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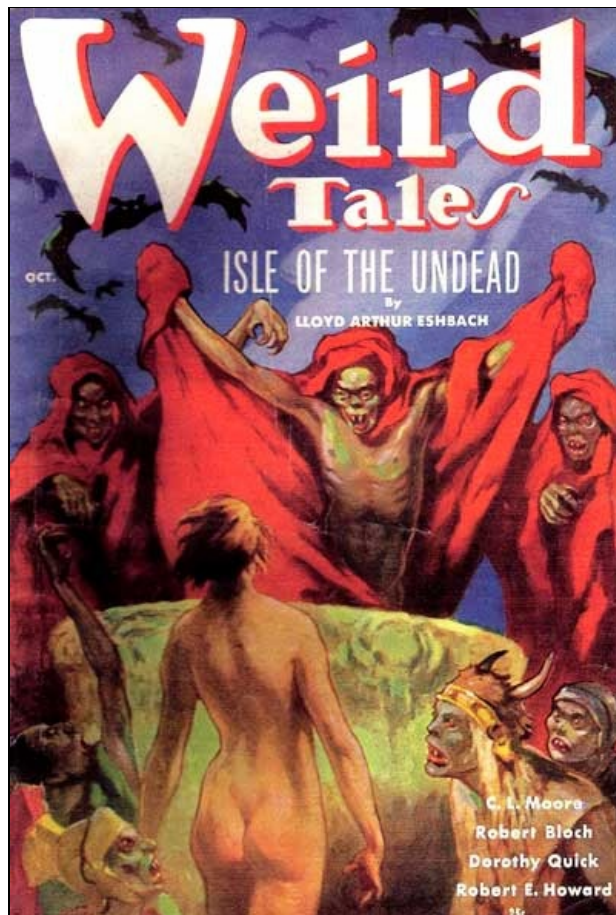
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"One hand closed on his thin neck, and the other, a rock-like fist, made a bloody ruin of his mouth."

Isle of the Undead

By LLOYD ARTHUR ESHBACH

A gripping, thrilling, uncanny tale about the frightful fate that befell a yachting party on the dreadful island of living dead men

1. A Horror from the Past

A drab gray sheet of cloud slipped stealthily from the moon's round face, like a shroud slipping from the face of one long dead, a coldly phosphorescent face from which the eyes had been plucked. Yellow radiance fell toward a calm, oily sea, seeking a narrow bank of fog lying low on the water, penetrating its somber mass like frozen yellow fingers.

Vilma Bradley shuddered and shrank against Clifford Darrell's brawny form. "It's—it's ghastly, Cliff!" she said.

"Ghastly?" Darrell leaned against the rail, laughing softly. "One cocktail too many—that's the answer. It's given you the jitters. Listen!" Faintly from the salon came strains of dance music and the rhythmic shuffle of feet. "A nifty yacht, a South Sea moon, a radio dance orchestra, dancers—and little Clifford! And you call it ghastly!" Almost savagely his arms tightened about her, and the bantering note left his voice. "I'm crazy about you, Vilma."

She tried to laugh, but it was an unconvincing sound. "It's the moon, Cliff—I guess. I never saw it like that before. Something's going to happen—something dreadful. I just *know* it!"

"Oh—be sensible, Vilma!" There was a hint of impatience in Cliff's deep voice. A gorgeous girl in his arms—dark-haired, dark-eyed, made for love—and she talked of dreadful things which were going to happen because the moon looked screwy.

She released herself and glanced out over the sea. "I know I'm silly, but—" Her voice froze and her slender body stiffened. "Cliff—look!"

Darrell spun around, and as he stared, he felt a dryness seeping into his throat, choking him....

Out of the winding-sheet of fog into the moonlight crept a strange, strange craft, her crumbling timbers blackened and rotted with incredible age. The corpse of a ship, she seemed, resurrected from the grave of the sea. Her prow thrust upward like a scimitar bent backward, hovering over the gaunt ruin of a cabin whose seaward sides were formed by port and starboard bows. From a shallow pit amidships jutted the broken arm of a mast, its splintered tip pointing toward the blindly watching moon. The stern, thickly covered with the moldering encrustations of age, curved inward above the strange high poop, beneath which lay another cabin. And along either

side of her worm-eaten freeboard ran a row of apertures like oblong portholes. Out of these projected great oars, long, unwieldy, as somberly black as the rest of the ancient hulk.

Now a sound drifted across the waters, the steady, rhythmic *br-rr-oom, br-rr-oom, br-rr-oom* of a drum beating time for the rowers. Its hollow thud checked the heart, set it to throbbing in tempo with its own weary pulse. Ghostly fingers, dripping dread, crawled up Darrell's spine.

Stiff-lipped, Vilma gasped: "What—what is it?"

Cliff answered in a dry husky voice, the words seeming to trip over an awkward tongue. "It's—it's —it *can't* be, damn it!—but it's a galley, a ship from the days of Alexander the Great! What's it doing—here—*now*?"

Closer she came through the moon-path, a frothing lip of brine curling away from her swelling prow. Closer—her course crossing that of the *Ariel*—and the watchers saw her crew! They gasped, and the blood ebbed from their faces.

Men of ancient Persia, clad in leather kirtles and rusted armor, and they were hideous! In the yellow moon-glow Cliff could see them clearly now—a lookout standing motionless in the stem, the steersman on the poop-deck, the drummer squatting beside the broken mast, the rowers in the pit—and all, *all* were a bloodless white, the skin of their faces puffed and bloated and horribly wrinkled, like flesh that had been under water a long time.

Dead men ... men whose movements were stiffly wooden ... as dead as their faces. But most horrible was the fact that they were there, that they moved at all!

“**A** queer mirage, isn't it?" A hollow voice spoke suavely behind them.

Vilma gasped at the sudden sound, and they whirled. A foot away stood the tall, lean figure of the *Ariel's* captain, Leon Corio. A queer smile twisted his thin lips.

"What's the idea—sneaking up on us?" Darrell demanded angrily. He didn't like this man, hadn't liked him from the moment he had approached Cliff to sell him the yacht. But Cliff had bought the craft because she was a bargain, and in accordance with their agreement he had hired Corio as captain.

The tall man's smile remained fixed, and he bowed gravely. "Sorry, sir. I always walk softly. A habit, I suppose." He gestured toward the galley. "It looks quite life-like, don't you think so?"

"Life-like?" Cliff spoke between his teeth as he again faced the black ship. "It looks *dead* to me!"

The galley had almost reached them *now, veering sharply to draw up beside the Ariel*. The drum quieted, and the oars trailed in the water, motionless except for the swaying imparted by the waves. A musty, age-old odor filtered through the air like a breath from a grave. The music and dancing had stopped. A fear-filled hush shrouded the yacht.

Vilma drew Cliff's arm about her shoulder. He glanced back at the motionless captain.

"*Do something, Corio!*" he rasped. "Don't stand there like a dummy!"

Corio nodded with his same queer smile. His hand darted to an inside pocket, came out bearing a curious instrument like four twisted cones of silver bound together with silver thongs. As he raised this to his mouth, his eyelids were slits behind which burned the embers of his eyes.

Out over the sea crept a single note, deep, hollow, laden with eery minor wailings—a sound that summoned imperatively, yet a sound that repelled. It was a moan, hideous as the moan of a dying demon. It raked the heart with fear-tipped claws. It rose, and fell, and rose again, and as it died, it awakened the crew of the ancient galley to motion, sweeping them in a horde to the rail of the yacht.

Cliff swung toward Corio in bursting fury, fury mingled with dread. His fist lashed out at that glittering silver instrument and the face behind it, but Corio avoided him like a wraith, still smiling fixedly, the horn again at his lips. Cliff cursed, and hurled himself through the air. One hand caught a bony shoulder; he felt fingers like hooks close on his own throat. He wrenched free, landing a stunning blow on Corio's face—saw him reel and crash to the deck—and then he heard Vilma scream!

He whirled. She was struggling between two of the *flabby-faced things* from the galley! In an instant he was upon them, his fist thudding against icy flesh, burying itself in something horribly soft and yielding. Startled, Cliff swung a second blow; and an arm, tomb-cold and strong as the tentacle of an octopus, wrapped itself around him—a vise of thin-covered bone! A dead, drowned face peered over his shoulder, staring blankly. Other arms seized his legs, and though he struggled and writhed with the strength of a mounting fear, he was borne to the rail. Over they went, and dropped to the rotting deck of the galley.

A numbness was creeping through him like a contagion, spreading from those crushing hands of ice. His struggles ceased. With eyes that turned stiffly in their sockets he looked for Vilma, saw her raised high above the heads of two other pallid creatures, saw them climb over the rail. Then the blackness of a dank and musty cabin enveloped him; and he was dropped with jarring force.

His captors bulked black against the moonlit doorway, treading soundlessly, and were gone.

Cliff lay in rigid paralysis, every sense keenly alive, his mind striving to clutch a single spar of reason in this chaotic whirlpool of the incredible. This *couldn't* be! Soon he'd awaken to laugh at his absurd nightmare.... Yet it seemed horribly real.... It *was* real!

From the *Ariel* boiled a fearful bedlam. Screams of terror. Curses. Then other shadows loomed in the doorway, and Vilma, motionless and rigid, was dropped brutally beside him on the spongy floor.

Furiously Cliff struggled against the maddening restraint of paralysis. He couldn't lie here helpless! Vilma needed him! He'd—he'd *have* to do something. With an effort that studded his forehead with rounded drops of sweat and sent the blood throbbing through the distended veins of his neck, he sought to move. And like a cord snapping, his invisible bonds fell from him.

He was crouching over Vilma, rubbing her wrists, calling to her, when again he heard the silver horn of Corio. A low droning utterly unlike the note that had awakened the galley's crew, it drifted languidly along a channel of endless sleep. It seeped through the ear-drums, touching every nerve-tip with resistless lassitude. Doggedly Cliff fought against the sound, pressing his hands over his ears, gritting his teeth, holding his eyelids wide. Yet he felt his muscles weaken, began to relax, knew dimly that his mind, sodden with drowsiness, was creeping toward the pits of slumber—and the vibrant drone ended!

His head cleared rapidly, and he bent over Vilma. As he touched a limp arm, he knew she had passed from paralysis into a deep, quiet sleep. He shook her. It was useless. He listened, heard her steady breathing; and at that instant realized that the noises from the yacht had ceased.

Rising, he strode toward the square of chalky moonlight. A foot away he halted, fell back. He had heard a faint footfall, had seen an armor-clad figure climbing over the rail! With silent haste he flung himself down beside Vilma.

And there he lay while the crew of the galley carried his friends from the *Ariel*, all slumped in that unnatural sleep, and stretched them out on the floor of the black cabin. Unmoving, he watched through narrow lids till all save Corio had been carried aboard, and the drowned things had gone back to their places in the rowers' pits. Again the hollow voice of the drum began throbbing through the silence, and the oars creaked a faint accompaniment. He could feel the galley cleaving the oily sea.

On his feet, he peered through the doorway. The backs of the rowers rose and fell with stiff, mechanical rhythm. Beyond the galley's stern came the yacht, slinking along like a thief, only one dim light showing, her Diesel engines purring almost soundlessly.

He turned and bent over Vilma, still in thrall to that strange deep slumber. As he traced the delicate outlines of her lovely face, now so lifeless and pale, bitter wrath flared within him, wrath and hatred for Leon Corio. But as he thought of the ghastly *undead* things out there in the galley pit, thought of this water-soaked anachronism which had no right to be afloat, his skin crisped with a sense of foreboding, a fear of what was yet to come. He must do something!

Stepping over the still forms of his friends, he moved to the forward wall where a beam of radiance crept fearfully through a gap between two boards. His hands touched the hull—and he jerked them away. Rotten, clammy, like a decayed corpse, partly frozen. Crouching, he peered through.

Far ahead, a blotch of evil blackness squatted on the horizon, an island crouching low like a black beast ready to spring. Around it the moonlight seemed to dim, as though it were striving to hide some nameless horror. Interminably Cliff watched while the shadowed mass drew closer ... closer....

They were headed for a towering wall of black basalt; and as the galley neared it, Cliff saw that it bore striking resemblance to a gigantic human skull, its rounded surface broken by caves that the sea had carved into hollow eye-sockets and an empty nasal cavity. The rock wall ended high above the water; beneath it lay a gaping chasm of pitchy darkness. And the galley, drum silenced, oars at rest, slid under the ledge, into the mouth of the skull!

Just before total blackness fell, Cliff sprang to Vilma's side and raised her in his arms. If he hoped to do anything, he must do it now! He groped his way to the starboard bow and moved one hand along the dank timbers, searching. He found what he sought, a wide gap at the edge of a board. Gently lowering Vilma to the floor, he gripped the slimy wood with both hands and thrust outward mightily. A wide strip of decayed timber burst free. He dropped it into the sea and attacked the next board. In moments a wide irregular opening yawned in the galley's hull.

Leaning out, Cliff looked down. He could see nothing. Then suddenly a faint light appeared, and he heard the hum of the *Ariel's* motors as she entered the cave. The humming ceased instantly, but the faint light persisted.

Now he could see the blackness of waters, a rock wall beyond. He drew back—and a he did so, he

heard movements on deck! At any moment the rowers might enter! He'd have to risk a drop into the water with Vilma—there was nothing else to do. If only she were conscious!

He stooped and raised her, holding her firmly with one arm. Gripping the hull with the other, he climbed through the opening, inhaled deeply, and dropped! A heart-stopping plunge—and cold water closed over them. Down, down—then they shot upward, reached the surface; and even as Cliff gulped a single gasping breath, something struck his skull a blinding, stunning blow! The oars!

With rapidly numbing arms and legs Cliff kicked and flailed the water, striving for land. Dimly he knew he no longer held Vilma; dimly he visioned her as were those ghastly undead; then his body scraped on something hard, and a blackness that was not physical blotted out consciousness.

2. *The Dreadful Isle*

Red-hot hammers pounding against his temples wakened Cliff Darrell. He opened his eyes to stare into total darkness crawling with mental monsters spawned by his pain-stabbed brain. He lay half immersed in shallow brine, his head resting on a jagged stone just above the surface. Struggling to his hands and knees, he shook his head from side to side, dumbly, like an animal in pain. Something had hit him—and now he was in water—and there was no light. What had happened? Where was Vilma?

Vilma! He groaned. He remembered now. They had dropped—and his head had struck something—and—and—maybe she was floating out there even now, dead eyes staring upward.

"Vilma!" he cried, his voice pleading. "Vilma!"

Only a mocking echo answered him. There was no other sound, not even the whisper of waves swishing among the rocks.

Cliff pressed his hands fiercely against his throbbing head. The pain had become a madness, matched only by the agony of his own helplessness. He felt his reason reeling; he fought an insane desire to fling himself shrieking into that silent expanse of water to search for Vilma; then with a tremendous physical effort he jarred himself back to sanity.

He staggered to his feet, groped stumblingly over the rocks away from the water. His hand touched a rock wall broken and pitted by the action of the sea; and he crept slowly inland, feeling his way like a blind man. As he plodded on his thoughts blended into one fixed idea: he must get to light, must get light to search for Vilma.

Gradually the insensate pounding in his head abated, and strength returned to his body. When at last he saw light beyond a narrow fissure around an angle in the cavern, he had almost recovered. In moments he was gazing out over a plain bathed in the glow of a leprous moon. As he stared, he shivered; and it was not because of the cold draft drawing through the fissure, fanning his brine-drenched body.

Grim and starkly forbidding the plain lay before him, dead as the frozen landscape of the moon. Once there had been life there, but now only the skeletons of trees remained, lifting their wasted limbs in rigid pleading to an unresponsive sky. Some, there were, that had fallen, uprooted by the fury of passing hurricanes; these lay like the scattered bones of a dismembered giant, age-blackened, and painted with hoarfrost by the brushes of moonlight. Feebly the dead forest stirred under the touch of a moaning wind, and the gaunt shadows cast by the trees seemed to be multi-armed monsters slithering over the rocky earth.

He looked beyond the trees, and he saw light. Little squares of pale radiance cut high in the walls of an ancient black castle. Castle? Cliff frowned. He could liken it to nothing else, though he could not recall ever having seen a castle which thrust curving, needle-thin spires into the sky like a devil's horns.

Impatiently Cliff stepped from the wall of rock and glanced along a path that writhed through the forest; glanced—and crouched swiftly, a low cry escaping him. A single spot of water on a smooth, flat stone! A spot shaped like a woman's shoe! Vilma had passed this way!

But—might it not have been some other woman from the *Arie*? No! They had been carried—and even if they had walked, their feet were dry!

Like a hound on the scent, Cliff Darrell sped along the serpentine path. The wind moaned above him, and the souging branches seemed to whisper croaking warnings, but he ran on, his eyes constantly seeking signs of Vilma's course. Here a drop of water shaken from her drenched skirt, there another; and Cliff blessed the full moon whose light made possible his trailing of the almost invisible spoor.

Now he had passed beyond the dead forest and was moving toward the castle. The trail had been growing steadily fainter, but he managed to follow it. It led him toward a narrow stone stairway climbing crookedly to a misshapen opening in the wall. Light glowed faintly lurid somewhere deep within; and now Cliff heard a blasphemous sound belch from the depths of the castle—a wheezing, sardonic croaking like the moan of a demoniac organ, rumbling an obscene dirge. His

hair bristled, and he stopped short.

He looked at the steps, searching for the fading trail—and he stiffened. There on the second step was an irregular blotch of moisture! What did it mean? Had Vilma crouched there? Had she ascended those steps? Entered?

With drawn face he began to skirt the base of the black building, searching every nook and cranny, scanning the bare walls. His heart lay like ballast in his breast. If—if something had lured Vilma into that demon-infested vault ... he checked the thought.

Suddenly he cursed. Mechanically he had begun to measure his stride in time with the doleful dirge from the castle. He stalked on with altered pace. As he rounded the corner at the rear of the structure, he saw a shadow outlined against the sky, crouching on a ledge below one of the little windows. He looked again—cried:

"Vilma!"

The figure above him stirred, looked down, then climbed hastily earthward. It was Vilma ... Vilma, with black hair hanging stringily about her head, face pale, eyes fixed in the wideness of fear ... Vilma, with her wet clothing clinging to the lovely contours of her symmetrical body.

"Oh, Cliff!" she gasped, a dry sob choking her. "Thank God—thank God!"

She clung to him, her face hidden against his shoulder, quivering uncontrollably. Then tears came, saving tears, relieving her pent-up emotions.

Cliff said nothing, only held her close, strongly protective. And gradually he felt the tempest of terror subside. At last she looked up. Some of the dread had gone from her face, and she tried to smile.

"I guess—I can't take it," she said.

Cliff shook his head solemnly. "You're a game girl, Vilma! You've nerve enough for two men. If you can, tell me what happened. Or if you'd rather let it wait, just say so."

"I'll feel better if I get it off my chest," she said. "You probably saw those—things—carry me from the yacht." Cliff nodded. "Well, I was just about paralyzed when they dropped me in their terrible boat. I remember, you tried to arouse me; then that horn blew, and I just seemed to float away in an ocean of sleep.

"After that I can remember nothing till I awoke with water filling my eyes and nose and mouth, choking me. Someone's arms were around me—it must have been you, Cliff—and then they weren't there any more, and I struggled wildly, out of my wits. I don't know how I got to shore, but I did, and I lay there in the shadow of the galley, choking and gagging, but afraid to cough. It wasn't altogether dark, and I could see those dreadful things with people hanging over their shoulders, carrying them along a narrow ledge close to the water's edge, heading inland. I thought maybe you were one of those limp bodies; and I—I almost died of fright. After a while the last one had gone, and the light went out. Then I heard another pair of feet moving over the rocks. Corio, I suppose. The sound died—and I was alone.

"That place was awful, Cliff. The blackness almost drove me mad. I wanted to scream, but I was afraid to. Some terrible weight seemed to be crushing my lungs. If I followed those undead things, they might capture me, but it seemed worse to stay there in that dreadful dark.

"I got out of there somehow, though it seemed to take hours. Then I didn't know what to do. I stood at the edge of the dead forest trying to decide; trying, too, to keep myself from shrieking and running—anywhere. Then Corio's horn blew again—a sound, Cliff, worse than anything I've ever heard. It—it was a wicked sound, promising to fulfill every foul desire that ever tainted a human mind. It repelled, yet it lured irresistibly. And—I answered!"

She stopped, and buried her face in her hands. After a moment she went on. "The sound stopped just as I found myself crawling on hands and knees up the stone stairway on the other side. Another started—that awful groaning—music—but it didn't draw me. I ran down the steps and scurried away like a rabbit trying to find a place to hide.

"After a while I came back—I thought you must be in there—and I climbed up to the window. And—and—Cliff, it's hellish!"

Her eyes, boring into his, widened in the same rigid terror he had seen in them when he joined her.

"We could go back to the cove and get away on the *Ariel*, Vilma," Cliff said stonily. "And if you think we should, we will. But—I brought our friends here, and—well, I want to get them out if I can."

With an effort Vilma nodded. "Of course. We can't do anything else."

He released her and stepped up to the wall.

"I'm going to see what's going on in there," he said. "You wait here till I come down."

In sudden dread Vilma seized his arm. "No, Cliff. I couldn't stand waiting here alone. I'll go with you."

He nodded understandingly. And together they began climbing the precipitous wall, fitting hands and feet in step-like crevices that made progress fairly rapid. Soon they were crouching on a wide stone ledge, clinging to thin, rusted bars, staring into the black castle.

3. *The Steps of Torture*

A gigantic hall lay before them, a single chamber whose walls were the walls of the castle, whose arched ceiling rose far above them. Directly below their window a stone platform jutted from the wall, spreading entirely across the chamber. A stone altar squatted in the center of the platform, a strangely phosphorescent fire smoldering on its top. And from the altar descended a wide, wide stairway ending in the middle of the hall. All this Cliff saw in a single sweeping glance; afterward he had eyes for nothing save the lethal horror of a mad, mad scene, revealed by the dim radiance of the altar fire.

Behind the altar stood five huge figures clad in long, hooded cloaks of scarlet. The central figure had arms raised wide, his cloak spread like the wings of some bloody bird of prey; and from his lips came a guttural incantation, a blasphemous chant in archaic Latin, in time with the wheeze of the buried organ. Now his arms dropped, and he was silent.

From the room below came a concerted whine of ceremonial devotion, a hollow, hungry wail. It rose from the bloodless lips of strangely assorted human figures ranging down the center of the long stairway in two facing columns. A hundred or more there must have been, representing half as many periods and countries, according to their strange and ancient costumes. Men in the armor of medieval Persia—the crew of the black galley; yellow-haired Vikings; hawk-faced Egyptians with leather-brown skins; half-naked islanders; red-sashed pirates from the Spanish main; men of today! And about all, like the dampness that clings to a tombstone, hovered a cloud of—death! The undead!

Cliff's gaze roved over the tensely waiting columns, then leaped to the foot of the stairs. There, cowering dumbly like sheep in a slaughter-pen, were his friends from the *Ariel*. All clothing had been stripped from them, and they stood waiting in waxen, statuesque stiffness. He saw then that three others lay prone before the stone altar, naked and ominously still.

And far down at the very end of the hall stood Leon Corio, draped in a hooded cape of unbroken black, a glint of silver in his hand—his horn of drugging sounds.

Now, as though at a silent command, a girl left the group and began to mount the stairs, as those motionless three must have mounted! Vivacious Ann—she had been the life of Cliff's yacht party; but now she was—changed. Her blanched face was rigid with inexpressible terror despite the semi-stupor which numbed her senses. Her nude body glowed like marble in the dim light. Horribly, her feet began their climb with a little catch step suggested by the moaning chant of that cracked organ note.

She reached the first of the undead, and Cliff saw light glint on a knife-blade. A crimson gash appeared in the flesh of her thigh; and dead lips touched that wound, drank thirstily. The girl strode on, blood gleaming darkly on the white skin. A second drank of the crimson flow—a third—and the blood ceased gushing forth.

Another knife flashed—and lips closed again and again on a redly dripping wound. And the girl with the unchanging pace of a robot climbed the stairway to its very top—climbed while fiendish corpses drank her life's blood—climbed, to sink down on the altar.

One of the red-clad figures stooped over her, lifted her, buried long teeth in her throat—and Cliff saw his face.... His own face paled, and talons of fear raked his brain. Those others on the stairs—they were abhorrent, zombies freed from the grave. But this monster! A vampire vested with the lust and cruelty and power of hell!

He lowered her, finally, and she sank down, lay still, beside the other three.

Another began the hellish climb, a giant of a man with a thickly muscled torso. Cliff knew him instantly; and his heart seemed to stop. Leslie Starke! They'd played football together. A brave man—a fighter. He mounted the stairway with the same little catch step, the same plodding stiffness. No resistance, no struggle—only a hell of fear on his face.

The marrow melted from Cliff Darrell's bones. What—what could he do against a power that did *that* to Les Starke? He tried to swallow, but the saliva had dried on his tongue. He wanted to turn to Vilma, but he could not wrench his eyes from the frightful spectacle.

Up the stone steps Starke strode. And no blade leaped toward him; no thirsty lips closed on his flesh! In an unwavering line he mounted toward the cowed monster in the center of the dais, like a puppet on the end of a string; mounted to pause before the stone altar, to lie on it, head bent back, throat bared.... Mercifully Cliff regained enough control to close his eyes.

He opened them at a gasp from Vilma; saw the vampire raise the flaccid body of Les Starke and hurl it far from him, to crash to the stone steps, to roll and thud and tumble, down and down, sickeningly, to lie awkwardly twisted on the floor before his companions!

And another began to climb the long stone steps....

All through the interminable night Cliff and Vilma crouched on the ledge, staring through the barred window. A hundred times they would have fled to escape the maddening scene, but they could not move. Senses reeled before the awful monotony of the ceaseless climbing, their eyes smarted with fixed staring, their tongues and throats were parched to desert dryness; yet only after hours of endless watching, only after the last victim had climbed the steps, did the edge of terror dull, and a modicum of control return to their bodies.

Stiffly Cliff looked over his shoulder. A faint tinge of gray rimmed the sea on the eastern horizon.

"Almost daylight," he whispered hoarsely.

Vilma nodded, her gaze still held by that chamber of horror. Cliff followed the direction of her eyes; and saw Corio standing like a great bat in his hooded cape close to the far wall. He raised his four-piped horn to his lips. And the instrument's fourth note crept through the room.

It was a doleful sound, a cry like the cry Death itself might possess; yet oddly—and horribly—it was soothing, promising the peace of endless sleep. And touched by its power, the columns of undead stiffened, thinned to wraiths, flowed as water flows down the stone steps, vanished!

The dead-alive—those five vampires in crimson cowls—looked upward uneasily. The shadows under the roof were graying with the light of dawn. Cliff could sense their thought. Before sunrise they must be in their tombs under the castle, to sleep until another night. With one accord they strode down the stairs, past Corio who had prostrated himself, and entered a black opening in the wall. With their departure the altar fire dimmed to a sullen ember.

Corio arose. He was alone in the chamber save for that dead, broken body lying in a twisted heap at the foot of the stairs, and those other half-alive wretches stretched out before the altar. Now, Cliff told himself, was the time for him to get in there at Corio; now was the time to rescue his friends—but he continued to crouch, unmoving.

Again Corio blew on his silver horn, and a faint cry leaped from Vilma's tensed lips. The luring note that had drawn her, Cliff thought hazily; then he thought of nothing save the sound, the sound that promised him all he could desire. Earth and its dominion, his for the taking—if he answered that call!... Then even the sound eluded his senses, and he heard only the promise.... He must answer, must claim what was rightfully his!

But those half-dead creatures—sight of their stirring steadied his staggering sanity. Here and there heads lifted and bloodless husks of bodies tried to rise. In the pallid light they seemed like corpses, freed from newly opened graves. Some could only reach their knees; others rose to uncertain limbs. And all moved down the stairway toward Corio, answering his summons; followed as he made his slow way toward the opening in the wall, still blowing the single note—the note that promised Earth and all it held....

Cliff glanced toward Vilma—and she was not there. He looked down, saw her far below, dropping from crack to crevice with amazing speed and daring, hastening toward—Corio!

The thought jarred any lingering taint of allurement from Cliff's mind. He must stop her. He swung around, ignoring the cramped stiffness of his legs, and started down the steep wall. Down, down, recklessly, with Corio's horn-note only a faintly heard sound fading behind him.

Now he saw Vilma reach the rocks below and dash around the corner of the castle, and he cursed, redoubling his speed. Down—down—and suddenly the ancient rock crumbled underfoot. For an instant he hung from straining fingertips—then dropped.

A smashing impact—a stone that slid beneath him—and his head crashed against the castle wall. Through a fiery mist of pain he pictured Vilma in the grasp of Corio. The mist thickened—grew black—engulfed him.

4. In Corio's Hands

Cliff awoke with the sun glaring down on his face. He opened his eyes, and stabbing lances of light pierced his eyeballs. Momentarily blinded, he pressed his hands across his face and struggled erect. There was a sick feeling in his stomach, and the back of his head throbbled incessantly. He touched the aching area, and winced. A lump like an egg thrust out his scalp; it was sticky with blood. He stood there, weaving from side to side, trying to recall something....

As memory came, he groaned. Vilma! He had last seen her racing madly toward Corio, lured by his damned horn. It was daylight now; the sun had risen at least an hour ago. An hour—with

Vilma gone!

Shaking his head to clear it, and gritting his teeth at the pain, he stalked along the wall. Turning the corner he strode on toward the crooked steps. The lifeless terrain reeled dizzily, but he went on resolutely. The pain in his head was fading to a dull ache; and as he mounted the steps, strength seemed to flow back into his legs. With every sense taut he passed into the gloom of the castle.

A quick glance he cast about—saw the body of Starke lying where it had fallen. No use to examine it; there was no life there. His gaze swept up the slope of the stairway to the altar at its head, lingered on the phosphorescent eye of light still glowing there. Then he shrugged grimly and moved on to the doorway in the wall. Warily he peered in.

As his eyes adjusted themselves to the greater darkness, he saw a narrow stairway leading downward into a shadowy corridor. Somewhere in the tunnel's depths a faint light shone. He could see nothing more. He moved stealthily down the damp, dank stairs.

At the bottom he paused, listening. He could hear nothing. A hundred feet ahead, the corridor divided in two; a burning torch was thrust in the wall at the junction. Cliff nodded with satisfaction. Corio *must* be somewhere near by; for only a human needed light.

Silently Cliff strode along the corridor. At the fork he hesitated, then chose the right branch, for light glowed faintly along that passageway. The other led downward, black as the pits of hell.

A doorway appeared in the wall ahead, and he moved warily, with fists clenched. Flickering torchlight filtered into the corridor. There was no audible sound. Now Cliff peered into a small chamber, and gasped in sudden horror, his eyes staring unwinkingly at a spectacle incredibly pitiful.

Here were the passengers of the *Ariel*, whitely naked, and lying in little groups on the cold stone floor, huddled together for warmth. Their faces turned toward Darrell as he stood in the doorway, but there was no recognition in the vacuous eyes, no thought, no intelligence, and little life in the wide-mouthed stares. It seemed as though their souls had been drained from their bodies with their blood.

Sickened, Cliff turned away, cursing his own helplessness to aid them, cursing Leon Corio who was responsible for their plight. Black wrath gripped him as he moved on.

Again the corridor branched, and again he kept to the right. Suddenly he halted, ears straining. He heard the sound of a voice—the hollow voice of Corio! It came faintly but clearly from a room at the end of the passageway. Cliff went forward slowly.

"And so, my dear," Corio was saying, "we entered into a pact with the—Master, a pact sealed with blood. In exchange for our lives we three were to bring other humans to this island for the feasting of the dead-alive. Every third month each of us must return with our cargo when the moon is full; and since we come back on alternating months, they have a constant supply of fresh blood. Usually some of our captives live from full moon to full moon before they become like those of the galley—the undead. Some of these we waken when it suits our fancy; they are not like the Masters; they awaken only when we call them—we three or the Masters.

"More than life they give us for what we do. Centuries ago pirates used this island for refuge. They—died—and they left their treasure in this castle. It lies in the room where the Masters lie; and we three receive payment in gold and gems. Tonight I receive my pay, and tomorrow I leave on the *Ariel*—and you go with me!"

Cliff heard Vilma answer, and even while his heart leaped with relief, he marveled at the cool scorn in her voice.

"So I go with you, do I? I'd rather climb the stairs with the rest of your victims than have anything to do with you—you monster! When Cliff Darrell finds you——"

"Darrell!" Corio's voice was a frozen sneer. "He'll do nothing! I'll find *him*—and he'll wish he could climb the stairs of blood! As for you, you'll go with me, and like it! A drop of my blood in your veins, and you will belong to the Master, as I do. We shall attend to that; but first there is something else—more pleasant." His words fell to an indistinguishable purr.

Still moving stealthily, Cliff hastened forward. Suddenly Vilma screamed; and he launched himself madly across the remaining distance, stood crouching at the threshold.

Vilma lay on an ancient bed, her wrists and ankles bound with leather thongs drawn about the four tall bed-posts. Only the torn remnants of her under-garments covered the rounded contours of her body, and Corio crouched over her, caressing the pink flesh. Vilma writhed beneath his touch.

Cliff growled deep in his throat as he sprang. Corio spun around and leaped aside, but he was too slow to escape Cliff's powerful lunge. One hand closed on his thin neck, and the other, a rock-like fist, made a bloody ruin of his mouth. Howling with pain, Corio tried to sink his teeth in Cliff's arm.

Cliff flung him aside, following with the easy glide of a boxer. Corio crawled to his feet, cringing, dodging before the nemesis that stalked him. Again Cliff leaped, and Corio, yellow with fear, darted around the bed and ran wildly into the hallway. At the door Cliff checked himself, reason holding him. Corio could elude him with ease in this labyrinth of passages; and his first concern was Vilma's safety.

He returned to the bed. Vilma looked up at him with such relief and thankfulness on her face that Cliff, with a little choked cry, flung himself to his knees beside the bed and kissed her hungrily. For moments their lips clung; then Cliff straightened shakily, trying to laugh.

"We've got to get out of here, sweetheart," he said. "I'm not afraid of Corio, but he knows things about this place that we don't know. After you're safe on the yacht, I'll come back and get him."

He looked around for something with which to cut her bonds. On the wall above the bed were crossed a pair of murderous-looking cutlasses. Seizing one of these, Cliff wrenched it from its fastenings and drew it through the cords.... She stood beside him, free.

"Your clothing——" Cliff began, his eyes on her almost-nude body.

She blushed and pointed mutely to a heap of rags on the floor. Her eyes flamed wrathfully. "He—he ripped them from me!"

The muscles of Cliff's jaws knotted, and he scowled as he surveyed the room for a drape or hanging to cover her. For the first time he really saw the place. All the lavish splendor of royalty had been expended on this chamber. It might have been the bedroom of a king, except that the ancient furnishings belonged to no particular period; were, in fact, the loot of raids extended over centuries. Yet despite its splendor, everything was repulsive, cloaked with the same air of unearthly gloom that hovered about the galley.

He moved toward an intricately woven tapestry; but Vilma checked him, shuddering with revulsion.

"No, Cliff—it's too much like grave clothes. Everything about this place makes my flesh crawl. I'd rather stay as I am than touch any of it!"

Cliff nodded slowly. "Let's go then."

They hurried through the corridors toward the stairway, with Cliff holding the cutlas in readiness. As they passed the room in which lay the *Ariel's* passengers, he tried to divert Vilma's attention, but she looked in as though hypnotized.

"I saw them before," she whispered. "It's awful."

As they started up the stairway to the great hall, Cliff took the lead. He moved with utmost caution.

"It doesn't seem right," he said uneasily. "We should hear from Corio."

At that moment they did hear from him—literally. From somewhere in the maze of tunnels came the sound of his accursed horn—the note of sleep! It swirled insidiously about their heads, numbing their senses. Cliff felt his stride falter, saw Vilma stumble, and he hurled himself forward furiously, gripping her arm.

"Hurry!" he shouted, striving to pierce the fog of sleep. "We've *got* to get out! Damn him!"

Vilma rallied for an instant, and they reached the top of the stairs. On—across that wide, wide room, each step a struggle.... On while the droning sound floated languidly through every nerve cell.... On—till their muscles could no longer move, and they sagged to the hard stone, asleep.

Moments later Cliff opened his eyes to meet the hellish glare of Leon Corio. Corio smiled thinly.

"So—you awaken. Good! I would have you know the fate I have planned for you. You see this?" He held the cutlas high above Darrell's throat like the blade of a guillotine. "With this I could end your life quite painlessly and quickly. It really would prove entertaining for Miss Bradley, I'm sure." He chuckled faintly behind bruised and swollen lips.

Cliff squirmed, striving to rise, then subsided instantly. He was bound hand and foot.

"I *could* kill you," Corio repeated musingly, "but that would lack finesse." His teeth bared in a feline smile. "And it would be such a waste—of blood! Instead, I'll take you out to the galley and let you lie there till her crew awakens tonight. They have tasted blood, and after tonight will taste none again for another month. I imagine they'll—drain you dry!" The last phrase was a vicious snarl.

Cliff heard Vilma utter a suppressed sob, and he turned his head. She lay close by, bound like him with strips of leather. Furiously Cliff strained at his fetters, but they held.

"And while you wait for those gentle Persians to awaken," Corio continued in tones caressingly soft, "you can think of your sweetheart in my arms! It may teach you not to strike your betters—"

though you can never profit by your lesson."

Stooping, he raised Cliff's powerful form and managed to fling him over one shoulder. Then he moved from the great hall, down the stone steps, and across the dead plain with its sighing skeleton trees. He was panting jerkily by the time he came to the fissure leading to the cove, but he reached it, despite Cliff's two hundred pounds. Without pausing, he went on into the cavern, along the rock ledge, to step at last upon the deck of the black galley.

"Pleasant thoughts," he said gently as he dropped Cliff to the spongy boards. "You have only to wait till dark!"

Cliff listened to his rapid footfalls till they died in distance; then there was no sound save his own breathing.

Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the heavy gloom, and he saw that Corio had dropped him just at the edge of the rowers' pit. There were white things down there—bones, pale as marble, scattered about aimlessly. Could—could those bones join to make the rowers who would arise with the night? It seemed absurd—*was* absurd—yet he knew it was so! He had seen too much to doubt it.

He rolled over on his back and stared upward into the shadows. He must lie here helpless while Corio returned to Vilma—did with her as he pleased! Perhaps he might even transform her into a blood-tainted monster like himself! He saw her again in that room of ancient splendor, spread-eagled to the bed; and the muscles corded in his arms, and his lips strained white in a futile effort to break free.

Interminably he lay there waiting. The galley was damp with the chilling dampness of a sepulcher, and the dampness penetrated deeper and deeper. Clamping his jaws together to prevent their quivering, he struggled against a rising tide of madness which gnawed at his reason. His mind began to crunch and jangle like a machine out of gear, threatening to destroy itself.

On and on in plodding indifference the stolid moments passed, till at last Cliff realized that it was growing darker. He rolled over on his side and stared into the galley pit, eyes fixed on the inert masses of white. Soon they would move! Soon the undead would rise! His thoughts, touched by the whips of dread, sped about like slaves seeking escape from a torture pit. And abruptly out of the welter of chaotic ideas came one straw of sanity; he seized it, his heart hammering with hope.

Those Persian sailors were armed! Their swords and knives were real, for they cut flesh! Somewhere among their bones must lie sharp-edged blades!

He struggled to the edge of the pit, let his feet drop over. As they touched, he balanced precariously for an instant, then fell to his knees. He peered feverishly about among white bones, moldering garments, and rusted armor—and saw a faint glimmer of light on pointed steel. He sank forward on his face in the direction of the gleam, turned over, squirmed and writhed till he felt the cold blade against his hands. He caught it between his fingers and began sawing back and forth.

It was heart-breaking work. Age had dulled the weapon, and long slivers of rust flaked off, but the leather which bound him was also ancient. Though progress was slow, and the effort laborious, Cliff knew his bonds were weakening.

But it was growing darker. Even now he could see only a suggestion of gray among the shadows. If those undead things materialized while he lay among them!... Sweat stood out on his forehead and he redoubled his efforts, straining at the leather as he sawed.

With a snap the cords parted and his hands were free. A single slash severed the thongs about his ankles, and he stood up, leaped to the deck. Not an instant too soon! There was movement in the pit—a hideous crawling of bones assembling themselves into skeletal form....

Cliff waited to see no more. There were limits to what one could see and remain sane. With a bound he crossed the rotting deck, and sprang ashore. Despite the dark, he almost ran from the madness of that cave, ran till he passed through the wall of rock, till he saw the rim of the moon gleaming behind the castle.

5. The End of the Island

Out on the plain he sprinted through the ghostly forest. He knew he had no time to spare—knew that soon the march of torture would begin—knew that if Vilma were within the castle, she must answer the summons of Corio's horn. Even now light glowed faintly in the high, square windows.

That horn! At the foot of the steps he stopped short. If *he* heard the horn, he too must answer! He dared not risk it. With impatient fingers he tore a strip of cloth from his shirt, rolled it into a cylinder, and thrust it into his ear. Another for the other ear—and he darted up into the castle.

A sweeping glance revealed no one, only the murky glow of the altar fire, and the wraiths of

smoke pluming upward toward the shadowed roof. Wishing now that he had brought a weapon from the galley, Cliff crossed to the opening in the wall. He stood at the top of the steps, listening, then cursed silently as he remembered that he could hear none but very loud sounds. He saw nothing; so he hastened down into the corridor. His steps were swiftly stealthy as he moved toward Corio's room.

He was past the first branching passage, when a sixth sense warned him of someone's approach. He ran swiftly to the next fork, then paused within its shelter and glanced back, saw five red-cowled figures glide along the tunnel and vanish up the stairway. Cliff frowned. With the vampires in the great hall, Corio must soon follow, leading his victims to the blood-feast. He drew back deeper into the shadows.

His groping hands touched something in the dark—round and hard—like a keg. Curiously he investigated. It *was* a keg, and there were others. A sandy powder trailed to the floor from a crack in one of them. Thoughtfully Cliff let it run through his fingers. Gunpowder! Of course—he had heard Corio mention pirates and their treasure, and this had been their cache of explosive. An idea was forming....

He looked up to see a shadow pass the mouth of the tunnel; he crept forward and peered out. He saw the black-hooded figure of Leon Corio striding along, saw him enter the room where the passengers of the *Ariel* lay. In a breath Cliff was down the corridor to Corio's room. A tarnished silver candelabrum shed faint light through the chamber, and by its flickering glow he searched for Vilma, thoroughly, painstakingly—futilely.

He stood in the center of the room in indecision, his forehead creased with anxiety. If only he could find her, he'd know how to plan! He ran his hand through his hair helplessly, then heard very faintly the luring note of Corio's horn. She must answer that summons, unless Corio had her tied somewhere. His best chance of finding her lay in the hall above.

On the wall still hung the mate of the cutlas he had used to free Vilma; he wrenched it down and ran out into the corridor. The last of the naked marchers was disappearing up the stairway. Now the horn-note died, and he could feel more than hear the rumbling bass of the dirge from the depths below him.

He ran the rest of the distance along the passageway and mounted the steps two at a stride. He looked into the torture hall. As on the previous night, Corio stood far back, close to the wall in which Cliff crouched. The arms of the Master were raised high; raised, Cliff knew though he could not hear it, in a blasphemous incantation. And then he saw something that sent a crimson lance of fury crashing through his brain.

Vilma, stripped like the rest, stood with the other victims at the foot of the long steps! Her body gleamed pinkly, in contrast to the pallid drabness of the half-dead automatons, and she held her head proudly erect. But from where he stood Cliff could see the side of her face, and it bore a look of terror.

He could see Corio's face, too, and he was looking at the girl, baffled fury glaring from his eyes—as though she were there against his will.

Cliff's first impulse was to fling himself out there with his cutlas and hack a way to freedom for Vilma and himself, but cold reason checked this folly. Such a course could end only in death. Motionless he watched the scene before him, his brain frantically seeking a plan with even a ghost of a chance of succeeding.

The gunpowder! There was enough of the stuff below to blast this entire castle into the hell where it belonged! Hastily he retraced his steps to the tunnel in which he had found the kegs, plucking the torch from its niche in the wall as he passed it. He held it high above his head as he examined the contents of the broken keg. Unmistakably gunpowder!

Thrusting the cutlas beneath his belt, he clutched a handful of the black dust. Then, crouching close to the floor, he drew an irregular thread through the passageway toward the stairs. Once he returned for more powder, but in a few minutes the job was done. At the foot of the steps where the trail ended, he touched his torch to the black line and watched a hissing spark snake its white-smoked way back toward the powder kegs. An instant he watched it, then sprang up the stairs. He'd have to move fast!

With a hideous howl he darted into the hall, his cutlas above his head. Corio spun about—and it was his last living act. A single sweep of the great blade sheared his head from his neck, sent it rolling grotesquely along the floor. For three heart-beats the body stood with a fountain of blood spurting from severed arteries; then it crashed.

Coolly Cliff leaned over the twitching cadaver, ignoring the bedlam on the stairs, the horde sweeping down toward him, hurling aside the waiting humans. He pried open clutching fingers, seized a twisted silver instrument, and raised it to his lips.

The mass of undead were almost upon him, the murky light glinting on menacing blades, when Cliff blew the first note. The note of sleep! He tried again, hastily. And it was the right one!

At the doleful, soothing sound the undead halted in their tracks; halted—and melted into nothingness before his eyes!

But now those other five in their robes of bloody red—they were charging, and even though they were unarmed, Cliff felt a stab of fear. They possessed powers beyond the human, powers a mortal could not combat. He braced himself and waited.

At the bottom of the steps they stopped, ranging in a wide half-circle. The central monster—the Master—flung up his arms in a strangely terrifying gesture, and Cliff saw his carmine lips move in a chant which he could not hear. Something, a chilling Presence, hovered about him, seemed to settle upon him, cloaking him with the might of the devil himself. That unheard incantation continued, and Cliff felt a cold rigidity creeping through every fiber, slowly freezing his limbs into columns of ice.

With a mighty effort of will he flung himself toward that accursed drinker of blood—and at that instant a terrific detonation rocked the ancient building, and a cloud of smoke and flame burst from the opening in the wall. Cliff was hurled from his feet, rolled over and over, and crashed against the wall by the awful concussion, the cutlas and silver horn sent whirling through the air.

Dizzily he staggered to his feet, crouching defensively. Sounds came to him clearly now; the explosion must have jarred the plugs from his ears. He scanned the room; saw the unclad humans scattered everywhere, most of them lying still and unconscious. He saw Vilma rising slowly; then he looked for the monsters in red. Startled, he saw them rushing toward the opening in the wall, to vanish in its smoke-filled interior. Why did they—? Then he knew. Down there somewhere were their graves—graves rent and broken by the explosion—graves threatened by the flames—and panic had seized the vampires, fear of the death which would result with exile from their tombs!

Unsteadily Cliff crossed to Vilma. She saw him coming and flung herself sobbing into his arms. He crushed her lithe form close—and another explosion, more violent than the first, sent a section of the stone floor leaping upward as though with life of its own. Clinging to Vilma, Cliff managed to maintain his footing, though the floor bucked and heaved. A snapping, booming roar—and a great chasm opened in the floor. A breathless instant—and a segment of the stone stairs, rumbling thunderously, dropped out of sight into a newly formed pit! With it went the blasphemous altar and its phosphorescent fire.

Deafened, stunned, momentarily powerless to move, Cliff's mind groped for an explanation. It seemed incredible that gunpowder could cause such havoc. And the swaying of the floor continued; the thick stone walls shook alarmingly. Suddenly he understood. An earthquake! The explosions had jarred the none-too-stable understrata of rock into spasmodic motion that must grind everything to bits! The island was doomed! And Earth would be better without it.

If only they could reach the *Ariel* first!

New strength flowed through him, and hugging Vilma close, he staggered toward the spot where he knew the door must be. Somehow he reached it, and reeled down the broken stone steps.

The plain of dead trees swayed like the deck of a ship in a storm as Cliff started across it. A gale had arisen and swept in from the sea, ripping dry branches from the skeleton growths and whirling them about like straws. Yet somehow Cliff reached the crevice in the rock wall with his burden, reached the deck of the galley, crossed it, and won to the safety of the *Ariel*. Minutes later, with Diesel engines purring, they crept out through the narrow channel into the open sea.

Ten minutes later the Isle of the Undead lay safely behind them. Vilma had dressed; and now they sat together in the pilot house. Cliff had one arm about her, and one hand on the wheel.

"And so," the girl was saying, "while Corio carried you to that terrible old boat, I got loose. He hadn't tied me very tightly, and I slipped my hands free. I had to hide, and I could think of only one place that might be safe, where he wouldn't think to look for me. I ran down to the room where those—those others lay; I undressed, and buried myself among them. It was horrible—the way they sucked each other's wounds...."

Cliff pressed a hand across her lips. "Forget that!" he said almost fiercely. "Forget all of it—d'you hear?"

She looked up at him and said simply: "I'll try."

They glanced back toward the black blotch on the horizon. The seismic disturbances continued unabated. At that moment they saw the barrier of rock like a skull split and sink into the sea. Beyond, cleansing tongues of flame licked the sky. They saw a single jagged wall of the castle still standing, one window glowing in its black expanse like a square, bloody moon against a bloody sky. It crumbled.

They turned away, and Cliff's arm circled the girl he loved. Their lips met and clung.... And the *Ariel* plowed on through the frothing brine, bearing them toward safety and forgetfulness.... Together.

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