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DOMED AROUND AMERICA



JACK WILLIAMSON
Complete New Novel

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The Earth had been stripped bare of atmosphere and water, its surface left an airless and lifeless desert . . . except for America. A dome of energy had been erected around the U.S. in the nick of time and only within this vast transparent dome could men and women live in safety. Until the moment Barry Thane spotted a moving *thing* outside the dome!

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second complete novel**

About the author:

John Stewart ("Jack") Williamson was born in Arizona in 1908 and arrived in New Mexico by covered wagon in 1915, remaining there ever since. In 1928, while a student at college, he wrote and sold his first science-fiction story, *The Metal Man*, which encouraged him to continue as a writer. Two million published words since then have proven the wisdom of his choice, and his stories have appeared in innumerable magazines here and abroad.

Many of his novels have appeared in book form, among them *Dragon's Island*, *Darker Than You Think*, *The Legion of Space*, and *The Humanoids*. For several years Williamson wrote the nationally syndicated newspaper strip *Beyond Mars*. Recognition of his status as a leader of science-fiction was given him by his choice as guest of honor at the latest San Francisco World Science Fiction Convention.

***DOME
AROUND
AMERICA***

JACK WILLIAMSON

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DOME AROUND AMERICA

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THE PARADOX MEN (FLIGHT INTO YESTERDAY)

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ONE

RING around America . . .

Like the rim of a great glass bowl clapped down over the continent, it divided the brown arctic barrens from a more deadly desolation. It dammed in what was left of the Atlantic, where the Gulf Stream once had flowed. Thinner than a cobweb and taller than the clouds, it held shocking death at bay across the mountains of Mexico. It contained the air above America, and sliced off the narrow new Pacific.

Barry Thane first saw it the summer he was nine. He had come alone on the beamway to visit his Grandfather Barry. It was a thrilling thing to have a seat of his own next to the window in the shining coaster that skimmed so fast along its path of unseen energy between the power towers.

Grandfather Barry lived in a small blue plastoid bungalow on the shore of California Corporation, not a mile from where the Ring sliced in from the sea. He was a thin little brown-eyed elf, spry for his age, with a ring-shaped medal bright on his chest.

"Hi, Grampa." Barry shook his lean, trembly hand, and demanded at once: "Can I go down to the Ring?"

The hostess had pointed it out to him, before the coaster slid through the focusing tubes into the tower

station, and he was fascinated. Inside the Ring, Grampa's spotted cows were grazing green alfalfa, and waves were dancing on the beach, and a white sail was moving up the narrow lane of water.

Outside, there was no water. Dark strange valleys sloped endlessly away, where the ocean had lain.

"Can I touch the Ring?"

"Better not." The old man smiled. "Come in the house. Let's look in the cookie jar."

He wasn't diverted from the wonder of the Ring.

"Would it hurt me, to touch it?"

"No. It's smooth as glass."

"Then why—"

"There are things Outside a little boy wouldn't want to see."

"What things?"

"There's a fence you mustn't cross." Grampa's cracked old voice was suddenly commanding. "And there's the Guard, to see that you don't."

"Grampa—"

He was choking up, but Grampa smiled again.

"The Guard protects the Ring, to save all our lives," Grampa said. "I was a Guardsman."

"What could hurt the Ring?"

They had started toward the cottage with his luggage, but Grampa stopped to look across the alfalfa field into that bottomless dead valley beyond.

"There was a man named Brock," Grampa said. "He made a kind of screen to cast a shadow on the Ring. The Ring is radiated, and the shadow made a hole. This Brock had built a metal door to fit the hole, so that he could go Outside, but he must have miscalculated the pressure of the air—that's a ton and more, on every square foot."

Barry felt afraid, and he caught Grampa's hand.

"This Brock was blown Outside, door and all," Grampa said. "But his screen kept working. And the air kept

blowing out. It was a terrible tornado, that sucked in trees and animals and buildings, and the first men who came to stop it—"

"But you did it, Grampa!" Barry shouted with excitement. "That was old Dr. Brock. Mother used to tell me a story about how you stopped that storm. That's how you got your medal."

"I was a Guardsman, doing my duty." Grampa touched the medal proudly. "I managed to crash my patrol 'copter into the screen machine. That took the shadow off the Ring, and stopped the wind." He sighed. "It happened fifty years ago."

"Want to know something?" Barry spoke up suddenly. "I've just made up my mind. When I grow up, Grampa, I'm going in the Guard!"

"Your father will have something to say about that." Grampa's warm brown eyes turned oddly sad. "He'll want you to be a director of Chicago Corporation, and Chairman of the Board of General Nucleonics, the way he is. Me, I'd be proud to see you in the Guard. I think your mother would. But Patterson Thane will never let you give up all his millions, for anything so foolish."

"Doesn't anybody go Outside?" he asked. "Ever?"

"Brock wasn't the first to try, or the last. They've all been killed—and a lot of innocent bystanders, besides. But still they keep trying, in spite of the fence and the Guard."

Grampa was starting toward the house again, but Barry hung behind, looking out at the strange dead world beyond the invisible wall of the Ring.

"Want to know something?" he inquired. "When I grow up, I'm going Outside." When Grampa frowned, he added hastily, "But I'll find a safer way. A way to save the air, and cause no harm."

Next day, playing with his kite, he went down toward the Ring, for its forbidden mystery drew him like a magnet. A hundred yards within that transparent barrier, the green

fields stopped. On a tall wire fence hung signs that read:

KEEP OUT!
ORDER OF THE RING GUARD

Beyond the fence was a dusty road, still within the Ring. Waiting on his own side of the fence, he watched two guards come down the road beneath the ring, in a little gray electric jeep. At the beach, where the road ended and the Ring went on around the sea, they turned the jeep and came back past him again. When they were safely out of sight, he slipped under the fence and ran across the road. Beyond the road was a fringe of weeds—the Ring!

He crouched down in the weeds, to hide while he studied the Ring. He couldn't really see it, because its dustless transparency was so completely clear. He could feel it, though, harder and slicker than any kind of glass, but neither hot nor cold.

He tried it with his pocketknife, as boldly as another Dr. Brock. It broke the point of the blade, and it was still unscarred. He looked up, trembling guiltily, and saw the things Outside.

Horrible things, brown and dead, sprawled among the lifeless rocks. They had been men and women and babies and donkeys, but they were skeletons now, in shrunken brown casings or mummified flesh, half covered with torn and faded rags. One bony arm lay pointing across a sheet of torn newspaper.

With his face pressed against that hard, invisible wall, Barry tried to spell out the faded headlines. The words looked strange; he decided they were Spanish. These people must have come out of Mexico to the shelter of the Ring—too late.

Suddenly he felt ill, and almost sorry he had slipped away from Grampa. He turned hastily to look at something

inside the Ring. Even the green weeds around him seemed lovely to him now, because they were alive.

But soon his eyes went back to the Outside again. The wonder and the terror of it wouldn't let him go. Even its sky was strangely black, because there was no air to make it blue. Every shadow was a sharp-edged pool of mysterious midnight.

He looked across the dead plains of cracked sea-mud that slanted down and down forever into the empty chasm where the ocean had been. He couldn't see the bottom of it, but someday, he promised himself, he could find out what was there.

He tried not to look at the things that had been people. Grampa was right. They were things that a small boy should not see. But he couldn't help himself. His eyes came uneasily back, across the scattered possessions they had spilled; the faded blankets, the cooking pots, a broken bottle and a baby's doll.

He saw the skull—and screamed.

It lay in a pile of bones, half covered with leathery shreds of skin and tufts of sun-bleached hair. One eye socket was open and empty. The other looked straight at him, with a bright cold eye.

For a moment he was frozen. He couldn't move or breathe. He waited for that staring eye to look away, but it didn't even wink.

"Barry!" It was Grampa's distant voice, shouting for him. "Barry, boy!"

He put his hands in front of his face, to hide that dreadful eye. When he could move, he ran sobbing through the weeds back to the road, with his heart pounding hard against his throat. Grampa was standing at the fence, frowning at him sternly.

"Don't—don't be mad!" he gasped. "I didn't hurt the Ring!"

"Of course you meant no harm." The thin old guardsmen smiled. "I was a boy once, and I think I know why you crawled under the fence. But you had better get back on this side, before another patrol car comes along."

"Not yet, Grampa!" He clung to the fence, panting and trembling. "There's something Outside! Something alive!"

"Now, Barry—"

"But I saw it, Grampa! Something hiding in a dead man's skull, watching me with just one eye. Let me show you!"

Grampa shook his head. "People imagine things," he said. "Flashing lights and moving shapes, mostly. I checked a hundred reports, while I was in the Guard, and never found a sign of anything alive."

"I saw that eye!"

"I told you not to look—" Grampa hesitated, searching his frightened face. "Show it to me. It's probably nothing—but we can't take chances, with the protection of the Ring."

Grampa was still in the Guard Reserve, and he had a key that opened a gate in the fence. They crossed the road and pushed through the tall weeds. There Outside was the skull, still grinning at the Ring—with both staring sockets empty now.

"It's gone!" Barry gasped. "It's hiding from us now!"

"Oh perhaps you just imagined it."

"I—I hope so!"

But he was still afraid, and he clung to Grampa's hands as they went back across the road. That hidden eye was watching them, in his imagination. Shivering, he tried to keep from wondering what sort of one-eyed thing could live Outside, and why it should hide in a skull, and what it could do to the Ring.

"What is the Ring?" he asked uneasily, as Grampa locked the gate. "It felt like glass."

"But it isn't glass." Grampa stood looking back across

the fence, at the Outside's black horizon. "Long years ago, at the Ring Academy, I studied the theory of it. Big books crammed with educated guesswork about standing waves and spherical force-fields and exchange-force reversal layers and statistical anomalies. But all anybody really knows is what it does."

His gnarled hands began to fill his smelly old pipe.

"Power goes into a certain kind of machine—made of great electromagnets and vibrating crystals and gravitonic radiators. The power comes out as what we call the Ring. A kind of globe-shaped shell—one of my instructors used to call it a three-dimensional kink in multidimensional space—that reflects part of the incident energy.

"The reflection follows a special law, based on the wavelength of the energy. Heat goes through, and nearly all the visible light, and a variable part of the gravitation. But the special form of energy we call matter is nearly all reflected."

Barry nodded gravely, though the long words confused him. He couldn't forget what he had seen Outside, and he kept close to Grampa as they started back across the fields toward the blue cottage.

"The people Outside—" He glanced back uncomfortably. "What happened to them?"

"The dwarf came," Grampa said. "A burnt-out cinder of a star, smaller than Earth, but heavier than Jupiter. It passed too near. Its tidal forces stripped the air and the old oceans off the Earth. The people Outside died."

"Why didn't they have a Ring of their own?"

"There was a war. The Cold War—you'll be hearing about it in school. People called Reds were fighting America."

"So we shut them out of our Ring?"

"In the end, we had to." The old man nodded sadly, puffing on his pipe. "They hated America. They wouldn't trust us, not even when we tried to help them. But the

story of it begins two hundred years ago, when Major Victor Barry reached the Moon."

"Mother says I'm named for him." Barry Thane straightened proudly. "But tell me about the Moon."

"Another little world, that used to move around the Earth," Grampa said. "Airless as the Outside today, and just right for astronomers—air isn't good for telescopes. The major's men set up a telescope and found the dwarf, before the Reds attacked them—"

"Why?"

"The Reds wanted the Moon for a fort. So did we, till the major got back with his news. After that, the Moon didn't matter so much. All our greatest scientists were gathered into Project Lifeguard, to find an escape from the dwarf."

"And that was the Ring?"

"They found a clue in the spectrum of the dwarf itself," Grampa said. "Its faint light was queerly changed, by its terrific gravitation. They studied that change, and worked out the science of gravitonics. It made the Ring possible—as well as the beamway you rode from Chicago."

Barry nodded again, even though he didn't entirely understand how the light of a star had brought him here to the coast of the California Corporation.

"So what did the Reds do then?"

"We tried to save them," Grampa said. "We assembled ten Ring generators, and offered nine of them to other nations. But the Reds wouldn't have 'em. They were slow to believe in the dwarf, because it was still invisible from Earth. And you can't much blame them for being suspicious of us, after what happened in Australia."

"What did happen?"

"The Australians accepted a Ring generator. They set it up on the desert, near the center of the island continent, and they tested it. For some reason, the radius was set at twenty miles instead of two thousand. Maybe that was

sabotage. More likely, it was some sort of accident. Nobody knows exactly how it happened.

"But somehow they turned on too much power for the radius. Their twenty-mile Ring screened off too much gravitation. It sailed off into space, with the generator and the Australian engineers and a twenty-mile bite out of the Earth."

"Are they still drifting?" Barry's eyes grew big.

Sadly, Grampa shook his head. "They had rigged up a temporary power plant for the test, and it must have failed. Astronomers saw a little puff of dust, a million miles out toward the dwarf, when their Ring burst. They died—and the Reds yelled murder."

Grampa sighed.

"After that, the Reds kept us from saving anybody. They persuaded all the other nations to refuse our Ring generators—they were promising to supply survival devices of their own, that they said were safer. They even tried to wreck our generator. We finally had to close the Ring to keep their missiles out."

"What did they do then?"

"There wasn't much they could do." Grampa's face looked grim. "Evidently their survival devices didn't work. You've just seen the sort of thing that happened to everybody caught Outside."

"I'm glad!" Barry muttered suddenly. "About the Reds. They got what they deserved."

"Don't say that." Grampa stopped, smiling at him gently. "The Reds were human too, remember. I think they were following a false philosophy, but most of them must have been sincere. I don't like to think about the way they died."

He looked back across the vast dead chasm where the ocean had been, beyond the spotted cows and the green alfalfa and the weeds that hid those dreadful things Outside.

"Even here in the Ring, things were plenty bad," he said. "We couldn't screen out all the gravitation of the dwarf. It caused terrible quakes and floods. But the Ring did protect us from that awful tide Outside, which rose higher and higher until finally it swept the oceans and the air off the rest of the Earth.

"But that was two hundred years ago." Grampa took Barry's hand again, and they went on toward the blue cottage. "The dwarf passed. It carried the old Moon away into space, and it left most of the Earth as airless and dead as the Moon had been. But here in the Ring, our modern history began.

"The Age of Isolation—you'll be studying about it. Our troubles hadn't ended with the passing of the dwarf. America had suffered. The coastal cities were all destroyed, and half the population was dead. Even the survivors had a hard time learning how to live in total isolation.

"Slowly, they built our modern world out of the wreckage. They organized our modern Corporations, when the old state and federal governments collapsed. They found substitutes for most of the raw materials that the rest of the world had supplied. They kept the Ring going—and formed the Ring Guard, to protect it from men like Brock."

They were coming up to the cottage door, but Barry hung back for another long look at the wonder of the Ring.

"Want to know something?" he suddenly inquired. "When I'm grown and in the Guard, I'll find a way Outside. A better way than Brock's, so I won't hurt anybody. And I'll go out there."

He shivered, clinging harder to Grampa's hand.

"I'm going to find out what was in that dead man's skull, watching the Ring with one queer eye!"

Barry Thane's vacation was over much too soon. He went back on the beamway to his father's big house in Chicago Corporation, back to his books and his teachers. But he couldn't forget that staring eye.

Three years later, his father let him come back.

Once more he waited inside the fence for the patrol jeep to come and go. Eagerly, yet half afraid, he slipped across the dusty road again. This time he broke off a handful of tall grass and used it to brush out his tracks.

He crouched in the fringe of weeds again, with his face against the Ring. He found the same sun-faded, vacuum-dried human things that he had seen before. The bones and the broken bottle, the bleached rags, the scattered cooking pans, the scrap of newspaper. He looked for the skull where he had seen that staring eye—or thought he had.

The skull was gone.

Trembling with a vague dread, Barry Thane ran back to the blue cottage. Grandfather Barry was sitting in the little den, writing a letter, when he burst in with his abrupt confession that he had crossed the fence to the Ring again.

"Don't do it again." Grampa frowned as sternly as if he had still been an officer in the Guard. "Promise me!"

"I promise—till I'm in the Guard myself." Barry was panting, breathless from his run. "But listen, Grampa! That skull I showed you—where I saw that queer eye—it's gone!"

"Things change, even Outside." Grampa pushed aside his writing materials and reached for his pipe, with no sign of excitement. "When you're my age—"

"Grampa, *something* took away that skull!"

"Perhaps a meteor struck it." Grampa shrugged. "There are meteor showers Outside—most of them probably from debris the dwarf left in space. With no air to burn them up and no Ring to turn them off, they often strike the ground. I saw several fall, while I was in the Guard."

He stopped to light the pipe.

"That skull was very dry and brittle," he spoke around the pipestem. "When the meteor hit, it just went to dust."

"Maybe," muttered Barry. "But I didn't see any dust."

He was sixteen, by the time he found the courage to tell his father that he wanted to drop his business courses and enter the Ring Guard Academy. Patterson Thane was a big man, and anger made him florid. He stamped up and down the long, formal library of the mansion beside Lake Michigan, bellowing at Barry.

"Don't act a fool, son! I've got your career all mapped out. You'll be a senior executive in ten years. By the time I'm ready to retire, you can step into control of General Nucleonics. One day, with what I have to give you, you can be the biggest man in America. So you want to join the Ring Guard!" He made an angry snort. "Why, I can give you more for your next birthday than you'd earn in a lifetime in the Guard!"

"But I don't want money." Barry's voice trembled as he tried to find words to fit the vague but powerful necessities he felt. "I don't want—what you call success. I want something real."

"What's more real than a million dollars?" roared Patterson Thane. "Except two millions?"

"A—a safe way out of the Ring." Haltingly, Barry tried to put his feelings into words. "That would be something real!" Enthusiasm began to fire his voice. "There are plenty of real things Outside. New deposits of uranium and thorium, even, for your own company!"

Oddly, Patterson Thane grew angrier.

"Uranium!" he rapped. "If you had a lick of business sense, you'd know better than that!"

"There were known deposits on the land," Barry protested. "There must be more, where the sea was—"

"And they could ruin us! General Nucleonics controls all the known reserves, here inside the Ring. We can set our own prices. The Corporations can't let the Ring fail, to save a few dollars."

"We can't let the Ring fail at all," Barry said. "That's why we must find a way to reach the fissionable elements

Outside. They're there. America needs them. Somebody will find a way."

"Maybe you're talking sense, after all." Patterson Thane's hard eyes narrowed shrewdly. "If it has to be done, we'll do it. Learn what you can at the Ring Academy. Then I'll arrange for General Nucleonics to finance your search for new reserves Outside, in exchange for full control of all you find. That way our own interest will be protected—"

"Dad, you don't understand!" Barry paused, trying to smooth the bitterness out of his voice. "It's the Ring I care about, and no special interests. Science and progress—"

"You're a thundering fool!"

"Maybe I am," Barry whispered. "But I want to know what's at the bottom of those great valleys where the oceans were. I want to know what's going on Outside."

"It's dead as space!"

"I'm not so sure," Barry said. "I believe there's something out there, watching us. I'm afraid of some danger to the Ring!"

"Go on to the Academy!" shouted Patterson Thane. "Maybe they can hammer some practical sense into your head. I can't!"

He went to Ring City and passed the stiff examinations that qualified him for the Guard. He grew up at the Academy, into a straight, gray-eyed guardsman, but still he clung to his great dream. One day he mentioned it to General Whitehall, who was the head of the Academy and instructor of the advanced classes in the theory of the Ring.

"Do you think, sir, that we can ever go Outside? Without danger to the Ring, I mean?"

"I doubt it, Thane." The general shook his grizzled head. "For all our theories, we know too little about the Ring."

"I've been wondering, sir, why we know so little. Couldn't we learn more?"

"Not without experiment," the old general rapped. "We

can't experiment with the life of America."

"Couldn't we build another, smaller generator?"

"Outside, we could." Whitehall nodded grimly. "But here inside, any experimental generators would disturb the forces that radiate our Ring. You know what Brock did, with the small Ring field used for a screen."

"Yes, sir."

"I think we were lucky, even with Brock. As I understand the mechanics of the Ring, any such rupture destroys its stability. There's danger of the same effect you get when you puncture a soap bubble with a hot needle. If your grandfather hadn't managed to smash Brock's screen so quickly—I don't like to think what might have happened."

"We wouldn't be here," Thane agreed. "But there ought to be some safe way out."

"Perhaps there is," the general said. "We used to do some theoretical research along those lines, in the Guard laboratory." He shrugged wearily. "Lately, with the Corporations paring our funds a little deeper every year, we have our hands full to maintain the routine patrols."

"I—I'd like to do something about it, sir," Thane insisted, as vigorously as he dared. "There are minerals outside that America needs. And don't you think, sir, that we ought to be ready to fight Outside, to defend the Ring?"

"What could be a better defense than the Ring itself?" the general demanded. "And who's Outside, to attack the Ring?"

"There's *something* Outside!"

Whitehall's keen blue eyes looked interested, and he was an old friend of Grandfather Barry. Thane decided to tell him about that enigmatic eye and the skull that had vanished.

"My grandfather says a meteor powdered the skull," he finished. "But there wasn't any crater, that a meteor might have made."

"So what's your theory?"

"I don't know what it was," Barry confessed. "Some sort of small thing, hiding in the skull? Or maybe the lens of a camera, that some larger thing had hidden there? I don't know. But I'm certain it was something—"

"Pretty skimpy evidence."

"I know it is, sir," he had to agree. "But still I'd like to know what became of that skull."

At graduation, Barry Thane stood first in the little class of only twenty men—in the last economy drive, the entire personnel of the Ring Guard had been cut to less than two hundred. It was many years now since the last would-be explorer had broken through the Ring, in a rocket that crashed Outside, and all the dangers to it had begun to seem remote.

From the Academy, Thane was ordered to Key West Base. Ten men under Captain Steadman were stationed at the old, sun-washed town on its low coral island. They were responsible for nearly two thousand miles of the Ring, which chopped off the shallow sea a few miles beyond the island.

Thane was assigned to the north flight. Every other day, in a light patrol 'copter, he flew fifteen hundred miles along the circular rim of the sea. The months went by. He made a hundred flights. The sheltered sea was always different in its living response to wind and sky, yet never marred with any hint of peril to the Ring. The Outside, for all its passive hostility, never seemed to change—until the morning he saw the rock that moved.

Usually he took off at dawn, but that morning he had waited two hours while a repairman tinkered with the robot pilot. The sun was already up when he left the base. It burned through the Ring on his right, with too little air to veil its savage fire. His head was soon aching, in spite of his goggles. When he saw the shadow moving, he thought for an instant that his eyes had tricked him.

But there it was again—a long black blade stabbing out

toward him across a vast gray flat of cracked sea-mud, where all the other shadows were retreating. He let the 'copter fly itself, while he searched the long ridge beyond the flat with his binoculars.

The shadow pointed to the rock: a jagged brown boulder creeping toward him through a shallow pass. It stopped the instant he found it, and stood as still as any sea-worn stone. He studied it, looking for what had made it move.

A meteor?

A rockslide?

He rubbed his aching eyes and looked again, but he saw no trace of any natural cause. The motion he glimpsed had seemed strangely cautious, and he wondered if his unexpected appearance had caused its sudden halt. But what would move a rock so furtively?

Before he had found any reasonable answer to that, he realized that the sky was turning too black ahead. The maintenance crew had failed to fix that suicidal circuit, and the robot pilot was flying the 'copter into the Ring.

He snatched for the manual controls, a second too late. The 'copter grazed the Ring and fluttered down toward the lonely sea.

Stinging blood blinded him, from the cuts where his face had smashed against the fuselage, but at first he felt no pain. He was dazed, and vaguely angry at himself for causing a stupid accident, and still trembling from the shock of the thing he had seen.

When he could move, he wiped his eyes and snapped on the radio. His lips felt dead, and his salt-sweet blood was hot in his mouth.

"Patrol Eighteen, calling Key West Base," he croaked faintly. "Thane calling—"

"Go ahead, Patrol Eighteen."

"There's something moving Outside," he gasped. "Something camouflaged to look like a rock. Coming toward the Ring, across that long ridge in Sector 41-B. It stopped

when it saw me." That report was the important thing. He caught his breath and added: "'Copter crippled. Defective robot pilot ran it into the Ring. I'm falling into the sea. Do you hear me, Key West Base? Patrol Eighteen, reporting a moving object Outside—"

"Forget your moving object." The humming voice was cold with disbelief. "A rescue 'copter will take off at once."

In a rear-vision mirror that the collision had twisted askew, Thane caught a glimpse of his face. He knew it had to be his face, though it looked sickeningly unfamiliar. The cheek and the temple were cut to the bone. Loose red skin was peeled down over one eye. Something had happened to the nose.

Weakly, he pushed the mirror aside. Looks, he thought, shouldn't matter too much in the Guard. The important thing was his report, and it had been acknowledged. If the operator wasn't too skeptical to pass it along—

He saw the calm blue ocean coming up to meet him, too fast and too steeply. There was nothing that he could do about it. Water exploded against the pontoons. Spray drenched him, burned his face with fiery pain.

But the 'copter didn't sink. The rudder still worked, and he tried to hold the nose of the 'copter into the wind. He thought it would float longer that way. He had to keep afloat, because of the unbelief in the operator's voice. He had to get something done, about that incredible object.

The waves became battering surges of dark oblivion, but still he fought them. He didn't let go. He held out until the rescue 'copter hovered over him. He caught the tossed rope and knotted it around him, before he went down into the darkness.

TWO

AFTERWARDS, everything was jumbled. The rope was dragging him out of the wreckage. A rock was moving. Outside. Men were carrying him on a stretcher. He tried to tell them about the rock, but they only jabbed him with a hypodermic needle. He was on a beamway coaster. A nurse moved him gently. Another nurse was talking to him.

"Breathe," she kept repeating. "Just relax and breathe."

He struggled to tell her about that ominous rock, but he was gagged with bandages. He fought to tear the bandages away, but strong hands held him, and something pushed him down again into the dark.

He woke slowly at last in a clean hospital room. Its walls were creamy plastoid. Through a broad window, he could see a strip of green park and the crowded drive along the lakeshore beyond. Even before his mother came, he knew that he was back in Chicago Corporation.

His mother had a perpetual look of suppressed anxiety on her thin, sweet face, and strands of gray in her hair. She, too, had always seemed happier on their vacation trips, away from Patterson Thane, but she had been a faithful and uncomplaining wife.

"Hello, Mother." Barrys' voice was still muffled with the bandages. "What are they doing about that rock?"

She didn't know what he meant, but only that he had crashed his 'copter into the Ring. He told her about the

moving rock, and made her promise to call General Whitehall, who had recently left the Academy to assume command of the Guard.

"I'll call him," she agreed. "But don't you think you might have been mistaken—" She saw the urgent shake of his head. "Don't worry. I'll call the general." She stood smiling at him tenderly. "You don't have to worry over anything. I wanted to be the one to tell you. Your face will be almost the same."

He remembered the torn red mask he had glimpsed in the mirror.

"We called in Dr. Rand," she said. "The famous plastic surgeon. They wouldn't let me see your face before the operation, but it must have been—" Something checked her voice. "We had to find pictures, for Dr. Rand to follow."

"Flattering ones, I hope!"

"You aren't quite the same." She managed to smile at him. "The nurse let me see your face, when she changed the dressing this morning. Maybe the pictures had been retouched too much. Your mole is gone, and that little scar on your lip—but nobody would notice, except your mother. Dr. Rand is really wonderful."

A nurse in the doorway beckoned to his mother.

"Don't forget," he reminded her anxiously. "Call the general right away."

Next morning, he was awake when the dressings were changed, and one of the nurses handed him a mirror. Thinking of that red and dreadful mask, he was almost afraid to look. When he did, he gasped with relief. The only scars left were faint white lines, already fading. His face looked somewhat retouched, as his mother had said. But Dr. Rand was wonderful.

The mirror was still in his hands when another girl in white came in. Another nurse, he thought. But his heart skipped a beat as she walked toward him.

"Good morning, Thane."

Her voice was crisp and throaty. Even in her severe white attire, she had a glowing loveliness. He nodded at her hopefully, but her only response was a sharp look at the mirror in his hand.

"I'm admiring my new face," he said. "You should have seen the old one."

"I did. I'm Rand." She ignored his astonished gasp. "Lay your head back, please."

Her cool fingers touched his scarred face, so lightly that they caused no pain at all. He caught the faint, pleasant scent of her dark hair. Suddenly he wanted to hear her voice again, wanted to see what a smile would do to her grave beauty.

"Thanks, doctor, for all you've done—"

"Quiet, please!"

He lay still while she finished her brief examination and gave the nurses brisk orders about the anaesthetic mist and the dressings for his face. A kind of panic struck him, when she walked out without another word to him.

After the nurses were gone, he lay staring at the creamy plastoid wall, trying not to dream of Dr. Rand. If he had followed his father's road, there might have been a chance for him, but he couldn't hope that the famous surgeon would give up her career for a cottage at a Ring Guard base.

He shut his eyes to shut her out. But there she stood again, alive and alert, with that faint frown of concentration on her forehead. He wondered if she ever took the time to smile.

General Whitehall came to see him, the following afternoon. The new commander of the Guard was slender and very erect, beneath his seventy years. His blue eyes were oddly mild and kindly, in his lean, stern face.

"Well, Lieutenant!" His voice was always gruff and abrupt. "Your mother called me yesterday. Seems there's something on your mind."

"My report, sir. I wanted to be sure it got attention."

The general looked puzzled. "What report?"

"About how I came to let that 'copter collide with the Ring." Thane's voice lifted urgently. "I had seen something moving Outside. Something disguised to look like a boulder, coming over a ridge in Sector 41-B. I happened to be late that morning, and perhaps I took it by surprise. Its motion seemed cautious, and it stopped in an instant—"

"Don't worry about it, Thane," the general said. "Maybe it really was a boulder. Men in the Guard have imagined things before. The Outside can get on your nerves."

"It was moving, sir!" A kind of desperation shook his voice. "The position of the sun and the slope of the ridge happened to be just right to make its shadow magnify its motion, or I'd have missed it."

The general was smiling tolerantly.

"If it will ease your mind, I'll double the north patrol out of Key West," he said. "Any further reports of anything unusual in Sector 41-B will receive immediate attention."

"But still you don't believe me, sir!"

"I've served nearly fifty years in the Guard." The general almost forgot to be gruff. "In that time, there have been a number of similar reports, but every mystery has been satisfactorily explained—with no damage to the Ring. In your case, we must keep in mind that you were looking against the blinding Outside sun, and that shadows can be deceptive."

"But, sir, I'm certain—"

"I know you are." The general nodded sympathetically. "But your doctors agree that you seem to need a rest. I'm going to ask Captain Steadman to take you off active flight duty for at least three months. Key West is a good place to rest."

Tears of angry humiliation stung Thane's eyes.

"Yes, sir," he muttered. "Thank you, sir."

Two weeks later he was back at Key West Base. The

north patrol had been doubled, but Captain Steadman assured him that no moving rocks had been reported in Sector 41-B or anywhere else.

"I flew out to look at that sector myself," Steadman rapped impatiently. "Here's a set of stereos of that ridge. I made them myself, at the same time of day you say you saw that rock. Point it out."

Eagerly, Thane studied the stereos. They had been made with telescopic lenses. There were the sharply lighted, dark-shadowed hills, just as he had seen them. There was the shallow, winding pass, where the thing had moved. But it was no longer there.

"It has moved again," he told Steadman. "It's gone from the pass!"

The captain shrugged. He couldn't call the son of Patterson Thane a liar or a fool, but he looked as if he wanted to.

"Sir, you've got to believe me," Barry insisted urgently. "This proves there's something alive Outside. If it meant us any good, it wouldn't be so furtive. We've got to find out what it is, so we can defend the Ring against it."

"Defending the Ring is my duty," Steadman said stiffly. "I don't intend to neglect it."

Barry stumbled out of the room, with tears of helpless anger in his eyes. He went back to the barracks, and tried to grin cheerfully when the men joked about his poor eyesight and fine imagination.

Next day he rented a small boat and began learning to sail. On convalescent leave against his will, he had nothing else to do. The united front of skepticism had begun to shake him. Perhaps he really needed a rest.

But, when he had learned to operate the little boat, he couldn't help returning to the Ring. It gave him a strange feeling to sail along the brink of that abrupt wet precipice, looking out at the dead, shattered coral masses and the fragments of brown weed and the stretches of snowy sand.

He could see the dead, distant hills that had been Cuba—but nothing at all that moved.

But he found the rock.

He had sailed along the Ring for fifty miles. Noon had passed, and he was preparing to tack back toward land, when his eyes caught a jagged brown boulder lying on a white coral reef, not twenty yards from the watery wall of the Ring. It stood out clearly, dark against the glaring white, and the shape of it sent a shudder through him.

He didn't want to be locked up for mental observation. Perhaps he should just sail on, and cease to think of rocks. He debated that for half an hour, before he decided to tack back and take another look. When he did, the rock had once more disappeared.

He tried not to get excited. There were no markings on the water or the Ring, to show where he had been. Perhaps he had drifted—but there was the same white reef. There was even a sort of vague winding track across the broken coral, as if the traces of some passage had been not quite effaced.

But what had become of the rock?

Tacking back to search again, he crossed the coral shoal inside the Ring. The water was clear as glass. He was looking down, trying to estimate his rate of drift, when he saw a shadow moving.

Something shaped like that elusive boulder—but now it was inside the Ring, crawling steadily under water toward the low green blots of the mangrove keys along the coast of Florida Corporation. Barry Thane could hardly breathe. His body felt suddenly cold, and his hand trembled on the tiller.

He drew a line on his sailing chart, from the distant ridge Outside where he had first seen the object, through this coral shoal, straight on to the nearest mangrove key. He let out more sail, and tacked toward that key. When the object came ashore, he intended to be waiting.

Hidden in the mangroves where his charted line touched the land, he waited. The sun went down. The shallow seas changed through a thousand shades of blue and aquamarine and became a purple mirror—where nothing moved at all.

He got hungry, and began to wonder if his impulsive plan had been a little foolish. Perhaps General Whitehall had been right about the tricks the imagination could play. After all—

A muffled humming came across the black water, louder than the drone of the mosquitoes. Something splashed. A faint phosphorescence outlined a dark, jagged shape that came lumbering up the beach—the shape of something like a boulder.

It crawled deliberately across the stretch of open sand and went crashing into the dark tangle of mangroves beyond. He ran after it. His hands were shaking with his stereo camera, but he snapped a few hopeful shots. With the lens wide open, the sensitive film might show something.

He stopped where the thing had crossed another patch of open coral sand, and struck a match to study its trail. He found deep prints of cleated metal tracks. It must be some kind of camouflaged machine.

He snapped a picture of the prints and went on after the humming and the crashing in the jungle. A shuddery panic checked him. What sort of crew was operating that disguised machine?

Had some secret group of Americans managed to slip Outside, through the Guard and the Ring, to re-explore the airless Earth? Or were some unimaginable creatures of alien space attempting an invasion?

He couldn't guess the answers. But he fought his panic down, and he decided to follow the thing into the jungle. His films were unlikely to show anything, and he was afraid the object might escape into the sea again before

he had obtained any tangible evidence that it existed.

He stepped out into the path it had made.

Flash!

A point of painful violet winked ahead and was gone. It hadn't been bright, yet it left him almost blind. His body tingled and his muscles went limp. A terrible hand closed on his heart, with a pressure of pure agony. He couldn't breathe. The camera slipped out of his fingers, and his body wilted slowly down into the crushed vegetation.

A heavy weight lay on Thane's chest. The beat of his heart seemed uncertain and slow. It took all his will to draw a tiny gasp of breath. His whole body was numb and useless, tingling with needles of pain. That faint violet flash had somehow completely paralyzed him, but his senses weren't so much impaired. Above the wavering throb of his pulse, he could hear the muffled thrum of that invading machine. The crashing in the mangroves was louder again, and the coral trembled under him. It was coming back.

He could hardly move his eyes and everything was blurred, but he saw that dark, jagged bulk when it lurched into the limits of his vision. It stopped. The humming ceased. Metal clanged hollowly. Something emerged.

A dim, tall something. He forgot the agony of breathing and strained his throbbing eyes to see it. The tingling over him was suddenly a chill of fear. His fancy tried to paint some alien dweller of airless space. But then he could breathe again, for a low human voice had spoken.

"Hullo!"

That was all. He couldn't tell whether it expressed animosity, or astonishment, or even merely satisfaction. A tiny light dazzled him. He could neither close his eyes nor turn them away. He felt hands going through his pockets, and heard a familiar click as the stranger opened the back of his camera.

There was nothing he could do, when the stranger lifted him. He couldn't even keep his head from bumping painfully against the top of the low doorway, when he was carried into the machine. Inside, the stranger dumped him on a hard, narrow bunk.

He smelled a thin strange reek in the air, and heard a dull clang that must have been the door closing. The shoes of his captor grated on a metal floor. He heard unfamiliar mechanical sounds, but no other voices. Was his captor alone?

Glaring blue lights came on suddenly, but Thane, from where he had been dropped, could see only a bare metal bulkhead festooned with pipes and electrical wiring. He couldn't move himself. He tried to speak, but no sound came. It took all his efforts just to breathe.

"Lieutenant Barry Thane." That startled him, until he realized that the man must be reading from the papers in his pocketbook. "Division Eleven, Key West Base."

Something about the hard voice puzzled him. It seemed a little too precise, as if it had to be too careful. Suddenly he thought he understood. His Captor was an Outsider!

"Okay, Thane," the stranger rapped. "You're what I came for."

Thane scarcely heard the words. His brain spun as he tried to think. The impossible had happened. Somehow—somewhere beyond the Ring—other men still survived. What would they be, after two hundred years? He couldn't quite imagine.

Thane knew later they had crawled back under the sea. Spurred by desperate necessity, he fought the paralysis that numbed him. He found that he could wink his smarting eyes. He managed to shift his cramped arms. The pain let go of his heart and it was easier to breathe. He was able to move his head.

That let him see a little more of the machine. Everything was metal or plastic—the Outsiders would have no source

of lumber. The bolts and screws had curious triangular metal heads—the machine's builders must have been isolated Outside the Ring long enough to develop engineering standards of their own.

But then he saw a sun-bathing blonde on a *Life* cover pasted to the bulkhead. He squinted his aching eyes and made out the date—three years ago. Perhaps this was not his captor's first invasion of the Ring.

But suddenly the humming motors stopped. The machine lurched a little and lay still. There was only the whirring of a fan, and then the clatter of feet approaching across the metal deck. Thane rolled his head back hastily to face the wall again, and lay waiting helplessly.

The footsteps stopped beside the bunk. Strong hands rolled him over. Blinking against the harsh blue glare of a light overhead, he lay looking up at his captor. There was nothing else that he could do.

The Outsider was about Thane's own height. He wore tight trousers and a close-belted tunic of some unfamiliar lustrous gray material. There was something curiously familiar about the cut of his copper-colored hair and the way he trimmed his stiff little toothbrush mustache. His bearing was erect and military, and Thane couldn't help thinking that he would look well in Ring Guard blues.

"So you're coming out of it?" His voice was crisp and rapid. It was oddly accented, yet puzzlingly familiar—until Thane realized that he must have copied the speech, as well as the looks, of Mike Horgan, the TV sports announcer. "I believe you are precisely what I came for. But we had better have a talk."

He lifted Thane's head almost gently and thrust a pillow beneath it.

"Can you speak?"

Thane moved his head laboriously, with a feebleness that was only a little exaggerated. He drew another gasping breath, and let his face convey a mute apprehension.

"Don't be too much alarmed," the Outsider rapped. "Most of your motor nerves are still paralyzed, but the ray reached nothing vital. It's only a temporary short-circuiting, due to a reversible change in the myelin sheathing. You'll soon recover from that."

He moved Thane's cramped arm to a more comfortable position.

"I feel very fortunate that you have turned out to be a man in my own profession. Let me introduce myself. I am Captain Glenn Clayton."

Thane managed a tiny nod.

"As soon as you are able to speak, I am going to ask you for certain information. If you supply it freely and honestly, you will be treated with the dignity that a fellow soldier deserves."

He seemed entirely confident that the information he wanted would ultimately be supplied, willingly or not, and it occurred to Thane that the paralyzing light would make a very effective torture device.

"Here's what I want to know," Clayton rapped. "Everything about America. Particularly, I want to know about the Barrier—which you call the Ring. The location of the machine that radiates it. The numbers, disposition, and equipment of the forces assigned to its defence." He grinned. "Yes, you're the man I came for."

He moved out of Thane's sight, and returned with what looked like a flashlight on a pistol frame in one hand and two pairs of heavy steel manacles in the other.

"I must use these for your own benefit." He jingled the manacles cheerfully over Thane's face. "They'll be better for you than repeated applications of the paralysis flash, which can do permanent damage to the nerves. When you recover, we'll be free to talk, with no foolish interruptions."

The Outsider bent, and Thane felt a heavy hand on his arm. His own hands were numb and dead. He couldn't even clench them into effective fists. His feet were life-

less, too. This lean fighting man was too grimly efficient to give him any actual chance.

Yet the jingling manacles somehow sent his mind back to the Ring Guard Academy. He remember the old gymnasium, with its faint smell of leather and disinfectant and stale sweat. The precise dry voice of the physical combat instructor was rasping again:

"Now we shall take up the case of resistance against an armed opponent, when both hands and feet are fettered or otherwise incapacitated. Even this is not a hopeless case. As in all combat, it is a question of the intelligent use of the weapons available. In this case, the weapons are the body weight, the massive muscles of the back and legs, the grasping power of the teeth—"

Barry Thane forgot that he was a prisoner in a strange machine, hidden under the sea. The hard bunk under him became a sweat-odored mat, and Captain Glenn Clayton was only another cadet. He twisted his body off the bunk. His butting head struck that strange weapon aside. His teeth caught a firm grip on the flesh of Clayton's forearm. His feet were useless, so that he had to come down on his knees, but he bent his head and heaved.

The Outside fought. He whipped the manacles down against Thane's head, but Thane's deadened cheek scarcely felt the pain. Thane bent, and it was ended. Clayton went over his head, crashed against the bulkhead, and lay still on the floor.

The rest of it was more difficult. Using his elbows and his knees, Thane scraped the manacles out from under Clayton. With his teeth he pulled the open jaws over Clayton's wrists, and worked them shut with the pressure of his knees. With the second pair, he secured Clayton's ankle to the iron rail of the bunk.

By the time that was done, Thane could stand unsteadily on his tingling feet. A feeble strength had come back into his hands. He picked up the weapon and tried it on the

wall. A dim violet glow stabbed out when he pressed the thumb-key. This was the paralysis gun.

With fumbling, aching sticks of fingers, he searched Clayton's pockets. He found a ring of queerly shaped keys, a metal-handled knife, and a little bag of some woven plastic. In the bag were a dozen platinum coins. Anxiously, Thane studied one of them. The letters seemed oddly shaped, but he made out the inscription.

NEW EUROPA. *Ten shillings.* Figures that looked like a date: 194. On the reverse, a flaming sun and the motto: *Blood and Toil.*

Thane whistled softly. These precisely milled coins were clear evidence of a strong culture existing somewhere Outside. Dating its years from the cataclysm? And mobilizing its unknown resources now, for a secret attack on the Ring? Clayton hadn't come as an ambassador of peace.

Thane found a picture in another compartment of the plastic wallet, and almost whistled again. It was enameled in color on an oval piece of heavy metal. His eyes were still aching from the ray, and it took him a moment to bring them into focus. But then the picture almost came alive.

A girl, smiling with her lips, though her violet eyes remained oddly grave. The picture itself was an exquisite thing, and he thought that he had never seen a girl so lovely. It was long seconds before he turned the little plaque over and found the inscription engraved on the back.

*To Glenn
From Atlantis*

Here was Glenn, shackled to the bunk. Was Atlantis the grave-eyed girl, or the name of her dwelling, or some lover's reference that Thane would never understand?

He stepped back to take a long, thoughtful look at Captain Clayton. Even as he lay there, sprawled unconscious and gasping heavily, the tall, tanned Outsider was

still an enigmatic opponent.

Barry Thane's next discovery made the invader appear even more sinister. Still numbed and awkward from the paralyzing beam, his fingers dropped the little plaque. He snatched at it clumsily, and only sent it clattering against the metal bulkhead.

When he picked it up, he found that it had come apart. The girl's picture was on a separate sheet of platinum. It had covered a thin secret compartment, where several folded pieces of a dark, tough metallic film had been concealed.

Thane unfolded the metallic sheets, and found white-inked writing on them, in a bold, unfamiliar script. Most of them seemed to be merely memos. Puzzling names, strange addresses, incomprehensible notes. But one of them disturbed him.

The bearer, Captain Glenn Clayton, is hereby named our alter ego. Obey him, for the destruction of our enemies and the inevitable triumph of the Scarlet Star.

Beneath the writing was a star-shaped symbol, black-and-scarlet. The black was absolute, and the red was queerly luminous. The black felt cold, even to his numb fingers, and the intricate red arabesques felt hot—as if the black sucked up energy, which the red lines radiated. The symbol of the Scarlet Star would be hard to counterfeit.

Thane read that message twice, with alarm spinning in his brain. What was the Scarlet Star? Whose alter ego was Captain Glenn Clayton? And who were the enemies to be destroyed?

Dazedly, he returned the scraps of metal film to their shallow cavity and snapped the picture back to cover them. He looked again at the gravely smiling girl. She looked far too lovely to have any part in the sort of plot that he suspected.

Clayton's easy voice startled him.

"Well, Thane! Congratulations!"

THREE

THANE stepped back watchfully.

"I don't know how you did it." Clayton squirmed into a more comfortable position on the floor, with his back against the bunk, and lifted both fettered hands to feel of the back of his head. "You hit me like a meteor—and I thought you Americans would be fat and soft, from your easy living here in the Ring."

Thane gestured with the gun.

"Sit up on the edge of the bunk," he ordered. "It's my turn now to ask for information."

Clayton sat on the bunk and let his fettered ankle swing. His shrewd greenish eyes studied Thane, alert as ever, but unalarmed. He was still a challenging opponent. Suddenly he chuckled.

"I see that I had better explain," he said smoothly. "It seems that I have allowed my instinctive caution to get the better of good judgment. I suppose my behavior has appeared uncivil. But you must understand that my purposes are altogether open and frank. I have no plans at all for anything except the mutual benefit of my people and yours."

Thane's eyes narrowed. Clayton's lean brown face looked appealingly sincere, but his words didn't fit that metallic

document signed with the Scarlet Star. Thane kept the paralysis gun ready.

"Yes," he said. "I guess you had better explain."

"I see that you've gone through my pockets." Clayton's eyes fastened on the picture of the girl, which Thane still held in his hand. "You must have got some ideas, but I trust you won't jump to any damaging false conclusions. Just what do you want to know?"

Thane returned the picture to Clayton's wallet, and sat down on the edge of a map-cluttered navigation desk, where he was well beyond the Outsider's reach. The machine was whirring and clicking and hissing softly behind him, but its exploration would have to wait until Clayton had been questioned.

"Tell me about New Europa."

Clayton's hard face went blank. "What's New Europa."

"Something that mints coins, at least."

"Careless of me." Clayton's greenish eyes flashed with understanding. "But I wasn't expecting to be caught."

"About New Europa?"

"My country." His lean shoulders straightened. "Our history begins two centuries ago, when America set up the Ring to protect herself and left the rest of the world to die Outside—"

"That's not true," Thane objected. "We offered Ring generators to the people of every continent. It's no fault of ours that they saved nobody. Our own Ring was kept open for refugees, until we were attacked."

"Your version of history," Clayton said. "I thought you wanted mine."

"Sorry. Go on."

"We survived." A defiant pride illuminated Clayton's ruthless face. "Without your precious Ring."

"How?"

"In every possible way. We had two years of warning, remember. We used the time. Factories were turned to

the mass production of every sort of survival gear—air suits, air regenerators, special vehicles. Naval submarines were anchored in concrete and converted into refuges. Air raid shelters were rebuilt. The deeper mines were equipped with air locks, and stored with supplies."

Thane peered at him doubtfully. "People really got through it, in such places as that? The Earth's crust almost broke up. The tides must have been miles high, over every inch of land. I don't see how—"

"You're a fatcat American." Clayton grinned. "My ancestors were tougher. Only the toughest and the luckiest lived through it. But there were several thousand survivors, in old Europa and on the island of Britain—my ancestors came from there.

"Of course their troubles had only begun, when the dead star went on and the earthquakes stopped. For most of them, survival was only temporary. They died in their shelters, when their food ran out or the air equipment failed. The rest were isolated, shut up in their shelters and waiting to die, when help came."

"Help?" With a sudden unease, Thane remembered the eye he had seen staring out of a skull, and all his apprehensive speculations about space-dwelling aliens who had come with the dwarf. "Who helped?"

"The spacemen."

"Huh?" Thane tried not to shiver. "Spacemen from where?"

"From Britain," Clayton said. "And the part of old Europa called Russia. Some of them had reached the Earth's old satellite. Their telescopes had found the approaching star. They brought back the warning of danger, and the means to survive it."

Thane relaxed a little. "What kind of means?"

"For many years, they had been perfecting machines and techniques for keeping alive and moving about and doing useful work under the conditions of open space. When

those same conditions came to Earth, they were ready. A few ships steered clear of the cataclysm, out in space. The spacemen came back, to rescue and unite the scattered groups of survivors."

Clayton's greenish eyes were shining.

"My people were spacemen—and they were always the leaders. They had the know-how to build atomic power plants—and, with no air to burn, men had to have atomic power. They salvaged nuclear fuels from military depots that had withstood the flood, and they found new deposits where the seas had been.

"When another disaster fell, they were the leaders again. Men had to have water—for the air generators, as well as for everything else. They drilled for it, at first. But in a few years the wells ran dry. The underground waters were draining out the highlands.

"We followed the water."

Triumph rang in Clayton's voice.

"My people were leaders in that great migration, down to New Europa. They moved a thousand miles, down to the floor of the old Atlantic. They drilled new wells and opened new mines and built new power plants. They invented and worked and endured and always survived."

The handcuffs jingled suddenly on Clayton's wrist. He watched Thane's hasty reaction, with a hard amusement in his defiant greenish eyes.

"We're still there," he said. "We'll be there when your precious Ring has flickered out. Is that the information you wanted?"

"Part of it." Thane nodded, and gave him a smile of wary admiration. "Your people have a history to be proud of. But there's one thing I don't understand. Why didn't you communicate with us. We could have helped—"

"But would you?"

"Certainly!"

"We were all shut out of your wonderful refuge, don't

forget." Clayton shrugged skeptically, with another little jingle of his chains. "Anyhow, it's only recently that any communication has been possible."

"I don't see why."

"In New Europa, we're three thousand miles from here. In the struggle to keep alive, we neglected the art of space flight. We lacked resources to fuel the old chemical rockets. It's only in my own lifetime that the ionic jet was perfected and your Barrier rediscovered. America had become a legend. We were amazed to find that you really existed."

"What about radio?" Thane demanded. "Radiation passes through the Ring. Couldn't you pick up our broadcasts?"

"Things are different, Outside." Clayton looked smug. "Here, you have an ionized layer at the top of your atmosphere, which reflects radio signals back to the surface. Outside, we have no such convenient reflecting layer."

Thane nodded sheepishly. "I didn't think of that."

"Of course there are traces of air," Clayton added. "The sun ionizes them, down to the surface, so that radio transmission is almost impossible. Even at night, the range is usually limited to stations in your line of sight."

"Very well." Thane slid to his feet again, frowning at his uncowed prisoner and thoughtfully weighing the weapon he had captured. "Now that you have finally come to us, in this peculiar way—what are you after?"

"Help," Clayton answered promptly. "Our wells are going dry again, even under the old ocean deeps. I've come to beg for water—which means life itself. Or rather, to negotiate an exchange. We can offer you petroleum, coal, metals—even uranium to power your Ring."

"You were making a very furtive approach, for an honest trader." Thane glanced with narrowed eyes at the sun-bather pasted on the bulkhead. "Evidently you have been here before. Why all the secrecy?"

"Can't you imagine?" Clayton laughed harshly. "When we found corpses piled outside your wonderful Ring!"

"I've seen them," Thane said. "They were refugees who came too late, after we had closed the Ring. Any attempt to save them would have exposed us all to destruction."

"Perhaps you believe that." Clayton grinned bleakly. "But at least you can understand that they were enough to make us cautious. The men who discovered the Barrier took care to keep out of sight. They set up cameras and radio and television receivers—well, to spy on you."

"Huh?" Thane caught his breath. "Was one of their cameras hidden in a human skull, lying on a ledge of rock just above where the Ring comes in to the coast of California Corporation?"

"I wouldn't know." Clayton shrugged, but he was sitting up straighter. "I do know that most of the listening posts were set up along the western frontier of your Barrier—to conceal the direction of New Europa, in case we were discovered. I believe there was a post located at that point."

"That explains something that has worried me for years. I caught a glint of light from that hidden lens—it looked like an eye. Later, the whole skull was gone."

"Somebody must have been too careless." Clayton lifted his manacled wrists, with a hopeful grin. "Now that we have come to a friendly understanding—"

"But we haven't," Thane cut him off. "I want to know why you have waited so long, and slipped in so furtively."

"In the first place, it took us many years to perfect the polarizers I've been using to enter the Ring. All we had to start with were fragmentary copies of the blueprints and handbooks for the Barrier generator that was shipped to Britain two hundred years ago. We had to drill a long tunnel, to reach the Barrier at a point where our tests would remain undetected by your Ring Guard—"

"Where was that?" Thane shivered. "Suppose your experiments had burst the Ring?"

"They didn't." Clayton sounded somewhat disappointed. "But they were prepared to take that risk. The dead bodies

around the Barrier seemed to confirm the stories that you had been pretty ruthless in shutting other people out of your refuge. We had no reason to expect generosity now."

Thane met his hard level gaze.

"I think you'd have got all the water you want, if you had asked for it openly—"

"Perhaps you don't believe me," Clayton broke in. "Take a look at the letter I brought from my government to yours. It's in the map locker, yonder. Look in the upper compartment."

The locker was open. Thane found a long envelope of a heavy gray metallic film in the compartment Clayton indicated. He turned back quickly, to keep an eye on the Outsider.

"It's unsealed," Clayton said. "Read it."

Thane unfolded a thick sheet of the tough, pliant metallic stuff. The message on it was lettered in white ink, beneath an elaborate crest in blue enamel.

*To the United Corporations of America,
Greetings:*

Captain Glenn Clayton, the bearer of this document, seeks to bring about a peaceful meeting of our separated peoples. He has visited America, and he assures us of your generosity. He will explain our desperate situation, and he is authorized to negotiate the purchase of the water we must have to survive. We trust that the conferences he seeks will cement a firm friendship between our independent nations.

*Atlantis Lee, Secretary
League of New Europa
Level 10, Churchill Dome*

Thane replaced the thick metallic sheet in the heavy envelope. It might have been convincing—if Clayton hadn't

opened his negotiations with the paralysis gun, and if Thane hadn't happened to see those more sinister credentials hidden behind the picture of Atlantis Lee.

"Who," Thane inquired abruptly, "who is Atlantis Lee?"

"You've been admiring her, I see." Clayton's voice had a momentary snap of unconcealed resentment. "As the letter indicates, she's Secretary of New Europa."

"Your ruler?"

"One of our leaders." Clayton nodded vaguely. "Our political situation is a bit complicated."

"We'll want to know more about that."

Thane paused, frowning. His incredible prisoner had begun to seem more talkative than candid. The political situation in New Europa could safely be left to more experienced interrogators, with better means of separating fact from fiction. He hefted his captured weapon thoughtfully, wondering whether the manacles were enough to keep the Outsider secured.

"I say!" Apprehension widened Clayton's eyes. "Haven't I convinced you—"

"I'm taking you ashore. I warn you that I won't hesitate to use this weapon. Where's your control room?"

"Yonder." Clayton moved his head. "But I advise you against any rash attempt to pilot the *Friendship* yourself. Remember, we're a hundred yards down. You'd probably drown us both."

Thane peered into the control room, and had to concede that Clayton was probably right. He had expected to find motor and air controls, the polarizer—whatever it might be—that had let the machine through the Ring, and some sort of steering gear for the caterpillar tracks. He found far more. A bewildering array of unfamiliar dials and controls covered all the walls of the compartment within reach of the pilot's seat, and most of the roof and the floor. He turned slowly back to the tall Outsider, who sat grinning expectantly.

"I'm going to let you take the controls," Thane told him. "An intelligent decision." He held up the manacles to be unlocked. "The key for these is on the ring you took out of my pockets."

Thane unlocked the ankle chain and moved quickly back.

"You'll have to manage with the handcuffs," he said. "Walk slowly to the pilot's seat."

Clayton obeyed, complaining cheerfully; "You're too suspicious, lieutenant. But I suppose I shouldn't blame you. Strangers,—from strange countries—are apt to be suspicious at first."

The Outsider settled himself in the pilot's seat. Thane stood close behind him, holding the muzzle of that unfamiliar gun at the back of his copper-haired head.

"Take us back to the beach," Thane commanded.

"You're making things too difficult," Clayton said. "I need both hands—"

"I know you do," Thane rapped. "But go ahead."

Clumsy with his manacles, Clayton reach for the controls. Motors whined. Pumps throbbed. The machine lurched into motion. Clayton sat silently watching his intricate instruments.

Behind him, Thane watched alertly, waiting for him to produce some unexpected weapon, half expecting him to flood the machine to create a diversion, half afraid he would head for the Outside instead of the shore.

But waves slapped against the hull at last, assuring him that they were still inside the Ring. Presently he felt the machine touch bottom. Clayton did something to the controls. The sound of the motors changed, and they lurched ahead again. The Outsider nodded at a clump of palm trees in bright silhouette on a radar screen.

"We're on the beach."

"Stop right here, and turn on your radio transmitter."

Thane gave him the frequency of the Guard station at the Key West base. A bored operator answered. Shouting into the microphone, Thane reported that he had captured an invading machine from the Outside. He had brought it ashore on Long Key, and he was waiting for help. The machine had been camouflaged to look like a boulder—

The operator broke in, to ask what he was drinking. Thane asked for Captain Steadman. Who came on sounding sleepy and indignant. Patterson Thane didn't own the Ring Guard, and the captain had swallowed all the nonsense he could stand. If he heard anything else about perambulating boulders, he was going to break Barry out of the Guard.

"Tough luck, Thane." Clayton chuckled sardonically when Steadman hung up. "Where do we go from here?"

"Switch to the broadcast bands," Thane ordered. "We'll start jamming the commercial broadcasts. That should get somebody out here quick."

"You're in charge—"

Clayton reached for another switch—and Thane was struck by an invisible avalanche. It hurled him back down the corridor, and smashed him against the bulkhead at the other end of the machine.

The savage impact dazed him. For an instant he must have been unconscious. Then he was aware of a thin, doleful wailing. He tried to get up, and found that somehow the whole machine had tipped upright. In the pilot's seat, Clayton was suspended high above him now. The bulkhead had become the floor, and a cruel pressure pinned him fast against it.

Gasping painfully to breathe, he began to understand. The machine was a disguised rocket ship. That wailing was the jets. The force holding him down was the acceleration of the unexpected take-off.

He rolled his body over, under that merciless weight. He

raised his head. Blood half-blinded him, streaming from a gash on his forehead, but he found the paralysis gun lying where he must have dropped it.

It was half a dozen feet away. He squirmed toward it, carrying his quarter ton of extra weight. It was heavier than lead when he reached it, and lifting it took all his strength. He rolled his heavy body over again, forced the gun into line with Clayton, pressed the firing key.

Nothing happened.

There was no dull flash of paralyzing violet. The fall had broken something. He sagged back against the bulkhead, disarmed and chained down by that invisible force. Lying there, he heard Clayton's voice.

He thought the Outsider had called something to him, but he couldn't understand. A moment later he heard an answering crackle from the radio speaker, and realized that Clayton was making a report of his own. The Outsiders words seemed completely strange at first, another language, clipped and harsh and rapid as a machine gun burst, but then he began to make out phrases of English.

"... trapped the man I was after . . . description of the *Friendship* . . . emergency change of plans . . . everything identifies Target One . . . radiated from geographic center of the Barrier . . . nuclear missile, before these fools wake up . . . alert personnel in indicated path of flood waters . . . radio silence now . . . Aldebaran out!"

Then there was only the muted screaming of the jets.

Lying flattened against the bulkhead, Thane tried to find a meaning in those fragmentary phrases. There was only one that he could find, and it struck him with a blow more stunning than his fall.

Clayton was not returning to the Outside. Thane's reports of the camouflaged machine had made him change his plans. He was proceeding to make a nuclear attack on

Target One. At the geographical center of the Ring, Target One could be only the Ring generator.

Thane lay dazed. With the generator knocked out, the Ring would flicker out of existence. The undammed waters of America would pour down across the dry sea-floors. The imprisoned atmosphere would explode into the emptiness Outside, and unwarned America would lie sprawled in dreadful death.

Clayton had to be stopped. Fighting that merciless acceleration, Thane got up on all fours. He struggled to his knees. Somehow, he climbed to his feet. He lifted the lead-heavy gun, hoping to use it for a club. But Clayton was still twenty feet overhead. Twenty feet, many times multiplied by that merciless rocket thrust, in terms of the energy that climbing them would take—even if he could find a ladder.

But there was no ladder.

In blind desperation, Thane tried to throw the weapon. His heavy arm came up slowly with it, too sluggishly. It rose a few feet above him, and crashed instantly back down to the bulkhead.

"You again, Thane?" Clayton had heard the crash. "If you interrupt me now, you'll kill us both."

That didn't matter, even if it were true. All that mattered was how Clayton could be interrupted. Thane couldn't reach him, against that wall of force. He had been alerted now, and he could defend himself.

Thane dropped on all fours to recover the useless gun. He looked up in time to glimpse the backward swing of Clayton's arm. A bright missile came down at him, its velocity multiplied by that driving thrust.

Desperately, he dragged his sluggish body aside, toward the narrow shelter of the map locker. The object grazed his shoulder, and thudded into the bulkhead. He saw that it was a fire extinguisher. He reached for it, though he

knew that he could never throw it back against that deadly acceleration barrier—and he found the inspection plate.

A narrow metal plate, covering an opening in the bulkhead beneath him. Something was stenciled on it, in odd white letters that he took no time to decipher. It had been fastened in place with screws, but the heavy impact of the fire extinguisher had caved it in.

He fell on it furiously, wrenching at it with his bare hands, and hammering with the fire extinguisher. He tore it off. Beneath it, he uncovered something of intricate wiring and glowing tubes and tiny crystals that must have been transistors.

"Stop it, you suicidal fool!" he heard Clayton screaming at him. "That's the reactor control. Touch it, and we crash!"

Instantly, he smashed the heavy fire extinguisher into the delicate crystals and tubes. Now, that acceleration gave power to his blow. Blue fire hissed and spat in the twisted wreckage, and he heard a sudden quaver in the howling of the jets. He struck again, to make sure—and something knocked him flat.

The next thing he knew, he was staggering to his feet, somewhere in the dark. His hands were burned and his head was aching from a new concussion, and blood was drying on his face. Something was hissing thinly, somewhere above him.

His fumbling hands found a hot metal wall, with a small opening in it. That was the bulkhead, now almost vertical again. He was still inside the machine. It lay motionless now, tipped a little sidewise, where it must have crashed. The hissing must be air, or perhaps the gas used for reaction mass in the nuclear jets, leaking from a broken line.

He fumbled about the sloping deck until he found the broken gun, and then felt his way along the corridor toward the pilot's seat. He felt fresh air before he reached it, cool

on his wet face, and saw faint starlight outside an open hatch.

He thought that Clayton was gone, until he heard hoarse breathing above that dying hiss. He started toward the sound, and discovered the Outsider with his feet. Clayton lay unconscious on the tilted deck, still handcuffed, and slippery with his own hot blood.

Thane dragged him to the open hatch, and lowered him carefully to the ground outside. By that time, headlamps were flashing in the distance. He waited, standing in the muddy cottonfield beside the inert Outsider, until the car stopped with its lights glaring on him.

"Looky, Paw!" a small boy was yelping. "It's the meteor, just like I seen it over the henhouse; Bigger'n the barn!"

"They ain't no meteors," a man snapped nervously. "Not here in the Ring."

"Come back, Dub!" a woman called. "I'm a-skeered—"

The car door slammed. Light glinted on the barrel of a shotgun.

"Hey, feller!" the man shouted. "What you all a-doin' in my cotton patch?"

Hastily, Thane identified himself. He learned that the cotton patch was in South Corporation, thirty miles from the New Memphis beamway station. Clayton's attack had fallen safely short of Target One.

Thane called General Whitehall from the farmhouse. He was swaying with shock and exhaustion, but he gasped out his story of the invading machine and that incredible attempted atomic attack on the Ring generator. The general listened quietly, and abruptly cut him off.

"Okay, Thane. That's enough."

"Wait, sir! I've got this Outsider and his machine for proof—"

"You misunderstand me," the general rapped. "I don't doubt you, but we can't waste time. This is the moment

when we must justify the Guard. I'm alerting the local authorities and I'll be out there myself. Till you get help, take care of that Outsider!"

"Thank you—" Thane had to gulp. "Yes, sir!"

General Whitehall came to see him that night in a New Memphis hospital. His cuts and burns and bruises had been dressed. He had slept most of the day. He felt weak and ravenous. His triumph over Clayton had left him with a glow of well-being, in spite of all his injuries, and it shocked him to see the trouble on the general's haggard face.

"It looks bad, Thane." The general shook his head. "Bad! Our engineers are moving that amazing wreckage to Headquarters for more thorough study, but their first reports already confirm your report. The nuclear armament on that rocket could have knocked out the Ring generator, in spite of all our defenses."

"But now we've got the ship—"

"We've got one ship—thanks to a very stubborn soldier." The general gave him a bleak little flicker of a smile. "But there are surely others. There's the unknown nation that built and armed it. There's the incredible hatred, behind the attack."

"We've got Clayton—"

"I've seen him," the general said. "We've removed a blood clot that was pressing on his brain. The rest of his injuries were pretty superficial. He had regained consciousness when I saw him. In fact, he appeared to be very much in possession of himself."

The old general shrugged despairingly.

"I never saw such a man. I don't understand him. He is obviously intelligent and extremely competent. The staff psychiatrist agrees with me that he is probably sane. But the only regret he seems to feel about his effort to murder America is that you were able to stop him."

"And he was laughing at me!"

"He appears completely certain that the Ring will be destroyed. Though he is being very cagey about giving up any information that might be useful to us, I gather that he is expecting his friends Outside to make another attack—and he isn't apparently worried about what it will do to him."

The general walked aimlessly to the window of the room and back again. He raked his lean fingers through his snowy hair, and stared at Thane with a sick bafflement in his eyes.

"What can we do?"

"We can question Clayton—"

"He's being questioned," the general said. "We'll wring out every fact we can, by every humane means. But he's clever and brave and still determined to murder us. We can't depend on anything he says."

Worry cut deep lines in the general's face.

"We've got to do better," he muttered. "We've got to learn the truth about our enemies Outside. We've got to learn why they hate us so bitterly. We've got to find out the extent of their resources, and precisely what they plan."

"And we've got to stop them."

"But I don't know how." Dejectedly, he shrugged. "What can we do?"

Thane could offer no solution then. Late that night, however, lying sleepless on the hard narrow hospital bed, he found the answer.

FOUR

THANE spent the next two days thinking out the details, while he waited for the hospital to discharge him and the beamway coaster to carry him back to the headquarters of the Guard in Midwest Corporation, beside the threatened generator of the Ring. He took his plan to General Whitehall.

The general was busy, trying desperately to mobilize the rusty defenses of the Ring, and Thane had to wait a long time outside his office. He looked up dully when Thane entered, with only the merest flash of a smile to hide the sickness in his worn blue eyes.

"I think I have it, sir," Thane told him. "We must do what Clayton was evidently planning, when he captured me. We must send a spy Outside."

Suddenly the general's eyes were alive again. For a long second they studied Thane with an absolute concentration, as if they could see every detail of the project in his mind. Suddenly they frowned, as if they had discovered the inevitable traps and barriers ahead.

"Clayton wasn't planning any immediate attack on the Ring, until I forced his hand," Thane argued hastily. "He was too uncertain about our defenses, and too cautious about alarming us. That gives our agent a chance to gain us some time, at least, by advising more delays. With luck enough, he might get back with the facts we must have.

Even at the worst, he should be able to create some sort of useful diversion."

The general shook his head, still frowning.

"Who could accomplish such a mission?"

Thane caught his breath.

"I'll try it, sir."

"You've done your bit," the general said. "I like your spirit. But I don't see how—"

"I'll impersonate Clayton."

The general snorted. "You don't even resemble him."

"I'm the same height," Thane said. "We can send for Della Rand, and have her do another plastic surgery job. We have Clayton. I can study his mannerisms, learn all I can about the people I must fool—"

"He'll cross you up," Whitehall cut in. "He's plenty sharp."

"Sharp enough," Thane said, "so that he has evidently been coming and going through the Ring for the past several years, without being detected. He was evidently planning to use my uniform and dog-tags—"

"A good point. But don't forget that he had many years to study us." The general glanced at the typed documents piled in neat alignment on his desk. "I've been going through the reports on everything that we got in that machine. To show you the extent of the preparations that Clayton had to make, there's even a sort of spoken dictionary, with tape recordings of thousands of words. Though his native tongue is a sort of English, time has made a lot of changes in it. It's almost a foreign language."

"We can use his dictionary."

"But we won't have years, for you to study it."

"We can put it on those new hypnotic training tapes they're using out at the Academy," Thane answered promptly. "The dictionary, and all Clayton's maps and books and documents."

"I see you've put some thought in this." The general

nodded reluctantly. "But the invading ship is wrecked. Even if it can be repaired, it's much too valuable for us to risk it on such a flimsy scheme."

"I'll be better off without it," Thane assured him. "I've been talking to the engineers. They've found some escape equipment in the rocket. An air suit equipped with two-way radio, and a light electric motorcycle. My whole plan is built on that."

He saw the first faint glimmer of hope in the general's worn eyes.

"You see, I'll use the radio to get in touch with Clayton's base of operations. I'll report that the rocket was attacked and destroyed, when he attempted to attack the Ring generator—by weapons that are waiting for any other attackers."

General Whitehall rose abruptly.

"You're making it seem possible." A restrained excitement rang in his voice. "As Clayton, you can report that you were captured by the Ring Guard and set free to take back a message. We'll reply to that letter from the Secretary of New Europa—though I still don't entirely understand it. We'll offer to supply the Outsiders plenty of water, on any reasonable terms, if they want to build pipelines up to the Ring."

He paced the office floor, restless with elation.

"If our peace offers are accepted, that's all we want. If they are refused—and I'm afraid they will be—you must bring back every fact you can collect that might help defend America. You must find out the basis for that insane hatred—it must be a kind of mass insanity, that we must somehow cure.

"But—" General Whitehall stopped his pacing suddenly, as if he struck some immovable obstacle. "If you don't take the rocket, how will you get through the Ring?"

"I discussed that with the engineers," Thane said. "They are learning something about the device on the rocket that

Clayton calls a polarizer. You know there's a very gradual leakage of air molecules through the Ring."

"I know the theory." The general nodded impatiently. "A few stray atoms get through, because they happen to strike the reflecting layer at a certain critical velocity, with their axes precisely normal to it."

Thane nodded. "The engineers tell me that the polarizer creates a special field that lines up the atoms, without causing any other change. The effect is probably quite temporary, but this polarized matter evidently passes through the Ring just as light does, without making any actual opening."

"The device is intact?"

"It is being repaired. Dr. Wooten promised me that it will be ready to put me through the Ring, with the air suit and the motorcycle whenever I'm ready to go."

"You're pretty confident." Whitehall peered at him oddly. "But have you thought about how you're going to get back?"

Thane grinned. "That's a bridge to be crossed when I get to it. It ought to be simple enough to get out of the Ring at sea level—if the polarizer works. It won't be so easy to get back, against fifteen pounds of air pressure. Clayton had the thrust of his jets. I'll have to hit on something else."

"But my mission doesn't depend on that," he added at once. "I can make reports through the Ring, by radio. By that time, the engineers may have the rocket ready to fly Outside and pick me up. Or perhaps they will duplicate the polarizer, and install an air lock in the Ring. But all that can wait."

Thane's voice dropped urgently.

"Please, sir—what do you think?"

"The matter will have to be discussed with my staff." The old general smiled at him soberly. "But I suppose we'll have to let you go."

"Thank you, sir!" whispered Thane.

Dr. Della Rand arrived next day from Chicago Corporation, in answer to General Whitehall's urgent call. At the beamway station in sleepy little Ring City, Thane was waiting to meet her. His breath came a little faster as the long bright coaster slid out of the focusing ring. The famous doctor came down the ramp, and his heart skipped a beat.

Her dark, vital beauty was arresting as ever. Her skin had the same warm glow, her eyes the same penetrating quickness, but something had changed. Thane felt a pang of vague loss. Then he knew what the trouble was. Della Rand hadn't changed at all. But, he had seen Clayton's picture of that violet-eyed girl of far-off New Europa, who bore the haunting name of Atlantis Lee.

"Hello, Thane."

Even her brick, impersonal voice was still the same. She paused for an instant to study his face, yet he knew that she saw only the deft work of her surgeon's hands.

"General Whitehall sent for me," she stated. "What does he want?"

Thane felt at ease with her now, because she didn't matter any longer.

"A military secret," he said: "I need another facial operation."

"I've no time for banter." She frowned with annoyance. "There's nothing wrong with your face—"

"I'm not kidding." He told her about his plan and the situation that made it necessary. Her quick mind accepted and filed away the fact that men lived Outside. Suddenly she looked at Thane again, as if she had never really seen him before.

"Isn't this scheme of yours very dangerous?"

"Perhaps." He shrugged. "We're all in danger now."

He escorted her to General Whitehall's office.

"Clayton mustn't know what we're planning," the gen-

eral explained. "We're still trying to question him, without much success. He'll set a trap for Thane, with some clever lie, if he suspects anything."

Della nodded. "But I'll need to study his face."

"We're arranging that," Whitehall said. "You see, he was cut up when the rocket crashed. He has been informed that he needs plastic surgery. You will do the operations."

"A challenging assignment." Her eyes were bright with interest. "Perhaps I can help with the interrogation, too. Have you tried scopolamine? Or radical hypnosis?"

"We've tried everything." The general nodded. "Nothing works. I don't know whether the Outsiders have undergone some mental mutation, or whether some psychological block has been conditioned into Clayton—but he knows more than we can make him tell."

"Quite a challenge," whispered Della Rand. "Let me see him."

Thane was present in the operating room when they met. Clayton had already been wrapped in sheets and strapped to the table, and Della Rand was gowned and masked in white, but the Outsider's greenish eyes lit with an instant admiration.

"Hello, doctor." He grinned at her. "You're going to complicate my task. I came here to destroy you Americans, along with your precious Ring. Now I see that I'll have to save you, somehow, and take you back to New Europa."

Della caught her breath. It was the first time that Thane had ever seen her air of curt efficiency disturbed. He thought that she was curiously pleased as well as flustered. In a moment, however, she got her professional briskness back.

"All ready?" She turned to her assistant. "Anaesthetic!"

Thane watched the operation. The bright instruments seemed to live in her deft hands. Newly developed adhesives joined nerve and muscle and skin, so that no stitches

were required. When she had finished, only a few tiny lines showed where Clayton's face had been torn. Even those would slowly vanish.

Next day, Thane walked past the guards into Clayton's hospital room. The lean Outsider was sitting up in his bed, sipping orange juice through a straw.

"Such luxuries!" His greenish eyes smiled, behind the bandages. "There are no oranges in New Europa. You Americans have really had it soft—up to now."

"I can't understand you." Thane stood peering at him. "You're brave. You're smart. I almost like you—"

"Thanks, Thane." He lifted the glass. "I can say the same for you."

"But I can't make you out." Thane stood frowning. "Why were you trying to murder America? That seems—well, insane."

"Not to us Outsiders." Clayton laughed harshly through the bandages. "I told you that some of us resented being shut out of the Ring."

"I explained that you had no reason for resentment."

Clayton's eyes glinted hard.

"I rejected your explanation."

Thane tried another angle.

"This secret political organization in New Europa—I believe it's known as the Scarlet Star—what had that got to do with your attack on the Ring?"

Clayton shrugged: "I don't know what you're talking about."

"We've evidence connecting you with this organization."

"Send your pretty doctor around again, if you really want some information." Clayton chuckled sardonically. "Let her try her radical hypnosis."

"Perhaps we shall."

"That should be amusing. I find her quite attractive. Too charming to die. I must find a way to take her home."

"What about Atlantis Lee?"

"Atlantis," Clayton said, "is a long way from Midwest Corporation."

Thane thought that over, and asked to see the heavy platinum ring that Clayton wore on the third finger of his right hand. That request must have been a blunder, because the tall Outsider stiffened suddenly. The dressings concealed the expression of his mouth, but his eyes had narrowed shrewdly.

"Why?"

"If you refuse to talk, we must examine every clue."

"Don't damage the ring." Clayton's voice seemed oddly urgent. "It has a sentimental value."

"I can't picture you as sentimental," Thane snapped. "Give it to me."

Clayton slipped it off and tossed it to him.

"I was wondering when you'd think of the ring." He grinned mockingly. "Not that it will help you much."

Thane tried not to start.

"You know what I mean," Clayton said. "And you ought to know that you haven't got a chance. Just reverse the situation. Suppose that I had managed to turn up in your shoes, on my first visit to America. Think of all the odds against me. Just one false step is all it takes, remember."

Thane stood dazed, wondering blankly what had given his plan away.

"Maybe Della can give you a copy of my face," Clayton said. "But the scars will be there. I'm slightly taller. My eyes and my voice and my hair are different. Your people have been making some amusing efforts to observe my voice and mannerism, but they haven't observed enough. Something will betray you. If you ever get that far!"

Clayton paused to chuckle mockingly.

"Remember, Thane, life is hard Outside. It's easy to keep alive here in America. A naked animal can do it. Outside, it

takes a lot of equipment and a specialized know-how that I've been learning since I was born. You haven't got a chance."

"Thanks for all the hints." Thane grinned faintly. "But just keep the situation reversed. Suppose you were in my shoes. Wouldn't you try it?"

Beyond the bandages, Clayton's eyes looked warmer. He nodded slowly. For that moment, at least, Thane had to like and admire the tall Outsider.

"Sure I would."

The morning after Thane's operation, General Whitehall came with Della Rand to his hospital room to see his new face. The surgeon lifted the dressings very deftly, and inspected her work with a brisk little nod of professional satisfaction. She kept on watching him oddly, with a look of unspoken worry.

Standing behind her, the old general pursed his wrinkled lips in a silent whistle of astonishment, and turned to call for a mirror. Thane looked in the mirror and gasped.

It was uncanny. It made shivery cold feet run up and down his spine. He felt the same, except that his face was still numb and dully painful. But the hard, handsome features grinning at him from the mirror were those of Captain Glenn Clayton.

His dark hair had been bleached and dyed. Chemical stains had reddened and browned his skin. His gray eyes, from the delicate injection of special pigments, had taken on the greenish glint of Clayton's.

"I can't believe it!"

Even his voice startled him. Clever surgery on his sinuses and larynx had given it the quality of Clayton's. He looked down at his hands. They also had been altered—but the fingers of his right hand were restlessly tapping the tip of the thumb, in a nervous little habit of his own.

"That isn't Clayton," General Whitehall warned him. "That little gesture—or any one of a thousand others that

don't belong to Clayton—might be enough to kill you.”

That afternoon, Thane went back to the field at the base where the engineers were at work on Clayton's rocket. He spent his days poring over every detail of every object that Clayton had brought, and half his nights under the hypnotic training tapes.

The day he was to leave, he couldn't resist the temptation to visit Clayton's room in the hospital, where Della Rand's efforts at interrogation by medical means were still going on. He was wearing Clayton's tight gray trousers and tunic, to get accustomed to them, and the repaired paralysis gun was sagging in its odd plastic holster at his hip. One of the guards started apprehensively, and then apologized.

“Sorry, Lieutenant Thane. For just a second I thought you were *him*.”

Two more guards were standing in the corridor, outside Clayton's room. Thane was a little surprised to find Della Rand inside, alone with the prisoner. Clayton's handcuffs had been unlocked, and he was sitting at a little table with his hands on the electrodes of some laboratory device. He looked up at Thane with a blank astonishment, which changed to smiling admiration.

“Splendid, Thane!” he exclaimed softly—in the voice that was now Thane's, also. “Thanks for letting me see.” His sardonic greenish eyes flickered back to Della. “Your gadget must have registered something then, beautiful.”

“There was a reaction.” Della nodded, with an air of restrained exasperation. “There are some reactions that even you can't quite control.”

Clayton grinned at Thane.

“She still believes she's coming here to extract information.” His hard voice had a malicious ring. “But I don't need any special equipment to tell me that she is doing most of the reacting. She's falling in love.

Della's skin turned darker.

"Stop it," she ordered curtly. "Or I'll call the guard."

Yet she didn't seem really displeased. Thane wondered if that were not the truth. He had a feeling that the Outsider was playing with her, yielding just enough shreds of useless information to keep her coming back, deliberately arousing her.

"A marvelous likeness." Clayton studied him sardonically. "But even perfection wouldn't be good enough. There are a thousand things that can betray an impersonator in a world he has never seen before. Perhaps you have thought of a hundred. There are nine hundred more, waiting to destroy you."

"We'll see," Thane said. "So long."

He waved his hand, in a silent farewell to Della, and walked out past the guards.

Eighty seconds later, Clayton followed him. Della Rand was left lying on the bed. She was unconscious from an anaesthetic injection out of her own kit, her mouth and wrists slowly turning blue from the pressure of Clayton's hands. Clayton had flung off his bathrobe. He had torn his underclothing and mussed his hair. Della herself had scratched his face, unwittingly aiding his planned effect.

"Where's he gone?" he snapped at the startled guards in the corridor. "That dizzy dame had unlocked the handcuffs, and he jumped me. Took my clothes and gun. He looks like me now. I suppose you thought—but where's Clayton?"

The nearer guard blinked and gulped and pointed automatically.

"Lieutenant Thane—I thought he was Thane—went out the front door."

"You fool, that was the Outsider!" His voice cracked like an angry whip. "Working our own scheme in reverse. Do something! Call Whitehall! Here, give me your gun!"

"All right, sir." The dazed guard surrendered his automatic. "Don't blame me, sir. I'd have sworn—"

It was a simple plan, one that had the audacious simplicity that was the spice of life to Clayton. He grinned with elation, sprinting down the hospital corridor toward the entrance.

It was neat. Thane would be buried, if nothing went wrong, as Clayton, killed while attempting escape. And Clayton himself, calmly carrying on his own masquerade, would be escorted to the Barrier and safely through it by his unsuspecting captors. The first intimation of the truth might be the unexpected descent of another atomic missile, here on the Ring generator.

Of course there were a good many things that could go wrong, but Clayton was used to risks and he enjoyed them. This improvised dash for freedom, he reflected, had more in its favor than Thane's own wild scheme.

There was only one phase of the affair that Clayton regretted. He wished it had been possible to take Della Rand with him. He had admired her from the beginning, but he had never quite realized how much he really wanted her until he felt her struggling in his arms, biting and scratching and gouging with a surgical expertness, before the anaesthetic acted.

He turned a corner and saw Thane going out the door. He raised the unfamiliar pistol he had taken from the guard. His finger found the firing lever. The tube was pointed at Thane—but suddenly the gun shuddered in his hand.

Thane wore his own clothing. Thane was walking with his own jaunty walk. That high bronze head was his own. He couldn't kill himself!

He pushed that uncanny feeling away, and steadied the gun. He was suddenly aware of an unexpected liking for the soft-spoken Guardsman, but he had no time for emotion now. Nothing mattered now, but victory for the Scarlet Star.

He aimed again, as Thane paused outside the door, speaking to one of the guards there. He pulled the trigger

lever—but it was unexpectedly stiff. The weapon wavered before it exploded, and he knew that its clumsy projectile was going to miss.

Broken glass sprayed from the open door. The guard outside crumpled down, as if fatally paralyzed, but Thane reacted instantly. He crouched and spun. The flash-gun flickered. The narrow beam caught Clayton's hand, and his borrowed weapon clattered on the floor.

Even then, disabled and disarmed, Clayton kept insisting he was Thane. At the actual Thane's suggestion, they were both handcuffed and held for General Whitehall.

Della Rand recovered from the anaesthetic shot in time to give her account of the affair. The genuine Thane identified himself with knowledge that the other could not match, and hurried away to undertake his mission Outside.

Clayton was escorted back to his room. Della Rand was gone, and her laboratory equipment had been removed. The room was stripped bare as a cell. He spent the rest of the day shackled to his bed, with two guards watching him from the door.

Next morning, General Whitehall came in the room to see him. The lean old soldier was very sober, his voice deliberately quiet.

"Clayton, you've killed a man."

"The guard?" Steel jingled cheerfully, as Clayton sat up on the bare mattress. Red and welted where Della had scratched it, his hard face grinned without regret. "You might better say that I saved him from a less pleasant death—when your Barrier flickers out of existence."

"You're a riddle to me, Clayton." The general looked both sad and stern. "I could almost like you, personally. But the way you hate America is something I can't understand—"

"If you had lived Outside, you'd understand." Clayton's voice had a bitter ring. "If you had seen human beings die horribly for want of the oxygen in one cup of water, you'd understand."

"We're willing to give you water."

"You're willing to promise us a few drops now, to save your lives. You failed to do it two hundred years ago—when you were not in danger. America should congratulate herself, General, on two centuries of stolen time!"

Whitehall's face turned sadly grim.

"That attitude is unfortunate," he said, "both for America and for New Europa. But since it exists, we must deal with it." Cold now, his shrewd old eyes studied Clayton. "Captain, we are prepared to offer you two alternatives."

"Only two?" Clayton mocked him.

"Change your attitude," he begged urgently. "Answer our questions honestly. Help us understand and cure this mad hate. Cooperate squarely with our efforts to establish friendly relations and peaceful trade with new Europa."

Clayton shrugged impatiently. "Your other alternative." "Euthanasia."

Clayton's greenish eyes were puzzled for an instant.

"Oh." He nodded, with a bitter grin. "The easy death—your polite and scientific name for murder!"

"You were attempting to murder us all," the general retorted grimly: "You did kill that guard. A military court has been convened. If you persist in your defiance, there is no question of the verdict."

"Well, don't cry about it." A reckless glint lit Clayton's eyes. "In your place, I know what my verdict would be—with no regrets at all. But you surprise me. Perhaps you Americans are better men than I thought."

"You're a strange man, Clayton." Whitehall shook his head sadly. "Here in America, we respect human life. Even in your case, this has been a difficult and painful decision. But at least I can assure you that when the time comes the surgeon will be ordered to see that you suffer no pain."

"I'm not crying!"

Clayton allowed himself a wolfish grin. Who, he wondered, would the surgeon be?

FIVE

BARRY THANE went Outside that night.

Captain Steadman met him at the Key West beamway station and took him in a little Guard 'copter to a bare coral islet that was cut by the Ring. Three Guard engineers were there ahead of them, setting up and testing the repaired polarizer. The innocent-looking little device was bolted to a heavy platform, anchored to the coral with long steel spikes. Its control cables ran to a panel in a deep foxhole, a hundred feet back.

Thane shook hands with the somewhat awed and apologetic captain. He sealed himself in the clumsy-seeming air suit, and climbed on the little electric motorcycle for a practise run on the beach inside the Ring while he was waiting for the engineers to finish testing.

When everything was ready, he leaned the motorcycle against the invisible Ring, above the polarizer. He stepped warily back, and waved his hand to signal the men in the foxhole.

"Okay, Joel"

Something crashed like near thunder—and slapped the motorcycle through the Ring.

"Okay, Thane," Steadman called. "All set?"

Thane nodded silently. He walked around the wooden

platform, and pressed his armored body flat against the hard glassy slickness of the Ring. Waiting there, he had to fight a momentary panic. A sudden sense of all the other deadly barriers ahead left him shuddering and numb.

"Good luck, Thanel"

He was glad to hear Steadman's voice, because it broke his dread. He moved his hand, in a silent signal. He heard something click inside the polarizer, and the Ring was gone. Air-pressure, like a tremendous fist, knocked him—Outside!

Dazedly, Thane got back his breath and stumbled to his feet. Heavy in the suit, he shuffled toward the platform. The Ring was there again, and he collided with its unseen wall.

Steadman and the engineers came out of the foxhole. He could see them speaking, but no sound came through. For a moment he was crushed beneath a painful loneliness. He fumbled for the controls on the front of his suit and snapped on the radio receiver. A blare of American dance music lifted his spirits.

He set up the motorcycle and mounted it stiffly. With a last wave to Captain Steadman and the engineers, he turned down the first barren slope of the abyss that had been the Atlantic. Now at last he was on his own.

His first destination was the nearest known outpost of New Europa, "Point Fury" on Clayton's charts, nearly three hundred miles from the Ring. That was thought to be the base that Clayton had called from the rocket, to report his attack on the Ring generator, but Thane had no map to show the traps and hazards that would be waiting for him there.

The low coral island became a flattened hill looming out of the dark behind him, and the watching men were lost. The air under the Ring made a strange misty blur across the western horizon, but the stars Outside filled the rest of the sky with a splendid burning frost.

The electric vehicle ran soundlessly, here beyond the air. Its headlamp made a scurrying little patch of frightened light beneath the overwhelming dark. Under its wheels, age-dried weed crumbled to noiseless dust. Empty shells dissolved into powder.

Thane inched up the speed and began taking chances on the bumps. Elation mounted in him. This was what he had dreamed about, since the day he first saw the Ring. His heart began to pound. He crouched lower in the saddle of the jolting motorcycle and his thick gloves tightened on the handlebars. He jumped a black pit in the dry sea-floor, and careered around a boulder. He piled up in the next hole.

Drunkenly he struggled to his feet. He felt hot, fevered. A warning thought came dimly: he was breathing too much oxygen. He adjusted the valves, and sanity came slowly back. Once more he perceived all the sobering perils ahead. He closed the valves a little farther. A few pounds of oxygen might be the price of life itself, before he reached Point Fury.

He set up the motorcycle. Except for a few bent spokes in the front wheel, it seemed uninjured. He mounted again and rode on down, more slowly now, into the sea's empty bed.

Later, he lost his count of the days. He lived and struggled from moment to moment. He had a job to do and he was trying to do it. The time no longer mattered. The sky was always dark. No matter how strange the wastes of black-fissured sea-mud about him, or how wild the crags of uneroded mountains, he couldn't get lost.

He knew the direction of Point Fury. Always he could find it, by looking for some familiar group of stars. That was all he had to do—just follow the stars down into the empty sea.

It didn't matter how his body ached from effort, or how the pressure of the heavy suit chafed him, or how stale the

air became, or how the numbing drunkenness of weariness begged for him to stop. There was nothing to do but go on.

He never knew how long it took him to climb that last black volcanic range, which once the sea had drowned. Rugged precipices opposed him. Sharp lava tripped and impeded him. Recklessly he opened the valves to give himself a new spurt of energy.

It was close to sunset when he came to the summit of the range. Hopefully he looked beyond the cragged pass. According to Clayton's maps, Point Fury ought to be in sight from here, on the crown of another range sixty miles beyond.

From his feet, the shadows fell. They made chasms of frigid midnight. Half-afraid to look, he let his eyes range farther. Past the black, ragged shadow of the range lay another desert plain, vaster than any he had crossed. Another wall of stark hills broke it, mile on mile beyond.

There was no gleaming dome, no moving rocket, no work of man.

Wearily he sat down on a rugged jut of lava. Once, sometime in the blur of the past, he had seen some rusted steel plates. They must have been part of a ship sunk long before the dwarf tore the oceans away. But that was the only hint that men had ever been Outside before him.

A dull despair began to chill him. Would he ever find New Europa? He began to fumble with the radio dials, listening anxiously for any human voice. But his straining ears heard only the hiss and crackle and static.

The sun went down. Like a black tide of death, freezing shadows flowed up through the pass. Barry Thane shivered in the clumsy air suit and kept twisting the radio dials. Slowly the roar of the sun's interference faded out.

An hour later, the first voice came through. Harsh and guttural in the phones, it sounded as strange as a completely foreign language until he began remembering his hypnotic training.

" . . . Point Fury."

Another volley of static.

" . . . patrolling Barrier . . . no trace . . . dead by now . . ." The last phrase was clear. "Captain Baronov, contact off."

Thane reached to switch on his own radio transmitter, and abruptly checked his hand. Those voices were too strange. His hypnotic training had been too brief, and the clues in Clayton's tape-recorded notes too sketchy. He was suddenly afraid to call.

All that night he listened desperately for scraps of talk. Whispering huskily in the big helmet, he practised the harsh accent. He was still practising, after the rising sun had cut off radio transmission, when he began to notice his air turning stale in the suit.

His power supply was failing. All that day he lay motionless in the shade of a rock, hoarding his energy, staving off asphyxiation. A blinding headache struck him, and he felt miserably ill. Long before night came, he thought he had waited too long to call. Even the radio was almost dead, when at last the sun had set, so that he could turn it on.

"Calling Point Fury," he gasped feebly into the microphone. "Aldebaran calling." Aldebaran had apparently been Clayton's designation, in some communication code. "Calling . . ."

The swift reply startled him.

"Aldebaran, where are you?" The voice was faint in his dying receiver, but it had a crackle of excitement. "We've been searching—Rocket *Avenger* to Aldebaran! Can you give us your position?"

"*Friendship* lost," he panted. "I'm in suit—sixty miles west." He wasn't acting, when his voice began to wander incoherently. "Message from America. . . . Can't breathe . . . Power going . . ."

"Hang on, Aldebaran," rasped the phones. "We'll pick you up."

"Hurry!" gulped Thane. "Can't . . . breathe . . ."

He kept his headlight flashing into the east. Presently the blue glare of rockets grew and sank among the stars. The ship dropped a hundred yards from him, on silent ion-blasts that brushed rugged lava points with white incandescence.

The *Avenger* was larger than the *Friendship* and it carried no disguise to make it look like a harmless boulder. The sleek, tapered lines of its welded gray hull were honestly vicious and deadly. The glare of its jets had faded, but a searchlight speared him blindingly. Lights flashed from the opening valve at the base of the upright ship. Portable lights bobbed toward him across the lava.

SIX

MEN PULLED THANE upright. Harsh voices reached him faintly. He couldn't understand the dim sounds that came through the suit. He moved to show that he was still alive and then relaxed. They carried him through the valves of the rocket and took him out of the air suit. He breathed good air again. An elevator lifted him. He was put in a bed. A savage pressure smashed him against it and he knew the rocket was in flight. He heard voices.

"Captain Clayton, can you speak?"

Thane muttered something and let his eyes open blearily.

Men surrounded him. He assumed a vacant unseeing stare, yet he managed to see a good deal. These men—officers, doubtless, of the *Avenger*—wore brown uniforms with red stars on their sleeves. Did that mean they were members of the mysterious Scarlet Star party?

They began to hammer questions at him.

"What happened to you in America? Do you feel all right? What happened to the *Friendship*? Have the Americans any defenses, besides the Barrier? Will you advise Admiral Gluck to attack?"

Thane listened and muttered unintelligibly. They could think he was out of his head—which was still half true. Despite the impatient questions, they displayed respect. Clayton, he realized, must be fairly important.

At last the rocket thrust ceased. The ship swayed and was still. Thane knew they had landed. He tried to gather his resources. He didn't want the attention of doctors, who might too easily find the scars of his facial operations. He tried weakly to sit up in bed.

"Hello," he muttered. "So you picked me up, eh?"

He thought his accent wasn't bad and hoped that the real weakness of his voice would hide any flaws. A heavy man in brown stepped quickly to the side of his bed.

"Don't you know me, Clayton? Your old friend Baranov! Seems we were just in time."

"Thanks-Baranov!" Thane tried to assume Clayton's grin. "Guess I was-about finished. Where are we?"

The heavy man looked puzzled. "You've got to pull yourself together. We've just come down to Point Fury. Admiral Gluck has signaled me to take you aboard the *Nemesis*, to report at once. Can you stand?"

"I think so," mumbled Thane.

"Save your voice for the Admiral. You'll feel better when you get cleaned up."

Brown-uniformed orderlies supported him into a bathroom. The tiny spray of water was disconcerting, until he

remembered how precious water must be Outside. The shower awakened him to new awareness of the many perils ahead.

The stubble on his face was only a little too dark, but he was glad of the chance to shave with an odd-looking razor. He left the narrow coppery mustache. The mirror cheered him, for it gave back Clayton's reckless, green-eyed grin.

Barry Thane was appalled by the endless risks of this desperate game, yet this was just the sort of adventure that sharpened Clayton's enjoyment of life. It helped Thane to try to imagine that he was really the daring, hard-eyed fighting man whose face he wore.

The orderlies had laid out a brown uniform that fitted him fairly well. He transferred to its pockets Clayton's plastic wallet and the letter from the American Corporation Control Board to Atlantis Lee.

A central elevator dropped him and Captain Baranov to the base of the rocket. Orderlies helped them into air suits. They entered the valve, pumps throbbed, the outer gate clanged open. Thane had his first glimpse of Point Fury and shuddered in the heavy suit.

It was day again. The blinding sun had come back into the dark, changeless sky, above a rugged mountain wall that marched ink-black across the east. Point Fury was a roughly leveled plateau, dotted with low domes of gray metal. Upon it stood a rocket fleet.

The tapered gray cylinders stood on end, supported by angular landing stanchions. They glittered under the sun and cast long, stark, black shadows. They were like rows of shells in some old munitions factory, before the age of the Ring. They were like metal monuments in some fantastic graveyard of giants.

A cold hand of apprehension grasped Thane's heart. America had no weapon that could stop these evil machines from destroying the Ring generator, nor could hope to find one. And this, he grimly reminded himself, was only Point

Fury. For all he knew, there might be thirteen other fleets, or thirty. In the big helmet, he caught his breath. He simply could not fail!

An armored car was waiting at the air-lock. Thane and Baranov clambered in and it rolled away through a sinister forest of rockets. It jolted heavily on rocks, but there was no sound. The silence of the Outside became queerly oppressive.

The valves of the *Nemesis* opened for them and an elevator carried them up to the quarters of Admiral Gluck. Brown guards admitted them to a room hung with a barbaric display of weapons, ranging from curved wooden boomerangs to a duplicate of Clayton's paralysis gun.

"Well, Clayton!"

The sharp, impatient voice was oddly high, almost shrill. It came from a thin, little man standing behind a desk. As he made a queer stiff-armed salute with exaggerated mechanical precision, medals jingled on his brown breast.

Thane imitated the salute. So this was Admiral Gluck! He had shaggy iron-gray hair, bushy white brows over sharp, dark, hollow eyes, and a luxuriant yellow-stained mustache. His face was lean and stern, brown as his uniform.

"At ease, Captain." He sat down with a tinkle of medals. "Your report?"

Thane caught his breath and tried to remember all his hypnotic training. He let his lean body sag, yielding to the real exhaustion in him. He didn't try to keep his voice from sounding weak and hoarse.

"The *Friendship* safely entered the Barrier as ordered, sir. On a small island of the Florida Corporation, I captured a member of the American defense force, which they call the Ring Guard."

Admiral Gluck's bright, sunken eyes narrowed.

"What's wrong with your voice?" he shrilled impatiently. "I can hardly understand you."

Thane made a hoarse, apologetic little laugh.

"I'm sorry, sir. An air suit cold." That was a diagnosis he had overheard. "I'm afraid I've been practicing Americanese so long it's natural to me."

Gluck shrugged impatiently. "Get on."

"This American brought me down to a crash landing," Thane told him. "He used a hand weapon."

Gluck's mouth fell open, revealing yellow fangs.

"What hand weapon could destroy an armored rocket?" he blurted in amazement.

"It looked a little like a paralysis gun," Thane said. "It didn't make any beam that you could see, but metal crumbled. Hard steel turned to fine gray dust. I heard the weapon called a decoherer."

"D—decoherer, eh?" Gluck's voice stammered. His dark face turned darker with anger. "The pampered rats think they can defy the Scarlet Star, do they?" His tiny eyes glittered shrewdly. "How is the Barrier device protected?"

Thane shook his bronzed head and looked solemn.

"They call it the Ring generator," he said: "It is surrounded with hidden batteries of decoherers. Not hand machines, but powerful projectors that can send the beam two thousand miles, all the way to the—the Barrier."

That was almost a slip. Thane felt a little tingle of dread, but Gluck hadn't noticed. He pounded on the desk with a gnarled fist.

"The Scarlet Star will smash them yet!" he shrilled.

"Certainly it will, sir."

Gluck repeated that stiff-armed salute and Thane responded promptly.

"Get on," the General urged sharply. "How did you escape?"

"I didn't." Thane imitated Clayton's grin. He didn't feel a bit like grinning, but he knew that Glenn Clayton would have enjoyed this situation. "The Americans set me free!"

Gluck smiled grimly.

"So you tricked them?"

He let Clayton's laugh ring scornfully.

"They found the letter from Atlantis Lee and took it to their government." Thane attempted Clayton's most wolfish grin. "They sent me back with a message of peace!"

He showed the gray envelope addressed to Atlantis Lee.

"You know what it says?" Gluck demanded.

"The United Corporations are willing to establish friendly relations. They suggest an exchange of ambassadors. They are willing to set up a joint commission, to discuss exchanging water for our oil and uranium."

"Fat fools!" shrilled Gluck.

"They don't know the Scarlet Star!" Thane grinned, hoping that his hard brown face didn't show any of his alarmed bewilderment about what the Scarlet Star really was. He offered the envelope. "Do you want it, sir?"

"Deliver it," Gluck snapped impatiently. "Let your pretty friend play our game. Perhaps we should send an ambassador—to find a way for our bombers through these decoherers."

"Yes, sir," Thane said. "Yours orders, sir?"

Gluck's keen little eyes gave him a startled, stabbing look. Thane knew he had made a serious mistake. Clayton wouldn't have asked for orders. He grinned and tried to chuckle, to make a joke of it. But Gluck's dark face remained bleak and grim.

"The *Avenger* is ready to take you back to Churchill Dome tomorrow," he said. "You can present this message from the plutocratic Americans to Atlantis Lee. No doubt you will take time to rest from the hardships of your expedition."

The bushy eyebrows lifted knowingly.

"Thank you, sir," Thane replied, grinning more widely.

He made the stiff-armed salute once more, but he was both puzzled and alarmed. Evidently there was something

he didn't know about the relationship between Clayton and Gluck. Somehow he had blundered.

He was anxious to meet Atlantis Lee, even though that meeting might be the gravest test of his masquerade.

Thane was a little surprised at himself. This was the sort of bold adventure that would appeal to the reckless audacity of Captain Clayton, yet he really meant that grin himself. There was something haunting about that picture of Atlantis Lee.

Gluck's next words were a shock to him.

"I'm calling a general staff conference aboard the *Nemesis*. It will be necessary for you to give a detailed report of your expedition through the Barrier and to answer all questions about the defenses of America."

"Yes, sir."

Behind Clayton's hard face, Thane felt a chill of dread. Did this mean that the little admiral suspected? A grilling by men who doubtless knew the real Clayton would be a difficult test.

He might never see Atlantis Lee.

Whitehall's office, in the gray old Ring Guard Headquarters building, was suddenly still. Even the clock on the plain military bareness of the wall seemed to pause in its muffled ticking.

Dr. Della Rand tried to breathe again, struggled to move her frozen face, to speak. But she could only stare at the old general, who stood so precise and straight behind the military neatness of his desk. She had thought that he was kind, but now his air of stern decision terrified her.

The eerie howl of rocket-jets broke that painful silence. Dully she looked out through the window. Something that looked like a rugged brown boulder dropped toward the flying field, cushioned on hot blue flame. It settled to an easy landing and the shriek of jets was stilled.

"Clayton's machine," commented Whitehall. "The engineers are testing it today." He looked back at Della Rand and she saw the dark shadow of pain in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Dr. Rand. It's a long time since the death penalty has been necessary in civilized America, but that is the verdict. In such a case, involving the safety of the Ring, no appeal is allowed."

Della caught her breath with a little gasping sound.

"Perhaps he has to be killed." Her voice sounded false and choked and strange. "But why must I be the one to do it?"

Behind his stern military mask, the slight old Guardsman looked uncomfortable.

"Secrecy is necessary," he explained. "It is possible that the Outsiders have sent another spy into the ring to find out what became of Clayton. If the Outsiders learned that Clayton is dead, that would be the end of Lieutenant Thane's masquerade."

Della made a tiny nod of understanding.

"You are the only doctor who has been connected with the case," Whitehall went on. "I don't want to call in another. I am requesting you to administer euthanasia, for Clayton's sake. Of course you are free to refuse. In that case I'll call a firing squad for Clayton."

Her strong hands clenched.

"May I have time—time to think?"

He shook his head. "The sentence must be carried out at once. I've already sent for an ambulance to carry Clayton's body to the Ring City crematory. If you wish to refuse, just say so."

She tried to swallow the dry, harsh pain in her throat. With an effort, she shut Clayton's reckless green-eyed grin out of her mind. Her duty seemed clear. In a faint hoarse whisper, she said:

"I'll do it."

Whitehall smiled grave approval.

"When you get to the crematory," he add, "don't put Clayton's name on the death certifications. Designate him as John Doe, an enemy of the Ring. I'll notify the officials what to expect."

Walking across toward the white hospital building, she paused to stare at the *Friendship*. The testing crew was just coming out through the valve. They climbed into a waiting car and drove away.

Della felt a painful lump in her throat. Destructive as she knew that machine to be, it was still a symbol of soaring power. It stood for Clayton's hard strength. Now she was going to put him to a nameless death as an enemy of the Ring.

The ambulance startled her. It had come in under silent electric power, but its tires shrieked on the pavement as it stopped by the side door of the hospital. Two men carried a stretcher into the building, to wait for Clayton's body.

She hurried on. The morning sunlight was suddenly devoid of warmth. Her body felt numb and a little shiver shook her. The world wasn't quite real any longer. Her actions were stiff and mechanical.

She found her kit in the locker room downstairs. She went into the laboratory to mix crystal drops of instant death. With hands that were like skillful machines, no longer part of her, she filled the little needle.

The guards let her into Clayton's room. The thick vitroid windows gave a tantalizing view of the broad flying field, with the brown, jagged shape of the *Friendship* at the side of it. But they were stronger than steel plate. They needed no bars.

Clayton lay on a mattress on the floor. His hands were manacled in front of him. His ankles were fettered and a short length of chain secured them to a ring-bolt in the wall. The Ring Guard was taking no chances.

"Hello, beautiful."

The chains made a soft little jingle as Clayton sat up

on the mattress. He grinned at her. For the moment his eyes held only amusement. His voice was light and calm as ever.

Della merely stood there, the black kit clutched in her clammy hands. Her numb body ceased to exist. A darkness settled over the room. She couldn't see anything but Clayton's grinning face.

"Good-by," Clayton said. "It was nice of you to come."

She clung to his words and they steadied her. She breathed again. Sudden tears flooded her dry and aching eyes. Clayton knew that he was going to be killed and he wasn't afraid.

"What's the matter, beautiful?" he asked. "Aren't you going to speak to me?"

She couldn't speak. It was all that she could do to hold back hysteria. His eyes dropped from her face to the black bag in her tense hands.

"Oh," he said softly. "You're the executioner?"

Mute and ill, she nodded. Amazingly he grinned again. The chains tinkled as he made a cheerful shrug. His voice was softer than she had ever heard it.

"Don't let it get you down," he said. "I'd rather take the poison cup from you, beautiful, than any other girl I know."

Something happened to her then. The agony of that conflict in her mind became more terrible than she could endure. Clayton's reckless grin and that softness of his voice tipped a balance in her. The conflict was solved.

It wasn't an act of reason. Her tortured mind couldn't reason any longer. It had been a conflict of emotions. Now, while Clayton grinned, one emotion won the victory. The other, for the time, was simply blotted out.

Suddenly her purpose was clear. All the numbness left her. Her senses and her mind were sharper than they had ever been. In one lightning instant the plan was made. Her hands were quick and sure.

She opened the black case. Discarding the needle that she had already filled with quick and painless death, she filled another with something else.

Clayton watched her from the mattress on the floor.

"Quite a treat, beautiful," his hard voice mocked, "to see your own lovely hands stirring up the fatal dose."

But she thought that a change had come into his tone, for her alone to hear. It told her that he understood. It thanked her for what she was doing. It said that they were comrades now, boldly playing a desperate game.

"You're a cool one, beautiful." Admiration rang in his voice. "You're the kind I like." Cold steel tinkled as he waved her a kiss. "Good-by. I'm ready, when you are."

The new needle was filled with its imitation death. The few bright drops were mixed without research or tests. She realized that any error might have made them fatal, but she knew she had made no error.

General Whitehall was in the doorway, watching silently. Clayton, grinning, managed to slip his own sleeves up. He held out his arms to wait for the needle. It seemed to Della that they were steady as iron. Her quick hands were steady, too. She thrust the tiny point into the vein and drove the little piston home.

"Good-by, beautiful," Clayton murmured wearily.

The hard grin faded. Her heart swelled with tenderness when she saw the face of a tired, bewildered child. He went to sleep. The fetters jingled as he fell back on the mattress. Della put away the needle and found her stethoscope.

Clayton's heart fluttered and stopped. She gave the instrument to General Whitehall. He listened, then nodded at the guards. They removed the fetters. The men from the crematory came in, unrolled their stretcher on the floor, lifted Clayton's limp body upon it.

Della followed down the stairs to the waiting ambulance. That march seemed to take a thousand years. She

was afraid Clayton would stir too soon. The drug should keep his heart and breath slowed beyond detection for four or five minutes. After that—

"Thank you, Doctor." Whitehall's quiet voice startled her. "Remember about the certificate."

"Of course, General." She asked the ambulance driver, who was waiting by the open doors at the back of the vehicle: "May I ride to the crematory with you?"

"Sure, Doctor." He nodded at the cab. "Get in."

She walked slowly to the cab and climbed into the seat. The key, she saw, was in the lock. She knew she must look tense and pale. But if these men noticed, they must think it was because she had just killed a man, not because she hadn't killed him.

She watched them slide the stretcher into the vehicle behind her. Silently she slipped behind the wheel, turned the key. Her foot found the accelerator. She waited. She could scarcely breathe. Her heart paused. At last the doors were closed. The driver and the two others came around toward the cab.

"Hang on." She caught part of Whitehall's order to the guards. "See him into the furnace. We can't take—"

She stepped on the accelerator, hard. Tires screamed beneath the sudden drive of electric power. The ambulance lunged out of the startled group. A breathless shout faded away.

The ambulance turned on two wheels, jolted across the hospital lawn and burst through a white-painted wooden fence. Lurching and bouncing, it careered across the flying field toward the jagged, brown hull of the *Friendship*.

"Thanks, beautiful."

Clayton's hard voice was still breathless from the temporary effect of the drug. A little pale, he climbed up into the front seat beside her.

"Neat work!"

Swiftly searching the glove compartment, he found a

heavy automatic. They didn't need it and they had no time to use it.

Della didn't set the brakes until she was a few yards from the *Friendship*. Its steel hull finished the task of stopping the ambulance. Clayton had flung open the door of the cab. They stumbled toward the open airlock.

Guards were running across the field. Stray bullets had begun to ping on the rocket's steel hull, but in another second they were aboard. Clayton slammed the valve and ran to the controls.

"They've got armored cars," gasped Della. "Three of them—under tarpaulins in the hangars—with cannon."

"Don't worry, beautiful." Clayton raised his voice above the mounting scream of rockets. "We'll be a hundred miles high before they can get them uncovered. We'll smash the Ring generator before they know what has happened!"

SEVEN

IT SEEMED to Barry Thane that he spent a thousand hours at the long metal table in the wardroom of the *Nemesis*, surrounded with the brown-uniformed officers of Admiral Gluck's general staff. From his long trek across the dry sea-floor and the strain of his interview with Admiral Gluck, Thane was near the final brink of exhaustion. He didn't try to conceal that. It gave him some

excuse for not mentioning names, or promptly recognizing faces.

The questions came in battering volleys. It was easy enough to talk about America. The real danger was that he would display too much knowledge. To half the questions, he said he didn't know. To many, he told the truth. The more these men were interested in what he said, the less attention they would pay to himself. He didn't attempt to lie, except for insisting that the Ring generator was impregnably defended. At last they were done.

"Splendid work!" thick-jowled Baranov applauded. "The Scarlet Star will give you your due for this."

Thane felt a tiny shudder of dread. He didn't like Baranov's small, piglike eyes. Several of his questions had appeared faintly suspicious. Did Baranov mean that he knew, that Thane had somehow already betrayed the impersonation? But the thick-set Outsider seemed suddenly friendly.

"Shall we go back to the *Avenger*, Clayton? I can see you're all in. I think you'll need a bit of life when we get to Churchill Dome tomorrow—for her, eh?"

His elbow poked into Thane's ribs.

"That's right, Baranov."

Thane followed gratefully into the rocket's elevator. He *was* all in and he did want to be at his best tomorrow. His life and the fate of America might turn on what happened when he met Atlantis Lee. For all his apprehensions, he thought, the real Clayton himself couldn't have been more anxious for that meeting.

Back in his tiny room, aboard the *Avenger*, he took out her picture. Only, he reminded himself, that she was smiling for Clayton. The more she loved Clayton, the more likely she was to discover the masquerade and the more she would hate him when she did.

He put the picture away, and went to sleep.

The lurch and thrust of acceleration woke him. He knew that the *Avenger* had already taken flight for Churchill Dome. He put on the brown uniform and an orderly brought him breakfast—a large bowl of a sweetish yellow gruel.

The Outsiders must have few food animals, he knew, and probably only a limited variety of plants. Probably this mess was synthetic. It did have a faint sharp chemical taste. Such food was one more basis for envy of America, the paradise beyond the Barrier.

The elevator took him up to the control room in the nose of the rocket. Captain Baranov was not in evidence. The brown-shirted pilot nodded cheerfully from the intricate banks of controls.

"Hello, Clay," he called familiarly. "Want to spell me?"

Thane knew that he ought to reply with the pilot's name.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm not quite up to it today."

The pilot stared curiously.

"Something must have hit you pretty hard," he commented. "You aren't the old Iron Clayton."

Thane imitated Clayton's careless shrug.

"It was pretty tough." He tried to change the subject. "When do we get to Churchill Dome?"

"Five minutes late." Evidently he was supposed to know the schedule. The pilot smiled challengingly at him. "Unless you want to take the rod and make it up. Guess you're pretty anxious."

Thane nodded, assumed Clayton's green-eyed grin.

"Lucky guy"—the pilot looked sober and lowered his voice—"if the party lets you keep her!"

Thane didn't dare ask what he meant. He was a little sorry he had ventured up here. Any show of curiosity could give him away. He was glad when the pilot turned back to his instruments.

Thane looked out through the observation ports. The

view was both magnificent and appalling. Forgetful of the danger, he caught his breath in audible wonderment.

The rocket was at least a hundred miles high. It was early morning and long, inky shadows made the convex mountainous landscape appear almost as rugged as Earth's long-lost Moon, in pictures Thane had seen. The lateral thrust of the rockets altered his sense of down, so that the stark cragged surface of the planet seemed crazily tilted.

"You've changed, Clay." The pilot's cheerful voice alarmed him. "Staring at the scenery like a yellow cub! Atlantis has got into your blood, all right."

Thane shrugged and tried to grin Clayton's reckless grin. He was more and more certain that he would sooner or later betray himself.

Presently the rugged desert of the ocean floor tipped beneath them and swung vertiginously back. Thane knew that this was mid-flight. The rocket was reversed for deceleration. He moved to another view-port, to watch for the first glimpse of Churchill Dome.

"There she is!"

There was nothing that Thane could see, except new expanses of stark desolation, plain on plain of dried sea-mud, walled with range on cragged range of wild black-shadowed volcanic mountains. But the cheerful pilot nodded at the telescope beside him.

Through the lenses, Thane glimpsed the city. It stood on the end of a high, rugged, dark plateau. The gray-white metal that walled it against the Outside's grim hostility was probably some aluminum alloy. It was really more a flat disk than a dome. Several upright rockets stood on the level center of it. Grouped about it were a number of smaller domes. More rockets stood upon a long, dark rectangle.

He was startled by the pilot's cheery voice.

"Anybody'd think you had never been here."

Reluctantly Thane gave up the telescope. He decided he had better get out of here before he gave himself away.

"See you. I've got another report to write."

He returned to his stateroom. Blue-jowled Captain Baranov came in a few moments later and began to ask more questions about America. The pig-eyed officer seemed eager and friendly—altogether too eager and friendly. Thane tried not to show his relief when the *Avenger* landed.

The ship descended upon the flattened top of the low metal dome. Her wheels dropped after the landing stanchions had absorbed the shock and dock-hands in airsuits rolled her over a valve in the city's roof. Her bottom valve was sealed against the opening, so that the ship's elevator could drop into the city.

Thane stepped out of the little cage with Captain Baranov at his side. He mustn't seem to be too interested or astonished, yet his life might depend on what he could quickly see and understand.

The elevator had come down into a long space, like a covered wharf. Up and down it, other cages were rising and descending. There were piles of crates and bales and kegs and bright metal ingots. Sweaty men with silent electric trucks and cranes were moving cargo. Thane was a little surprised at these evidences of vigor and industrial efficiency. Churchill Dome didn't look like a city about to perish for want of a few gallons of water. Perhaps Clayton had been lying.

"Here she is, Clayton!"

It was Baranov's voice. Once again Thane thought he seemed too friendly. His small eyes seemed almost suspiciously watchful. In a moment, however, Thane forgot all his apprehensions—for he saw Atlantis Lee.

"Hello, Glenn."

The girl stopped in front of him. Her violet eyes smiled gravely. She was lovelier than the picture had hinted.

The sheer beauty of her set a pleasant ache throbbing in his heart. Then he was shaken with a black and bitter jealousy of Clayton.

She was speaking again. He could hardly hear the words. He knew that her voice was softly melodious, somehow quite free of the twangy harshness that seemed to characterize the English of New Europa.

"I'm glad that you came safely home," she said. "Do you have an answer from the Americans, Glenn?" Anxiety put tenseness in her voice and there was a cool note of scorn. "Or did the Scarlet Star let you deliver our message to America?"

Thane saw the hurt in her violet eyes. Desperately he broke the panic that chained him. He caught his breath and tried once more to imagine that he was the real Glenn Clayton. He tried to grin Clayton's reckless, green-eyed grin.

"You're so beautiful—"

Captain Baranov was standing near. His beady eyes were quickly watchful. Thane thought the heavy man had stiffened imperceptibly at the girl's mention of the Scarlet Star. But he tried not to wonder about that.

He did the thing he was certain that the real Glenn Clayton should have done. He swept the girl into his hard arms. His eager face brushed through her fragrant hair. He kissed her thirstily.

The next instant Thane knew that he had made a mistake.

The anti-aircraft batteries about the Ring generator and the Ring Guard Headquarters patterned the sky with bursts of white, but the escaping *Friendship* was far too swift for their range-finders. The howl of rockets faded as she came up through the stratosphere.

Della Rand's dark eyes looked into Clayton's reckless grin.

"There'll be no smashing the Ring generator!" Her voice was low and shaken. "I thought of that before I helped you get away. I knew that all the war heads had been unloaded from the *Friendship*. That was a safety precaution before the test flights began."

"Thanks, anyhow, beautiful."

Glenn Clayton locked the controls. He turned to Della Rand, his green eyes bright with elation. He took her in his hard arms and kissed her. Despite the monstrous alarm now awake in her, she liked the ruthless pressure of his lips.

"That doesn't matter," he told her. "In three hours we'll be back to Point Fury. They'll load new missiles there and we can leave word about Lieutenant Thane."

Della Rand thrust her lithe body out of his arms.

"Do you think I'll let you do that?" Her face had turned a little pale, but her dark eyes flashed. "Do you think I'll let you murder America?"

Clayton grinned. "What did you think you were doing, beautiful, when you set me free?"

"I didn't have time to think. I only knew I couldn't kill you." She stared at his brown face, bit her quivering lip. "Perhaps we could hide the ship somewhere. You can't go on with this insane attack against the Ring."

His face set grimly.

"The Scarlet Star doesn't owe America anything. The breaking of the Barrier will give us the water we need. That has been planned since the time when America was only an unpleasant legend. All our cities are built where they won't be flooded when your precious bit of ocean pours down."

Della Rand tried not to shudder.

"You owe something to one American," she reminded him. "You owe your life to me."

He gave her his green-eyed grin.

"Don't you worry, beautiful," he said. "I'm going to

pay that debt, personally, to you." His hard fingers caught her arm, drew her almost roughly to him. "This way."

She yielded to his kiss, found it queerly sweet, but already she was planning what she must do. It had been impossible for her to murder Clayton. It was equally impossible for her to let Clayton murder America.

"Thank you, darling," he whispered. "I'll never let you be sorry."

But she could see that his eyes remained alertly watchful. Perhaps she had the shadow of a chance, yet she knew it would not be easy.

When the wail of the rockets grew silent she realized they were above the restraining air. The sky was purple-black above and the gray misty convexity of America rotated beneath them. As Clayton took the controls again she moved away from him.

"Wait," he said. "Better stay where I can watch you."

The gun he had found in the ambulance was thrust in his belt. It made her a little ill to realize that he would use it unhesitatingly against her. She watched his brown, busy hands at the controls. He kept talking easily to her, as if they were at peace. But she knew that it was impossible to do anything now. She could only wait and hope for the chance to come.

She didn't know just when they crossed the Ring, but she saw that the misty Atlantic was sliding away behind them, cut off as if by a long, curved blade. Beneath was the barren mountain desert, where once the sea had flowed Outside.

Clayton seemed to relax. He grinned at her and began testing a new piece of equipment.

"We're through the Barrier. In half an hour we can signal Point Fury and tell them to send patrols to look for Thane."

Half an hour—still there was a chance.

"Kiss me, darling," Clayton said. "You'll never be sorry."

All her surgeon's strength and quickness flowed into the fingers that snatched the heavy automatic out of his belt. She didn't wait to threaten him, because no threat would have meant anything to Clayton. He would have used any delay to take the weapon back.

She fired instantly, yet her surgeon's skill was in control. She didn't want to kill him. No matter what he was, she would never want to do that. She tried to do nothing that her skill could not repair.

The gun made a frightful sound. It leaped in her hand and hot smoke stung her face. Clayton's hard body jerked to the bullet's impact. She felt a stab of pain, as if it had been her own flesh, but she clung to her purpose. She stepped away from Clayton before he could gather any strength. She sent a second bullet into the radio, so that it could never send out the message that would betray Barry Thane.

"You win, beautiful!"

Clayton's voice seemed to hold no anger, only admiration. The bullet had torn his side horribly. It must have gone deeper than she meant. Already blood was flowing, but Clayton's pale, tense face contrived to grin.

"Let me set her down," he whispered. "I can hold out for that."

He clung for a moment to the console, then lowered himself carefully into the big metal seat. Still deft, his fingers touched the controls. The ship spun and Della felt the crushing pressure of deceleration.

Already she was on her knees beside him, trying to stop the blood. That ruthless pressure made it difficult and multiplied the strain on his heart, but Clayton brought the rocket down.

It crashed with bruising, dazing force against the flank

of a dark volcanic summit that once the sea had flooded. The tough hull took the shock. There was no shriek of escaping air.

"Well, darling," Clayton breathed. "Here we are."

Consciousness flowed out with his leaking blood, but Della got him out of the seat. With a strength she had never known she possessed, she carried him back to the bunk. She found an emergency surgical kit and dressed the wound.

Clayton would live.

She wasn't sure the radio had been completely destroyed. She made sure. Then, with a heavy wrench, she smashed the polarizer. She battered all the delicate equipment around the rocket motors into shapeless scrap. She thought of the caterpillar tracks, and remember that they had not been replaced when the dismantled machine was put back together. She thought of escape equipment, but there had been only the air suit and motorcycle Thane had taken.

They were here to stay.

But the reactor was still running. It should last for months or even years, recycling the air, regenerating oxygen, even manufacturing food. She had made the machine an isolated island, where they were securely marooned.

She came back at last to where Clayton lay. All the reckless hardness had gone from his face. His monstrous purpose, to shatter the Ring and destroy America, seemed completely incredible now. Smiling a little, she softly smoothed his forehead.

After all, she had managed things well. It would have been difficult for them to hide in America. Here, she supposed, there would be little danger. On the crown of this rugged range, one more boulder would hardly be discovered. She forgot that she had been a busy surgeon. She let herself dream. The disguised hulk of the fallen

rocket was a tiny world, secure against invasion. She and the tall Outsider could find happiness here, of a sort.

Her dream ran on. If some catastrophe did overtake America, she and Clayton might survive. The breaking of the Ring would make a new sea in the dry valley below them. Perhaps the old ocean deeps would hold air enough so that they could breathe. In time they might emerge from the *Friendship*—a new Adam and another Eve.

Della bent and her lips brushed his gently.

"Thanks, beautiful."

His faint whisper shocked her. Searching the pale mask of his face, she told him what she had done.

"Do you really mind, Glenn?" she finished. "Do you mind so very much?"

"Don't you worry, beautiful." He tried to grin. "I didn't really need to get back. Your bold American spy will be taken care of without any help from me."

"What do you mean?" she whispered apprehensively.

"There's a man named Baranov who wants my place in the party," he explained. "I was playing him along until I could learn all about his plot." Clayton's pale lips smiled, as if deadly intrigue had been merely an exciting game. "Baranov, no doubt, will take care of Thane. It'll be a good joke on both of them."

Della Rand bit her lip.

"Oh, if I hadn't smashed the rockets—"

"But you did, beautiful." Clayton's bright eyes mocked her. "We're stuck here together. Thane might be on another planet, for all the warning you can give him." He grinned. "Do you mind—so very much?"

For answer, Della bent to kiss his pale lips lightly.

"Thanks, beautiful," he murmured.

He closed his eyes, thinking. When the time came to leave the *Friendship*, he could manage it. Some rocket would pass in sight of them. He wouldn't need the radio. A signal light would do. He smiled again, thinking what

would happen when Baranov discovered that he had murdered the wrong Clayton.

EIGHT

ON THAT BUSY WHARF under the roof of Churchill Dome, Atlantis Lee stiffened in Thane's embracing arms. Her lips were cold to his. They drew away and the red-haired Secretary of New Europa spoke quietly.

"Let me go, Glenn."

That was all she said, but the icy restraint of her voice seemed to cover something more than pain and anger. Her calm tone stung like a slap in the face. Thane released her and stepped back. He knew that the hard, brown features that Della Rand's surgery had given him, the living mask of Glenn Clayton, were flushed with an unwonted color of confusion. But he forgot to wonder what Clayton would have done.

"I—I'm sorry," he stammered. "Please—"

"It's a little late to be sorry now." Her voice was painful as a whip. "I could never understand you, Glenn. Certainly I'll never make an attempt again."

She stepped away from him, so that heavy pig-eyed Captain Baranov stood almost between them. Her face was cold as marble and her violet eyes were dark with the shadow of some old hurt. Thane couldn't understand Clayton, either. He was suddenly bewildered and angry

at whatever Clayton had done to make this girl despise him so. But that feeling didn't help. He had his masquerade to think about, his life and the safety of America.

"Sorry, beautiful." He tried to grin Clayton's hard, reckless grin. "You used to forgive me."

It hurt him to see the wrath on her face, yet he knew that Clayton would have enjoyed it and he kept grinning. Her red head jerked angrily. The smooth column of her throat pulsed as she swallowed. She tried visibly to smooth the pain and the anger away.

"Rage is becoming to you, beautiful," he commented lightly. "It sets a sparkle in your eyes."

"Please, Glenn!"

Her voice was low and grave. With one little nod she seemed to dismiss everything that had happened. Her violet eyes flashed with a proud humility. A painful lump came into Thane's throat. He wanted desperately to make peace, to get her forgiveness, to take away all her hurt. But he had to keep in character.

"Okay, beautiful." He tossed her the thick gray envelope that held America's offer of peace, of water in a fair exchange. It fell on the floor. He picked it up and gave it to her lazily. "This ought to make you happy."

He stood admiring the unconscious grace of her hands as she tore open the gray envelope and anxiously unfolded the heavy stiff letterhead of the American Corporation Control Board. Her violet eyes drank in the message. It did make her happy.

"Glenn, it's wonderful! I knew the Americans couldn't be as bad as you always claimed. I knew they would be generous, if we would just give them a chance." Tears brimmed in her eyes. "Glenn, I could kiss you!"

"Here I am," he said.

Amazingly she did kiss him. She laughed and her warm lips lightly brushed his cheek. He didn't dare take her in his arms again.

"Glenn, I could never understand you," she repeated, her bewildered eyes searching his face. "You knew—you must have known—what this letter said and still you brought it to me." Then a doubt was on her white face. "Or is this just another of your jokes?"

Thane forgot to grin.

"It isn't a joke," he said soberly.

"The Americans are really willing to be friendly?"

"Of course they are," he told her. "I think they would give us water to relieve our temporary distress, without any payment at all. But they do need oil and metals. Uranium and thorium particularly. They are anxious to open trade."

Beside him, Captain Baranov made an abrupt, angry movement. He said nothing, but his greasy face had a sullen look. Thane wished that Baranov hadn't heard, wondered what he wanted, what he was waiting for. The girl herself looked surprised.

"Do you mean that, Glenn? You aren't just trying to hurt me again?"

"Of course I mean it, beautiful." Remembering that he was Clayton, he grinned. "Did you think I was a green-eyed monster?"

"Maybe I did." She scanned his face again. He saw that the letter was trembling in her hands. "I can't believe it! Will you come to the League? Will you tell them that?"

She waited anxiously for his answer. At Thane's side, Captain Baranov cleared his throat. It was a noisy bark of warning. Thane hesitated. Didn't Baranov have anywhere to go? Another thought made him shiver. He didn't like the way Baranov clung to him. Now he thought he guessed the big man's purpose.

It had seemed a little odd that Admiral Gluck had been so willing to grant Thane two weeks' leave. His unexpected report about the decoherer must have precipitated

a crisis in the plans of the Scarlet Star party, whatever they were. It was a little strange that Clayton, the one man who knew the most about America, could be so readily spared—unless Admiral Gluck suspected something!

Thane tried not to shudder. Were they just giving him rope enough to hang himself? Was Baranov detailed to shadow him, to keep a record of all his slips and errors until the evidence was certain?

Slowly Thane turned back to Atlantis Lee. She was an ally. Besides, she was beautiful. It made his heart beat faster, just to look at her. He knew he loved her already. He wanted to tell her who he really was, yet he didn't dare. Perhaps she wanted peace with America, but still she was a citizen of New Europa. He wondered if she weren't, unconsciously and unwillingly, still in love with Glenn Clayton. She couldn't be expected to aid an American spy.

He would have to tell her that it was he who had captured Clayton, that he had left the prisoner under sentence of death. He was, in a way, responsible. He couldn't tell her.

"Will you come, Glenn?" she asked urgently again. "Will you speak to the League?"

"Sure beautiful." He grinned. "I'll tell them anything you like."

That wasn't what he wanted to say, but he had to keep in character. Within the limitations of his role, he was determined to do all he could to help the cause of peace. If trade were actually begun, before the only defense of America was found to be a lie, the disaster might be averted.

Atlantis gave him a long troubled look.

"The League will be meeting tomorrow," she said at last. "I know you've cut it down to nothing, but it still has some shadow of constitutional authority." Her shoulders stiffened defiantly under the green cloak. "I'll

take the risk of using it—if you will really come, Glenn?"

"I'll come," he promised her.

She smiled and took his hand. Her grasp was firm and cool and it made his heart beat faster. She started to leave, and then turned slowly back to him. Her eyes had a strange, haunted look.

"There's something else happening at the meeting," she told him. "One of the observatory men has asked permission to make what he calls a very important announcement. I don't know what it is, but I have heard some rumors."

"What sort of rumors?"

"I won't repeat them, but I think you should arrange to hear what he says." Her expression changed. "If the rumors are true, Glenn, I think his news ought to change all your plans."

She left him quickly, before he could ask what she meant.

Suddenly he was uncomfortably aware of Captain Baranov waiting beside him—waiting, he suspected, for him to make some fatal blunder. Thane didn't know what to do next. He didn't know where Clayton would stay in Churchill Dome. He didn't even know where the League would meet next day. Still Baranov waited, his piggy eyes watchful.

"Going my way?" Thane said desperately.

"All right." The blue-jowled face was a heavy mask that betrayed no thought. "If you have anything to drink at the apartment."

At least he knew now that Clayton had an apartment. It was cheering news, if Baranov would guide him to it. That would give him a chance to relax, if too many friends of Clayton's didn't unexpectedly turn up. After he got rid of Baranov, he ought to be able to learn a few things from Clayton's papers and effects.

"There ought to be something." He made a weary little gesture. "Glad to have you along, Baranov. I'm all in today."

"You aren't acting yourself," the heavy man agreed.

Again Thane tried not to shudder. He tried to hope that his apprehension had no base, but the double meaning in Baranov's words seemed ominously clear. Displaying a fatigue that was real enough felt, he let Baranov lead the way. Another elevator dropped them four levels. They stepped upon the moving floor of a corridor-street. At a corner they descended a stair, to another moving at right angles.

At last Baranov stepped off in front of a door and waited for Thane to open it. Thane had Clayton's ring of keys. Fortunately the second one he tried happened to fit, but he thought that Baranov's small animal eyes reflected new suspicion.

The apartment was larger and more luxurious than he had anticipated. There were half a dozen spacious rooms. The chill of metal walls was relieved with tapestries. Deep-piled rugs, perhaps of some mineral fiber, cover the floors. Thane didn't know where to look for a drink.

"Help yourself," he told Baranov, "to whatever you can find."

He dropped into a big chair, found he didn't have to simulate exhaustion. Baranov went into another room. Presently he came back with two tall glasses. He cleared his throat and said:

"Don't you think you're going a little too far?"

Thane blinked and prevented himself from shivering. He managed to keep his hand steady as he accepted the drink.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You'll find out tonight."

It sounded like a threat. Staring sullenly, Baranov

drained his glass and wiped his thick lips on the back of a hairy hand. He stamped out of the room. Puzzled and worried, Thane locked the door behind him.

Thane began an anxious search for information. In the bedroom were several pictures of women, all different, all with endearing inscriptions. That was hard to understand, when there had been Atlantis Lee.

He paused to try on some of Clayton's clothing. The garments didn't fit exactly. The Outsider had been slightly larger, taller and straighter. In far-off Ring City, making the plan, Thane had hardly thought of clothing. Now, when he was wondering what to wear when he spoke before the League tomorrow, the matter assumed an alarming importance.

The letters and other bits of metal film in a big desk revealed nothing new. Clayton must have hidden or destroyed every important document before he started on the adventure to America.

At last, behind a tapestry, Thane found a door of a concealed wall-safe. He caught his breath. Perhaps this held the evidence that would show Clayton's connection with the Scarlet Star, or something else equally revealing. But he was unable to open the combination lock. Tomorrow he would try to find a locksmith.

He settled down to study one of the odd metallic newspaper rolls. The advertising gave him names of streets and stores and resorts, lists and prices of commodities, a thousand items that he might desperately need to know.

A heavy knock interrupted him. Tense to face a new emergency, Thane laid aside the roll and magnifier and unlocked the door. Baranov thrust himself into the room, followed by four nervous men in brown. They all wore paralysis guns. Baranov's blue-jowled face was damp with perspiration.

"Sorry to disturb you." His voice was hoarse and uneasy. "Just a routine matter." His trembling hands pushed

out a rolled sheet of gray metal film. "If you'll just put the party seal on this warrant."

Thane blinked and gulped.

"The seal?" He caught himself and tried to conceal his astonishment. With narrowed eyes he surveyed the sweating men again. "For a routine matter, you all look pretty excited."

"We have information that Atlantis Lee is calling a special meeting of the League." Baranov's voice was flat and ominous. "She is plotting to deal secretly with our enemies in America."

"On the contrary," Thane said, "she told me about this meeting. I am going to attend it myself. What is that document?"

Baranov glared at him.

"This is a warrant for the arrest of Atlantis Lee, on suspicion of treason." The metal sheet rattled as he added: "The time has come for us to smash the last vestige of the League!"

Thane stepped forward.

"You knew I wouldn't put the seal to that!" He made his voice crack hard. "You knew I was going to speak to the League!"

Baranov flinched uneasily from his eyes.

"Let me tell you now," Thane rapped. "The extreme policies of the party are going to be changed. I have learned that the Americans are inclined to be friendly. We can get far more by peaceful trade than by war. I'll never order and never allow another attack on the Barrier!"

Baranov crumpled up the warrant and threw it on the floor.

"That's what we wanted to know." His voice was a tense, hurried croaking. "The aim of the Scarlet Star, from the very beginning, has been to destroy the Barrier.

It is as important to avenge ourselves on those who shut us Outside as it is to fill our own seas again."

His sweaty face made an uneasy grimace.

"I've been planning to get you, Clayton," he rasped, "ever since you beat me out of the leadership. But I never hoped you'd lay yourself so wide open. I used to think you were clever, but your time's up, traitor!"

NINE

DELLA RAND, aboard the *Friendship*, had fired the bullet with a surgeon's knowledge. After the disguised rocket fell upon that bleak volcanic summit, she had repaired Glenn Clayton's wound with a surgeon's careful skill. She couldn't fail. The tall Outsider's hard, green-eyed grin moved her with a feeling that was as strong as her love for America. Always she had risen to emergencies. A calm confidence ruled her hands. She had no fear of blunders.

The wound healed swiftly. Sooner than she had expected, Clayton was able to leave his bunk for tiny expeditions about the disabled machine. He showed no great concern about the smashed rocket motors.

"Well, beautiful, you're through," he complimented her. "You must like my company, taking such precautions as this!"

He put his arms around her and she was careful not to hurt his healing wound. She liked the harshness of the stubble on his chin. She closed her eyes and let herself dream again of the new Adam and another Eve.

Glenn Clayton let her dream. Now he had a role to play and a secret to keep. He was resolved to make no blunder. He kissed her, and presently they went on with the business of taking an inventory of the supplies aboard.

"The air machine manufactures carbohydrates," he told her. "With rationing enough to keep you slim, we can hold out two years, anyhow." His green eyes seemed warm and kind. "Like the prospect, beautiful?"

She did and she let him know it, for two years would be an eternity of paradise. There was scarcely any need to look beyond that time. But she let herself dream of a day when they might walk out of the rocket, to begin a new life somewhere.

Clayton let her go on dreaming. Della didn't object when he set up the telescope. The instrument was small. The perfect seeing in the airless Outside, together with its powerful system of electronic amplification, made large lenses or reflectors needless.

"Time here will hang heavy, beautiful," he said, "even for you and me. We must plan our lives in this little world of ours, keep doing things. Let's have a look at the stars."

Della didn't guess his purpose. She was eager to follow any interest of his, happy because he was accepting the situation with such apparent cheer. The control room in the nose of the helpless ship became their observatory.

Glenn Clayton proved to be an excellent astronomer. The Outsiders had lived for two centuries under perfect astronomical conditions. The catastrophe of the passing dwarf had given them a sharp, if rather apprehensive interest in the mysteries of illimitable space. Clayton, as she already knew, had a keen and ready mind.

The little round screen was black, or sometimes gray with dusty nebulae. Stars swam across it and seemed to come near or recede again as Clayton's fingers moved the controls. He was talking easily to Della, who sat beside him on the big chair's arm, about the wonders of the constellations they explored.

He started when he saw the object.

"You might as well have saved your bullet, beautiful." His lean face was haggard from the long effort. His hard voice had a gravity that was new, yet something made him grin sardonically. "That comet you see coming is going to smash the Barrier and your precious America, more completely than all our atomic missiles could have done."

She clutched at the big chair's arm for support.

"The Ring is strong!" she protested. "Strong enough to stop the heaviest meteors."

"This is more than a meteor, beautiful."

Tense and breathless, she waited for him to go on. Even now his hard voice rang lightly. It seemed to her that Clayton rejoiced in danger. She had never seen him afraid.

"It's more than a comet, too. It's round and solid and it doesn't have any tail. It's still so far away that I can't measure it accurately. And I still haven't been able to estimate its mass." His green eyes seemed maliciously gleeful. "But I can guess, darling!"

She tried twice, before her husky whisper came.

"What can you guess?"

"It is coming out of the same part of the sky where the dwarf disappeared, two hundred years ago, after it had stripped the air and the oceans off the Earth—"

"You think—" Della gulped. "You think it is the dwarf?"

"Why not?" he asked lightly. "It's the same size. It's coming from the same direction. Of course the old astronomers, two hundred years ago, said that it was going

on into space, never to return. But astronomy was pretty well disorganized by the time the dwarf had passed. Suppose they were mistaken? Its mass was only a fraction of the sun's. Suppose it was pulled into a long cometary orbit? Suppose that it is just now returning for a second visit? Anyhow, darling, that's my guess."

She stared at his brown, smiling face. She didn't know what to believe. Perhaps it was all a joke, or a ruse to get her to let him signal a ship.

"How close will it come this time?" her low voice asked.

"The aim seems to be improving." A shadow drowned the reckless glint of his eyes. "That's what I've been working on these past two nights." His bronze head made a grave little nod. "This time, sweetheart, the dwarf isn't going to miss us."

She stepped back a little and her voice went sharp.

"Glenn, is this a joke?"

He shook his head. "None of mine, anyhow, beautiful. If the forces that rule the cosmos have a sense of humor, it may be a joke to them, but that body is coming straight toward Earth's orbit. Collision is inevitable. There won't be much left."

T E N

IN CLAYTON'S APARTMENT, listening to Captain Baranov's harsh-voiced threat, Thane reached for the paralysis gun at

his hip. The two men behind him seized his arms before he could draw it.

Baranov scowled and turned to Thane. "Clayton, I'll give you a choice. Hand over the seal, without any tricks or fuss, and you can have a nice, easy death."

Thane had to swallow before he could trust his voice.

"And," he prompted, "what if I refuse?"

Baranov's cold eyes narrowed.

"We'll take you to the vacuum cell. That fits our plans much better, anyhow. It will appear in the records that you were tried by a party court and sentenced to the vacuum cell for treason. The cell isn't comfortable for a live man." His broad blue face was thrust forward. "What's your choice, Clayton?"

Thane shrugged. "I don't want to spoil your hunt for the seal." His borrowed voice rang light and clear, but he felt numb and cold and ill. His own words seemed to come from far away. "You'll have to take me to the cell."

Baranov's thick lips quivered with anger.

"Let's see you grin in the vacuum cell—with your own blood boiling out of your body!" The gaping muzzle of his weapon gestured at the door. "Get moving!"

Dimly Thane had hoped that the trip to the vacuum cell, wherever it was, would give him some opportunity to escape or call for aid. But Baranov's plot was too well organized for that. The moving pavement outside was stopped. Ropes were stretched across the corridor-street, at the ends of the block. Brown-clad guards were stationed there. Men in blue, with noisy pneumatic equipment, were making unnecessary repairs to the pavement.

Baranov's men rushed him across the corridor, into a convenient elevator. It dropped them through a darkened shaft. They emerged in a narrow passage, somewhere deep in the hive-like city, walled with plates of gray-painted steel.

For five minutes they pushed Thane along it, until a metal door stopped them. Baranov found a key and unlocked the massive door. Then he stopped Thane with a wave of his heavy hand.

"Still time, Clayton," he said. "An easy death, if you want to change your mind. Just tell me where the seal is."

Thane made his stiff face grin.

"You might try that safe," he said.

"Get insidel" Baranov jabbed him with the weapon. "We'll try the safe, all right. We're rid of you, whether we find the seal or not."

A kick sent Thane reeling into the cell.

"Last chance!" croaked Baranov.

As he thought Clayton might have done, Thane thumbed his nose. The airtight door closed with a heavy, muffled sound. The lock made a dull click. He was alone in the windowless cell. Dim blue light came through a heavy glass plate in the ceiling.

Thane looked around apprehensively. The metal walls and the metal floor were bare. The only thing to attract attention was a metal valve high in the opposite wall. That must be the outside wall of the dome-city. The valve was intended to let the air out of this death-chamber.

Barry Thane crossed the floor to examine it. It was two feet in diameter, large enough for his body to pass through, if it were open. But what would be the use of that? The whole Outside was a single lethal chamber.

Thane felt weak and ill. He sat down on the cold metal floor and wiped chill sweat off his face. He had failed. That realization was more painful than the danger to his life. Clayton had beaten him, after all, merely by keeping silent about the danger of Baranov's rivalry and his own unsuspected position in the party.

Where was the emblem of his secret power? Squatting on the floor, Thane began to wonder what Clayton would

have done with the seal. It kept him from thinking about what would happen when Baranov opened the valve.

Since it apparently had been the sole proof of his position, Clayton wasn't likely to have entrusted it to anyone else. Nor to have left it in such an obvious place as the safe in his apartment. The logical thing would have been to carry the seal on his person.

But Thane had searched the Outsider when he first captured him. There had been only the wallet that contained the picture of Atlantis Lee, and a few other trinkets, such as the platinum ring. Absently Thane turned the ring on his finger. He was certain, too, that the seal couldn't have been hidden aboard the *Friendship*, unless it had been cleverly disguised.

He caught his breath and stood up abruptly. With fingers that trembled a little, he slipped off the massive ring. He remembered Clayton's protest against giving it up. The plain platinum face of it was larger than the star-shaped impression of the seal.

With quivering fingers, he twisted at the ring. Nothing happened. Thane laughed harshly at his own momentary hope. Even if he found the seal, it would be no good to him—

His breath caught. The face of the ring had snapped up. It was merely a thin platinum cover. Beneath it was a star-shaped bit of dull black metal. He fumbled in his pockets for a scrap of metallic film and pressed the star-shaped die against it. The film turned hot in his fingers, and it came away glowing with that singular emblem of hot red on cold black that he had seen before.

He had the seal!

With a weary sigh Thane snapped down the metal cover and replaced the ring on his finger. It was no use to him now. He only hoped that Baranov wouldn't be clever enough to discover it, if they searched his body. He almost admired Clayton—

S-s-s-s-s!

Thane started and went cold at the sound of that thin, deadly hiss. He saw that the valve-gate was sliding slowly aside. The room felt cold and a mist of condensing moisture swirled like a ghostly shape under the blue light. The air was going out.

Baranov might open the valve slowly, to prolong his discomfort. That didn't matter greatly. The end would be the end. The seal was no use to him now. Then something happened to the valve. First there was a tapping. Then an explosion made a dull, muffled thump. The air was already nearly too tenuous to carry sound. The gate was ripped away and Thane saw stars in the dark sky Outside.

Whoof!

The air was gone.

Thane doubted that Baranov had been responsible for that explosion. Somebody else had caused it, but he had no time for riddles. He opened his mouth, threw back his head and exhaled swiftly, so that lungs and eardrums might escape rupture.

He fell toward the open valve. Dimly he knew that hands had grasped him. With all that was left of his strength, he kicked and squirmed and pushed.

He slipped through the valve. It came to him, with a sense of far dim wonder, that he was Outside—where no naked human animal could live.

Then he was in a white bed. Through small, heavy windows he could see a rocky landscape, glaring strangely bright under the Outside's ominous sky. Two or three miles away, he saw the flat city dome. He knew he was in one of the smaller structures, nearby.

He moved a little and Atlantis Lee came silently around the bed. A shaft of sunlight, as she passed it, turned her hair to sudden red glory. But her face looked tense and

white and her smile was grave.

"Feel better?"

Thane tried to speak. His throat felt as if iron hooks had torn it.

"Don't talk, if it hurts," she said. "You'll feel better in a few minutes. Dr. Wolf just looked you over. There's nothing a little rest won't fix."

He managed a faint, painful whisper.

"Thanks. It was you, who got me out?"

"With the help of some friends," she said.

"How did you know—"

A cough choked off his question and his throat burned again.

"Dr. Wolf left this for you." She held a glass of something to his lips. It had a sharp biting taste, but immediately he felt better. "We had a friend in touch with Baranov's plot. He learned about the warrant for my arrest and your refusal to sign it. We had planned the rescue beforehand—in case we had to save one of us."

"Us?" whispered Thane.

"There's just a handful of us," she said, "all that's left of the old democratic opposition. We've kept together a little underground organization, hoping somehow to prevent the destruction of the Barrier and bring peace between New Europa and America."

"Where are we?" Thane inquired, looking across the dead miles to Churchill Dome.

"Lee Observatory," she said, her eyes watchful.

"Thanks, beautiful." Thane remember he was Glenn Clayton and tried to grin. His throat felt slightly better. "Nice of you to help an old enemy."

"Don't be an idiot!" She came close to the bed and her worried eyes looked down at him. "If you feel able to talk, tell me who you are."

Thane tried not to look astonished.

"Could you forget me, darling?"

"I haven't forgotten Clayton." She spoke as if she wished she could. "You do look the part—almost. But you just don't know the lines. You've made half a dozen blunders. The worst one was getting caught by Baranov. Clayton had been watching Baranov set his trap for two years, planning to catch Baranov himself in it, whenever it was sprung." She glanced at the window. "Clayton wouldn't have had to ask where we are."

"All right," Thane yielded. But Clayton's green-eyed grin seemed natural now. "I'm Barry Thane, American. We caught Clayton before he could smash the Barrier. I came out in his place."

"That was foolish." Her grave eyes smiled again. "But I like you for it."

Thane watched her face.

"Don't you want to know what happened to him?" He had to catch his breath before he could go on. "It was I who captured him. When I left, he was awaiting death for murder."

For a long period she looked past him. Then her red head shook slightly.

"It would have mattered once," she said softly, "but things have changed."

Thane felt very much relieved.

"I'm glad," he told her huskily. "I thought you might—well, feel bitter at me. You see, he was carrying your picture."

"You thought that—and still you told me?" Suddenly she smiled. "I think you're all right, Barry Thane." Her white face turned grave again. "It's true that Glenn wanted me to marry him. There was a time when I might have agreed—if he hadn't insisted that I must join his conspiracies."

"But you didn't." Thane grinned gratefully. "Tell me

something," he whispered urgently. "The Scarlet Star—what's it all about? What's behind this insane hatred of America?"

"No wonder Baranov won, if you didn't know that." She smiled at him oddly. "You must have known you were taking suicidal chances. You're as bold as Clayton was."

He shook his head stiffly. "Clayton would have loved the game. I simply had no choice. About the Scarlet Star?"

"The party is older than your Barrier," she said. "It was fighting America, before the cataclysm. I don't know how it began. Your people should have more historical records—"

"The Reds!" Thane caught his breath. "One of their emblems was a red star!"

She nodded. "They're different now, no doubt. But some of the spacemen who came back to old Europa after the cataclysm were called Reds. They came from a place called Russia. Their rockets had ridden through the cataclysm. They brought machines and skills that helped keep survivors alive. But they had brought their twisted philosophy of hate, along with the useful things. They tried to conquer Europa, and failed. Their party was outlawed and suppressed. But they kept it alive, with the legend and the hatred of America."

"How—"

"They turned it into a diabolical political device. They blamed America for all the hardships and misfortunes of our lives. They brewed hatred, and used it to poison all who opposed them. Our democracy was strong enough to survive all their attacks, until the rediscovery of the Barrier gave them new fuel for jealousy. But they have rekindled the old hatred since, and used it to attack our opposition."

"I see," Thane whispered. "And you knew Clayton was their secret leader?"

"He told me, when he wanted me to marry him. Most of the party members were supposed to believe that he was only a trusted subordinate, but evidently Baranov discovered or guessed the truth."

Thane sat up in bed.

"What's the situation now?" he asked. "Baranov will be desperate when he finds out I was rescued. Now that he has shown his hand, he knows he'll have to win or die. Can he find me here?"

Anxiously he watched her face.

"Probably," she answered. "Most of the opposition exists among our scientists and engineers. The observatory has been our headquarters. Baranov will know where to look. A rocket took off from the city before sunrise. It's probably Baranov's *Avenger*."

Thane looked out again, across the dead miles to the city.

"What about weapons and defenses?" he pursued. "If Baranov's ship should attack, or his men on the ground, have we the weapons to hold them off?"

Atlantis shook her head.

"There are two dozen men of our group here at the observatory now—astronomers, engineers and members of the League council. Dr. France called them to an informal meeting here to tell them about a recent discovery of his. But we have no weapons. We can't hold out against the Scarlet Star. The extremist element has been wanting for years to wipe us out. Clayton restrained them only, I think, because of his old friendship for me. That was one of the arguments Baranov used in getting recruits for his plot."

She shrugged unhappily.

"I don't see what we can do," she concluded. "Baranov

and his extremists will doubtless order an attack on us at once. Admiral Gluck can destroy the observatory and all of us, with one nuclear war head.

"Admiral Gluck?" Thane repeated. "Is he in on the plot?"

"I don't think so. Our friends in the party are certain he knew nothing about it. He is loyal to the party. If orders come to him stamped with the party seal, he will obey them without question. Baranov will order him to attack the observatory and he will obey."

Thane grinned. He caught the girl's arms, pulled her to him and set a kiss on her startled face. His triumphant whoop was checked by the pain of his raw throat.

"Then we're all right, beautifull" he croaked breathlessly. He liked that word of Clayton's—for Atlantis Lee. "We'll just send an order to Admiral Gluck—and have Baranov and his gang taken care of for the traitors they are."

He slipped the massive ring off his finger, pressed the tiny stud to uncover the star-shaped die. He waved it under her eyes.

"There it is. I've still got the seal"

Her eyes failed to light with his own elation. The shadow of fear was still dark on her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Do you think they'll attack before we have time to reach Admiral Gluck?"

"That's possible," she admitted. "Baranov and his men must be desperate. They will do everything they can, without any delay. We may even be betrayed by others in the plot that we don't know of. But there's something else—the announcement I was telling you about."

Thane caught his breath.

"It must be bad news," he whispered. "You look so pale and anxious. Can't you tell me what it is?"

She shook her head. "I've promised not to talk. But you'll hear it soon enough, from Dr. France himself." She

added onimously, "When you've heard it, Baranov's plots won't matter so much."

ELEVEN

THANE was rapidly recovering from his ordeal Outside. Atlantis Lee wanted to take his arm, but he walked without her aid into the small lecture room, where a few dozen men were waiting for Dr. France's announcement.

Atlantis introduced him before they sat down.

"This is Captain Clayton, just back from America."

Quick hostility flashed on several faces.

"We don't want him here!" a spectacled man said angrily.

"Captain Clayton's viewpoint changed after his recent visit inside the Barrier," the girl said. "He is now one of us."

"That's right," Thane croaked painfully. "I'm going to use my influence to try to prevent any attack on America, or on any of you. But I have enemies in the party. Miss Lee just saved my life. There will be trouble."

A bearded man shook his head.

"You don't know how much trouble, Clayton, until you have listened to Dr. France."

An ominous, expectant silence settled over the room as a tall, gray-faced man came through a door behind the speaker's platform. He looked over the room with hollowed, preoccupied eyes.

"Dr. Reynard France," Atlantis breathed.

The tall man cleared his throat and his pale, nervous hands took metallic documents out of a brief-case. In a low voice, he began simply.

"Thank you for coming here. A few of you have received some hints about this discovery, but I waited, before making any formal announcement, until two of my associates had checked my work. The check has just been completed. There is no escape from the truth."

A breathless stir swept the room.

"Some months ago," the astronomer resumed, "we picked up a new object on plates taken of the southern sky. It was almost in the same position where the dwarf star disappeared, two hundred years ago. That made us suspect that it might be a mass of drifting ice, from the lost seas of Earth, returning as a comet. As it continued to approach, however, we found disturbing evidence that it could be no ordinary comet."

France paused to fumble with his notes. Somebody began to whisper excitedly, and somebody hissed impatiently for silence.

"We found that it has rings," France went calmly on, as if deliberately playing down the drama in his words. "Rings like those of Saturn. No ordinary comet has mass enough to hold such satellite bodies. We thought the dwarf star was coming back."

France smiled bleakly, over his spectacles.

"Some of you have no doubt heard rumors of that. We were very much alarmed, because our new observations also showed that the object is moving on a path that intersects the orbit of the Earth. Moreover, our computations indicate that it is going to reach the point of

intersection at the same time we do. That means collision!

"Fortunately, however, we were wrong about the dwarf."

France paused again, looking around the breathless room as if he secretly enjoyed the suspense.

"The old astronomers, two hundred years ago, stated that it would never return. Apparently they were correct. This body is now near enough so that it would be affecting the motions of the planets, if it had been the dwarf. We have observed no such effects."

"What is it?" somebody shouted at the rear of the room. "What's it going to do?"

France waved his notes for silence.

"It's the Moon," he said. "The Earth's former satellite. Evidently it is still a member of the solar system, even though the dwarf star pulled it into an elongated cometary orbit. Now, after two hundred years, it is returning to perihelion."

"But the Moon had no rings."

"The rings are debris from Earth," the astronomer said. "Fragments of ice, from our lost seas. And probably particles of frozen air. Recently the outline of the rings has dimmed with a faint haze. I believe the haze is due to the evaporation of frozen atmospheric gases."

"But what about the collision?"

"We've discovered no escape from that." France shook his head. "Even though the Moon is far less massive than the dwarf star, it's big enough. The impact will certainly destroy every trace of life on Earth." His bleak stare shifted to Thane. "Even in America."

Thane swayed to his feet, leaning on the desk in front of him.

"How much—" His raw throat stuck. "How much time have we?"

"About six weeks." Frances paused as if to make some

quick calculation. "To be more precise, about forty-one days and eighteen hours." His voice turned bitterly sardonic. "That should give you time enough, Captain Clayton, to complete the destruction of America."

A nervous titter broke the stunned silence in the room. "Forty-one days and eighteen hours," the bearded man whispered. "Forty-one days—"

He rose suddenly and bolted for the door, as if the little room had suddenly become a deadly trap.

Thane went swaying weakly down the aisle to the haggard astronomer.

"Things have changed, Dr. France," he rasped painfully. "Miss Lee will explain. I want to save America now. Isn't there something we can do?"

"What would you suggest?" The astronomer shrugged. "With a few years of time, it might have been possible to plant a colony on Mars or Venus. I see no hope at all for Earth."

He spread out the sheets of metallic film to show diagrams of the Moon on her altered orbit. He traced the path of the Earth, and explained his computations.

"There's nothing to be done," he concluded emphatically. "These forces are on the astronomical scale. They are far beyond the limits of any human effort. I understand that you are quite competent in your own special field, Captain Clayton, but you can't do much about the Moon."

"Perhaps I can't."

Others were waiting around the astronomer with impatient questions of their own. Thane stepped aside with the diagrams of doom. Atlantis Lee bent over them with him.

"Forgive Dr. France for digging you," she whispered. "He doesn't know you're an American. But he's our best astronomer. If he says we're licked, we very likely are—unless you Americans can help!"

"I doubt that America can do very much alone." Thane

looked up from the gray metal sheets, into her troubled eyes. "But I was just wondering—"

"Wondering what?"

"Dr. France says New Europa is helpless alone," he said slowly. "I'm afraid America is. But I was wondering what we both could do together."

Eagerness lighted her eyes.

"You have a plan?"

"Not yet." He glanced at the astronomical diagrams. "But I believe your rockets have a range of several million miles in space. Is that right?"

"I think so. Glenn used to talk about a flight to Mars—" She caught his arm with urgent fingers. "Tell me, Barry, have you found a way?"

"I don't know. Let me ask a question." He tried to swallow the pain in his throat, and called to the astronomer. "Dr. France, I've been studying your diagrams. Suppose the Moon could be cut off from all gravitational forces, a few weeks before the collision."

"If you want to play games, why not just suppose it doesn't exist?"

"Please, Dr. France," Atlantis said urgently. "Barr—" She checked herself. "Captain Clayton is serious."

France peered at Thane.

"I don't know how to intercept gravitational forces," he said. "But if you want the consequences of an impossible hypothesis: The Moon's path would straighten. It would pass on by the sun, outside the Earth's orbit."

"How far outside?"

"That depends on when you intend to place your impossible screen between the sun and the Moon." His voice turned faintly sardonic. "Will you tell us that?"

"Perhaps you can," Thane said. "How long would it take the rocket fleets of New Europa to move some of your biggest atomic power plants out to the Moon?"

"That might be done." He moved toward Thane suddenly, with a piercing intentness in his eyes. "Can you Americans cut off gravity?"

"There's a way," said Barry Thane. "If we can all work together—"

He was interrupted by a lean, freckled youth who came running into the room, waving a scrap of metal film and shouting, "Lan, where are you?"

"That's Tony," Atlantis informed Thane, "my brother. He's the one who helped me pull you out of the vacuum cell." She called, "What is it, Tony?"

Tony was breathing hard and he looked excited.

"I've been eavesdropping on the Scarlet Star." He put the metallic sheet in the girl's hands. "A radio message I picked up before sunrise. I just got it decoded. Read it, Lan!"

She read, aloud:

"'Urgent and confidential. Blood to Coral. Reporting new activity at opposition headquarters in Lee observatory. Dr. Reynard France spreading hostile propaganda through old League organization, with fantastic rumors of danger from space. Opposition has been joined by man claiming to be Captain Glenn Clayton. This person is obviously impostor, since he is not using party seal. Urge immediate attack on observatory, before this group can act. Blood to Coral, contact off.'"

"Blood is the code name for Captain Baranov," the panting boy explained. "The message came from his rocket, *Avenger*. It was received and acknowledged by Coral—that's Admiral Gluck, on the *Nemesis*."

Thane felt cold and weak, as if the stark chill of the Outside were still in his blood. This was a quicker blow than he had expected. His clammy hands clutched the edge of the battered lecture table. It was hard to think of anything to do.

"Can you take me to the radio?" he asked. "I want to talk to Admiral Gluck."

He knew he had to strike back, but it was hard to think of what to say.

"Sure, Captain," Tony Lee agreed. "We can try, but the sun is up now and radio won't reach very far. Baranov's message came just in time to reach the relay stations. Now the solar interference has shut down."

"We must try!" Thane insisted.

He followed the boy up a circular metal stairway into the communications turret. Evidently this was Tony Lee's domain, for the metal walls were decorated with model rockets. Observation ports looked out in very direction, upon dead black mountains that had never seen the sun until the dwarf came, upon the gray disk of the city and the smaller domes around it.

The boy twisted dials.

"Aldebaran to Corall" Thane gasped into the microphone. "Aldeb—"

The floor pitched and jerked. Shattering glass crashed somewhere. A great mushroom of fading fire grew up beside the observatory. Black fragments of rock hurtled out of it. Debris rang against the observatory dome.

The boy's eyes were still shining and he didn't seem afraid. He knew that his world had only days to live. Death clanged and rattled incessantly against the metal dome, yet his voice was low and calm.

"That was an atomic missile, Captain. The fleet must be somewhere above us now, but maybe they can't hear. The sun plays queer tricks with radio. . . ."

The hail of bomb splinters and rocky debris ceased. In the narrow little communications turret, above the observatory dome, Barry Thane turned to Atlantis Lee's red-haired brother.

"Try again, Tony."

Excited but unafraid, the boy went back to his dials.

"Aldebaran to Corall" Thane rasped hoarsely. "Aldebaran calling—"

Admiral Gluck's shrill voice startled him.

"Hello, Aldebaran." It rose and fell on a sea of hissing static. "Will you surrender the observatory and submit to a party trial on the charges of treason against you? Or do you want another and bigger bomb?"

Thane swallowed to clear his husky throat.

"I refuse to surrender," he rapped in Clayton's hard tones. "I am not a traitor. The real traitors are Baranov and his henchmen. I have let them show their hand."

Upon the roaring static, Gluck's sharp voice seemed uncertain.

"Can you explain your dealings with the enemies of the party?"

"I can explain whatever I like." Thane tried to speak curtly. "Send a ship to pick up a confidential message. It will be stamped with the party seal."

On the rushing static, Gluck's thin voice audibly faltered.

"The seal? But Baranov informed me—a ship will be sent at once, sir."

Atlantis Lee helped him compose the message and typed it on a sheet of gray metal foil. Thane stamped it with the singular die in Clayton's ring.

The attack on the Barrier must be abandoned. The fleet and all the resources of the Scarlet Star will be placed at Captain Clayton's disposal, for the task of averting disaster. With your own telescopes, you can confirm Dr. Reynard France's discovery that the Moon is coming back toward collision with Earth. When you have done that, come with your staff to the Lee Observatory.

A gray war rocket dropped on angular landing stanchions at the edge of the new bomb crater beside the observatory. Tony Lee, wearing an air suit and waving a black flag, carried the message to its valve.

A long hour passed. Thane talked a little to Atlantis Lee. She seemed as unfrightened as her brother. Thane suddenly knew that he loved her, but this was not the time to speak of love.

Two rockets dropped beside the observatory—Gluck's *Nemesis* and Baranov's *Avenger*. A dozen men came through the air lock, into the observatory. Thane met them. The fierce little admiral was tense and suspicious. Baranov's sullen face looked uneasy, defiant.

"You checked Dr. France's discovery?" asked Thane.

"There is a strange object in the south." Gluck's small, shrewd eyes were piercing. "But your behavior has been suspicious, Clayton. Grave charges have been made against you. I am here only because I am loyal to the party."

"Dr. France is waiting in the lecture room," Thane told him. "I want you to listen to him. Check his work all you like. Convince yourselves that the danger is real. Then we'll talk about what to do."

Scowling ferociously, Baranov pointed a thick finger at Thane. "Admiral, don't trust this man! This looks like a trap. Are you going to walk into it? This man's dealings with the known enemies of the party are obvious treason. Why don't you arrest him?"

The little admiral did not take his probing eyes off Thane.

"The Scarlet Star," he said, "commanded me to come here."

Baranov stepped forward, one hairy hand trembling near the gun at his hip. His broad face held a look of leering triumph.

"Admiral, look at this man!" his thick voice rasped. "Is he Captain Clayton? Is he our real leader? I have evidence

that he is not. When he came back from America, he didn't even know where Clayton lived."

A blunt finger jabbed.

"Look at him! You can see he's a different man. His hair is too dark and he's a little too small. See, Clayton's clothing doesn't quite fit. Look—" Baranov stepped closer and his voice grew harsh with excitement. "Look at the scars on his face. I hadn't noticed them before, but they are the scars of plastic surgery!" He drew his gun as he finished triumphantly. "This man is just a copy of Clayton!"

Thane grinned Clayton's hard grin.

"Better put up your gun," he advised Baranov. He turned to Gluck. "Admiral, I want you to listen to Dr. France. Then I have something to tell you."

"Wait, Admirall" yelped Baranov. "Are you going to allow this impostor—"

"The Scarlet Star's command!" Gluck shrilled. "Put up your gun."

An hour later, when they came out of France's lecture room, the little admiral and his staff looked shaken and pale. Even Baranov appeared subdued and his thick lips kept moving.

"Forty days!" he whispered. "Only forty days!"

With Clayton's hard voice, Thane rapped at Gluck.

"Admiral, you are convinced of the danger?"

The stern little man tugged at his yellow mustache.

"I am convinced." His thin voice was husky and quavering. "I have checked everything. It is more than a danger. It is a sentence of doom." Medals tinkled as he shrugged hopelessly. "What were you going to tell me, Captain? What can the party do?"

"Nothing alone," Thane said gravely. "But I believe that all of us, working together, have a chance." With a hard grin at Baranov, he confessed: "It's true that I'm not Captain Clayton!"

The shaken men merely stared at him.

"I'm Barry Thane, American." Before the officers' startled gaze, he slipped Clayton's ring from his finger and snapped the face open to show the black, star-shaped die. Baranov made a gasping sound, as if of rage and pain. Grinning at him, Thane gave the ring to Gluck.

"The seal," he told the astonished admiral. "I don't need it any longer. Will you keep it in trust for the party?"

A stern pride lit Gluck's thin old face. The suspicion vanished from his shrewd eyes. He put the ring on a gnarled finger of his right hand and looked dazedly at Thane.

"You are an American," he quavered hopefully. "You know the science that created the Barrier." He paused and his keen eyes probed Thane's. "Do you really know how to stop the Moon?"

"It can't be stopped," Thane admitted without hesitation. "But there is a way to turn it a little aside—if we can get there with the necessary equipment in time.

"How?" demanded the admiral.

"If sufficient power is used," Thane explained, "the anomaly in space created by a Ring generator can be made opaque to gravitation. We must set up a new Barrier around the Moon to cut it off from the sun's gravitation. That will change its path enough, if we can do it in time, to make it miss the Earth."

"But we have no generator," objected Gluck.

"There's a spare in America," Thane told him. "Remember, the war is over. It will take the united efforts of us all to avert destrucion. The Americans couldn't do anything alone. They haven't the ships to reach the Moon, or atomic power plants big enough to supply the tremendous energy that will be required. But America can supply the Ring generator."

Admiral Gluck tugged doubtfully at his yellow mustache. He wasn't used to the idea of Americans as allies.

Four days later the *Nemesis* landed at Ring City. Thane introduced the little admiral to General Whitehall. The

bulky crates that contained the parts of the spare generator were loaded without delay.

"The generaor wasn't designed for a gravitational shield," Whitehall warned Thane. "You will have to overload it about a hundred times. I don't know how long it will hold out—perhaps a few minutes, perhaps long enough. If we only had time to build another—"

But there was no time!

The *Nemesis* slid through the Ring again and lifted to join the rocket fleet already rising from New Europa with its heavy load of dismantled atomic power plants. Nine days out, the fleet met the white-ringed Moon. The rockets dropped in a great circle on an ice-crustcd lunar plain.

Barry Thane went out with the air-suited Ring Guard engineers and Dr. Reynard France, to begin surveying for the foundations of the new Ring generator. The dismantled power plants went slowly back together. Thick cables were unrolled to bring more power from the reactors in the circling ships.

At last, after endless days and sleepless nights, the job was done. Barry Thane stood watching, outside the air lock of the *Nemesis*. He saw the green flash of a signal cartridge exploding above the new generator, and he waited for something to happen.

But there was nothing.

He could imagine the mighty river of atomic energy pouring from all those reactors, but the dead airless emptiness brought him not even the click of a closing switch. He watched the sky, and saw no change. Beyond the bright pointed pillars of the standing rockets, and above the ice-armored peaks, the rings of the Moon made a fantastic triple rainbow, white as sunlit snow against the black of space. The Earth hung inside that blazing bow, gray and dead as the Moon itself, except for the sharp-edged circle of black water and living green land that was America. And nothing happened.

"The satellite ring!" The excited voice of Dr. France crashed suddenly from the speaker in his helmet. "Watch the satellite ring!"

Thane looked back at that splendid triple arch, and saw that it stood taller and wider against the dark.

"Our Barrier is functioning!" the astronomer was shouting. "The ice rings are expanding, because it has cut them off from the gravitation of the Moon."

"That's mighty fine." Thane recognized the voice of an American engineer. "Now comes the million-dollar question: How long can our overloaded generator stand the gaff?"

Days went by, and somehow the engineers kept the generator going. The Moon slipped out of the spreading spiral cloud that had been its triple ring. The naked gray Earth grew vast in the heavens, but Reynard France announced that the Moon would miss it safely—unless the generator failed.

T W E L V E

A MAN AND a woman, alone in a broken machine on the desert where the Atlantic had lain, were waiting for the end of the world. Under the woman's tender care, Clayton recovered from the wound that she had inflicted. He watched

the object creeping Earthward in the southern sky and found at last that it was Earth's lost satellite, ringed now with ice.

"So what?" Della Rand shrugged. "Will it make any difference?"

"Probably not," he admitted. "The Moon's big enough to smash the planet—Barrier and all. But I wish we could get out of here. Whenever I see the jets of a ship, I'm going to signal with the searchlight."

He watched her apprehensive start, grinning at her.

"Yes, beautiful, you slipped up," he told her. "You forgot to smash the searchlight."

"Can't you wait," she whispered bitterly, "for the Moon to kill America?"

Clayton laughed and put his arm around her.

"Forgive me, beautiful." His voice turned oddly gentle. "I can't really blame you for anything you think about me, but things are different now. You have made them different."

She turned to look into his face. He smiled at her—with a softness she had never seen in his greenish eyes. She waited, silent and bewildered in his arms.

"I remember reading something in an old book," he said softly. "In one of the precious old paper books that had been preserved through the cataclysm. Something about a gateway to paradise. I see now that we in the Scarlet Star party have been knocking a long time at the wrong gate. You've helped me find the right one, beautiful."

His hard arms drew her closer.

"That's why I want to get out, now," he said. "I don't suppose it will make much difference in the end, but I'd like to repair a little of the damage I have done. If I'm not too late, I'd like to warn Barry Thane about Baranov."

He laughed and the old hard glint came back into his eyes.

"Even if I am too late," he added, "even if Baranov has already sprung his trap, I'd like to see him face to face with the ghost of the man he murdered!"

"I wonder—" Della Rand shivered a little in his arms. "Have you really changed?"

They watched the night skies for rocket jets, but no jets passed. Clayton's hopes withered into a troubled wonder.

"Seems there are no more patrol flights," he said at last. "Gluck's fleet must have left Point Fury." He grinned at her suddenly. "I guess we'll see the end together after all, beautiful!"

"I'm glad," she whispered in his arms.

Night by night, they watched the Moon.

Beautiful and dreadful, in the snowy splendor of the triple ring, it grew on the telescope screen until the telescope was no longer necessary. They could see the shape of it through the small quartz windows, and to Della its shape was death.

Her dread was a kind of spreading numbness. She tried to find small housekeeping tasks to occupy her mind, but everything had lost its savor now. She was glad to be with Clayton yet her love had turned to fear of the moment when he and she would die. She was moving like a tired machine, when she heard him calling.

"Della, somebody's playing pranks!"

She dried her hands and walked woodenly to join him in the little pilot room.

"Look at the Moon!" She was dully aware of his breathless perplexity. "She's running out of her orbit—shedding her rings as she goes!"

Della shivered. Her dark eyes dilated, staring at him blankly. She clutched abruptly at her throat. The sudden pang of hope was more painful than despair had been.

"What do you mean?"

"Take a look—and tell me who repealed the law of gravity!"

She ran to one of the small quartz ports. There was the Moon, tiny-seeming but bright among the diamond stars. And there was its dazzling triple ring—slid curiously askew.

"Oh, Clayton!" She clung to his muscular arm. "What does it mean?"

"I'd like to know." All his old levity was gone. "If you really see what I saw, something is shoving the Moon a little off its orbit."

"Enough to make it miss us?"

He shrugged. "You guess, beautiful. Unless you can tell me who is doing the shoving, with what. A near miss, maybe, instead of a center shot. Too near to do us any good—if it passes within the critical distance."

"What's that?"

"Four radii," he said. "There's a theory that any planetary object passing so near will be broken up by tidal stresses. If that happens to the Moon, Earth will get a new ring of its own—and we'll be buried under miles of falling rock."

He turned to look at the Moon again.

Day by day it grew, blotting out the stars. Its lost rings slipped away, dissolving into a blinding spiral of ice. The ice and the Moon cast a cold gray glare on the fissured plains of dead sea-mud.

Della Rand tried not to look outside. She invented needless tasks to busy herself, in the small iron space that had become her home. But Clayton watched, grinning sometimes at her dread. It seemed to her that he found a kind of elation in the anticipation of cosmic cataclysm.

Once, near the end, she brought him a tray of food from the galley. She found him at the navigation desk, bent over some calculation, and she couldn't help looking outside.

It should have been day, but the swollen Moon had eclipsed the sun. It spread over most of the sky, a terrible jagged blot. Even around the edges of it, the sky was hidden by lurid streamers of swirling vapor.

Della shrank back, hiding her eyes.

"Take a good look, beautiful." Clayton grinned at her from the desk. "It's something you'll never see again. The Moon is passing us, within about three radii."

"And what will happen to us now?"

"I'd like to know." He frowned down at his computations, in perplexity. "Seems the Moon just doesn't give a damn about the law of gravity. She isn't breaking up. Evidently there are no tidal strains—or we'd feel quakes."

"Then—" She gasped for her breath. "Then we're safe?"

"Don't you know we're never safe?" His green eyes held the old reckless glint. "No matter what the Moon does, there's still the ice that was in those rings. It still seems subject to the law of gravity, and it's coming straight at us. I think we're going to have a hailstorm, beautiful." He swept her into his hard arms and kissed her. "A hailstorm like none there ever was before!"

They watched it. White chaos veiled the naked face of the departing Moon. Strange white plumes curled across the lurid sky, in fantastic slow motion. The rays of the returning sun picked out the first great masses of falling ice.

Clayton pointed, and Della clung to him. They watched a jagged ice asteroid strike a distant line of dead hills. The dry ocean floor shuddered from the impact. Steam exploded, rising in an enigmatic mushroom cloud. The shock waves reached them, and Della's forgotten tray crashed to the metal deck.

"What will it do?" She clung to Clayton, trembling. "To the Earth?" Her dark eyes searched his face desperately. "And to us?"

"Too soon to say, beautiful," he told her. "We'll have to wait and see."

The generator stood the gaff, long enough. The Moon had moved twenty radii beyond the critical distance, before it finally failed. The wandering Moon went on. The rocket fleet came home, carrying only the salvaged uranium from the abandoned power plants, to an Earth that was strange and splendid now with its own bright ring of recaptured ice.

The Earth herself, as the fleet drew near, looked even stranger. Her dead gray mountains were veiled again with a luminous haze. New lakes jeweled the uplands. A layer of white clouds floored the old Atlantic, hiding New Europa.

"That mist is more than water vapor," Reynard France told Thane. "The dwarf star must have swept most of the lost air of Earth, as well as the seas, into that ring around the Moon. I think we have recovered a useful fraction of it—"

He was interrupted by a flurry of excitement on the rocket. The watch officers had observed a signal light flashing from the bare sea-floor, a few hundred miles outside the Ring that still sheltered America. The rocket was landing to investigate.

The flashing searchlight guided them down to the rock-shaped hulk of the disguised rocket *Friendship*, lying on the shore of a new shallow sea. Della Rand and Glenn Clayton came outside, hand in hand, to greet their rescuers. They were breathing fast in the thin, recaptured air, but they needed no air suits.

Clayton met Thane with a hard, twisted grin.

"Well, Captain Clayton!" Clayton said. "I'd supposed you were dead. This spoils our game of Adam-and-Eve, but we're rather glad to see you." He gestured almost casually at the new sea beside them. "Maybe you can tell us what happened to help us dodge the Moon?"

Briefly, Thane told him.

"Congratulations!" His greenish eyes inspected Thane's borrowed features. "Seems you've been living up to the old Clayton name. And you may keep it if you like. I've found something else." He looked at the dark-eyed girl and the hardness went out of his grin. "We've found something else," he repeated softly. "I have found a gateway, and Della has found a dream."

Thane looked at Della's radiance.

"I'm glad," he said. "But I'm returning your name."

Two hours later the rocket dropped through the thinning cloud ceiling over Churchill Dome. Now the city stood upon the end of a long rugged headland. A new sea washed the bare black cliffs beneath it.

Thane heard Reynard France explaining why the ice-fall had done so little harm. Most of the fragments had been relatively small, and friction with the Earth's returning air had thawed them nearly all to briny rain.

The rocket landed on the level crown of the city dome. Thane hurried out of the air lock and pushed through the cheering crowd, looking for Atlantis Lee. The sky had cleared, and across it soared the white eternal arch of the ring around the Earth. He thought it really looked like a great gateway, into a fair future world. Beneath it, he found Atlantis waiting.