopic department keeps a rigid watch on all ingoing and outgoing vessels—there might be trouble. If it’s drawn off magnetically by whomever is being signalled, it will look like a crash landing, and not be questioned.”

“And why lash it to the freighter if they want it drawn off?” Vanita asked, still puzzled.

“For convenience during flight. A tailing vessel very often keeps bumping into the larger mass and bouncing off again, which makes it difficult to stay on course. I don’t doubt they will have those lashings ready for instant cutting when the magnetism is correctly focused.”

Earomar looked through the port. It was impossible as yet to see the distant freighter with the naked eye. He turned to the girl again.

“Keep the freighter sighted telescopically, and warn me if I go off course. We’re going to have some fun when we’re near them . . .” Earomar paused, evidently struck by a thought. “Yes, fortune may favour us still further,” he continued. “If our ship *is* successfully drawn off it will mean that we can detect where the magnetism is coming from, and that, I’ll gamble, will be the headquarters from which all this berry business is handled.”

“Meaning Anziba?” the girl asked.

“I imagine so. He’s in the Venusian hinterland somewhere, and this may give us a direct lead. For obvious reasons, Commander Holden would never ask the normal authorities for help.”

Earmar kept the radio in action, since it was reasonably certain that fresh instructions would soon be coming forth. They did, about ten minutes later, giving precise directions to the unknown who was evidently in control of the magnetic beam. Earmar listened for a moment or two, and then switched on the magnetic detector on the control board, an essential instrument on all space-machines. At first only the sun influenced the needle in its vacuum case, then, as Earmar hair-fined the detection, the solar field became less obtrusive and the lesser magnetism gave a faint but detectable reading.

"I've got it, Van!" Earmar exclaimed. "Now let's see. Where exactly does that centre us on Venus' surface?"

To compute the source of the magnetic attraction from the very faint reading given was no easy task, and Earmar had to check his figures again and again before he got a reasonable solution. Then he stood looking at the mighty world of Venus through the port. By this time the planet was no more than a few million miles away, but being by-passed because the course was being held in the direction of the freighter.

"Magnetism centred," came a brief announcement from the speaker.

"Yes, they've got it," Vanita confirmed, motionless at the telescope. "Our ship is being drawn off. The cables must have been released from inside the ship somewhere."

Earmar was hardly listening: he was busily checking his mathematics against Venus herself, and then the scale-drawn chart of the planet on the navigator's bench. At length he put a dot and cross through it over the region marked "Unexplored".

"That settles that," he said, relaxing. "I've got the point marked so we can fly straight to it. . . . How's our ship going on?"

"It's moving towards Venus at high speed, and the freighter is starting to travel in the direction of Earth again. I can just detect the rear jet exhaust."

"And we're still on course?"

"Swinging slightly off it now the freighter's moving. Two degrees Earthward wanted."

Earmar made the correction, and thereafter he relied entirely on the girl for directions. He was smiling to himself in grim anticipation as he sat at the switchboard, eagerly awaiting the moment when he would be within range and ready for revenge. The beauty of the situation was that his own vessel would never be recognized as an enemy and he would be able to attack without warning.

Still moving at its high velocity, the machine hurtled across the void, by now leaving Venus well behind. And at last Earmar was able to see the freighter in the distance, several thousand miles away, its jets still flaring as it got up speed to make the Earthward run after its long delay.

"Okay, take over." Earmar told the girl, "Just keep it on its present course. I've the gun to operate."

Vanita did as instructed, and watched through the central port as the freighter was steadily overtaken, the thousands of miles rapidly lessening until finally the FG/86 on the machine's prow was easily discernible.

"Here we go," Earmar murmured, his eyes on the gun-sights; then he depressed the lever of the firing mechanism. Instantly the first of the shells dropped into position and was

afterwards ejected with inconceivable force into space, still retaining its velocity when it struck its target dead amidships.

Earmar could not help but wonder what the startled inmates must have thought as the shell tore clean through their vessel's plates and went out the other side. Inevitably the air would escape from the particular compartment which had been struck.

Not that Earmar was satisfied with one blow. As fast as the shells dropped into the firing mechanism he depressed the button, raining a peppering onslaught at every part of the freighter and watching the gaping holes appear in the metal-work.

As he fired the last shell the velocity of his own vessel carried it close above the freighter. There was a momentary vision of the smashed sides, the twisted iron, the ragged edges of the holes. The jets had stopped operating and the vessel was drifting, plainly without control. Then from the other side of the freighter there was a momentary glimpse of one or two bloated corpses, evidently having been sucked out through the larger holes with the outrush of air.

"Pity I can't leave my visiting-card," Earmar commented dryly, coming over to the switchboard. "Anyway, that's one consignment of kurna berries which will never reach Earth. . . . Good work, Vanita. You held us nicely on course. I'll take over again from here."

She got up from the seat. "One thing you haven't thought of, Earmar. Besides kurna berries there were probably normal cargoes aboard that ship as well. What happens when the vessel is found riddled? Blame might attach to you."

"How? Nobody alive to prove what happened, and most certainly the attack wouldn't be seen from Venus. Nothing to worry about, sweetheart; nothing at all. But thanks for being so good a secretary as to remember all the details."

Earmar swung the vessel gradually in a great arc until at length he was heading for Venus again. The girl looked at the chart he had marked.

"This where we're heading?"

"That's it. The Venusian hinterland, hundreds of miles from the small colonized centre known as Tropica City. Right in the jungle, in fact. We may find enough there to lead us to the source of all this trouble."

"Since there is magnetic apparatus, which drew our ship from the freighter, there'll probably be detectors too. We may be spotted long before we're there and find ourselves walking into the arms of a reception committee."

"Quite possible," Earmar assented. "For that reason I don't intend to actually land. I'll fly low enough to make what observations are possible and then take my information—if any—to the authorities in Tropica City. If we're drawn down by magnetism or otherwise shot to bits we'll have to accept it. We're in this thing up to our ears now, Van, and we've got to finish it."

"I'm with you," the girl replied. "After all I had to say about wanting excitement I wouldn't dare be otherwise!"

Earmar grinned a little and said no more. Vanita turned her attention to the port and stood watching the vast, brilliantly bright world of Venus as it grew ever larger upon the vision, the dense cloudbanks reflecting the glare of the sun with eye-wrenching intensity. Vanita had few qualms about Venus. She knew it fairly well from spasmodic visits—a planet of great heat, though not of course equalling the sunward side of Mercury, but mercifully blanketed from the sun by the almost everlasting clouds. Venus was a young world, three-quarters of its surface covered in dense, exotic jungle, beside which the one-time Amazonian forests of Earth would have appeared mere outcroppings.

On Venus there were trees which soared eight hundred feet into the clouds; there were walls of vines which only flame-guns could penetrate. Animals there were none, but insects of immense size abounded, some deadly and others innocuous. Of the intelligent races of Venus few facts were known. To Earth eyes they all appeared dough-skinned and cat-eyed, men and women alike, yet there were certain racial distinctions visible to the trained observer. Some were co-operative and on friendly terms with the Earth authorities and settlers; others were relentless foes of all intruders.

Venus, planet of contrasts, a world with a six-week-long torrid day—due to planetary axial tilt—and a steamy, enervating night of equal length. . . . Vanita came to the end of her meditations as she saw the clouds were now very near and Earmar was darting the space-machine directly towards the spot marked on the chart, taking his guidance from the instruments.

Then the clouds closed and the vessel was flying through dense white vapour which condensed in droplets on the outside of the ports. The visi-screens came into action and gave a demisted view of the exterior. At the moment the machine was flying about two miles above the summits of Venus' lofty mountains, and this progress continued for about five minutes—after which the vessel sailed clear of the mountainous region and flew with greatly reduced speed over the jungle hinterland.

Lower Earmar brought the machine, and lower still, until finally he was skimming over the lofty tree-tops at about two hundred miles an hour, just below the restless vapours of the clouds. Intently he gazed below, Vanita just as earnest as she stood beside him.

"Somewhere in this region," Earmar murmured at length. "It all looks alike, that's the trouble. Jungle everywhere."

Which was true. As far as the eye could reach, except for the receding mountain range to the rearward, there was only dense, impenetrable jungle, the foliage so thick it was quite impossible to see what lay beneath it.

"This is a sheer waste of time as far as vision is concerned," Earmar said finally. "I'll try the X-screens and see if they help any."

He switched them on, but the result was not much better. They were only designed for rendering fog-obscured objects visible, hence the only view they gave was the same as that seen by the eye.

"Nice place to hide out, anyway," Vanita commented finally. "Nothing can be spotted from above, and the jungle itself is nearly impossible to penetrate."

"Yet if somebody is in hiding down there they must have blasted a path in the first place _____"

Earmar broke off suddenly. The machine had given a sudden lurch, which was certainly none of his doing. He corrected the fault, and almost immediately it came again, causing him to lose altitude.

"Quickly!" he told the girl. "Is there a reading on that magnetic detector? I've got to keep my hand on these controls."

He forced the vessel upwards again as the girl examined the instrument.

"Yes, there's a reading," she responded. "Eighteen two over fourteen six, linear degree twenty."

"Note that down," he requested. "That same magnetic power which pulled our vessel out of the void from the freighter is now trying to ditch us, and the source of it is that reading you've just made. I'm going to drop: that will put us out of magnetic range."

Still fighting the probing tugs of the magnetic beam, he turned the ship's nose round until the vessel was facing in precisely the opposite direction. Then, cutting speed down to zero, and now having apparently lost the magnetic beam completely, he began to drop towards the tree-tops. Vanita watched anxiously as the tangled sea of livid green vegetation came up to meet them.

"You'll never do it, Earmar!" she cried.

He made no answer. Changing from rear to underjets he began to drop almost vertically, and then it was that the girl gathered the idea. The sparks and flaming gases of the jets incinerated the vegetation below, exploded branches into steam and blasted apart the thick interlacings of the higher vines. Thuswise, incinerating a "shaft" for itself the vessel began the final descent through the midst of the trees, smashing the heavier branches by reason of weight and smothering the fire as the vessel's mass excluded the air from the flames.

The final landing on the forest floor was somewhat violent, obliterating the small lake of flames which had sprung up. The vessel came to rest amidst a vanishing cloud of smoke and Earmar switched off the power.

"Everything all right?" Earmar asked the girl.

"Uh-huh. Banged my funny bone on the wall, but I'll get over it."

There was silence for a moment. Through the port the two gazed on the motionless forest, upon its colossal and starkly beautiful flowers, barrel-boled conifers, and net upon net of shiny, ropy vines doing their utmost to strangle everything in sight. No wind, no movement, just the crushing sickly heat and deep green light caused by the filtered wavelengths produced by the overhead screen of leaves.

"Well, we're here," Vanita said finally. "What now?"

"All depends if our unpleasant friends who tried to magnetize us *know* that we're here. It's possible, of course, since they must have detected us earlier on in order to try to magnetize us." Earmar turned to the compass and set the needle to $18\frac{2}{2}$ — $14/6$, and then made the necessary latitude to 20 degrees.

"Time to explore," he told the girl, picking the compass up. "I've no weapon you can use, I'm afraid. I'm relying on my usual methods. . . . Ready for a risk?"

"Ready, yes—but where are we going?"

"Following the compass. That will bring us finally to the spot we're looking for. I want to be satisfied as to what we have to face: if it's too big for us we'll fly back to the authorities in Tropica City and tip them off."

Opening the airlock, he stepped out into the forest, the girl coming behind him. Immediately they were conscious of the soaking heat and humidity of the atmosphere and the heady, indescribable perfume from untold myriads of giant blossoms. Nowhere a sound. Even insects were not apparent at the moment, though it was well known that they existed.

"A good thing the ship blotted out the fire as we descended," Vanita commented. "This foliage is as dry as dust. If the flames had got a good hold the whole forest might have caught alight!"

"Possibly," Earmar agreed, and seemed to think about this for a moment; then he took the girl's arm and led the way forward. Or tried to. Almost immediately they were up against the screens of vines.

"How about the ship?" the girl asked, glancing behind her. "Can we find the way back?"

"Blaze the trail as we go, that's all." Earmar took out his pocket knife ready for the job, and each tree they passed he notched deeply. So, tearing vines and saplings out of their way,

they made slow progress—very slow. Earmar constantly consulting the complicated compass to be sure of direction.

“No idea how much farther, I suppose?” Vanita asked at length, drawing the back of her hand over her streaming forehead.

“No idea at all. The compass doesn’t give distance, only direction, but I don’t think we can be very far from——”

Earmar broke off suddenly, and held up his hand. Vanita realized at the same moment that there were sounds in the forest—the breaking of branches and twigs under advancing feet.

“Somebody perhaps searching for us,” he said quickly. “Duck down and leave this to me.”

They both backed to the rear of a monstrous bush of blossom and waited expectantly. The sounds came nearer, and before long two flabby-skinned Venusians appeared, both of them in shabby uniform which bore the Venusian symbol for “A” on the left shoulder. In their hands they carried heat-guns.

“This is too easy,” Earmar murmured, grinning. “Our friends are evidently two members of the militia of Anziba—hence the ‘A’. They can probably tell us a good deal and cut down time.”

He rose slowly as the two men had their backs turned momentarily, then in three swift bounds he had reached them. His immense size and strength divested the men of their guns before they realized what had happened. They stood watching in consternation as Earmar tossed one gun behind the bush to the girl, and the other he threw into the foliage out of sight.

“You two speak the interplanetary language?” Earmar asked briefly, and they nodded.

“Very well. Answer my questions and you’ll have a chance to go on living. Otherwise I’ll crush the pair of you together until you crack like eggshell. . . . You”—Earmar pointed to the bigger man—“can do the talking. You belong to the insurgents of Anziba, don’t you?”

“We do, yes. And we were sent to locate you. If we don’t return others will come. The position of your ship is known.”

“I’m not surprised; but nobody can know that I personally am the intruder.”

“That is not known,” the Venusian agreed. “But all intruders in this region are treated alike. They die—as you would have done had you not proved too quick for us.”

Vanita came from behind the bush with gun in hand. The two guards glanced towards her, then back to Earmar.

“Where is the location of Anziba’s headquarters?” Earmar asked, after a moment. “How far away?”

“About six kija.”

“Two miles, eh?” Earmar glanced at the girl. “We’ve been saved quite a little trip. . . . And what do his headquarters contain? Scientific apparatus, obviously. I am aware of his magnetic-beam device.”

“He has everything needful,” the soldier replied boastfully. “Before long Anziba will overthrow the intruders who have——”

“Never mind the political talk: stick to the subject. Anziba is controlling a market in kurna berries, and has—or had—one Commander Holden of the freighter line shipping the things to Earth. From where were those berries sent?”

“From Anziba’s city. He——” The soldier stopped, looking irritated with himself.

“So he has a city to himself in the hinterland here, has he? Very interesting. The only puzzle to me is how he erected it in this tangle of vegetation, how he managed to transport the necessities.”

“The city belongs to the ancestors of Anziba,” the soldier continued, evidently feeling that free explanation might be the safest course. “We of Venus are of many mixed races, some of us with a proud heritage. Anziba has such a heritage, and the city was populated by his ancestors. Now he has taken it over and filled it with the scientific necessities we need for attack, defence, and ordinary living.”

Earmar nodded. “I see. Making use of his ancestors’ domain, as it were. Logical enough, and it explains why he can survive indefinitely in this jungle fastness. So far, so good. You say the berries are sent from this city?”

“They are collected from the surrounding jungle and packed in the city. Commander Holden and other freighter men, willing to aid Anziba’s great movement, and liking the pay, detour from the ordinary Venusian freighter stations at Tropica City and touch down in Anziba’s city, the surrounding jungle having been sufficiently cleared to allow of this. We are far enough away from Tropica City to avoid telescopic observation when the freighters take off again.”

“Very informative,” Earmar commented. “You are earning your freedom, my friends. Finally, as to Anziba’s objective with these kurna berries. It is to make Earth people destroy all those who are fostering Venusian settlement, is it not?”

“It is, and it will succeed. Anziba’s voice speaks to the eaters of the kurna berries on a radio wave——”

“Yes, I know, above the audible frequency range.”

“Later,” the soldier finished, “the great Anziba will make other moves to free our violated planet. Already he has spoken of his intention to record different orders for the time when nearly all the people of Earth are slaves of the berries. He will order brother to kill brother, and sister to kill sister, until not an inhabitant remains on the accursed Earth.”

Earmar’s expression changed a little. “So *that’s* his ultimate purpose, is it? To set Earth people at each other’s throats and make them destroy themselves? That can only happen if the kurna berries get to Earth, which they will certainly not do.”

“Anziba will win,” the soldier answered, with simple faith.

Earmar turned to the girl. “Grab some of those vines, Van, and tie these boys up. And tie ‘em tight. Better still, I’ll do it myself. Keep them covered.”

The guards kept their eyes on the steadily pointed gun as Earmar tore away several lengths of the tough vine from the surrounding trees. At the end of five minutes he had both men trussed as tightly as fowls ready for the oven. Then he tethered each man separately to a tree.

“How long you will stay here I can’t say,” Earmar told them, as they glared at him sullenly. “Think yourselves lucky that I don’t wipe you out entirely. The only reason you have your liberty is because I realize you are merely Anziba’s dupes and not actually responsible for the orders you have to carry out. Later, maybe, you’ll learn sense and realize that progress can only come with co-operation. . . . You said that if you did not return to headquarters others would come and look for you. On that hangs your chance of release.”

With that Earmar turned away, Vanita beside him. He picked up the compass from behind the bush and then commenced the return trip into the forest, a far simpler task than the former laborious progress, since all the vegetation had already been smashed away.

“We’ve got the facts about Anziba,” Vanita said, as they followed the blazed trail, “but what can we do about it? He seems to be in an impregnable position.”

“No man is ever that—and certainly not one whose main aim is to spread destruction and death upon Earth. I hadn’t realized how deep his scheme is, or how vital it is that he be

crushed before he can put it into operation. Induced civil war on Earth could utterly destroy our civilization. That's the issue."

"So far we seem to be winning," the girl said hopefully. "We stopped Commander Holden in his tracks, and he seemed to be about the worst offender. Wonder who the others are?"

"I've no idea, but they have got to be stopped. We're going straight to the authorities at Tropica City and see what we can do. And the sooner we get on our way, the better, in case Anziba acts quicker than we expect."

This thought was in itself enough to stimulate them to greater speed, and in spite of the heat they allowed themselves no let up until at last they had regained their space-ship. Passing within it, Earmar went to the control board, setting down his compass, whilst Vanita sealed the airlock—though this was hardly necessary, since their trip to Tropica City was not likely to take them beyond the atmosphere—except for emergency reasons.

"All ready," Vanita announced, but to her surprise Earmar did not start the vessel moving. Instead he was contemplating the switchboard carefully.

"A machine of this type ought to have retractable flying gear," he explained, seeing the girl's puzzled look. "Wings falling into the bodywork and normally invisible, as well as helicopter screws and a prop unit, all for normal air flight. It's our only way of getting away from here without setting things on fire."

"Why, of course!" Vanita looked startled. "I'd forgotten that we nearly incinerated everything as we landed. In upward flight we wouldn't have the chance to smother the flames as we rise."

"That's just what's worrying me. We— Ah!" Earmar broke off in delight. "Here we are—full set of retractable gear switches. I thought there ought to be some somewhere. I'd have used them on the downward journey had I thought of it."

He switched on the power and then pulled the requisite levers for the retractable gear. Through the reflecting screen there became visible outside the ship twin helicopter screws, two swept-back wings, and finally a complete propeller unit sliding forth out of the stern.

"Good enough," Earmar commented. "Let's hope they work all right."

There was no trouble about this. Under the power of the helicopter screws the vessel lifted easily through the narrow "shaft" already created through smashed branches and incinerated vegetation, and once clear of the tree-tops Earmar turned the vessel southwards and flew with the normal propeller unit at as fast a speed as it could maintain—which seemed a deadly crawl after the terrific velocities attainable by rocket propulsion.

Accordingly it took nearly two hours to reach Tropica City, the amazing modern metropolis set in the heart of Venus' wastes, populated alike by Venusians and Earthlings—as up to date as Western cities had once appeared in the midst of African wildernesses.

Earmar landed the machine at the central space-port and then chartered an aero-taxi to take him and Vanita to the headquarters of law and order. Here they were granted a special interview with the Earth consul in his roomy, fan-cooled office. He was a cordial enough man, military in appearance and wearing spotless white clothes, though he did survey the two grimy, travel-stained visitors in some surprise.

"In trouble, my friends?" he asked, motioning to chairs and pushing a large glass jug of orange-juice across the desk.

"The whole Earth is in trouble, unless we act fast," Earmar replied briefly, pouring out the orangeade into glasses for the girl and himself. "Maybe my name doesn't mean anything to you?"

“It is vaguely familiar, Mr. Brown, though I cannot recall any specific connection.”

“Well, never mind. Let us say that I have been privileged to help the Earth authorities on several occasions when they found scientific crime getting a little beyond them. For your information, Consul, the recent troubles on Earth concerning members of the O.V.S., of which you must have heard over the general radio broadcasts, have been directly caused by one Anziba.”

The Consul’s eyes sharpened. “Anziba? But he’s been outlawed from the community!”

“Anziba is too clever a scientist to accept that kind of banishment, Consul. He is concerned only with vengeance, and stopping the colonization of Venus. My secretary here, and I, have been through fire and water to get at the facts. It is imperative that you hear them.”

“I am all attention.”

Earmar gave the details of all that had happened, and it plunged the Consul into deep thought. When the story was over he was frowning.

“Kurna berries amidst Tropica cherries! I never heard of such a flagrant breach of the law. Naturally, Mr. Brown, we must take action immediately. What suggestions have you?”

“The first and most essential move is to get in touch with Earth and warn them of what is intended. I do not anticipate any freighters landing there for some little time, but immediately they do so they should be stopped and examined for kurna berries. If there are any in the cargo the commanders must be arrested and sent to trial.”

The Consul reached to the intercom and switched it on.

“Get me in touch with Earth immediately—Sir Kenneth Ansoll of the Public Safety Department.”

“Yes, sir.”

The Consul switched off and looked back at Earmar again. “I think that side of the business can be taken care of easily enough, Mr. Brown; but what about Anziba himself? From what you tell me, he is very deeply entrenched in this city of his ancestors. Of course, we could probably bomb him out from the air, pin-pointing his position from that compass indication you have made.”

Earmar shook his head. “That wouldn’t do. As I have told you, Anziba has magnetic apparatus which could account for every plane or space machine you cared to send over his territory. It is also a reasonable assumption that he has his city well protected with scientific apparatus which would negate the power of any bombs dropped upon him.”

“But dammit, man, he can’t be invulnerable! There must be *some* way of getting at him.”

Before Earmar could speak the radio phone buzzed. The Consul picked it up.

“My call to Earth? Yes. . . . Hello—Oh, how are you, Sir Kenneth? Consul Marsden here. I’ve most urgent news for you concerning the cherry havoc on Earth. There’s a very brave man here—and an equally brave woman—who have endured numberless dangers to get to the root of the mystery, and what is more important, they’ve done it. Here are the facts. Have them recorded, will you?”

Earmar and Vanita sat in silence whilst they listened to the Consul recounting all that had been told. When at length he had finished he sat listening to the voice sixty million miles away, and quite inaudible to Earmar and the girl. They noticed, however, that the Consul’s expression slowly changed and a look of amazement and then annoyance came to his features.

“I just can’t believe it!” he protested at length. “Even if it is so, you cannot possibly turn down the suggestions on that account!”

Long pause, then, “If you’re wrong about this, Sir Kenneth, there’s going to be terrible trouble. I’ll call you back.”

The Consul switched off, and met Earmar’s enquiring glance across the desk.

“They won’t accept the suggestions you’ve made, Mr. Brown. In fact I don’t think they believe a word I’ve said—or, if they do, they think you are the primal cause of the cherry trouble.”

“They what?” Vanita demanded, astounded.

“I’m in a different position,” the Consul muttered. “For my own part I believe every word you’ve said—but back on Earth there is a warrant out for your arrest on a charge of murder.”

“Good Lord!” Earmar whistled incredulously. “You mean to tell me they let a thing like that stand in the way?”

“It isn’t just that. The authorities think you are at the back of the berry business and that, when an attempt was made to arrest you, you escaped into space, taking your secretary with you. You haven’t been seen on Earth since, and the assumption concerning the Venusian you murdered is that he did not carry out orders, or something.”

“Talk about making a mountain out of a molehill!” Vanita cried indignantly.

“I do not think they would view the matter so seriously were you an out-and-out Earthling, or Venusian,” the Consul added, and shifted uncomfortably. “You are—er—a half-breed, of course, and for that reason the Earth authorities seem to think you capable of anything.”

Earmar shrugged. “I killed that Venusian to make one less in the villainous gang trying to distribute the hell-fruit—but the unimaginative inspector of police saw only the legal side. Maybe he was right; I don’t know—but that everybody on Earth should be left open to danger because it happens to be I who gives the warning is preposterous.”

“Let them suffer, that’s all!” Vanita snapped. “They deserve it!”

Earmar became thoughtful, then asked a question: “Did Sir Kenneth say how things are there?”

“I gathered that they are about the same. He did not refer to any new consignments of cherries, nor did he mention that any more O.V.S. members had been killed. Perhaps they took some of your advice to the police inspector in that direction.”

“And yet still insist on implementing that murder charge.” Earmar laughed shortly. “The thing’s fantastic! Altogether, Consul, there doesn’t seem to be much more I can do then. I have given the facts, but without co-operation I can’t do a thing. My only course is to go to Earth and argue it out at my trial. Meantime humanity is threatened.”

“Not if I know it!” the Consul declared flatly. “I know I have no authority to take action without permission from Earth, but this time I’m going to waive the rules and act as I see fit. . . . Which is another way of saying I believe every word you have told me, Mr. Brown.”

“Many thanks,” Earmar smiled.

“I’m on the spot, and Sir Kenneth and his bureaucrats are not. We can stop Anziba right here, whereas they’ll only act when everything is falling to bits around them. Let’s go back to where we were interrupted by the ’phone. What have you in mind for uprooting Anziba?”

“The simplest and yet most effective method,” Earmar replied. “Fire.”

“Fire?” The Consul frowned. “How do you mean?”

“The idea is really a throwback to a fire we nearly started with our underjets when we landed in the forest. I think it could be developed. Anziba’s city is in the heart of the jungle—that much we know—but if the jungle caught fire all around him. What then?”

“He’d extinguish it, I suppose. He must have fire-fighting equipment.”

“You mean he would *try* to extinguish it,” Earomar said calmly. “Think of the height of the trees, the density of the foliage, the frightful heat generated in an already overpowering atmosphere. His city would be ringed by a blazing inferno. From that inferno sparks would inevitably drift to the more inflammable of his equipment and ignite it. He probably has ammunition and bomb dumps, too, which would be endangered. I do not suppose, either, that he has vast numbers of men at his command as fire-fighters. Against a fire of forest-sized dimensions he would be beaten. If we found that he was by some chance winning the battle, we’d go over with bombs and heat-beams and finish the job. We could do it in safety then, because all his attention would be directed upon the fire-fighting, not against us.”

“Wherever he goes he’ll have no escape,” the Consul mused. “Yes, I like the idea, but the authorities will not if it succeeds. They’ll say I have been too ruthless, and should have brought Anziba to trial, instead of burning him to death along with his comrades. Reaction would be none too good, I’m afraid.”

Earomar sighed. “Very well, if one must be sentimental about this vicious killer, there are ways to cover the law. Give him warning by radio that unless he surrenders himself to the authorities within a given time—say two hours—you will not be responsible for what happens to him. Have the warning recorded, then any authorities back on Earth who get conscience-stricken can hear it. On top of that Anziba still has a way out, remember. He has no need to be trapped unless he deliberately wishes it.”

“What way out? He dare not go anywhere on Venus. He’s an outlaw, remember.”

“He’ll certainly have a space-ship in that city—maybe several of them. Assuming only one, there is nothing to stop him trying to escape into the void, and that, I think, is what he will do. Where he will go doesn’t matter much: wherever it is he’ll never get there.”

“You mean to follow him?”

“And destroy him,” Earomar said quietly. “There is no other way to stop such an incurably vindictive rebel. Besides, the fate of millions of lives depends on his being extinguished.”

There was silence for a moment or two. The Consul sat with tight lips, thinking things out. Then at last he slapped his hand on the desk.

“Right! We’ll do it, Mr. Brown, and explain things to the Earth authorities afterwards. . . . Now, before we go any further, you and your secretary need food, rest, and change of attire. I will have a suite placed at your disposal.”

VI

Some hours later, refreshed, rested, and freshened up, Earmar and Vanita rejoined the Consul in his office to hear of his plans—and apparently they were very thorough.

“I have dispatched four corps of men to north, south, east, and west of this central point marked by your compass, Mr. Brown,” he explained. “The positions they will take up are about three miles from the location of Anziba’s city, and I see no reason why they shouldn’t reach their appointed stations safely. I have arranged for them to be transported by radio-guided gliders, the radio influence being cut off several miles from their point of landing. They will make the final descent by parachute. In that way Anziba will not be able to pick up the electrical emanation of ’plane engines, or receive any sound vibrations.”

“Excellent!” Earmar exclaimed in satisfaction.

“The men have radio equipment, of course,” the Consul added. “If their broadcasts are picked up by Anziba—as in fact they will be—it will be too late for him to do anything about it, since by then the fires will have been started. There now only remains for me to warn Anziba that he must surrender, or take the consequences. For that, too, I have made arrangements.”

The Consul switched on the microphone on his desk, then waited for the red-light signal. After a moment or two it came.

“This is the Earth consul speaking exclusively to Anziba,” he said deliberately. “You are herewith given an ultimatum. Certain facts having been discovered about you in regard to kurna berries, which are having a very detrimental effect on the people of Earth, you are herewith notified that you are under technical arrest, and that murder stands predominant amongst the charges against you. Because of the obvious difficulties attendant on reaching your jungle headquarters—though their location is accurately known—you are herewith given two hours in which to surrender yourself to the authorities in Tropica City. If you decide to do so, your ’plane will be given free passage to the Tropica City airport. If you refuse, or make an attempt to escape from this planet, we will not be responsible for the consequences. I await your reply.”

The Consul switched off and turned to the intercom. “Get that all right, with full recording?”

“Everything perfect, sir,” came the reply of the engineer in charge.

The Consul nodded to himself, glanced at the clock, and then to the waiting Earmar and Vanita.

“I have my men watching for him escaping into space,” he said. “If that happens, Mr. Brown, I am relying on your own statement about pursuing him. A fast space-machine of the most modern type is at your disposal.”

Earmar nodded. “Many thanks—though I don’t think it very likely that Anziba will give in that easily. . . .”

Silence fell again, the Consul still watching the clock. The five minutes were nearly up when the nearby loudspeaker came to life. A voice, speaking English with some difficulty, made itself distinctly heard.

“Your sudden decision to issue an ultimatum, Earth consul, leaves me unimpressed, and it is typical of the bombast of the men of your planet that you expect me to do exactly as you

order. I am fighting for a cause—the freedom of the men and women of my planet to do as they wish on their own world—and that cause I will defend to the finish, even if it means destroying every living soul who is born of Earth. That is my answer.”

“No more than I expected,” Earmar commented, shrugging. Then he rose to his feet. “My secretary and I had better be on our way, then, if Anziba makes a dash for it, as eventually he must, we’ll be ready for him.”

The Consul switched on the intercom again. “Give our men the signal to fire the forest,” he ordered, and to Earmar he added, “That will simply be one straight buzz and nothing more, which will convey nothing to Anziba.”

He got up from his chair and shook hands. “All I can do is wish both of you the very best of luck, and you can be sure of my full support if the Earth authorities try to implement this ridiculous charge of murder.”

Earmar smiled, then escorted the girl from the office. An official was waiting for them, and they were quickly transported to the space-port and conducted to their machine, definitely of the latest design and fitted with modern armaments and ample provisions.

Once within it Earmar switched on the normal flying gear, and then he gave an anxious glance about him. He relaxed again in relief as he beheld his compass nearby on the switch-panel bench. Evidently the Consul had had everything done thoroughly.

“Ready when you are,” Vanita announced, closing the last clamp on the airlock.

Earmar nodded silently and switched on the power-plant. In a matter of moments the vessel was lifting cleanly from the metal runway of the space-port and darting northwards. Vanita came to the bowed observation window and looked intently ahead.

“How long do you suppose Anziba will be able to hold out against the fire?” she asked.

“No idea. Depends on the number of men he’s got and the efficacy of his fire-fighting equipment. Long or short, the answer will be the same. When trees several hundred feet high and nearly eighty feet thick start crashing down in flames all around you, and on top of your buildings, you don’t stand much chance. That was one reason why I suggested fire. I take it that the city of Anziba’s ancestors will be of the old-fashioned stone variety: for that reason the battering-rams of falling trees should make short work of it.”

Vanita looked back again through the window, anxiously watching for the first signs of smoke on the horizon, and before long it became visible. First as a grey smudge, then as an upwardly curling fog as the machine flew onwards quickly—until at last the full range of the holocaust was clearly visible. In a gigantic circle the mighty forest was burning furiously, throwing sparks, flames, and smoke nearly a thousand feet into the sky. And it was rapidly spreading outwards from the perimeter. In the centre of the circle there was no fire as yet, so presumably that was where Anziba’s domain existed, the smoke making it impossible to see it.

Cruising at a thousand feet, Earmar kept the machine circling, watching the inferno intently. As he had surmised, Anziba and his followers were evidently too intent on fighting the flames to use magnetic apparatus. Certainly no attempts were being made to claw the ‘plane down out of the skies. . . .

In the space of thirty minutes the extent of the fire had more than doubled, the heat-dried foliage igniting the moment sparks alighted upon it. Down in the heart of that holocaust there must be existing the mad exodus of myriads of insects and the shift and tumult of men, both those who had started the fire and those within its embrace, fighting its relentless inroads.

Turning to the radio, Earmar switched it on, but no sounds were coming forth. If Anziba was directing operations, he was evidently not using radio as the medium. . . .

An hour passed—and two hours. By this time hundreds of miles of forest were blazing, and the centre point marking Anziba's region was still obliterated with smoke. Yet still the radio was dead and there was no sign of a space-ship or space-ships trying to escape into the void.

"What's happened, I wonder?" Vanita turned from the window with a puzzled gaze. "The fire has about destroyed all the vegetation on the edge of Anziba's territory by now. It's done all the damage it is likely to do, and yet he hasn't tried to escape. Do you think he's somehow survived, after all?"

"I just don't know, Van." Earmar surveyed the flames below, eating their way well outwards from the centre and destroying everything in their track. "Seems to me the only solution is to go down and take a look."

"It will be the finish of us, if that's what Anziba is waiting for."

Earmar shrugged. "Fact remains we can't stay up here conjecturing."

He put the machine into a steep dive and made the descent swiftly, plunging through the midst of the drifting columns of ash-laden smoke, and finally bringing the vessel on the charred carpet which formed the region Anziba had occupied. Down here on the ground the smoke was less dense. Between the rifts it was possible to see that Earmar had not been wrong in his guess-work.

The city of Anziba's ancestors had plainly been of considerable size, and of archaic stone architecture. Now most of the buildings had been demolished, presumably by falling trees which had afterwards burned themselves into ash—and those buildings which had survived were blackened with flame and smoke. . . . But the eerie part was that there was not a soul in sight. Certainly nobody could have escaped into the flaming jungle, and there had been no signs of aircraft or space-ships.

"Only one answer," Earmar said grimly, surveying through the window. "They must have escaped underground. An old city like this would inevitably have catacombs beneath it, possibly coming up far beyond the fire area. That's one we didn't think of! Impossible to search, too, with the ground still white hot with ash."

Vanita did not respond. She was looking at the empty shells within the buildings which still stood, and the observation stirred a thought in her mind.

"What about all the equipment, the scientific machinery which we know he must have had? Flames would not destroy that, yet there's no sign of anything."

"There probably might be if we explored some of the other buildings. This is only a part of the city, remember, and it is most improbable that Anziba used all of it. His equipment, or lack of it, doesn't worry me. It's *him* I've got to find. As long as he is free, anything can happen."

It was at this moment that the radio, which he had left tuned in on the off-chance, came suddenly to life again.

"Unit Four commander reporting. Anziba and two dozen insurgents sighted by our scouts in clearing half a mile away, and beyond range of fire, which has not yet got that far. Six of the insurgents shot dead; the others captured. Anziba escaped in space-machine concealed in jungle. Apparently the party emerged from underground tunnel, the existence of which has just been located. Instructions required concerning Anziba and the men now in our hands."

"Do what they like with the men in their hands," Earmar said quickly. "This is our cue. Anziba evidently had a machine poked away some distance from his city in case of emergency, and but for that observation corps we might have missed him after all. Hang on to your teeth, my dear."

Earmar livened the gently humming power-plant and took swiftly to the air, soaring high over the smoke-wreaths, and at length into the clouds themselves. Here he withdrew the ordinary flying gear and set the jets in operation. At dizzying velocity he shot straight upwards, through the opaque white blanket of the Venusian atmosphere. The wind howled and screamed round the window sockets, the pressure against the floor grew ever stronger.

Then the noise of the wind began to abate and the vapours thinned as the vessel, now a space-ship, hurtled out into the vacuum and left the enormous globe of Venus receding below. Vanita, still by the window, staggered a little under the terrific acceleration, but she was too intent on watching the void to think of lying down on the bunk. Earmar, too, his hands on the switches, peered intently into the abyss, narrowing his eyes against the overpowering glory of the sun.

“There he is!” Vanita exclaimed abruptly, pointing. “To the left there—at the edge of that constellation.”

Earmar shifted his gaze, and after a moment or two detected the glittering silver speck which had become apparent to the girl’s sharp eyes. She turned, labouring against the inertia, and swung the telescope into position. She only needed a moment or two of observation to satisfy herself.

“Space-ship all right, so I suppose it’s Anziba. He’s moving fast, too. Faster than we are, I think, since he’s growing smaller.”

“In which direction is he heading?”

“Away from the sun, which inevitably takes him in the direction of Earth’s orbit. But he’d never be fool enough to try to land on Earth, surely?”

“Hardly—and it won’t be safe for him to land on Mars, either. There are colonists there too, remember. He just has no planet where he can gain a foothold. Probably he doesn’t know himself yet where he intends to settle. He may be risking the outer deeps—Jupiter, Saturn, or one of the big fellows.”

“Then why should we endanger ourselves? Isn’t it sufficient that he is an outcast and can’t set foot anywhere?”

“With a man like him it is not sufficient, Van. As long as he has life he can be a nuisance and a menace to the law-abiding ones. . . . Since he can’t make up his mind where to go, it is for us to show him.”

Earmar did not explain any further there and then, chiefly because he realized Vanita might raise objections at his ruthlessness. Instead he gave instructions.

“Lie down on the bunk, Van. I’m going to get up greater speed so I can get well ahead of Anziba, if it’s possible.”

The girl looked puzzled, but she obeyed orders. Earmar’s hand pulled the speed lever farther over, and a burst of the jets sent the machine darting away at right angles to Anziba’s distant vessel. Thereafter Earmar piled speed upon speed, until the frightful pressure was forcing him back into the springs of his seat and he was only just able to draw breath into his constricted lungs. Vanita lay motionless on the bunk, flat out, her chest hardly rising or falling under the tremendous load pinning her down. Only with difficulty was she able to retain her senses.

Anziba’s machine was only just visible through the telescope as a mere dot, Earmar himself making observations through the instrument, but using the prismatic eyepiece to do it—an extension to the instrument itself—so that he did not have to move from his seat. Thuswise, with Anziba’s machine pin-pointed, he swung in an enormous arc through space,

covering half the distance to Earth's orbit in the process, and finally had his own vessel several thousand miles ahead of the rebel. Only then did he begin to turn inward, so that finally he and Anziba were approaching each other at high velocity.

Fast though he was still travelling, Earmar had cut the speed down sufficiently to make breathing more tolerable, and accordingly was sitting more upright in his seat. Vanita, too, stirred and got slowly from the bunk.

"Surely you don't intend to ram him?" she asked, startled as she detected Anziba's vessel far away ahead.

"No." Earmar's face was grim. "You'll see."

"How long before things begin to happen?—whatever those things may be."

"At our present velocity, in about an hour. Possibly he has spotted my manœuvres through his telescope, in which case he will open fire the moment he is within range. Whether he's seen us or not, he certainly will soon. Stand by the deflective screen apparatus. It may offset whatever he throws at us."

Vanita moved to the switchboard in question, separate from the main control panel and taking its power direct from the plant. The movement of a switch was able to entirely encircle the vessel with a cocoon of repulsive energy, by which most radiations, or objects like meteorites, could be turned aside.

Still Earmar drove on steadily, then after fifteen minutes he snapped on the radio.

"Calling Anziba," he said curtly, and almost instantly there was a reply.

"Anziba speaking. I have been watching your mad flight through space, my friend, and can only assume you are either crazy or very anxious to die quickly. I have instruments aboard this vessel of mine which can, and will, take care of you."

"That remains to be seen. You are not fighting one of the Venusian authorities, Anziba, who would probably not bother to deal with you to the death. You're dealing with Earmar Brown, and I'm resolved to finish you, if it's the last thing I do."

There was a pause, then, "Earmar Brown! That makes matters all the more interesting. From various sources I have gathered that you are and have been responsible for most of my troubles. Since you are willing to fight it out, so am I."

"I shall not use weapons, as such," Earmar said. "It is against my principles. I rely on two powers only, my physique and my mind."

There was a sound at the other end which could have been a sardonic chuckle.

"More fool you, Mr. Brown! I prefer something of a more concrete nature—a heat-beam, for instance. As you will discover when I am within firing range."

Earmar was silent for a moment, and Vanita gave him an anxious glance. Her hand was on the switch of the deflective screen, waiting for the order for action. Outside, Anziba's machine was sweeping ever nearer, but he was no longer moving in a straight line. Evidently he considered that avoiding action was called for, in case Earmar changed his view about relying on either his mind or his physique.

But Earmar had not changed his view, and Vanita, looking at him, began to grasp what was intended. She could see that strange, deadly change taking place in his eyes, the kindling of abysmal fires deep in the pupils as he gazed through the port, the microphone still close to his lips. To her there leapt the memory of many famous hypnotists back on Earth who had been forbidden to broadcast their powers over radio or television for fear of the impact of their thoughts. But here, apparently, Earmar was using the radio as a means of projecting his thoughts across the abyss of space to Anziba.

“Anziba, can you hear me?” Earmar asked at last, his voice low, gentle, and inhumanly seductive.

“I hear you,” came Anziba’s retort. “And very soon you——”

“Turn your ship around and retrace along the course you have already followed,” Earmar interrupted, still in the same chilling, other-world tone.

This time there came no reply. Earmar’s gaze was still directed through the window, his distended eyes unblinking and fixed. Vanita gave a little shudder to herself. It was at moments like these that she realized how utterly alien this cosmic half-breed really was—then her attention switched back through the window as she saw Anziba’s machine was still hurtling towards them.

This fact did not seem to disturb Earmar in the least. He kept a guiding hand on the controls, and when at last it seemed that the two machines must crash head-on, he changed course very slightly so that Anziba’s vessel flew overhead. Immediately Vanita expected to hear the order to switch on the repulsive screen, but Earmar remained silent.

“He—he didn’t fire at us, Earmar!” she exclaimed in wonder. “He was well within range, and still is, but——”

She stopped as he made an impatient gesture for silence. He was staring with that unnerving gaze into the big rear mirror outside the front port, which gave a distinct view of Anziba’s vessel. . . . It was turning, very slowly, at the start of a great arc which must finally cause it to fly back along the path through space it had already covered.

“Earmar, what’s the idea?” Vanita demanded. “Do you want me to stand by these switches or not?”

He shook his head mutely, staring into the mirror. Then his voice intoned again into the microphone, every word so drugged with mesmeric force that even Vanita, who was not the subject, could feel herself becoming unaccountably sleepy.

“You will continue straight before you once you have completed the full turn, Anziba. You will make no attempt to use your weapons. You will completely ignore the vessel which you can see through the port.”

“I will ignore the vessel I can see through the port,” came Anziba’s mechanical repetition.

Earmar gave a taut smile to himself, his gaze watching the machine as it slowly completed the arc and then started to come rapidly through the void. Vanita watched anxiously, still not at all convinced but what a blast of destructive power would suddenly belch forth and blow her and Earmar to eternity. . . .

But no such thing happened. With the passage of time Anziba’s machine slowly gained on them, overtook them, and then continued ahead of them, hurtling in the direction of Venus. For a moment or two Earmar relaxed and gave the girl a glance. He switched off the microphone momentarily.

“This is liable to be a lengthy job,” he said. “Anziba has a long trip to make, and nobody can make him do it except me. I’ve got to remain continuously at this switchboard and concentrate upon him until the job is done. You can leave that deflecting switchboard: it won’t be needed now.”

“I wish I could feel confident of that, Earmar! At this very moment Anziba must have recovered his normal faculties and——”

“No.” Earmar shook his head. “He is post-hypnotized for quite a little while yet. I’ll get him back in the toils before he can properly wake up.”

“Where’s it all leading, Earmar? Are you sending Anziba back to Venus, or what?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Mercury, then? There’s nothing beyond Mercury.”

“I fancy there is—as Anziba will find out.”

Vanita reflected for a moment, then, as she gazed into space and shielded her eyes from the saturating glare of the sun, she gave a start.

“Earmar, you don’t mean——!”

“I mean the sun. I’m going to force Anziba into its field of attraction. If that doesn’t make certain of his extinction, nothing will. . . . And no arguments!” Earmar finished sternly, as he saw the girl preparing to protest.

To prevent her speaking he resumed his hypnosis, opening the microphone and speaking again.

“You hear my voice, Anziba?”

“I hear your voice.”

“You will swing your ship two million miles to the eastern limb of Venus and then continue in a straight line. You understand?”

“I understand.”

And so for Earmar there began the long, gruelling, self-imposed task of holding Anziba in thrall. Vanita prepared a meal, and Earmar relaxed long enough to eat it in snatches; then again he was back on the job, constantly willing the outlawed Venusian to obey the mental commands being carried on the radio wave. It was possible that he had brief spells when he was again the master of himself—coinciding with the times when Earmar felt compelled to relax his concentration—but the intervals were not possibly long enough to permit of him changing course or making an attack with his weapons. He was too far ahead to be in range, anyway.

So the time passed on. The two-million-mile swing away from the eastern limb of Venus was duly carried out, and after that Anziba drove his vessel relentlessly onwards at high velocity, only Mercury and the sun lying ahead. But, high though the speed of both machines was, the distance to be covered was still considerable, and there were limits to even Earmar’s powers of physical and mental endurance. He did the only thing he could do: gave Anziba post-hypnotic orders to hold him enslaved, and then he relaxed and slept, using drugs to bring repose as quickly as possible.

Throughout these times Vanita kept anxious watch, she having snatched her own sleep during Earmar’s waking moments, and for her they were periods of razor-edge uncertainty. As an ordinary woman with no particular claims to tremendous mental resources, she just could not convince herself that Anziba was really so bewitched as Earmar seemed to have made him.

Yet evidently this was so, for he flew on and on, hour after hour, Earth day after Earth day, Mercury growing larger all the time away to the left and the ever-increasing, blinding grandeur of the sun filling all space ahead. . . .

At this point Earmar remained constantly at the control board, surveying space through the successive layers of deep purple glass which he had switched into position over the observation window. Through this density Anziba’s vessel was a remote speck, but even so the field of attraction was not yet so absolute from the sun that Anziba could not turn back if his mind were released from the mental vice Earmar had clamped about it.

Earmar, however, was determined to see the thing through, and there was nothing Vanita could do but watch and control her fears as best she could. Flying so close within range of the

sun was something no space-fliers had ever willingly done before, and it required fine focus calculation to be sure that the boundary was not overstepped.

“The time has come,” Earmar said, relaxing for a moment and switching off the microphone, “to give our friend his final send-off. I’m going to catch up with him and give him the last of his orders. Stand by for speed.”

“But, Earmar, haven’t you done enough? He can’t possibly get away from the sun’s field now——”

“He can, and he will if we don’t finish the job properly. I know what I’m doing.”

On that Earmar returned to his hypnotic task, at the same time increasing the velocity of the vessel until the usual crushing pressures of acceleration began to make themselves felt. Through the purple shields the speck that was Anziba’s machine began to grow larger and larger still as time and the hundreds of thousands of miles were hurdled at a truly awe-inspiring onrush. Throughout the time Earmar did not relax, and the measure of the strain to which he was subjecting himself showed in the drawn lines round his mouth and the perspiration trickling down his forehead.

The terrific heat within the machine did not help matters, either. Only thirty million miles distant from the luminary now, on the very edge of that awesome attractive field which spelled destruction to anything in it. Earmar gave one glance at the instruments, decided he was near enough to Anziba’s vessel for comfort, and gave his final orders.

“Increase speed, Anziba, and maintain it for fifteen minutes, then cut off your power. You understand?”

“I understand,” came the mechanical voice in the loudspeaker, at which Earmar relaxed thankfully and mopped his face.

“That puts him where he belongs, my dear,” he commented. “He can never turn back now, and the discovery will be all the more terrifying to him because he is now in possession of his normal faculties and is probably discovering what has happened.”

“I know exactly what has happened!” came Anziba’s voice again, through the loudspeaker—and Earmar realized he had not switched off the microphone, and that therefore his words to Vanita had been carried to the outlaw. “I have been aware of your hypnotic efforts, Earmar Brown, in the brief times you relaxed your hold over me. I know I am doomed, that you have driven me inextricably into the grip of the sun—but long before I am consumed I shall be dead. You have been clever, my friend, but not clever enough. I have switched on the magnetic beam used for towing disabled space-ships, and my instruments tell me that the magnetic influence is just within range of your vessel. If I am to go into the sun you shall go too!”

For once in his life Earmar looked really horrified. He switched on the forward jets at half maximum, but for all the effect they had he might as well not have bothered. The vessel was still travelling sunward in the wake of Anziba’s vessel.

“Hypnotize him again!” Vanita cried hoarsely. “Make him switch off his magnetism!”

“You are too late for that,” came Anziba’s voice. “Even you cannot hypnotize a corpse, Earmar Brown!”

After which there followed a faint sound like a deep groan, and then silence. Earmar sat for a moment or two in rigid concentration, then abruptly relaxed.

“No use!” He gave the girl a brief glance. “He must have turned a ray-gun on himself. Definitely he is dead: I can tell that by meeting no resistance to my mesmerism—— And

we've got to get out of this!" he finished desperately. "He's left that magnetic beam in action on his vessel and it will stay that way until the final destruction of the machine. . . ."

Immediately he increased the thrust of the forward jets to absolute maximum in a desperate endeavour to overcome the magnetic pull of Anziba's doomed vessel and the slowly growing power of the sun's own field. In response to this terrific counterblast, the vessel slightly decreased its speed. Earmar and Vanita stared at the meters fixedly, watching in particular the velocity needle quivering gently backwards on the scale . . . then it began to move forward again with relentless inevitability.

"We've got to pull out of this in the next five hundred thousand miles, or we're finished," Earmar panted. "That's the absolute demarcation line of attraction, beyond which we stand no chance. We'd better add the side jets to the forward ones, and see if that helps. Stand by the power plant, and if the fuses blow under the load, replace them immediately . . . And have a spare power bar handy. We're using up energy at a frightful speed."

Vanita nodded quickly and stumbled to the plant. It was glowing brightly in the matrix under the nearly maximum current Earmar was using. No space-motors were made to fight for long periods against such an overwhelming gravity as that of the sun, and therefore there existed the hideous possibility that the plant would burn itself out, and thereby finish everything.

Impatiently Earmar dropped the final purple shield over the window, masking to maximum density the raging sea of flame which was the sun's gaseous photosphere. Even so, the intensity of the light was so powerful that it stung the eyes even through the successive layers of masks. . . . The heat rose to scorching heights, leaving both Earmar and the girl weak and sweat drenched in the strangling atmosphere.

And still the machine was not pulling free. Though Anziba's vessel with its magnetic power aboard could not be seen through the shields, it must be at exactly the same distance as before, both vessels falling at a uniform rate, ever faster towards the devouring maw of the centre of gravity. On the distance-meter the fated half-million miles that remained to the deadline was inexorably decreasing . . . 370,000—300,000—297,000 . . .

"Can't you *do* something?" Vanita implored, forgetting all about the power plant and gripping Earmar's shoulder. "We've only got about fifteen minutes to pull free! And we're not making it! The velocity is still going up. . . ."

She stared at him bleakly, perspiration wet on her face. When he did not answer she nearly lost her temper.

"Stop it!" he ordered curtly. "Hysteria never got anybody anywhere. . . . Quickly, how much power bar is there left in the matrix?"

"About half a bar. Why?"

"That may be enough," Earmar muttered, struggling to his feet. "Stand by the plant with a spare bar, ready to put it in when I tell you. What I am going to do now will take every vestige of power we've got. I'll even have to cut off the jets to get all I want."

"But if you do that we'll just fall and fall——"

"Do as you're told!" Earmar commanded. "I'm going to use this single defensive blast gun and give it everything it's got. Since the magnetism aboard Anziba's vessel can reach us, it means the range of this gun can also reach his vessel. I should have thought of it sooner. Our only hope is to blast that vessel to bits, magnetic apparatus included."

Whilst he had been speaking he had swung the vessel's only defensive armament, the blast gun, into position, finding the outlaw's space-ship by radar equipment and matching it up with

the sights. Then he cut out all the jets and depressed the gun button.

Using maximum energy, the recoil from it was so terrific it knocked Earmar backwards across the control-room, and at the same time the firing-chamber of the gun itself exploded under the excessive load. Pieces of hot metal flew in all directions, but were prevented from injuring the pair by reason of the many metal projections and instruments in the way.

Earmar lurched to his feet and snapped on the radar equipment again. There was no answering "echo" on the screen.

"Done it!" he cried. "Blasted that vessel clean to hell——"

"Look at the velocimeter!" Vanita shouted frantically.

Earmar jerked his eyes to it. Their speed was tremendously increased, and on the decrease-gauge the deadline was coming desperately near. 200,000—170,000—140,000. . . . Earmar swung round.

"How's the power plant?"

"Nearly burned out."

"Put the new bar in—quick! Quick!"

He flung himself at the control board, fingers itching over the switches. Vanita, half fainting with heat and terror, the heavy replacement copper bar in her arms, went to work as rapidly as she could. The ejector mechanism threw out the nearly spent power bar; then the matrix clamps closed over the new one. She staggered back, nearly falling, looking as though she had just emerged from a bath of water.

"Right," she whispered. "It's in . . ." and with a huge effort she managed to stop herself fainting.

Earmar threw in the power-switches and gave one glance at the decrease-gauge. 110,000! Outside there was only the sea of intolerable flame, burning into the very soul, filling all the void, warping space itself with its incredible magnetic strains and gravitational stresses.

The forward rockets blasted forth and rapidly climbed to maximum power. The side jets joined them. Earmar kept the pressure on a steady maximum and thereafter sat like a soaking image, clothes plastered to him, burning eyes fixed on the velocity-meter. The needle was slowly halting, proving the rate of fall was being checked. It all depended if the check became absolute before the decrease-gauge had sunk to zero.

Touch and go. A heavy gasping cry from Vanita as she came blindly forward. The decrease-gauge was touching 98,000. The velocimeter needle was motionless. . . . Then very slowly it began to creep forward. A long sigh of relief escaped Earmar. He could not take his eyes from that needle. But there was no longer any room for doubt: the vessel was starting to pull away from the demarcation line, and with every second the advancement of the needle increased.

At the end of five minutes it had established a definite creep. At the end of half an hour it was gliding along the graded scale. At the end of an hour the last shadow of doubt was gone. The vessel was fast pulling free.

"We did it," Vanita whispered, too exhausted to exhibit the relief she felt. "And from the look of the power plant we'll only just have enough copper to enable us to get back to Venus. We can re-fuel there before carrying on to Earth."

Earmar nodded, setting in the robot control, since there was no longer any need of his actual presence at the switches. With every moment the three foes—gravity, light, and heat—were receding. One by one the automatic shields were snapping back under the diminution in brilliance which normally held them in position.

Going to the power plant Earmar took a look at the half-consumed bar and gave a ghostly grin. Then he caught the tired girl to him.

“Cheer up, sweetheart! We got away with it, didn’t we? Not a thing more to worry over.”

“Except the return to Earth,” she responded. “That you should be arrested after all this just doesn’t make sense. It isn’t justice: it’s insanity.”

“Worry about that when we come to it. Thing to do now is set the course for Venus, and then give ourselves a well-earned rest.”

And this they did, reaction claiming them so heavily that they slept for six hours, Earmar being the first to awaken and discover that they had travelled beyond all claim of the sun and had indeed passed the orbit of Mercury itself.

He shut off the power plant, since the vessel had achieved a constant velocity—and thereafter the remainder of the trip back to Venus was boringly uneventful. When they ultimately reached the Consul’s office they expected to find him grimly satisfied with events to date, and nothing more. Instead, however, he was smiling and welcomed them both with vigorous handshakes.

“Congratulations, my friends! You did a wonderful job of disposing of Anziba. A trifle ruthless, perhaps, but there was no other course under the circumstances—and you certainly took desperate risks to achieve your end.”

Earmar and the girl sat down slowly and glanced at each other in wonder. “But how do you know what we did?” Earmar asked in surprise.

“By means of the radio, of course! Every word you spoke to Anziba, and every word he spoke to you, was heard here—and I took good care it was heard on Earth also! I arranged for a relay hook-up, and had the Earth authorities listen in. By this time there can’t any longer be any doubt in their minds but what you were fighting on the side of law and order. Anziba was known to be a criminal of the highest calibre.”

“True,” Earmar admitted, “and I can understand the Earth authorities approving of my disposing of him, but that, after all, does not prove that he was back of that kurna-berry business.”

“I have all the facts on that too,” the Consul smiled. “Once the wreck of his jungle city was fit to approach after the fire, our men instituted a search. They found much scientific equipment, various amenities, and so forth. But best of all they located the underground vault where Anziba had kept all his private papers. Amongst them were several references to his kurna-berry activities, the names of agents on Earth, the space-skippers transporting them, and so on. In fact the whole roll of dishonour. I promptly transmitted that news to Earth, and not very long ago I heard that half the agents had been arrested. The whole business has blown sky high—and in the jungle city, in another part of the underground, there were also several hundred crates of kurna berries ready for transportation by the next space-freighter. Needless to say the commander of that vessel will never turn up for his cargo: he’ll know from the radio which way the wind is blowing, and keep quiet. Photographs of the crates have been televised to Earth for the authorities to see.”

“Then—then this means Earmar isn’t any longer in danger of arrest?” Vanita asked eagerly, and the Consul laughed.

“Great heavens, no! If anything, Mr. Brown, you have become a public hero, especially since the identity of the Venusian you murdered has been established as that of one of the leading agents. All things considered, your lone fight against Anziba and Earth’s moribund

legal nonsense has made you emerge as a master mind—and the bravery of yourself and secretary in chasing Anziba all the way to the sun caught the public imagination.”

Earmar smiled slowly and looked at the girl. “From the sound of things, Vanita, we’d better sneak back to Earth as silently as possible—just as we’d planned to do, anyway, when we thought my arrest was imminent. Now we’ll do it for an exactly opposite reason. To escape the eulogy!”

But this was something they could not do. When they returned to Earth their space-machine was immediately sighted and the word went forth. The law, the scientific circles, and the public all combined in their congratulations, and the only shadow over the proceedings lay in the news that those who had fallen slaves of the kurna berries had no way out but death.

“For them we hold the deepest sympathy,” Earmar told those who had gathered at the banquet, “but let us remember it could have been every single one of us. That was Anziba’s main aim. And if my secretary and I have destroyed that possibility—which we have—there is no more to be said. We rest content.”

THE END

[The end of *The Hell Fruit* by John Russell Fearn (as Lawrence F. Rose)]