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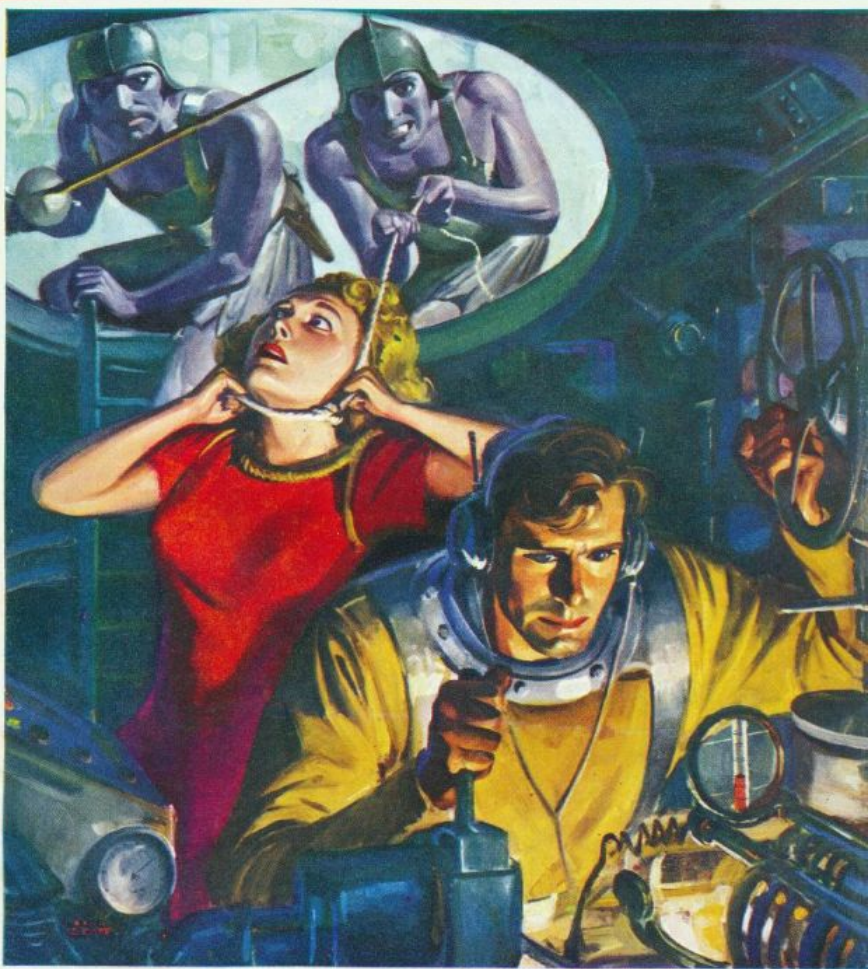
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## SUBSTITUTE FOR WAR

by D. D. SHARP

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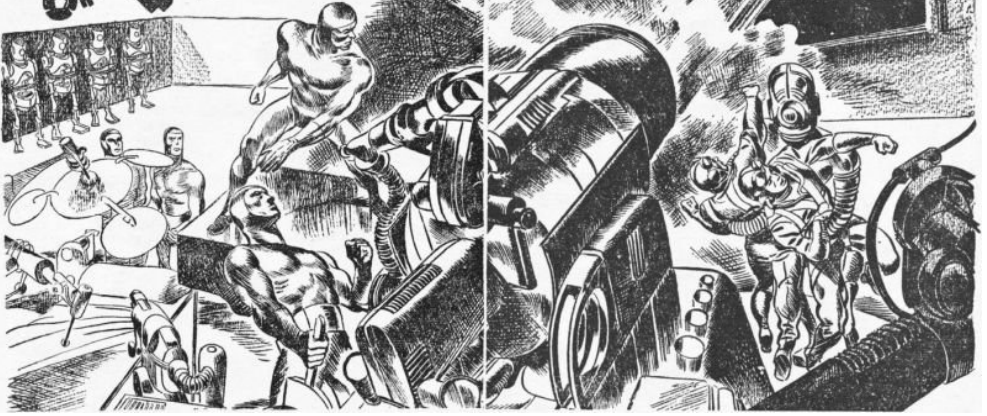
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by  
JOHN RUSSELL  
FEARN

# QUEEN OF VENUS



## QUEEN OF VENUS

*Weird mechanisms stirred the projectile, suddenly sent it trembling through the aperture. "You've done it!" Hilt cried. "You've shot her to Venus!"*

STARTLING BOOK-LENGTH SUPER-SCIENCE NOVEL OF THE DICTATOR OF  
TOMORROW, OF A WORLD ROBOT-RULED, OF MAN REDUCED TO MATTER!

# QUEEN OF VENUS

By  
JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

First published *Marvel Stories*, November 1940.

*Machines must reduce all mankind to matter; a disintegrator must transform their lovely golden-haired Eveta into a mass of electrons and energy, for Hilt Read and Cranby Doyle knew their plucky stratoplane could only fall to pieces before the radio-vibrations encircling this mad scientist's Utopia!*

To Hilton Read the ceaseless droning of the stratoplane's engines had become a part of his life; engines that had never once faltered in their sweet surging rhythm since he and Cranby Doyle had left New York three days before.

Three days without touching ground, on the fastest non-stop world-hop in history. New York to Madrid, across Italy, Soviet Russia and Mongolia, and now . . . The Pacific Ocean again with only about two thousand miles between them and home.

Hilton sat hunched over his controls like Rodin's immortal statue of the Thinker, save that both his hands were on the control gears. His massive leather-jacketed shoulders overflowed the narrow, strongly sprung leather seat; a pillar of a neck poked from the jacket top and supported a head of tumbled blond hair. A side view revealed his face as one of strongly chiseled masculinity—full, firm lips, a straight nose, gray eyes. Yes, he was almost handsome, this young Hercules who had so far whisked every aeronautical trophy out of his beloved United States.

His companion seated before the radio and the charts in the neighboring seat was cast in a different mould. He was less in stature, wiry and strong, sat folded up like a ware spring about to uncoil. His features were thin to the point of being haggard, etched out in a cynical smile that typified his constant attitude towards life—one of dry tolerance and good humor. There was precious little that could ruffle Cranby Doyle; he'd seen life in too many spheres, usually high above the earth, for that . . .

"Can you imagine how they'll start to yammer when we land back?" Hilt asked suddenly, grinning. "I can just picture 'em! Police squads, girls, the mayor, banquets— Hell, but I'd sooner hit the hay and let things drift. Eh?"

Cranby's only response was a shrug. He was busy on calculations.

"At the moment we're about fifty miles from Hawaii," he commented. "That should bring us home in about—twelve hours . . ."

---

He paused, switched on the radio as it buzzed noisily on the emergency circuit. The mechanical voice of East American Weather announcer came forth.

"Calling all Pacific Ocean sea and aircraft in Quadrants Seven and Nine! Hurricane expected in these areas, bearing south eastwards. Be on your guard. Seek shelter. That is all."

“Hurricane, eh?” Hilton wrinkled his nose and stared over the seascape. Far away in the distance he glimpsed the Hawaiian Islands: directly ahead low down on the horizon was a faint smudge that denoted the westernmost Americas.

“Next time I think we’ll equip this damned thing with floats,” Cranby murmured, his cold blue eyes directed through the window. “If we had them on now we could find shelter, because unless I’m nuts *that* is the hurricane right behind us!”

Hilt twisted round and stared through the rear window. Far to the back of them the blue sky had paled to misty grayness; with the seconds it crept into visibly deepening dark. Tendrils of angry nimbus spread across the sky like frost over a window pane.

“Say, this is serious!” Hilt’s jaws clamped together suddenly. He swung back again and slammed in the controls, fought suddenly for altitude.

“We skip right round the damned world with hardly a shower and now we’re nearly home we get this!” he growled savagely.

“I told you to avoid the hurricane belt,” Cranby sighed. “Of course I’m only your friend and side kicker and so—”

“Dry up, will you? How near is it?” Hilt swung his head round, a frown on his features. The sunshine had gone. The peaceful calm of the seascape had changed to somber hues. Above the noise of the plane’s engines came a slowly rising crescendo of sound. Little buffetings of wind banged round the small flyer’s fuselage and streamlining.

“Charming! Positively charming!” Cranby observed.

Hilt twirled back again, his face carven in strain. He stared at the cloud-ridden remoter heights for which he was aiming, gave the engines every vestige of their power, shot with bulletlike velocity into the upper reaches with a force that pressed him and Cranby flat in their seats.

But the ship didn’t quite make it. Suddenly, with all its incredible fury, the hurricane arrived. The whispering puffs and tuggings of its approach resolved suddenly into a cataclysmic nightmare of impacts. The whole atmosphere was screaming, a howling tempest whipping creamy rollers along the sea below. Rain slashed against the plane’s windows with unbridled ferocity.

Plunging and leaping helplessly the flyer twisted and turned in its frantic efforts to rise. It was beaten down, refused to respond to Hilt’s frenzied coaxings. Cranby sat with a frozen, fatalistic smile on his face, clutching the radio instruments for support. He flashed a glance outside as a piece of bodywork tore off with a noise like rending calico.

“No use!” Hilt panted at last. “If we try and fight this we’ll be down in two shakes. Only course is to fly with it.”

“And to hell with one perfectly sound world record,” Cranby groaned. “Why did I ever become a stratoman?”

---

Hilt swung the machine round with difficulty, eased the tail into the very teeth of the hurricane. Instantly the whole vessel was caught bodily in the tempest’s grip, screamed across the ocean like a leaf in a fall gale. Keeping position as well as possible as the control room rocked and swung crazily, Hilt held the machine’s nose straight ahead. His eyes began to fill with bitter regret as he realized how far they were swinging off their appointed course.

“Just where are we heading?” he shouted, after ten minutes of roaring wind and rain.

Cranby hunched himself over the compass in its universal mountings, kept his body passably steady. Five minutes more slipped by before he answered.

“As near as I can figure it out the hurricane has veered southeast, just as the weather bureau forecasted. We’re still over the Pacific, some two hundred miles east of Christmas Island, and no sign of Santa Claus.”

“Quit clowning!” Hilton roared. “What direction are we taking?”

“Southeast, of course. What the hell else did you expect?”

“Anyway, the darned thing may blow itself out after we’ve crossed the Equator line,” Hilt grunted. “In that case—” He stopped, startled eyes on the fuel gage. “Sweet Hades!” he whistled.

Cranby looked too and sucked his teeth. The gage was down to quarter-full.

“Must have used up the juice in fighting the wind for altitude,” he said briefly. “Of all the cockeyed ideas! Unless the wind drops we shan’t have enough fuel to get back to New York anyway!”

Hilton fell silent, staring at the sweeping rain on the window. The vision of failure so near to home was too stunning to contemplate . . .

---

It was many hours before the hurricane abated. By gradual degrees it subsided and at last evaporated into nothing. Hilt began to relax a little, breathed a long whistle of relief as the sun streamed forth in all its tropic glory. He peered at the sprawling country below, glanced anxiously at the still further lowered fuel gage.

Cranby looked up from the instruments, nodded his head below. “That’s the northwest corner of South America. Probably Ecuador. Right now we’re heading across Peru to the east. That means four thousand miles to New York and three thousand to Rio de Janeiro. We haven’t enough fuel to make New York anyway.”

“You’re telling me!” Hilton scowled in thought. “O.K., we’ll turn due north back to Puerto Rico. One of our own fueling stations is there.”

He threw in the rudder-fin control and waited impatiently for the flyer to swing round—but it didn’t! It flew on in a straight line as before. Hilt gave a start, repeated the action with more ferocity, but still nothing happened. Cranby angled his face against the glass and squinted at the rudder. It told its own story—sundered wires were hanging down forlornly.

“We can’t turn,” he stated finally. “Unpleasant though it is, we’ve got to go in a straight line, or else come down and fix the damage.”

“Down there!” Hilt looked ominously at the alternately rock and verdure ridden terrain.

“Hardly to be recommended,” Cranby admitted ruefully. “If we keep on going in a straight line we might make either Pernambuco or Rio. I always said they should build stratoplanes so as you can get outside and make running repairs. Wonder why my ideas don’t appeal to people?”

---

Hilt sat biting his lip; finally he shrugged. “We might just make it,” he muttered. “Try anyway: depends on the fuel. Better send out a radio call in case we get into difficulties.”

“In *case*!” Cranby echoed blankly, then sat down at the apparatus. “Hilton Read World Hop plane calling!” he intoned repeatedly into the mike, until at length the accented tongue of the Pernambuco radio station responded.

“Call received, Hilton Read. Go ahead.”

“Carried some two thousand miles off our course by hurricane. Flying now over North West Brazil, approximately 650 longitude and zero latitude. Will call again. Heading for Rio or Pernambuco. Please relay.”

“O.K. We’ll keep in touch. Weather ahead is good. Hope you make it.”

“You and us both, sweetheart . . .” Cranby switched off and lighted a cigarette. “Pity we failed. I’d cleared the sideboard for the trophy.”

Hilton waggled the useless rudder control furiously. Finally he gave it up and concentrated on the compensating controls, held the plane as near to a straight course as possible by the compass.

Far below the terrain changed slowly as they moved with bullet swiftness over the pure virgin greenness of the Brazilian interior. The main worry to Hilton was the strong head wind into which they drove. His face grew gradually grimmer as with the passing time the fuel indicator level sank lower and lower . . .

In two hours, with only half the distance covered, it had sunk to zero. Motionless, he and Cranby sat staring at it, then they looked at each other, and finally the world of green below.

“This head wind!” Hilt raved. “We’re sunk, Cran, good and proper—”

He broke off as the giant engines gave an ominous splutter. For the first time since the start they coughed over the dwindling fuel, banged and backfired furiously. Desperately, Hilton eased in the last drops.

“Calling Pernambuco!” Cranby shouted, slamming on the radio transmitter. “Hilton calling! We’re falling! Send help! Longitude 47, latitude 15—”

He twirled round as the engines went dead, sat motionless in his seat. Like two images he and Hilton stared down at the sea of green rushing up swiftly to meet them. The wind soughed through the streamlining as they dropped with increasing swiftness. Hilt maneuvered frantically, as well as he could without a rudder. He dipped and tilted to ease the fall, his whole being concentrated on the task.

But Cranby saw something else during those wild plungings, something in the distance perhaps five miles away. It glittered with silvery brightness in the dying light of the sun. Like a mirror—

Then he held his breath as gargantuan trees swept up to meet the ship.

There was a monstrous splintering and rending, a stunning concussion that hurled him out of his seat. Hilton shouted hoarsely as tree branches smashed through the window, as he belted backwards against the wall with an impact that knocked the senses out of him. Darkness closed on his racked body . . .

## CHAPTER II

Hilton became subconsciously aware of scorching liquid coursing down his throat, of a surge of vitality back to consciousness. Dazedly he opened his eyes, moved suddenly, then winced at a wrenching pain in his shoulder.

It took him a second or two to piece things together— Then he remembered. Cranby was bending over him in the light of a small, newly kindled fire. The heavy darkness of jungle was in all directions, punctuated by animal calls and the crackling of sappy branches in the flames.

“You’re O.K.,” Cranby observed laconically, putting the brandy flask back in his pocket. “Gash on the shoulder; no bones broken. I think I was unconscious for a few seconds. Got a crack on the head. Dragged you out of the plane. We’d no gas left to catch fire anyway . . . But say”—he glanced around quickly—“I’ve been hearing things. Else it’s the result of that fall. Pin your ears back and listen . . .”

Hilton lay listening intently to strange, heavy thuds emerging from the jungle, followed by a crackling of twigs that was certainly not the work of animals.

“I get it!” he exclaimed abruptly, getting to his feet and steadying himself. “It’s the noise of knives hacking branches. Savages, maybe.”

“Yeah?” Cranby’s hand dropped to his revolver. He yanked it from its holster and stood grimly at the ready as the sounds came nearer. Quietly Hilt followed his example.

But it was not a horde of savages who finally entered the clearing, but almost naked white men—or so they appeared to be at first. As they came nearer into the firelight’s range it became evident that their skin was golden yellow, their hair ravenly dark. In a way they were handsome, and from their expressions they were obviously puzzled. Their dark eyes flashed from Hilt to Cranby in startled interest.

“O.K., boys, take it easy,” Hilt said tersely, glancing at the strange weapons in the men’s hands. “I don’t know whether you cotton onto my language or not, but you’ll understand this!” He twirled his gun menacingly.

“Wonder which circus they’ve escaped from—?” Cranby began, mystified; then his sentence broke off short as yet another figure entered the clearing. He was neither half naked nor yellow.

He moved languidly, attired in soiled white ducks, a topee at an almost rakish angle on his head and a half consumed cheroot in the corner of his mouth. In build he was rotund; the round face that showed under the helmet was flabby and double-chinned. The eyes seemed to be very bright blue.

“Really, gentlemen, violence is not called for,” he remarked, in a smooth mellow voice, strolling forward with his hands thrust in his jacket pockets. “In fact, if you get violent you will be bound to get the worst of it. Right now I have you covered, and my men are equipped with lethal weapons which you cannot possibly fight.”

“I’m not dropping my gun for you or anybody else,” Hilt growled back. “I don’t know who you are or—”

“Forgive me. Glyn Underwood is the name . . . And I *should* drop those guns before I signal my men to blow off your revolver hands. That might be—er—shall we say painful?”

Underwood lazily withdrew his hands from his pockets. A small automatic was in each of them. He watched steadily over the faint wisp of smoke from his cheroot.



Hilton shrugged, dropped his gun into the soft loam. Slowly Cranby did likewise. At a signal one of the men came forward and picked the weapons up.

“O.K., wise guy, what next?” Hilt snapped.

---

Underwood smiled round his cheroot. “You will be my guests. I rather fancy we have one or two things to discuss. We have only five miles to cover, a mere nothing in the radio-bus. Come—and in front of me if you please.”

The two fell into step in front of him, walked slowly behind the yellow men as they followed the trail they had already forced through the jungle.

“Say, what the heck’s a radio-bus?” Cranby murmured.

“Don’t ask me! But nothing this guy can do can surprise me. I don’t begin to get the hang of it at all.”

In five more minutes the radio-bus mystery was almost solved. Standing in the center of a clearing was an egg-shaped machine with a forward propeller and helicopter screws. Definitely it was unorthodox, resembled a theoretical space machine or stratoplane of the far future. Hilton was studying its odd lines as Underwood came up.

“Rather an advance on the clumsy flying machine, is it not?” he asked politely. “It works by radio from my city. Remote control is something you know about; this is purely an extension of the idea. Radio waves provide both the power and the guiding path. It can of course use ordinary fuel if necessary—”

“But there’s no city in this waste, surely?” Hilton broke in.

“On the contrary . . .” Underwood waved his right hand automatic to the airlock. “Enter, if you please . . .”

He swung round to the yellow men, snapped out some orders in an unknown language. They turned and moved off into the jungle.

“They can walk,” he explained, smiling as he entered the lighted control room. “I always think walking is an occupation best suited to the lower minds, don’t you? It wastes so much time, a habit beloved by the animal . . . You’re sure you are comfortable?”

He looked at the two in their sprung seats: they glared back at him. Not that he seemed to mind. Now they could see him in the light they were not overimpressed. The eyes *were* bright blue, very shrewd and hard over the cheroot, and there was more than a hint of subtle cruelty behind that suave, mechanically smiling visage.

Slowly he sat down before the controls, seated sideways so he could anticipate any move against him. Quickly he flicked in switches and the queer vessel rose with effortless ease into the air. At a height of two hundred feet the climb stopped and another set of switches moved. The ship shot forward with tremendous velocity, traveled as though rushing down a chute.

“All done by radio, for which neither guidance nor braking is necessary,” Underwood murmured, aiming round a bright blue eye. “We shall automatically come to a stop when we arrive in the city.”

“Just who are you?” Hilt demanded, leaning forward. “What on earth are you doing in this neck of the woods?”

“I am a god,” Underwood stated calmly.

“That’s what you think,” Cranby commented dryly. “You may be a god to those yellow guys, but you’re dealing now with two hundred percent Americans. Just what *is* your racket?”

“Forgive me, but it is my job to ask questions, not answer them . . . Not that I need to ask many. I know your names, I know you are world hop fliers who ran out of fuel. Your radio

messages from your plane told me that. I saw you land and decided to come for you.”

“Generous of you. Why did you put yourself out?”

---

Underwood smiled. It was a strange smile, insolent and evasive. He blew a cloud of smoke in the air and said nothing. Hilt clenched his fists and went slightly redder in the face; Cranby leaned back with a frozen grin. That rocklike automatic held the pair of them in their seats. In those few seconds Hilt’s half-formed suspicions of this well mannered mystery man changed to deep hatred. His fingers itched to get at that flabby, fleshy throat.

Then his attention was distracted by the view through the window. He gazed down in amazement on a bowl of light spots dancing in the dark. They became larger with the minutes until he could clearly distinguish the outline of silvery buildings needling up to the skies. And towards them the radio-bus was sweeping with a gradually diminishing velocity.

“Say, this place must be what I glimpsed when the plane fell,” Cranby muttered. “I saw something gleaming— Funny nobody has ever seen it before.”

“The dead,” Underwood said calmly, “tell nothing. No flyer, no explorer that has ever seen this city has told it to the outer world—and none ever will!” He shrugged. “I must apologize for sounding unpleasant,” he added, “but just consider for yourselves. What South American explorer or aeronaut has ever mentioned this city? None! True, there have been legends about buried cities, but after all— Well, those who have crossed South America and seen my city were brought down. As for others, they will see nothing and tell nothing.”

Neither Hilt nor Cranby passed any remark to that. A great glittery square of floodlit rooftop was sweeping out of the dark to meet them. Without so much as a jolt the ship came to a halt. Underwood put his guns away and opened the door, waved outside.

“An attack on me will not avail you anything now,” he smiled. “My people will protect me, avenge me to the death, because I am their god. You understand?”

“Be damned if I do!” Hilton grunted.

He strode outside onto the rooftop with Cranby beside him. Silent with amazement they gazed over the strange city. From this height they could discern the orderly street, the delicately chiseled buildings, the tall towers for purposes unknown. There were windows in plenty and in some of them were lights. Hilt’s brooding gaze traveled over the whole enigma to a distant roseate flush perhaps a mile away. Over the top of a low roofed building he fancied he caught a glimpse of drifting rainbow hues like sunlight on a waterfall spray. He raised a puzzled eyebrow.

“The Eternal One,” Underwood explained unhurriedly. “A geyser which my people worship because they believe it gave them me. It erupts at thirty minute intervals, ceaselessly.”

“And you were the best it could vomit?” Cranby asked briefly.

“Two priests of the golden race always guard it,” Underwood went on, his cold eyes staring right through Cranby with the malignancy of a snake. “There are times when to satisfy the people the Eternal One needs a sacrifice . . . Medieval of course, but there it is.”

“Who in God’s name built a city like this in the middle of the jungle?” Hilt asked at last.

“Who built it is no concern of yours. I call it Utopia . . . Yes, Utopia, because it brings the realization of my fondest dreams. I am an idealist, my friend . . .” Underwood stood regarding the expanse for a moment, then swung round. “But I am forgetting I am your host. Come with me.”

---

Turning, he led the way down a flight of steps to the building's lower reaches. In baffled silence the two followed him. The journey took them—whether purposely or unavoidably they did not know—through vast halls flooded with white light in which reposed machines of every imaginable description. But every one of them appeared to be idle, heavily caked in protective grease, had the appearance of never having been used.

Three such halls they traversed in their journey to ground level, and in every case beheld machines of titanic meaning and inexplicable power. They could not even start to guess at the purpose for which they were intended, and certainly Underwood did not volunteer any information.

---

So finally they came to the street itself, had the buildings towering on all sides of them in silvery loftiness. Here and there they glimpsed golden men, and occasionally women, watching them furtively—only to dodge back hastily when Underwood caught sight of them.

“Guess they don't like you much, Underwood,” Hilt observed dryly.

“Not every subject reveres the master,” he said ambiguously. “I have found it quite impossible to achieve my ideals without causing a certain amount of hardship to the people . . . But they will recover. A human being, particularly an unintelligent one, is a most adaptive animal.”

“They struck me as being fairly brainy,” Cranby said, as they started to march down the street. “By no means savages, anyway.”

“Savages compared to me,” Underwood averred, and gave his insolent smile.

Hilt frowned worriedly, wishing he could fathom this egoist lost to the world and apparently to all scruples as well. He became silent, busy with his thoughts, observed subconsciously that they finally left the street and entered a building apart from the others. It was flooded with the customary bright light. He was still silent as they presently came into a room as big as a ballroom, the walls draped with rich tapestries, the furniture all metal and comprising numberless chairs, a table, and a desk. Thick curtains of heavy material, the like of which was unknown in the outer world, hung over the massive windows.

“My own particular study and dining room,” Underwood explained, his keen eyes glancing at the table. It was set for three. In the further reaches of the room two golden-hued women, shapely and not far short of beautiful, waited in respectful silence.

“Fortunate for my servants that they laid the meal without fault,” Underwood smiled, throwing off his hat to reveal dark hair turning gray. “I am never tolerant towards a fault; there is no room for mistakes . . .” He crushed out his cigar in the ash tray with certain inexorable meaning. “But please sit down. You are my guests.”

“Prisoners!” Hilt corrected, dropping into the appointed chair with Cranby opposite to him.

---

Underwood shrugged, poured out a pale wine into three glasses. With that the meal started. It was sumptuous enough and was followed by heavy, luscious fruit. At the end of it all Hilt at least felt a little less irritated, but still mystified. He looked grimly across at Underwood as he thoughtfully lighted a fresh cheroot.

“Don't you think it's time you let your hair down, Underwood?” he asked bluntly. “The servants have gone; we can talk freely. Just what are you driving at? What are you doing here? What do you want with us?”

“Would you really like to know?” Underwood murmured, and at the grim looks of assent he clapped his hands sharply. The words he spoke were foreign, but in response one of the women brought him in a hand microphone with flex trailing to quarters unknown.

“Listen carefully,” he invited, holding it before him. He depressed the switch and waited a moment. Clearing his throat he spoke round the cheroot.

“My people, hear me! Stop your work in factory, home and mine. Your God is speaking . . . For a long time now you have groaned under the weight of oppression, believing—and rightly—that only a sacrifice to the Eternal One could ease the yoke about your necks. In that you have imagined correctly. I have only carried out the orders of the Eternal One, and if those orders have been harsh towards you it was not my fault. But now there is to be change, my people . . . The Eternal One shall have a sacrifice at dawn tomorrow . . . Not one sacrifice—but two! It is many years since such a sacrifice was made, but the fates have brought us two from the great unknown, two who will willingly give their lives to the Eternal One that oppression may be forever removed from you. At dawn tomorrow the Eternal One shall be appeased . . .”

Underwood paused; then repeated the whole thing again in a foreign language. Finally he closed the switch and laid the microphone down.

“Some understand English,” he murmured. “Because you understand it as well I gave it in that language first. The other message was in the people’s own language.”

“Just what the heck *was* all that bunk?” Hilt snapped.

“It was I confess a trifle pagan in its appeal—but that is the only way I know of in which to exact interest from these strange people. I can control them to a certain point with my western knowledge and culture, and by the use of some of the machines in this city, radio forces for instance. But to achieve my own ideals I am forced to inflict hardship. The yellow people resent it, believe that the Eternal One—the geyser—inflicts it on them through me. Strange indeed are the notions of the primitive, uneducated mind. But there are some among these people who are not so dense as their fellows, and they might start an uprising against me unless— Unless I appease them for a long time to come with a sacrifice, a double sacrifice, to the Eternal One.”

“In other words it’s a polite way of telling us we’ll be chucked in that waterspout tomorrow morning?” Cranby said bitterly.

“At least it has been nice knowing you,” Underwood sighed. “When you are both dead and the sacrifice made I shall temporarily ease the working conditions of the city under a supposed command from the Eternal One. Then I shall creep back to the old regime. You see, I have to gain time until my work is finished, and to gain time I’ll sacrifice anything, throw away human lives if need be to stave off possible revolution and failure.”

“Just what is your work?” Hilt insisted. “At least tell us that!”

“I have nothing to tell you, or anybody.” Underwood smiled urbanely, blew smoke in the air. “All I can suggest is that you prepare yourselves for the dawn. It will soon be over, I assure you. You will fall, bound, into the boiling mud river which runs at the base of the geyser shaft. Perhaps you will be somewhat burned, but death will bring swift release. I really am sorry, but you see I am compelled . . .”

---

Hilton sprang to his feet. “By God, Underwood, if you think—”

“I’m afraid I do!” Underwood drew out his automatic suggestively.

“You realize that planes from Pernambuco are coming to look for us?” Hilt went on desperately. “You can’t get away with it, man! You’re up against fliers who will find you this time, and your damned city. They’ll blow hell out of you . . .”

“Really? I am afraid that if one plane or a thousand come to look for you the result will be the same. I have said that no man ever seeing this city can tell of it to the outer world. It wouldn’t do. I loathe sightseers . . . You see, radio waves can be altered in length to become vibratory. That means that any material structure, such as a plane, just falls apart. Inconvenient for the pilot, of course, but— Well, if one has power as I have it may as well be used to advantage. There are quite a few radio-vibration towers in this city.”

“You didn’t build ’em anyway!” Hilt blazed. “You don’t have the brains to think out such masterpieces! Petty tyranny is your line! A little empire away from everybody where you can be dictator over a lot of unhappy innocents! Who really invented the machines and wonders of this Utopia?”

A cold, inscrutable smile was the only answer. Hilton breathed hard, thumped his clenched fists on the table. The automatic still pointed at him— Then suddenly his mounting rage spilled over, regardless of the consequences he shot out his right fist with devastating force.

Never expecting the hazard Underwood did not get time to fire. He took those iron knuckles under his flabby jowl, went reeling backwards, chair entangled on top of him, his gun clattering to the floor. Cranby dived for it and Hilton followed up his advantage. Swinging the struggling man to his feet he slammed him again, sent him flying back across the open floor with a crimson nose. He teetered on his heels, rocked back to equilibrium and tore frantically at his other pocket.

“Better not, pal!” Cranby’s voice was clipped and hard. “I’ll wing you, Underwood, sure as hell. Fact I’ll kill you, and glad of it.”

“This—this won’t get you anywhere!” Underwood panted, mopping his nose.

“Guess we’ve made a good start anyway,” Hilt retorted. “Grab that mike and take back that promise of yours, or else—”

“Well, what do *you* want?” Underwood snapped suddenly, glancing irritably towards the door. It was an old gag, but it worked. Cranby glanced around in surprise, and simultaneously Underwood tore his other gun out and leveled it. “Drop it, Cranby!” he commanded bitterly.

Scowling with fury at himself Cranby obeyed. Underwood smiled, at his ease again, retrieved his fallen cheroot. Again he mopped his nose.

“You really have not improved things by this,” he said at length. “I was going to grant you a comfortable night here; now I think an uncomfortable one in a dark cell is called for . . .” He broke off and called sharply. In a few moments two six-foot golden hued men entered quietly, took the men’s arms in a firm grip.

“March!” Underwood snapped. “And I’ll be right behind you, so don’t try anything. March—damn you!”

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A mile walk through the city ended for the two in a cell of total darkness, upon which there closed a massive door. They felt around for a seat or makeshift bed, but there was none. Finally they sat on the floor. Cranby saw Hilt’s rugged, bronzed face for a moment as he struck a match to light a cigarette. Then there was only a red glow in the void.

“Swine!” Hilt breathed at last.

“A charming host,” Cranby admitted. “Wonder if he’d come to my New Year party and give away presents to the kids?”

“Mad—obviously!”

“I’m not so sure of that, Hilt. He’s got a whole lot of power in this city and some distinctly ingenious ways of getting the support of the people. If only I knew who the people are and what he means by an ideal I’d be a heap more satisfied . . . Give me a cigarette, will you?”

A match scraped. Cranby inhaled complacently.

“Not much good knowing anything when it’s curtains tomorrow,” Hilt growled presently.

“Unless the rescue plane—”

“Oh, why kid yourself, man? You know as well as I do that Underwood’s got everything just where he wants it.”

Cranby lay back against the wall, smoking thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on the red end of his cigarette. In spite of his anxiety of mind, never revealed through his habitual levity, physical weariness was a dominant factor. It seemed centuries since he had slept. He extinguished his weed, allowed his thoughts to trail off—

He opened his eyes again to daylight, sat screwing his fists into his eyes and gazing at the opened door of the cell. Men were limned against the rosy flush in the east. Hilton was already standing up, set faced, his fists clenched helplessly.

Then Underwood appeared, hat one-sided on his head, the eternal cheroot angling out of his mouth.

“I trust you passed a comfortable night?” he smiled. “No? Well, never mind, you have such a long sleep coming to you I am sure it will make up for it.”

He snapped his fingers sharply at which four of the golden men came forward with strong cord in their hands. Hilt stood in grim silence as his arms were bound to his sides, as every part of his body was fastened immovably. Cranby struggled for a moment, realized the futility of it, and finished up the same way as Hilt.

Underwood examined the ropes minutely, paused a moment—then drawing back his right fist he landed it deliberately in Hilt’s face. Helpless, he fell backwards, was jerked upright again by one of the golden men. He shook his head dazedly, felt a trickle of blood from his nose.

“My apologies,” Underwood murmured. “That cancels our debt for last night. Thanks to you I have the jaw ache this morning . . . All right, take them out!”

“If I ever get my hands on you, Underwood, I’ll—”

What Hilton intended saying was abruptly truncated. He was lifted into the air by feet and shoulders, carried horizontally on the shoulders of four of the men. Twisting his head he saw Cranby being treated likewise, desperately though he was trying to free himself.

Underwood came up in the rear, marching with calm, unhurried tread.

Hilt slanted his head around, as he was carried, noted the files of golden-hued men and women lining the entire route from prison to geyser. At the geyser itself there were hundreds of them, packed in serried ranks upon all sides of a vast, specially constructed amphitheater.

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Set on his feet at last Hilt stood staring about him, struck by the pagan idolatry of the place. It was something from the classics, the amphitheater, with the geyser spouting its vicious steam column in the center. For quarter of a mile round it were cracks and crevices, an exact circle being maintained by a metal ring which joined the floor of the amphitheater. Around this ring, marching with ceaseless tread along a narrow pathway, were four men, weirdly attired, pausing ever and again to bow to the steam-jet which at the moment was quiescent.

“They’re nuts all right,” Cranby observed grimly, as he too was lowered.

Hilt said nothing. His eyes searched the dispersing morning mists above.

“If you are looking for a plane, my friend, it came during the night,” Underwood volunteered, smiling cynically. “It even came towards the city—but that was all it did! It dropped in pieces at approximately three-ten this morning. Curiosity killed other things besides cats, you know.”

“You devil!” Hilt whispered, staring at him. “You inhuman devil!”

“I think,” Underwood remarked, “that it is sunrise!”

He stood staring towards the east, stomach protruding, dirty white coat drawn taut in the small of his back. Finally he nodded as the first shaft of rising sun smote the spurting steam of the geyser. It was the signal for the packed masses of people to burst into a roar of sound. They became eager, restless.

Underwood turned and marched forward, took up his position on a small raised platform close to the geyser. He raised a commanding hand for silence.

“Last night I told you that the Eternal One should have sacrifices,” he cried. “Today I fulfil that promise. For this the yoke of bondage will be removed from you.”

There were solitary cheers from those who understood English. When the words were given in the native language the applause was deafening.

Hilton and Cranby looked around desperately; then they were seized in a relentless grip, carried along the narrow pathway to Underwood’s side. They stood rocking on their feet, trying to maintain their balance on the very edge of the crater, from the center of which spouted the geyser from its lava-formed cone.

“Look well!” Underwood invited.

The two did not need the injunction. Their senses reeled at the vision of that sheer varicolored chasm going down into steamy darkness. The whole thing was obviously an extinct volcanic crater with this newly formed geyser cone in its center.

“Down at the bottom is boiling mud, lava, and white hot ash,” Underwood stated with implacable calm. He stood eyeing the two, grinned at the sight of their set, sweating faces. Then he shrugged. “Such a pity we could not prolong the friendship,” he commented—and suddenly thrusting both his hands forward he shoved sharply.

Hilt and Cranby reeled helplessly to the pathway edge, overbalanced, and dropped headlong into the depths. At the identical moment the geyser spurted with sudden magnificence, formed Underwood’s gross figure against shining, scalding mist. He raised a hand.

“It is done!” he thundered, then stood in grim satisfaction as a tide of praise and loyal acclamations rolled towards him.

### CHAPTER III

As he toppled over between those varicolored walls Hilton cramped his eyes shut, set his teeth for the agonizing shock of striking that molten fury an unimaginable depth below. Anguished seconds sliced off as he dropped through space in total darkness—then suddenly he struck something soft and yielding, rolled helplessly sideways over and over, finished up in darkness amidst a pile of cold—gloriously cold—stones!

A second later Cranby landed on top of him. They lay together, panting and sweating, staring at a dim gray circle in front of them through which they had obviously just tumbled.

No mud? No death? No—? Hilt blinked, absorbing the colossal fact that he was alive and unhurt. A torrent of thoughts poured through his brain. Then Cranby's voice broke in on them.

"Turn on your side; I'll get my teeth on your ropes."

So the struggle began. Cranby finished up with bleeding gums, but Hilt was free. Before long they were both standing side by side, moved with mute accord to the opening through which they had rolled.

"A net!" Hilt whistled, his face baffled in the daylight sifting down the shaft.

Cranby stared at it in wonder. Incredible though it seemed there was a net of enormously strong and resilient silken cord stretched taut across the shaft to unseen staples on the other side, the whole being totally invisible from above. The tilt downwards immediately explained to the two why they had pitched sideways to safety. Further below, perhaps another two hundred feet, was the faintly glowing inferno into which Underwood had planned they should have fallen.

Hilt glanced up. The top of the shaft was a round circle far away.

"Can it be that we—we were deliberately saved?" Cranby asked slowly.

"Looks that way, but who—?" Hilt scratched his head, then shrugged.

"Well, we can't get up this shaft even if we wanted to, which I don't think we do. Only thing is to carry on through this cave and see where it brings us. Let's go."

He yanked out his matchbox and used the tinders with infinite economy. It was pretty evident that their cave had only one exit, leading into a black tunnel with a curious gray glow at the end of it. Puzzled, they hurried along it, stopped at the mouth of the passage and stared in awed wonder upon a volcanic hell. For a distance of two miles in front of them yawned a vast hole in the earth like a monstrous pan filled with molten lead. Crushing, beating waves of heat swirled around them as they stood looking, their eyes took in the vision of that relentless, unthinkable hot sea surging below.

Hilt passed an arm over his streaming face and stared round the edge of the crater. There was a fairly wide ledge ringing it, and on the left was the black hole of another cave mouth.

"Might risk it," Cranby said, glancing at it.

"O.K.—and if this is a dormant volcano I'm a monkey wrench. Looks right on the verge of eruption to me. Listen to it . . ."

Cranby nodded grimly as monstrously deep buried concussions floated up to them. Against the black, glistening walls little pieces crumbled away and dropped to feed the angry maw beneath.

"Come on!" Hilt snapped suddenly.

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He eased himself gently along the ledge, pressed flat against the frowning wall, dared not look into the white-hot sea below. Sweat poured down him in rivers as he went along inch by inch to that cave mouth, Cranby close behind him. The pair of them looked like flies on the edge of a pan of boiling milk. Inch by inch, both of them measuring the chances of the least slip: inch by inch through blistering inferno—until at last, a seeming eternity afterwards, Hilt reeled into the cave mouth and dragged Cranby in after him. They stood breathing hard, regaining their shattered nerve.

“There’d better be a way out,” Cranby panted; “I’m not going back through that for all the money in Washington . . .”

Again they went on, passing a right-angled passage before which they hesitated; finally they ignored it and went straight on instead. To their surprise it brought them to a three-foot square of immensely thick glass—incredibly thick indeed. Possibly a foot through. Silent, amazed, they gazed through onto a cavern lit with pale yellow light. It was easily the most incredible thing they’d struck yet in this weird city.

The cavern was stacked to the walls with complicated instruments, every one of them functioning to some unknown purpose. The purpose indeed seemed to be centered on four motionless, hideous beings lying prostrate on four tables in the center of the machinery. What light there was revealed the creatures as insectile. Their heads were antlike and equipped with antennae. Legs were numerous, the two forelegs crossed on chitinous breasts as though in death. Perfectly motionless the four lay, the machinery working steadily about them.

“Well, whadda you know?” Hilt whistled at last. “What in heck are they, anyway?”

“I’d say ants with hypertrophy.”

Hilt scratched his blonde hair. “More I see of this place the more stumped I get. Pretty obvious we can’t get in to them, anyway. Only way now is to take that right-angled passage . . .”

He turned back actively. Together they followed the passage to its end. But it finished in a narrow chasm in which surged boiling cataracts of water, roaring with Niagara force. Hilt stopped nonplussed, stared through the clouds of steam towards the opposite side. He blinked for a moment as he fancied he caught a glimpse of somebody watching him from a cave mouth level with their own.

“Guess I’m going nuts,” he growled. “Looks to me as though this flood is something new. In which case—” He broke off, staring again. There *was* something on the opposite cliff face across the river—a group of people. He smiled grimly. So their escape had been discovered, eh? He turned away bitterly, debating how to find some other way out of the mess; then a voice hailed from across the chasm.

“Hey there! Are you the sacrifices?”

Only for a moment did Hilt hesitate, then yelled back an answer.

“Yeah! What are you waiting for? If you’re trying to recapture us you’re unlucky!”

“We’re friends! Revolutionaries! Are you willing to risk a rope across?”

Hilt cocked an eye on Cranby, who nodded.

“Might as well. No way out anyway.”

“O.K., sling it over!” Hilt shouted.

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There followed signs of movement on the opposite side of the chasms as an apparatus was brought into view. Then something shot like a harpoon across the divide bearing a rope with

it, much in the fashion of a life line. Hilt caught the rope end, secured it round a massive shoulder of rock.

“Well, see you in heaven,” he remarked briefly, then swung out hand over hand across the surging river. He prayed to Providence he would not get cramp; that Niagara of boiling water was itching to seized him. Again he was scorched and seared, felt his hand, getting stiff and numbed until he could hold out no longer. It was at that moment that other hands gripped his arms and legs and dragged him upward to safety. In five minutes Cranby was across beside him.

They stood looking round in some amazement. There was a party of five golden men and one girl in the tunnel. The girl in particular held attention. She was medium-seized, dark as a Polynesian, with regular well-shaped features and a smooth, lightly clad body. Rather to Hilt’s surprise she had none of the dumb languor common to the other women he had seen. Her voice, though soft, was practical enough in what it uttered.

“We’re revolutionaries,” she said quickly. “That is we oppose the rule of the god, better known as Glyn Underwood . . . I’m Eveta,” she finished, with a modest little smile.

Hilt grinned. “I’m Hilton Read; this is my pal Cranby Doyle . . . Say, was it you that fixed that net over the geyser shaft?”

The girl nodded. “We wanted to save you. From the radio broadcast by Underwood last night we knew the exact time and everything—but only we know of the tunnels under the ground leading to that half-way spot in the geyser shaft. We fixed the net to save you and had intended being there to meet you when you fell, only—” She looked down into the chasm anxiously. “This sudden underground eruption stopped us. This chasm is usually bone dry, like the crater pit further along.”

“That isn’t dry either,” Hilt said grimly. “It’s filled with boiling lava. We nearly fried getting past it.”

Eveta glanced significantly at her companions. “I don’t like it,” she went on slowly, her firm young face setting. Then, “We knew you would have to come this way to get through; you couldn’t get past the cul-de-sac of the Wanderers.”

“The beetles in the clock store?” Cranby asked casually, and she gave a faint smile at his simile.

“Yes. I’ll explain that later. At the moment you had better come with us. We saved you in the hope you might be able to help us overthrow Underwood. Some of us are engaged on that job between times. Our hide out is down here . . . Come with me.”

Hilt thrilled to the grasp of her warm encouraging hand as she led the way into the darkness of the tunnel . . .

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The distance the girl covered was only short, and it ended in yet another cave of enormous proportions, lighted by naturally ignited volcanic gas. In some surprise Hilt stood looking round on the men and women lying or sitting on the rocks; then his gaze traveled beyond them to a hazy mass of machinery at the far end of the cavern.

“Here,” Eveta said quietly, “is the full complement of revolutionaries, men and women who have dedicated their lives to the overthrowing of Underwood and the restoration of the peaceful days we once had . . .” She looked somberly in front of her for a moment.

“Then Underwood doesn’t know anything about your being down here?” Hilt asked.

“No. He knows nothing of these underground caves and passages. We know them from life-long association with them. Down here in these catacombs we can plan in peace, and

since it is not our shift at the factories we're safe enough."

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The girl turned and motioned to a nearby rock, seated herself upon it with Hilt and Cranby on either side of it. The others stood looking on, maintaining silence.

"Perhaps I can explain it to you briefly," the girl said. "You two are the first men outside Underwood to ever come to this city, and therefore we have the hope that you might be able to aid us by understanding some of the things Underwood uses against us. You might for instance know of a way to defeat his strange powers of radio destruction. We knew nothing of radio, you see."

"We *might* do something . . ." Hilt mused a moment, glanced grimly at Cranby. He was loathe to admit he didn't know the first thing about radio disruption. He went on quickly, "About this Eternal One business? Do you believe in it?"

"None of us here do," Eveta answered. "The geyser is volcanic, of course, and has its birth down here—but because the Wanderers are also buried down here, and because many of our race are just like superstitious children, there has grown up around the geyser a legend to the effect that since it comes from below it carries the orders of the Wanderers with it. That legend is now a tradition, a religion, of which Underwood has taken fullest advantage."

Hilt stroked his stubbly chin pensively. "Yeah, so I've noticed. Then who are the Wanderers? What are they doing lying out cold?"

"They have lain that way for untold ages. So long that none of us can remember when they began. They are sealed in that cave and it can only be opened from the inside, by *them!*" Eveta paused, considering. Then she asked quickly, "Are you scientists?"

"Sort of," Hilt said. "Why, what's the angle?"

"Well, it may sound unbelievable to you, but we people—all we golden ones—are Venusians, reared from Venusian life-culture by the Wanderers an in-guessable time ago. Earthly conditions molded these cultures into earthly appearance. Had we evolved on Venus we would have looked like the Wanderers—insectile . . ."

"Yeah?" Hilt stared his amazement. The girl's seriousness was enough to convince him.

"So we grew here in this impregnable city of Valordom—or Utopia, as Underwood has called it. Buried in jungle the city was pretty safe from prying eyes, though I daresay legends have grown up about it . . . Anyway, there was mating and intermating; we flourished. But we were like children in a wilderness of machines. We found every machine locked up. We could not—and still cannot—understand or use them. Only the Wanderers understand them and they have been asleep so very, very long. Records say that they left Venus because of a plague and came and settled here, reared life cultures, then sealed themselves below for the purpose of exploring the cosmos by mind-projection, a task in which they were interrupted when the plague came. Don't ask me what mind-projection is: the Wanderers alone can explain that if and when they ever awake. Now you see why legends have grown around them.

"But we all believe they will awake someday, and when they do the mystery of the giant machines will be explained, and the reason for the indestructible city of Valordom unearthed."

"Then you people are sort of caretakers of this place?"

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"We were until Underwood came!" The girl's face set bitterly. "He soon mastered us, particularly the more pagan of us. The rest of us went under, but with the firm resolve to one day emerge victorious. Underwood reached the city from the jungle; he was delirious and half dead. We got him back to health. In response he turned on us. He was, it seemed, the only

survivor of a private expedition searching for the lost lands of the Incas, whatever those may be.”

“And then?” Hilt persisted.

“Now he has only one object in view. This city is made of *valsix* metal, which is actually crude iron ore treated with electrical processes to finally make it untarnishable, acid and explosive proof. Underwood made an analysis of it and ever since has been trying to find the right formula to duplicate it. Such a metal, once the full formula is known—for of course the Wanderers have locked it up somewhere—could gain vast power for Underwood in his outer world. That much we’ve found out. Also, he is mastering by degrees the intricacies of radio-vibration destruction, with which he can invent weapons of offense. . . . So he has two good reasons for staying in Valordom, and he keeps us hard at it experimenting on ores, making different tests, until he satisfies himself that he has found a formula that the outer world can duplicate. He has, I believe, one friend in the outer world, somewhere in the America from which he himself came originally. To this friend he radioes at intervals on a special ultra-short band which only his friend can receive. This friend will tell him when success has finally been reached in outer-world duplication of valsix and radio-control.”

“Do you know this friend’s name?” Hilt asked slowly.

Eveta shook her dark head. “No. Underwood always calls him by number and no names go back and forth. I have heard the radio messages often while I have worked my shift in the radio power rooms. I simply do as I’m told and keep my ears open. I suppose Underwood imagines it doesn’t matter if any of us hear what he says, and he can’t operate the vast transmitters alone. . . . I know so little about radio,” she went on, clenching her little fists. “We have used it for years by simply following out the instructions left to us by the Wanderers. By its aid we have learned many outer world languages besides our own. . . . But to follow out the orders of pressing certain switches and starting up certain generators does not explain the actual processes involved. If we knew that we could very probably defeat Underwood in no time. . . .”

“Sorry, Eve, but I don’t think so,” Hilt said grimly. “Underwood is turning radio to many startling uses, uses which even I could not hope to understand without years of research. Either he is an expert scientist, or else he knew enough of radio to transform it unimaginably from its basic system. A madman, I guess, with notions of world power like they all get. . . . And he might just do it at that unless— Just what sort of a counter-scheme did you have in mind, anyway?”

For a long time the girl sat in moody silence, then she said slowly, “There is perhaps just *one* way to get at Underwood. These catacombs have many shafts leading up to the surface, one of them going up directly under the floor of Underwood’s main study-dining room. Now we think that if we could—”

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She broke off suddenly and glanced up as one of the men came dashing forward from the cave mouth. His face was drawn in sudden alarm.

“The river in the chasm! It’s rising!” he gulped hoarsely. “It means—”

Eveta jumped to her feet. There was an instant stir among the gathered people. Hilt glanced up perplexedly.

“You were saying about—”

“No time for that now,” the girl interrupted him anxiously. “Don’t you understand? An internal water eruption! I thought it might end in that when I saw the river in the chasm, when

you told me the volcano pit was afire again. They happen every few years these things, and each one seems to threaten to be the last. If the Wanderers would only awake they could probably master the difficulty . . .” She broke off and glanced round. “We’ve got to get out of here quick and finish planning later. Come on!”

Hilt shot Cranby a helpless glance, listened for a moment to the ominous concussions booming from the cave entrance; then as puffs of steam started blowing through it, pushed before a hot, scorching wind, he followed the flying golden figures across the cave, caught up with Eveta in a few seconds.

“This way!” she panted, and darted into a side tunnel in which the volcanic gaslights were bobbing fitfully at the stir in inner pressures. The rest of the dispersing people vanished miraculously.

“They’ll find their own way!” Eveta exclaimed. “We’ve got to look after ourselves. Hurry! *Hurry!*”

She went down the passage like the wind with Cranby and Hilt blundering after her. Behind them the booming had increased to thunderous roars as pent-up forces released themselves. The girl stopped suddenly, then made a surprising leap upwards and caught the bottom of a rope ladder swinging in space. With the agility of a trained acrobat she swung herself up to it.

“Up!” she screamed, mounting rung by rung. “Up! Before the water gets here!”

Hilt understood then, followed her example, leaned his strong arm down to Cranby. Thunderous commotion roared and belched from the tunnel as Cranby muscled up to the first rung. Not a second later a solid wall of boiling, bubbling water pounded through the tunnel as though out of a giant sluice. Clouds of suffocating, acrid steam went surging up the shaft. From the midst of it came the girl’s shout.

“Keep climbing! Quickly!”

Swinging in the fog Hilt and Cranby ascended slowly for a distance of perhaps two hundred feet, emerged from the pouring steam belching around the shaft top to find themselves in the open with the girl waiting anxiously for their appearance.

In grim silence they stared about them. They had emerged at a fairly distant part of the city on high ground, not very far from the building on which the radio-bus had landed at the commencement of their adventure. Things were happening in the city in plenty . . .

From a dozen quarters steam was stabbing upwards in relentless power, sending monstrous obscuring clouds over the sun. The Eternal geyser itself was now occupying its entire crater, projecting a magnificent thousand foot plume into the skies. Water, surging cataracts of boiling water, was everywhere. From this high position the three could see the scurrying figures of men and women racing for the buildings. Not that those could afford lasting protection against water. It would be bound to penetrate eventually.

“Looks like we might open a laundry around here,” Cranby said finally.

“This is just like the last time, only worse,” Eveta muttered in a hollow voice. “There were only three extra geysers: this time there are a dozen.”

“Just what do we do?” Hilt asked quickly. “Stop here on the chance that the flood subsides or try to get on top of one of the buildings? We are cut off from trying to reach the jungle anyway.”

He looked round him as he spoke, then gave a violent start. His eyes narrowed as he caught sight of a figure in white on the flat roof of the building half a mile away on which the radio-bus had landed.

“Underwood!” he exploded, pointing.

Cranby and the girl turned to look.

“You’re right!” Cranby breathed. “And I think I can figure what he’s going to do. He’s going to use his radio-bus to shoot him across the flood to the safety of the jungle. Nice work —”

“We’ve got to stop him!” Hilt shouted, clenching his fists. “Come on, before the water cuts us off!”

He leapt forward immediately, raced pell-mell down the slope separating him from the building. Two yards behind him pelted the girl and Cranby, running with lung-bursting speed to defeat the first sweeping tide of hot water encroaching now on this remoter part of the city . . . They only just made it, floundered up the steps of the building as the water raced past them in a scalding tide.

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Without pause Hilt dashed for the stairs, raced up them like a demon, floor after floor, through the silent machine-halls. As he had hoped, Underwood had left the roof trapdoor open in his emergency, was in the very act of scrambling into the radio-bus as Hilt rushed onto the flat roof.

The impetus of his arrival gave him the advantage. Underwood had no time to draw his gun; he found himself seized in a clutch of iron, whirled from the ship’s airlock, then hurled half across the roof by a terrific blow between the eyes. The utter amazement he was experiencing at finding the man he had thought dead here to attack him wiped the fight out of him for a moment. Then his eyes narrowed as he saw Eveta and Cranby appear. Malignantly he scowled at the girl.

“So this is some of your doing—” he breathed, scrambling to his feet; but a second later he was down again, his mouth salty with blood.

“Get in Cran—you too Eve,” Hilt snapped, backing towards the airlock himself as they did so. Then he suddenly started forward again, his hand clamping down on Underwood’s right wrist as he struggled to tear his gun out of his pocket.

“If you take it easy I’ll get you clear of this mess, on my terms,” Hilt panted. “I’ll not let you die in the flood—but you’ll play it my way and like it!”

“Like hell!” Underwood gasped back, and tore himself away, ripping at his pocket.

“O.K!” Hilt roared. “Now you’ll take back that blow in the face you gave me!”

He whipped round his right fist, struck Underwood in the jaw. The man lurched backwards dizzily, stumbled hard against the rail edging the roof. His head and shoulders leaned far out, then with a wild howl he overbalanced and vanished from sight.

Breathless, set-faced, Hilt hurled himself to the roof edge, watched in grim bitterness as the flaying body in white struck the swirling, boiling river surging past the building. It vanished instantly in the smother. He stood gazing down on the all triumphant waters, glanced at the screaming, whistling geysers spurting their scalding death to the skies.

Internal fury had gone mad under Valordom. In an hour the place would be inundated. Already there were numberless golden bodies, atrociously burned and bloated, floating in the rising waters.

“Hey! Come on, can’t you? How’d you work this damned thing?”

He swung round at Cranby’s urgent voice, headed for the bus’s airlock, clambered within and spun the valve shut. Dropping before the controls he forced his mind to work to remember the actions Underwood had performed the night before. Push in the red button, shift the green

. . . He tried it out gingerly, grinned with satisfaction as the helicopter screws suddenly went into action and raised the little ship high over the roof.

“Underwood? He fell in the flood?” Eveta asked quietly, coiled up in the back seat.

“Yeah—overbalanced.” Hilt’s face set grimly. “He had it coming, I guess . . . Say, why the devil doesn’t this thing go forward?” he snapped impatiently, pressing the appropriate button. “Engines are working O.K.”

“The radio rooms will be flooded; generators out of action,” Cranby said, thinking. “Try the ordinary propeller.”

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Hilt studied the controls for a moment, scratched his head. The radio devices made little sense to him: the normal control board was far more understandable to his aeronautical knowledge. Carefully he eased in what he took to be the correct lever. Immediately the flyer stopped its climb and swept smoothly forward with ever-increasing speed.

“Got it!” he cried. “And boy, is she a beaut—” He broke off, looking at the fuel gage. “Full!” he yelled. “What d’ya know!”

“I think I can explain it,” Cranby said swiftly. “Underwood knew the radio power would be useless anyway, hence the ordinary gasoline fuel. He planned hopping back to civilization, probably to return when the flood has gone down. It would be no use him going just as far as the jungle, anyway, as we first thought. This flood may last weeks . . .”

“Quite that,” Eveta confirmed, gazing down on the buildings rearing up amidst the scalding stream.

Hilt smiled rapturously. “Are we fools for luck!” he breathed, hurtling the ship forward from the obscuring clouds. “We’re going right back home—to New York!”

“New York!” Eveta cried, her dark eyes gleaming. “The outer world!”

“Yep—and once there we’ll make proper plans, come back to this place when the waters have gone down. If Underwood planned a bright future for *valsix*, so can we, and without his tyrannical methods. I don’t see letting a fortune go to waste. The metal won’t be hurt by the flood anyway. Besides, the machines interest me. I want to make a thorough scientific investigation . . .”

He grinned again, gave the machine all it had, tore out over the wastes of jungle and headed due north.

## CHAPTER IV

Though he did his best to make a quiet return to New York, Hilt failed miserably. For one thing he arrived by daylight the following day, and his strangely designed ship was immediately sighted, followed, and thereafter became studied by eager crowds until it finally landed at the New York airfield from which he had started his world-hop in his own plane little more than five days before.

Questions rained on him. Everybody knew of his forced landing in South America. Where had he gotten his strange new ship? Who was the dark girl in overlarge overalls who hid shyly behind his massive form?

Hilt mastered the situation as best he could, said the word hop had only been a blind anyway, that he had wanted to test out a new machine—the one he'd come back in. Sure he'd come down in South America, but the radio report had been garbled: he'd come down deliberately near his secret airplane laboratory, of which this particular flyer was an experimental product. Reporters gobbled up the news, television cameras reared up in all directions. The girl? Oh, yes—his wife. Been married to her secretly for some time . . . That suited the romance-hunting specialists. Altogether, Hilt considered he scrambled out of the mess pretty well without giving away any secrets. Cranby was not so sure, though he said little.

Anyway, the public was satisfied. He had failed to make the record, but since he had a new type of plane he was still a public hero. Impatient though he was he had to run the gauntlet of eulogy. The mayor threw a banquet, notables spoke of valor and conquest of the skies, toasts were rained on the baffled Eveta who, plucked from the city of Valordom to this mighty metropolis of the west, was not quite sure whether she was on her head or her feet. She sought protection in Hilt's masterful control of the situation, timidly clung to him, listened while he explained to her that they were married now by special license. She smiled happily at that, glanced up at him with her big dark eyes . . .

It was a week before the three of them could successfully throw off the public demands on their time—then at last they were free to go their own way. Hilt promptly had the airplane moved to the hangar at his out-town residence where it took the place of his original stratoplane.

Eveta fitted with consummate ease into the household of his big, rambling place, never once gave away any clue as to her real origin. As the weeks went by her quick, keen mind adjusted itself to the new situation. With secret pride Hilt watched her slowly fit into the methods and style of New York. She became calmer, more dignified, a wife any man could be proud to have. . . . It was only when they were alone that she would confess her bewilderment and terror at some of the things the city pressed upon her. It was so vast—so complex, compared to the life she had led. Hilt only smiled, gave her gentle encouragement, to which Cranby added his share whenever he was at the house—which he nearly always was.

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By degrees Hilt evolved plans, unhurried plans since he wanted to give the waters of Valordom plenty of time to subside. His main method was to contact as many big men in metallurgy as he could find, together with steel magnates and big business bosses, testing each one carefully to determine exactly how much one could expect from a metal like *valsix*. And



the more he went into the matter the more Hilt became convinced of the vast fortune the metal could realize.

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One metallurgist in particular was a constant caller during those weeks—a slim, black-headed man with light blue eyes and a very decisive manner. He was, it seemed, an experimental metallurgist with a private fortune, and as such was willing to go to any lengths to exploit the unnamed wonder metal at which Hilt had guardedly hinted. Of all the other men connected with the idea, this one in particular possessed the keenest interest.

Inwardly Hilt did not like him. He was too keen, too damnably precise in everything he said and did to please his blunt, matter-of-fact character. But he allowed no hint of this dislike to become apparent. Victor Lanning might be useful somewhere.

It was during the fourth discussion in Hilt's own laboratory, at which Cranby was also present, that Hilt could stand it no longer. He looked very directly at the immaculate metallurgist and said briefly,

"Just what *is* your interest in my proposed metal, Lanning? I haven't got it yet, you know: you treat the whole thing as though I had. To say the least of it, it's queer!"

Lanning lighted a cigarette. "Nearly as queer as your story to press and public," he answered slowly.

"Meaning what exactly?" Hilt shot a quick glance at Cranby.

"Do you really imagine for one moment that I, of all people, swallowed your ridiculous narrative about a hidden laboratory in South America for airplane manufacture? Anything but it! I don't believe that any more than I believe your wife is a girl from America. Why not admit the truth? You found Valordom, you found *valsix* metal, and the girl belongs to Valordom. Now you'll try to market *valsix*."

Hilt compressed his lips. "I might have guessed it. You're Underwood's partner in crime?"

"I was his partner," Lanning snapped; "until you killed him! You did that in the hopes of getting the metal for yourself, but you'll not do it. I've kept in close touch with you recently and asked so many questions just to find out what you were driving at. You've ruined a perfect plan between Underwood and me, and I'll repay you in full for your damned meddling. I'm not just a metallurgist, my friend; I'm a scientist as well. And an infinitely better one than Underwood."

"Then why the hell didn't you go to Valordom instead of sticking here?" Cranby put in sharply.

"It suited me better here, that's all—"

"Listen, Lanning, you've got me wrong," Hilt broke in. "I didn't kill Underwood: he met his death in a geyser eruption . . . And come to think of it what makes you tell me all this now?"

"Why not? I'm just giving you fair warning to keep clear of Valordom and all it contains. If you do that you've nothing to fear. But if you persist I'll finish you, Hilton Read—and you, Doyle . . . Not to mention Mrs. Read."

Hilt clenched his fists, suddenly seized Lanning by the coat lapel.

"Now listen, Lanning . . . You're not scaring me. If this is a declaration of war between us you'll find me good and ready. You'll follow out Underwood's tyrannical rule only over my dead body! And you'd better not try anything on my wife, because if you do I'll follow you to the ends of the earth, to the ends of the universe if need be, and smash every bone in your body one by one . . . So—think it over!"

“That goes for me too!” Cranby snapped out.

---

Lanning shrugged, pulled his coat back in place. Without a word he turned, picked up his hat, and left the laboratory. The door closed with a certain sinister quietness.

“Trouble,” Cranby said slowly, “is blowing up in good big clouds . . . We’ve gotten ourselves a different sort of enemy in Lanning, Hilt. He’s hard—hard as forged steel. No superficial geniality like Underwood had.”

“Yeah—you’re right.” Hilt stared moodily at the door. “If this were Valordom instead of New York City we could settle him. As it is we’ll have to sit tight and finish our plans, then return to Valordom and meet him on his own ground. At the moment he’s as checkmated as we are. He has laws to contend With, and the Valordom floods won’t have fully subsided yet, either . . . Whatever happens I must watch Eveta day and night, in case. But if Lanning tries anything like that—!”

Hilt left his sentence unfinished, but the color deepened in his neck.

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Victor Lanning did not drive to his apartment in the city after leaving Hilton. Instead he headed out of the city to a deserted factory site standing in isolated ruin in the midst of brick-clay workings. The long untenanted factories were a good blind anyway; and since he had bought the land ostensibly for building he was well within his lawful rights. Only he knew that beneath the old factories there was a laboratory—a gigantic cellar, formerly a furnace room, stocked now with all manner of instruments, some orthodox and others the product of his own brilliant, incisive mind.

As usual he concealed his car in the nearest brick shed and closed the doors, entered the laboratory and switched on the lights. A faint, taut smile was around his lips as he thought of Hilt’s words.

“Possibly a dangerous customer,” he muttered, switching on the generators. “The brawny kind who sometimes succeed through very lack of fine planning. However . . .”

He stood listening critically as the generators rose to a whining scream, then he crossed to one of several control panels and closed a series of switches. In answer, a cagelike mass of wire twirled slowly on a slender rod, stopping finally as there burst from a loudspeaker a curious jargon of words.

Lanning sat down, began translating the words rapidly—and the more he translated the more his eyes began to gleam . . . That he could have netted a fortune from this startling radio invention alone never seemed to have occurred to him, or if it had he had pushed it on one side as unproductive. Fortune was one thing—but world domination by force of scientific knowledge was distinctly another, and it was the latter idea that always absorbed his pitiless, insatiable mind. Here in this laboratory he had always picked up the radio calls from Underwood. Underwood, by no means gifted with such genius as Lanning, had passed on such radio knowledge as he had found in Valordom—and Lanning had used it, to very startling effort!

Here he had radio pickup in its essence. The cage sent forth streaming waves of magnetism, magnetism which passed straight through the earth and emerged at any predetermined spot without loss of power. Hence horizon curve was no hindrance . . . By a simple process of controlling the pickup in exact sympathy with a flawlessly accurate map, there was no difficulty in directing the magnetism to any given spot. Once there it fulfilled its purpose and absorbed whatever sound waves were passing round it, transmitted them back

along the electromagnetic beam to the source of origin. Transformers did the rest in much the same way as radio reproduces the original sound from electrical waves. No spot on earth was sealed to Lanning. Voices reached him from far and near, through the strongest walls, through all locked doors. He could have mastered the world through knowledge of the plans of nations there and then—but as yet he had other ideas.

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At present, even as he had for a week past, he listened to the strange language floating to him from Valordom in the South American jungles. The language he understood fairly well: Underwood had long ago supplied him with its basic meanings. Venusian language, and the Wanderers were uttering it! The Wanderers had awakened . . .

Lanning wrote on steadily, a scientific eavesdropper, heard things that at last made him give himself up to meditation.

“So the floods have subsided?” he murmured at length. “That’s good hearing—but the rest is better! Is it possible that control of not one, but *two* worlds is within my grasp? Space travel! They have unwittingly shown me how to accomplish that. I can make a space machine . . . And carbon! Diamonds! Infinitely better than *valsix*. Yet I might even use both. By Heaven, I just *wonder* . . .”

He glanced up at the loudspeaker and began scribbling again.

It was a week later when Hilton felt he had all the necessary metal magnates contacted in readiness to go to work on *valsix* metal once he had obtained samples. He felt free to arrange for an immediate return to Valordom. Of Lanning he had heard nothing in the interval: if he had gone ahead to Valordom he could be met on his own ground, and that was the one thing Hilt wanted. Without conventions and laws to hamper him he felt sure of his ability to master the cold-blooded scientist completely.

“I take it we go in the radio-bus?” Cranby asked, as he, Hilt, and Eveta were grouped together in the library after dinner to discuss their final arrangements.

Hilt nodded, glanced at the girl. “You’re pretty certain the floods will have gone down by now?” he asked her.

“If they run true to form, yes . . .” She frowned for a moment. “Hilt, I really can’t quite understand what all this struggle for *valsix* metal is for. Why bother with it? You have money, loads of it, and we have peace and contentment. Why walk right into danger?”

Hilt smiled. “You don’t understand this modern outer world very well do you, Eve?” he murmured. “It isn’t so much the money that impresses me: it is the thought of what I can give to America. I can give a metal which can replace steel, which can be useful for munitions and armaments and invulnerable against attack. You see, dear, we live here in a world at war, war from the air, and that war could never come to the country that has *valsix*. That is what I am thinking of. Besides, there is the other angle. I want to know more about Valordom, the Wanderers, the giant machines—”

“*Look!*” Cranby shouted suddenly.

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Hilt glanced up from his meditative ramblings at that astounded voice. He too felt a surge of horror pass through him as he gazed at Eveta. She had become curiously motionless and rigid; her face had gone deathly white. But that was not all. She was becoming *transparent!*

“Eve—!” Hilt screamed suddenly, jerking out of his paralyzed wonderment. He hurled himself at her, brought up sharp against the library desk against which she had been standing. His mind reeled to the awareness that the girl was no longer there! A surge of electric energy,

or so it felt to be, made his hair roots tingle for a moment. Cramping trickles ran the length of his body.

“What the hell—!” Cranby exploded, staring blankly. “Where’d she go? Are we nuts, or —”

“Stolen! Kidnaped!” Hilt shrieked, jerking upright. “Don’t you understand, man? This is Lanning’s work! It must be!”

“But how on earth did he—?”

“Don’t ask me! He’s a scientist; I’m not—but I do know there is only one place on God’s earth where he could pull a trick like this from and that’s Valordom! Does he think he can get away with this, the rotten swine? Let me get my hands on him! Come on! We’re leaving right now!”

“Wait a minute, man—hold on!” Cranby was his cool self again now. “How do you know this Maskelyne and Devant act was worked from Valordom? Might be local.”

With a terrific effort Hilt forced himself to be calm. After thinking a moment he shook his head. “Couldn’t be. He wouldn’t pull anything like this in a modern city—the rap’s too tough for kidnaping. It’s Valordom, I tell you, where he’s safe. And once he’s got Eve there God knows what he’ll do to her.”

“Right!” Cranby fled for the door. “I’ll finish things off with the domestic; you get the bus ready.”

“*It is* ready. We were starting tomorrow, anyway . . . Step on it, will you?”

But Hilton was wrong in his beliefs. While he was so furiously denouncing Lanning the scientist himself was in the hangar annexed to his laboratory, putting the finishing touches to a small cylindrical affair some fifty feet long and six feet in diameter. Certainly he was not concerned about Eveta Hilton; at least not immediately. His plans were laid with true cunning to encompass events cast in the future.

His whole concentration was given over now to the completion of this thing upon which he had labored for over a week, working almost continuously night and day, taking his instructions from the words uttered by the loudspeaker connected with Valordom. Machines and electrical blast furnaces had enabled him to make his own castings and manufacture without recourse to outside aid.

He knew he proposed to take a desperate chance. This space projectile, controlled entirely by radio waves, might miss its objective and hurl him into the depths of space forever. On the other hand, if his calculations were correct, the automatic radio controls in his laboratory would function undisturbed and guide his ship, by prearranged calculation, across the void to Venus. Everything depended on that—everything. Again and again he had checked his mathematics, felt assured that there could be no mistake.

Again he went over the instruments, checked the mechanisms on his projectile. Satisfied, he started up the engine of the mobile cradle in which the vessel lay and drove the thing out into the open field outside. Yet again he went over every detail, then drove the now empty cradle back into the hangar and locked all doors securely from the outside.

Feeling like a man getting into his own coffin he clambered into the narrow vessel and clamped the airlock tightly shut, sat down at the radio control board. His jaws set; his hand closed the switches. Instantly, the radio power generated from his laboratory reacted through the pickups. Effortlessly the projectile lifted from the ground, went speeding into the darkness of the night.

Smiling bitterly, Lanning watched Earth falling away from him with dizzying, sickening speed . . .

## CHAPTER V

Hilt Read sat sizzling in pent-up fury as he drove the radio-bus with demoniacal speed through the night. Far above the levels of ordinary airplane traffic, he forced the radio-bus forward with all the power of which it was capable, pressed himself and Cranby back in their sprung seats with chest crushing force. Faster the machine went, and faster, its engines singing to the smooth flow of power.

Hilt sat rigid, eyes on his instruments, only glancing occasionally at the world far below him. It was his wife who constantly floated before his vision—his wife, and Lanning. As he hurtled onwards he mentally considered what would be the slowest, most horrible way to kill the scientist. Cranby had little time for such thoughts: upon him rested the onus of keeping the course checked. At such dizzying speed any variation meant enormous loss of time in getting back to it.

“At this lick we should reach Valordom in six hours,” he said presently.

“Less, if the damn thing will do it,” Hilt grated back, pulling the power levers to maximum. Like a bullet the plane rocketed its way southwards, following an almost straight line. Below, the faint spots of lighted ships floated in the sweeping vastness of the Atlantic.

In a little over an hour they had passed the Bahamas: an hour after that Porto Rico swept by in a blaze of little lights far below them. Once they encountered squalls and rain, went through them like a meteor, with windows streaming and engines howling a triumphant song.

The heat in the control cabin grew oppressive; Hilt felt himself getting cramp, but he drove on ruthlessly with sweat trickling down his determined face.

Another hour and they were over the Caribbean Sea, could see it below like molten silver in the full moonlight.

Four hours—and Caracas, on the North American coast. Five hours—and the southern frontiers of Venezuela . . . Then Brazil itself. With a diminishing speed they moved over the virgin jungle stretching out below.

“We want latitude 47 and longitude 15,” Cranby said. “Keep going—I’ll direct you . . .”

Hilt nodded briefly, stared fixedly through the windows in front of him, watching for the first glint of silver in the light of the moon. Again and again he altered the ship’s position, moving now at a mere hundred to the hour. He zig-zagged in response to Cranby’s instructions as he checked the map by the compass— Then he gave a sudden shout.

“There’s Valordom! Right ahead!”

“And we can get ready to be bumped off,” Hilt snapped. “If Lanning’s in that city he’ll pick us off like a fly, like Underwood used to do for a hobby when anybody got too near. Hold everything while we play tag with his radio disruption . . .”

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But to the surprise of both of them there was no sign of attack from the city, though it was perfectly evident that the entire strange metropolis was at work. There were lights in every building, no trace of flood waters. Either the waters had subsided or been forced under control.

Hilt frowned in some bewilderment as he drove the ship downward, heading for the flat landing roof in the north of the city. He made the landing perfectly, glanced at Cranby with a puzzled frown.

"Looks like Lanning doesn't know we're around," he said finally.

He sat pondering for a moment, then scrambled stiffly to his feet, took down revolvers and slipped them in his belt holsters. Silent, Cranby did likewise. In another moment they had the airlock open and stepped out into the flat roof . . . But the instant they did so they were seized from behind.

"Why, you—"

Hilt stopped helplessly, amazed to find that he was not being held by men but by the pincer hands of massive robots. He stood gazing at one of the things, at its square head, lenslike eyes, then at the metal mesh in its abdomen which evidently concealed the vital mechanisms.

"Take it easy, Hilt," Cranby murmured. "We can't fight this ironmongery anyway. Too tough . . ."

Hilt hesitated a moment, breathing hard, then he relaxed. That was the signal for the robots to push them forward to the roof trapdoor. They were forced down the stairs, but not to street level. On the second floor they were led off down a corridor and through one of the machine halls they had seen on the previous visit, but this time the complicated mechanisms were all working with smooth, surging power. In baffled wonderment the two stared at them as they were marched past; then finally they were thrust through an adjoining doorway.

The robots released them, stood guard by the door.

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It took Hilt about thirty seconds to absorb the scene in front of him. The place was an operating theater of advanced construction. As well as the usual paraphernalia of a modern surgery there were devices he could not hope to understand—immaculate, glittering instruments and machines, electrical devices, floodlamps by the myriad, all trained on one motionless, supine figure, strapped to a long table.

"Eve!" Hilt screamed hoarsely.

His dazed eyes shot from her motionless form to four golden hued men standing round her. They were watching him with steady eyes. He rushed forward frantically, but before he had covered half the length to the operating table he was seized by his particular robot captor from behind and held in a relentless grip.

"Excitable, obviously," one of the men said briefly, in the Venusian language.

"O.K., I know what you're saying!" Hilt snapped. "Eve—that girl you're butchering—taught me your damned language backwards—"

"Oh, so?" The man who had first spoken went on in his native language after Hilt's outburst in Venusian. "You are Hilton Read, of course—and this is your friend Cranby Doyle?"

"Never mind that! Where's Lanning? What are you doing to my wife?" Hilt's voice rose to a roar. "Who in blue blazes are you, anyway?"

"I am the Master," answered the man who had first spoken. "The Master of the Wanderers . . ." He glanced at his three companions.

"Don't hand me that!" Hilt snorted. "I've seen the Wanderers for myself, and they're insects! There's something phony about this, and Lanning must be back of it. Where is he?"

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The Master frowned. "Just who is this Lanning?" he asked pensively.

"You're asking *me!*" Hilt yelled, struggling again with utter futility. "Blast you, let my wife alone, can't you? Tell this robot to release me—"

“You will be held captive until we are finished,” the Master snapped. “That you happened to arrive here at this juncture in our work is not our fault . . .” He glanced at his companions. “We will proceed,” he stated briefly.

Though he swore and raved Hilt could do nothing but watch. He stood, eyes glaring, noting every move the men made. Much of it he could not understand, but he did sense a certain inner admiration at the calm efficiency with which they went to work. For an hour they busied themselves with their strange instruments, first bathed the girl from head to foot in the glare of a deep violet lamp, at the end of which immersion every portion of her skin had changed from its normal white to deep red-brown.

Then other instruments went to work on her skull. Curious sawlike devices made Hilt tremble with horrified rage as he saw them scalp the girl completely. She lay motionless, undisturbed. More rays came into action, laying nearly a half an inch thickness of synthetic tissue on her skull, onto which the living hair was regrafted so perfectly that she was unchanged, save for possessing a higher forehead than before.

The one who called himself the Master nodded at length, wiped his hands on a spotless towel and spoke sharply. A robot came forward from the surgery wall, lifted the girl in his metal arms after undoing the straps, and carried her out of sight.

“In God’s name, what have you done to her?” Hilt shrieked, reverting to English in his extremity.

The Master answered in English without effort, spoke quietly. “We have done things you cannot possibly alter, rest assured of that. However, since you have seen this part of the work you may as well see the rest.”

He turned, and the robots, evidently drawn by telepathic force, followed him as he walked the length of the surgical laboratory. In the adjoining machine hall he walked directly to a long, cigar-shaped cylinder of glittering metal resting in a cradle at a forty-five degree angle. Hilt’s dazed eyes followed the path the thing would take upon release. A portion of the roof had opened like an eye to the starry sky.

“What’s the idea?” he panted, glancing round on thundering, whining machinery; then he looked around sharply as one of the golden men seated himself before a mammoth switchboard and made some control adjustments.

“Eveta is leaving here—for Venus!” the Master stated calmly.

“What! Look here, you can’t get away with this! You infernal devil, I’ll—”

Nearly sobbing with rage Hilt broke off as the robot who had carried the girl off suddenly reappeared, carrying her in his metal arms once more. But she was dressed now in a white tunic that covered her from head to foot. Her feet were shod with heavy soled shoes; round her slender waist was strapped a belt with a curious type of gun in it.

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The Master nodded as he inspected her, looked thoughtfully at her brown, unconscious face. With a brooding stare he watched her slack body eased through the projectile’s airlock and lain full length on the floor inside. He closed the airlock himself, turned suddenly to one of his companions.

“Seven day anaesthesia?” he asked briefly.

“Unconscious until she arrives,” answered the man addressed. “We can give her maximum. Heart and lung strain minimized, of course.”

The Master turned aside and raised his hand in a signal to the man at the control board. In alarm and bewilderment Hilt and Cranby watched the events that followed. Knife switches



closed on the control board; weird mechanisms reacted at the foot of the projectile—then with incredible smoothness it swept up the forty-five degree metal slope and vanished through the hole in the roof amidst a faint gust of wind.

“She’s—she’s gone!” Hilt whispered, his face ghastly with shock. “She’s gone!” he repeated with a bellow of rage. “By Heaven, you’ve done it! You’ve fired her to Venus!”

“To fulfil a definite purpose,” the Master said, with implacable calm. “Nothing you can do will alter our motives, Hilton Read. You are dealing with scientists—master-scientists!”

“Devils! Filthy devils all of you!”

“At least give us an explanation,” Cranby exclaimed. “After all, Eveta *is* his wife . . . Or daren’t we ask questions?”

The Master considered for a moment, then he shrugged. “You have imagined me as ruthless,” he said slowly. “In that you do me an injustice. I have sentiments, finer feelings, but I will not have my plans interfered with through a misunderstanding of the real facts. There is too much at stake for that.”

Hilt laughed bitterly. “At any rate you’re a liar to start with,” he grated back. “The Wanderers are insects in a sealed cavern far under this city. I’ve seen them—so has Cranby.”

“I know all you both did in this city, young man,” the Master smiled. “That is why I am willing to tell you so much now. I realize how you saved a vital experiment by saving Eveta from the flood . . . You see, electric eyes in the machine rooms recorded everything that ever happened through all the generations we were asleep . . . I know of the treachery of Underwood, of my people’s efforts to overthrow him, of the flood. It was during the flood that our long sleep came to an end. Mentally, we have explored the cosmos from end to end—by a projection of mind-images into the void. You cannot fully understand that, perhaps, but you will know that there is no barrier to mind. It can travel anywhere. What we learned does not concern you, but we did discover among other things that the original plague which drove us from our home world of Venus has long ago ended. Venus can be tenanted again . . .

“We awoke, found the flood was with us, surrounding and burying our cavern. But we had instruments in the cave which cleared the water; heat rays turned it into dispersing steam; other rays sealed the geysers forever and produced harmless outlets for the inner pressures. Valordom is no longer threatened. So finally we emerged into a dry city. As we had expected, there were certain difficulties in our having insectile bodies; the other earthly bodies were much less cumbersome. We found four perfect but dead bodies in the flood remains and utilized them, surgically changed our brains into them and so took them over. I hope that explains one of the things that seem to baffle you?”

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Hilt nodded slowly at the faint mockery in the Master’s eyes.

“Yeah, I can imagine your super hacksaws doing that all right. But where does Eveta fit in? What did you have to pick on her for?”

“Before we went into voluntary seclusion for mental projection we left life cultures in the city here to evolve,” the Master resumed slowly. “We knew they would be fully evolved men and women by the time we awoke, and thereby suitable to be projected back to Venus to take over their natural life on that planet. In the meantime they would be unconscious guardians of Valordom. That, I know, they have been—until Underwood arrived. But even he could not understand the machines we had sealed up . . . Our recovery from sleep revealed the disconcerting fact that our hoped for race to recolonize Venus had been wiped out in the flood.

Not a living soul remained! There was only one way—we must create life cultures again on Venus!

“That we have done. Hurling to Venus from our machines at this very moment are agitation waves projected along an electromagnetic beam timed to keep Venus perpetually within focus. The cultures have long since been fired; the agitation waves will do the rest and excite life into them. But this time we have made differences in our system. When we created life cultures in Valordom here we allowed evolution to take its natural course; this time we are sending forth to Venus metabolism radiations as well, radiations such as exist in the cosmic waves and are directly responsible for evolution. On Venus those cultures will evolve at tremendous speed: evolution will telescope generations into weeks. These machines you see around you are doing that at this moment. . . .”

Hilt and Cranby said nothing. They were awed by the terrific scientific powers the Master hinted at.

“But to rule these cultures, these people who have evolved, we needed a true heritage Venusian,” the Master went on. “No other would do. The king or queen of Venus—like any other king or queen—must be one by direct racial descent. None were left in Valordom: we could not go ourselves because of the necessity for controlling the machines from this end. Then our instruments showed just one had escaped Valordom to the outer world. That one was Eveta. . . .”

Hilt frowned, just beginning to appreciate how completely Victor Lanning had dropped out of his calculations.

“Our detector instruments found Eveta’s exact energy wavelength,” the Master resumed. “The rest was easy. Our system was reintegration over a distance. For an example, you are aware that the stars can break down matter in their inner cores into energy, and then build up that energy into matter again?”

“I’ve heard Eddington refer to it,” Hilt mused. “The cyclic scheme of the universe itself, isn’t it?”

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“Precisely, and it can be reproduced on a small scale on earth. It is much the same as television, whereby an image is broken down into electrons and rebuilt later into the original image, at a distance. We directed the necessary breakdown vibration to the exact spot where Eveta stood according to our instruments. She was disintegrated into a compact mass of electrons, energy, and component vibrations—everything that went to make up her body and brain. Magnetism drew those assembled components back here. She was reintegrated without harm, just like a television receiver reassembles a transmitted scene.”

“And the operation?” Hilt asked bitterly.

“A mere nothing. We pigmented Eveta’s skin and thickened the bone and tissue of her skull to prevent it being affected by the intense solar radiations that stream down through Venus’ cloudbanks. Since she is to spend her life there she has to be physically fitted for it. The other thing we did was slightly alter the receptive centers of her brain to make her immediately responsive to hypnotic orders. She will be quite unconscious until she reaches the planet. Thereafter she will follow out our orders, projected across space to affect her brain. She will marshal together the evolved Venusian cultures, rebuild a magnificent race to whom, little by little, she will reveal all our secrets. The *valsix* city we had on Venus still stands: over that she will take supreme command. It is equipped with machines embodying every necessity of science.”

“And just what do you four figure on doing?” Cranby asked briefly, as Hilt remained silent.

“When we are sure that Eveta is the undisputed queen we shall voluntarily die, go into the cosmos to continue our mental excursions, away from trammeling bodies. We are incredibly old, but we must have others to carry on our heritage. We could have done it here on earth, of course, but it could have meant mastering Earthlings, upsetting their rightful planet. We do not wish that. We are scientists, not tyrants.”

There was a long silence in the laboratory as the Master ceased talking.

“Listen,” said Hilt slowly, “will you grant me one thing? Let me go and join my wife on Venus? My friend and I? We could help a lot.”

The Master’s lips set in an adamant line. “That is a matter of opinion. You could also undo the work of generations. I do not doubt your earnestness, but you could upset things unintentionally. I cannot afford to take that risk—at least not until Eveta is firmly established as queen. Until that time you will both remain in Valordom as prisoners. You will have every comfort, so long as you do not try to escape or do anything rash . . . For the time being, my friends, that it all. The robots will telepathically obey my orders and give you all you need. And do not try to escape. The whole city is manned with machine men, and they all have certain instructions and duties to fulfill. . . .”

“And suppose people come looking for us?”

The Master smiled. “They will be in the same plight. . . .”

He made a motion to the robots and turned aside. Helpless, Hilt and Cranby found themselves marched away.

## CHAPTER VI

In so far as every comfort was concerned, the Master kept his word. Hilt and Cranby found themselves kept through the succeeding days in a magnificent apartment with everything they could wish for—good food, soft beds, a balcony where they could take exercise, sun themselves, or gaze out over the reconrolled city. They had everything, except freedom—and the more he dwelt on that the more savage Hilt got.

It was on the fourth night of captivity that his rage boiled over. With furious eyes he stared at the sky, at Venus low down in the west over the city's further distances. The planet hung motionless in the calm tropic air. Bitterly, he dropped his gaze to the ceaseless, throbbing industry of the city.

"Machines!" he whispered. "Machines, Cran, controlling the girl I love, guiding her to a blasted world that doesn't matter two jots, ruling her brain to make her the queen of a collection of lousy cultures—My God, the Master can't get away with this!"

"Unless I'm cockeyed he's doing all right so far," Cranby sighed.

"So far, yes—but listen!" Hilt glanced back into the room where the robot stood motionless guard by the door. "Do you figure, as I have been doing, that that iron man's vitals are in his middle behind the mesh? Suppose we took a chance, put him out of action, and headed for the main lab? It's only two doors down the passage. We could perhaps get the Master on the hop and force him to—"

Cranby shook his head. "Too risky, Hilt. He'll know all about it long before we get to him. There are no flies on that gentleman."

"But suppose he's so busy thinking about other things that he thinks we're innocuous?" Hilt's jaw set obstinately. "I'm going to risk it! I'll go nuts if I don't get action of some sort!"

"O.K., I'm with you!"

Cranby squared his shoulders as they strolled back together into the great room.

For a moment or two Hilt roamed around with apparent casualness, his eyes on a heavy metal vase on the table by the doorway. As he passed by it he suddenly whisked it up and whirled into action, slammed it with all his force into the robot's metal-mesh middle. Instantly those enormous arms reached out towards him, struck him with pile-driver force. He whirled around, struggling frantically, clawing at the cover on the divan and wrapping it round his fist.

Even as he performed the action those appalling arms crushed him tight; evidently some mechanical reflex action was so devised in case of such attack. Cranby hurtled to the fray with a chair, whirled it savagely at the robot's face and smashed off the eye-lenses.

Straining with cracking lungs against the constricting force, Hilt hammered his protected right fist furiously into the half cracked mesh. Twice, three times—then he felt his hand go clean through, was thankful for the cover's protection as he felt glass go splintering to atoms under the force of his thrust.

That crushing pressure relaxed. He staggered free just in time as the heavy metal mass toppled over to the floor. Wires, glass shards, and curious cogs sprinkled out of the shattered middle.

"Oke?" Cranby panted.

"Yeah! Come on!"

Hilt slammed back the door bolt, whirled himself out into the passage and raced along it with desperate speed to the second doorway. At the precise moment of his arrival the door opened and a golden man looked out inquiringly. He received an answer immediately as a hamlike fist struck him full between the eyes and sent him slithering backwards into the laboratory.

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Like a whirlwind Hilt raced in, knocked another of the scientists flying in his headlong rush, slid to a halt as the Master himself twirled round from his master control board. A powerful arm hooked itself under his chin, dragged him backwards over the stool to the floor. Only then did Hilt change his hold, transfer his fingers to the scientist's throat.

"I'll find the odd man out!" Cranby shouted, prowling round with clenched fists.

Hilt grinned bitterly as he stared down at the Master. "This, big shot, is my party," he murmured. "Either you do what I say for a change or I'll choke the damned life out of you! I punctured your blasted robot, anyway—"

"You—fool!" the Master gulped out hoarsely. "This won't help you! If you kill me your wife will die as well. Upon me relies her entire safety. Let me up, you—"

"You're going to bring her back," Hilt breathed. "You sent her off, so you can recall her by the same method. And I'll stand over you while you do it—yes, even if it takes days and nights on end. She hasn't got to Venus yet; you can still recall her ship. Now, how 'bout it? Shall I tighten my hold or—"

He relaxed his fingers again as the Master gulped and choked.

"Don't you realize—" he started to say; then he stopped as a loud speaker suddenly came into life and gushed forth a hurry of Venusian words. Cranby twirled round, uncertain: Hilt remained where he was, still alert but listening.

"Master, something is wrong! Come quickly! The X-ray telescope shows that somebody is already within our Venusian city! Apparently an Earth man. He seems to have control . . . I cannot understand it. Eveta will not reach the planet for another day yet. Our cultures are grown to full maturity . . . Come to the observatory quick!"

"Victor Lanning!" Hilt shouted hoarsely, springing to his feet. "By God, it *must* be Lanning!"

"So that's where our playmate went," Cranby mused.

The Master got slowly to his feet, fingering his throat. Hilt looked at him grimly.

"Now you've got to do something!" he snapped out.

The scientist bit his lip in vexation. "Just who is this Lanning person you keep referring to?" he demanded.

"Partner of Underwood's—they were hand in glove. Seems Underwood used to contact him by radio and always used a number. That's probably why you don't know anything about him . . . If any man can queer your pitch on Venus he can!"

"But how could he have *got* to Venus?" the Master asked in bewilderment. "How could he have known of our plans . . . Unless—" His lips began to tighten. "Wait! I believe I have it! I know Underwood rooted out most of our radio secrets; even if he did not understand them himself it is very probable that this Lanning person did. Somehow he must have put together our radio voice pickup system. In that case he must have overheard the plans I made with my colleagues for the formation of a Venusian dynasty with Eveta as queen, must have heard how to build a radio spaceship . . . Must have heard everything!" he finished hoarsely.

---

Hilt frowned. "Even if he did do all that he wouldn't take that risk just to control Venusians or get at Eveta," he grunted. "Last I heard of him he was nuts about *valsix* metal. What about this city of yours on Venus? It's *valsix* as well, isn't it?"

"Certainly."

"Hmm. Well, I guess he can get *valsix* ideas from there as well as he can from Valordom. What then was the real attraction that drove him over space? Conquest of Venus, maybe? He loves power, does Lanning . . . Listen, did you and the others mention anything in your discussions likely to sound like tempting bait to an Earthling? I mean, anything of value on Venus?"

The Master pondered for a long time. "I believe we mentioned carbon," he said at length. "Yes—carbon, of value to us for scientific reasons, in which Venus richly abounds. And of value to an Earthling because of the possibilities for diamonds! I wonder if that—"

Hilt snapped his fingers. "You've hit it! Diamonds, *valsix*, and control of Venus through Eveta— Gosh, what a scheme! The dirty skunk!"

He swung around as Cranby came forward with a grim face. Behind him came the two other scientists who had been knocked out. Not a moment later the fourth man came through the doorway and raced across. He flashed a brief glimpse at the two Earthmen, then at the Master.

"Master, you got my message?" he asked anxiously. "What are we going to do? This interloper can ruin everything for which we've struggled so long. We must—"

"He must know every one of our plans," the Master pondered. "And we cannot get at him with hypnotism machinery because his brain is not prearranged for that purpose. We might hypnotize Eveta to destroy him, but against that we have his various resources to think of. He would probably destroy her first. When Eveta gets there—"

"Listen a moment!" Hilt broke in tensely. "You've got to reconsider your whole setup. Lanning is my meat, and Eveta is my wife. That's a guarantee of good faith if ever there was one. Let me go with Cranby to Venus and clean up the mess. I'll fix Lanning somehow."

"And steal Eveta, of course?" the Master asked quietly.

Hilt shrugged. "I frankly confess I'd do it if it would do any good, but where's the use? You've got scientific powers that can always find her, or me, whenever you choose. I can't fight you, Master, so I'm asking for another thing—the chance to be by my wife's side while she carries out her task. I'll bring Eveta back here to Valordom: by that time you may have some other ideas. I'll prove my loyalty anyway . . . If you don't agree to my idea your plans are ruined by Lanning anyway. But if you do agree you can save your scheme and I can get my wife. If that isn't logical let's have your ideas."

For a long minute the Master looked at Hilt's grim face steadily. Then he nodded impassively.

"Very well. Circumstances compel me to give assent. But remember, I place you on your honor to return Eveta to Valordom here. If you can do that I may possibly find . . . other ways."

"Right!" Hilt's eyes shone. "But I've a condition to make. Don't use any hypnotism on Eveta, otherwise it might upset my plans for getting her. Leave her mind free to make her own decisions."

"You have my promise on that," the Master nodded. "The robots will prepare a machine right away for both of you. It will be similar to the one in which you flew here. Radio will drive it across the gulf, generated by these engines. Afterwards you will call on your own

power reserve. In like manner you will leave Venus. Your engines will lift you above Venus; our radio powers will draw you back. You will be constantly under observation in the X-ray telescope's field."

"Why bother about another ship?" Cranby put in mildly. "Why can't we use the one we've always used? We're sort of friendly with it by now."

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The Master shrugged. "If you wish it. It is still on the roof where you left it. I will have the engine tanks filled to capacity, provisions and arms loaded aboard, and the radio apparatus carefully checked . . . Now go and make whatever personal preparations you desire and be ready to leave within an hour . . ."

---

It was midnight when Hilt and Cranby climbed through the airlock of their vessel on the flat departure roof. The four Venusian scientists, all ideas of enmity banished from their minds now in view of this greater trouble, bowed slight acknowledgments of farewell.

"Both of you are brave men," the Master said quietly. "Venus is by no means a pleasant world, as you will discover."

"It's my wife I'm thinking of," Hilt retorted, and with that he slammed the airlock shut, settled beside Cranby at the controls.

At the first touch on the switches the radio power generated from the city had instant effect. With every mounting velocity the little vessel tore upwards into the starry night. Valordom fell away in shining spires far below.

Upwards, through troposphere and stratosphere and out through the Heaviside Layer. The purple of the night vanished and gave place to star-dusted blackness. Vibration and tremor left the hosts of heaven and they became solitary, glittering points, friendless, incomprehensible. Below, the earth decreased from a tangled landscape to a concave sphere.

Despite the urgency of their mission, it was an unforgettable experience to the two. Spellbound, they watched through the windows, pressed themselves flat in their seats to ease the strain of constant acceleration. Here in free space their speed mounted by leaps and bounds. Both became aware of laboring hearts and swimming brains.

"I expected something like this," Hilt growled at last, staring bleakly at the diamond-bright spot of Venus directly ahead of them in the firmament. "The radio control will keep the ship going, anyway. We'll have to relax into unconsciousness if we're to make the right speed."

No word came from Cranby: he was unconscious already. With a vast effort Hilt moved the radio levers to maximum then lay back. The ship surged forward again . . . Hilt's senses swam in darkness.

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So through hours punctuated with wakefulness and coma, interspersed with violent attacks of sickness and nausea, they fled across the 60,000,000 mile abyss, only began slackening their hurtling rush when Earth had decreased to a flamboyant green star behind and Venus filled all space in front of them—glaring white with its heaped up banks of eternal cloud.

Slower Hilton went, and slower, as they neared the clouds. He was using the ordinary engines now, waiting for the first grip of atmosphere. He stared below with narrowed eyes, kept his hands tight on the controls for immediate action.

Then with a sudden roaring jolt the ship struck the first layer of atmosphere, slowed up enormously with the friction. Instantly Hilt transferred the power to the propellers . . . Gently

he nosed his way down through the blanketing mist, eyes glued to the window, Cranby's lean, taut visage next his own.

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For hours they seemed to do nothing but stare at their own reflections while mildew ran down the glass. Then, amazingly, the world was suddenly clear in front of them. With grim eyes they stared down on a landscape steamy with heat, lush with vegetation of riotous size, broken here and there by plateaus of obviously volcanic nature.

"Swell place for a weekend party," Cranby remarked. "Looks like the Earth in the Carboniferous stage."

"Maybe you've got something there," Hilt retorted. "This may be Venus' Carboniferous Era." He glanced at the instruments. "External temperature 130° F. That puts Sierra Leone right in the polar regions by comparison. Wonder what part of the day it is? Seven hundred and twenty hours of day here, you know. Same length of night."

"No kiddin'," said Cranby solemnly. "I know all that, you dope!"

Hilt leveled the ship out, sped on monotonously over the torrid swamps. Now and again monstrous shapes loomed out of those waters below, vanished again in a wallow of bubbles. The country over which they were passing looked like a nightmare Garden of Eden. Poisonous-hued flowers reared ugly heads from the morass. Trees like titanic pineapples bulged on what little solid ground there was. There were interlacings of verdure reaching down into thick undergrowth, through the midst of which coiled and writhed revolting shapes.

"The Master knew his onions when he said Venus wasn't pleasant," Cranby grunted presently. "The city must be apart from this stuff, surely?"

Hilt made no response, kept his eyes fixed ahead—then at last the swampy region began to diminish, gave way to landscape that looked like the floor of a volcano. Bare, reddish rocks were everywhere. From amidst them spurted clouds of scalding steam. Chasms of unimaginable depth yawned in all directions, some filled with raging waters, others with mud which spawned all manner of diabolical, twisting life.

"Pretty obvious where Venus gets its clouds from," Hilt said after a while. "All this damned internal activity keeps the sky forever bottled up."

"With the sun so near, thank Heaven for that," Cranby growled.

More miles of ravines and deadly gorges—then suddenly Hilt gave a cry and stared ahead. "Hey, take a look! Am I nuts or is that a wall over there? A metal wall at that!"

"You're right!" Cranby whistled. Fascinated they stared at its colossal height. For five hundred feet it reared into the air, invincible, sunk Heaven knew how far deep into the rocky plateau. Not a sign of any city was visible beyond it as yet; it reared too high for that.

"They sure don't mean any of these mud animals getting past," Hilt said. "Nor us either, for that matter—if we hadn't got the ship, that is . . ." He looked down morosely on the chasms below.

"We can fly over the wall, anyway," Cranby observed.

"Yes, and be spotted right away. Remember, Lanning won't be expecting us, and on that hinges our chance of success. We daren't fly over the wall; it's too risky. There's got to be another way."

Hilt stared at the top of the wall thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing as he noted the turretlike projections at regular intervals along it, probably containing weapons of attack for use against the mud monsters if they ever attempted a serious invasion.



“It’s our ship that will give us away if seen,” he resumed; “but if we wait until dark and then drop a cable noose round one of those turrets we’ll have a rope to climb up with. We can scale the wall and get down the other side. Leave the ship on this side where it isn’t seen.”

“You’ve got something there. And once we’re over the wall?”

“With darkness for seven twenty hours we’ll find something we can do. I’m dropping right now. . . .”

Hilt dipped the ship’s nose, pushed the helicopter screws in action. Gently the vessel sank at the base of that titanic mass, some four yards from the edge of a steaming chasm.

## CHAPTER VII

Evidently they had arrived in the Venusian evening, for to their satisfaction another hour brought a gradual dimming of the light: thirty minutes after that the daylight vanished entirely and gave place to thick, steamy night.

Hilt aroused himself, sat before the control board again and sent the ship upwards once more. Level with the wall he fixed the vessel in a stationary position and stood for a moment gazing out over the wilderness of city beyond. It was lighted, amazingly industrious, looked like Valordom itself. In fact, in design, it was a duplicate of Valordom in its entirety. Even the buildings were laid out in the same way.

Turning, he opened the floor trap. Immediately, steamy, suffocating warmth came surging into the control room. Slowly he payed out the emergency cable, lowering it to the metal projection fifty feet below, dropped the noose squarely over it then allowed the free end to fall over the wall's outside. The thing was done.

To lower the ship back to the plateau and climb out onto the plain was only the work of minutes. The pair of them, laden with food haversacks and guns toiled slowly through the enervating heat, came at last to that wire reaching down from the heights.

"You first," Hilt said briefly.

Cranby nodded, took hold of the wire and went up swiftly, feet braced against the wall. Hilt turned to follow him, then swung round at a sudden sound from behind him. He caught a vision of a monstrous, sinuous shape surging out of the mist. Some nightmare object, bearing unpleasant similarity to a sea-serpent, had squirmed out of the mud chasm.

Instantly he clutched the cable, fought his way up with frantic speed, saw that vile head receding below him.

"What's eating you?" Cranby demanded, staring down. Then he saw the thing too in the gloomy miasma below. "Uh-uh! No wonder they built this damned wall!"

He went up again, hand over hand stopping ever and again with a scissor grip around the cable. It seemed infinite miles to the top of that wall, but at last they both made it, staggered exhausted and sweat drenched to its broad summit, gazed along its deserted endless length. It was pretty clear that it entirely encircled the city.

"Let's take stock of our assets," Hilt said, when he had recovered his breath. "This city is an exact replica of Valordom—or rather vice versa. Anyway, we know from that that the layout of buildings is the same. That cuts down time to an enormous extent. Eveta will have arrived by now—but point is, which building will she be in?"

"One of the machine rooms?" Cranby hazarded. "That's where Lanning will be, sure as eggs."

"Try anyway . . ."

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Hilt tugged out his guns, examined them, then thrust them back in their holsters. Carefully he pulled the cable up and dropped it down the other side of the wall. With swift silence they both slid to the ground below and again contemplated the city.

At last Hilt set off rapidly through the steamy shadows, revolver ready in his hand . . . That started both of them on a slow, painstaking sojourn amidst rock and earth, taking them surreptitiously round the edge of the city as they angled for position to find the corresponding

position as they had experienced it in Valordom. It was an hour later when they came to it. Before them were the lighted buildings that could only be the machine halls.

“Won’t be too easy,” Cranby grunted. “People around— Or are they people, anyway? Those insect-things. They’re natural Venusians, aren’t they?”

“Yeah; guess that’s how the cultures would evolve on this world, with different conditions. Eveta, queen of those things!” Hilt gave an involuntary shudder. “Hell—no!”

“Just what is *that*?”

Cranby pointed ahead. Perhaps half a mile from them, apart from the city, floodlights were blazing up from a hollow of the ground into the murky sky. Hilt frowned as he studied it.

“Darned if I know. Might be worth a look, though. Come on.”

Ten minutes brought them to the spot. Lying flat on the ground they stared into a narrow, shelving valley. It was swarming with insect people, busy with apparatus. Drilling machines bored into rocks; trucks and conveyors worked industriously—and amidst them all stood a human figure in snow white, black hair sweeping her shoulders. Curtly she was snapping out commands in the Venusian language.

“Eve!” Hilt gasped, twisting an astounded face to Cranby. “Of all the unimaginable luck! We can—”

“No, we can’t!” Cranby hissed, dragging him down again. “Do a bit of thinking, you fathead. We can’t just snatch her from amidst all those creatures! We’ve got to work carefully or we’ll muss the whole thing up.”

“I’m for taking a chance!”

“Then you’ll do it alone,” Cranby retorted doggedly. “I’m not scared of dangers, you know that—but I do like things properly organized. Be yourself, Hilt! One false move and the skids are under us for keeps.”

“Well . . . mebbe you’re right.” Hilt subsided into grumbling silence.

“Just what the dickens is she doing anyway?” Cranby asked presently.

Surprise began to register very gradually on Hilt’s grim face. The insectile beings were busy loading the material they had dug up into the conveyors: thence it was taken by automatic means to a hidden point in the city itself. The stuff was black—black as soot.

“Carbon!” Cranby ejaculated suddenly. “Pure carbon! Must be a whole area of it around here or something—”

“I get it,” Hilt broke in. “Look at Eve—that isn’t her normal way of doing things, standing there with a ramrod back snapping out orders. She’s under hypnotism, that’s what—Lanning’s hypnotism. Don’t you see the angle? He knew she was coming as queen of this outfit; he knew these insects would follow her orders for that very reason. Since the Venusians back on Earth aren’t hypnotizing Eve, Lanning’s doing it instead, ordering the mining of carbon, and incidentally getting Lord knows how many carbon deposits . . . The double faced swine!”

“Infernally ingenious, if you ask me,” Cranby sighed. “I wonder why I wasn’t born with brains like that instead of being purely good looking? Of course, we daren’t snatch her away from here for another reason,” he went on seriously. “There’ll be a circuit which will break on Lanning’s switchboard—wherever it is—if we interrupt her mental flow. Best thing we can do is follow her, watch where she goes. It’ll perhaps lead us to Lanning and it’s him we’ve got to be rid of!”

“Guess you’re right.” It took Hilt a good deal of personal effort to make that admission—but the sanity of Cranby’s notion was obvious enough.

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They waited for perhaps an hour, then leaving the insect men at work the girl suddenly turned away from their midst and walked with a steady, somnambulistic tread out of the depression, turned towards the city. Instantly Hilt jumped to his feet, followed at a safe distance behind her, Cranby right beside him. They followed the girl's walk all the way back to the city itself, watched her finally turn into a single building ablaze with light.

"Now what?" Cranby breathed quickly.

"The building's a single-floor one," Hilt muttered, with a keen look. "See those skylights on the roof? I'm going up there; maybe I'll see something."

"Stars probably if Lanning spots you. Granting he's in there."

"He'll be in there O. K., and I'll risk the stars . . ."

Against the wall at the building's rear they paused. Hilt studied the edifice for a moment or two, measuring the niches between the welded plates. There was toe and fingerhold, but only just.

"Oke!" he whispered, and immediately Cranby bent down and made his back into a stepping up platform.

In another moment Hilt was climbing up, straining his powerful muscles. Plate by plate he went up, scrambled over the edge of the fifty foot height at last, wriggled his way onto the sloping roof. To reach the nearest skylight was only the matter of minutes. Below, he saw a wilderness of light-drenched machines. It was the same at the second skylight; then at the third one he moved cautiously. For one thing it was unmistakably open. For another a voice floated to him, in English—the familiar voice of Victor Lanning.

Hilt moved along gently, applied his eyes to the skylight crack. Warm, stifling air hot with oil reek came floating from the laboratory's interior. His eyes centered on the figure of Eveta immediately below him. At this end of the laboratory a raised platform of machines had brought the floor level far nearer the roof . . . Facing the girl, attired in white ducks and smiling frozenly, was Lanning. His hand rested on the switch of a complicated apparatus.

". . . and you will sleep," he was saying softly. "You will never realize that you were sent here to colonize a world. Your duty, all the time you are here, is to force these beings to mine carbon. As much of it as they can get! You will see to it that they load it properly, that arrangements are made for it to be transported back in adequate sized space machines. You are their queen, and you in turn will always do as I say."

"I will have the beings mine carbon. I will always do as you say. I am the queen," Eveta repeated mechanically.

Lanning eyed her steadily. "When you have rested you will eat, then resume work on the mining of carbon."

---

She repeated the sentence like a parrot, standing erect and motionless. Hilt felt his neck getting hotter. Carefully he erased his hand around for his right side automatic: here was the chance he needed. One shot, and Lanning would be winged, disabled. Then back to Earth with him and snatch Eveta clear of the whole mess.

Hilt drew carefully, nosed the muzzle of the gun towards the crack—but at that identical moment his heavy boot slipped against the metal plate of the roof on which it was insecurely braced. Helplessly he slid backwards, revolver flying out of his hand. Like a sack of coals he fell over the roof edge, dropped to the ground with a jar that shook every bone in his body.

"What happened?" Cranby came pelting out of the mist, hauled him to his feet. "Hilt, what in—"

Hilt winced, rubbing his back. “My blasted foot slipped and—”

“Stand exactly where you are!” a bitter voice snapped out of the gloom.

They obeyed, scowled as Lanning himself came quietly into view, a ray-gun in his hand. He gave a distinct start as he beheld the two; then just as quickly recovered his composure.

“So it was *you* who made the noise on the roof,” he murmured, his voice cold and cutting. “Well, how very interesting!” Stepping forward he snatched Hilt’s remaining gun out of its holster, disarmed Cranby. Then he went on slowly, “I don’t pretend to know what brought you to Venus, how you so cleverly walked into my field of activity—but I do know you will not get away with it! I’ll have your space machine found and destroyed, or put out of your reach . . . Turn around!”

Had not the thought of Eveta’s helplessness recurred to his mind Hilt would have ignored the order, risked the ray-gun to beat the living daylight out of Lanning. But he dare not take the chance . . . He turned, face set like granite, with Cranby beside him. They marched into the expanse of laboratory. Eveta was still there, regarding them with blank unrecognition.

“Stand there!” Lanning commanded, jerked his head towards the wall; then after locking the door he flashed his cold eyes at the girl and walked to his switchboard, placing his ray-gun in her hand.

“If they make a single suspicious move shoot to kill,” he ordered implacably. “You will make these two men walk to the edge of the cliff near the carbon deposit workings. See that they are thrown over the cliff into the mud below. The monsters will finish the rest. Collect some workers from the carbon mines to help you.”

Eveta repeated every word. Hilt stared helplessly at her blank, expressionless face—then he swung to Lanning.

“What the hell’s the idea?” he shouted. “If you’re so darned set on bumping us off why can’t you do it cleanly—with a gun?”

Lanning smiled. “I forgot to add something,” he said icily. “When I first came here my presence was resented by these insectile people. I was forced to lock myself in here until Eveta arrived. Since then she has followed out my orders whilst I can stay in hiding. If *you* and Cranby are thrown over the cliff in true spectacular style the insects will believe it is *me* and a friend. They have seen nobody else land here. That will divert their unwelcome attentions from this power house . . . you see? I will see to it that Eveta lets them believe such to be the case. . . .”

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He turned to the girl again. “You will tell the people that the imposter has been found by you, together with his colleague. You have ordered them to be destroyed. Repeat that!”

She did so. Hilt swung back to her.

“Eve, in God’s name, you can’t do this! I’m your husband, Hilt! Look here—”

“If you move any closer, imposter, I shall kill you where you stand,” she said tonelessly, as he unwittingly took a step towards her.

“Lanning, this is your blasted work!” Hilt raved. “That switchboard there forces her to take your orders. Amplified hypnosis acting on her already prepared brain. God. I’ll get you for this Lanning if I have to crawl back from hell to do it!”

“Definitely it *will* be from hell,” the scientist said dryly. “The mud chasms of Venus are no place for entertainment. All right, Eveta, get going!”

She walked forward deliberately. Perforce the two had to go in front of her. As he walked outside Hilt toyed with the idea of springing round and overpowering her, but he caught

Cranby's eye.

"Better not," he muttered. "That ray gun isn't like a revolver. She just can't miss, and one whiff from that and—Blooley! Take it easy; we'll think of something."

Hilt tried the other alternative. He pleaded with the girl as he walked, tried every possible verbal means he could think of to break the iron hypnosis that held her. But it was useless. She marched on, set-faced, that gun held in her steady hand.

As they passed the carbon workings she uttered a sharp command, went on reeling off in the native tongue the whole tissue of lies about imposters. That was sufficient to bring a dozen of the strange creatures hurtling up the slope. Hilt forgot everything and slashed out with his mighty fists. Cranby jumped to aid him . . . They finished up in the grip of pincer claws, were lifted, whirled steadily along.

"Guess it didn't work," Cranby panted. "In fact I'd say we're going no place at the dickens of a speed. Try the lingo on them, man! Tell 'em the truth. It's the last chance!"

"Hey, you mugs—!" Hilt roared; then he remembered and switched to Venusian. But he only got about four words out then a roar of savage fury drowned him out.

"I have a lurking suspicion these insects didn't like Lanning coming here," Cranby jerked out. "Judging from the way they're yelling at us, that is. Which reminds me—"

He stopped. Hilt, too, felt the hair rise on his scalp as the end of the short plateau suddenly came into sight through the mist wreaths. Without pause the insectile creatures hurled him forward, suddenly released him. He went flying out helplessly into space with Cranby only a few feet away from him.

They seemed to fall a vast distance, landed finally with tremendous force in warm mud. It felt like tepid molasses. It surged into their ears, stopped up their nostrils. With frantic effort Hilt beat his way to the surface.

"Cran!" he bellowed hoarsely. "Cran, where are you?"

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There was no answer, but a surging of the mud a foot or two away sent him striking towards it with mighty overarm strokes. It was like swimming in glue. He caught Cranby by the hair, tugged him upwards with superhuman power.

"Swim!" Hilt bellowed frantically. "Swim—keep going—anything to stop this mud getting a grip. I'll help you. . . ."

He struck out with fiendish force, dragging the thrashing Cranby along with him. Dimly through the murk he could see the rearing mass of the cliff at the chasm's other side—but between it and them were dark, elusive nightmare creatures that stirred in the unholy filth. To the right of them a head from Hades reared upwards in the mist; giant eyes watched them.

"A—a saurian like that thing we saw on the plateau," Cranby gurgled, then he battled on again. The mud heaved and rocked around them both as the monster brute suddenly plunged towards them.

"Down!" Hilt screamed, and they went down together, fought on with bursting lungs through a clogged mass of thin ooze that was hellishly agitated by the plungings of the monster. They felt it pass around them with waves that almost stunned their senses.

When lack of air forced them to the surface again the thing had floundered past.

The whole area seemed to be surging now with diabolical shapes. Time and again they were forced to submerge out of sight, heading all the time towards that frowning cliff, until at last to their infinite relief they felt shingle grinding under their feet. Exhausted, weighted down with mud, they floundered up the narrow beach.

But even here there was no respite. Small objects like serpents came squirming out of the morass after them. With bursting hearts and lungs they raced up a slope, floundered more by luck than judgment into the small mouth of a natural cave.

Here at last things were quieter. They stood breathing like donkey engines, smearing the mud off their faces and arms.

“Well, we do live in stirring times,” Cranby sighed at last. “If I start to look like Adonis after that mud bath let me know, will you? And incidentally we have your prize biceps to thank for getting us out of the mess. Thanks a lot, Hilt—you saved my life.”

“Oh, quit being heroic,” Hilt snorted. He stared back at the surging swamp life. “We’ve been as near death as we ever shall be, I guess. Lanning underestimated two things—my strength and the consistency of the mud . . . We’re going back to the city, Cran. We’ve still work to do!”

“You don’t have to tell me—but there’d better be a better way than over that swamp. We’d never make it a second time . . . Personally, I’m for trying this tunnel. Might lead to the surface somehow. They usually do.”

They turned into the darkness of the tunnel behind them. The further they plunged into its blackness the more they could feel that it rose constantly on a steady gradient. Down it blew distinct drafts of fresh air—as fresh as Venus could produce, anyway. Encouraged, they hurried on, emerged at last onto another ledge beyond which lay a further chasm of abysmal depth. Hilt glanced upwards, then gave a cry.

“Look! We’re practically at the top of the cliff face! A few yards up this rockery and we’ll make it! Come on!”

---

Immediately Cranby followed him along the rock acclivity, blundered up behind him as they came onto level plain. Cautiously they moved forward and for a moment the eternal drifting mists cleared a little, it revealed to them a surprising sight—a wall rearing invincibly upwards.

“Great Cat, we’ve come up beyond it!” Hilt shouted hoarsely. “We must be somewhere near where we first landed—”

“We sure are!” Cranby interrupted him, in a grim voice. “Take a look at that light to our left—somebody or something is near our ship! I seem to recall that Lanning said he’d have it found. He must have made Eveta give the order and—”

“Come on!” Hilt snapped, suddenly sighting the glimmer. Together they went forward at a run, finally discovered the light was streaming from the porthole of a small flyer similar to their own. Outside it, busy fastening an anchor cable to the ship’s nose, was an insectile Venusian.

Hilt grinned bitterly, made a long jump forward and seized the creature round its shell-like neck. Whirling him round he snatched his gun from the belt round the thing’s equivalent of a waist. But just as he was about to fire it Cranby leapt lightly forward, deflected the blast into mid-air.

“What the hell’s that for?” Hilt bellowed.

“Take it easy, hothead!” Cranby whirled the cringing insect man to his feet. “Maybe this guy can help us somehow. We got to play every card well from now on, Hilt, and I figure this glorified centipede may be the ace of trumps. Don’t forget that Lanning thinks we’re dead. We’ve got the pull on him because of that.”

“But this brute can’t help us—”

"I'm trying it!" Cranby snapped. "I'm in this as much as you are. Keep your shirt on . . . Don't you remember Lanning saying that these people hated him? That he threw us overboard to make believe *he* had been killed? What's going to happen if the Venusians find out that Lanning is still much alive and that he's been hypnotizing their queen! Why, they'll tear the damned city apart to get at him! This guy here is going to have the truth, and like it. Sure he was sent to destroy, or rather take our ship—but we'll use him instead."

Hilt scratched his head. "Guess I was a bit too hasty at that. But say, suppose Lanning gets worried at this brute's absence and comes to look for him?"

"When he's supposed to be dead?" Cranby asked patiently.

Hilt's eyes brightened. "Hell—you think of everything. Of course he'll stick in the power house. All right, let's get inside our bus and see what we can do. We want action before the night ends if possible."

He motioned to the waiting creature. Obviously frightened it obeyed with alacrity and moved quickly through the airlock doorway, stood watching the two in the control room light with its queer, but none the less quite intelligent eyes. . . .

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"What's your name?" Hilt demanded.

"Zaldar."

"I suppose you're one of the beings under the orders of Queen Eveta?"

"Yes; but—" The creature was clearly puzzled, went on slowly, "She does not do the things which we expected she would. We expected that she would make plans for controlling the swamp areas, ridding our world of the monsters which still roam it, perfecting science. All she does instead is give orders for the production of carbon. *Your* orders, I suppose?"

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"That's where you're wrong, Zaldar," Hilt replied grimly. "We are Eveta's friends, your friends. You were tricked into believing we were imposters—you threw us to death, but we escaped. And now—now it's our turn! What we are trying to do is overthrow yet another being like ourselves who has no right on this world, who is trying to drive you all into slavery and overpower your queen."

"You—you mean there is still another like you in the city?" Zaldar demanded in amazement.

"Exactly that. Now listen very carefully, Zaldar . . . This being is controlling Eveta through hypnotism from the power house. The carbon you have been mining is for this usurper, to give him wealth. The hypnotism explains why your queen has done none of the things you expected of her. We tried to beat the usurper and for answer he threw us in the mud-valley, turned the tables on us completely. He also made Eveta give you orders to destroy our ship, this very one we're in now. You can't need more proof than that!"

"My people must know of this," Zaldar muttered. "There are so many things I understand now. I must tell them—"

"Yeah, but just a minute," Cranby broke in. "We want no mistakes. Here is what you have to do. Queen Eveta must be left untouched. You will advise your people of the facts and then wait until your queen, of her own accord, enters the major power room to the north of the city. You know it, of course?"

The chitinous head nodded vigorously.

"Once you see her go in there and close the door—as she certainly will—radio the fact to us," Cranby went on. "Understand? Then we will come. We will take Queen Eveta out of



danger before you attack the usurper. If you were to rush in on him with your queen still there he would slay her instantly. Then all would be lost. We must work as I have planned, and I rely on you to control your people to do likewise. You have authority of sorts, I suppose?"

"I am a guard," the creature answered. "You have my word . . . Wait for my signal."

"O.K. One last word, it's got to be done before sun-up. . . ."

Zaldar nodded and moved to the airlock, crossed rapidly to his own ship and climbed within it. In a moment or two it was rising swiftly upwards towards that monstrous wall.

"Well, the plan sounded O.K.; but just what do you figure on doing?" Hilt asked, pondering.

"Simple enough. You told me Eve stands on a sort of platform while Lanning gives her his hypnotic orders. Very well, you'll have to reach Eve from the skylight. Get it? Whip her up while I signal the Venusians. They'll rush in and—" Cranby's lean face broke into a slow grin. "I'm really sorry for Lanning. He's going to have the hell of a time."

Hilt smiled bitterly and sat back in his chair, switched on the radio in readiness.

"All set," he murmured. "And I think we could improve the shining hour by grabbing a bite to eat. Get busy; I'll watch the radio."

## CHAPTER VIII

Three hours passed, time in which Zaldar was presumably gathering together his fellow Venusians. In that time Hilt and Cranby chafed with impatience, examined their guns again and again—then at last the radio signal buzzed loudly. Instantly Hilt switched it on. The flutelike voice of Zaldar came through the speaker.

“I have told the others what to do,” he said briefly. “They will attack the power house and destroy the usurper when you give the word. Queen Eveta has entered the power house and closed the door. I think she has been sleeping.”

“Right!” Hilt snapped. “Be near the power house. When I give a double whistle charge for the doors and smash them open. We’re coming now. . . .”

He switched off, swung round to the control board, sent the ship upwards from the plateau in a long curving line. It went over the wall like a rocket. Hilt drove steadily onwards, headed swiftly to the north, began to drop as the recognizable bulk of the powerhouse loomed out of the distance. Swiftly and silently he dropped to the street outside it.

“I’ll hand Eve down to you from the roof,” he said briefly. “Be ready to grab her . . .”

He swung outside, clambered swiftly up the projections on the ship’s exterior to the summit, vaulted lightly to the roof. He was not surprised to find the skylight shut considering his last experience. But below it was Eveta, Lanning facing her, his cold eyes boring into hers.

Hilt smiled twistedly and whipped out his gun, slammed the glass through in one tremendous impact.

“Hold it, Lanning!” he snapped, pointing the barrel straight at the astounded scientist. The reappearance of a man he had believed dead took the wind out of his sails. He raised his hands slowly, glared upwards.

With his boot heel Hilt smashed the remainder of the glass out, reached down his free arm and caught Eveta by the collar of her tough tunic. She turned a blank, startled face upwards as she was raised like a doll and dragged through the skylight.

But in doing that Hilt distracted his attention. Lanning made a flying leap, missed the girl’s feet by inches. Instantly Hilt caught her round the waist and dragged her free, whirled her onto the roof, pushed her helplessly down it. Cranby’s head popped over the roof edge, waiting to catch her.

Then a shot from below sent Hilt’s gun spinning out of his hand. He dived for it, missed, tumbled headlong through the skylight and crashed onto the platform below.

“Smart guy, eh?” Lanning blazed, jumping towards him with gun leveled.

Hilt sprang up and forward in one move, jerked that gun arm upwards with not a second to spare. The bullet impacted against the metal roof. His left came round with terrific force and landed under the scientist’s jaw, sent him flying backwards.

“I owe you plenty, Lanning, and now you’re going to get it!” Hilt panted. “Better fix yourself. Neither of us have got weapons now!”

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The scientist lay where he was for the moment, scowling. Then he got to his feet in sudden alarm as there came a pounding and rending against the powerhouse’s enormous doors.

“Yeah—it’s the ant men, after you,” Hilt snapped, seeing his startled look.

“They’ll—they’ll tear me in pieces if they get in here!” Lanning shouted. “Listen, you’ve got to get me out! After all we are both earth men—there’s a code of honor—”

“Honor?” Hilt raised an eyebrow as he clenched his fists. “Did you think of that when you enslaved Eveta for your own uses? Did you think of honor when you planned to master two worlds by superior science? And what about when you threw Cranby and me into the mud . . .? You, rotten, lying skunk!”

Hilt’s words finished in a roar as he hurled himself forward.

Adroitly, Lanning twisted himself sideways, evading the rush. He ran for his life to the metal ladder leading to the first engine balcony. With slipping feet he clambered up it, glanced round as the powerhouse doors burst open to vomit forth a multitude of shouting, struggling antmen.

Like a shot Hilt dove for the ladder, raced up it, chased Lanning along the broad spiralway, up another flight of steps to the second balcony. Below them the engines of the place roared with swelling power. Antmen teemed along the gangways.

In an extrapowerful dive Hilt caught up, swung Lanning round and sent him reeling with one blow of his tremendous fist. Desperate, the scientist jumped up and lashed out with a short arm jab, missed Hilt’s face by inches. His reward was a slam under the jaw that lifted him off his feet, hurled him backwards along the narrow aisleway.

Confusion and pandemonium raged from below. The antmen had seen him now, were racing towards him in a vengeful horde. He reeled to his feet, lurched to the attack once more. He was hurled right and left by those piston fists, reeled drunkenly against the balcony rail, his face blood smeared and bruised.

“Had enough?” Hilt panted, clutching him. “Listen, I’ll try and save you for earthly justice if you’ll—”

He broke off perforce as Lanning suddenly surged back to life, brought up his knee and drove it straight into Hilt’s stomach. Winded, anguished, Hilt staggered backwards and collapsed on the floor. The toe of Lanning’s boot struck him brutally in the jaw.

He lay agonized, watching the scientist flying along the gangway. With vast effort he mastered his pain, clawed his way to his feet. His face set into a ruthless mask. He waved back the antmen as they surged towards him. Zaldar, in the forefront, called a halt. Slowly Hilt moved along, his eyes watching that figure. By degrees his pain abated. . . . He walked faster, he ran, seized Lanning at the end of the gangway.

There was no mercy in the terrific punch he slammed into the scientist’s face. Time and again he pounded him, rained blows on his face, his chest, hurled him like a sack of coals along the gangway. Hands outspread like claws Lanning used the rail to spring himself forward again. Hilt anticipated it, drove his right arm up with a force that lifted Lanning clean off his feet. Head at an acute angle he whizzed backwards, caught the rail in the small of the back and overbalanced.

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A second later there was a noticeable brief reduction in the roar of the power engines; then it returned to normal. Quivering, sweat drenched, Hilt moved to the balcony and stared over. He turned away, set faced, at the vision of a charred wreck on one of the main power feed wires. Lanning had absorbed half the voltage of the powerhouse through his body and, contacting a machine as well, had earthed it. . . .

Zaldar and his antmen came forward slowly, stood looking down on the thing that had been Lanning. He spoke disappointedly.

“A pity the usurper eluded us, Earthman—but at least you have destroyed him, and for that we are grateful. Now we must have our queen back. . . .”

Hilt swung to him. This was a contingency he had not reckoned with. His eyes passed over the hordes packing the gangways.

“Yes—of course,” he muttered. “I’ll fetch her.”

“We will come with you,” Zaldar said, with a certain adamancy.

As he walked along and descended the stair flights Hilt thought swiftly. Naturally the people wanted their queen back, but— That would put things pretty much the same as before. There was one chance, and one only . . . his legs!

On the ground floor he still walked casually; then suddenly he spurted into a fiendish run, heading for the door at frantic speed. As he whirled outside he yelled out.

“Make way for Hilt! I’m coming, Cran! We’ve got to move! Quick!”

Like a whirlwind he tore down through the surging masses of antmen outside. Surprised at his action they made way for him. Fighting and struggling he pounded to the airlock opening, plunged through it. Swinging round he slammed the valve clean in Zaldar’s face as he came racing up.

“Up! Up before they get us!” Hilt yelled.

Without a word Cranby threw in the engine switches. Lightly as a feather the ship hurtled into the upper reaches, stopped for a while in the safety of the eternal clouds.

“Whew! Done it!” Hilt mopped his face, briefly recounted his experiences. Then he glanced at Eveta sitting in the spare seat. “O.K. now?” he murmured gently.

She nodded promptly. “Yes, but—Hilt, what’s been happening? The last thing I remember was going under anaesthetic way back on the earth, in Valordom. Now we’re on Venus. Just what—”

“Tell you as we go along, Eve. . . . We only just got out in time,” Hilt went on, glancing at Cranby. “Those devils wanted Eve back. I staked everything on a hundred yard sprint. And now. . . .”

He shrugged and his face went a shade grimmer.

“Valordom!” he muttered.

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It was a week later when the space machine finished its journey across the gulf and landed back on that self same roof in Valordom. The four scientists were there to meet it, stood gravely looking on as the three stepped through the airlock.

Without a word being spoken they were conducted through the rambling reaches of the great building to the Master’s own enormous residence. Here a meal had been laid with faultless perfection. Silently he motioned to the vacant places, sat down with his three comrades on either side of him.

At last he broke his long silence, his voice undeniably sincere.

“Hilton Read, you are a man of honor, endurance, and above all, bravery.”

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Hilt shrugged as he voraciously glanced across at Eveta.

“Not much honor about it,” he answered shortly. “I swore I’d get Eve and wipe out Lanning—mainly for personal reasons—and I did it. I told you before I only brought Eve back into your—er—clutches because there’s no way to escape you. Don’t make me into a hero. . . .”

“My colleagues and I took full notice of all you did on Venus,” the Master went on. “The X-ray telescope penetrated the cloudbanks, revealed your every action to us. . . . Such men as you—and Cranby Doyle here—are very rare!”

“So what?” Cranby asked, chewing languidly.

For the first time the Master smiled.

“When I stole Eveta as the one surviving link in the Venusian chain I did not realize that a man of another world—this world—could have all the necessary attributes to make him equal with her. I realize now that a blood tie is not entirely necessary for control of a planet. . . . You have shown yourself capable of working side by side with your wife, Hilton Read, and I see no reason why Doyle cannot work with you.”

“Just what are you getting at?” Hilt asked quietly, lowering his knife and fork. “Are you suggesting that we all go back to that hell-fired planet? If so, think again. I wouldn’t go through that experience again for anything you could name. . . .”

“Listen to me! I think you are intelligent enough to make a bargain with me. At the outset of your experiences you wanted to get the secret of *valsix* metal in order to make your country safe from any attack, did you not?”

“Right enough.”

“Suppose that we did away with our secrecy here, admitted our presence to the world, and conferred upon it whatever benefits our advanced science can give? Suppose, without interfering with any one form of government, we kept a scientific eye on the world, kept world power balanced so that war and aggression would be impossible. . . . Now, just how much does that appeal to you?”

Hilt pondered for a long time, glanced over to Cranby and the girl again. Their expressions reflected merely his own silent wonderment.

“Well, of course, it’s a terrific idea,” he admitted finally. “With your knowledge and radio control, and space travel too, you’d make the world worth living in. But just what is the price?”

“Our own world of Venus still needs a ruler,” the Master said quietly. “In fact not one but two—even three. Rulers who have strength, humanity, and youth. You three have those qualities. Back of it all we can be in control, ready at any time to give advice. . . . There will be no hypnosis; no anything. I am prepared to trust the three of you with the task of making that distant world into a worthwhile place. . . . You will be instructed how to use the machines; you will clean up the planet’s prehistoric portions; you will open up an interplanetary empire!

“You will be the queen and king of Venus, with a trustworthy aide in Cranby Doyle. Always together, pioneering, until— When you have moulded a first class planet I will hand over the secret of space travel to Earthlings. Trade between worlds will begin. . . . Do you not understand? You can found an empire in the stars! You started the work on Venus; why not finish it?”

“The idea’s so mighty I hardly know how to take it in,” Hilt muttered. “After all, it means remoulding the destiny of a planet. . . .”

“And it means the beginning of the interplanetary age,” Eveta said quietly. “I’m ready to do it, Hilt. . . . After all, Venus is my natural home.”

“Well, it’s O.K. by me,” Cranby grinned. “More interesting than skipping round the earth breaking records, anyway. Count me in.”

“All right,” Hilt said slowly, his jaw squaring. “We’ll do it, Master—but I make one condition. You’ve got to make Eveta’s brain normal again so she can’t be hypnotized with

such consummate ease. You see, those antmen may try something when we get back. For that reason we all want control of our own minds.”

“Of course,” the scientist smiled. He looked around at the three, then at his colleagues. Finally he filled the seven glasses by his elbow with light wine.

“Suppose, a toast?” he exclaimed. “A toast to the potential empire—the empire of the stars. . . .”

THE END

[The end of *Queen of Venus* by John Russell Fearn]