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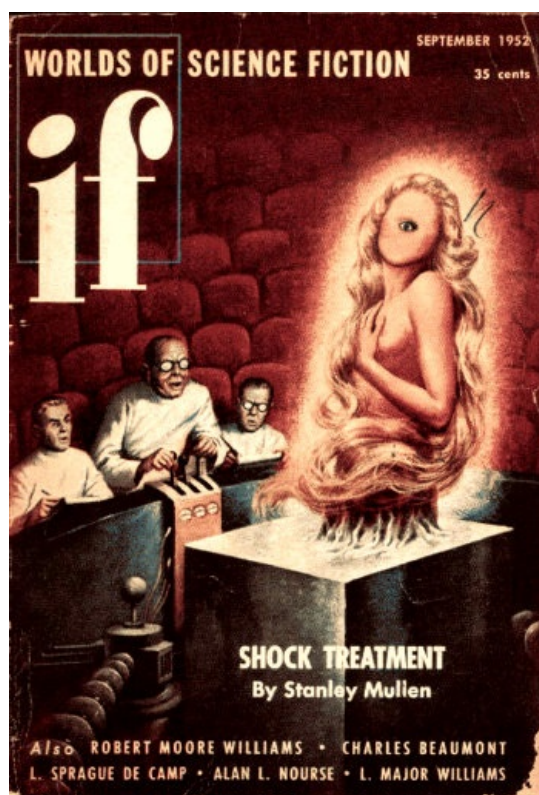
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SHOCK TREATMENT \*\*\*



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# Shock Treatment

By Stanley Mullen

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In Venusport, on payday-night, it is difficult to tell for certain where the town leaves off and the pink elephants begin. It is difficult to tell about other things, too. Spud Newlin had heard that a man could sometimes get rich overnight just tending bar on such occasions, and he was putting the rumor to the test. Not many bartenders had lasted long enough to find out.

The night had had a good start. Clock hands over the bar in the Spacebell registered 1:18 Venus-time, and considering, things were almost dull at

*"I'll give you the cure for the most horrible disease," Songeen said. "The sickness of life itself." Newlin replied, "Fine. But first, give me a couple of minutes to kill your husband. Then we'll go on from there."*

the moment. The place had been jumping earlier, but hilarity had worn itself out, the dead had been removed and excitement dulled. No relatives or widows of the dead sportsmen had yet appeared; all corpses-elect had died clean, with the minimum of messy violence and, surprisingly, only three more or less innocent bystanders had been burned down in the proceedings. After shattering uproar, such calm was disturbing. Newlin was actually getting bored. Then *she* came in—and he was no longer bored. But, perversely, he resented the surge of interest that ran through him at sight of this out-of-place girl.

At a casual glance, she might seem ordinary, but Newlin was never superficial. Her kind of beauty was something to be sensed, not catalogued. It was part of the odd grace of movement, of the fine, angular features, of the curious emotion which dwelt upon them, sad and subdued. Even her costume was as out of place in the Spacebell as her mood; the dress was simply cut and expensive, but drab for the time and place. It clung about a slight, well-formed body in smoothly curved lines that seemed almost a part of her. Only her hands and eyes showed nervous tension.

At first he thought her eyes were cold, but it was something racial rather than personal. He noticed that they were large and luminous—like moonstones—with a pearly opaque glimmer as if only upper layers colored and reflected light. In their depths was an odd effect, like metalflakes drifting through ribboned moonlight with abysses of deepest shadow beyond. There was pain, trouble, and sadness in them, and behind that, fear—a desperate fear. You thought of wailing, haunted moonlight, and of dreadful things fled from in dreams.

Newlin's first thought was that she was one of the new-made widows, and was likely to be all too human about it. Later, when he had begun to doubt that she was all-human, her physical charms still went inside him and turned like a dull knife. He was no more immune to animal attraction than the next man, but in this particular woman there was something else even more intriguing and unpredictable. He felt a powerful impulse to do something to relieve her of that paralyzing supernatural dread.

A situation pregnant with violence was working up at one of the gaming tables but Newlin wilfully tore his attention from the mounting tension between the fat Martian gambler and an ugly character from Ganymede.

"Anything I can do for you, sister?"

Her smile was strange, thoughtful, preoccupied. "Yes," she told him. "There is something you can do for me. Unless your question was purely professional. If so, forget it. I need something stronger than the—the liquors you serve here."

Newlin grinned sourly. "You don't know our drinks. One sip and a mouse snarls at a snow-leopard. The question was not purely professional. Not my profession, anyhow. I don't know about yours. Or do I?"

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Her head jerked on its slender stalk of neck. Pale eyes stared into his; her lips twisted in cold scorn.

"I don't think you do. And I'll do without your help. Perhaps you'd better go back to polishing glassware."

The rebuke failed to impress Newlin. He waited while her glance swung about the room, evaluating the place and its occupants in one quick sweep. Dissatisfied, she turned back to Newlin and again the moonstruck eyes probed and assessed him.

"Take your pick," he said sharply. "But don't judge them by their clothes. On Venus, a man in ragged space-leather may have heavy pockets. Now, take me—"

"I was told I could find Spud Newlin here. Point him out and I'll pay your fee—"

Newlin was suddenly cautious. "Yes, he's here—but what would a woman like you want with such a notorious—"

"I'm asking questions, not answering," she said calmly. "And I'm well aware of his failings. I selected him because of his ... his reputation. It's revolting, but even such a man may have uses. My requirements of him, and my reasons for the choice, I will discuss with him. No one else."

"Free advice, sister. Forget it, and get out of here. He's no good. Particularly bad, for a choice morsel like you."

"I'm used to making up my own mind. Where is he?"

Newlin shrugged. "You win. I'm Newlin. You take it from there."

Incredulity flooded her face and slowly drained away. "You! Yes, you could be Newlin. But you're working here. A famous man like you. Why?"

Newlin laughed easily. "It's very simple. I need money. If I can last through till morning, I'll have it. Now I'll ask the questions. You answer them. What do you want? Why me?"

A variety of expressions flowed over her mobile features.

"But—you could leave?" she faltered.

"I could, but I won't. This isn't charity night, kid. So go home and come back another time. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow won't do. Maybe I've chosen the wrong man, but there's no time for second chances. I wanted a man with courage, a man used to living dangerously and going his own way, a man who wouldn't ask questions and would do anything for money. You sounded like something out of the old books; a rogue; a rebel."

Newlin sighed. Did it show so much? From the gutter that spawned him, he had fought and gouged and elbowed his way up. To him all men were enemies. As a spacebum, he had explored the raw, expanding frontiers as Man surged from planet to planet. As a hunted outlaw he had existed perilously on the twilight fringes of civilization. Ruthless and savage, a thief and despoiler, a criminal and adventurer, he had found his way back to Earth, Mars, Venus and wrested a niche of sorts within the citadels he had attempted to overthrow. Despite the brittle amnesty, he knew that authority awaited only a single slip to deal with him according to their views. But in the bitterness of ultimate disillusion, he had found the fountainhead as lacking in civilization and sanity as its furthest ripples. He longed, now, only for the final gesture of rejection. Escape....

"I had expected more of Newlin," said the girl.

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His reply was a short, bitter laugh. "So had I. My character is as corrupt as the rest of mankind. Poverty is undignified and degrading; it poisons virtue and debases the outlook. Without money a man cannot claim his birthright of freedom; getting money he loses his independence and his character."

"You think money would make you free?" the girl asked.

"Not of itself." Newlin scowled. "With money, a free man can be free; a slave with money is still a slave. Perhaps I want to learn for myself which I am. I want enough to pay for a spaceship, the best to be had. A one-man ship in which I can escape this madhouse and venture alone—beyond Pluto. Such a plan requires money, so I work in the Spacebell. Between wages, tips, graft and my winnings, I may have half enough, by dawn. If I live that long."

The girl nodded, then spoke contemptuously, "I can pay very generously. You can set your own price. Enough even for your spaceship. But what do you expect to find—beyond Pluto?"

"Myself, first. After that, who knows? This solar system is a vast pesthouse. I am contaminated by fools, moneygrubbers, sheep and the corrupt authorities that rule them. What else I find isn't important if I find myself. Even death."

Newlin's eyes burned with a hot glare of fanaticism. Dread sprang into the girl's heart. Always with these people there was this fear, this panic-desire to escape, always an urge to destruction coupled with eery mysticism, compulsions, conflicts—and always the final delusion of personal sanity in the atmosphere of chaos. Some of Newlin's words found echo in herself, but she checked a momentary sympathy. The system was mad, true—but how sane was Newlin? How sane and trustworthy? He could be a dangerous tool in her unskilled, frightened hands.

She had chosen him on the basis of his reputation. From his police record, and other documents. A capable man, courageous and self-reliant, ingenious, but a person of tensions and conflicts, a man of violence, unpredictable, torn by contradictory impulses, a savage but not without kindness and generosity. For her purposes, he might do as well as any other. At worst a man, cast in heroic mold. Quickly, but not without revulsions and reservations, she made her fateful decision.

"For a man of your talents," she said, "the task should be simple. I want you to break into a building and bring me something. There is danger you would not understand. If you fail, death for both of us. For success, you set the price. Are you interested?"

Newlin laughed cynically. "You promise the moon if I can steal it for you, nothing if I can't?"

"No such shrewd bargaining," the girl murmured uneasily. "But name the amount you hoped to make here. I will match it now—and double it if you accomplish my errand."

"Fair enough," said Newlin. "But keep your money. I'll case the job first. Pay me later—if I don't change my mind again."

Ducking behind the bar, he shed his apron and buzzed for the stand-in bartender. Ed Careld forsook his interminable game of Martian chess and appeared to take over.

"Seems quiet," he said. "What's up?"

"Nothing," Newlin told him. "Private business. I may not be back. Keep an eye on Table Three."

Careld nodded, eyed the gamblers at Table Three dubiously. He tied his apron carefully and sidled toward the table to oversee the situation and clamp down a lid if necessary. Table Three picked that moment to erupt in profane violence. Three languages splashed pungently in dispute

which passed quickly to a climax of crisscrossed heat-beam brilliance. Marksmanship was poor; both the fat Martian and his adversary from Ganymede survived, and only two questionable kibitzers blazed into sudden oblivion. Careld swept up the corpses into neat piles of ash, then tried to warn the combatants against further displays of short temper.

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He died in an outburst of majority resentment, punctuated by heat-beams. Newlin returned behind the counter and buzzed for Careld's stand-in. Then clutching the girl's arm, he left the place, dragging her along.

The street was dim, silent, deserted. "Where to?" asked Newlin.

Her quick nod indicated direction.

"Walking distance?" he persisted. "Inside the city? If not, I'll have to get protection suits from a public locker."

"Just inside. Monta Park."

Newlin whistled. "Nice neighborhood. Do you live there?"

"No," she faltered. "I'm just in from—Earth."

Earth! It was a long time since Newlin had seen Earth. Few of his memories were pleasantly nostalgic. Born there, in the poorest quarter of the international spaceport of Sahara City, his early life had been hard. Both parents had died there, broken from strain and poverty, and Newlin escaped only by stowing away in the dangerous after-holds of a rocketship bound for Mars, risking the unpleasant death from leaking radioactives in preference to being poor on Earth.

He had been poor since, in many places, but never with the grinding hopelessness of those early nightmare years. Their mark stayed with him and colored his life. He knew every rathole of the system, with the same intimacy the rats knew them. Once, on a non-stop express rocket from Mars to Pluto, he had lost a finger and all the toes from his left foot in ceaseless guerilla warfare with rats which had disputed possession of the hold in which he stowed away. More than once he had bummed passage near the atomic fuel vats of cranky old space-freighters that were mere tin cans caulked with chewing gum. As boy and man, he slept in jails from the dark, mad moons of Neptune to the fiery beach-head colonies of Mercury. And with fists, brain and nimble fingers he had written an epic biography in Security Police annals.

Like other cities of the space frontier, Venusport was raw and crude, exotically beautiful and cruelly violent. To Newlin it was old stuff, picturesque, with the spicy flavor of a perilous vacation spot. After abrasive years on a dozen planets and habitable moons, the ugly savageries of Venus had only a quaint charm. Survival was always comparatively easy there, and a man shed normal fears with the shredding, blistered skin of spaceburns. He was surprised when the girl shuddered and drew close to him. Her instinctive trust amused him, and he laughed brutally. The sound slashed between them like a chilled blade.

They went together, in silence. Faint, flat breeze from the city's air-conditioners fanned their faces. It was dark enough, and for Venus, reasonably cool. Buildings strewn like a careless giant's toys formed a vague and monstrous backdrop. Street-lighting was poor, for such luxuries are expensive and the city fathers cared little what happened to the poor, diseased, half-starved nonentities. All streets were crooked aimless alleys, all black and empty. Only near landing stages and space-freight elevators was there any activity. Darkness and the Cyclopean setting gave more menace than intimacy to the dim tangles of avenues and parkways.

The girl stopped, panting for breath. Newlin waited for her.

"You're a fool to trust yourself alone with me in a place like this," he told her grimly.

She hugged the loose mantle tightly across her shoulders and tried vainly to read his face in the murk.

"If you're trying to frighten me, you're wasting time," she said, "I have more important fears."

Newlin chuckled. Skinny wench, but she had something. There was pride in her, and scorn, and a hot spark that burned through the tones of cold scorn. Something else, too. A hint of desperate courage that baffled him.

"I still think you should have tried the panther sweat at the Spacebell," he suggested. "One sip and—"

"I know," she snapped. "And I hope you've had yours for tonight. You'll need it. We're almost there."

"In that case, we'd better talk," he said curtly. "I still know nothing about you. Who you are, what you want? I don't even know your name."

She spoke in low, vibrant tones, but the language seemed unfamiliar to her. She groped for exact words, extracted subtle meanings. But there was a hesitance, an uneasiness, about speech itself,

as if she found it a tedious and inflexible medium for thought expressions.

"I told you. In a—building, there is a man I must see. He does not wish to see me, and there are barriers I cannot pass. The building is a combination workshop and living quarters, and something else you would not understand. You must go inside for me and induce him to come out to me. My name is Songeen. Tell him that. He will know me, and perhaps he will come. But it has been so long—"

Newlin grunted. "That man I must see. One who wouldn't come when you whistled. However long it has been?"

"He has changed—greatly. He may be insane. He may be dangerous. In self-defense, it may be necessary for you to kill him. For your protection, I have provided a weapon. Use all other means to persuade him first, but threaten if you have to. And be ready to kill if he attacks you. But dead or alive, bring him to me."

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Suddenly Newlin disliked his errand. Even more, he disliked himself. For a brittle moment, he was moved to turn back, refuse to carry out a bargain he now regretted. Killing for pay, at the whim of a jealous or scorned woman, was too ugly even for his calloused morality.

"Preferably dead?" he asked thinly.

"Preferably alive," Songeen murmured. "You would not understand, of course. It is because I love him. He will not come, but he must have the chance. And I must send a stranger to kill him, because he has—forgotten."

Newlin stiffened angrily. He was on the point of rejecting the girl and her project when a battery of lights moved toward them from the winding lanes of the Park. Too well he knew what they meant.

As the wealthiest district of Venusport, Monta Park was smug, respectable, luxurious—and protected. Roving radio-patrols of Protection Police—privately hired thugs—guarded its dwellers and their possessions. A prowling mono-car slowed and maneuvered to cast a revealing spotlight on the loitering pair. Newlin, had he been alone, might have dodged into the dense shrubbery, but the girl knew better.



***The spotlight meant violence and sudden death.***

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Calmly she turned to face down the occupants of the PP car, and her haughty expression would have chilled the blood of any PP constable presumptuous enough to question her. Her attitude and the obvious richness of her clothing seemed to satisfy the patrol, for the beam swung briefly and hesitated on Newlin. He dropped behind her like a servant bodyguard and hoped his scuffed space-leather was not too noticeable. The beam held for seconds, then flicked out. Soundlessly the patrol car vanished.

Neither spoke as the pair moved quickly into the precincts of the Park. As residence area, it was splashy; a series of interlocked estates rather than expensive mansions packed closely together. Each unit sat alone in sprawling, neatly sheared grounds, landscaped with flowering trees and set with the chill sophistication of statuary in gold, silver and platinum. Botanical splendors from exotic worlds rioted in orderly tangles of aromatic greenery, with sculpture of glass, marble and the noble metals glinting like pale ghosts against the darker masses.

Shadows parted before them. Half-hidden among trees rose a slender spire, needle-shaped, tall as a tower, but unwindowed. For a dwelling, its design was curious, and the interior must consist

of circular rooms one above the other. At the base, an arched, oval aperture should have been the door, but neither handle nor keyhole showed on the flat, polished plate.

"Here we are," the girl said needlessly, her voice soft as a hint of pain trembled in it. A tremor ran through her body as she thrust out two objects toward him. A key and a gun.

"You will need these," she went on. "He will be in one of the upper rooms. His name is Genarion. Perhaps he will talk with you, especially if you surprise him. But remember, he is deadly. His scientific knowledge is a more frightful weapon than this. So do not hesitate to use violence."

Newlin fumbled the gun into a pocket, fingered the key. It was slim as a needle and as smooth. Without comment, he stared at her as weariness and disgust strangled him.

"Tell me your price," she said quickly, as if in haste to get words out before either could think too much. "I will pay—now."

Shabby bargaining, he thought. But he would call her bluff and force her to back down. "Not money," he said savagely. "I don't kill for money. For a woman, yes. I want you."

He expected anger, scorn, even hatred. She gasped and her face went pale and hard. Wilting under his glare, she nodded.

"Yes, even that—if you wish. I have no choice."

Newlin felt sick, empty. He no longer desired her, even if she were willing. He despised her and himself. But a bargain was still a bargain. He shrugged.

Like an outsize toy, a child's model of a spaceship, the oddly graceful structure towered upward into arching darkness. Like her, it was slender, radiant, beautiful. Bitterly, he caught the girl, dragged her to him, felt her flesh yielding to him. She leaned and met his lips with hers. The kiss was cold and ugly as writhing snakes. Cold. Ugly. *Alien....*

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The key went in smoothly, did not turn. It must have been impregnated with magnetism. Somewhere electronic relays clicked switches faintly. The door was open, its movement indescribable in familiar terms. It neither slid, nor swung on hinges. There was no door, much as if a light had switched off.

A rush of air came out. It had the high, sharp tang of ozone, and something unfamiliar.

Newlin stood inside what was obviously an airlock valve. A door inside had opened soundlessly.

He went on. Beyond the inner doorway was a large circular room. Its dimensions seemed far greater than Newlin would have guessed from the exterior of the building.

This was no mere dwelling, no laboratory or workshop. It was a spaceship of radical design. Elfin stair-ladders spiralled up and down. The girders seemed impossibly delicate and fragile, as if their purpose was half-decoration, half-functional; and stresses involved were unimportant. Such support framework was insane—in any kind of spaceship. It had the quality of fairyland architecture, a dream ship woven from the filaments of spiderwebs.

But there was hidden strength, and truly functional design, as may be found in spiderwebs. Newlin was no engineer, but he sensed solidity and sound mathematics behind the toy structure's delicacy.

The stair ladder supported him without vibration, without give or any feeling of insecurity. He climbed.

Walls and the floor and ceiling bulkheads were rigid to his touch, supported his weight firmly, despite their eggshell-thin appearance of fragility. There were no corners; everything fused together seamlessly in smooth curves. Walls were self-luminous and oddly cool.

The lower chambers were bare of all furnishing. Higher levels contained a hodge-podge of implements, all in the same light, strong formula of design. But none familiar, either as to material or their possible function. There were machines, but all too simple. Neither the bulk of atomic engines nor the intricate complexities inseparable from electric or combustion motors.

Newlin was puzzled.

He stopped to listen, feeling like an intruder into a strange world. The building, or spaceship, ached with silence.

Another stairwell beckoned. He climbed, slowly, with increased caution. It would do no harm to have the gun in hand, ready. Where was the man who lived in such a place? And what sort of man could he be? What would he have in common with the frightened, haughty girl outside? The obvious explanation no longer satisfied.

As Newlin ascended, another floor opened and widened to his vision. The stair-ladder ended here. It was the top floor. But this chamber seemed infinitely larger than the others. At first there was no sight of the man. Newlin stood alone in the center of a vast area. He did not seem indoors at all.

Endless vistas extended to infinity in all directions. In all directions save one, in which stood a tall shadow. Newlin gasped. It was his shadow, detached, seemingly solid.

Three-dimensional, it stood stock still. It moved when he moved. He gasped, then found the answer. By the shadow's echo of his movements, he could trace a vague outline of encirclement.

The walls were a screen, a circle about the room upon which were cast pictures so perfect that the beholder had illusion of being surrounded by eery, exotic landscapes. The scenes were panoramic, all taken at the same angle, by the same camera, and so cunningly fused into a whole that the effect was beyond mere artifice. For a moment, Newlin had stood within the strange world, its crystalline forms and strange jeweled life as tri-dimensional and real as himself.

It was a large screen, alive with light, alive with dancing, flickering figures. There was no visible projector, and the images were disturbingly solid and real. There was depth, without any perception of perspective. It was a reflection of reality, cast upon the plane of circling walls.

Then a man stepped from the screen. He had been invisible, because the projected images had flowed and accommodated themselves to his metal-cloth smock. For the moment, he had been part of the screen.

Newlin could not tear his eyes from that glaring plane of illusion. Something about the glare played havoc with nerves, and a faint hint of diabolical sound tortured his brain. No such world could exist in a sane universe. Not even with its terrible and heartbreakingly poignant beauty. It was a vision of Hell, bright with impossible octaves of light, splendid with raging infernos of blinding color, some of it beyond the visible range of human sight. And there was sound, pouring in maddening floods, sound in nerve-shattering symphonies like the tinkling clatter of many Chinese windbells of glass, all pouring out cascades of brittle, crystalline uproar.

Sound and light rose in storming crescendos, beyond sight and beyond hearing. They ranged into madness.

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Newlin screamed, tried to cover eyes and ears at once. He tried to run, but nerve-agony paralyzed movement. He was chained to the spot.

Sound and color descended simultaneously into bearable range.

He stared at the man he had come to see. He stared and the man stared back.

"Genarion?" Newlin asked, his voice thin and vague among the tumultuous harmonies bursting from the screen.

"Who are you that calls me by *that* name?" cried Genarion. He spoke in the same curious manner as the girl. He showed amazement, mixed with an ugly kind of terror. "You're not one of *them*!"

"Them?" Newlin said, striving for sanity as sound and light swelled again. His brain reeled. "Songeen sent me—!"

Speech itself was a supreme effort.

Genarion was beyond speech. Tigerishly, he moved. He leaped upon Newlin and thrust him back. Newlin sprawled painfully, his back arched and twisted by invisible machinery.

Genarion stood with a gun in his hand. Aiming hastily, he pressed trigger. The beam flashed and licked charred cloth and smoking leather from Newlin's sleeve. There was an odd jangle from the invisible machinery which gouged so tangibly into Newlin's body.

Instinctively, Newlin fired. He did not bother to aim. For him, such a shot was point blank, impossible to miss.

Genarion staggered. Part of his body vaporized and hung in dazzling mist as the projected images of light played over it.

Dazed, Newlin scrambled to his feet. He was sick. But the screen held him. He stared, hypnotized. Images jiggled and flowed in constant, eery rhythms. They moved and melted and rearranged themselves in altered patterns, without ever losing their identities or the illusion of solidity. The scene was not part of Venus, or of any world Newlin had seen. He had seen every planet or moon in the Solar system. But this was different, alien, frightening.

And the screen was not really a screen at all, for the body of Genarion, hideous in the distortion of death, lay halfway through its plane. And it was changing, subtly, as he watched. It was no longer even a man, totally unhuman, as alien as the world it lay partway in. The body flowed, molten, hideous.

The screen was a surrealist painting, come alive, solid and real. And the solid, physical body of Genarion was part of it. He was dead, but real. His alien form was a bridge between two worlds, and now dead, Genarion was alien to both of them.

It was madness. The madness of the screen communicated itself to Newlin. Before his shocked eyes, Genarion's body began to steam and rise in a cloud of vaporous, glittering crystals. Swiftly

the haze dissipated. It was gone, gone invisibly into the alien world. Whatever Newlin had killed, it was not human, not a man.

Newlin turned and fled down the fairy stair-ladder.

He went through the still-open airlock doors and out into the screaming night. Behind him alarms were ringing frantically. Now they would be ringing in the stations of the Protection Police and call orders would go out to the radio-equipped prowls cars. Police would converge swiftly.

Sound shattered the night stillness. From far away, coming closer, was the shrill wail of a siren. Other sirens.

There was a harsh bleat of police whistles, near at hand. Newlin's imagination quivered with the possibility of blaster beams thrusting at his back. He fled.

The alarms had burst into sound too quickly. Had the girl set the police on him, waiting only long enough to make sure he would accomplish his mission?

Whatever he had been set to kill, had not been human. Not a man. Intuitively, Newlin realized that the girl had anticipated everything. She knew what would happen, he reflected bitterly. She had promised payment only on delivery of a corpse, when there could be no corpse.

Spud Newlin, Sucker No. 1.

Conscience did not trouble him. After all, the man—or the thing—had fired first, without warning, without waiting to hear him out. Without waiting for details like identity, or even asking to hear the message he brought. It was self-defense, in a peculiar way.

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Newlin ran and tried to lose himself in the shadowy fastness of Monta Park. He was not surprised that the girl had not troubled to wait and meet him.

He was not even angry. It was part of the game.

The Protection Police radios were carrying the alarm. Soon the Security Police would take up the hunt. If the girl had turned him in, she would be able to give a detailed and accurate description. Newlin guessed that he would be lucky to last even the few hours till daylight—or what passes for daylight on cloud-shrouded Venus.

Long before then, his career might end suddenly in a wild network of blaster or heat beams. By dawn he would very likely be crumpled among the ashcans and refuse in any dark alley.

But still the city would be his best bet. No use beating his way to the spaceport landing stages. Space Patrol units must have been notified, and would already be searching all outgoing units.

For the moment, he had a brief interval of grace in which to think things over and try, if only for his own satisfaction, to figure out what had happened. It—whatever it was—had writhed hideously when the blaster beam drove home. Part of it vaporized instantly, and the organs revealed did not even look animal. Eery, geometric, but not the naked electronic symmetries of a mechanical robot. Not metal. But what? Collapsed like wet sacking, it had lain half-inside and half-outside the screen. He could not recall clearly its rapid mutations of form after that.

Did it matter? The alarms were out. Blaring metallic clangor, and the uncanny banshee wailing of the hunting sirens. Police care little who is murdered in the nameless dives of Venusport, but let one of the lordly rich men die, and all Hell is loosed on the killer.

If the girl had turned in the alarm, it was only a matter of time. They would have his name and number; his ident-card would be listed and reproduced, sent everywhere. They would probably have the robot trackers out, those hideous electronic bloodhounds which can unerringly sort out a man's trail from the infinity of other scents and markings, following not smell, but a curious tangle of electrical impulses left by his body like static electricity or intangible magnetism. No layman could even guess how such a robot worked, but fugitives had learned to dread its infallible tracking ability.

Newlin fled, and as he went, he cursed himself for getting involved in such a nightmare.

Figures moved and blundered about him in the darkness of the park, but none got in his way. None seemed to notice him. Since it was not a man he had killed, perhaps others hunted him; other remote, alien beings he could not see, or sense.

The girl would know, of course. If he could find her. But she had vanished before he ever issued from the strange tower, and it was highly unlikely that he would ever see her again.

Chance, and a sudden rush of blue-clad figures across a street ahead of him, turned Newlin back toward his own, familiar part of town. The scant shelter of shadows in deserted alleyways was a comfort, but little real protection. He had friends, of a peculiar sort, in the old native quarter, and the Spacebell lay just outside the fringe of the mutants' district, where the half-human natives laired up. These friends might hide him, for a while, although such refuge was of little use against the robot-trackers.



By daylight, he could be smuggled outside the domed city, and once into the wastelands, there was a chance. Not a good one; but there, even the robot-tracker could hardly come upon him without his knowledge. A lucky blaster shot would leave a blank trail and a shattered robot for his pursuers to follow. He wondered if they would risk another such expensive machine merely to hunt down a murderer in the wastelands. Scarcely, when the wastelands would kill the fugitive sooner or later anyhow.

His first task was to reach the Spacebell and collect his pay. Then to get protection-armor, against the peril of sandstorms and the radioactive sinks that spot the old sea-beds outside Venusport. After that, the native quarter, if he lived to reach it.

Shortly before daylight, he turned the last alley-corner and came in sight of the Spacebell.

A shadow stirred with movement. A lithe, loosely draped figure hurried to meet him. It was the girl—Songeen.

"Don't go in there," she said. "They know who you are, and the police are waiting for you."

Newlin felt numb all over. "How did they know? Did you tell them?" he snapped.

"Of course not. Don't be a fool. Would I inform, then wait to warn you? I did not know he had automatic alarms, and automatic cameras to make records of anyone who came into the—the place. It was the pictures. They were identified with your ident-card at the Central Police Bureau. And the robot-trackers are out."

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Newlin and Songeen studied each other for a long moment of silence.

"I guess it doesn't matter now," Newlin said finally, "but I'm glad you didn't turn me in. I might almost as well give up and get the thing over with. There's no place to run. Not without money."

Songeen produced a small sack of platinum coins which jingled as she offered it.

"That's one reason I tried to find you. After the alarms, I knew I would only handicap your flight. I hid. Then I came here, because I thought you might come back. I'm sorry I have no more money, but the rest is all in credits. It would be no help to you in the wastelands."

"I see," muttered Newlin. "Why did you care? Were you afraid I'd talk if the Police caught me?"

Songeen shrugged coldly. "No, I hadn't thought of that. But I think I owe you something. Murderer's wages. I knew you couldn't fulfil your bargain when you made it. But, in a way, I am responsible for you."

"In a way," agreed Newlin bitterly. He snatched at the bag of coins. "This will do. Thanks for nothing."

"Don't blame me too much. I had no choice, and I did not know it would work out like this."

"Perhaps not, but next time do your own killing. It's rough on both your victims."

Songeen was crying, tearless wracking sobs that shook her frail body.

"I'm sorry," she moaned. "But I couldn't even get in to see him. He knew the exact vibration level of my body, and had set supersonic traps to kill me if I tried to enter. Even my bones would have shattered. I would have died painfully and horribly. I would rather have died myself than cause his death. Believe that. There is always a third victim. He was my husband, and I loved him. You can't understand, of course—"

"I understand less than ever now." Newlin knew that it was madness to remain so close to the Spacebell. But he could not force himself to leave Songeen. She seemed near collapse.

A thought struck him. "Say, is there anything there to tie you up with this business?"

Songeen gave a wry thrust of her thin shoulders. "Much—but does it matter? It was my—our home. Before he tricked me outside and would not let me return. They don't know what happened—yet. But there will be enough evidence against both of us. Part of what you saw was illusion. His body is still there. Changed—but the trackers can identify it. The charge is murder, and they will want both of us. Not just you."

"Come with me." Newlin spoke harshly—sharply.

The girl's eyes flickered. "Are you threatening me?"

"No. It's just that I've led them to you. We're in the same boat now. With the mechanical hounds on our heels. They will connect you through me, now that our trails have crossed. And they'll follow both of us. How will you manage?"

Songeen smiled wearily. "One always takes risks. I came here prepared for—anything."

"Don't be a fool! Protection Police don't stop to ask questions. They're hired Killers."

"I suppose not. What do you suggest?"

"Run and hide. Come with me, if you like. But suit yourself. I'm getting out of here. Out into the wastelands. It's almost dawn now. In the city, we're lost. Outside, there's a chance. A poor one, but—"

Light was that gray ugliness that precedes the smeary glare of dawn on Venus. The girl seemed very slight and young and helpless. Again, Newlin felt that impulse to save and protect her. He could see no details of feature, even her face was shadowed, and not quite human; but her body was beautiful, and trembling.

"Are you coming?" he asked, savagely.

"I'll go with you," she said. "You're kind. Perhaps I can *help* you. If they corner us, please kill me. I don't like—being hurt."

Newlin laughed grimly. "It's a promise. But I'll kill some of them first."

"Please," she begged. "No killing—not for me."

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Ten hours later, far out in the wastelands, Spud Newlin called a halt. The girl had trudged wearily behind him, uncomplaining and with patient determination. They wasted no precious breath in words, and walking had been doubly difficult for her. The protection armor was twice too large, and very cumbersome for such a slight figure; but such garments never come in half-size. Children and women are forbidden to venture into the wastelands, except in special vehicles.

Actually they had started out by vehicle. But it was old, cranky and ready for the junkyard. In the first flurry of sandstorm, it had clogged, burned out and died. Nothing very reliable was available in the black market without more notice.

Newlin accepted the inevitable and proceeded on foot. Perhaps they could reach the Archaeological Station at Sansurra. He was not certain if it would be inhabited at the Sandstorm season, but there was a good chance of stored food and water. Turning back to Venusport was impossible. So they went on.

Now he was confused. Directions are difficult at best on Venus, and his radio-compass proved faulty. He had only the vaguest idea where they were, and none at all where they were headed. But if he stopped too long, the shifting dunes would cover them. And if they tried to go too fast, it would be fatally easy to blunder into one of the open sink-holes of molten, radioactive metal.

He stopped and motioned the girl to rest.

She sank down, exhausted.

Newlin adjusted the throat microphones and headsets in their plastic helmets to make for easier conversation. But for a while, neither could talk. They sat and gasped, yearning for a breath of fresh, unreclaimed air. Water supplies were low, and already Newlin had established iron rations. Drinking by tubes was difficult in the helmets and the water was warm and foul.

"You're lost?" Songeen asked at last.

Newlin nodded. He produced a wrinkled, battered map. "I can't even trust the compass. I don't know where we are."

The girl took the map in her gloved hands and peered intently through her face-mask. One finger traced a tiny circle in the film of dust.

"I know," she said. "We are somewhere about here. And over there—" she indicated a direction behind Newlin—"is the city from which my people came."

Newlin was startled. The directional instinct with which all Venusians are endowed was familiar enough, yet he would have sworn the girl was not from the enfeebled and mutant races of the veiled planet. She was, at once, more human—and more remote. Songeen guessed his doubt. Through the fused quartz faceplate, her angular features wore a curious, faint smile.

"No, not Venusian. This was an—an outpost. A colony and a quarantine station. The city was abandoned long ago. Long before the atomic holocaust my people fled. Eons have passed. Everything is now in ruins—if even ruins remain. See, it is not marked on the map. Not even as ruins. But we have unusual race-memory. I can see the fabulous towers and arsenals, the terraced gardens and the palaces—as if they still stood today as they were in that vanished yesterday. And we have the homing instinct. It was my people who gave it to the Venusians. The one thing of value that still remains to them."

Newlin was still dubious. "Unless you're dreaming."

Her finger jabbed at the map. "We are here," she insisted. "And if you care to search and dig, the city is probably still there, as it was a million years ago."

"Would there be water in your ruined city?" Newlin asked.

"Who knows? The wells are probably all filled with sand now. Or gone dry, or become

contaminated. There is always much radioactivity near the ruined cities. They were primary targets when the peoples of Venus destroyed themselves. Even this desert is mute evidence of the holocaust; if one needs evidence. My people fled before that madness, because they anticipated it."

Newlin snorted. The pre-holocaust Venusians were purely legendary. No written records could exist, amid such conditions as must have followed the ancient wars. Science knew that at least half a million years had passed since Venus was a fair green planet peopled with hearty, beautiful, ease-loving races. Half a million years since the surface people had even looked upon the sun.

"If you're right about where we are," Newlin growled, "I'm still interested in that city. We can never make Sansurra with the water we have. Ruined or not, there may be wells. Is there a chance?"

"Not a good one," Songeen replied. "But better than none."

"Whenever you're ready," Newlin said. "You lead."

Wearily, man and girl struck off across the seas of shifting sand. Great dunes blocked their way. Some they circled, others must be climbed laboriously.

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From the top of a huge, wind-ribbed billow, Newlin stared at a pale flickering in the dust ahead. In all other directions stretched endless humps and hollows. But before him lay a great wind-scoured hollow of bare rock. Beyond that, crowning a series of low hills, which must have thrust above water line in this shallow part of the ancient, vanished sea, were ruins.

Even as ruins, the city was spectacular. Massive columns had eroded slowly into stone toothpicks. Walls crumbled into formless heaps resembling the dunes. A few outlines of smoothed blocks and shattered lintels huddled the ground, half hidden by the encroaching sand. Details had vanished eons ago, but something still remained to tantalize imagination. The few buildings that still stood, and the soaring, fragile towers evidenced an engineering civilization of staggering proportions. Surface dimensions were still tremendous, and the city itself must have been of first importance, covering hundreds of square miles.

"Our city," said Songeen.

Newlin glanced quickly behind. Still distant, but moving very rapidly was the string of dark objects that could only be sandsleds of the pursuit. One tiny figure, scarcely visible, was far in advance of the others. The robot tracker.

He gestured. "They're covering three miles to our one," he told her grimly. "We'll try to reach the city before they catch up with us. Perhaps we can hide out among the ruins, and—with luck, booby-trap the tracker. If there's water, we can hold out for quite a while."

Songeen nodded crisply. Her voice was strained with emotion and fatigue. "As fugitives my people abandoned this city. Now, as a fugitive, I return."

Then she was off, running awkwardly, the cumbersome suiting of her protection armor giving her bounding strides the laughable appearance of a lumbering teddy-bear.

Descent into the hollow was riding a series of miniature sand avalanches. Each step buried the foot deep, but the sand gave way and slipped in loose spills. His boots struck hard on rough, bare rock. He grunted, fought for balance, then sprawled heavily. She helped him up, then took off again. Newlin followed.

Over the wind-carved rock, they made good time. Ascent of the long, jagged slopes to the city was heart-killing work, delicate and treacherous. The surface was like sponge-glass, brittle and deadly with knife-edges when broken.

Sheltering from wind-driven sand under the cover of a great monolith, Newlin and Songeen watched the racing figures of pursuit top the crest of the opposite ridge and start down. Man and girl were too winded and weak even to get up. They dared rest only a moment, then plunged on into the maze of tumbled ruins. Ultimate exertion had taken toll of their energies and rapidly burned up air reserves. Both were cruelly thirsty. The heat, even inside their insulated suits, was stifling.

There was no time to take stock of manifold discomforts.

The race was neck and neck. Death sniffed at their heels in the guise of mechanical trackers. On Venus, life is to the swift and cunning. To Newlin, life was perilous, but sweet.

Their helmet microphones picked up and amplified a curious droning buzz. It was the deathsong of the electronic tracker and it seemed closer than it was.

Slowly, inexorably, it grew louder. Sound swelled steadily, and it was a whiplash to their flagging energies. They fled in panic through the streets of the dead city.

It was no real refuge to them, but its megalithic precincts gave some lying illusion of safety. They

chose a twisting, tangled route into the very heart of the ruined city, with the instinct of a hunted animal to confuse its trail. They doubled back to cross their own trail twice, in the vain hope of baffling the electronic enemy.

Newlin had been hunted before, on Mars, but by live bloodhounds. Pepper, oil of mustard, and perfumes had saved him then. But this hound followed not scent, but something intangible, electrical, and as mysterious as the soul-aura itself. It sorted two life-complexes from all other impulses and followed its own prime-directive—hunt down and kill.

The end was inevitable as death.

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Newlin laid ambush for the mechanical monster. Crouched in a nest of rubble, he waited for it, blaster gun ready. Around a corner of shattered stones, it appeared. It moved like a whipping shadow, like part of the gathering twilight.

Silent, save for the high, nerve-tearing drone, it came warily across the courtyard paved with eroded stone. It was low, not animal in appearance, with the form of a fat, ugly snake. Fading light of the Venusian day cast a glint of metallic gray from its scaling of interlocked rings.

Newlin waited for a close shot. How vulnerable was such a soul-less, mechanical monster to even the shattering-heat-forces of a blaster gun?

Songeen lay quietly beside him, her body quivering as much from strained muscles as from fear. Behind the face-mask, her thin features were pale, ghostlike.

With elaborate caution, the tracker circled their hiding place. Its froglike head, with a ruff of exposed filaments lifted, like an animal scenting blood. It edged slowly closer, its movement a glide, sinuous, crafty, with no suggestion of mechanical action.

Newlin pushed the girl's form roughly away, lest her trembling foul his aim. Sighting, he pressed trigger. Bright flame leaped from the weapon, crackling.

The beam lashed at the tracker, which stopped suddenly, threw back its monstrous head, and burst into hideous uproar of sparking, electrical discharge. Like a live thing, it twitched, jerked, and flung itself in mad spasms. Convulsions stopped as short-circuits flared in both head and body. Molten, flowing, its metallic carcass glowed eerily in the dimness. Dying, it blazed up in a fireworks display spectacular enough to attract half of Venus to the terrified fugitives.

But the drone continued.

From behind the same corner came a duplicate of the first metal monster. Another tracker.

Its drone rose into shrill crescendo. Like a dog, it approached the wreckage of its fellow. And like a dog, it summoned help. Then, without pausing to examine the mechanical casualty, it turned its electronic attentions back to the hunted.

Hopelessly, Newlin urged Songeen to her feet. They fled, and the game began all over again.

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It was a madman's dream. Desperate flight, the haunted ruins of an unknown city, deadly pursuit closing in, slowly, patiently inevitably. The familiar hare and hounds pattern of nightmare.

They fled through vague, littered streets, treacherous with the rubble of lost centuries. Buildings were lighter patterns upon the gathering darkness. Stone flagging underfoot was rough, eroded, rotten.

A pinnacled precipice rose suddenly to bar their way. Immense, sheer, buttressed by spills of loose rock, it towered above them and lost its heights in gloom.

Within a massive, deep-carved archway of stone, set an oval of polished red granite. A doorway, barren of carving save for one, scrawled and monstrous hieroglyph. Uneasiness stirred in Newlin, for something in his buried race-memories recalled that symbol with supernal dread. Ice formed about his spine and melted in trickling terror-drops. Instinct cringed, but his conscious mind rebelled at even the effort of memory.

Songeen stopped and stared at the hideously marked doorway, as if tranced.

"I *remember* this place," she said in swift excitement. "But I had thought it vanished—eons ago."

Newlin swerved on her angrily. "This is no time for experiments with your subconscious," he growled, savage with strain.

"It is—sanctuary," she replied softly. "Come!"

Boldly she stood before the oval door. Her finger traced its complex symbol, and the symbol responded with a glow like moonfire.

Again, as it had been with that oval door in Monta Park, there was baffling suggestion of

unmechanical movement.

The stone block did not slide, roll, or swing open. It gave a slight quiver and dissolved.

Songeen stepped through its aperture and the inner darkness of the building claimed her. Reluctantly, Newlin followed—caught as much by curiosity as driven by the yelping spectres of pursuit.

No light entered the building from any source. It was dark as the pits of Ganymede or the under-surface laboratories of Pluto. It was dense and tangible as a block of black crystal. Newlin could see nothing, not even Songeen. And there was an alien *feel* to the interior.

He was aware that Songeen operated some hidden mechanism, and that the door, though he could not see it, was replaced.

"Now, for the moment, we are safe," she said slowly. "They cannot enter here."

Newlin shrugged bitterly. "It's all one. They can't enter and we don't dare go out. So we stay here and die of thirst. If you were really a top-rung witch, you'd think of details like air, food and water."

Songeen's laugh was a ripple of eery crystal in the darkness.

"How did you guess I was a witch?" she asked whimsically. "But we need not die here. Not unless you prefer to die among surroundings familiar to you. There is another way out. If we dare take it. For me, it will be simple. For you—"

"Not so simple, eh? You paint an interesting picture. Like one I once saw on Mars, in the Gneiss Gallery. 'Nocturne—Venusport,' it was titled. Beautiful. Dark purple background, the city seemed like fountains of flowering stars. It's not like that, not from the places I've seen it. Filth and dirt, people dying from poverty, disease or violence. Just a comparison. How close does your picture match the reality?"

"Close enough. You're a strange man, full of contradictions. I think you're only slightly mad. But for anyone, the way I could take you would be difficult. The pathway leads to my own world. To you—or anyone, not native—it will seem madness. Something of it you saw in the tower."

Around him in the darkness, he was conscious of her swift movements. She seemed untroubled by the lack of light. Neither by vision or hearing could he distinguish anything, but he sensed activity.

Then, suddenly, as if she had uncovered a cache of implements and struck a fire, radiance spread around her. Its source was not definite, and it spread slowly, like a stain through water. But something illuminated a vast, vaulted interior, Gothic in a sense, with a church-like air of gloom and mystery. It was Gothic, but of spiderweb delicacy, soaring arches, vague fretted ceilings, walls intricately carved into lacework of stone. Everywhere were echoes of that same eery symbolism in the door hieroglyph, and Newlin's folk-memories were oddly disturbed.

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He could not place the feeling. Certainly none of the symbols bore even slight resemblance to any written language known to him.

Something about their intricacy clouded even clear perception, and the emotional effect was not religious in any sense—it was stark, abysmal fear, as if the mysteries behind such symbols were too great for humanity to bear.

Ignoring him, Songeen persisted at her curious tasks. Newlin went and stood beside her, watching.

With gloved hand, she appeared to be tracing out some maze of deep cut markings that figured what must have been an altar-fane.

"Do you expect any results from this ritual mumbo-jumbo?" he questioned irritably.

Songeen looked up, startled. "Not more ritual than any other mathematics," she chided. "This is no temple, as you seem to imagine. It is the old quarantine station. I seek a doorway, but not into a hidden passage. There are other doorways. This one leads between dimensions. My world exists in a different plane. At least, our pathway to it follows strange ways, that you could never understand. You are no scientist or scholar. How could you grasp such unknown and forgotten matters? How could anyone in your world?"

Newlin stared at her, seeing things he had only guessed before.

"You are—*alien*," he said.

"You can't guess how alien," she answered. "I said I was not of Venusian stock. My people came from outside. Our world exists in the same plane as yours, a planet circling one of the nearer stars. This place was never our home, but we had colonies on Venus, Earth, Mars and one of Jupiter's moons. Other colonies—like this one—and observatories and quarantine stations. Our scientific observers and the medical staff stayed here. They studied and recorded and treated.

"We were not gods nor demons nor anything else supernatural. Just a people not human, but not too remote from humanity. Just emissaries and workers, students and doctors. You might call us elder brothers to the human race. We came not to conquer, enslave and exploit, but to help. Sometimes the Masters came with us, since they were interested in our work.

"Many times, by our guidance, human beings reached high levels of development in the arts and sciences. We taught them and guided their stumbling steps, and released to them such knowledge as we dared trust to them. Time and again, we raised them from the slime, only to have them fall back. There is fatal disease in the race, a disease of instability and cruelty and violence. Call it madness—insanity—in the technical sense. It is pathological, and the disease is common to the human race, in all its ramifications. The Solar System is mad, and all who dwell in it are lunatics. Dangerous and homicidal lunatics. Sol's system is the asylum and pesthouse of our galaxy. We—my people—are its keepers and doctors.

"We are charged with the care and treatment of an ailing form of life. Because of our near likeness, in form and thought, it was hoped that we could understand and help them; in time, perhaps, find a cure. There are other races inhabiting the galaxy—many of them, civilized, intelligent, living, and sometimes even of matter similar to ours. Their minds and bodies are too different. We are nearest, both in form and feeling.

"We have tried, patiently and hopefully. For the most part, it is a long history of frustration and failure. The corruption is too deep, too basic. It is part of the life-pattern of the race. Some individuals may rise above it, but its taint lies dormant even in them. At best, they are carriers. And there seems little future for such a race.

"Your galactic neighbors have been patient. But now a time of decision is near. Your ships explore, exploit at will within your system. You have pushed your limits to the furthest expansion of that system. Colonized and despoiled. Now, you stand at the expanding horizon of stellar flight. Other star-systems tempt your imaginations, and technology batters at the problems involved.

"Your neighbors are watching, and afraid. If your people burst outside the limits of Sol's system, the contagion of your madness will spread and engulf the galaxy. At our request, they have given time, granting extensions freely. For countless centuries we have tried, and our effort, all our work and thought, has led only to failure. Now, the others have set a time limit, and the deadline is very close. Very close. You are all living on borrowed time; and but for our pleadings, it would be still less.

"The masters often send emissaries to us, as we send ours to the planets of Sol. They help and advise us—not as superior beings or as gods, commanding—but as elder brothers, trying to share their wisdom, trying to help and guide us. They only help and advise, never intervene unless asked. Their advice is wisdom—sometimes terrible, difficult to understand, painful to accept. Recently, they brought a message from the other peoples—a message and ultimatum. And the Masters advised us to accept failure, to let them destroy humanity as a blot on the galaxy. We begged one more chance, a last, desperate gamble, probably foredoomed to failure. But they granted us the painful right of the doctor. We can operate, but if the patient dies, so do we. That was our choice."

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As she talked, Songeen had engaged herself busily with the queerly formal operations of tracing the intricate diagrams.

"Do you believe me?" she asked, looking up.

"I'm not sure," Newlin replied frankly. "Are these Masters your gods?"

"Not gods. Living, intelligent beings, civilized, but not like us. Not material. I cannot explain. Even they are but advisers and messengers. Not all-wise, nor all-powerful. I wish they were; for they are kind."

"You sound like nice people," Newlin admitted. "I wish I could believe you. Off-hand, I think you're crazy. You say we're all off the beam. Then you talk like delusions of grandeur, and I have reason to know you can be homicidal. One of us is nuts. It's a toss-up."

Songeen smiled wearily. "It is possible that I am infected. I am inoculated against it, but so was Genarion. Will you believe that I loved him? He was my husband. We were children together, like brother and sister. Later, we were schooled together, were married, and asked to be assigned our task together. I did not sentence him, and I would have died myself first. But he had been here too long. If he had gone back, the contagion would have gone with him. It was fated. You and I were mere tools. Weapons."

"I'm sorry, Songeen. I do believe you loved him."

She shook her head in curious ruffle of emotion. "He was not the first. Many of our kind have renounced their birthright to go among your people, become like you and share your hideous lives. They are part of your great religions, part of the legendary history of your races."

Silence fell between them. Newlin thought of dying Mars, the burnt-out husk of Venus, the

political and economic pesthole of Earth—even the grim, gray, terrible frontiers on the further planets and moons. His recollections were a dreadful pageant of spectres, of an ugly, terror-haunted childhood, of the bleak years of his barren, lonely wanderings—the memory kitbag of a homeless, and often hunted, spacebum.

"I can believe you," Newlin admitted slowly. "Most of the truly worthwhile leaders of mankind stand so far above the mob that they seem cast in a different mold. The real leaders—not politicians, nor military brass. The thinkers and scientists, even the prophets. Every great religion sprang from the vision or inspiration of a single leader. Beyond the chaff, the fragments of his actual thoughts and words—always sound good. But their followers don't follow them."

Songeen's face twisted in bitter wrath. "How terribly true! Can blind men follow the sun? They feel its warmth and reach out to it, but they stumble and fall on their own clay feet. Blind eyes and hands can never reach the light. Most of our emissaries, of that kind, die horribly, and their message is distorted to serve the ends of madness and corruption."

"Is there no hope for us?"

She stared at him. The pale glow of her moonbright eyes softened and intensified.

"One hope, and only in yourselves. We have tried and failed. If you feel so strongly, why have you done nothing?"

Bitter hatred snagged in Newlin's throat, making his laugh a sound of horror. "Not me. I can pity the masses of poor and down-trodden, but only as masses. As abstractions. Individually, I loathe them. Cornered rats will fight back—but men lick the boots of their tormentors. I learned only hate and defiance. I'm a cornered rat, not a man."

There was sound now, outside the door they had entered. Low at first, a mere scabbling, as if the trackers had located their refuge. In moments only, there came a heavy pounding, followed by the skirl of atomic drills. Newlin tensed, his hand itching at the butt of his blaster.

"I'm a rat," he went on. "Cornered, like any other rat. And the terriers are out there scratching at my hole. If you'll open that non-squeak door, I'll talk to them. Maybe even kill a few."

"No," said Songeen positively. "No killing."

"But I'm a killer," Newlin insisted. "I've killed men before for a lot less reason. They're mining the door. How long do you think that will last against explosives?"

"Not long," the girl admitted. "But long enough. I have the key at last. Stand back."

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Something formless and faintly radiant hovered indescribably in space. Suspended above the worn flooring, without visible support or tangible outline—it existed. Something like weird emptiness, a void appearing in the air itself.

"This is the portal," Songeen told him calmly. "Choose now. I will take you with me if I can without permission. But do not come with me, unwarned. There is grave peril, beyond anything I can describe to you. Beyond your experience or imagination. I will try to get you safely back, somehow. But I can promise nothing. And if you stay too long, there is no coming back. You must remain there; even if the terror of your surroundings kills you."

She stood beside the mysterious doorway, waiting. Newlin made a start to follow her, then balked.

"Wait!" he ordered roughly, as she was about to lead the way. "I can't go with you—not like this."

"Afraid?"

"Yes, but not of you or your world. I trust you. But you say everyone here is crazy. That it's infectious. Won't I carry the contagion into your world?"

Songeen hesitated. Shadows deepened inside her eyes. "You would, yes. But you will have contact with no one but me. Perhaps with the Masters—if I can take you to them. They may help us, but they are strange, unpredictable. Remember, I promise nothing and you come at your own risk. But your disease will harm no one—I'm inoculated, and the Masters are immune. If you overstay the limit and cannot return, you will be decontaminated just as we must be when we return to our own people.

"Here, in this room, is the place where the people of our colony on Venus were decontaminated before they could be allowed to enter the place of refuge the Masters had prepared for them. It is a cruel and harrowing experience. I know. There may be a way to get you safely back, without that. But your mind could never stand the shock. Understand that, before you choose."

"If it won't harm you, I'll go along," Newlin decided. "Almost any world would be an improvement on this."

"Don't be too sure," she warned. "At worst, the terror here is familiar. Come, then. Hold my hand, stay close, and try not to be frightened. It will be bad enough. And try not to change too much, or

I will have difficulty returning you alive."

The portal swallowed her, and Newlin felt himself drawn into the force-vortex, still clinging to her hand.

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Transition was mild enough, less shock than he had expected.

A moment of chill detachment, as if something indescribably cold shattered his body into component atoms and readjusted them to new patterns. He gasped, his body making the same thermal changes as if he stood under a cold shower. He shivered.

Then it was like coming out of the blanketing fog of horror into the sunlight of sanity; like rebirth, painlessly, into an eerie other-dimension.

There was light and sound about him, a stir of cool air. Songeen had become separated from him in that moment of strange passage. She stood apart, watching him with laughter in her eyes. Laughter as cool and calm and soothing as the soft wind that riffled her hair. She had stripped off the bulky armor, shed her plastic helmet. Now she was all woman again, and somehow, oddly, a symbol of all women.

Other senses than his five sprang into life within him. Weird *awareness* through new perceptions which were nameless to his mind or to his memory.

At first there was no terror, no surprise. Merely an overwhelming *difference*.

Overhead was starless night, but not darkness. It was a vaulted, infinite sky, like an inverted ocean of tinted crystal, transparent, but softly colored, deepening imperceptibly to a heart of emerald, a-glow with faintest witchlights. All around him was a maze of shimmering crystal in odd forms, grotesque, clear but echoing the witchlights of that haunted sky.

Wind-borne, came the faint, sweet chiming of distinct porcelain bells. The place was alive with movement, sensed but incompletely seen. Even the wind flowed in almost visible currents, thickened as if the air had become dense, molten glass. All forms in the maze of crystal varied constantly. Light flared and died in odd rhythms, and the almost visible winds played icy arpeggios upon strings of spun glass, like Aeolian harps. Showering notes like those of Chinese windbells hung in clusters in the eddies of great wind rivers, and both sound and light flowed together and wove strange patterns and infinite variations.

It was not quite pleasant, vaguely nerve-tightening, but highly stimulating. Sound was muted at first, as was the light. Images blurred and outlines were unsteady, baffling. Everything fused and flowed together like half molten shards of broken glass. Wavelengths of troubled sound formed trembling notes that hung in the air, almost visible, crystalline and somehow painfully dissonant.

Like Songeen, her world or the pathway to it was strange, alien, but poignantly beautiful.

It was stranger than he thought.

He realized almost at once that his mind was making adjustments. It was lying to him, translating unfamiliar concepts into terms known to memory. It was diluting and enfeebling his sensations. But dread grew in him.

When his mind tired, stopped lying to him, what would it really be like? Could he stand the factual perception?

They trod the forest aisles of crystalline forms. There was light, of odd, gray, glary kind. A twilight, silvery, unreal as the trans-Lunar dreams of drugged poets. Songeen moved ahead slowly, making no effort to regain her clasp of his hand. Almost she seemed to avoid him, waiting until he almost overtook her, then skimming lightly away from him. Her slim, pale witchery was both taunt and challenge. She appeared to float rather than walk.

One by one she dropped her clinging robes. She became part of the mad forest, part of its dreamy gray enchantments.

Light grew steadily, and with it came more color, more magic, and more confusion of senses. The forest-forms assumed strange geometries. They stretched about him in endless vistas, blurring and transmuting as he watched. The dream-like cloudiness was fading from his perceptions. He caught dreadful hints now and then of new, unheard-of forms and colors, of unstable geometries as far beyond Einstein's as his were beyond Euclid's. Nothing was tangible or definite, and perhaps that was the secret. Nothing ever is. Fear wove a crystalline web about Newlin's throat, strangling.

He halted and took stock. Ahead, Songeen waited, watching him, her figure a pale, elfin flame form against the shadowy mass of colored crystals. It was a forest of gemfires, and she was the purest jewel of the forest. Naked, alien, but—

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Why had he come here? His mind balked at backtracking. There was no going back. Perhaps he



had already come too far. Was Songeen a vampire luring him into the hideous depths of this unknown place? He had been here before. It was like that awful illusion in the tower, but muted. How much did he perceive? How much was sheerest self-deception? Was he mad in the midst of awful sanity, or sane in the ultimate horror of lunacy?

Her voice floated back to him, its sound the chiming crash of splintering glass.

"Try not to change too much," she warned.

"Change?" Even the word sounded strange to him, as she said it. He felt a swift surge of anger. There was no change in him—*none!*

The tinkling bell-tones matched the swirl of his emotion and rose to jangling, tormented heights. It was shrill, maniacal tumult, that ranged upward and upward into octaves beyond sound. It was a rollicking, tortured insanity. Windbells chiming, jangled; tinkling, shimmering, exploding inside his brain. Windbells shattering in a hurricane of sound and ecstasy.

With his fists, Newlin pounded at his bursting skull. Pain deadened perception, gave him a moment's relief.

He was not changing, he shouted in loud defense. He was not!

Songeen poised, watching. Her body-outlines swirled and altered in swift mutations before his eyes. She was not woman now. Not even human. She danced and flickered and gibbered at him. She was jeweled movement. Change. She was as crystalline as the forest, as molten emerald as the sky. Points of fire inside her caught and flared and burned inside his eyes. She was not Songeen!

Newlin screamed. He looked down at his hands. He screamed again, louder. His hands were transparent as glass, and as fluid as water. Outlines wavered, changed.

"Try not to change too much," Songeen pleaded. But her voice joined the clattering crystalline tumult which raged about him. He was cracking. He could feel the seams in his mind giving way.

Like a great, floundering beast, he charged toward her. Forms of brittle crystal shattered at his touch. Shattered into sound and pain. The forest-forms changed color, echoing his violence. New vortices of movement converged upon him. Perceptions expanded and radiance showered about him, through him.

The hovering, dancing crystal notes were now visible. Beads of light, dripping from a sky of light. They were sound a color, bright, bursting bubbles of sound. Their rhythmic tempos increased, murmur swelled into insistent roaring and the jangling of insane dissonance. Vitreous grotesques shimmered like a forest of aspens quivering in wind and sunlight. Glassy fragments of splintered sound poured in floods from sky and ground. Trampled grass gave way under his feet in brittle crunching, and the brush shivered at his touch, dissolving into chill slivers of slashing sound.

Blood was dripping. The forest changed color, as if crimson stain spread through it. Hellish glare was a roaring torrent of musical color. Red stains spread swiftly, dying the crystal columns, the glassy sward, seeping into the reeling brain.

There was blood. The taste of it in his mouth, the hot, salt smell, the sound of its dripping. He swam in seas of ruby light, crashing and plunging wildly, sinking into its crimson depths. Red light thickened around him, deepened, smothering.

The darkness was red, fire-shot, roaring....

Then pain and timeless darkness.

Newlin awakened slowly, to ugly tension in his mind. Shadows like beating wings disturbed his memory.

The churning light and sound were gone. He drifted idly, body and mind coming softly to rest upon a bank of soft grass.

Someone knelt beside him. Someone cried softly, to the same murmurous rhythms of the crystalline forest. Without opening his eyes he sensed this, and knew also that he was still within the eery precincts of the maze. He opened his eyes, painfully.

This time, there were tears, glistening and falling slowly, glistening like crystal dewdrops in sunlight, and falling in softly tinkling shower like spilled jewels.

"Songeen!" he cried.

"Yes," murmured a tympany of glass bells, "I am here."

It was Songeen—almost, again, as he remembered her, almost human. It was Songeen, small, delicate, unreal, but sweetly feminine—almost human. It was Songeen, but with something added, changed, oddly blended into both form and personality.

"I tried to save you," she murmured. "I tried, but could not reach you. My knowledge is incomplete. I thought you were weak, confused, too frightened and disturbed to be changed easily. But you were strong, and your violence was a challenge to it. Only the Masters could understand. They saved you—not I. They intervened in time."

"The Masters!" Newlin glanced round, quickly, warily. "They are here?"

"Not here—now. But they saved you. I did not know all the dangers. They—not I—"

"Saved me from what—death?"

"No—worse. And now they say you must go back. At once. The Masters urge haste."

---

Newlin tasted bitterness on his lips. "Orders from headquarters. Well, I've been kicked out of better places—but few more interesting. Too bad I forgot my brass knuckles."

Physically, he tried to rise. Every bone and muscle ached. But it could have been worse. He seemed intact. Hints of vagrant color rippled over his visible skin, but he sensed neither pain nor menace from them.

Songeen bent over him. Her arm supported him in sitting position. It was unnecessary, but the sensation of contact was pleasant. He yielded to her ministrations and looked about. It was still the forest, crystalline, murmurous—but now muted. The same glary, unpleasant light beat down from the same impossible sky. Storming, eery colors flowed infinite mutations of form through the crystal spectres of the maze. And the tinkle of myriad glass wind bells held a maddening overtone.

He had thought, somehow, that it would be different. That it would have changed, subtly, as had Songeen. But from a brief survey, nothing had changed. The tumult had faded, become bearable—but identity remained.

Disappointed, he rose slowly, and felt her strong arm clasp about him. He felt clumsy, off-balance, but not weak. If anything, he was stronger. Stronger, and more cleanly, clearly alive than he had felt before.

"Come," urged Songeen. "I will take you back to the portal."

"Back—to that?"

Newlin struggled with the futility of words. He was not sure what he wanted, let alone what he wanted to say. That insinuating crystalline clatter got inside his brain, scattered thought.

Songeen caught a stirring of rebellion in him and sensed his mental confusion.

"Don't fear the hunters," she said. "There are other doorways, and you can issue onto some other planet, if you wish. Try not to think, or even feel."

Her voice penetrated the uproar of his mind, stilling troubled waters, blanketing other sounds. For seconds, it seemed to elevate him to some remote, lofty plane where life was serene, uncomplicated. Detached, he drifted with his own alien thoughts. Through senses other than visual, he watched his stumbling progress at her side as the girl threaded a pathway through the maze. Through senses not normally his own, he was aware of the utter strangeness behind this forest and its crystalline mysteries. He recognized the girl as part of the strangeness.

Dimly, he sensed some cosmic reluctance in himself, and was disturbed by his trend of thought. Faintly, he was aware of bodily movement and the crowding feel of shadowy aisles about him. But he was more aware of the girl, of her physical presence, and of the unrest she inspired in him.

Songeen! He had known many women on many, strange worlds. But none like this, none ever so strange, so wonderful, so terrifying. He had wanted her, yes. But only for an hour of passion, at first. An hour of the blinding futility of trying, in her arms, to forget the crowding ugliness of life. He had not cared if the women he knew had souls, or if he had. Souls were unfamiliar, vague, and he would not have known one if he encountered it. Soft, white bodies, glowing like pale witchlights in the darkness. Yes, he had known many such. He had known many women, loved none.

Newlin had not spoken, not in words. But Songeen heard, by some subtle sense that was part of this abnormal forest.

Her laugh was a soft tinkle of breaking glass. She did not speak aloud, but word-symbols of thought poured from her mind. Newlin was aware of them, springing suddenly into his own brain, but he knew they came from her.

"Many women, yes. But none like me. If you loved me, it would not be for this body. It is not what you think. I hold this substance, this form, only by power of will. It is mine only for a short while more. My flesh is not like yours, subject to different laws of form and movement."

---

Newlin answered her, but now in words. His voice sounded like a note of strained sanity in such a place of nightmare.

"I never learned love in the sense you mean," he said. "Nor had I thought of you again, in that way—after Monta Park. You were too alien for me. I understood that. Too alien for any kind of

love I knew. You were—repulsive."

In silence, then, thoughts blocked out, Songeen guided Newlin. She seemed aloof, withdrawn. They filed slowly amid towering masses of smoky crystal. She led, drifting like a smoke wraith, before him. Newlin picked a cautious pathway over treacherous, unstable footing. He followed, bemused, and reluctance grew into agony of mind.

What was wrong with him? He grappled with himself, and strains grew into open rebellion. What did he want?

Near the portal, sensing it or another like it, he balked.

"Songeen!"

At his call, she glided back, phantomlike. "Yes?"

"You're in trouble here, aren't you? Because of bringing me?"

Shoulders as translucent as thin ivory shrugged. "No matter."

"But you are?" Newlin insisted, as if it mattered suddenly to him.

"Yes," she granted softly. "But do not alarm yourself. Only misunderstanding. I will explain my motives. They will point out my error. There is no punishment here."

"You're not telling everything. What is wrong?"

Her moonfire eyes were troubled. "Nothing you can help."

Newlin probed mercilessly. "Tell me. Why did you bring me here? It was not only to save me from the hunters. Even I guessed that. Why?"

Poised, slender, defiant as a sword, Songeen met and parried his attack. "I cannot tell you that."

Newlin took her rebuff gracelessly. He was a son of Chaos, a man of the brawling, violent Solar breeds. His temper was short, his words and actions direct. He saw challenge and answered in kind.

"Then take me to the Masters."

Fear and fury blazed in her eyes. "They have not sent for you. I cannot take you to them like this. You are mad. You will live to regret this. Why, why?"

"I'll tell you. You said I could be decontaminated. You said I could be cured, that I could stay here—afterwards. I want to stay now. Is there a way. Can I be cured?"

"Of the madness, yes. But it is a fearful way. Do you know how all lunatics are treated? How they are cured, if at all? In your own asylums, do you know how madness is treated?"

"Yes, I know," Newlin answered roughly. "By shock treatment. I suspected something of the sort, all the time. Am I right? Is your treatment similar?"

Songeen nodded, her movement a shimmering echo of the forest's mirrored quivering.

"Similar—but not the same. The shock used is different. More intense and terrible than insulin or electrical shock. Could you survive such treatment?"

Newlin snorted. "I don't know. I'm just crazy enough to try. I won't say I like this place—your world or the nuthouse entrance to it. But with you, I like it better than any other place without you. I think I'm in love with you."

Worms of pale light flared and writhed in her eyes. Something shifted, the oddments of woman-flesh shredded from her. Like a transparent mannequin of glass, she stood. Inside her, luminous organs squirmed visibly. Like a dream-woman, she stood just outside the boundaries of sanity. But like a dream-woman, she was beautiful, immortal, desirable.

"You've said it," she murmured. "Now that you see me as I am, do you still want me? Say it again, now, Spud Newlin, say it in your new knowledge of the things as they really are."

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Newlin hesitated, made his choice. Wandering, ill and alone, terrified, in the forests of nightmare—he chose. Madman's choice.

"I love you, Songeen. Take me to the Masters."

Nightmare wavered. A hand, oddly shaped, sought his as the witchfires burned low and faded from the sky.

"I can take you now. It is not far, and the Masters are waiting. I have warned you. If, after that warning, you still ask to stay, they will grant your wish. It needed only your free choice. I am glad you have chosen, but shock treatment is a dangerous chance. Are you sure you love me—enough?"

"Songeen!" his mind pleaded. "Wait!"

She heard his wordless cry, and waited, opening the glowing, pure citadel of her thoughts to him. She gave no answer in words or glowing thought symbols. She waited.

"No, I haven't changed my mind. I want to stay. Maybe I can learn to like your world. I want the decontamination—the shock treatment. I'm scared, but I want it, no matter how it hurts. I want to stay here—but not if you're not here. I want to be with you—Hell, Venus, or even Callisto—I want to go with you. I love you. If my love is part of my madness, don't cure me. I haven't asked you, but I'd like to know. Do you love me?"

Songeen was silent. In the glittering forest of crystalline tree forms, jeweled birds sang wild riots of bubbling, bursting notes. Darkness gathered swiftly in the dense air.

"Didn't you know?" Songeen chimed, matching the bird-notes. "Our names are already enrolled in the Great Book. It was custom here, our mating rite. It was the only way I could bring you. I did not tell you, because—"

She stopped, then continued. "Because I had to be sure of you. Because I wanted you to have free choice. Now you must share all my tasks, my responsibilities. Before, the task was mine alone. Now we must share it. You and I are selected—"

"Selected for what?" Newlin broke in.

He could not see her for thick darkness. But he sensed eery tension of movement, and emotion flowed to him from her mind.

"For the great task, the last and greatest of all. We must go back together. To Hell. To the system you sprang from. It is for us to release to them the ultimate weapon. The deadline is close, as I told you. Other races grow desperate, now that your system's isolation is breaking down. Pressure for interstellar expansion is extreme on all of Sol's planets. The technicians work full time at the problems, and they will solve it, soon. We have until then, to kill or cure the patient.

"Other powers and weapons have been released to them in the hope that mounting responsibility would bring sanity. Atomic power was turned into dangerous toys, implements of murder. We gave them knowledge of atomic fission and fusion, and they use the knowledge to butcher and destroy each other. We tried all the minor shock treatments. They have failed. The time has come for the final treatment. The major shock. We—you and I—must give them the ultimate weapon."

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Newlin knew his humanity. He protested. "But why? If they have misused everything else. Why give them something still more hideous? Why give them means for further destruction?"

Her answer pulsed through darkness which glittered like black crystal.

"Because it is the final experiment. The last hope for your people, your system. We cannot help them beyond that. They must choose for themselves, as you did. We must go back to Earth, this time. And it is our task to give them the final treatment and test. The ultimate weapon. Gravity displacement. Once used, it is the end. Planets will be wrenched from the Sun, electrons from their parent nuclei within the very atoms. It is the same force. The choice is theirs—kill or cure. Sanity or destruction. You and I will stay, try to guide and help, advise, but not interfere. Like you, your people must have free choice.

"We must stay with them, and share whatever happens. This is their shock treatment—and yours. We will share it together. But come, the Masters are waiting. I will take you to them."

"Together!" said Newlin, awed. "You will stay with me and share my—our shock treatment!"

"Together, always—now. It is a small price to pay, whatever happens," murmured Songeen.

Her hand drew him close, and she led him outside the zone of crystalline murmurs. Darkness leaned closer, solid, tangible. Ahead, was a great and terrible light.

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