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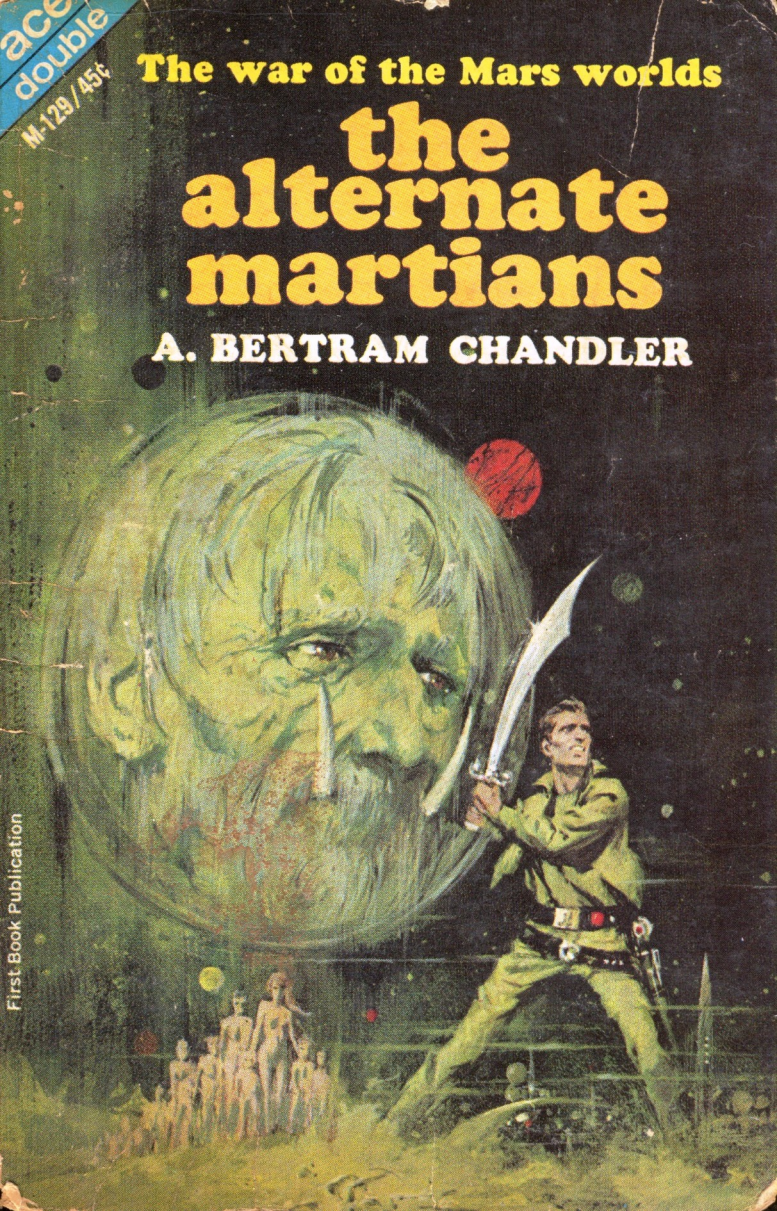
The war of the Mars worlds

the alternate martians

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER



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THE ALTERNATE MARTIANS

by

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

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THE ALTERNATE MARTIANS

Cover by Jerome Podwil, interior art by Jack Gaughan.

Dedication:
For the Mars that used to be, but never was.

Printed in U.S.A.

I

SCIENCE CITY, the only settlement on the desert planet Venus, does not extend a hearty welcome to guests. The "Mad Scientists," as they are called by the respectable research workers with their laboratories on the Earth, the moon, Mars and the various Space Stations, are not the sort of men and women to suffer gladly those whom they consider fools. Brilliant they are, and off-beat, and engrossed in their work, and they would never have the patience to explain things to an inquisitive visitor. In the extremly unlikely event of there being an inquisitive visitor, such a person would speedily wish himself elsewhere, as the "Mad Scientists" are all engaged upon lines of research of such a character that an experiment gone wrong might well

have utterly disastrous consequences. So, to all intents and purposes, they have been exiled by the Central Government to what is, without doubt, the most valueless hunk of real estate in the Solar System, an arid dust-bowl of a planet with no indigenous life save a few obnoxious viruses, with no precious or useful minerals, so constituted as to make the cost of terraforming utterly prohibitive. *If any world is going to get blown to smithereens,* some highly placed Civil Servant must have reasoned, *it might as well be Venus.*

Christopher Wilkinson, lately Second Officer of the liner *Venus Queen,* could not be classed as a guest; his status was almost that of one of the family. Normally a spaceman paid off from his ship for medical reasons—in Wilkinson's case it had been an unpleasant virus infections—would have been accommodated at the Spaceport Hostel on his discharge from the hospital, there to await repatriation to Earth when fit to travel, enjoying (or otherwise) no contact whatsoever with the inhabitants of Science City. This would have been the pattern of events for Wilkinson had not a certain Dr. Henshaw of the Advanced Physics Laboratory required a guinea pig—one with teeth, claws and intelligence, with the ability both to observe and to make a detailed report upon such observations. Wilkinson, for reasons of his own, had agreed to act as Henshaw's guinea pig. He had hoped that if the scientist's time machine did work it might be possible for him, sent back a year or so into the past, to do something to avert the *Martian Maid* disaster or, failing that, to make certain that his fiancée, Vanessa Raymond, was not among the passengers aboard that ill-fated vessel.

But it had been an odd sort of past into which Henshaw's weird device had transported inanimate objects, white rats borrowed from the biologists, somebody's pet tom cat and, finally, Wilkinson himself. It had been a past in which Venus was a moist, tropical world with a breathable atmosphere

and lush vegetation, a past in which the planet had been colonized from Earth, a past in which rocket ships burning chemical fuels plied between the planets instead of the Inertial Drive vessels of Wilkinson's time. It had been a past in which Wilkinson had lived, as a spaceman, but had been killed; a past in which Vanessa Raymond was still living.

It had been a past from the perils of which—a ruthless Dictatorship, a hunted Underground—Wilkinson had saved Vanessa, and from which he had, at the finish, barely escaped himself.

And—this was the utterly fantastic part—it had been a past, not an alternate universe.

Wilkinson had been sent back into the past, as promised by Henshaw, and had made the jump from one of the Coils of Time to another.

II

WILKINSON AND VANESSA walked slowly through the tunnel that led from the Advanced Physics Laboratory, where they were accommodated, to the Advanced Biology Laboratory. Wilkinson was in uniform, tall in his black and gold, his cap perched at a jaunty angle atop his unruly mop of sandy hair. The girl was dressed in a simple dress that she had borrowed from one of the female laboratory assistants. It was little more than a sack of gaily patterned synthetic fibre, but she did something for it, and in return it did something for her. The bright colors enhanced and complemented the glowing, golden skin of her arms and shoulders and legs, matched, somehow, the violet of her eyes, contrasted with the lustrous blackness of her hair. The fabric clung to her curves, hinting at the perfections that lay beneath.

She was saying, "But what does Dr. Titov want us for,

Chris? Surely, by this time, the pair of us have told him everything he could possibly want to know."

"He's a scientist," Wilkinson told her, "and he'll always want to know more. But I agree that we've told him everything that we could tell him. Our brains have been sucked dry of all information, relevant and otherwise."

"Yes. So . . . ?"

"So it'll just be a pleasant social evening. To judge from my own past experience, Titov likes playing the genial host. He enjoys the good things of life, and enjoys sharing them." He went on, "You've never been in the Biology Dome, have you? You thought that Henshaw and his colleagues did themselves well—but the Biology boys do themselves a damned sight better. Their Common Room could be a park, and a very well kept park at that, back on Earth. A wall-to-wall carpet, almost a square mile of it, of beautifully kept grass, with an ornamental stream and a small lake. The inner surface of the dome simulating a summer sky, clouds and all. Flowering trees and shrubs . . ."

She smiled. "We had all that on Venus, Chris . . . *my* Venus."

"But with your own yellow sky. And with no outdoor tables, and no pretty waitresses bringing cold drinks."

"Overdressed hussies, you mean!" snapped the girl.

Wilkinson laughed. The Biologists' Bunnies could have been classed, perhaps, as hussies, but overdressed they were not. But on Vanessa's steamingly hot world the rig of the day had been nudity—with sidearms. He asked, "How did you know about the Bunnies, anyhow?"

"Olga told me. She used to be one herself. She showed me photographs."

"What does it matter? We'll enjoy ourselves; Dr. Titov knows how to look after his guests. At least he'll give us *real* whisky, not that muck that your people made from moss."

"Yes," she said slowly. "*My* people. I still think that we shouldn't have run out on them. I still think that you could have given them the knowhow to make weapons to blast the Committee off the face of the planet."

"If I hadn't escaped in time," he told her quietly, "the Committee would have wrung from me the knowhow to launch an offensive against Earth and Mars, and possibly against *this* universe as well. . . ." He could not suppress a shudder at the memory of Moira Simmons' interrogation chamber.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly.

"You needn't be. I'd expect you to be loyal to Claire and the others. And to the memory of them. But there are so many problems. That machine of Henshaw's is still far too chancy in its operation. If he could send a small, well-armed force back to the time, on your continuum, when the Committee was just getting ready to take over. . ."

"But if he did," she said, "what about *us*?" She whispered, "I feel guilty, Chris, and selfish. . . ."

They came out of the tunnel, through an archway of trained bougainvillea, into the dome that housed the Common Room of the Advanced Biologists. Titov advanced to meet them over the green, closely cropped lawn, his white smile vivid in his darkly tanned face, his hand outstretched. "Welcome aboard, Wilkinson," he said. "And you, Vanessa, are doubly welcome." He shook hands with them, then turned to lead the way across the velvety grass, making a slight detour around the small flock of slowly grazing sheep, pointing out with pride the various exotic Terran plants flourishing in their well-tended beds, and the great golden carp that swam lazily under the quaint Japanese bridge over the stream. And then, to Wilkinson's surprise, he realized that they were being taken to the entrance of another tunnel, to the passageway that led to the Accommodation Dome.

But if Titov wished to entertain privately, in his own suite, that was his privilege.

The biologist's quarters were not quite luxurious, but they were a little more than merely comfortable. The livingroom was almost a conservatory. The study, into which they were taken, had one wall which was a tank in which brilliant fish were a fascinating, living kaleidoscope. The other walls were lined with books. There was a paper-littered desk, and four comfortable lounge chairs, with side arm rests upon which a glass could be placed without risk. Then, after Titov and his guests were seated, a tall, red-haired girl came in with a tray loaded with bottles, glasses, a bowl of ice cubes and another of lemon slices. This she put down on a low table. There was a brief flurry of introductions, during which Wilkinson and Vanessa learned that Natalie Weldon was Titov's personal assistant, and guessed that the title covered a multitude of duties.

"I prefer the personal touch when it comes to dishing out liquor," grinned the biologist. "I can always taste the tin in the drinks dispensed by those blasted robots in Physics. . . . But name your poison, Vanessa."

"I . . . I'm still not used to all this luxury."

"Then let me recommend this sherry. A quite fair Amontillado. And you, Wilkinson?"

"Gin, please. Pink."

"I'll keep you company. And I needn't ask what you're drinking, Natalie. I see you've brought the fixings for your not very dry Martini."

"The laborer is worthy of her hire, Boris."

"I hope so." He turned to the others. "She'll be telling us next that she's been sweating and slaving all afternoon over a hot stove."

"And so I have."

Vanessa's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "But I thought you people did everything by machinery, Dr. Titov."

"Not everything, my dear. And not everybody. Oh, I know that the low mechanicians in Physics devour, with much smacking of lips, horridly standardized meals mass-produced by their autochef—but most of us, in Biology, prefer the personal touch. Tonight, for example, paper-thin pancakes with a kidney filling and a curry sauce, followed by a fruit salad, the raw materials for which came from our own orchards, not out of tins. The hock to go with the main course is imported from Earth, but with the sweet there's a dessert wine that we've processed from the grapes that we grow ourselves. It's not at all bad."

"It's a wonder that you have any time for research," said Wilkinson.

Titov laughed. "The old myth that a man's not earning his money unless he's uncomfortable dies very hard. And comfort is more than a sound roof over one's head. Comfort is also a well-lined belly—and by well-lined I mean well-lined with *good* food, well and imaginatively cooked, accompanied by the right wines."

Wilkinson glanced at Vanessa. He could see that she was enjoying herself. A faint shadow of regret passed over his mind for that other Vanessa, the Vanessa who had died with *Martian Maid*. She, too, had enjoyed good food and wine. But . . . the *other* Vanessa? This was Vanessa. She had lived, in the past, on so many of the Coils of Time, on an infinitude of them, perhaps, and would live again on so many of them in the future. Just as he, Chris Wilkinson, had—and would.

They chatted over their drinks, and the girl Natalie refilled their glasses when necessary and then, eventually, called them to the dining table that had been laid in the living room. They talked during the meal, lightly, enjoying the

well-cooked and well-served food. They adjourned, when they were finished, to the study, and Natalie brought in coffee and brandy, cigars for the men and for herself, cigarettes for Vanessa.

And then, when the air was filled with slowly swirling coils of blue, aromatic smoke, Titov said quietly, "We may have another job for you, Wilkinson."

III

WILKINSON REQUIRED no time to consider his answer; his delay in replying was because what Titov had said had been so unexpected. He said, "No, thank you, Doctor. My days of guinea-pigging are over. In any case, the old *Venus Queen* is due three weeks from now, and Vanessa and I will be repatriated."

"We don't want you as a guinea pig this time," Titov told him.

"Sorry. I'm still employed by the Commission, and there's bound to be a vacancy on one of the runs. Vanessa and I will marry as soon as we get back to Earth, and then I'll put my name down for the Lunar Ferry."

"What if I tell you that the Director has already applied to the Commission for your services?"

"What if you do so tell me? I'm a spaceman, with a narrowly specialized education and training—for most of which the Commission footed the bill. I can't see them releasing me, even temporarily. I'm sorry, Doctor. I've grown to like all of you in Science City, yourself especially, but Vanessa and I have our own lives to live. And we've a lot of catching up to do."

"Yes," said Titov. "As you say, you're a spaceman. But

it's as a spaceman that we want you. We're thinking of recommissioning the *Discovery.*"

Wilkinson visualized the ancient vessel standing to one side of the landing field, no more than a shapeless mound under its thick coating of plastic preservative, the thicker drifting of fine dust. He protested, "But she hasn't been spaceborne for all of twenty years!"

"I know she hasn't. But you'll admit that we have the resources here to make her spaceworthy in a matter of weeks. And Clavering, the Master Mechanic in the Advanced Physics dome, was her Chief Engineer." He drew thoughtfully on his cigar. "You probably know that we have a contract with your Interplanetary Transport Commission. Mainly it's concerned with the ferrying back and forth of personnel and the delivery of supplies, but one of the clauses obliges your employers to supply a qualified Master for our ship should we ever wish to make use of her again. You're qualified, and we already know you, so you might as well get the job."

Wilkinson brightened. "You interest me," he admitted. But he was more than interested. To jump straight from Second Officer's rank to command without the intervening years of service as Chief Officer was well worth consideration. Had he been completely honest he would have said, "You tempt me." But, especially now that he had found Vanessa, he did not believe in jumping into anything with his eyes shut. He said, "I know that it's not the practic in the Commission's own ships, but would the Master of your *Discovery* be allowed to take his wife with him?"

"I don't see why not." Then Titov laughed. "But you aren't married."

It was Wilkinson's turn to laugh. "No. Not yet. But I've already made a few inquiries, and I've found out that your Director has the power to solemnize marriages. The only snag is that, as yet, Vanessa has no legal existence in-

sofar as this Coil of Time is concerned. We were going to wait until we got back to Earth to get things ironed out."

"Why worry?" asked Titov. "Legally speaking, Vanessa is the ward of Science City. Not that legalities worry us much. We make our own laws to suit ourselves." He grinned ironically. "Bless you, my children."

"Marriage is not a joke, Boris," snapped Natalie.

Sensing a certain tension between his host and hostess, Wilkinson changed the subject. "And just where do you want me to take *Discovery* when she's recommissioned?"

"Mars, probably." The tall, thin man got to his feet, walked to one of the book-covered walls, and turned to face his guests. "As a guinea pig, Wilkinson, you were working for Dr. Henshaw. As a Master Astronaut you'll be working for me. There's a pet project of mine, a project born of Henshaw's experiments and your own experiences. I warn you, it's a crazy project—but as we're all Mad Scientists here I didn't have much trouble talking the Director and the rest of our top brass into lending their support. And, if it's any comfort to you, *I* shall be the guinea pig this time. You'll just be the bus driver who'll take me to my jumping-off place."

"I still think it's mad," said Natalie sullenly. "Alongside you, Chris is a very model of sober sanity. He was looking for somebody *real*." She smiled briefly at Vanessa. "But *you* . . . Dejah Thoris!" she spat, making the name sound like an oath.

"It could be," said Titov, "that I'm interested in the lady only as a biologist. After all, oviparous mammals aren't all that common."

"Who is this Dejah Thoris?" asked Vanessa curiously.

"Just a character in a book, my dear," chuckled Titov in reply. "But I think I'd better start at the beginning. I'll think out loud—for my own benefit as much as yours.

"To begin with, the Coils of Time. The ever-widening spiral—with the past towards the center, inwards, and the future expanding outwards. The repetition of personalities on coil and after coil. On *your* coil, Vanessa, there was young Wilkinson, and there was a Dr. Henshaw, and there was an Olga Kubischev. Probably I was there too, and Natalie, but neither you nor Wilkinson ran across us. Those are the similarities—but there are the differences. Different histories, and even different worlds. Very different. *Your* Venus, Vanessa, was a world upon which it was possible for humans to survive with no artificial aids whatsoever. *Our* Venus . . ." He laughed grimly. "Just go outside the domes in your birthday suit, and seconds after you're asphyxiated, the wind-driven, abrasive dust will have stripped the flesh from your bones, and seconds after that your bones will themselves be part of the dust. But . . ."

He paused significantly.

"How many of us carry memories of past existences, of the different worlds upon which we have lived, from coil to coil?"

"What do you mean, exactly?" asked Wilkinson.

"Just what I say." He moved away from the bookshelves, half turned toward them, gestured with his right hand. "Here are some of the people who, just perhaps, had such memories."

From where he was sitting Wilkinson could read some of the titles on the spines of the books, the old, old books, their covers patched and preserved with transparent plastic. "*A Princess of Mars,*" he read aloud. "*Carson of Venus. . . .*" Then, on another shelf, "*The First Men in the Moon. The War of the Worlds.*"

"Science fiction," said Titov. "Twentieth century science fiction. Written long before the first unmanned probe rockets orbited Mars and Venus, crash-landed on the Moon. Stories

in which human beings could gallivant around on the surfaces of Mars and Venus—and even in the caverns honeycombing the Moon—without so much as the protection of even a simple oxygen mask.

"Bad guesses, Wilkinson? Or—memories?"

"I've never read any of those books," admitted Wilkinson. "But I've read about them. I've read Clarendon's *The Great Martian Canal Myth . . .*"

"Yes. A myth on this Coil of Time. But is it a myth on some of the others?" He resumed his chair, signaling to Natalie to pour some more brandy. "Take Venus, for example. Take Venus as we know it—the torrid, poisonous gale that howls outside the domes, the all-devouring dust. Take Venus as you and Vanessa knew it—an uncomfortably hot world, humid, but not unpleasant once you got used to it and dressed for the climate; a Venus whose indigenous fauna was not unlike that existing on Earth in the remote past. A Venus that was described, in some detail, by Burroughs, and Heinlein, and Bradbury, and dozens of others. Were they guessing—or were they remembering?

"Or Mars—the Mars of Burroughs, Leigh Brackett, John Wyndham. A breathable atmosphere, a climate warm enough to permit the minimum of clothing during the day although chilly enough after sunset. And the canals. Don't forget the canals. There are canals *now*—but we cut them. There weren't any canals at the First Landing; neither were there Burroughs' Red Martians, Green Martians and all the rest of 'em. Neither were there Wells' octopoid Big Brains, with the handling machines and fighting machines that were extensions of their feeble bodies, nor were there Stapledon's intelligent clouds.

"But when it came to Mars—with assorted Martians complete with a canal system—were Wells, Burroughs and all the rest guessing, or remembering? Was there a Wellsian or

a Stapledonian Martian Invasion on some other Coil of Time? Was there a John Carter who married the Princess Dejah Thoris?"

"I'm sorry," said Wilkinson, "but it seems fantastic."

"You should talk. You'd have drowned in a good, old-fashioned Venusian swamp if it hadn't been for your suit. But, on *this* Coil of Time, such swamps exist only in fiction."

"Dr. Titov," asked Vanessa sharply, "just what is it that you want Christopher to do?"

"Skipper the *Discovery*. Take her to Mars, that's all—assuming, that is, that Central Government grants us permission. The ship will be, to all intents and purposes, no more than a mobile, spaceborne laboratory, with Dr. Henshaw's apparatus installed on board in its own special compartment. After the landing has been made I, as I've already told you, will make the Time Jumps."

"Jumping, he hopes," said Natalie, "straight into the welcoming arms of Dejah Thoris." She turned to Titov. "You'd better watch out that John Carter doesn't skewer you with his sword."

"But isn't your assumption that Central Government will grant permission for a landing on Mars, or even for the establishment of a closed orbit about the planet, rather optimistic?" asked Wilkinson. "As I understand the setup, all you people have been virtually exiled to Venus because your experiments are too dangerous to be carried out on any inhabited world."

"Yes, that is the case, but the Director hopes to persuade the authorities that Henshaw's tinkering with time is dangerous only to whoever is the guinea pig."

"But if we can make the trip from one Coil to the next, what's to stop something or somebody unpleasant from that Coil making the trip in the opposite direction? After all, Vanessa did."

"You don't flatter your fiancée, Wilkinson. I should not describe her as something or somebody unpleasant."

"You know what I mean, Doctor."

"Yes. That point, as a matter of fact, has already been considered. Central Government raised it. They were told to dig Burroughs' Martian novels out of their library. I don't think that they'd consider Burroughs' Martians much of a military menace."

"What if some bright bureaucrat should stumble on Wells' *The War of the Worlds?*" asked Natalie.

"And so what?" asked Titov. "Wells' Martians were more than a match for the armies of the late Nineteenth Century but, after all, by *our* standards they were nothing marvelous. Being shot off their planet by a huge cannon for a start, and making uncontrolled crash landings on Earth in their projectiles. Their famous Heat Ray was no more than laser, and their Black Smoke was only a poison gas, effective only against people utterly ignorant of scientific warfare."

"So you think we'll be permitted?" asked Wilkinson.

"I'm pretty certain of it."

"But there are still Department of Spacial Navigation Regulations to contend with," pointed out Wilkinson, with a certain glum satisfaction.

"Such as?"

"Such as the manning scale. A Master—which you have. At least two watchkeeping officers, which you haven't. Radio Officer. Engineers . . ."

"That point has already been considered. *Discovery* is classed as an experimental ship, fully automated. The Department is satisfied that our watchkeeping gadgetry is of such a high standard that only a Master and an Engineer need be carried. Clavering, of course, will be the Engineer."

"Then what are we waiting for?" asked Wilkinson.

"Don't be in such a hurry," admonished Titov. "We still

have to obtain permission to carry out experiments on Mars—and, come to that, *Discovery* has yet to be declared spaceworthy. Legally speaking, you, as the only Master Astronaut presently on Venus, are qualified to act as a Surveyor. And, since both you and Vanessa will be shipping out in *Discovery*, I'm reasonably certain that the surveys will be thorough ones."

"They will be," promised Wilkinson.

IV

So WILKINSON and Vanessa were married, but there was no honeymoon. Wilkinson was far too busy seeing to it that *Discovery* was made spaceworthy. Clavering was of very little assistance to him. The Master Mechanic was harboring a grudge, complaining that he had accepted his post at Science City on the understanding that it was to be a shore job. But Wilkinson coped. As the holder of a Master Astronaut's Certificate of Competency he had been obliged to satisfy the examiners that he possessed some rudimentary knowledge of engineering principles. He could read a meter, could test a circuit as well as the next man. He could see to it that things that should be greased were greased, that things that should be oiled were oiled, and that the right kind of grease and oil was employed in every case. When it came to the re-establishment of the ship's air-conditioning equipment he relied heavily upon Titov and his staff, reasoning (correctly) that the biologists would know at least as much about hydroponics as the generality of ship's biochemists. And the bright boys of the Physics Laboratory made short work of putting the vessel's communications and electronic navigation equipment into first class trim.

Even so, in spite of his early command (and the strong

hints that it might be a permanent one) Wilkinson felt a growing sense of disappointment. He knew that Vanessa felt as he did. He had hoped that they would be married on Earth, and that their honeymoon would be spent in places and cities that he knew and loved—that she, with him as her guide, would come to know and love. But now the honeymoon would have to be deferred until the landing on Mars. It would not be the same, with the cities under pressurized domes, with no outdoor life at all apart from the occasional walk over the desert muffled up in heavy clothing and wearing an oxygen mask. And there would be too many memories—the memories of the other Vanessa, the dead Vanessa.

Still, there would be compensations. There would be the voyage itself, from Venus to Mars. There would be the opportunity for him to strut (discreetly, subtly) before his female, Master under God, monarch of all he surveyed. (But he could not imagine the notoriously independently minded Mad Scientists taking a Master's pretensions too seriously.)

Venus Queen came—and, after her usual short stay, went. Wilkinson accepted the congratulations of his old shipmates upon both his appointment and his marriage. The first was regarded by them as being a matter of luck; he had been Johnny-on-the-spot when the vacancy occurred. The marriage they found somewhat more puzzling, inasmuch as many of them had met the first Vanessa before she had died. It is a well-known fact that both men and women tend to team up with a succession of carbon copies of their first loves—but the living Vanessa was more, much more, than a mere carbon copy. And she even had the same given name as her predecessor. (Had *Venus Queen's* officers known that her second name had also been the same they would have been even more puzzled.) They assumed that she had been one of the female staff of Science City, and that Wilkin-

son's meeting her had been, like his being given command of *Discovery,* just another piece of luck. At the somewhat wet party prior to the *Queen's* departure the bride and the bridegroom were toasted, and the hope expressed that Wilkinson's luck would continue to hold.

Wilkinson was not sorry to see the ship go—and he was glad, now, that the original arrangements had fallen through. He could see that a voyage to Earth in the *Venus Queen* would have been awkward for both Vanessa and himself. Too many old wounds would have been reopened, too many new ones inflicted. The way things were now, it would be a completely new start for both his wife and himself.

Meanwhile, there was work, and more work. First of all *Discovery* was rendered spaceworthy after her long lay-up. And then there were the structural modifications to be made for the accommodation of Henshaw's apparatus. And then the ship had to be rendered spaceworthy all over again.

But the Science City people worked long hours, efficiently and cheerfully. There was none of the irritating unionism that was such a fruitful source of delay on Earth, Mars and the Lunar Colony. If one of the biologists working on the hydroponics system picked up and used a screwdriver there was not a general walk-off. There were no demands for dirt money, danger money or any other kind of additional payment on dubious grounds. Clavering did unearth from among his effects a dog-eared copy of the Spacial Engineers' Award and started to leaf through its clauses—but Wilkinson, having already made a few inquiries, was able to tell him that he was already being paid far in excess of the ruling Award rates and that his accommodation aboard *Discovery* more than conformed to the minimum standards laid down.

And then came the day when the ship was ready for her trials.

Overriding his protests, Vanessa accompanied Wilkinson. He had told her that in space one could never be certain of anything, and that in a ship recommissioned after years of idleness anything could go wrong and probably would. She had said, "So it's risky, Chris. And what about the life that I was leading on the other Venus—the life of a hunted animal. Wasn't that risky?" He had been obliged to admit that it had been so. "All right. I'm coming along. If anything goes wrong, seriously wrong, I want to be with you. I lost you once. If you're killed again, I want to be killed with you." He had said that she was a morbid little lady dog and that, in any case, *he* hadn't been killed on the other Coil of Time. It was, of course, entirely the wrong thing to say. And so Vanessa came along.

Titov was there, naturally, and his Natalie. There was Clavering, as Chief Engineer, technically in command of the bright young scientists and technicians who infested his engineroom. In fact, as Wilkinson remarked rather sourly, if he were the Owner and the Science City boys and girls fare-paying passengers, this one short hop would make his fortune.

Before the takeoff he made a personal check of everything. He did not trust all the prettly little pilot lights that made a Christmas tree of his control panel, that were supposed to compensate for the lack of skilled, qualified officers. He knew that Lloyd's of London were, and always had been, the main stumbling block in the way of complete shipboard automation. He remembered what a Lloyd's Surveyor had once told him: "Don't forget, Mr. Wilkinson, that a human being is a robust, multi-purpose robot—and, furthermore, one with imagination and prevision. We, as the underwriters, should never be happy to see a ship at the mercy of a single fuse. . . ."

At last he was satisfied.

Every piece of machinery was either functioning or ready to function. Airlock doors were hermetically sealed. The hydroponics room was a mass of broad-leaved greenery, and the fans were maintaining air circulation through the hull. Chemical purifiers had been installed for emergency use, as had been bottles of oxygen.

He returned to the Control Room and strapped himself into the pilot's seat, sparing the time to smile briefly at Vanessa, who was keeping well out of the way in a spare chair, then at Titov and Natalie.

The red-haired girl, who seemed to have appointed herself communications officer, asked quietly, "All ready, Captain?"

"Yes, Miss Weldon. You know the procedure?"

"I think I do, Captain. I've been studying hard to qualify myself for the job."

"I didn't know that you were getting it, even," grumbled Wilkinson, then took the sting out of the words with another smile. He pressed the Stand By button set in the center of the lower half of the panel, that devoted to engine controls. He watched the pilot light change from red to amber—and then, after a slight time lag, to green.

Natalie Weldon was speaking into her microphone. "Your attention, please. Your attention, please. Secure for Space. Secure for Space."

And no departmental heads to report all secure, thought Wilkinson. *That's one thing that the automation experts forgot.*

He said, "We shall have to use the Countdown technique. Tell them takeoff in five minutes; then four, then three, and so on. On the final half minute, switch to seconds."

"Ay, ay, Captain."

"Before you start, get the usual permission from the Spaceport Manager."

"Will do, sir."

Wilkinson looked around his Control Room. He was on his own, now. There was nobody to whom he could turn for advice, nobody to give him orders, And, just to improve matters, this would be an instrument takeoff. The metal screens were down over the viewports, and would remain in place until the ship was well clear of the swirling clouds of gale-driven abrasive dust. He stared at the radar display, at the blob of light that was the dome housing the spaceport offices, at the other blobs that were the domes of Science City. He tried to memorize their relative positions. This was the way that he wanted them to look on the screen when he came in for his landing.

"Permission granted, Captain," announced Natalie Weldon.

"Thank you. Please start the Countdown."

He heard her say, "Takeoff will be in exactly five minutes' time. Please see to it that all is secure."

Wilkinson started the Inertial Drive, initiating the normal warm-up procedure. He heard the whine of the Drive Unit, felt the vibration, felt too the odd sensation of lightness that would persist until the ship actually lifted, until acceleration became a substitute for a gravitational field.

He was aware that Vanessa was saying something, her voice little more than a whisper: "Not . . . not like a rocket . . . ."

He smiled at her, then held his finger to his lips warningly.

"Three minutes. . . ."

Time was dragging.

"Two minutes. . . .

"One minute. . . .

"Thirty seconds. . . . Twenty. . . . Ten. . . ."

I hope this crew of planet-lubbers has secured everything. . . .

"Nine. . . . Eight. . . . Seven. . . ."
No trouble lights on the panel?
"Four. . . . Three. . . . Two. . . ."
No.
"One. . . . *UP!*"

His finger stabbed the correct buttons. Abruptly the whine of the drive became almost supersonic, the sensation of lightness was replaced by one of weight, and the needle of the altimeter quivered and then started to climb. On the radar display the blobs of fluorescence diminished, then began to drift off the screen. The gale had hold of them. Hastily, Wilkinson brought the Auxiliary Drive into play to compensate. He knew that this was bad spacemanship, that a really competent pilot could correct lateral drift merely by juggling his Main Drive and his gyroscopes. But, until he had the *feel* of the ship, his motto was Safety First. The only one who would know what had been done, who would be able to guess *why* it had been done, would be Clavering. But the Engineer could be told that it was a necessary testing of all propulsive machinery.

It was a leisurely climb, a long climb. Wilkinson had no desire to break records. At long last he was able to lower the shutters so that the others could stare out at the blackness, at the shining points of light that were world after world, sun after sun, at the huge half-moon below them that was the planet from which they had lifted. He actuated the polarizers, then turned the ship so that the sun, with its corona and one great solar prominence, came into view.

Finally, using Main Drive and gyroscopes only, he made an orbit of the planet, homing at last on the Science City beacon.

When the ship grounded gently at her berth he knew that she was his.

V

INSOFAR AS THE voyage to Mars was concerned, Wilkinson's job was a sinecure as soon as he had lost his distrust of automation. He knew that the reaction time of the various electronic devices was far faster than his own, than that of any spaceman, but it took all of two weeks for emotional acceptance to set in. Once it did, he sat back and enjoyed himself. In his commodious Master's suite, and with Vanessa to share it, he was far better off than a First Class passenger in any ship of which he had been an officer.

There was not much social life, but that was no worry. Dr. Henshaw, aided by his technicians, fussed and tinkered with his apparatus, although Wilkinson considered it advisable to give strict orders that it was not to actuated while the ship was in flight. Clavering, practically chased out of his engineroom by the unqualified young men who knew more about the Drive than he, a certificated engineer, ever would or could know, retired to his cabin to sulk, with a frequently renewed bottle of Scotch to keep him company. Only Natalie and Titov, who was acting as ship's biochemist, seemed to have any spare time. They were good company, on those occasions when the Wilkinsons felt like company, and both of them were excellent cooks.

And slowly, slowly, the Red Planet expanded from a mere ruddy point of light to a disc, to a disc upon which the canals and oases and one polar ice-cap could be seen with the aid of the big mounted telescope, and then, finally, with the naked eye. And there were the bright sparks of reflected light that were the glassy domes of the cities, the other domes covering the farms.

They were sitting in the Control Room, the four of them, Wilkinson and Vanessa, Titov and Natalie.

"And what *do* you expect to find, Boris?" asked Wilkinson, pointing with the stem of his pipe to the world whose orbit they were steering to intersect.

"Beautiful, undressed blondes who lay eggs," jeered Natalie.

Titov laughed. "Much as I enjoy Burroughs' novels I've never been able to see eye to eye with him on that point. Oh, I agree that an egg-laying mammal might find use for mammary glands; as you know, the Australian platypus suckles its young after a fashion. But the children of Burroughs' Martians stayed in the egg until they were almost adolescent.

"But Burroughs *had* something.

"Look at it this way. Even in matters concerning your past life on *this* Coil of Time your memories are often faulty. How much faultier will they be of past lives on other Coils?"

"I still can't understand this memory business," complained Wilkinson. "I'd sooner believe in memories of past incarnations. After all, in that case, there could be a physical link between the lives, even if only a very tenuous one."

"When we get back," said Titov, "I'll have to turn you over to our Paranormal Psychology boys. They'll soon convince you that there are more links between personalities than crudely physical ones." He laughed. "Do you know, we've been trying to get them interested in Henshaw's experiments, but they just won't play. We're using *machines*. We're cheating."

"They're just jealous," said Natalie. "Old Henny's getting results, and they aren't."

"Could be, could be." He turned again to Wilkinson. "Tell me, Chris, just what will be the drill when we touch down?"

"Quarantine first. The Phobos Station has been discon-

tinued—it was too much of a nuisance, both to the ships and to the swarms of port officials. So we land at Marsala to pass Health, Immigration and Customs, and then we lift again for the short hop to the site they're letting us have at the North Pole." He grinned. "What was the Arctic climate like in John Carter's day? Could he get around in comfort in just his little short kilt and leather suspenders?"

"That's what I hope to find out. But I'll be doing the same as you did—making the jump in a spacesuit."

"Wise man. A pity that we didn't bring one of the two-legged dreadnought models along."

"I decided against that. A man in one of those looks like nothing human, and is far too liable to be shot up just on principle."

VI

WILKINSON BROUGHT *Discovery* in to a good landing at the Marsala spaceport and then, as he had neither Purser nor any other officer for the duty, went down to the main airlock to receive the various port officials in person. Most of them knew him and were suitably congratulatory. All of them were curious about the ship herself, especially Captain Holdsworth, the Port Master, who was also the Department of Spacial Navigation Surveyor, and Mr. Jones, of the engineering firm of Jones and Wilson, who was a Lloyd's Surveyor.

It was then that the trouble started.

"I surveyed this ship myself, quite legally, before she lifted from Science City," Wilkinson told them. "I've been in command of her all the way from Science City to Marsala. In my opinion she's perfectly spaceworthy."

Holdsworth snorted, glaring at Wilkinson with his hot

blue eyes under their bristling white brows. "Of course, *Captain,*" he growled, "we are making allowances for your youth and experience. We don't know yet what Mr. Jones has found—but as far as I'm concerned you, on your voyage from Venus to Mars, have broken just about every regulation in the Navigation Act."

"But I was assured by the Director that Central Government agreed to waive the Act as far as we're concerned since we're rated as an experimental vessel."

"Your Director got things wrong. *I* was told that you had lifted from Venus on a provisional permit only, and that competent Surveyors—Mr. Jones and myself—were to decide whether or not this permit is to be extended. The way that I see it you'd be entitled to circumnavigate Venus from now until Doomsday, landing at and lifting from *Venusian ports only* whenever you happened to feel like it. But once you poked your nose outside Venusian territorial limits you'd be in trouble. Big trouble."

"I tell you, sir, that the ship is perfectly spaceworthy. She handles like a dream."

"So *you* say, Captain. But according to the Regulations she's not. According to Lloyd's requirements, she's not. To begin with, she's undermanned, both in the Control Room and the Engineroom. Then there are no Certificates, either Lloyd's or the Department's, to cover all your fancy watchkeeping gadgetry. Why," he went on, warming to his theme, "you haven't even got a certificated ship's cook on your Articles of Agreement."

"But we got here, Captain Holdsworth. We got here, and lived like lords all the way."

"You shouldn't have got here, and you should have starved."

The Lloyd's Surveyor came into Wilkinson's office then. He was walking a little unsteadily, and there was a strong

smell of Scotch whisky on his breath. He announced, unnecessarily, "I've been talking with your Chief Engineer, Captain." He went on, "He's far from happy about the degree of automation in his department. He's even unhappier about the uncertificated personnel he's had to work under him."

"Uncertificated personnel!" exploded Wilkinson. "Damn it all, Mr. Jones, those men have *degrees*, not mere Certificates of Competency. Would you call a Doctor of Science uncertificated?"

"As far as we're concerned," put in the Port Master, "he might just as well be a Doctor of Dental Surgery or a Doctor of Divinity." He turned to his companion. "What about all this automation, Wally? That's your concern rather than mine, isn't it?"

"Rip it out. Ground the ship until manual controls are installed."

"Can your people do the job?"

"Of course."

"You heard that, Captain Wilkinson," said Holdsworth. "Mr. Jones, as you know, is one of the partners of Jones and Wilson. Of course, if you'd rather put the matter in the hands of some other firm . . ."

Wilkinson was tempted, but he had learned early in his career that it doesn't do to antagonize Surveyors. "All right," he agreed. "Let Jones and Wilson do it."

"Now, Captain, your manning. Before you lift ship for Venus or for anywhere else in the Solar System you'll have to engage qualified personnel—at least two certificated watchkeeping officers in the Control Room, at least two certificated engineers in addition to the Chief. *And* a certificated radio officer. *And* a cook.

"But for all that there's no hurry. As I understand it, it is your intention to proceed from Marsala to a site that your employers have leased in the North Polar regions, there to

carry out some experiment or other. This will be no more than an orbital flight to which the Deep Space manning regulations will not apply. However, the engineering modifications *must* be carried out before you proceed any further; you will be passing over several centers of population while *en route* to the Arctic, and you will realize that any failure of the main propulsive unit could well have disastrous consequences."

Knowing Clavering, thought Wilkinson bitterly, *I'd say that the risk of engine failure has been increased. . . .*

"So, Captain, all you can do now is to leave matters in Mr. Jones' capable hands, and then make the orbital hop as soon as he issues the Certificates of Spaceworthiness."

"But my passengers—or my Owners—won't be at all happy."

"My heart fair bleeds for them." Holdsworth grinned a not unkindly grin. "You can tell them that they're lucky not to be living in the days when everything had to be signed in London."

The passengers were not pleased.

They seemed at first to think that the delay was all Wilkinson's fault, and then some of them began to recall occasions upon which they had become entangled in red tape while still working on Earth. Titov composed a long spacegram to the Director, assuring Wilkinson that this gentleman's main qualification for his post was his ability to find his way through the bureaucratic jungle, and that by the time the experiments were over the automatic controls would be reinstalled and the Manning Scale, insofar as *Discovery* was concerned, forgotten. Meanwhile, nobody would be any the worse for a few days' relaxation in Marsala, and as soon as Messrs. Jones and Wilson had finished their dismant-

ling and blanking off, the ship could carry on for the North Pole.

And that was the way of it. Wilkinson was rather worried that old friends of Vanessa (the other Vanessa?) might recognize her, but Natalie was equal to the occasion, going ashore to purchase her a blonde wig and then, by the skillful use of cosmetics, altering the appearance of her face. So Vanessa was able to go ashore with Wilkinson without running the risk of embarrassing recognition. They enjoyed themselves for the four days that it took the shore engineers to make the required alterations. It was almost with regret that they returned to the ship from the hotel in which they had been staying.

And it was with very real regret that Wilkinson felt the stickiness of his controls when the ship lifted, felt her reluctance to tear herself away from the apron. He regretted not having stood up against the Surveyors, sitting tight at the Marsala spaceport with his automation intact while the Director of Science City, by spacegram and interplanetary telephone, fought it out with the bureaucrats in Washington.

But it was too late now.

VII

THE LONG VOYAGE from Science City to Marsala had been a pleasant dream; the short hop from Marsala to the North Pole was a nightmare. The ship was unhandy, her controls sluggish. Wilkinson had to fight her every inch of the way. He heaved a great sigh of relief when the signals of the radio beacon that had been installed at the site started to come in loud and clear, when he could see, bright against the snowfield, the marker blinkers.

He brought *Discovery* down carefully, gingerly, handling her with caution and distrust. There was an irregularity in the whine of the Inertial Drive that frightened him, something wrong about the vibrations that were transmitted to him through the structure of the ship. And the altimeter needle was moving in jerks, not unwinding slowly and steadily as it should have.

But he worked grimly, all his attention focused on the control panel, not even daring, at the finish, to as much as glance out of the viewports. The others—Vanessa, Titov and Natalie—seeing that he was having a bad time of it, maintained a respectful silence.

And then, when she was all of five feet above the surface of the thin, crusted snow, *Discovery* dropped like a stone. Five feet, in terms of linear measurement, is not much. But in terms of foot tons, even in a relatively weak gravitational field, it is too much. After the initial crash the complaining of the ship's structural members continued for many long seconds. Somewhere something had shorted; there was the stink of burning insulation, the acridity of ozone. A broken pipe dripped noisily. And from below drifted a mounting murmur of angry protest.

Hastily, Wilkinson stabbed the *Finished With Engines* button. He did not trust Clavering; he feared that the engineer would be quite capable of trying to start up the Drive again unless otherwise ordered. While he was waiting for the acknowledgment Henshaw bobbed up through the hatch in the Control Room deck like an angry Jack-in-the-box. "What the hell are you playing at?" he demanded. "You know damned well that my apparatus won't stand rough treatment."

"Neither will the ship," Wilkinson told him tiredly. He picked up the engineroom telephone, waited until he heard Clavering's testy "Hello?"

"Mr. Clavering," he asked coldly. "What the hell are you playing at?"

"I lost my damned surge effect, that's what."

"But why, Mr. Clavering?"

"Because the damned main oscillator packed up."

"But why, Mr. Clavering?"

"Don't ask me. I'm not a Doctor of Science. I'm only a poor damned Spacial Engineer with a Chief's ticket."

Wilkinson kept a tight rein on his temper. He said coldly, "You'll have ample time to effect repairs before we've finished the experiments. If you think it's necessary, I'll get Jones and Wilson to send technicians out. But you should be able to manage with your own staff."

"With those academic puppies?" It sounded as though the engineer were spitting in disgust. "No damned thanks. I want practical men, not blown away university professors."

Wilkinson sighed. *Discovery* had functioned perfectly until the practical men had got their paws on her. He wished that it were possible to dispense with the services of a qualified Chief Engineer altogether—but until matters were straightened out by the Director he would have to go through the motions of complying with regulations.

He said tiredly, "So you want Jones and Wilson?"

"Yes."

Henshaw broke in, "But how can we carry out out experiments, Wilkinson, with hordes of outsiders swarming all over the ship?"

"We could, I suppose, defer them until the repairs are finished. But it shouldn't be necessary. Jones and Wilson's people will be working only in the engineroom. The rest of the ship can be made out-of-bounds to them."

"Yes, yes . . . but suppose some oaf starts playing around with the Inertial Drive while my apparatus is in operation."

"Nobody will. I'll issue strict orders that it is not, repeat not, to be tested without my written authority."

"That should cover it," put in Titov.

"That's all very well, Doctor," Henshaw told him. "But you haven't the responsibility of operating the apparatus."

"Perhaps not, Doctor. But I'll be the one who's taking the risk."

"But it's still *my* responsibility, Doctor."

Wilkinson decided that it was time that he intervened. He said, "Not only shall I issue written orders, but I'll see to it that the main fuse rests in my possession, under lock and key, to be signed for when given out, and to be returned to me after any test or trial has been completed."

"I suppose that will be all right," admitted Henshaw grudgingly.

"Of course it will be all right," said Titov. "Having come so far, I don't want any further delays."

"He won't be happy until he's had one night of love with Dejah Thoris," sneered Natalie.

"Pipe down, wench. Don't parade your awareness of your own inadequacies."

"You know, Boris," she mused, "I'm quite convinced that you rode to your parents' wedding on a bicycle."

"Dr. Titov! Miss Weldon!" said Henshaw.

Wilkinson laughed. He knew that his friends were merely letting off steam after the strain of the orbital hop from Marsala. He wished he could do the same; perhaps after he had worn his brass hat for a few years he would be able to do so in public without the fear of loss of dignity.

"Natalie," he said, "would you mind getting in touch with Marsala and asking them get the repairs in hand? And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go to beard our Mr. Clavering in his den. Apart from anything else, I want to make sure

that the Drive *can* be immobilized while we're playing around with Dr. Henshaw's box of tricks."

"That's essential, Wilkinson," Henshaw told him. "*Absolutely* essential."

"I'm only a biologist," remarked Titov. "As far as Physics is concerned, I don't know which way is up. So tell me, just what would happen if the Inertial Drive were operated at the same time as your Time Twister?"

"I don't know," admitted Henshaw reluctantly.

VIII

A DAY AFTER their near-disastrous landing at the Polar site all was in readiness for the first experiment. The technicians from Marsala were at work in the engineroom, and had been told that they were not to stray into other parts of the ship. They—and Clavering—had objected strongly when they had read, and reluctantly countersigned, Wilkinson's orders to the effect that no test runs were to be made of the Drive while Henshaw's apparatus was in operation, and had objected still more strongly when the main fuse had been removed, to be locked away in the Master's safe. It would have been better to have immobilized the generators—but Henshaw wanted power, and plenty of it.

And so all of those concerned were assembled in the compartment that housed the Time Twister. There, modified slightly so that it would fit against the curved inner shell, was the complexity of brightly gleaming wheels, the metallic Moebius strip on its universal mounting, the oddly twisted antennae, the convolution upon convolution of glass tubing, looking like a mobile produced by a drunken sculptor. On the polished deck was a circle marked in white paint, the target area in which Titov would stand.

The biologist was all ready, save for his helmet, in a light spacesuit. Over the armor he wore a belt, and from this depended a sheathed knife and a holstered pistol. He was smiling confidently—but the smile could not hide his underlying nervousness. Natalie, too, was trying to disguise her real feelings. She asked flippantly, "Aren't you overdressed, Boris? I thought a little apron and a pair of suspenders would be the rig of the day. And a sword, of course. . . ."

"Dr. Titov," Henshaw asked fussily, "are you sure that you've forgotten nothing?"

"Quite sure, Dr. Henshaw. What would *you* say, Wilkinson? You're the only one with any real experience."

"After what *I* went through, I'd suggest a machine cannon."

Titov laughed. "You should have made sure there was one in the ship's stores." He turned to Natalie. "Help the knight on with the rest of his armor, wench."

"To hear is to obey, Sir Boris."

She was already holding the helmet, but before she lifted it into place she leaned forward and kissed him full on the lips. Then, saying nothing, she brought the transparent sphere down onto the neck-piece of the suit and gave it a swift half turn. Titov, his voice distorted by the helmet diaphragm, said, "Thank you." He walked steadily to the white circle and took his stance in the center of it.

Henshaw grunted, then made his way to the switchboard. He growled, "Keep well clear, all the rest of you." As though he were at the keyboard of some fantastic musical instrument, he pressed buttons and turned knobs—and the accompaniment to his actions was the song of the suddenly spinning wheels, low-pitched at first and then rising higher and higher to an almost painful shrillness, to a thin, keening near-inaudibility. And a lambent flame was flickering through the intricate convolutions of the glass tubing, the

distorted and attenuated Klein flasks, and the gleaming rotors were spinning in a luminescent haze . . . were spinning and fading, spinning and precessing, tumbling down some formless infinity, down into the gulfs between the continua, fading and vanishing, yet entirely invisible.

And the metallic Moebius strip was turning slowly on its mount, turning until it seemed to be a misshapen lens focusing the emanations from the spinning, precessing rotors onto the man who stood in the center of the circle. Titov raised his hand in a gesture of salute.

Vanessa's grip tightened painfully on Wilkinson's arm. Natalie uttered a little cry that was half gasp, half sob.

Titov was gone.

Henshaw, still at his controls, was muttering irritably to himself. The light in the transparent convolutions flickered and flared, flickered and died. The song of the gyroscopes faltered and the thin, high whine dropped down the scale to a dying rumble. The spinning wheels, as their rotation slowed, resumed their solidity.

And Titov, back in the center of the painted circle, glistening ice crystals thickly scattered over the shoulders of his suit, something white-furred and bedraggled in his right hand that dripped blood onto the polished deck, was stamping the snow from his boots.

When Natalie had lifted the helmet from his head and he had lowered himself to a chair pushed forward by one of the assistants, he said, "It was cold—not that it worried me in this suit. It was cold, and the snow was in deep drifts, although there were lichen-covered boulders exposed here and there. And it was snowing. Quite a blizzard, in fact. . . ."

He held the pitiful bundle of bloodied fur in his two hands. "I found this. I saw it killed, as a matter of fact.

Luckily, one shot from my pistol scared away the brute that had done the killing—otherwise this would have been the entrée and myself the main course."

"But what is it, Titov?" Henshaw was asking excitedly.

"Can't you see, Doctor? It's a common enough little animal on Earth."

"A rabbit," said Wilkinson.

"Yes. A rabbit. It's not an albino, so it must have adapted to Arctic conditions."

"But there *are* rabbits on Mars," Wilkinson pointed out. "Rabbit farming, for home consumption, is quite a thriving local industry."

"So there *are* rabbits on Mars. But, tell me, are there any rabbits outside the domes?"

"I . . . I don't think so. But it would need only one pair to get loose, and they'd soon multiply."

"Would they? And what would they breathe while they were doing their multiplication? And what would they eat?"

"Mutations . . . ?" suggested Wilkinson dubiously.

"Possibly, possibly—but that first pair would already have to be mutants before they escaped, on *this* Mars." He held the corpse up by its long ears. The blow that had killed it had crushed the hindquarters; the head and the upper portion of the body were undamaged. "Look carefully. Do you see any signs of abnormal lung capacity?"

"No . . . But . . ."

"There aren't any. You can take my word for that."

"But you can't be sure until you've dissected it."

"But I'm sure now. I'm sure that the world on the other Time Coil is very different from this one. Very different. To begin with, there was that heavy snowfall."

"Freak weather conditions."

"And there was the animal that killed the rabbit."

"What was it?" demanded Dr. Henshaw.

"A refugee from Burroughs' Martian novels. It was big, and it looked something like a Polar Bear.

"But it had six legs."

IX

Both Wilkinson and Vanessa, with their past experience of Time Jumping, were asked to attend the conference that was held shortly after Titov's return. It was Wilkinson who pointed out that the Polar regions were most unsuitable as a jumping-off place. He said, "Unless the other Mars has some race equivalent to the Terran Eskimo, you'll find no intelligent life on the ice-cap. There'll be a few herbivores—indigenous ones, perhaps, as well as imported ones like your rabbit. There'll be carnivores to prey upon them. And that's all."

"There could be trappers, or hunters . . ." suggested Natalie.

"Yes. There could be. But trappers and hunters, human or otherwise, would be just the right sort of people to shoot first and to ask questions afterwards."

Natalie paled and Titov said, "I think you have something there, Chris. But what do you suggest?"

"I'd suggest lifting ship and shifting a few degrees of latitude to the south. But first of all we'd have to get permission from the Martian government at Marsala—and they'd probably refer it back to Washington. And, of course, we'd want the works in working order."

"So that's out, for the time being at least. Any more suggestions?"

"Yes. Dr. Henshaw, could the field of your machine be extended so that two people can travel at once?"

"There's no need to modify the apparatus. If the two

people stand very close together in the circle they will both be transported."

"Good." Wilkinson turned back to Titov. "I think that two people should go next time, both of them well-armed."

"He needs me to keep an eye on him," said Natalie Weldon.

"You will stay here and now," Titov told her.

"Like hell I will. I'm as good a shot as you, and you know it."

"I suggested two people," explained Wilkinson carefully, "so that they can take with them one of the collapsible aircraft that are used on Mars. They're odd little brutes—a sort of cross between a balloon and an airplane. One man *can* attend to the laying out of gasbags and their inflation from the helium cylinders, but it's better to have two. There's a light electric motor, of course, with power packs . . ." He paused, trying to visualize the contraption in its deflated form. "Yes. I'm pretty sure that two people, together with all the bundles, gas cylinders and whatever, could crowd themselves into the circle, even though it meant holding quite a lot of things over their heads."

"I suppose that there'll be no trouble in obtaining one of the things?"

"No trouble at all. In fact, we can put in the order now by radio telephone, and Jones and Wilson's technicians can bring it out with them in their rocket plane tomorrow." Then, to Titov, "You can fly, of course?"

"I'm sorry, Chris, I can't. A hover car's my limit."

"What about you, Natalie?"

"I could learn. . . ." she said hopefully.

"It's not a thing you can learn in five minutes." He sighed, but it was more for effect than from emotional upset. "Oh, well, it looks like I'm elected."

"Chris!" Vanessa's voice was sharp. "I don't like this."

"Somebody has to do it, dear."

"But why you?"

"Because I seem to be the only atmosphere pilot aboard this ship."

She made no further comment, but he knew that he would have to talk, and talk hard, once they were by themselves.

"But with all this gallivanting around in flying machines," objected Henshaw, "you'll complicate the question of return to the here and now."

"Not necessarily," Titov told him. "You'll just have to keep your machine running in reverse until we come back from our survey flight."

"Yes, yes, but what if some wild animal stumbles through the . . . the gateway?"

"That's easily handled. A cage of steel bars to completely enclose the area covered by the circle. Somebody on duty here all the time with a supply of anesthetic grenades."

"Why not a rifle?" asked Wilkinson.

"Because I'm a biologist, and I'd like a few living specimens."

"But suppose *we* try to come back, and the cage is already full to bursting with a couple or three of your not-quite Polar Bears?"

""I *said* it was a complicated problem," sniffed Henshaw.

"Those bracelets you made for me . . ." said Wilkinson thoughtfully. "Those little Moebius strip affairs . . . Is there any way you could adjust the field of your apparatus so that only anyone wearing a bracelet could pass through?"

"Yes . . ." admitted Henshaw, "I could. . . ."

"Then why not make another couple of the bracelets?"

"Or four," added Titov. "Two and two spares . . ."

"So you can bring back Dejah Thoris?" asked Natalie sweetly.

"I'd hoped you'd forgotten her," said Titov.

"No more than you have, darling."

"Of course," huffed Henshaw, "you must realize that all these things take time."

"We have an infinitude of Times to play with," Titov told him.

X

AFTER ALL, Wilkinson told himself, there was no hurry. He could appreciate the spirit of inquiry that was driving Titov—but the biologist's motives were far less urgent than his own had been. He, Wilkinson, had snatched at the chance, however slim, of finding his lost love; all that Titov wanted to do was to prove that some fantastically bad guesses made by twentieth century science fiction writers hadn't been bad guesses at all, but faulty memories. And what did it matter? (But did his wild search for Vanessa matter to anybody but Vanessa and himself?) And the other worlds, on the other Coils of Time, would keep. He, now, was content with this one.

But was he?

He had volunteered to pilot the light aircraft for Titov. He would be leaving Vanessa, just as Titov would be leaving Natalie.

Why?

Why?

Why was he a spaceman, and why was Titov a scientist—one of the "Mad Scientists," at that? Was it that in both of them there was the desire to see what lay over the next hill, on the further shore? Was it no more (and no less) than a manifestation of the Wanderlust, the urge that on Earth had driven men across seas and deserts and mountain ranges, that was now driving them, in their flimsy tin

coffins, further and further across the boundless seas of space?

And if space, why not time?

As he stirred and twisted in his bed, a fragment of half-remembered verse came to him, a chorus from some queer old play he had seen somewhere—London, perhaps, or Marsala, or Moon City. It had been an Arabian Nights sort of story, set in ancient Baghdad . . . a passionate pastry-cook, and a captive princess, and . . .

He murmured,

"We are the pilgrims, Master, we shall go

"Always a little further; it may be

"Across that last blue mountain rimmed with snow,

"Across that angry or that shimmering sea . . ."

"What was that?" asked Vanessa sharply.

Perversely he replied,

"Take courage, ladies, it was ever thus,

"Men are unwise and curiously planned . . ."

And she continued,

"They have their dreams, and do not think of us . . ."

"What comes next?" he demanded, with a strange urgency.

Her voice was tense as she answered, "You should say it. But we'll say it together.

"We take the Golden Road to Samarkand!"

But I saw the play with Vanessa, thought Wilkinson. *It must have been all of a year before the* Martian Maid *disaster. I saw the play with her in Marsala. . . .*

And Vanessa, the other Vanessa, said, "I remembered that, from somewhere. I remember a theater, and you sitting beside me, and on the stage characters in what I think must have been ancient Persian dress. . . . And the scenery . . . archways, and minarets, drenched in blazing moonlight. . . ."

"Perhaps on Venus . . . *your* Venus."

"How could it have been? Can you imagine the Underground, as you yourself knew it, going in for amateur theatricals?"

"You read it, perhaps?"

"And what books did we have?" She laughed bitterly. "One or two technical manuals. How to strip and reassemble a machine pistol, and what part does which. Laser maintenance and repair. . . . No, if it's a memory it must be a memory of my—*my,* not *her,* Christopher—of my life on this Mars, on this Coil of Time. Boris is right. There *are* memories. And that's why I'm scared. I *know*—don't ask me how I know—I *know* that this other Mars, the world into which we opened the door briefly this morning, is a world in which none of us has any existence. There are no memories at all."

Wilkinson laughed gently. "How can there be? As you know, we read those fantastic Martian novels on the voyage out. There was only one Earthman on Burroughs' Mars, and that was John Carter. And we have no John Carters in our crew."

"I suppose you're right. And, after all, the only thing of which I can be certain is that a duplicate of myself is not waiting for you on the other side of the doorway. Which, perhaps, is just as well."

He said, "There's only one of you, Vanessa."

"That's not true, and you know it. How would you act, I wonder, if you *did* meet my duplicate?"

"Not duplicate. Incarnation."

"How would you act, anyhow?"

"It all depends upon whether or not I knew it was another incarnation."

She laughed. "Cautious. Very cautious. But I was only teasing. Even so, it's . . . odd."

"As we well know."

"But there's nothing odd about *us.* There's nothing odd

about our being together. About our having been together, on Coil after Coil of Time. . . ."

"But there must have been worlds in which the cards didn't fall just right, in which the random groupings of genes and chromosomes produced you but not me, or me but not you—or neither of us. After all, the individual is no more than an utterly insignificant eddy on the surface of the broad stream of history. . . ."

"You're right, I suppose. But I still like to feel that there's some . . . some continuity insofar as the individual is concerned. The trouble is that I *feel* that we'll be venturing onto a Coil of Time on which that continuity is broken."

"*We?*"

"Did I say *we? You,* I meant. You and Boris. And Natalie and I will have to sit here, waiting patiently, while the pair of you go flapping off in that absurd flying machine, and we won't even be able to see what's happening to you. You *are* selfish, you know. I'm no hothouse flower, Christopher. I did my share of the fighting when I was in the Underground. I wouldn't mind betting that I'm as good a shot as Boris, if not better."

"But this is Boris's party, after all. And the folplanes carry only two people."

"Then why are *you* going along?"

"To fly the damned thing!" he almost shouted.

He reached to the bedside table for a cigarette, savagely puffed it into life. By the dim glow of its smouldering tip he could see her beside him, her eyes and mouth large and dark in her pale face. He wondered how he could have been such a fool as to have volunteered to pilot a light aircraft over the Polar regions of an unknown and possibly—no, probably—hostile planet. It didn't make sense. It just didn't make sense.

Oh, well, at least he would take a memory with him, and

leave one with Vanessa. He threw the cigarette into the disposall and turned toward her. At first her lips on his were welcoming—and then abruptly she stiffened, got her arms between their bodies and pushed him away.

"What's the idea?" he demanded, hurt.

She said coldly, "I can see the point of a woman's giving her hero one last night of love when he's leaving her because he *has* to leave, or when he's volunteered for some worthwhile mission. But this isn't a worthwhile mission. Oh, all right, you think that you owe a debt to your Science City friends because you think that they helped you to find me. But they didn't send you into *my* Venus for your sake, Chris, or for our sakes. All they knew and cared was that you were a willing guinea pig. If Boris had some *real* motive—if he'd lost Natalie and knew that she was waiting for him on the other side of the gateway, for instance—that'd be different. I'd *expect* you to do all you could to help.

"But just to advance human knowledge—*no*. If the advancement of human knowledge is so damned important, let the Government take over the experiment. Let them send the Army through every gateway that's opened—horse, foot *and* artillery. And the Navy.

"I'm serious, Chris. There have been far too many silly damned women who've given their quixotic boyfriends their all, and waved them goodbye, and then sat and moped in widowhood for the rest of their lives." She chuckled grimly. "We used to have a rather good motto in the Underground—although we were careful never to say it aloud if any of the Leaders were around: 'Do what you're told, and volunteer for nothing.' "

It was Wilkinson's turn to laugh. "That motto," he told her, "came into existence with the world's first army. It was passed on to the first navy and then, after the lapse of

millennia, to the first air force. Then, oddly enough, the Space Navy got hold of it . . ."

"That makes no difference to the truth of it."

"Oh, it's true, up to a point. But I've said that I'll do the job. I can't back out now."

"Can't you? You may be the only astronaut on the premises, but that doesn't make you God's gift to aeronautics. It may interest you to know that Natalie belonged to a gliding club, back at some place called Austral on Earth, and told me that after a couple of lessons she'd be able to handle a folplane."

"But who's going to issue her license? Don't you know the regulations? So many hours with an instructor, so many hours solo, so many takeoffs, so many landings . . ."

"And who the hell is going to ask to see her license on that cockeyed Coil of Time next door? John Carter, or Dejah Thoris, or Carthoris, or Thuvia, or Tars Tarkas, or . . . or . . ."

"A thoat-herder's license might be more to the point," admitted Wilkinson.

"So what does it matter? Natalie wants to share the risks with Boris—and I want you to share a certain freedom from risk with me. Of course, if you *insist* on going . . ." She abruptly turned away from him.

He took hold of her shoulders, tried to turn her back. At first she resisted, then came willingly enough. But still she kept her arms, her tightly clenched fists, between them. She whispered, "Only if you promise. Only if you promise to teach Natalie, to give her her chance."

He surrendered at last, but he muttered, "I'll feel like a louse."

"Better a live louse than a dead lion," she said.

XI

"VANESSA, I suppose?" Titov said when Wilkinson told him of his decision not to make the Time Jump.

Wilkinson admitted this.

"Can't say that I blame her. Come to that," he added, "I had *my* troubles last night. Natalie's determined to come with me, and she's quite convinced that a day's instruction is all she needs to be able to fly the folplane." He snorted. "Women!"

"Women!" agreed Wilkinson.

"So, Chris, I'll be vastly obliged if you do your best to get that wench of mine airborne as soon as the contraption's to hand."

"I still think," said Wilkinson stubbornly, "that it's no job for a woman."

"Isn't it? Oh, perhaps we in Science City are a little less square than you astronautical types. Of course, you have centuries of tradition to contend with, tradition that's been building up ever since the very first ship was launched. Women and children first, and all the rest of it." He laughed. "Oh, I'm not sneering, Chris. Tradition's a fine thing. But there are times when it has to be jettisoned. Look at it this way. Suppose something goes wrong with Henshaw's Time Twister . . . won't it be better if Natalie and I are marooned together on some other Coil of Time than for me to be stuck *there*, and for her to be stuck *here*?"

The rocket from Marsala came in then, skidding to a spectacular landing in a great cloud of glittering ice crystals. Wilkinson and the biologist walked out to it, reached it just as the outer airlock door opened. The first of the technicians to emerge called, his voice muffled by his respirator, "Hi, Cap! Got some parcels for you here!" Two of his

mates dumped the bundles out onto the snow, then passed down from the aircraft a half dozen gas cylinders.

By this time Vanessa and Natalie had joined them.

"When do we start?" asked the red-haired girl.

"Now, if you like," Wilkinson told her. "Give me a hand to lug all this junk clear of the rocket."

Even in a gravitational field as heavy as Earth's there would have been no real work involved. The pack containing the folplane itself was fantastically light, and the motor, the power packs and the skis of the undercarriage came in cases and a strapped bundle that could be carried with ease. The gas bottles were weightier than the other components, but they were small and not hard to handle.

Wilkinson led the way to a smooth stretch of snow where there were no protruding boulders. He unsnapped the catches on the pack, carefully unfolded the fabric of the collapsed aircraft, and spread it out on the ground. It looked like a silhouette of an old-fashioned airplane cut by a child out of a sheet of crumpled paper. He then removed the motor and one of the power packs from their cases, carefully set them down on the patches of reinforced fabric marked for their reception, and snapped the retaining straps into place. Then, as the others watched in mystification, he placed the cylinders that he would not be using on other reinforced patches—patches that, when the thing was inflated, would become shallow sockets.

"What's the idea, Chris?" asked Titov.

"Ballast," replied Wilkinson. "We'll be filling this thing with helium, and we don't want it taking off before there's anybody aboard it."

"But why helium? Why not carbon dioxide, or ordinary compressed air?"

Wilkinson paused in his work. "The folplane, inflated and with a full payload, has negative buoyancy. But it's still so

light that the motor doesn't have to work very hard to keep it airborne—and, of course, this means that it has a much greater cruising range. Then, too, in the event of motor failure you drift down like a falling leaf; you don't drop like a stone."

"Just as well," said Titov, "seeing that I'll have an inexperienced pilot."

"I may be inexperienced *now*," Natalie told him sharply.

By this time Wilkinson had the cylinders connected up, and was opening the valves. Slowly the wings and fuselage of the folplane swelled; slowly the wrinkles were smoothed from the thing's yellow hide. It stood there on its stubby landing gear—the skis, and the struts that were no more than tightly inflated tubes of plastic—looking more like a toy than a real flying machine. Of the party, only Natalie showed any enthusiasm.

"I think I can fly her," she said. "I know I can fly her."

And, as Wilkinson was bound to admit, she was right. She mastered the simple controls the first time in the air, made child's play of the power-conserving technique of drifting in to a landing with a dead motor. And it was she who suggested an improvement to the takeoff procedure, this being to steer for a gently swelling hummock, run for it at full speed and then, from its summit, literally jump into the air.

After she had made three solo flights—the second and third with Titov as passenger—Wilkinson was satisfied.

He also felt far less guilty.

So Titov and Natalie were ready, but Henshaw was not. By this time Wilkinson was beginning to appreciate the importance of the role played by the Director of Science City, the man who was more a politician and administrator than a real scientist. There had been bright ideas aplenty on

this expedition, but nobody seemed to have been possessed of the necessary patience to work out irksome details in advance. There had been far too much playing by ear.

It took Henshaw three days to make the required modifications to his apparatus—three days in which Wilkinson acted as flying instructor to Titov as well as to Natalie, three days in which the technicians from Marsala made some progress with the engineroom repairs. It was on the evening of the third day, just after the departure of the Jones and Wilson rocket for the spaceport, that Henshaw at last announced that he was ready.

Very promptly, Titov and Natalie said that they, too, were ready. And so, in their spacesuits, hung around with weapons and equipment like Christmas trees, helium bottles stacked around their feet, holding the packaged folplane over their heads, they stood together in the circle of white paint.

Henshaw fussed over his control panel. The flickering blue light started to play through the convolutions of glass tubing, the gleaming rotors to spin and to precess. Slowly, slowly, the Moebius strip began to turn on its mounting. But there was something wrong. Henshaw was muttering to himself, was experiencing increasing difficulty in adjusting his controls.

And then Wilkinson realized what was wrong. There was the odd sensation of abnormal lightness, and there was the vibration, out of phase with that induced by the Time Twister. But it couldn't be that. He had issued strict orders that no test runs were to be made of the Drive without his permission. And the main fuse was securely locked away in his safe.

But the sense of lightness persisted, and the off-beat vibration.

"Dr. Henshaw!" he shouted. "Stop the machine! At once!"

"I have to get it started first, young man. Don't interrupt!"

"Stop it, I say!"

Wilkinson jumped to his feet, took hasty strides to where the physicist was fluttering around the control panel. But he was too late. Suddenly one of the attenuated Klein flasks exploded, and from it crackled a streamer of blue flame, playing like lightning, like a lightning flash of impossibly long duration, over the complexity of spinning rotors. The deranged machine whined querulously and then screamed, a dreadful, high-pitched scream that rose above the limits of audibility, that even when it could no longer be heard was excruciatingly painful.

Wilkinson knew that he was not competent to deal with this emergency—but the cause of it lay within his competence. He ran out of the main saloon, through alleyways and down ladders, hurrying to the engineroom. And there, as he had expected, he found Clavering, a misshapen gnome in filthy overalls, crouched before the Main Drive. It was running—slowly, slowly, barely ticking over. But it was running.

Wilkinson ignored the engineer, reached out for the switchboard, knocked up the main switch. Clavering slowly straightened, a puzzled expression on his seamed, dirty face, muttering, "What the hell's wrong wi' the bastard no'?" And then he saw Wilkinson, and what he had done. He snarled, "Ah'll thank ye tae keep yer scabby honds off *my* switchboard, Skipper!"

"What the hell do you think you're playing at?" demanded Wilkinson. Then, keeping his voice low and controlled with a great effort, he said, "Mr. Clavering, I gave strict orders that the Drive was not, repeat not, to be run without my permission."

"Dinna be sae daft, mon. A wee bitty test . . ."

"And where did you get the fuse?" Wilkinson glared at the socket that should have been empty, saw the ruddy

gleam of metal. He reached out and viciously wrenched free the short length of heavy gauge copper wire. "I see." He counted to ten, then to another ten. After the second countdown he was able to say coldly, "Mr. Clavering, you'd better start packing your bags. You are instantly dismissed. As and from now."

"Ye canna dae that tae *me,* Skipper."

"I've done it. Unless you'd prefer to appear before a civil court on a charge of willful disobedience to lawful commands."

The telephone buzzed. Clavering reached out for it, but Wilkinson slapped his hand away and picked up the handset himself. At first he did not recognize the voice that came from the instrument. He knew Titov well by this time, but had never, until now, heard the biologist when he was in a state of excitement. "Is that you, Chris? You'd better come topside, to the Control Room. Fast!"

"I'll deal with you later," Wilkinson growled to the engineer. "Meanwhile, touch nothing! That's an order!"

He could not guess what this fresh emergency might be—but he knew, from Titov's obvious excitement, that it must be a serious one.

XII

WILKINSON PASSED through the main saloon when he hurried up to the Control Room. Henshaw was still there; he and his aides were clucking over the ruined machine like a flock of old hens. The physicist tried to detain him, but Wilkinson brushed him aside.

As soon as he emerged from the hatch in the Control Room deck he could see that there was something wrong, very wrong. It had been only a few minutes after sunset when the experiment had been commenced; now bright sun-

light was streaming through the big viewports. He looked up, to the transparent overhead dome. He could see blue sky—far too light a blue. He could see gleaming wisps of high, feathery cirrus. This could never be the Martian firmament—or could never be the firmament of the Mars that he knew.

He joined Vanessa, Natalie and Titov at one of the viewports. He stood there, saying nothing, and stared. There was snow outside the ship—but it was real snow, not a sparse coating of ice crystals. There was snow, thick snow, piled in drifts around protruding, weatherworn boulders, great, smooth rocks encrusted with what appeared to be a pinkish lichen. And there were wind-heaped dunes of snow stretching in glittering undulations to the horizon.

In the middle distance there was a building—low, black, untidily sprawling, its proportions oddly alien. From a squat stack on its convex roof drifted a plume of white vapor. This was the only visible movement in the wintry scene.

Titov broke the silence. He said, "I think I know *what* has happened. I still don't know *how* it happened."

"That damned fool Clavering started the Main Drive," Wilkinson told him.

"Against stupidity, the gods themselves fight in vain," murmured the biologist. "But I thought you had the main fuse in your safe."

"It's still there. But it's removal from its socket was more for psychological than mechanical effect. Any fool can rig a makeshift fuse."

"Which he did."

"The damage has been done now," muttered Wilkinson. "But tell me. Where are we? Or *when*?"

"Mars, of course."

"But . . . All this snow. And there must be a reasonably dense atmosphere."

"As you say. And, for your information, I've already checked the outside temperature. It's quite mild—minus 5° Centigrade. So in low latitudes it must be definitely warm."

"Not Mars," said Wilkinson definitely. "There must have been a displacement in space as well as in time."

"Must there? You, of all people, shouldn't advance *that* theory. *You* know that climatic conditions on our Venus are slightly different from those on the world from which you rescued Vanessa."

"Yes. But Henshaw himself said that he didn't know what would happen if the Drive were operated at the same time as his Time Twister."

"He knows now." Titov took hold of Wilkinson's arm. "Look, Christopher. I'm no navigator, but even I know that the horizon wouldn't be as close as it is if we were on a planet the size of Earth. Then there's the gravitational field: if we'd been suddenly transported to Earth we'd feel the difference. *Wouldn't we?*"

"We should," admitted Wilkinson grudgingly.

"So I'm convinced that this is the Mars we were trying to reach. And now, what shall we do about it?"

"Sit tight," said Wilkinson without hesitation. "Sit tight until Henshaw has figured out a way to get us back to where we belong."

"But to get *here* was the purpose of the expedition. If the entire damned ship, with all her equipment, has made the Jump instead of only two people, so much the better. Well, Captain, what do we do now?"

"I'm just the bus driver."

"You are the Master. Not only is the ship your responsibility—so are all the people aboard her."

"Then, as I've already said, we'll sit tight."

"Do you want a mutiny on your hands?" Titov laughed. "What I propose is that we call for a couple of volunteers—

and I'll be one of them—to investigate the pumping station."

"The *what?*"

"You heard me. The building where the pumps are—the pumps that maintain the flow of water from the snowcap through the canals. The canals that *we* didn't cut, that were here when Man hadn't yet come down out of the trees. Oh, everything may be fully automated." He laughed again. "I know that automation is something of a dirty word in this ship, but no matter. The pumping station may be fully automated, but if it's not there'll be attendants. Human attendants, if the memories from which Burroughs and Bracket worked were reliable ones. We have to make contact with them."

"How is it," asked Wilkinson, staring out at the alien building, "that they haven't made contact with us? The ship's big enough to see, and obviously not a permanent feature of their landscape."

"Why should they come out into the cold? And I can't see any windows in that shack, although there must be doors . . . Anyhow, Chris, I suggest that you call a general muster. Up here will be the best place. Everybody will be able to see for himself, then, what's happened."

Wilkinson agreed.

And now, with Vanessa and Natalie beside him, he was watching Titov and one of the other scientists, a young man called Farrell, plodding off across the snow toward the black building. The two men were wearing snow shoes—which were, as a matter of fact, Venusian dust shoes, some of *Discovery's* people having been wearing them when boarding the ship. They were wearing spacesuits, although more for warmth than for any other reason; the tests had shown that the atmosphere of *this* Mars was perfectly breathable.

Too, there was the convenience of being able to use the suits' built-in radios. They were armed, each carrying a rifle and a heavy automatic slung at his belt.

At first they had maintained a stream of chatter, a running commentary on almost every step. But now they were silent; it had been hard going over the deep snow. The sound of their heavy breathing was audible from the speaker of the Control Room transceiver.

"They're almost there," said Natalie unnecessarily.

Wilkinson did not reply. Through his binoculars he watched the landing party make its cautious way along the low wall that faced the ships, obviously looking for some way into the building. Behind him the transceiver crackled and then Titov's voice said, "Can't find any openings this side. The building's made of metal. Odd construction. Seems to be one huge casting—although it could be a really excellent job of welding. In either case, an advanced technology. . . . It's relatively warm, too. The snow around its base is melted. There's the noise of machinery. If I hold my helmet against the wall you might hear it. . . ."

There was a brief pause, and then those in the Control Room heard a steady *thump, thump, thump*. . . .

"As I said, a pumping station," went on Titov. Then, "We're going to investigate the other sides of the shack now. There's bound to be a doorway somewhere."

"He should have taken the folplane," whispered Natalie. "That way he could have made a quick getaway. I don't like this."

The two men were out of sight now, but Titov's voice was still coming in strongly. "Damn it all, the place seems to be hermetically sealed. Guess we'll have to scramble onto the roof and do a Santa Claus act down their chimney. Whoever these people are, they don't believe in fresh air. . . ."

And then another voice, Farrell's: "Look, Boris. A crack in the sheathing."

"I do believe you're right, Paddy. Could be a door, a circular door, a very well fitting door. Can't see any doorbell, so we'd better knock. . . . Yes, use the butt of your rifle."

Distinctly the thudding sound drifted from the transceiver.

"Yes, you're right, it's opening. Keep well back, Paddy, and have your rifle ready. We don't know yet if the natives are friendly."

Then—suddenly, shockingly—there was the sound of a loud report, and another, and the vicious rattle of a pistol fired on the full automatic setting. There was a hoarse shout, almost a scream, and Titov's voice yelling something.

There was silence.

"What did he say?" Natalie was crying. "What did he say?"

"It sounded like 'damned tin octopus'," said the man who had been standing by the transceiver, in a doubtful, frightened voice.

XIII

WILKINSON WAS really on his own now, realizing just how much he had leaned upon Titov in the past. He was on his own, and whatever decisions were to be made he would have to make—and fast. But he realized that to rush things could lead, at best, to delay—and, at the worst, to further disasters. So, while the others stared at him, waiting for him to say something, to do something, he filled his pipe with calm deliberation and slowly went through the ritual of lighting it. By the time he expelled the first fragrant mouth-

ful of blue smoke his plan of campaign was beginning to take shape.

With the stem of his pipe he pointed at one of the physicists who, during the voyage out, had shown considerable interest in astronautics. He said quietly, "You're appointed Acting Chief Officer, Peter. In my absence, Acting Master."

"But . . . but I'm only an amateur."

"Don't let that worry you. In any case, I'll be keeping in touch with the ship by suit radio. But you'll be in full charge until I get back." Slowly he surveyed the faces before him. He wanted young men, strong men, and few of the scientists qualified. There was Lefarge, and there was Briggs . . . but there should be at least two others in the second landing party. Four volunteers . . .

He must have whispered the words, and he was not surprised when he saw Natalie step forward, and with her Vanessa, with Briggs and Lefarge only a half second behind them. He remembered what Titov had said about the outmoded concern for the safety of women, and what both Vanessa and Natalie had had to say on the same subject. Besides, Vanessa had already fought by his side, and he had no doubt that Natalie would be able to do the same.

"All right," he snapped. "You'll do. Now . . . equipment. Light spacesuits. Snowshoes. I think our armory will be able to afford us a pistol apiece, with ammunition. And we'll take along a couple of laser projectors; I don't think much of them as weapons, but they have other uses. And flashlights; it could be dark inside the pumping station."

Only a few minutes later the members of the landing party, clad in their spacesuits, were waiting by the airlock and, after a lapse of about thirty seconds, the equipment Wilkinson had ordered was brought to them. Swiftly they

buckled it on. Wilkinson saw that the others made the necessary adjustments to their suits so that they would be breathing the local atmosphere; there was no sense in using the air from their tanks, and circumstances might arise in which the canned atmosphere would be essential to survival.

And then they were out of the airlock, stepping down the short ladder, clumsy in their snowshoes, treading cautiously and slowly, until they had mastered the technique, over the snow. The air, in spite of the filters through which it had passed, was cold and crisp, with the tang of frost. The light of the sun, low in the southern sky, was reflected blindingly from the smooth surface. Wilkinson used the polarizer in his helmet to cut down the glare, and told the others to do the same.

In the lead, he followed the trail left by Titov and Farrell. It was easier going. Ahead of him loomed the low, black building. It had looked sinister enough before the vanishment of Titov and Farrell; now it was doubly so. As he plodded on he pondered the significance of Titov's words. *Damned tin octopus. . . .* A robot, he decided. A maintenance robot, or a mechanical watchdog with built-in instructions to dispose of any potential source of danger to the station. He imagined what he might find, and wished that he had not allowed the women to come along, Natalie especially.

Then he was walking along the thawing snow at the base of the wall, rounding the corner. He could see the disturbed area of the snow surface, the evidence of the struggle that had taken place. As he reached it a brassy glint caught his attention. It was an empty shell, expelled from an automatic pistol.

"There's the crack that Paddy was talking about," said Lefarge.

"I see it," Wilkinson told him.

It was hair-thin, almost invisible, outlining a circular door—a door, decided Wilkinson, on which he would not be knocking. He would open it himself; he would not knock and then wait for whoever or whatever was inside to come out for him. It would be simpler if he knew where the hinges were, but it did not much matter.

He hefted the hand laser projector by its pistol grip, motioning with his other hand for his companions to stand well back. He said, "Calling the ship. Calling *Discovery.*"

"I hear you, Captain."

"We're burning our way in."

The invisible beam played along and around the crack, tracing the circle. Metal flared to blue heat and then, smoking and sizzling, dribbled to the bare, wet earth at the base of the wall, exploding the moisture into steam. Again Wilkinson traced the circle, and again. In the widening fissure he thought he could see guttering projections that could be the remains of catch or hinges. He gave these a few seconds of concentrated attention and then—cautiously, cautiously—advanced to make a closer inspection. He retreated again, returning the laser projector to its holster, drawing in its stead his automatic. He loosed off a full clip at the base of the circular door.

As he had hoped, the impact of the heavy slugs finished the job. Slowly, deliberately, knocked off balance, the heavy valve toppled outwards, slamming down onto the snow, sending up a flurry of ice crystals and a puff of steam.

Through the opening so revealed there was a passageway—a tunnel, rather, circular in section. It seemed to be unlit; its far end was shrouded in darkness. From it, louder now, frighteningly loud, came the *thump, thump, thump* of the pumping machinery.

Wilkinson flicked the switch of the flashlight at his belt.

He said, "Come on. We're going in. But you, Natalie and Vanessa, wait outside. Did you hear that, *Discovery*?"

And coincidental with the acknowledgment from the ship came the protest of the two girls: "Like hell we will!"

Wilkinson shrugged. An argument, now, would waste too much time. Carefully, he kicked off his snowshoes, then stepped into the tunnel, his reloaded pistol ready in his right hand. He found it hard, in his metal-soled boots, to keep his footing on the curved, slippery surface, and had to use his left hand to steady himself. He heard at least one of the others scrabbling desperately behind him.

He said, "Calling *Discovery*. We are now inside the building."

There was no reply. Apparently this metal structure inhibited radio communication. That might be why nothing further had been heard from Titov and Farrell. So, Wilkinson thought with relief, they could still be living. He said sharply, "Vanessa, can you hear me?"

"Yes, Chris."

And so communication was still possible between the members of the landing party. So far, not too bad. Yet.

The beam of his flashlight, together with the beams from the others, was reflected confusingly from the curved, polished walls. But the imbalance of his body told him that the tunnel had a downward trend, slight at first, then increasing. Ahead of him was what he took to be a blank wall, and then, as he approached it, he could see that this was a bend, the first of many bends. The path that they were treading, down which they were slipping and stumbling, was a spiral ramp, leading down, down. . . .

Down to the machine room, perhaps, the pump room. The mechanical thumping was loud and louder, so that they had to shout to be heard on the suit radios. And there was a taint in the air that they were breathing—hot metal

and hot oil, and oddly mingling with it a chilly dankness.

Down, and down. . . .

Down the steep, slippery spiral, sliding and stumbling, fighting to retain balance, with no retreat—or, at any rate, no hasty retreat—possible.

Down—as though being sucked down by the great, clangorous pumps.

Down—until they almost fell onto a level platform, a deck of smooth, slippery metal.

There was light here, of a sort. There were red-glowing tubes set in the low, arched ceiling. Turning around, letting the beam from his flashlight fall on every inch of the compartment, Wilkinson satisfied himself that there was no sign of life, no sign of hostile movement, then gave the order to switch off the belt lights to conserve the power packs. Nothing stirred except the black, sullen water rushing by the platform, impelled by the noisy pumps, driving south to the canals, to the low latitudes, to the cultivated areas and to the cities.

Briggs was saying something. Wilkinson heard, "This can't be the main thawing center. That must be somewhere else —at the Pole itself, perhaps. These pumps are just boosters . . ."

All very interesting, thought Wilkinson, but before he could put a stop to the man's idle speculations Natalie broke in, her voice sharp and strained. "Where's Boris?"

I should never have let her come, thought Wilkinson again. But where *was* Boris? Where was Farrell? Where was the "tin octopus" that had, presumably, captured them?

He walked to the edge of the wharf. There was nothing alongside it, but, several feet away, moored to the curving wall of the tunnel, there was a boat, an ungraceful contraption, decked over, little more than a rectangular box. It seemed to Wilkinson to be a remarkably unhandy way

of doing things, especially as there were mooring cleats along the wharf stringer. But perhaps the craft could be brought alongside by remote control, or perhaps . . . He had a vision of the "tin octopus" extending a long, long tentacle, fumbling with the lines, casting them off and then drawing the boat alongside the working platform. Meanwhile, it was well out of the way, leaving the berth clear for any incoming traffic.

In any case, it was obvious that a boat would be necessary for any rescue operations. The prisoners (or the specimens?) must have been removed by water. But how to get to it? A spacesuit could be used as a diving suit of sorts . . . but, without weights, could a man cross this swiftly flowing current without being swept away? Wilkinson doubted it.

There was one way of getting across that black water. It would not be an impossibly long jump even on Earth; here on Mars it was well within the capabilities of the average non-athletic spaceman. But the spacesuit and the assorted ironmongery with which it was hung would have to come off. Wilkinson told the others of his intentions, then removed his helmet and was helped out of his suit by Briggs. He took off his uniform jacket, and then his shoes and socks. The air was warm enough, but damp. Now that his helmet was off, the thumping of the pumps, the machinery behind the low archway through which the water was gushing, was deafening.

He walked back as far as he could from the wharf edge, back until the curvature of the tunnel wall forced him to crouch. Then he ran forward and jumped. His bare feet came down onto the metal deck with a thud and the boat rocked violently. He put his hands out to the wall against which it was moored to steady it. He cursed as the boat rocked again, as he felt hands clutching his shoulder. He

turned, angry words on his lips, then saw that he was looking into the face of Vanessa. She shouted, "I thought you might need a hand!"

"I might," admitted Wilkinson.

He studied the situation. The boat was moored at its forward end only, with a short length of what looked like very flexible wire rope cast around cleats set into the curved tunnel wall. But coiled down on the metal deck was another length of wire, ample for Wilkinson's requirements. He picked it up, ran it through his hands. There were no kinks, no entanglements; it would run free. He shouted to the wharf, hoping that his voice would carry above the noise of the pumps, through the helmet diaphragms: "I'm throwing you a heaving line!" One of the men raised a hand in acknowledgment.

"As soon as they have the line," Wilkinson told Vanessa, "let go. They'll pull us across to the wharf."

She nodded.

Getting the line across to the wharf was easy. Catching it should have been as easy, but Briggs fumbled it badly, dropping it to the deck. He had to go down on his knees —even a light spacesuit inhibited free movement—to pick it up. And then he had it, standing there, legs well apart, waiting to take the strain.

"Let go!" Wilkinson shouted to Vanessa.

The boat swung out from the tunnel wall, into midstream. The weight came onto the heaving line. "Catch a turn around your wrist!" yelled Wilkinson to Briggs but he was too late. The smooth wire slipped through the awkward gloved hands, then dangled uselessly from the ringbolt in the bows of the boat.

The current had the boat, and before Wilkinson or Vanessa could do anything they were swept into the tunnel.

XIV

THE TUNNEL was a long one, and their passage through it seemed to take hours. There was clearance enough—but the question of headroom had not been among Wilkinson's worries. The wharf, with its mooring arrangements, and the boat itself had been evidence that it was a thoroughfare for waterborne transport as well as an artery of the irrigation system. There was clearance enough, and it was lit after a fashion, dull-glowing tubes being set in the roof at widely spaced intervals. There was enough light for Wilkinson to be able to see Vanessa's pale face, the outlines of her bare arms and legs, but that was all. He tried, working by touch, to find out something about the boat. He was certain that it was a powered craft, and if he could somehow get the engine started he would be able to get back to the subterranean wharf.

There was a depression in the plating of the foredeck, a shallow bowl. There were slots in it, too thin for him to insert even a little finger. And his pockets were empty; he had deemed it prudent to remove from them all hard and sharp objects, to avoid chafe, before putting on his spacesuit. Vanessa could not help him.

And so, in the near-darkness, they were swept on, past smooth metal walls utterly innocent of any projections, in a craft that did not possess so much as a boathook to catch such projections if they ever did appear. They huddled together for warmth, and when they were thirsty they scooped up water from overside with their hands. There was nothing that they could do about their growing hunger.

They talked, of course. They wondered if the rest of the party had succeeded in making their way up the spiral ramp and, if they had done so, what action they would take.

It was probable that the canal ran due south, underground, from the pumping station, and that it would emerge somewhere beyond the southern limits of the snowcap. It should not be beyond the capabilities of the amateur navigators remaining in the ship to find the point of emergence. After all, they had the folplane at their disposal.

They talked—and then, made drowsy by the darkness and the monotonous susurration of the water, they slept a little. But it was an uneasy sleep. They were lightly clad, and they were cold, and the metal deck was unyielding. They awoke with a start when bright daylight hit their closed eyelids like a blow.

Astern of them, black against a wall of ice and snow, was the circular mouth of the tunnel from which they had been spilled. Ahead of them and all around them was a vast lake, extending to the horizon. Their speed had diminished but the current still carried them along at a good seven knots; they were keeping to what must be a deep water channel, marked by long, straight, parallel lines of pile beacons.

The time of day seemed to be late afternoon. The sun was close to the western horizon, sinking almost visibly, and a shimmering golden path ran from its ruddy disc, across the calm water, to the boat. And around the setting sun were the towering castellations of gilded cumulus clouds. It was wrong, all wrong—but the water was real enough and so was the air, the air that carried the faint scent of vegetation, the subtle hint of wood smoke, that they were breathing.

While the light lasted, Wilkinson and Vanessa made a careful inspection of the boat. But of loose gear there was none. There was only the short painter of intricately braided wire by which she had been moored, and the longer one that he had used as a heaving line. And there was that odd

depression, that shallow bowl with the peculiar yet regular arrangement of slots. A pilot's seat? Possibly . . . but for no human or humanoid pilot.

Suddenly, it seemed, the sun was gone.

The sun was gone, and low in the still luminous west hung a bright star, a planet, shining with a steady, green-blue radiance. Earth, of course. Home. (But what was Earth like on this Coil of Time?)

The sun was gone, and the darkness was sweeping in from the east, and overhead the twinkling points of light that were the stars were making their appearance. From the surface of the water a silvery mist was rising, condensing in clammy droplets on the metal deck and on the garments of the man and the woman. Phobos rose in the east (but too large, too bright) and then Deimos, hurtling across the heavens in retrograde motion (but surely never visible in these high latitudes), filling the mist with shifting shadows, lending to the pile beacons the illusory semblance of trees and towers and steeples.

And it was cold, a raw cold that penetrated to the marrow of the bones. Wilkinson and the girl huddled together, holding each other tightly. But it was almost useless. They were exposed, bare-footed and lightly clad, on a metal platform absolutely devoid of cover, a platform upon which the dew was already turning to frost.

"This is no good!" Wilkinson said through chattering teeth.

"We have to keep moving. Otherwise we freeze to death."

And what, he asked himself, of the energy expended in motion, the energy that needed food for its renewal? But surely they would be able to make their way to land tomorrow; surely they would be able to find food and shelter of some kind. And surely Natalie, flying down the canal in the folplane, would find them. . . .

Yes, they were out of the lake now. They could see, loom-

ing indistinctly through the mists, the canal banks, the tall trees that lined the banks, looking at them almost without interest as they jumped up and down, as they waved their arms wildly, as they fell into a sequence of motions that bore some slight resemblance to calisthenics. Slowly warmth returned to their bodies, but they were tiring rapidly. They could not keep it up for much longer.

Suddenly Vanessa, who was facing her husband, who was looking downstream, stiffened. "Look!" she cried, pointing. "A fire!" And then, at the top of her voice, "Hello! Hello, there! Help! Help!"

Wilkinson caught her slim shoulders. "Stop! We don't know who or what they are!"

"They've got a fire," she said. "And if we don't get to it we freeze to death!"

And that, he knew, was almost a certainty. But how to reach the bank where the fire was blazing? They had already discovered that the freeboard of the boat was too high for them to use their hands as paddles, and there was nothing aboard the craft that could be used.

"Hello!" Vanessa was shouting again. "Help! Help!"

From the bank drifted a confused shouting, and then, "Come in ter land! Don't try anyfing funny! We've got yer covered!"

The voice was threatening rather than friendly, and it promised nothing. Wilkinson knew that if the boat were to be beached it would have to be by his own efforts, and that there was no time to be lost.

With numb, clumsy fingers he unbuttoned and unzipped his clothing and let it fall in a little heap to the deck. It would hamper his movements if he left it on; besides, he would be needing dry apparel shortly—he hoped. He threw a bowline of sorts into the free end of the longer of the two painters, then slipped it over his head and shoulder.

"What are you doing?" asked Vanessa. "*What are you doing?*"

"I'm going to try to tow us in." As gently as possible he disengaged himself from her arms and slipped over the side. The shock was not as great as he had feared it would be—possibly the water was a degree or so warmer than the air—but it was bad enough. Somehow he managed to inhale a great, shuddering breath, and then he started to swim. The icy water seemed to be compressing his body, seemed to be congealing around his flailing limbs. But he kept on, somehow, steering vaguely for the ruddy, flaring torches that had been brought down to the water's edge. Luckily the boat had still been well upstream from the fire when he had gone overboard; even so, he began to dread that he would be swept past the beckoning light and warmth. The weight of the clumsy craft was dragging him back, and the towline was pulling him down. The choking water, when he misjudged the timing of his breathing, was like fire in his lungs.

From a long way off he heard the shouts—the encouraging shouts?—and then something smacked the surface of the water just in front of his face, splashing him. Bitterly he resented what was, after all, only a minor irritation—he could be neither wetter nor colder than he already was. Again came that seemingly irrelevant *thwack*, and again. And there was a rough voice shouting in what sounded like Cockney English, "Grab it, yer bleedin' fool, afore I gets tired o' throwin' it!"

His arm became entangled with a rope of some sort. He willed his fingers to close around it, then managed to grasp it with his other hand. When the weight came on it the painter cut into his neck and shoulder, but he felt nothing. He let himself be drawn through the water until he felt rough sand scraping his knees and elbows. He crawled

up the gently shelving bank, dimly aware that ungentle hands were freeing him from the towline and pulling the boat in towards the land.

He lay there, cold and exhausted but refusing to give up until he was assured of Vanessa's safety. He saw her jump from the boat, the bundle of his clothing in her arms, and then scramble up the bank to where he was huddled. She fell down beside him, trying to cover him and to warm him with her body. He heard a not unkindly voice saying, "Come on! Give us an 'and ter get 'im along ter the bleedin' fire."

XV

His immersion in the freezing water had been painful; the thawing out was more painful still. He sat before the roaring fire, wrapped in the skin of some fur-bearing animal. It had not been very well tanned, and it stank—but it was warm. A man wrapped in a fur cloak brought him something in a crude mug. It smelled and tasted vile, but it was alcoholic. After the first violent spasm of coughing he downed the rest gratefully.

And then, as the agony of returning circulation faded, he began to take some interest in his hosts. There were rough-looking fur-clad men, all heavily bearded. There were tough-looking fur-clad women. And there were other beings, towering head and shoulder above the humans. They, too, were muffled in heavy clothing, but he could see that they had four arms instead of two, that up-jutting tusks growing from their lower jaws gave their faces a ferocious aspect, and that their skins were green. In Wilkinson's universe no such creatures existed in the solar system—except in the books which had initiated this crazy experiment. He listened to his rescuers as they talked among themselves.

Yes, that dialect was Cockney—the dropping and misplacing of aspirates, the distorted vowels that had always betrayed the man or woman born within sound of Bow Bells, that would persist as long as there was a London. But it didn't make sense. These people were at least forty million miles from that ancient city.

" 'E's comin' rahnd," remarked the man who had given him the drink. Then, to Wilkinson, " 'Oo are yer, myte? Where did yer spring from?"

Wilkinson, his wits addled by his experiences, by the heat of the fire, by the strong liquor, replied foolishly, "I am Captain Christopher Wilkinson, of the spaceship *Discovery.*"

" 'Ere, come orf it!" exclaimed the other angrily. "Yer knows bleedin' well that they never lets even tame 'oomans near their bleedin' spaceships!"

"Mebbe they *is* tame 'oomans, Bill," contributed a scrawny woman. "They talks like 'em." She squatted down beside Vanessa and rubbed the material of the girl's shirt sleeve between filthy fingers. "They dresses funny. . . . An' they come'ere in one o' the Masters' barges. . . ." One of the green-skinned beings was kneeling beside her, had picked up Wilkinson's shirt and trousers and was examining them intently. " 'Ere's ol' Tars Tarkas. 'E's bin offen enough ter their cities." She nudged the giant sharply. "Woddyer s'y, Tusky?"

"Cor lumme, Delia Doris, this ain't 'arf a rum go!" replied the Green Martian. "They does talk summat like the tame 'oomans, but not so plummy, like. An' these duds o' theirn—there ain't noffin' like 'em on all Barsoom. The Masters could 'ardly care less wot their slaves wears—if anyfing—an' they'd never go ter all the trouble o' settin' up a factory ter turn out rags like these. . . ." He asked sharply, "Could they have come from *your* world?"

"It ain't our world," the man called Bill said bitterly. "An' yer knows it. It ain't bin ours for all o' three 'undred years, never since their bleedin' invasion."

"But 'e says as 'e's a spaceship cap'n," pointed out Tars Tarkas.

" 'E's as drunk as a fiddler's bitch. But wot s'y we arsk 'is trouble-an'-strife? She ain't 'ad no muvver's ruin. . . ." He turned to Vanessa. " 'Ere, Missus. Wot's *yore* bleedin' story?"

Wilkinson felt Vanessa's hand tighten on his. He wondered what she would say, what she could say. He cursed himself for having blurted out the truth so carelessly. He should have played for time, fished for information. He should have found out who *they,* the Masters, were. (Was Titov's "tin octopus" one of them?) He should have tried to find out something about the "tame humans."

Vanessa said quietly, "What my husband says is true. He is the Captain of a spaceship."

"And are yer from Earth?" asked Tars Tarkas sharply.

"No," she replied without hesitation. "No. From Venus."

This seemed to be the right answer. "It mykes sense," muttered Bill. "Cor stone the bleedin' crows, if it don't. *They'd* never go there. Too bleedin' 'ot fer the bastards. I 'member me ol' man tellin' me, years an' years ago, some coves tried ter 'arf-inch one o' their ships so's they could scarper orf fer Venus. . . . Tell me, Missus, wot's it like on Venus?"

"Hot," she said. "Dry."

"Fits in, don't it?" asked Bill of the assembly at large.

"But why in the nyme of all that's bleedin' 'Oly should they come 'ere?" demanded Delia Doris.

"Why did yer come 'ere?" asked Bill. He added hopefully, "Ter 'elp us?"

Vanessa looked at Wilkinson imploringly. She had played

her part, but now she was getting out of her depth. Wilkinson realized that he would have to carry on, and that lies would be useless. He would have to stick to the truth—a carefully edited version, but the truth.

"As a matter of fact," he began, "we need help ourselves. Our ship is broken down. We made a landing on the snow-cap, near a pumping station . . ."

"And how can we help you?" asked Tars Tarkas.

"Well, we thought that we might get some sort of assistance at the station. We sent two men to . . . to case the joint. When they found the door into the building they were out of sight from the ship—but *something* came out to get them. We heard sounds of the struggle, and one of the men shouting what sounded like 'damned tin octopus' . . . ."

"An' just 'ow did yer 'ear orl this?" asked Bill suspiciously.

"They were keeping in touch with the ship by radio."

"Radio? Wot's that? Never 'eard of it."

"You can use it to talk over a distance."

"Wireless. That's what he means," contributed Tars Tarkas. "The Masters have it. It ain't much good."

"Yes. Wireless. Ours *is* quite good. Anyhow, we organized a rescue party as soon as we could. We broke into the pumping station and found our way down the spiral ramp. We came to an underground chamber—I'd say it was just down-canal from the pumps. There was a boat there—the boat we came in—but it was moored to the tunnel wall, across the channel from the wharf. When we tried to get it across the canal it broke adrift, and my wife and I were carried away with it."

"An' you didn't see any o' the Masters?" demanded the woman.

"No."

"It all figures," growled Tars Tarkas. "It all figures. They

check up on their pumpin' stations once in a blue moon. The two coves what was caught by the tin octopus was just unlucky. He just happened to be there, makin' his rounds, when they came knockin' at his door. Prob'ly thought they was just a couple of wild 'uns in fancy duds—an' didn't see why he should look a gift horse in the mouth. We all knows that the wild 'uns has the best flavor. . . ."

"Are . . . are you cannibals?" asked Vanessa.

"No, Missus. We ain't. An' the Masters ain't neither. But that don't stop them from regardin' Bill Carter's people as somethin' tasty fer supper."

"But . . ." objected Wilkinson. "A tin octopus. A robot. How can a robot be carnivorous?"

"What's a robot? The word's new to me. . . . But I see what you're drivin' at . . . an intelligent machine. That almost describes the Masters. They 'aven't any bodies to speak of. Just brain, and eyes, and beaks, and a handful of tentacles. But they have mechanical bodies that they change like we change our duds. The bastard what got your mates was in his workin' rig."

"Where have they been taken?" asked Wilkinson urgently.

"How should we know? We have as little to do with the Masters as possible. Probably to the city."

Wilkinson was dry now, and warm. He dropped the fur cloak and took the shirt and trousers that Tars Tarkas handed to him. The Green Martian puzzled him, as much by his lapses from Cockney into Standard English as anything. But this was only a very minor part of the still greater puzzle. As he was pulling on his clothing he said, "Perhaps, sir, you can show us how to get the boat started up. We have to get back to the pumping station, to the ship, to organize a rescue party."

"Yes," Tars Tarkas told him. "You can get the boat going

easily enough if you have a handful of twigs to poke into the slots. But you're not doing it."

"And why not?"

"Because the Masters have airships, and they patrol their canals all through the daylight hours. If they see one of their boats with two humans aboard they'll start taking notice."

"Why don't yer use yer bleedin' wireless?" asked Bill.

"Because it was left in the damned pumping station!" Wilkinson said, almost shouting.

"I still reckons they're spies," muttered Delia Doris.

"An' fer why should they wanter spy on a gang of 'unters?" countered Bill.

"An' fer why should anyfing the Masters do make sense?" she flared back at him. She appealed to the Green Martian. "Wot abaht you, Tusky? Woddyer s'y?"

"They ain't spies," stated the Green Martian definitely. "If they was, they'd be dressed different. An' they'd have some cock an' bull story about being Tame Ones tired o' sittin' around waitin' for what's bound to happen to 'em in the end. No, they wouldn't be dressed the way they are. Not so much as a pair of boots between 'em, this far north." He twanged a tusk reflectively. "Now, this boat they came in. We have to hide it before sunup. There's that cross canal half a mile from here, completely overgrown with spear grass. . . .

"Yes, that's the way we'll play it. Hide their boat, and put them in one of the spare tents tonight. Even if they wanted to get away, they'd never make it. The spare tents are right in the middle of the camp, and besides . . ." He pointed to Wilkinson's feet, lapsed into the dialect of his companions. "Look at them plates o' meat, will yer! Never trod on nuffin' rougher nor a bleedin' Axminster in their

bleedin' lives. 'Ow far could they get over rough grahnd wiv no boots? They'll stay put, orl right.

"Then, come mornin', we pushes north, as was our intention in any case. Having these two with us needn't interfere none with our hunting. And then, if we do find their ship, we'll know that they aren't trying to come one over us."

"Suits me," said Bill, after a brief silence.

"I can't say as I likes it," complained Delia Doris.

"Pipe dahn!" Bill told her.

"So now you know," said Tars Tarkas to Wilkinson. "You're lucky that you caught us in a good mood. Delia Doris will show you where your tent is, and she might even bring you a bite of supper. Off with you, now!"

The woman, beckoning them, started to stride away from the fire. They followed, staring, as they stumbled over the rough ground, at the fur-clad sentries with their long spears and their crossbows, at the tethered lines of great, six-legged beasts drowsily munching at the lichenous growth underfoot, at the high-peaked tents of skin.

Delia Doris paused before one of these and threw back the flap.

"In!" she ordered curtly.

Wilkinson and Vanessa made their way cautiously into the musty darkness.

XVI

THEY explored the interior of the tent—by touch rather than by sight—and found a pile of furs. The rancid smell of them was sickening, but they would be warm. "We can't afford to be fussy," Vanessa said. "We're better off than we were on that boat, on that freezing canal. . . ."

Delia Doris returned then, thrusting at them a platter

and a jug. She left before they could thank her. They sat down inside the tent entrance, pulling one of the furs over them to keep out the cold, taking advantage of the light of the fire while they ate and drank. The food consisted of strips of some leathery meat, dry and salty. In the jug was a weak, sour beer. But it was better than nothing.

When they were finished they put the jug and the platter just outside the entrance, dropped the flap and groped their way to the untidy pile of skins. They made a nest for themselves and, apart from the itching that made it obvious that they were sharing the furs with some other, much smaller, life form, were soon reasonably comfortable, in body if not in mind. But it was not yet time for sleep.

"Chris," asked Vanessa, "what do you make of it? What Mars *is* this? The Green Martians call their world Barsoom, and they have four arms, and tusks. . . . And there's this man called Carter, but he's Bill, not John, and he most certainly never came from Virginia. And there's Delia Doris —which is almost Dejah Thoris."

"And Tars Tarkas," added Wilkinson. "Don't forget Tars Tarkas."

"Your obvious concern for the memorability of my name flatters me," said a deep voice. The tent flap was thrown open and the huge Green Martian entered, carrying a little lamp with a naked, flickering flame. He was followed by Bill Carter, who had in one hand a jug and in the other, his fingers through their handles, four drinking vessels. "Sir and madam," went on Tars Tarkas. "I trust that you will pardon our intrusion."

"Stow it, Tusky!" said his companion. "Wot d'yer wanter talk well orf fer?"

"This is a mood of speech, William, with which our guests may be a little more familiar than with that of your tribe." He turned to Wilkinson. "As you may have gathered, Cap-

tain, at one time I was a frequent visitor to the cities. I learned from the tame humans their version of the English language. As spoken by them it is, I consider, somewhat richer in vocabulary than as spoken by these nomadic hunters."

"Cor lumme, Tusky—'ave yer swallered the bleedin' dictionary?"

The Green Martian and the human spread skins for themselves and sat down. Carter uncorked the jug and splashed liquor into each of the earthenware tumblers. He raised his in salutation. " 'Ere's mud in yer eye!"

"And in yourn," responded Wilkinson.

"So yer can talk like a civilized 'ooman bein' if yer feels like it!"

"I think," said Tars Tarkas firmly, "that we shall continue to converse in English." He sipped from his mug, the drinking vessel that, in his huge hand, against his ferociously smiling mouth, was no more than a liqueur glass. "And now, Captain Wilkinson, we shall be greatly obliged if you will tell us your story. I am of the opinion that you and Mrs. Wilkinson have already told us the truth—but was it the whole truth? We think not. But can the whole truth, in all its nudity, be revealed to the whole tribe? Once again, we think not. So, while most of the people are engaged in the shifting and the hiding of the Masters' boat, my friend Bill and I, the co-leaders, request that you afford us some further measure of enlightenment."

Wilkinson took a small mouthful of the fiery spirit, swallowing it with care. He said, "I'm afraid this is rather a hopeless task. Get this straight: I don't think for one moment that you people are lacking in intelligence. It's just that you haven't the background to comprehend what I'll try to tell you."

"Don't be so bleedin' sure of that, me old cock," Bill

Carter told him. "I've 'eard tell that when the Martians came in their bleedin' rockets the only people 'o believed in space travel was blokes like Jules Verne, 'o writ adventure stories fer kids."

"But what about time travel?" asked Wilkinson.

"Yer mean goin' back inter the past, an' all that? Yer should'a bin in the same trade as Jules Verne, mister."

"But you've told us, Bill," said Tars Tarkas, "that your people laughed at Jules Verne and his space travel stories until the Martians came—the Masters, that is, not ourselves. So—can *we* afford to laugh at time travel? I think not. And, in any case, it is pleasant to contemplate a future, a future from which Captain Wilkinson and his wife must have come, in which your people have been liberated, in which the Masters have been destroyed." He addressed the Wilkinsons. "And tell me, how is it with *my* people, the true Martians?"

"But we don't come from the future," said Wilkinson. "Or, if we do, it's from a future universe."

It was not as hard to explain as Wilkinson had feared it would be. But, after all, Bill's not-so-remote ancestors had seen and heard the Martian rockets screaming down from the peaceful sky of nineteenth century England, making their landing on a world in which Good Queen Victoria was still on the throne, in which the sun never set on the British Empire. They had seen laser beams brought to bear against horse-drawn artillery and coal-burning warships, had experienced the horrors of chemical warfare decades before the occasion—on another Coil of Time—of the first use of poison gas in a European war.

Bill's people had had space travel thrust upon them before they, themselves, had succeeded in launching a successful airplane. And on Mars, Tars Tarkas' people, primitive nomads, had watched in wonder and from afar the first

test rocket firings, and in even greater wonder as the ships brought back the first loads of captives, the four-limbed beings who were destined to replace those indigenous humanoids wiped out by the Great Plague.

So the two Martians—the native and the descendant of unwilling colonists—were not altogether incredulous. And Tars Tarkas had said cautiously, "I think I believe you. I could tell that you and your wife were from . . . Outside. From a very long way Outside. Your appearance and your manner of speech make it obvious that you are alien to the Tribes. And yet your bearing is that of free men, not that of the Tame Humans." He sighed gustily. "If your ship were not broken down, and if she were a warship, this would be a happy day for Barsoom. And for Earth. The Masters, these days, make little scientific progress, if at all. Your fighting men could dispose of them with ease."

"When we get back," promised Wilkinson, "we'll try to organize military aid for you."

If we get back, he thought.

Carter went out for more liquor, and after his return the talk carried on far into the night. Wilkinson and Vanessa learned that the Martians' first landing had been in southern England, and that the majority of the prisoners—or livestock—shipped to Mars had been captured in London. Of these, it had been the rougher, more fiercely independent slum dwellers who had succeeded in escaping from the pens, and the respectable, middle-class families who had meekly accepted their servitude. Meanwhile, Earth itself was under Martian rule, and probably a similar state of affairs existed there.

They listened intently while Bill Carter and Tars Tarkas talked of their own lives and times, heard the story of Carter's rise to power by means of his marriage to the daughter of the chief of the tribe, and heard of the expul-

sion of Tars Tarkas, who had been Jeddak of a far larger tribe, by his own people.

He said, "They are afraid of the Masters. When I proposed that we make an alliance with Bill's people to fight against them, to drive the Masters from the face of Barsoom, my own tribe rose up against me." His red eyes blazed. "But one day I shall unite the tribes—the tribes of *both* races. And then . . ."

Wilkinson took advantage of the short silence to ask a question. "Why did the Masters go to all the trouble of invading Earth?"

"To begin with, we do not make good slaves. Secondly—but perhaps most important—they don't like the taste of us. Although they have come to prefer the flavor of the wild ones, Bill's people, to that of their human cattle. . . ."

"What about Boris and Paddy?" demanded Vanessa, unable to repress her renewed anxiety. "Have they . . . have they been eaten?"

"No." The green man's voice was reassuring—in a way. "No. I think they will be saved for the Masters' Feast Day, the anniversary of their Invasion of Earth. That is just seven days from now. And they will not be *eaten*. Not by the Masters, that is. The Masters cannot take solid food." His huge hand swooped down on the fur rug covering Vanessa and Wilkinson, came up with something very small caught between the long nails of his thumb and his forefinger. There was an unpleasant *crack*, a tiny spatter of blood—Vanessa's, or Wilkinson's? "The Masters feed like the vermin they are. The Tame Humans get the leavings."

XVII

THE HUNTERS made an early start the following morning; the camp was astir as soon as the first, pale flush of dawn

was in the sky. With the ease of long practice, tents were struck and bundled, with other gear, into the clumsy wagons. By small cooking fires men, women and children were wolfing strips of the dried meat and gulping some sort of hot drink from crude mugs. Wilkinson and Vanessa, who had been evicted from their tent by Delia Doris and another woman, were standing in the near-darkness, still sleepy, bewildered, trying to keep out of the way. They were relieved when Bill Carter found them. He gave each of them a pair of boots of soft leather—they were not new, and they stank, but they were a boon to their bruised, cold feet—and a short fur jacket. He led them to one of the little fires. Mugs were thrust into their hands. This drink was not alcoholic; it seemed to be some sort of herb infusion. It tasted vile, but it was both warming and refreshing. And it had, they soon discovered, certain medicinal properties.

Wilkinson was more embarrassed than his wife—but she had lived rough in the Venusian Underground while he had always led, save for the brief interlude on Vanessa's Venus, a comparatively sheltered existence. As he tried to find some privacy among the bushes he remembered, nostalgically, his aseptically clean bathroom aboard *Discovery*. . . .

And then the tribe was on the march. Ahead were Tars Tarkas and his followers, mounted on ungainly six-legged brutes—thoats, they were called—that looked like oversized, reptilian camels. The long lances, each with its fluttering, ragged pennons, were in sharp silhouette against the paling sky, and the screaming of the beasts was like cavalry trumpets. Then there were the wagons, some drawn by teams of thoats, some by a single animal. They were loaded with tents and other gear, with spare weapons, with the younger children and with obviously pregnant women.

On each side of the column of vehicles marched the able-bodied tribespeople, men and women, boys and girls, some

armed with spears, some with clumsy-looking swords, almost all of them with crossbows. And there was a rearguard, too, in command of which was Bill Carter, with Delia Doris at his side. He motioned to Wilkinson and Vanessa to join them, grunting, " 'Ope yer can keep it up. Me Ol' Dutch'll create ter beat the bleedin' band if I lets yer ride wiv the toddlers an' the expectant mums."

"Yer can s'y that agyne, Bill Carter," said Delia Doris.

"We can manage, Bill," Wilkinson assured him.

And we should be able to manage, he thought. *Vanessa and I are used to the relatively heavy gravities of Earth and Venus.*

The sun came up on their right hand, and light and color returned to the world. There was the pink, spongy lichen over which they were marching, following a trail that must have been followed by this tribe, and by other tribes, for generations. There were frequent clumps of dark green, spiky bushes that, now and again, attained the height of true trees. There were weatherworn, lichen-covered boulders, some of which were roosts for bird-like (or were they bat-like?) things that flapped leathery wings and squawked discordantly as they passed. There were the insects (if they were insects), tiny, metallically scintillating, that shrilled around the occasional burst of purple blossoms that stood out in sharp relief against the all-pervading pinkness.

They marched, and they marched, and jackets were thrown open as the sun rode higher in the cloudless sky. They marched, and they marched, and Wilkinson became aware that he had the beginnings of a blister on his right heel. He caught a sidewise glimpse of the tough, vicious face of Delia Doris and knew how little sympathy he could expect if he asked Bill Carter to call a halt for his benefit.

They marched, and they marched.

Carter halted abruptly and looked up at the sky, slanting

his eyes against the glare of the sun. He fumbled at his belt, drew from it a whistle, put it to his lips and blew a succession of piercing blasts. The column jolted to a stop. And then the marchers were crowding around the wagons, drinking from the skins of water that were handed out to them. The water was lukewarm and had a strong organic flavor.

Wilkinson gagged over the first nauseous mouthful. He suggested to Carter, "Wouldn't it be better to keep to the line of the canal, instead of striking inland? There's any amount of water there—clean water, cold water . . ."

"There is, mate—but our line of retreat's cut off on one side. 'Ere, out in the bush, we can run any way we bleedin' well likes if we 'as ter. 'Sides . . ." He pointed. "One o' their patrols. 'E's s'posed ter keep ter the line o' the canal. But if 'e could do a bit of 'untin' at the same time that'd be 'is good luck."

Wilkinson looked in the direction that Bill was indicating. He saw something flying very slowly. It was an airship of sorts, a non-rigid airship at that, a latticework fuselage suspended below a roughly cylindrical gasbag.

"Is that the best that they can do?" he asked scornfully.

"Rockets'd be no bleedin' good fer that job. Too bleedin' fast." He looked around him. The last of the water bags was being handed back to a woman in one of the wagons. "We've 'ad our blow. Let's get crackin'." He raised the whistle to his lips.

They marched, and they marched, while the sun slowly slid down the curvature of the western sky. They marched, and both Wilkinson and Vanessa were limping badly now. They marched, and Wilkinson and Vanessa were watching the sun, willing it to a faster descent. They knew, both of them, that they must get back to the ship as soon as pos-

sible—but the prospect of the night's rest was more and more tempting in anticipation.

Abruptly Bill Carter halted, stiffened. "Listen!" he snapped.

There was a droning sound, the noise of distant smoothly running machinery. Automatically Wilkinson looked up to the sky.

"Not there, yer stupid clot!" snarled Carter.

"What is it?"

"I 'opes yer don't find aht. I 'opes the bastard don't find us. We ain't the only 'unters, mate. The Masters'll be aht 'untin' fer their bleedin' feast!"

Something was coming up from the south, something that was visible above the tops of the spiky trees, something that gleamed like burnished metal, that moved with an odd rolling motion.

"Scatter!" yelled Bill. He blew an irregular series of sharp blasts on his whistle. "Scatter!"

The column exploded, riders and wagons taking off in all directions, those on foot sprinting after them. Men were shouting, women and children screaming, the thoats bellowing. The panic was infectuous—and yet Wilkinson wanted to see what was causing it. He heard Bill Carter yell, "Run, yer fool!" and then realized that the man was gone.

There were three of the things now, metal globes careening along at just above tree-top height. And then they swept clear of the trees. They were like nothing that Wilkinson had ever seen. Tripods they were, each leg a latticework girder, each with that almost featureless globe mounted at the apex. They had neither wheels nor tracks, and their motion was neither a walking nor a running motion. They rolled, each of the three feet of the tripod hitting the lichenous ground in succession, throwing up a small explosion of pink frag-

ments. And yet the eyelike transparency that was set into the surface of each globe maintained its orientation.

Wilkinson grabbed Vanessa's arm and jerked her into motion. Running was far easier in this relatively slight gravitational field than walking had been. Soon he and the girl settled into the rhythm of it and were flying over the spongy surface in a series of great leaps, overtaking the stragglers of the scattering.

And then, catching her toe on a projecting stone, Vanessa fell heavily.

Wilkinson came down to a clumsy landing beside her, got his arms around her and jerked her to her feet. "My ankle!" she cried, her face twisted with pain. "I can't go on!" She pushed at him with her fists. "Leave me, Chris. Leave me."

"Like hell I will." He stooped and slung her over his shoulder in a fireman's carry. She didn't weigh much.

And then he realized that the mechanical humming was louder—far too much louder. He turned, looking up to the source of the sound—and saw towering over him, many feet in the air, the blank, metallic face of one of the monsters. He thought that he saw a flicker of movement that was not mechanical behind the window in the sphere, had a fleeting impression of two cold eyes staring down at him. He tightened his grip on Vanessa and started to run again, between the great metal legs of the tripod. And then a long, metallic tentacle flickered out from the underside of the sphere, striking like a snake. It wrapped itself around Wilkinson and Vanessa, squeezing the breath from their lungs, lifting them from the ground. They were dropped, with surprising gentleness, into a metal-mesh basket slung beneath the globe, a basket that already contained two of the women of Bill Carter's tribe.

The tribeswomen stared at the new captives in speechless misery, and Wilkinson remembered, with horror, what he had been told of the eating habits of the Masters.

XVIII

IT WAS almost sunset when they came within sight of the city, when they were approaching the graceless sprawl of low, black buildings on either side of the canal. It was with something approaching relief that they peered through the strands of the net that imprisoned them to what they all knew would be yet another, more solid, prison. They knew what awaited them—the two women from Carter's tribe had taken a morose pleasure in acquainting them with all the details, and even though Wilkinson suspected that they had been drawing upon their imaginations, there must be a substantial substratum of truth. But, at the moment, anything was better than a continuation of this vilely uncomfortable journey. There had been the rolling motion with which the machine had sped over the lichenous plain, and the basket had swayed sickeningly, and every second it had seemed that one of the great, flailing legs must inevitably strike the fragile container, crushing its occupants to a pulp. But there had always been clearance—at times no more than the thickness of a coat of paint, but enough. Whatever else they might or might not be, the Masters were superb engineers. The metal strands had cut cruelly into the flesh of the captives, and the cold wind had whistled through the open mesh, chilling them to the bone.

Wilkinson had ceased to worry about their ultimate fate. All he knew and cared about, at the moment, was that any prison, any slave pen, would be infinitely more comfortable than this metal creel slung below the bulbous body of the monstrous machine.

As the first hunter approached the city it set up a deafening mechanical ululation, a somehow exultant howling that was echoed first by its two companions, then from at least half a dozen sirens on the taller buildings.

The machine slowed to a walk, a peculiar mode of progression employing two legs on one side, one on the other. It rocked and teetered, seemed at times to be in danger of crashing over on to its side. Even though speed had been reduced, the motion was still acutely uncomfortable.

Wilkinson looked down through the bottom of the basket and saw that they were traveling over a thoroughfare paved with what looked like a gray cement, the surface of which was scratched and scarred by the metal feet of the machines. It was wide, and was bordered by neat rows of the dark green, spiky trees. Over the tops of these he could see cultivated fields crisscrossed by irrigation ditches. In some of them groups of men and women were working, each party overseen by a glittering machine, by something that could have been Titov's "tin octopus" but that could just as well have been described as a metal crab.

Then the road became a street, with the low, black buildings on either side. These were rarely higher than two stories, although now and again a tower or a smokestack broke the monotony. Doors and windows were circular ports. Wilkinson detected signs of movement behind some of them, but gained only a confused impression of bulky, dusky bodies, of writhing nests of tentacles, of staring, saucer-like eyes.

And then, moving slowly now, barely crawling, their captor edged through a narrow gateway into a wide courtyard. It stood there on the gray concrete, humming mechanically to itself. It was joined by its two companions. They, too, had made their catches: in each of the baskets there

were prisoners, four women in one, three men and a woman in the other.

Suddenly the whirring of machinery became louder, and above it sounded a shrill piping, but it seemed to be some sort of code rather than music, reminded Wilkinson of the bo's'ns' pipes still in use aboard the vessels and in the shore establishments of the Federation Navy. From a circular door in the wall of one of the buildings surrounding the courtyard streamed a small army of people. There were men, naked save for the gold bracelets they wore on their upper arms (badges of rank?) and the whips that they carried. There were women, also unclothed, and some of them also displayed the golden bracelets. They looked healthy enough, their skins deeply tanned, their bodies well-nourished, even over-nourished. But there was something *wrong* about them, about the way they carried themselves. They stood in a circle about the machines, their attitudes expectant, subservient.

Slowly, jerkily, the metal globes atop the tripods began to fall, dropping as the legs telescoped. When the baskets were a foot off the ground they opened suddenly, spilling their occupants onto the hard concrete. Wilkinson disentangled himself from the arms and legs of the two tribeswomen, and stooped to help Vanessa to her feet. He straightened with a curse as something stung his cheek viciously. It was the lash of the whip wielded by one of the brawny, gold-bangled men, a fellow with a jowly, scowling face, who snarled, "Hurry up, you! Do not keep His Overlordship waiting."

Wilkinson clenched his fists and made a step toward the "tame human"—the "tame human" who, in his dealings with prisoners of his own race, was not so tame. Somebody caught his arms from behind. It was Vanessa. "Don't, Chris!" she whispered urgently. "You can't do any good!"

No, he thought. He couldn't. He was clothed and shod—after a fashion—and the other man was naked. He was unarmed, but the other man was armed; a whip with a metallic lash could be a nasty weapon. He was alone, save for Vanessa—the captured Wild Ones were cowed and terrified—and the other man could rely upon at least a dozen of his fellows for assistance. It hurt to have to obey this arrogant, paunchy lout, even more than the slash across his face had hurt, but with Vanessa to consider as well as himself it was the only possible course of action at the moment.

The prisoners were kicked and buffeted away from the machines that had captured and carried them. Rough hands tore the clothing from them; fingers prodded them and pinched them. Again Wilkinson had to restrain himself as the guard who had taken his whip to him muttered, as he ran his hands over Vanessa's body, "This one is a little too good for the cooking pot after the Overlords have finished with her. I wonder if we could . . ."

And one of the other men muttered, "Quiet, Thomas. We don't know how much the Overlords can hear, how much they can understand. And, besides, we'll have our chance before the feast. We always do. . . ."

This time Wilkinson broke loose. His right fist sank almost to the wrist in the first guard's belly. The second guard tried to bring his whip into play—then, moaning and retching, joined his friend on the concrete when the spaceman's knee came up, hard, between his outstretched legs. And then it was Wilkinson's turn to scream as the first of the whips slashed across his naked back. He was down on the concrete himself, overwhelmed by weight of numbers. Horny feet thudded into his ribs, his sides, against his head.

Dimly he heard a fresh voice say, "Lay off him, you fools.

If he's too badly damaged one of us will have to take his place at the feast."

Reluctantly his assailants drew away from him, and stood around him, whips upraised and ready. They made no attempt to stop Vanessa as she knelt beside him, supporting him with her arms. "Try not to upset them," she whispered. "Help *must* come soon."

And then she stiffened abruptly, staring at some point beyond his left shoulder. Painfully he managed to turn his head, trying to see what she was looking at so intently. He saw that the globe atop the nearer of the three machines, its net retracted, was now resting almost on the ground, the legs of the tripod no more than thick stumps. A sliding door in the gleaming shell was opening. Beyond this port was visible a padded interior, and emerging from the artificial womb, its movements slow and painful, was a creature disgustingly different from the shining, cleanly designed mechanical extension to its body. It was a bulging, shapeless sack of gray, wrinkled hide, roughly ovoid, sagging and billowing as it dragged itself over the door sill. It had a cruel, parrot-like beak, on either side of which were set two huge, coldly gleaming flat eyes. Below the beak were the nests of writhing tentacles with which the thing was pulling itself out of its cabin. It was piping irritably.

A half dozen of the women ran forward, their faces frightened. Four of them stationed themselves around the Master, two on either side; they made a cradle of their arms and lifted it tenderly and carefully into the open. One of the others, with an instrument ludicrously like a garden spray, filled the air around it with a fine mist—a mist that stank of long-dead carrion. The sixth woman, who was carrying a golden bowl, knelt on the rough concrete before the loathsome thing. From the steaming water she

took a sponge, and with it she bathed the Martian's face—if it could be called a face—and eyes.

"I'd sooner be eaten than come to that!" whispered Vanessa fiercely.

XIX

THE PRISONERS were hustled out of the courtyard, through one of the circular doors and then along a short passageway. It was dark inside the building, the gloom being relieved only by dim-glowing tube lights. The corridor opened into a huge, low-ceilinged hall, a crowded room whose atmosphere was foul with the stink of perspiration and fear. Wilkinson and Vanessa gagged at the fetid air; they tried to hang back, but the lashes wielded by the guards sent them stumbling forward. They heard a clamor of voices, all speaking the uncouth dialect of the tribespeople. Some, as the newcomers stumbled over bodies sprawled on the hard floor, were raised in protest, some in enquiry. " 'Oo are yer? Where're yer from?"

"Bill Carter's mob," replied one of the two women who had been captured with Wilkinson and Vanessa.

Wilkinson's eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness now. The scene, in this dim, lurid light, reminded him of old pictures he had seen of Hell. There was the huddle of naked bodies, looking like some medieval artist's conception of the souls of the damned tossed headlong into the Pit. There were the guards, who could have been tormenting demons, but with whips instead of tridents. From somewhere wisps of smoke or steam were drifting across the scene—and almost as visible was the miasma of despair, of utter hopelessness, that was the one element needed to render the illusion complete.

Somebody was ringing a bell.

Two hefty female slaves staggered into the room, carrying between them a huge, steaming cauldron. Somebody cursed them halfheartedly as splashes of the scalding liquid were spilled on him, but they took no notice. They set the vessel down on the floor, then marched out. The guards followed them. The door shut with a clang.

Already a crowd of the prisoners had gathered about the enormous pot; already the hardier ones among them were dipping cupped hands into the almost boiling mess, raising it to their mouths and slurping noisily. A stranger, a young woman who had been eying Wilkinson covertly, sidled up to him. "Better get in, duckie, while the goin' is good. Them pigs leaves nuffin' but scraps. There should be a couple o' Tame 'Oomans ter see as 'ow we all gets fair shares, but ever since two 'o the bastards got drahned in the bleedin' stew they've bin skippin' the job."

Wilkinson looked at the girl. Making allowances for her unkempt condition, she was not unattractive. And then Vanessa, who had been standing behind him, moved to his side and held tightly onto his arm.

"Sorry," said the stranger, with a smile that revealed a mouthful of carious teeth. "Didn't know yer 'ad yer own Dinah wiv yer. But there wasn't no 'arm in tryin', was there? But there ain't such a crush rahnd the pot nah, so wot s'y we puts on the bleedin' nosebags?"

"I . . . I don't think I'm hungry," Vanessa said faintly.

"If yer thinks yer'll be gettin' yer own back in the stew, don't let that worry yer, duckie. Ain't nuffin' but vegetables. Them bastards keeps all the bleedin' meat fer themselves."

"Come on," urged Wilkinson. "We have to eat."

"Yus. We 'as ter eat. We 'as ter build ourselves up fer the Feast. Didn't yer know?"

"Yes," said Vanessa. "We know. But . . ."

"If it 'as ter come, it 'as ter come," said their guide phil-

osophically. "Ain't nuffin we can do abaht it. But wot time we 'as left—eat, drink an' be merry, is wot I s'y. Not that them bastards gives us anyfing ter drink but Adam's ale. . . ."

As they talked they were threading their way through the jostling crowd, and they finally found themselves standing beside the cauldron. The girl stooped, thrusting her arms deep into the metal vessel. She brought her cupped hands to her mouth and munched noisily, splattering Wilkinson with fragments as she said, "Not bad. . . ." Vanessa still hung back, but Wilkinson fished with one hand in the murky, lukewarm mess. He found what felt like a potato, brought it out and offered to his wife. She took it, and nibbled it dubiously. He found another vegetetable for himself. It was almost flavorless, but it was filling. And, at least, he was sure that it came from a plant and not from a human body.

He was bending down for another handful when he heard a clanging noise which he thought must have been the door opening. He paid no attention. And then he heard a voice demanding, "Where is that woman we captured from Bill Carter's tribe?" And another voice suggested, "Let's use our lights, Tom. She was at least two shades paler than the others. She looked as though she's had a bath within the last month or so."

Wilkinson straightened. He thought he recognized the first voice. It was that of the paunchy guard with whom he had fought out in the courtyard. He remembered what had provoked the fight, what the man had said.

"Is it you they wants, duckie?" the strange girl was whispering.

"Yes," replied Vanessa, in a low, frightened voice.

"Then come along wiv me. There's a good 'idin' place in the dunny." She added, as though to make it plain that she was not doing it for Vanessa's sake, "I 'ates them bastards!"

A bright, white beam stabbed through the darkness. Somebody shouted, "There she is! By the pot!"

The two girls turned to run, their naked bodies almost luminous in the glare from the torch, from the blazing eye that was advancing unsteadily but swiftly over the body-littered floor. Wilkinson knew that he could not join them. They might be able to escape if he was able to delay the chase. He clenched his fists, felt something hard in the right one. It was what he had assumed was another of the potato-like vegetables—but if it had been it would have pulped in his grip. It was a stone. Fleetingly he envisaged the slovenly cooking, the vegetables thrown, earth and all, with no pretense of cleaning, into the boiling water. He grinned. He did not think that the paunchy man had been the chef—but whoever had done the cooking was one of his friends.

The voice of that individual, from behind the glaring light, bawled, "There's the swine! There's the swine who showed fight! We'll get him first!"

"Careful, Thomas. There's been a tally, you know."

"We are allowed to use our swords in self-defense, aren't we?"

Squinting against the glare, Wilkinson drew back his right arm, then whipped it forward, opening his hand, and let fly. There was a sickening, crunching thud and a bubbling scream. The light dropped to the floor. There was a small crash of breaking glass, but it did not go out; it rolled, still burning, among the feet of those who were scurrying away from the advance of the guards. By the now-diffused illumination Wilkinson saw the paunchy man sprawled on his back on the floor. Or he assumed that it was him. His crushed face was unrecognizable. He saw, too, that the remaining guards carried drawn swords in their right hands, whips in their left. He had no doubt that they would use

the swords, especially now that one of their number had been severely injured, if not killed.

He was by himself now.

The press of bodies around him had diminished as his fellow prisoners edged away to safety. There was a clear path between him and the advancing guardsmen.

Desperately he seized the rim of the cauldron, thinking to overturn it and roll it against the feet and legs of his enemies. He was amazed by its lightness—and then realized that this was, after all, Mars, while he had been born and raised on Earth, with its greater mass. (That was why, a coldly analytical little voice at the back of his mind told him, the stone which should have hit the paunchy guard in the belly had smashed his face in.)

He stooped swiftly and lifted the cauldron. Then he threw it, with all his strength. He heard a clang of metal as the leading guards brought up their swords in a futile attempt to ward off the clumsy missile. He heard screams, and a snapping sound that should have been the breaking of bones.

Two more guards were down, but there were three remaining, three men who had staggered back, who had half-fallen but had recovered. Now they were advancing again, their whips and swords ready.

But there was a sword almost at Wilkinson's feet. It might have been thrown at him, or it might have been jolted from the hand of one of those smashed by the cauldron. Quickly he picked it up. It was an unfamiliar weapon, but it felt good in his grip. With it, he was no longer naked.

With foolish confidence he advanced, the blade outstretched before his body. The first of the guards, a wolfish grin on his face, came to meet him, thrust viciously. Wilkinson parried, then lunged. His point passed through empty

air and, at the same time, the other's point slid between his upper arm and his ribcage, breaking the skin.

The minor wound destroyed Wilkinson's self-confidence. He knew now that he was no swordsman, but he would do his best. His greater strength and agility might yet compensate for his lack of skill. Abruptly he changed his tactics, abandoning his clumsy attempts at fencing, trying to beat down the other's defenses by brute strength.

He was bleeding now from a dozen wounds, but they were no more than scratches. His opponent was gashed across the chest, and down his right thigh, and the superior sneer had deserted his face. So far, neither of his companions had made any attempt to intervene. There must, thought Wilkinson dimly, be some peculiar code of honor involved, some half-forgotten Terran tradition which insisted that a sword was a gentleman's weapon. Now that he had a sword, and was using it (after a fashion), he, too, was a gentleman, even if only temporarily. Had he not picked the thing up, the crowd of them would have skewered him without compunction.

As he would be skewered now, if he didn't keep his mind on the business in hand. That last thrust had been close, too close.

He slashed wildly and viciously, felt the jar as metal met metal, heard the clatter as the other's sword flew from his hand to skitter along the concrete floor. With a wordless shout he closed in for the kill—and shouted again, in pain and bewilderment, as something struck his right forearm, coiling about it, cutting into the skin. It was the whiplash, the weapon that, in the excitement of the sword fight, he had forgotten. And there was yet another weapon that he had not known about, the dagger that the guard pulled from his belt with his right hand.

Wilkinson's left hand smacked down, but it was, and he

knew it, no more than a gesture, too little and too late. He tensed himself for what was to come, the cold steel in his belly.

The hand holding the dagger dropped, and an expression of utter bewilderment appeared on the guard's face. Suddenly the skin of his chest sprouted an inch of sharp, pointed steel, the tip of a sword blade that was reddened with blood. He fell untidily, losing his hold on his whip, and behind him Wilkinson saw Vanessa, her face wearing an expression of concentration that, in the circumstances, was ludicrous, as she tried to free the guard's own sword from his crumpled body.

She pulled it out with an effort and, as Wilkinson was trying to free his right arm from the whip, turned to face the other two guards. Both of them were coming at her. Perhaps this absurd code of theirs did not apply to women, or perhaps by her intervention she had broken the code. But they were coming for her, and the expression on their faces made it obvious that they would show her no mercy.

Yet there were other codes, other traditions. The tribespeople, who had stood by to watch while Wilkinson was fighting for his life, were spectators no longer. The girl who had befriended them was screaming, "Are yer goin' ter let these bastards slaughter a defenseless woman?" There was a rising, ugly growl, and from all sides the mob closed in on the two swordsmen. They panicked, turned to run—but this only hastened the inevitable end. They went down beneath the sheer weight of numbers, with no chance to use their weapons. One of them screamed in a high, dreadful voice, wordlessly, and the other one was bawling for help. There were more screams, from the men Wilkinson had stunned with the cauldron, who had been kicked and battered back into consciousness only so that they could fully appreciate the manner of their deaths.

It was the women who took charge—the women who, far more than the men, had been victimized by the guards.

Sickened, not wanting to watch, Wilkinson and Vanessa stumbled to the nearer wall and leaned against it weakly. They were not surprised when the door opened again, letting in a flood of bright, white light. But there would not be a massacre, Wilkinson told himself: the Master would not be pleased if the game captured for their feast were wantonly slaughtered.

Even so, he turned Vanessa from him, forced her down to the angle between floor and wall, and then fell beside her, holding her in his arms, shielding her with his own body, dreading the sudden, vicious chatter of automatic rifles, or the hiss of striking laser beams.

He heard, instead, a series of dull thuds.

He looked around, and saw the vapor billowing from the bursting gas grenades.

XXI

With the first faint flickerings of returning consciousness Wilkinson realized dimly that the gas had not been a lethal one. He inhaled deeply of the pure, cool air, untainted either by the anesthetic vapor or by the mephitic reek of the prison pen. He began to feel better, less weak—and, at the same time, was beginning to become aware of his discomforts. The many cuts and scratches upon his body were painful, and he tried to bring his left hand up and around so that he could massage the cut on the right side of his chest. But he could not move. Straps were holding him down. He could wriggle a little against the resilient surface beneath him, but that was all.

He heard somebody say, "He's coming around, and so

is the woman. Have the others brought in, and we shall soon see if they recognize each other."

"Very good, sir," was the reply.

There was a hard light beating against Wilkinson's eyelids. He opened them cautiously, and was almost blinded by the blue-white glare from the unshaded globe hanging from the ceiling. But he was able to move his head, and did so, turning it to one side. Vanessa came into his field of view. She was strapped, on her back, to a low couch, the metallic bands deeply indenting her golden skin. Her breasts rose as she inhaled deeply, and then her eyes opened. She stared at her husband.

"Chris! Where are we?" she asked.

"You have been brought to my office," announced the voice that had issued the orders. Then, to somebody unseen, "Mr. Parkinson, would you please adjust the couches? I wish to introduce myself to my . . . ah . . . guests."

A man, naked save for the sword belt about his waist, stooped beside Vanessa's couch. It folded in the middle, the upper part of it snapping to the vertical with a sharp *click*. She cried out in pain as one of the straps cut into her flesh. And then it was Wilkinson's turn. He found himself being stared at by the coldest pair of eyes that he had ever seen, steely gray under heavy black brows. And then he took in the rest of the details—the bald head, the plump face, the beaky nose, the petulant mouth. Only the upper part of the man's torso was visible above the side desk, which was covered by what looked like pale leather. What could be seen of the body was fat, but not flabby.

"I am Hamilton Montgomery," said the man behind the desk. "My rank is that of Chief Slave. It is as good a title as any—although the noun, I admit, is somewhat meaningless. And now . . ." The voice hardened. "*Your* name."

"Wilkinson."

A fist crashed into the side of Wilkinson's face, and the man who had adjusted the couches growled, "Call Mr. Montgomery *'sir'*."

"You are a little overzealous, Mr. Parkinson," reproved Montgomery gently. "The lesson in etiquette could have been deferred. However . . ." He stared again at Wilkinson. "Your full name, if you please."

Wilkinson told him, stubbornly refraining from adding the honorific. Nonetheless, he was relieved when the omission did not bring another blow.

"So. Wilkinson, Christopher. Male, obviously. Age? That, at the moment, is of no great importance. Place of origin . . ." He steepled his fingers, regarded the prisoners over them. "That, my man, is the burning question. You are obviously not one of those whom we call Wild Ones; you are well-nourished, and you practise depilation. But, equally obviously, neither are you one of us. So. But I shall return to you after I have asked a few questions of the lady. . . . Your name, my dear? Wilkinson? Then you are, no doubt, the wife of this gentleman. And, like him, you seem to have come from far away, from very far away. . . .

"So, Vanessa Wilkinson, you are his wife. That would account for the zeal with which he protected you from Mr. Talbot and his squad. Please do not think that I bear any malice; on the contrary. I had already reached the decision that Mr. Talbot was to be transferred to the fattening pens—as an inmate, not as a guard. After all, we must tread delicately; we must, as it were, go through the motions of being faithful and docile slaves of the Overlords, even though . . . But no matter."

"Mr. Montgomery, sir. The other prisoners are here."

"Good. Then bring them around to where our new friends can see them, Mr. Martin."

There was the sound of shuffling feet somewhere behind

Wilkinson's back, a metallic rattling. Then Titov and Farrell shambled into his field of vision. Both of them were manacled at wrists and ankles, the leg chains permitted them to take short steps only. Their faces and bodies—bruised, and with scabbed-over cuts—showed signs of ill-usage. But they walked as erectly as the irons would permit, glaring at Montgomery. And then they saw the new captives.

"Chris! Vanessa!" cried Titov—but the glow of recognition faded from his face, and was replaced by the shadow of anxiety. "So they got you, too. But what about Natalie?"

"She's all right, as far as I know," said Wilkinson. He thought how much better it would have been if the biologist had pretended not to recognize them.

"And as for you, you fat swine . . ." began Titov, turning to face Montgomery, raising his manacled hands before him. He dropped them slowly as two of the guards, their swords out and ready, interposed themselves between him and their master.

"Dr. Titov," said the fat man reprovingly. "I did not expect such a show of temper from one of your educational attainments—although, to be true, we have only your word for it that you are a doctor. But . . ." Again the steepled fingers, the thoughtful expression. "But we still have to establish from where you have come. We know that there are four of you, and, to judge by your reference to somebody called Natalie, there is at least one other. So . . ." There was a long silence while he stared at the captives, then he went on in a thoughtful voice.

"You do not belong to this planet. Your strength and agility—the strength and agility that I have found it necessary to curb—are evidence of that. Could you be from Earth? I do not think so. I am in correspondence with the Chief Slaves of the Home World, and they have not told me of any seizures of the Overlords' ships; in any case,

the Wild Ones of Earth are remarkably similar to their counterparts here—nomadic tribesmen, the very limit of whose technology is the manufacture of a wheeled, animal-drawn vehicle. So perhaps you are Tame Humans from Earth, shipped to Mars for some reason, who succeeded in escaping from the spaceport. But that I cannot believe, either. I should have known of such an occurrence almost as soon as it happened.

"Then too, you are all utterly ignorant of the nature of the position held by a Chief Slave in this society, of the very real power that he wields. The Overlords—yes, they are the Owners, but they are no longer the Masters. We, their administrators, hold most of the actual power in our hands. 'Most of the power?' do I hear you ask? Not *all* of the power? Regrettably, no. The Overlords jealously keep to themselves the spaceships and the airships and the vehicles that they use for surface locomotion, *and* their heat ray projectors and the lethal poison gases. The situation—I have always been a keen student of history—is analogous to that prevailing in one of the countries of Earth at the time of the Invasion. There was an army in India, composed of English soldiers and native troops—sepoys, these latter were called. The sepoys could serve as infantry, as cavalry—but never as artillerymen. The big guns of the Europeans were their main defense against another Indian Mutiny.

"We, as it were, are the sepoys. We are trusted, but not entirely." He leaned forward over his desk, his manner confidential. "I know that you come from another world—could it be Venus? Was there an escape from Earth to that planet in the early days of the Invasion? I know that you come from a world with a high level of technology. The Overlord who captured *you*, Titov and Farrell, outside the pumping station did not realize the significance of his find." He smiled confidentially. "Strictly between ourselves, the

Overlords are not very bright. And they are becoming decadent—for decadence is ever the obverse to slavery—but their arrogance persists. They just cannot believe that a mere human would be capable of any but the most simple feat of engineering. So . . .

"But, to continue. I received from my own people a reasonably detailed report on the suits that you were wearing. I was told that you had weapons—some sort of projectile pistols. But the Overlord was not curious at all, merely ordered his personal slaves to toss everything into the incinerator. He was mildly interested when the pistol ammunition exploded, killing a couple of slaves—but his only real worry was when the High Overlord learned of his find and ordered that the two prisoners be tossed into the common pool. I have heard it said that the Overlords are emotionless—but if you ever learn their odd, piping language you will find out that this is very far from the truth.

"Then too, I was able to make a very thorough examination of the clothing that you, Wilkinson, and your wife were wearing when captured. There were the fur jackets and the leather boots that are standard wear among the tribespeople—but the rest of it did not fit in at all. It was never manufactured on Mars, and I doubt very much if that peculiar cloth was woven on Earth.

"So I have, in my hands, four strangers, four outsiders who, given the tools and the raw materials, will be able to make me weapons, who will work for me, who will work for the day when I shall be King, not"—and his voice dripped contempt—"Chief Slave." He smiled again. "I am sure that you will put your knowledge at my disposal."

"Help us to get back to the ship, and we will help you," said Wilkinson.

"Ah, yes. This famous ship of yours. As a matter of fact, I have come to the conclusion that your landing on

this world was by accident rather than by design. Was there an engine breakdown? I think there must have been, otherwise this mighty vessel would be roaring all over the surface of this world, turning the canals to steam with its flaring exhaust—in general, playing hell with a big stick. Of course, the Overlords would make short work of her with their heat rays, but I should by this time have heard about it. Or it could be that the four of you are her entire crew . . . No. There must be at least one other—this Natalie about whom Titov was so concerned.

"But you must face facts, and I will help you face them. Either your companions have written you off, and abandoned you here, or the Overlords have already found your ship—at times their airship patrols fly north of the ice barrier—and destroyed her. Your only chance of continued survival is to work for *me*. I can see that you are stubborn, all of you. I have my methods of persuasion—but, unluckily, my staff is often more enthusiastic than cautious in their application. Of what value is an engineer with no fingers, or no eyes?

"Even so, I think I know of a means whereby you may be persuaded. For some days prior to the Feast, the High Overlord samples, as it were, the game that has been hunted down and captured and imprisoned in the pens to await the celebration of the Anniversary. Perhaps you would care to witness such a sampling. You can imagine that it is one of your number—the woman, perhaps—who is being . . . ah . . . sampled.

"And as you watch you can tell yourselves what I am telling you now—that I, and I alone, can save you from the same fate."

XXII

THEY SHUFFLED down the long corridor, Wilkinson and Vanessa weighted down with chains and manacles, as were Titov and Farrell. Ahead of them marched Montgomery, with two of his guardsmen. Two more brought up the rear. The passageway was circular in section, and illumined only by the red-glowing tubes, widely spaced. But their eyes became accustomed to the ruddy darkness and they could see, at the very end of the tube, a pinpoint of frosty light.

They came, at last, onto a balcony overlooking a vast hall, a protrusion from the black wall that was oddly like a theater box. There were soft couches here, and onto one of them Montgomery sank, disposing his gross body more for comfort than for grace. He grunted to the prisoners, "You may sit down if you wish." They seated themselves, not without a clanking of chains. The guards remained standing.

Wilkinson looked out over the rail, down into the hall. It was, by the Overlords' standards, well lit. There was a polished expanse of bare floor but, save for an odd looking cradle in the center of the room, no furniture.

"Rank, even in a society of slaves, has its privileges," remarked Montgomery complacently. "My revered Owner is aware that I derive a certain pleasure from watching these . . . samplings, and so does not object if I, together with a few friends, am a witness to them." He chuckled.

"It could be that he thinks that the fear that I, even I, might become the main course on the royal table will make me a yet more loyal and hardworking slave. But quiet, all of you. Here comes the High Overlord."

It was a party of humans who entered the hall first, a dozen tall, muscular men marching with military precision to the muffled rattle of a little drum carried by one of

them. They wheeled smartly and took up positions about the cradle, standing at rigid attention, bringing the butts of their spears down, with a sharp *crack*, to the floor.

"Decadence. . . ." muttered the Chief Slave. "Why should they, with their spaceships and heat rays, want this archaic military ritual borrowed from a conquered people whom they regard as little better than cattle? You can see, can't you, that only the smallest push is required to unseat the Owners. And you will help me to give that push."

"I have yet to be convinced that the change would be for the better," said Titov disgustedly.

Montgomery laughed. "I have no doubt that I shall be able to convince you that it will be."

More humans were coming into the hall. First there were two women, armed with those absurd spray guns, filling the air with the nauseating reek of carrion. And then, walking slowly and carefully, four girls entered, carrying between them the disgusting bulk of the High Overlord, the loathsome gray sack into which was packed, presumably, the thing's brains and internal organs. The saucer eyes glared coldly, and the tentacles writhed like twin nests of snakes.

Gently, tenderly, the carriers lowered their burden into the padded cradle, then stood at attention on either side of it. The women with the atomizers sprayed the wrinkled gray hide until it glistened with moisture in the ruddy light.

Finally, four men entered. Their burden was a trestle bed, and to it was strapped a woman. She was obviously a Wild One: she was scrawny, her hair was matted, and her skin was dirty. But she was human; she was far more human than the plump, well-groomed placid cows, the female slaves who tended the filthy Overlord as though the thing were something divine. She was human, and she was terrified. She knew what was to happen to her, that there was no hope of escape. She was terrified, but still she was

defiant. She was screaming, but it was not a mere, wordless shriek of terror. She was screaming curses—at the Overlord and especially against the Tame Humans who were its slaves.

"*He* enjoys this racket," said Montgomery. "It gives him an appetite for his meal."

"Do *you* enjoy it?" asked Titov coldly.

"It does not worry me unduly. After all, is there not an old saying? 'Sticks and stones may break my bones; hard words will never hurt me.' "

"I hope I'm around when the Wild Ones come for you with sticks and stones," Titov told him.

"Do you? Then I hope, my man, that should this ever come to pass I have at my command the weapons you and your friends have made for me. But watch."

The stretcher had been set down before the Overlord's cradle. The beast in its padded nest set up a thin, high piping. As though obeying an order, one of the men picked up a long, silver tube that had been lying beside the victim's pinioned body. He held it in his right hand and, sadistically, made sure that the bound woman could see it, could realize what he was going to do with it. She had fallen silent for a brief spell but, at the sight of the instrument, resumed her frenzied cursing. And then she screamed horribly as the pointed end of it plunged through her skin, into her body at the junction of neck and shoulder. The watchers could see all her muscles tense and strain as she tried to shake her body to dislodge the shining lance, but the straps held her immobile. A spurt of blood issued from the free end of the tube.

"Slovenly," muttered Montgomery. "Slovenly. *He* doesn't like his dinner spilled. Mr. Martin, who is that man?"

"It is Mr. Billings, sir."

"Make a note of it. He is another candidate for the fattening pens."

And then the end of the tube had been inserted into the parrot-beak of the Overlord. The woman was still screaming curses, but it was obvious that she was weakening. The color was visibly draining from her skin. She was only whimpering now, and above her faint mewling could be heard the disgusting sucking noise made by the monster that was draining her blood.

"Not much in her," remarked Montgomery disparagingly. "And not much on her, either. Flavor is not everything. I prefer, myself, one of our own women, well fattened . . ."

"You filthy cannibal!" snarled Titov. "You're worse than your stinking Owners!"

Montgomery shrugged. "A man must eat. And there is no decent meat on Mars apart from human flesh. Mind you, I am rather tired of having to play jackal to the Overlords' tiger." His manner hardened. "But you have seen, all of you, what awaits you. Will you work for me?"

We have to play along, thought Wilkinson sickly. In his imagination he had seen and heard Vanessa, screaming, drained of blood and then dragged away to be dismembered and tossed into the cooking pot. *We have to play along, if only for a little time. It's our only hope of escape.*

And then, before he or any of the others could reply to Montgomery, there was a dull concussion, and another, and another. The third one rocked the building, and the balcony swayed dangerously. Faintly there came a confused uproar, the sound of shouting and screaming.

"What was that?" demanded the fat man, all his smug self-assurance vanished.

"Bombs," replied Titov happily.

XXIII

MONTGOMERY stared at the biologist, then snarled, "*Your* friends, I suppose. But I won't have you killed . . . yet. You could still be valuable." Then, to the guardsmen, "Get a move on, damn you. Drag these bastards back to my office."

"Mr. Montgomery, sir," protested one of the guards. "What about the High Overlord?"

"He can look after his stinking self, the same as we're doing. Come on. Get moving!"

The prisoners were jerked to their feet and dragged off the balcony. Wilkinson managed a backward glance at the scene below. The female slaves were clustered around the monster in the cradle, trying to lift it, but its tentacles, like whips, were slashing at their bare flesh. It had not finished its meal and it was resentful of the interruption. The almost drained body of the victim was still twitching feebly. Some of the spearmen were, even now, rigidly at attention; others were trying to help the girls. One of them raised his spear. Wilkinson saw no more, but it seemed to him that the point of the weapon was not directed against a human target.

Outside, the bombing was still in progress. The very structure of the building was creaking and complaining; fully half the overhead lights were out. But so far there seemed to have been no direct hits. That made sense. If this were a rescue operation, the aim of the air raid would be to cause the maximum confusion without, if possible, the infliction of casualities, especially among those about to be rescued. Then too, it could be that the hastily home-made bombs would not be very effective against the metal buildings, but adequate enough to make a lot of noise and smoke

in the streets. Even so, whoever had concocted the explosive had mixed a powerful brew.

But how had Natalie (if it was Natalie) known where to find them?

There was a lull in the bombardment, but the shouts and screams were louder now, closer, somewhere inside the building. When the party reached Montgomery's office the noise of the riot seemed to be approaching rapidly. The Chief Slave strode to his desk, started to sit down, then thought better of it. He stood there, all the cold smugness wiped from his face, indecision flickering in his eyes. "One of you," he said at last. "One of you had better run along to see what all the noise is about."

Nobody seemed at all anxious to obey the command. Wilkinson didn't blame the men for their reluctance. Some of those screams sounded far too much like the screams he had heard in the prison pen when the guards had been massacred.

"What are you waiting for?" bawled Montgomery. "That was an order!"

And then a man staggered into the room. His whip was gone, his sword was broken, and he was bleeding from a score of wounds. He saw Montgomery by the desk, made a half-hearted attempt to stiffen to attention, then slumped, keeping himself on his feet with an obvious effort. He muttered, "You'd better *do* something, Sir. The Wild Ones have broken loose. They're out for blood."

"Then get back to your post. They must be held, at all costs."

"Then you try to hold them. Sir. We can't."

"You can't?" The fat man's voice was an incredulous squeak. "You can't? When this is all over, my man, there will be an inquiry. I promise you that." He stood for a moment in thought. Then, "The Citadel," he said. "All forces

will withdraw to the Citadel. The Overlord's weapons will soon squash this uprising."

The wounded man permitted himself a smile—a smile that was more like a sneer. "But there isn't any Citadel," he whispered. "Not any more. There was this little airship, you see, and it came flying over, and nobody paid any attention to it. They must have thought it had come from one of the other cities, that it was some new design. But it dropped what must have been the father and mother of all grenades, and the Overlords in the Citadel must all be roasted by now, even those who weren't blown to little pieces. And then it destroyed the Overlords' airships before they could get off the ground. With a heat ray. Sir."

"But it must have dropped all its grenades. . . ." said Montgomery thoughtfully. "It's some time since we heard an explosion. . . ." He seemed to be on the point of taking charge of the situation. "And we have enough men under arms to make short work of an unarmed mob."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Montgomery. Sir. But we haven't. There are tribesmen in the city, with crossbows and swords and spears. And there are Green Martians, riding us down with their thoats, sticking us with their lances. And there are strangers in silver armor, with guns."

The uproar of the mob was louder, closer. The last vestiges of color drained from Montgomery's face. He muttered, "We have to get out of here. There's no time to lose." He walked quickly to one of the blank walls, found and pressed a concealed button. A panel slid quietly to one side, revealing the mouth of a tunnel.

"Kill them now, sir?" asked one of the guardsmen brightly, whipping out his sword and holding the point at Vanessa's throat. Wilkinson, trying to interpose his own body, found his way blocked by two other weapons, one at his chest and one at his midsection.

"No, you fool!" shouted the Chief Slave. "They are hostages. Get that through your thick skull. Hostages. We take them with us."

"You'd better let us go now," Wilkinson told him.

"What do you take me for? I shall be able to buy safety from your people, the men from your ship, but never from those animals out there. Into the escape way, all of you!"

The wounded man tried to follow them, but stumbled and collapsed to the floor. His fellows left him there, to be torn to pieces by the mob.

The tunnel, obviously, was the work of human hands, had never been driven by one of the Martian working machines. In places its walls were covered with rough plating, scrap from some factory; in other places its roof was shored up with metal props. And the overhead lights were bright, to suit human vision, not dim, red-glowing tubes.

Underfoot, the going was rough, especially for the prisoners, hampered as they were by their chains. One of the guards, irked by their slow pace, apprehensive about the sounds that were drifting into the tunnel through the closed panel, suggested, "Why not take off their leg-irons, sir?"

"Because the damned keys are in my desk!" barked Montgomery. "Do you want to go back for them?"

And so they stumbled on, over the uneven footing, Montgomery in the lead, followed by two of his guardsmen, then the captives, and then the two remaining guards, who did not hesitate to use their sword points to hasten their prisoners. Wilkinson heard Titov shout, "Stop that, you idiot! We can't go any faster!" And then, raising his voice, "Montgomery! Tell these apes of yours to keep their damned skewers to themselves!"

"But you *must* hurry," the Chief Slave called back, his

voice oddly plaintive. "If those animals back there find the secret panel, they will not discriminate when they catch up with us."

"And if *our* friends find us first," growled Titov, "they won't be at all well-disposed toward you if we look like a set of pin-cushions!"

"Mr. Martin! Mr. Parkinson!" Montgomery's voice was petulant. "Please try to be more careful."

"But, sir, we can hear the Wild Ones trying to break in the panel!"

"Be careful, I said! Remember that these people are hostages!"

"I'm remembering what the Wild Ones did to the guards in the prison pen."

"That's enough from you, Martin!"

"Is it?" Martin called to the men with Montgomery. "We'd have a chance of getting away if we didn't have all this deadweight with us. What do *you* say?"

"We might keep the prisoners—if we can make them get a move on. But as for this fat, arrogant swine . . ."

"Yeoman! Lewisham! Put your swords down!" The Chief Slave's voice crackled with authority—crackled, and . . . cracked. "No. *No.* Please. . . ."

Wilkinson moved in front of Vanessa. He didn't want her to see what was happening. He didn't want to watch it himself, but he had to look, had to remain alert to defend himself and the girl (if he could) when the swordsmen had finished with their leader. It wasn't the actual killing that was so sickening. It was the viciousness of it, the hate, the frenzied reiteration of thrusting long after the gross carcass, streaming blood from its many wounds, had ceased to twitch.

He heard Titov mutter, his voice carrying a hint of wry irony, "The Swordsmen of Mars. . . . *Christ!*"

One of the killers pulled his blade from the body of the dead man. It did not come easily. He turned to face the prisoners, and called, over their heads, to the other two guards: "What do you say, mates? Shall we make a clean sweep?"

"Yes. They're only a hindrance!"

Wilkinson managed to get his shackled hands up in front of his body, lifting them in spite of the heavy iron ball hanging from the chain. He parried the first thrust, somehow, and then lunged forward himself; he hoped that the other's sword would be useless at really close quarters. And then he slipped, his foot skidding in a still-warm pool of the Chief Slave's blood—and that saved his life. The guard's blade slid harmlessly over his left shoulder.

He was down, and he heard Vanessa cry out and, from a long way off, Titov shouting something.

And then the roof fell in.

XXIV

A SHAFT OF daylight broke through the ragged hole overhead, illuminating the pile of rubble, making a glittering mist of the dust motes and the smoke. Wilkinson, from his prone position, stared ahead dazedly. Of the two swordsmen there was little to be seen—only a hand, still gripping the hilt of a bent and twisted blade, protruding from the debris and, some distance from it, a pair of limp feet. But there were still the other two men to be accounted for, the ones who had sparked off the mutiny against Montgomery.

With a rattle of chains Vanessa fell down besides him, careless of the bruises that the rough stones inflicted on her skin. "Chris! Chris! Are you hurt?"

"No," he gasped. "I'm all right." It was not altogether

the truth. He had suffered additions to his already considerable stock of contusions and lacerations. But nothing seemed to be broken. He muttered urgently, "Don't worry about me. Watch out for the other two bastards."

"They've run for their lives," he heard Titov say. "Back along the tunnel—the bloody fools! I estimate that they'll meet the mob just as they get to the first bend. I hope that will give us time to get clear."

"But why?" asked Wilkinson. "That mob is made up of tribesmen and tribeswomen, escaped prisoners. They're our friends."

"I'd rather not chance it. The mood they must be in, they'll tear us to pieces first and apologize afterwards."

Two pairs of hands—one rough, one comparatively gentle—pulled Wilkinson to his feet. And then, supported by Titov and Vanessa, he watched Farrell scramble up the slope of sand and broken rock and metal. Hampered as he was by his manacles, in Earth-normal gravity the man could never have made it. But make it he did, and even, as he teetered atop the crumbling summit, managed a desperate standing jump that brought his hands to within clutching range of the edge of the crater. Dislodged by his down-thrusting feet, a large block of stone shifted, began to roll, and became the nucleus of a rockslide. The three still in the tunnel staggered back to avoid being crushed. Then, when this fresh cloud of dust had cleared a little, they were able to watch Farrell, with much grunting and clattering of chains, pull himself up slowly and painfully and, at last, wriggle over the rim of the hole.

But it was obvious that they could not follow. The pile of rubble had flattened, and from its peak the distance was now too great to jump. And, to judge by the screams—some exultant, some agonized—echoing through the tunnel, it would not be long before the mob was upon them.

Farrell's head reappeared, in sharp silhouette against the ragged circle of blue sky. "Come on!" he shouted. "Come on! It's all clear!" And then he saw what had happened, and called, "Wait a second!"

It was considerably more than a second before he came back; luckily, the mob seemed to be taking its time with whatever it was that it was doing. But he did come back at last, after Titov had essayed several hopeless leaps, and after Titov and Wilkinson had tried to lift Vanessa so that she could catch hold of the rim. "Here we are!" he shouted, and lowered to them what looked like a rope. It was woven from fine metal strands, and was flexible—but it was stubborn, resisting Wilkinson's attempts to manipulate it. He finally succeeded in getting a secure bowline around the girl's waist, and she was drawn upwards, slowly and jerkily, until she could grab hold of a projecting stone and help herself up for the remainder of the distance.

The wire rope was lowered again and Wilkinson, ignoring Titov's protests, got the end of it around the biologist's body. With Vanessa to help Farrell he was drawn up fairly easily. And then it was Wilkinson's turn. As he fumbled to adjust the loop—no easy task with his manacled hands; easier to do for the others than for himself—he saw the leaders of the mob rounding the bend of the tunnel. He heard the shouts, "There's another o' the swine! Come on, mates! Get the bleeder!"

But when the frenzied, blood-spattered men and women reached the low pile of rubble there were only his dangling feet for them to clutch at, to slash at with the swords that they had taken from the massacred guards. He was already too high for them to reach him, and by the time they thought of throwing stones it was too late.

Where the bomb had fallen there had been some sort

of a fight in progress, a stubborn knot of resistance that had been, in the end, wiped out by high explosive. There were dead bodies strewn over the street, flung by the blast against the low frontages of the black buildings, spattered against the scarred and pitted metal walls. They seemed to be mainly those of the Tame Humans, although there was one corpse that was unmistakably that of a Green Martian, and two more in the rough fur clothing of the Tribes. And, still stirring feebly, mechanically, there was the wreckage of a crablike machine, from whose domed carapace protruded the muzzles of weapons, while from a crack in its underside trickled a steadily widening scarlet pool. One long metal tentacle twitched spasmodically; the other had been broken off short. Wilkinson looked at Farrell with respect. It must have taken considerable courage to wrench from the thing the wire rope that had pulled them all out of danger back at the crater's edge.

But they were not safe yet. Already the heads of the mob leaders were emerging from the crater: already the apex of the human pyramid that had built itself in the tunnel was appearing above the ground.

Wilkinson stared at the contorted faces, hoping to see one that he recognized. Where was that girl, the one who had befriended Vanessa and him in the prison pen? Where were the men and women from Bill Carter's tribe?

"We're friends!" he shouted. "Friends!" He raised his manacled wrists, shaking his chains. "We're friends! We were prisoners, too!"

"Friends me left bleedin' foot!" yelled one of the men. "Yer can't fool us wiv them bleedin' darbies! Lissen ter the w'y the bleeder's talkin'! Gimme a boost up, 'Arry, so's I can git at the bastards!"

"It's no use, Chris!" Titov was saying. "We have to run!"

And so, stumbling, hampered by their chains, they ran,

with the howling of the mob growing louder and louder behind them. They could expect no mercy; they would be given no time to tell their story. Their appearance was against them—even now, battered, begrimed and exhausted as they were, they were too well nourished, their bodies too well cared for, to pass for Wild Ones. And their very accents would doom them.

They ran, not daring to look back but knowing that they were losing ground all the time. They ran, drawing great, gulping breaths that seared their throats and lungs. There was a fire somewhere, somewhere close, and the air was scorching, its oxygen content depleted.

And then . . .

We've had it, thought Wilkinson, with dull resignation. *We've had it.*

Dimly he saw movement ahead of them, great shapes plunging through the dust and the smoke, and heard the thunder of horny hooves on the metal pavement. The riders surged down upon them, horrendously tusked green-skinned giants astride scaly, six-legged monstrosities, ragged pennons streaming from uplifted lance heads, from points that were no longer bright, but dreadfully dulled.

He managed to get in front of Vanessa, and Titov and Farrell joined him to form a feeble barrier about the girl.

And then the riders were clattering past, their leader dipping his lance in salutation. Riding pillion behind him was a man—a man in a spacesuit!

Slowly, dazedly, the fugitives turned around, watching their rescuers deal with the mob. They were rough—they had to be—but they were as gentle as possible, using their shortened lances as batons, forcing the crowd back, slowly, by the weight and the bulk of their superbly handled steeds.

From behind them snapped an angry female voice. "So

there you are! If you'd had any sense at all you'd have stayed in one place, and then I'd have been able to find you!" It was Natalie, sitting in the folplane, the little aircraft that had drifted silently down to the street. "Don't stand there gawking!" she went on. "Two of you sit on the wings of this damned thing so I can get out. No, Boris, not you. . . ."

The others, tactfully, watched Tars Tarkas and his people playing at mounted policemen while she flung her arms about Titov.

XXV

And so it was over, or almost over, and Wilkinson and Vanessa were sitting very close together on the deck of the boat that was carrying them north along the canal. Titov and Natalie were not with them, having returned to the ship in the folplane, and Farrell was forward, taking an interest in the human-operable controls that had been fitted to the craft by one of *Discovery's* technicians. They sat together, nested snugly in the pile of warm furs that Bill Carter had given them. Reluctantly, the tribal chief had declined to come with them, explaining that there was still mopping up to be done in the city, complaining that if left to themselves his people would slaughter all the Tame Humans out of hand—which, since these slaves knew a little about the operation of their late Masters' mechanical devices, would be a pity. And Tars Tarkas, too, had decided to remain in charge of his own handful of green-skinned warriors. Without him at their head there would be far too much looting and senseless destruction.

"But we must stay to help them, Chris," Vanessa said firmly. "There are the other cities, where the Overlords haven't yet been overthrown. There are the so-called Tame

Humans—and some of them, as well we know, are even worse than their Owners . . ." She paused. "And they're such *decent* people at heart—the Wild Ones, I mean. They looked after us when we first stumbled upon them—and with our plummy accents, our whole appearance, they'd have been justified in killing us on sight. And there are the Green Martians, Tars Tarkas' people. And they and Bill's crowd cooperated with Natalie from the very start, right from the time when she made her forced landing among them." She went on, warming to her theme, "The Green Martians we *must* help. After all, they are the *real* natives. This is their planet. They should at least have some say in the ruling of it."

Wilkinson laughed briefly. "I don't think we need worry about *them*. They can look after themselves very well, very well indeed. And I think that after the recent fun and games Tars Tarkas will have no trouble in convincing his tribal elders that the two races must work together to defeat, and destroy, the Overlords."

"But what are *we* doing about it?" she demanded.

"*Discovery* is not a warship," he told her.

"I know she isn't, Chris, but she's a flying ship as well as a spaceship—she can fly higher than the Overlords' airships, and she's far more maneuverable than their rockets."

"But we can't outrun their laser."

"It seems to have a very limited range, Chris. Natalie was telling me that she flew right over what looked to her like a big projector, and all she felt was a mild warmth. And surely our technicians can make us laser guns that will outrange the Overlords'. And we already know that they can make bombs."

He said, "I'm civilian. I was brought up as one. If I'd wanted fighting I'd have joined the Navy instead of the Interplanetary Transport Commission."

"I'm a civilian too," she told him. "But I was brought up in a hard school. In the Underground we didn't worry about whether or not we had commissions, uniforms, ranks and ratings and all the rest of it. We just fought when we had to." Her manner softened. "Just as you've always fought when you've had to."

"But *Discovery* isn't *my* ship. I'm not the owner; I'm only the Captain."

"And her owners are in Science City, on a Venus that doesn't exist on this Coil of Time. Tell me, pray, how you propose to get instructions from them."

He grinned ruefully. "That's out of the question. But I suppose that, legally speaking, we'd have to put the question of intervention to the vote of the Science City personnel."

"And Boris will vote for intervention. And Natalie. And Paddy Farrell. And all the others who actually took part in the raid on the city." She stated flatly, "It looks like we intervene."

"And that looks like the ice barrier," said Wilkinson, staring ahead. He could see the white, glittering wall, the black mouth of the tunnel. Soon, he thought, he would be aboard his ship again. From what he had been told by Natalie and some others, the repairs on the Inertial Drive and Henshaw's apparatus were well in hand. It should be possible, soon, for *Discovery* to return to her own civilized, well ordered Coil of Time, for her to leave forever this crazy world somehow half remembered by Wells and Burroughs —and over-glamorized by the latter. And if there were any crusading to be done, the Government, with all the wealth and forces at its disposal, was far better equipped than any private individual. (But nobody in the Government had watched an Overlord enjoying the pleasures of the table—and he, Wilkinson, had. Suddenly he realized that he

was considering ways and means, working out how bomb bays could be installed without impairing the efficiency of the ship, envisioning the fitting of externally mounted, remotely controlled laser projectors.)

The barge was in the tunnel now, making good speed against the strong outflow. She was in the tunnel, sliding smoothly along beneath the dim overhead lights and then, at last, was coming in to the wharf in the terminal chamber. There were men there, people from the ship, to take the lines that were thrown to them, to shout good wishes and congratulations to Wilkinson and Vanessa and Farrell, to help the three ex-captives on with their spacesuits. It would be cold outside the pumping station, on the short walk back to *Discovery*.

The pumps were still working, the steady rhythm of their *thump, thump, thump* unbroken. *But for how long?* wondered Wilkinson. *For how much longer?* With the Masters overthrown—and what Montgomery had said about their decadence, their unreadiness to face an emergency, was true; only the slightest push was needed to topple them from their thrones—who would tend the pumps? And who would look after the atmosphere machines?

"We can't leave," muttered Wilkinson. "Not yet. . . ."

"What was that, sir?" asked one of the technicians.

"Nothing. Just thinking out loud."

"We can't leave," whispered Vanessa, very softly.

And then they were making their way up the slippery spiral ramp. Handholds had been tack-welded to the walls since that first day here, but even so, the party was out of breath when it halted to rest in the open doorway (the door now crudely repaired) looking out over the snowfield that gleamed golden in the sunset.

When they were breathing more easily Wilkinson led the way back to the vessel, feeling a great relief when, rounding

the corner of the pumping station, he saw that she was still there, a shining ovoid, bright silver against the whiteness.

He was first through the airlock door and, with hardly a pause, made his way directly to the familiar Control Room, Vanessa following a short step behind. Here he found Titov and Natalie. He was hurt when they gave him no word of welcome, almost ignored him. The biologist was staring through the big, mounted binoculars; he had them trained on a point just above the southern horizon. He looked away from the instrument, his face worried. Then he saw Wilkinson. "Company," he said briefly.

"Company?"

"Yes. Three of their blasted gasbags heading this way. And the folplane's had it—temporarily, at least. The little brute developed a leak on the way back north."

"But how did they know where to find us?"

"What does it matter? My guess is that the Overlords have some sort of telegraphic or telephonic communication between their cities, and no doubt the Chief Slaves have access to it. Our late friend Mr. Montgomery must have told some of his cobbers about us, and where he thought we came from. And then, when the news came through about the destruction of the city where we were prisoners, those Chief Slaves must have blabbed to their Owners."

"I did hear that they had radio. . . ." said Wilkinson absently. He had his own eyes to the instrument. He watched the three roughly spherical blobs, saw that their apparent diameter was rapidly increasing.

So much for all his plans for the conversion of *Discovery* into a warship. She wasn't one yet. She was just a sitting duck, unarmed and immobilized. The Overlords could bomb her, if they had bombs, or could melt her down with their laser beams. These might well be, as Natalie had said, only

short range weapons—but when there was no defensive fire from *Discovery*, the pilots of the airships would decide that they could safely descend.

But there was still the Inertial Drive. Perhaps.

Wilkinson went to the engineroom telephone. He dared not hope that anybody would answer the buzzer. But someone did. It was Clavering. "So ye're back, Skipper," he growled.

"Yes. I'm back. How soon can you get this crate upstairs?"

"Three minutes. Normal warm-up procedure. Ah've had nae interruptions, an' peace an' quiet tae dae ma worrk, sae . . ."

"Never mind that. Warm her up. Let me know as soon as you're ready."

He went to the pilot's seat, sat down and flipped the necessary switches on the console. He stared at the indicator lights, willing them to change from amber to green. And then he looked up. The airships were almost overhead now, high, dark spots against the blue sky. Said Titov, his voice mildly amused, "Our friends have opened fire. The outside air temperature just jumped two whole degrees."

"Wish we had something to fire back with," muttered Wilkinson, transferring his attention to the sweep second hand of the Control Room clock.

"They're dropping. But slowly. . . ."

Would that damned Clavering never be ready?

Suddenly it was very hot in the compartment—and Titov commented drily, "Looks like the thaw's setting in outside." Then, in a thoughtful voice: "Three beams, at least three beams, focused on the same target . . ."

A buzzer sounded. All the lights on the console changed to green. Wilkinson, his decisions already made—a lift to

lateral ratio of 1:4—rapidly punched buttons. The ship lurched.

And something was wrong; something was very wrong. She lurched, shuddering to the unsynchronized vibrations that seemed to be twisting her very framework. She lurched, and she shuddered, and suddenly it was very cold and light streaming through the viewports was bleak and harsh, all the sunset mellowness gone, and the sky overhead was so deep a blue as to be almost black.

Wearily, Wilkinson cut the Drive and slammed his hand down on the *Finished With Engines* button. Through the port he could see the red blinker beacons that had been installed (how long ago?) to mark *Discovery's* landing site, could see the area of disturbed snow—furrowed by the ski landing gear, melted by rocket blast, refrozen—where the rocket from Marsala had been landing and taking off.

But what had gone wrong? Was there some sort of rubber band effect inherent in this time travel, in his jumping from Time Coil to Time Coil? Had the band snapped?

Or . . .?

Slowly he got up and he made his way from the Control Room. The others followed him, saying nothing. But the ship was not silent. From the Main Saloon drifted the sound of angry voices.

Henshaw was there, with his assistants, staring at the smoking, fused wreckage of the Time Twister.

"Day and night," said the physicist. "Day and night we work to repair the apparatus. And then, just as we run our first test, some moron starts up the Inertial Drive." He added, glaring at Wilkinson, "I would have thought that you'd have learned by now."

"It was that or be roasted," Wilkinson told him. He asked urgently, "How soon can you get it fixed?"

"Don't bother me with silly questions, young man. We have used the last of the spares. There are no facilities on Mars for making fresh ones. It will have to wait until I get back to my own laboratory in Science City."

"*How long?*" repeated Wilkinson.

"Months. A year, perhaps. Over a year."

And while you're pottering, thought Wilkinson bitterly, *what about Bill Carter, and Tars Tarkas, and the others? How will they make out without our help? How* can *they make out?*

"So that's that," muttered Titov flatly.

"And you never even got to meet Dejah Thoris . . ." murmured Natalie, with the sorry sense of humor that women so often display in times of stress.

"You didn't miss much," said Wilkinson, and immediately regretted the words. Delia Doris had been scrawny to unloveliness, and sour—but she had been far more than a storybook princess. She had been tough, as had all her people.

And they'll need all their toughness, Wilkinson thought, and the close presence of Vanessa by his side did not make him feel any less of a Judas.