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**TERROR
OUT OF
SPACE**

by Dwight V. Swain



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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TERROR
OUT OF SPACE ***

**Somewhere in the void was a planet with a new
element that could transform men into supermen.
It was Boone's job to find that world—if he survived—**

The Terror Out Of Space

By Dwight V. Swain

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It was a good proposition, the way the lean, grey man from Associated Independents told it. He ticked off the points on his fingers:

"Ten thousand credits an Earth year, Boone, win or lose. Full command of the field force. Five per cent cut on the profits if you get a mekronal processing unit in production on one of the unassigned satellites ahead of the Cartel."

"Sorry, Terral." Again, Boone glanced at his chronox. "It's like I said. Any other time I might be interested. But right now I've got something else on my mind."

"Fifteen thousand, then. And ten per cent if you spot in more than one satellite." Terral leaned forward. "Hell, man, that's more than you can hope to make as a GX if you stay with the Cartel!"

Boone grinned, after a fashion. "Sorry."

The lean man pushed back abruptly and gulped down his drink. "Then it *is* the woman!" he accused. A spark of pale fire lighted behind the grey eyes. Even in the dimness of the thil-shop, Boone couldn't miss the tension. "Krobis shoves her in ahead of you, but you'd still throw away your future —"

Boone brought his own glass down on the tanach table top, just hard enough so that it clicked a curt, sharp period to the other's sentence. "And what makes that your business?"

For the moment Terral's narrow jaws seemed to widen at the hinges. His lips peeled back, as if he were about to say something raw and cutting. Then, reconsidering, he breathed in deep instead and slumped loose in his seat. The thin lips drew together in a crooked smile. "My business—? Nothing, Boone. Nothing at all."

"That's the way I see it, too." Boone got up. "Good night, Terral."

He strode on out, not bothering to shake hands or look back.

The night closed in upon him—the night, and the narrow street; the alien sounds and smells and stir of Gandor City. A cadet from the Federation fleet pushed past him, a moss-furred Callistan crustach perched on his shoulder.

Behind the cadet came two spask-masked berlon prospectors, up from the Hertzog fields, leading their lumbering flipper-tentacled coddob by a chain run through its gill-slits. The throb of the atmosphere compressors pressed in like a giant heartbeat, punctuated by the rattle of surface carriers, the shrill wail of tricol pipes. A sweetish, slightly nauseous scent of thes-wood flares and Martian paggod eddied from the doorway of a greasy-looking grill that placarded "Genuine Earth Meats—No Synthetics, No Alien Substitutes!"

Once more, Boone checked his chronox.

It was less than an hour till the end of the cycle now.

In spite of himself, Boone's belly tightened. Turning at the first intersection, he headed for the carrier station.

The IC flight was already on the line and waiting. He found a seat next to a dour-faced tech whose eye-whites showed green with mekronal infusion.

The carrier wheeled slowly forward into the lock that sealed off Gandor City's precious, bubble-pressured air supply from the bleak world outside. A moment later the lock's outer hatch opened. Climbing on its anti-gravitational beam—slowly, at first; then faster and faster—the carrier lanced out across the star-spangled black velvet of the Ganymedan sky.

The minutes dragged. Crag and peaks came and went below; then the dull grey wash of a cliff-bound sea of liquid gas. Off to the left, the sky took on a scarlet-purple tint, reflection of Jupiter's great Red Spot.

Down again, then. Down through another hatch, into another lock.

Its inner seal opened. The carrier swept into the bubble proper, settling onto the clean-swept ramp with its glaring forspark lights and the sign that said:

INTERPLANETARY CARTELS UNLIMITED
MEKRONAL PROCESSING DIVISION
GANYMEDAN ADVANCE BASE

Boone passed through the scanner unit; bared his ID plate for the guard.

"Back early, aren't you, Mister Boone?" The guard grinned. "Guess it makes a difference when you go alone. Though I will say that new job's a nice break for Miss Rey."

Boone nodded, not speaking.

"She goes out tonight, doesn't she?" The guard's face grew sober. "Hope she makes it o.k. That Titan run is no picnic—not with this monster business hitting half the ships. Bucking that kind of thing ain't my idea of a woman's job, no matter how high it rates nor how much it pays."

"She'll make it, all right."

"Sure." The guard's eyes shifted away from Boone's. "Sure, Mister Boone. She'll make it."

Boone passed on.

Inside the personnel compound, he looked at his chronox again.

Only half an hour now till Eileen was scheduled to grav-off.

Barely time for the job he had to do....

Turning in at his own quarters, he strode down the empty, echoing corridor to his room; closed the door behind him.

The nerve-gun lay in the top drawer, as always—sleek, grim, coldly lethal. Stiff-fingered, Boone checked the charge, then slid the weapon beneath his blouse and turned to go.

But Eileen's picture on the corner stand caught him ... held him.

Her picture, and the memories that went with it.

He picked it up; stared at it.

She was wearing her first uniform, with its student stripes, the silver comet Cartel insignia shining against the dark blue of the lapels. But even official tailoring and close-combed regulation hair-do couldn't hide her radiance. The blue eyes laughed with sheer love of living. Her lips showed soft and smiling, better styled for kisses than commands.

That was the Eileen Rey whom he remembered ... the Eileen of his own student unit days, the girl who'd climbed rank after rank beside him through

Interplanetary Cartels' service.

Till now....

He cursed Krobis under his breath, slapped the picture back, face down on the cabinet.

There was another guard at the gate to the Titan ramp. Boone bared his ID plate.

But the man made no move to step aside. "Sorry, Mister Boone."

"What—?"

"Mister Krobis' orders, sir. You are barred from the ramp till after the ship gravs off."

"Oh." For a long, long moment Boone stood very still. And then: "I see."

"He might still be at his office, sir. Maybe if you was to talk to him...."

"Thanks." Stiffly, Boone turned and walked back the way he'd come, past silent warehouses and noisy shops and rattling, rumbling surface carrier units.

Then he was in front of the blank-faced central administration building.

For the fraction of a second only, he hesitated. Then, turning in, he strode through the deserted passageways.

Krobis' office. Another guard. "Mister Krobis is busy, sir. He left orders that he wasn't to be disturbed till after the Titan ship gravs off."

Again, a long, long, moment of decision. Then, very gently, Boone repeated, "I want to see Krobis."

"I'm sorry, sir—"

Boone brought out the nerve-gun in one swift motion, leveled it at the man's belly. "Maybe you didn't understand."

The guard's eyes flicked from his face to the nerve-gun. "You're making a mistake, sir."

Boone kept the nerve-gun steady, ready. "You're probably right. But anyone who tries to stop me is going to get hurt."

"If that's the way you want it, sir...." The guard shrugged and stepped aside.

"No." Boone shook his head. "You're going in with me, friend. Ahead of me."

Wordless, the guard shrugged again and, turning, walked through the anteroom towards Krobis' door.

Boone spun the nerve-gun's impact dial down to the temporary paralysis level and fired.

The guard crumpled. Stepping across him, Boone tried the door handle.

It was locked.

Sucking in a quick breath, Boone kicked for the bolt with all his might.

The door burst open. He lunged into the office beyond.

It was a big room, with the desk set at the far end so that visitors would have plenty of time to lose self-confidence while they walked its length.

Martin Krobis specialized in tricks like that.

He leaped up as Boone came through the door—face stiff, nostrils flaring.

Then: "Boone—!"

"That's right." Boone heeled the door shut behind him. "You're a hard man to see these days, Krobis. This time I couldn't wait."

Krobis straightened slowly, a small, sharp-featured man with too-short legs. Twin spots of color came to mark his cheekbones, and his black eyes grew hard and shiny. "I don't believe I understand you, Boone."

Boone laughed, harsh and bitter. "You understand, all right." He strode forward. "That's why you gave orders to the guards to keep me away from you and off the ramp."

"So—?" This out of a thin-lipped, mask-like face.

"So Eileen Rey doesn't take the Titan run." Boone gestured with the gun. "Let's go, Krobis."

"You realize what you're doing, of course, Boone?" A raw, raging edge crept into Krobis' voice. "You know that this finishes you with IC? That as soon as my report goes in, it's the end of your career?"

Deliberately, Boone spun the nerve-gun's dial to the lethal output point. "Time's too short for talk, Krobis. We're going out to the ramp. You and me, together."

Again, Krobis' nostrils flared. His shoulders drew in. His head thrust a fraction forward.

Boone tightened his finger on the nerve-gun's trigger. "Try it, Krobis. Just try it."

Silence. Long, aching seconds of silence.

Then, slowly, Krobis' head came up. He made a business of smoothing his sleek black hair and came around the desk, walking with the peculiar, waddling stride that came of trying to stretch his too-short legs farther than they were meant to go.

He hadn't done quite a good enough job on his hairline, either, Boone noted. Tiny beads of sweat still showed at the roots.

"Well, Boone?" Krobis carved the words out of ice.

Stripping a coat from the rack, Boone draped it over his arm to hide the gun, then fell in at Krobis' left, not quite abreast him. In silence, they went through the anteroom where the stunned guard lay and on out of the administration building.

Again, the ramp gate loomed.

Low-voiced, Boone said, "I'm going aboard that Titan ship, Krobis. See that I get there if you want to live."

Krobis didn't answer. But his curt nod took them past the guard.

Ahead, the great sphere that was the Titan ship glinted under the forspark lights. The cargo hatches were already sealed. The last of the surface

carriers shuttled in and out like rumbling beetles through the shadows cast by the stubby tripod legs.

Boone herded Krobis to the loading shaft, into the lift; threw a tight grin at the man on duty. "How long?"

"Seven minutes, sir. We're right on schedule."

"Good enough."

The lift ground upward ... halted, finally, deep in the heart of the ship.

Boone prodded Krobis down the narrow, duroid corridor that led to the tech quarters. The card on the last door to the right said, "Miss Rey."

Boone knocked. The tension was almost unbearable now. His palms were slick. His belly quivered.

A latch-click. The door opened part way, framing Eileen's face.

Shoving Krobis ahead of him, Boone crowded her back into the cabin and shouldered shut the door.

She stared. "What—?"

Krobis spoke rapidly, caustically: "Boone's jealous of your new assignment, my dear. He doesn't want to let you go to Titan."

Eileen caught her breath. Her eyes flicked to Boone. "Fred—"

"You can believe that if you want to, Eileen." Boone quit trying to keep the anger, the tension, out of his own voice. "The main thing is, you're not going."

He could see the storm flare in her eyes. "Fred, you can't stop me!"

"Can't I?" Boone tossed the coat from his arm, baring the nerve-gun. "I've watched Krobis run through this big-boss act before, Eileen. He specializes in putting people under obligation. In your case, he knows how much your work means to you, so he'd like to maneuver things around to where you'll feel indebted to him for letting you prove your professional competency at the top level. Only this gun,"—he gestured with it—"says he's not going to get away with it."

The curves of Eileen's face changed to planes and hollows. A thin white anger-line drew about her mouth. "Fred, this is utterly absurd!"

And from Krobis: "Miss Rey happens to be one of the Cartel's best extraterrestrial biologists—"

Boone slashed in on him: "—And also, at the moment, she's a woman you want." He laughed—savagely, explosively. "A nice co-incidence, isn't it? You'd gamble her life on it—send her into a chunk of void where monsters materialize out of nowhere and two ships in three never come back. If she lives and cracks the nut, figures out how those nightmares get aboard our ships and why, mekronal production and your rating—with Eileen and IC both—go sky-high. If she dies, you chalk up another score for yourself as an ironclad Cartel man so set on his job that he doesn't know what sentiment means. Either way, Martin Krobis wins."

"Then you'd let this ship go out without a biologist?" Eileen's breath came fast and shallow. "You'd let the crew face the monsters with not even a fighting chance to win?"

Boone clipped his words: "Don't worry. There'll be a biologist aboard." And then: "You see—I'm going in your place."

"So—!" Face alight, Krobis turned to Eileen. "I was right, my dear! Boone's jealous, that's all—jealous of you, your ability, the chance I've given you to solve this problem!"

A tremor ran through Eileen. For an instant she swayed, her pale face a mask of mixed emotions.

Then, heedless of the nerve-gun, she clawed at Boone.

He stepped back fast; clubbed his left fist upward.

It caught her squarely on the point of the jaw. Her teeth clicked; her head snapped back. Already sagging, she reeled against the wall, then slid unconscious to the floor.

Krobis started to spin about.

Boone said tightly, "Come ahead, Krobis! Eileen I wouldn't burn. But you—it'd be a pleasure!"

Krobis froze in his tracks.

Boone shot a quick glance at his chronox. "Less than four minutes till grav-off. We'll have to hurry." He gestured with the nerve-gun barrel. "Get her up!"

"And if I won't?"

"Get her up I said!" Boone's voice rang savage with menace.

Krobis' eyes wavered. Squatting, he dragged Eileen's limp body round till he could slide an arm beneath her and heave her up onto his shoulder.

Boone closed in to help support her. "You know what to tell the man at the lift, Krobis: Miss Rey's suddenly been taken ill, so you're relieving her from duty and assigning me to take her place."

Black eyes as moulder, Krobis nodded.

"And in case you've got any sharp ideas—just remember no man alive can outrun a nerve charge...." Sliding his hand up under Eileen's service blouse to conceal his weapon, Boone jerked open the cabin door. In seconds, they had Eileen into the lift.

Then they were past the guard ... out on the ramp again ... into the black shadows on the far side of an emptied cargo carrier.

Boone stepped back while Krobis awkwardly lowered Eileen to the ramp. She moaned a little; that was all.

Barely two minutes till grav-time now, the chronox said.

Krobis straightened. "You'll never get away with this, Boone!" His voice was thick with hate.

"Because you'll stop the grav-off, you mean?" Boone spun the nerve-gun's dial back to the temporary paralysis level. "I've thought of that, too, Krobis."

He squeezed the trigger.

The other's eyes went blank and glassy. He slumped beside Eileen on the ramp.

Pivoting, Boone strode back to the ship.

The hatchmen were already gathering with their sealers. The hum of the converters rose in an all-pervasive drone.

Up in the tech quarters once more, Boone wryly slipped the card bearing Eileen's name from its bracket on the door and substituted his own. Then, going on into the cabin, he threw himself down at full length on the foamex bunk. He was tired, more tired than he could remember ever having been, with the utter weariness that comes of too much strain and tension.

A moment later the signal light above the door flashed red. Then a momentary shifting said that the sphere was off the ground and rising, riding its great beam of anti-gravitational force up from Ganymede's bleak surface.

So it was done. Eileen was safe at last and he, Fred Boone, was on his way to Titan.

Of course, there'd be charges waiting for him when he got back.

If he got back.

Only that could wait. That was still far off in the future.

He fell asleep that way ... a troubled sleep, full of mad, distorted dreams of Eileen and Krobis, and of monsters.

Then, all at once, he was awake again, sitting bolt upright in the bunk—sweat-drenched, fists clenched.

Dimly, confusedly, he sensed that some sound must have roused him.

In the same instant the sound came again—a knock, echoing over-loud in the cabin's stillness.

Stumbling from the bunk, Boone jerked open the door.

Eileen stood in the corridor outside, flanked by two guards with nerve-guns at the ready. A cold-eyed ship's officer waited behind them.

Boone stared—unable to speak, still not quite believing.

"I believe these are my quarters, Mister Boone," Eileen said. She was a picture of chill self-possession. Only a faint trace of color marked the place along her jaw where he had struck her.

"Eileen—!" he choked. "Eileen...."

"You're surprised, you mean?" Her voice stayed icy. "I thought you might be. It's just that you didn't hit me quite as hard as you thought you did. I was conscious again before you ever carried me out of this cabin. But you had a gun, so I let you take me off, then came back on again just behind you."

"I see," Boone nodded slowly. Of a sudden there was a churning weakness in his middle. "Then—Eileen—"

"Miss Rey," she corrected, voice still icy. And then: "You'll understand, of course, that I had no choice but to take this whole thing to the captain."

Again, Boone nodded. "Yes."

"To return to Ganymede once the locks were closed behind us would be an expensive undertaking. So we'll both go on to Titan. I'll serve as biologist for the run, in accordance with my orders. As for you"—she shrugged—"your status should be obvious."

"To you, maybe. Not to me."

"Then I'll clarify it." All at once her eyes, her face, mirrored bitter triumph. "You'll make the trip, Mister Boone, but you'll do it as a prisoner—under guard and confined to your quarters!"

CHAPTER TWO

The captain was a broad-bodied, heavy-shouldered man with the veined red nose and cheeks of a heavy drinker. The cold-eyed way he looked at Boone, low-lidded, told how he felt.

"Don't think I've turned you loose because I like you, Boone," he clipped. "I don't. But we're coming into Saturn's orbit, and that means we need a biologist on duty. Prisoner or not, you qualify, so you're elected."

Boone stared. "Miss Rey—"

"Her temperature hit 104 an hour ago."

A chill ran through Boone. "You mean—"

"That's right. Titan fever."

Boone caught his breath as the door swung open to admit a thin-faced young ensign. "Another down, Captain," the man reported grimly. "Verdov, converter crew."

"That makes four. Thank the good Lord we've got plenty of chandak extract." The captain hunched forward, his thick forearms heavy on the desk. "You see where it puts us, Boone. From here on in it's monster country; we'll pass Japetus any minute. So the quicker you check the ship, the better."

"Right." Dry-lipped, Boone pivoted and strode towards the door, gesturing to the ensign. "Come on."

The other nodded and fell in beside him. "Where do you want to start?"

"Top live cargo section."

Together they rode the lift to the highest level, then walked to the end of the "A" passage.

Boone kicked the hatch of the first bunker. "Open it up."

"Open it—?" The ensign's eyes widened. "You mean you're going to check inside, too?"

Boone nodded curtly. "That's right."

"Well, if you say so...." Frowning, the ensign broke the seal; swung back the hatch.

Cold air washed over them. Light glinted on the seven-foot synthice slabs stacked floor to ceiling, each casing a contract worker stiff in frozen sleep.

Narrow-eyed, Boone probed each nook and crevice with his light-rod, then stepped back. "All right. Let's have the next one."

The ensign slammed shut the hatch. He studied Boone curiously. "Just what are you looking for?"

Boone shrugged. "Monsters don't come out of nowhere; not really. My bet is that they get aboard our ships at the Titan base—in embryo, maybe, or as a virus. If we can spot one before it's grown to a full-scale nightmare, it may give us a hint as to how to beat them."

"But they say they're human, sometimes—"

"Maybe. But no man I know can appear and disappear at will, and so far we're the only humanoid race we've found anywhere in the system. Till I see more proof, I'll put my money on alien life-forms plus optical illusion."

"Oh." The ensign's brows drew together. He opened the next hatch.

Another blank.

It went on like that, section after section. They checked supply storage, power receptors, converters.

Still nothing.

In the control room, when they got there, Japetus was already fading from the visiscreen. Hyperion loomed ahead, a bead-like dot hovering in the shadow of the Rings.

Beyond it, dim and distant, lay Titan.

Titan, greatest satellite of Saturn, nearly half the size of Earth itself. Titan, that had given Man mekronal, the precious, mysterious catalyst that cut loose the human race from the need for the oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere of its homeland.

Titan, world of lost sphere-ships and phantasmic monsters.

Bleakly, Boone wondered if he'd ever reach it.

Or even if he did, would Eileen Rey live to see it with him? What were the odds against a woman struck down by Titan fever?

Those were questions without answers.

Weary, tight-lipped, he turned from the screen. "Nothing here. Let's try the crew quarters."

"Good enough." Once again, the ensign fell in beside him.

Overhead, the alarm bell clanged.

Boone went rigid; spun about as the com-box crackled, raw and ragged:
"Top level calling! There's something in "A" passage—something awful!
Get the biologist—Oh, my God—!"

A scream: the scream of a soul in torment.

The com-box went dead.

The ensign at his heels, Boone raced for the lift-shaft.

The top level, "A" passage. The lights at the far end were out.

Boone snatched the ensign's nerve-gun. Cat-footed, he moved forward.

Ahead, something shifted in the shadows. He became aware of a vague,
phosphorescent glow.

A whisper of sound. A floundering wallow of movement.

Raw-nerved, Boone flicked on his light-rod.

Its beam sprayed out across a creature like nothing ever seen before in earth
or heaven. A bulbous thing, a nightmare of pseudopodal horror.

But before he could fire, it began to change.

First it drew together, a bubbling mass like green calf-slobber shot with
blood. A rank stench of musty death curled to him from it.

Then, while he watched, a shape began to rise out of the slime; a shape—

He caught his breath. His blood froze.

It was a woman!

Now she stood erect and naked, shrouded from the hips down in the slime-
mass. Her hands caressed her high, proud breasts. She laughed and
stretched her arms out toward Boone.

In spite of himself, he took a dragging step forward. Then another, and another.

As from afar, the ensign's shout dinned in his ears. He half turned.

As one, woman and slime-mass lunged towards him. And now, incredibly, Boone saw that there were fangs beneath the laughing lips; that, like Medusa, the woman was crowned not with rippling hair, but writhing serpents.

He screamed as the voice on the com-box had screamed; blazed point-blank at the naked belly with his nerve-gun.

The soft flesh shimmered, darkened. Great scales took form. The smooth body distorted into the plated, cartilaginous torso of a dragon.

Boone hurled himself aside as its great horned head lanced forward. With all his might, he threw the nerve-gun into the yawning mouth.

The mighty jaws clamped down. The metal crumpled.

Behind Boone, thunder crashed in the passage. A fire-bolt from a blaster smashed into the monster.

Dragon and slime-mass alike exploded into spattering fragments. Half-stunned, Boone felt the ensign's fingers dig into his shoulders and drag him back towards the lift-shaft.

But he shook them off. "No. I've got to see—" Even as he spoke, he knew that the words were coming out an incoherent mumble.

He staggered back anyhow ... clawed amid the smoke and debris.

His hands came up green and stinking with viscous slime.

Numbly, he stared down at them. "Then—it was real—no optical illusion —"

"Real? Of course it was real!" This from the half-hysterical ensign. "I saw it all—the woman, the dragon! If I'd been two seconds later with the blaster, it would have got you!"

Boone slumped against the wall. "That thing—"

A muffled crash of sound from the lift-shaft cut in on him. Red lights flashed on the call-board.

"Third level—!" The ensign's voice rang raw with tension.

"Come on!" Boone lunged for the lift.

Together they plummeted downward ... stumbled out into a murky, smoke-eddy third level passage.

More slime, purple this time, and a man with a blaster.

Only he hadn't fired quite quick enough. He sprawled dead on the floor-plates, his chest torn wide open as if by talons.

Red lights were flashing all over the call-board now. Alarm bells jangled wildly.

The captain's voice rasped from the com-box: "All hands! Make for your closest emergency carrier and stand by to abandon ship! Central Control will blow all carriers clear in three minutes! Repeat, Central Control will blow all carriers clear in three minutes, so get aboard fast! All hands...."

Stiff-lipped, Boone stared up at the call-board. "Seven levels signalling! It's an attack in force, then...."

The ensign clutched his arm. "Let's go! There's a carrier at the end of the passage!"

Boone started to turn, then stopped short. "Eileen—!"

"What?"

"The other biologist—the girl with Titan fever."

"Let the medmen worry about her! They'll take her off if she's not too sick to move!"

"No!" Spasmodically, Boone jerked free. "We can't leave her!"

"But there's no time!"

"I can't help that." Boone shoved the other away. "You go ahead...."

The ensign threw him one last taut, frustrated glance, then wheeled and ran off down the passage towards the carrier lock. A score of steps he ran....

Only then, out of the murk, a primordial horror rose before him—a thing of tentacles and feelers massed about a hideous white skull-face.

It happened too fast for shouts or screaming. The ensign's head jerked back and sidewise. He tried to veer.

Too late. With a sound that came straight from hell, the skull-thing lurched forward. The tentacles engulfed him.

Convulsively, Boone clawed the blaster from the dead hands of the man beside the lift-shaft ... lanced a fire-bolt into the monster's leering face.

Face and monster vanished in a blaze of ear-shattering sound and blue-white flame.

Then the echoes died and Boone was alone again—shaking, retching. Of the ensign, no trace remained.

Numbly, Boone stumbled back into the lift and dropped it fullspeed down the shaft to the tenth level, the very heart of the great sphere-ship.

There was another monster waiting for him when he came out—a creature that looked for all the world like a huge, iridescent coffin whose lid came up to bare rows of razor-edged shark-teeth.

Raw-nerved, he blasted it to atoms; then, belly churning, waded through stench and putrescent fragments towards the tech quarters where Eileen lay.

As he did so, the ship rocked sharply.

For an instant Boone went rigid, then cursed aloud. That jolt—it could have been only the impact of the carriers' departure.

Now, truly, he was alone—alone in the void on a sphere of death, where nightmare monsters roamed lusting for his blood.

Alone with Eileen, perhaps. If she were still alive.

If....

He quickened his pace, moving along the corridor cold-eyed and wary, his finger taut on the blaster's trigger.

The last door to the right. A card that said, "Miss Rey."

Palm slick with sweat, Boone tried the handle.

The door was unlocked. He opened it a fraction.

A voice rose high and incoherent, ranting. The voice of delirium.

Boone stepped inside; flicked on the light.

Eileen lay in the bunk, held there by the broad straps of a safety pack. A flush-faced Eileen with wild, fever-blinded eyes. Her lips moved in ceaseless, garbled speech. Thin fingers tugged and twisted at the sheets as if it were not in them to be still.

A knot drew tight in Boone's midriff. Grimly, he studied the chart on the stand, then glanced at his chronox.

Time for more chandak extract.

Stiff-fingered, he prepared the aerojet; sprayed the precious drops into Eileen's jugular vein. Then, barring the door against invading monsters, he settled down to wait and hope.

The hours dragged by till he lost track, a blur of time broken only by the routine with the aerojet. Once he thought Eileen recognized him. Twice he fell asleep. A dozen times, in his mind's eye, the monsters came, only to fade away again as he fought his way up from the depths of his fatigue. Hunger, thirst—they were words only....

Then, the crash.

It threw him clear across the cabin, to land with stunning force against the farthest wall. The whole room hung tilted at a thirty-degree angle.

Dragging himself up, he clambered to the bunk.

Eileen's eyes were closed, her tongue and fingers still at last. To Boone, it seemed as if her forehead were less feverish—as if she might even be asleep.

But again, she might have slipped into a coma. In his own state, he couldn't be sure.

As for the crash, the room—Blinking, he looked around.

The cabin's angle was still the same. Thirty degrees, at least.

Only the room couldn't stay this way, tilted. Not with the sphere floating free in space. That was what the orientational gyroscopes were designed to prevent.

In the same instant, he caught the first faint whiff of ammonia.

A chill ran through him. Scrambling erect, he snatched up the blaster, fumbled open the door, and peered out into the corridor.

No monsters—but something worse. For here the ammonia-smell hung even stronger.

Dragging the door shut behind him, Boone half-ran, half-fell along the crazily-tilted passage to the administrative center at the ship's core.

The door to the medical office was locked. Cursing savagely, Boone drew back and to one side and fired a glancing bolt.

The door swung wide, the lock and half the panel shattered.

Inside, Boone pawed the supply chest into chaos, then turned to the wall cabinets.

A case of mekronal ampules stood on the first shelf.

Coughing as a new eddy of ammonia fumes curled round him, Boone snatched down the carton and an extra aerojet injector, then ran from the room and back along the passage to Eileen's cabin.

The air inside was a little better. Slamming shut the door, he tossed down the ampules and began wadding the first of Eileen's garments to come to hand into the wall vent.

A faint voice whispered, "Fred...."

Boone spun around. "Eileen—!"

She smiled, the pale wraith of a smile. But her eyes had lost their fever-wildness. Her cheeks were no longer quite so flushed.

"What's ... the matter, Fred?"

"Nothing. Nothing." Futilely, Boone groped for some convincing fable. "It's just—you've been down with Titan fever—"

"Don't ... lie to me, Fred. Please tell me." And then: "Were there ... monsters —?"

Of a sudden Boone could no longer face her. "Yes, there were monsters." He pivoted; stuffed more clothing into the air vent. "All hands took off in carriers. Now the ship's crashed—on Hyperion, maybe; someplace with an ammonia-and-methane atmosphere, anyhow. The plates must have sprung when we hit. The smudge outside is leaking in."

"Then—what—?"

Boone finished with the vent. Sliding down to the bunk, he tore open the mekronal case with unsteady fingers; drew out an ampule.

"We'll try it on mekronal," he answered in a voice gone flat in spite of him. "If we can last three hours till it takes effect, we still may make it."

He readied the injector and sprayed the ampule's contents into Eileen's bloodstream, then shot a second into his own.

The girl's hand touched his; held it. "I'm ... so tired...." Her eyes closed.

She slept.

Seconds dragging by, melding into minutes. The cabin growing uncomfortably warm, the air stale and stuffy.

A half-hour gone. Time for another ampule.

Again and again, Boone read the legend on the carton: *Mekronal is an unanalyzed catalyst derived from the skeletal structure of the non-carbon chemistry life-form Helgae found on Titan. When injected into the human bloodstream, it enables man to breathe all known atmospheres, regardless of content, without toxic effect. Dosage: One ampule every thirty minutes till three ampules have been injected. Repeat weekly until return to normal oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. Takes effect within approximately three hours after first injection though an additional one-hour safety factor is recommended.*

"Takes effect within approximately three hours after first injection...."

Three endless hours.

Or the other line—"Enables man to breathe all known atmospheres, regardless of content, without toxic effect."

Did that include carbon dioxide atmospheres like the one now forming in this cabin?

Bleakly, Boone wondered. He checked his chronox.

Time for the third injection.

Maybe it would be better to take no chances—move Eileen to a lower point, where the air was clearer.

Besides, the heat here by the bunk was becoming almost unbearable. Already, both of them were drenched with sweat.

Sweat! Heat—! Boone went rigid.

There shouldn't be any heat to speak of—not if they lay in a plate-sprung ship on Hyperion's frigid surface!

Then what—?

Boone could find no ready answer.

The air grew thicker, thicker. Eileen's breathing steadily became more labored.

Freeing her from the safety pack, Boone carried her to the room's lowest corner. She roused a little, then sank back once more, as if even consciousness had become an effort.

More seconds. More minutes.

Then, slowly, the pressure on Boone's lungs seemed to lift. Depression and weariness fell away. New energy flowed through him.

He dared a look at his chronox.

Three hours and seventeen minutes!

Of a sudden he was giddy with exaltation. He wanted to shout, to laugh and leap.

From the corner, Eileen whispered, "Fred, have we made it?"

Wordless, he stumbled to her.

Her eyes were open, cool and steady. The last flushed traces of fever had vanished.

"Eileen—!" he choked, "Eileen...." and strained her to him.

Then, because he could not trust his own emotions further, he rose and took up the blaster. "I'll go take a look around, get you something to eat."

The corridor outside was thick with the alien atmosphere. But though it stung his eyes a little, his lungs now accepted it without protest.

Watchful, wary of monsters, he made his way to the galleys and gathered up a sack of food, wolfing down a whole can of meat synthetic in the process.

Eileen was up and dressed when he returned. Grinning, he watched her eat with the eager hunger of the fever-famished.

When she had finished and he got up to leave again, she rose also. "Fred, I'm going with you."

He shook his head. "You're too weak. You need to take it easy."

"Please, Fred."

For an instant his eyes met hers and he knew again that now, as always, he never could deny her. "All right. Just for a little way."

Together, his arm about her, they left the cabin ... turned down the corridor that led to the nearest carrier lock.

The hatch hung free, sprung from its hinges. Bracing himself, Boone levered it open.

Eileen caught her breath. "Fred—!"

He twisted; stared out past her.

The sight that met his eyes set his senses reeling.

For here lay no frozen wastes, no icy crags and barrens.

Instead, a blaze of living color spread before him, kaleidoscopic in its brilliance. Huge flowers like none that he had ever seen carpeted the foreground in clumps of yellow, red, green, purple—every color of the rainbow. Strange trees stretched upward towards the shining blue vault of the sky, rustling and swaying in the gentle breeze.

"Fred—!" Eileen's hand rested on his shoulder. "Fred, it's beautiful!"

Her words broke the spell. "Beautiful? Yes, of course it is," Boone nodded, frowning. "But the question is, where are we? There's no planet like this anywhere in our whole solar system, so far as I know—"

He broke off; moved out into the carrier-cradle proper, where he could get a broader field of vision.

To the right, the flowerland stretched away to rolling hills that spread as far as he could see.

To the left—

He went rigid.

Beyond the flower-fields, strange, low domes rose—grey-silver domes whose very lines and curves bespoke an alien pattern. One atop the other they piled in a jumbled, sprawling mass like bubbles trapped in cooling lava. Boone could only guess how many miles of ground they covered.

Yet it was a scene of a kind he'd seen before, once, on microreels in IC's confidential archives.

Behind him, Eileen caught her breath. "Those things—Fred, are they buildings?"

"Buildings?" Boone hesitated; fumbled. "I don't know. I guess that you might call them that."

"You guess—? Then you recognize them!" Eileen's blue eyes were suddenly worry-shadowed. "Tell me, Fred. Don't hold back. Is something wrong? Where are we?"

For a long, long moment Boone stared away at the distant dome-pile. "No, nothing's wrong," he said at last. "Maybe it's even better luck than we could

hope for." And then: "But wherever we are, Eileen, one thing's for certain: That place is a Helgae city!"

CHAPTER III

It was a situation that held Boone tense, uneasy.

On the one hand, the Helgae domes loomed over the paradisaical flowerland where the sphere-ship lay in strange, silent menace.

On the other, aboard the globe, he could not but chill to the recollection of the monsters.

As for Eileen ... Boone wondered. She had said not a word about their earlier trouble—his desperation-born effort to keep her from making the Titan run; its sudden reversal and her triumph. Yet after the first moments of tenderness and relief at their own survival the clash hung like an invisible wall between them. Out of it, a reserve had come into being—a weighing of words, a wary watching.

Or was that only his imagination?

Regardless, they had to adjust to each other's presence; to work out some solution to their mutual problem.

Cautious exploration finally convinced him that the monsters had vanished from the ship as mysteriously as they'd come. It didn't surprise him; it had been the pattern in every such invasion—nightmare figures materializing out of the void to wreak chaos aboard the IC's Titan-bound craft, then disappearing again, back into whatever dark limbo they called home.

Too, the carrier towards which the dead ensign had been running when the monster seized him was still aboard; apparently the blast-charge had jammed its locks. So there was at least a slim chance for escape.

It was enough for Boone. He persuaded Eileen that, weak as she was, it would be best to stay in her cabin and eat and sleep and rest while they waited for night and stars that might give them some clue as to where they were.

For his own part, he moved from one empty carrier-cradle to another, studying the landscape and the sky.

The effort brought only bafflement. Here and there in the distance, great mountains towered. But always, the blue of the heavens seemed to chop off their highest peaks, as if the sky were a translucent ceiling that they pierced.

Nor could he find the sun, save as a vague, luminous glow that shifted slowly towards the far horizon.

Yet the astrogation microreels showed no satellite or planet short of Venus with an atmosphere thick enough to give such an effect.

Then, at last, the light began to fade. Eagerly, Boone waited for the stars.

Instead, a pitch-black night came down. Only in one tiny spot, almost directly over the fallen globe-ship, could he detect a spark of light.

Then it, too, vanished.

Boone cursed aloud.

But when, once again, he scanned the sky, the spark was back where it had been.

Or was it? Before, the glint had shone cold and blue. Now, it seemed to have a faint orange cast.

He settled down to watching it, as nearly without blinking as he could.

For a few minutes it grew brighter, then faded again till only ebon black remained.

Still Boone held his eyes on the place where it had been.

A dim, greenish glow, so pale he could not be sure that it was really there. Then a pin-prick of undeniable light.

Minutes, ticking by.

A rustle of movement. At his elbow, Eileen said, "Fred, that light—this black—I don't understand."

"I'm afraid I do." Boone rubbed the stiffness from his neck and quit trying to watch the spark above. "We've always thought of the outer worlds as

rock and ice. Where this one's concerned, we were wrong. There's ice, all right, but at least in places it's just a shell, with a warm pocket underneath."

He could hear Eileen's breath hiss in the darkness. "Then you mean—"

"Yes. We must have been crossing this planetoid's orbit when the crew abandoned ship. It's too small to have much gravity, but there was enough to pull us in. So we crashed through the ice-shell and landed here."

The girl's body touched his. He could feel her shiver. "Then those lights we see are the stars as they pass above the hole we made? We'll have to go through it again to get back into space?"

"That's right." Boone put his arm about her shoulders. "It shouldn't be too hard. I'm betting this is Hyperion—and that means we are close enough to jump to Titan, even in a carrier. We'll know for sure when it gets light again. I can check the time from sunset to sunrise against the tables that show how long it takes Hyperion to revolve on its axis."

"You make it seem so easy." Eileen sighed. "In a way, I'm not even sure I want to go."

"That has a nice sound." Boone held her closer.

But she twisted. "No. It—it isn't what you think, Fred."

Boone let his arm fall. He frowned into the darkness. "Then why—?"

"Can't you guess?" All at once the girl sounded weary; almost bitter. "There's going to be trouble, Fred. Trouble with Krobis. You know that."

"Oh."

"He won't forget what you did. He'll break you for it. And—and I won't like that."

"You ... won't like it?"

"You know I won't. You—you saved my life."

Boone could feel his muscles tensing. In spite of him, his voice came edged: "Then that's all that's bothering you? You just don't want to see me

get in trouble?"

"No, no!—Oh, I don't know!" Eileen's words were suddenly stumbling and uneven. "It's just that—well, you showed me something, Fred, when you tried to stop me. How you feel about me. How my work doesn't really matter to you."

"I see." Boone's mood turned raw and savage. "Maybe you even figure like Krobis pretended he did—that I was just jealous of your assignment when I barged into this business."

"Fred!" And then: "You're trying to hurt me, Fred. I hurt you, so now you want to pay me back."

He didn't answer.

A moment of silence. At last Eileen said, "I—I think I'll go to bed. I'm still awfully tired. That fever...."

Her voice trailed away. Then, after another moment, her shoes whispered on the cradle-plates.

Still Boone stared bleakly out into the darkness.

The whispering footsteps faded, died. He stood alone, in utter silence. Even the murmur of the breeze in the trees about the ship was stilled.

That stillness—it made him frown a little. It wasn't natural, somehow.

As a matter of fact, was anything natural in this weird, ice-shelled wonderland? Even the flowers lacked kinship with those he'd known on Earth.

Or did they?

It came to him in a flash that what he needed now was action. The night, the silence, the bitter disillusion—they'd rasped his nerves in a raw tension. Unless he cut it loose, something would snap.

The flowers, then, could serve as an outlet.

First, he'd get a light-rod....

Pivoting, he strode back along the carrier guides to the hatch ... started to step through.

From the other side came the hiss of a quick-drawn breath.

Boone froze. "Eileen...."

A tremulous laugh. "Fred, I came back. I—I was afraid."

"Oh." He made it curt. "I'm going out as soon as I can find a light."

"I've got one." A beam blazed in the black, half-blinding him. "You're going—out—?"

"Yes. Down onto the ground. I want a closer look at some of those flowers."

It was a belligerent statement, geared for more trouble. But Eileen's tone stayed almost humble: "Can I come with you?"

"If you want to." Boone took the light-rod and, with no further words, led the way down to the sphere-ship's lowest level and out through another carrier-cradle.

Just short of the mouth, he paused. Lowering himself carefully from the cradle-lip, he tested the ground.

It had the slightly spongy feel of thick carpeting, but there was no question but that it would hold his weight. Spraying the light out in a quick arc, he checked for other dangers—of just what sort he wasn't sure—and then helped Eileen down.

Already, he felt better; perhaps even a trifle chagrined at the emotions that had brought him here.

But it wasn't in him to show that now. Crossing to the nearest flower-clump, he spread the petals of a half-opened bud.

They were gigantic—three times the size of any he'd ever seen before. Within the corolla lay half-a-dozen concentric rings of thread-like, sharply differentiated tendrils.

He frowned; spoke half to himself: "Which are the stamens?"

"Or are there any?" Eileen slid a fingernail across the rippling tendrils. "Maybe this is a different kind of plant than we know—one based on six

sexes instead of two."

"Maybe." Still frowning, Boone picked another flower to study. Again, as earlier up in the carrier-cradle, he was acutely conscious of the blackness pressing in about them; the utter silence. It brought a queer prickling along his spine.

Eileen brushed against him. "Fred, why can't we let this wait till morning? After all, what do we know about this place, or the Helgae?" There was a tremor in her voice.

"The Helgae?" Stubbornly, Boone shrugged off his own mood. "If they could do anything to humans, they'd have done it when IC started operations out on Titan. As for this place—" He tilted the light-rod up to illuminate the ground ahead.

Its beam stopped short a bare six feet before them, cut off as completely as by a wall.

Eileen clutched his arm. "Fred—!"

Boone whipped the beam left.

Six feet it carried; no more.

Whirling, he pointed it back in the direction from which they had come, squarely at the sphere-ship.

But there was no ship; or if there was, the light-beam could not reach it.

Panic gripped Boone—the black, surging panic that roars up in a tidal wave when Man stands face to face with the unknown. Dimly, he knew that Eileen had swayed against him; that instinctively he'd thrown his arm about her. That was all.

Yet in spite of it, now, he forced himself into striding forward—one creaking step ... two ... three....

The light-beam shortened with each step.

The truth dawned on him, then: The beam stopped short as if cut off by a wall ... because, indeed, a wall had risen up before it!

A dull, translucent wall of silvery grey.

Numbly, he lanced the beam skyward.

There, too, it broke on the grey shell.

Boone's panic channeled into fury. He spun about; struck savagely at the barrier.

Blood spurted from split knuckles. The wall remained.

Twisting, he hurled his full weight against the barrier.

Again, it threw him back.

He straightened, then; swung round the light-rod, searching the shell for some flaw, some weakness.

He found none.

Beside him, Eileen was sobbing. "Fred, what's happened?"

"What's happened—?" Boone laughed, a harsh and bitter laugh. "We're trapped, Eileen; that's what: Trapped in a Helgae bubble like those domes we saw!"

Her tears died. She stared at him. "But the Helgae can't hurt humans—"

"They can't?" He threw out the query like a challenge. "What do we really know about it?"

"But—on Titan—"

"On Titan, we found what we thought was a dead or dying culture. No one's ever seen Helgae alive. Or maybe we have. They're a non-carbon chemistry life-form. The elemental blobs we figured for skeletal structure may actually be their version of organic matter. Our mekronal units could have been smashing the golden age of their civilization, for all we really know."

The girl's face blanched. "No! It can't be!"

"Why can't it?" Her opposition lashed Boone to new fierceness. "Man's never found a way to communicate with any other life-form—not even on our own home planet! We can't talk to ants or paramecium, let alone Martian torglors or Callistan crustachs. But we're egoists, so we've taken it for granted we're the only truly intelligent creatures. All over the system, we've moved in at will, taken what we wanted, because we had the power to

do it. But maybe the Helgae are different. Maybe, on their plane, they can think as well as we, or better. Do you think they won't react when the Cartel rips apart their cities and hauls them off by millions for the sake of the mekronal that can be extracted from their bodies?"

Eileen drew back. Her eyes distended. "You're mad, Fred! The Helgae—they'd strike back if they were alive or had the power to think!"

"Maybe they have. Maybe that's the origin of Titan fever, and the monsters that appear aboard our sphere-ships." Boone hammered on the shell that caged them. "Or would you like to deny this bubble, too? Whether it came down from above or grew up from below, it's here—and I, for one, can't break it!"

Eileen's lips were quivering. Her face averted. Her shoulders shook. "Fred—oh, Fred...."

Then she was crumpling. Barely in time, Boone caught her; held her.

What was there in him that made him strike out so at her? Jealousy, as Krobis said? Frustration at their plight here? A projection of the rage he felt towards himself for having been fool enough to leave the security of the sphere-ship to come out here in the black night without decent reason?

Or was it as some forgotten poet had said in a line of verse that he remembered—"For each man kills the thing he loves...."

He cursed aloud.

The night dragged on, with Boone cradling the girl in his arms. There were no more words between them.

Then pale light came, filtered and dim within the grey translucence of the bubble. Eileen roused, suddenly wild-eyed and rigid. "Fred—"

"Easy, girl. We're still inside the bubble." And then, to soothe her: "Don't worry. They wouldn't have taken the trouble to make us prisoners if they'd planned to kill us right away."

She didn't answer.

Wearily, Boone got up and started towards the shell's closest wall.

But as he did so, the ground seemed to come alive beneath his feet. Crackling and crumbling it tilted so sharply that he was pitched from his feet.

Then earth and flower-sod alike were sliding. Loose loam cascaded over Boone. Desperately, he tried to find Eileen amid the welter.

"Here, Fred! Behind you!"

Floundering, Boone craned to see her.

She stood close to the shell's wall, braced against it.

Then another tremor threw him flat; half-buried him.

Clawing, cursing, he wallowed towards the girl.

She darted forward in the same instant. Her hand locked on his. With a final effort he shook free of the clods and lurched panting to a place at the wall beside her.

Another jolt. Again the earth slipped from beneath his feet. Yet now, since he had the wall to brace him, the surge of movement did not fell him.

Then it dawned on him that the shell itself was sliding, sliding upwards!

It was Eileen who gave the answer: "Lean back, Fred! The bubble's rolling, that's all. The dirt keeps sliding forward." Strangely, her voice was steady now; calm, almost.

After that, there was no more time for talking. Faster and faster, the grey sphere careened onward, bumping and bouncing. A dozen times, one or the other of them fell. But as long as they held their places against the rear wall, the earth and clods spilled away from them, so that with sweat and scrambling they managed each time to regain their footing.

Then, at long last, the strange globe slowed and changed direction. The surface beneath it seemed smoother now, and the bubble moved in arcs and curves. Shadows fell across it. The light grew dim, then faded altogether.

More movement, through long lanes of utter darkness. Strange sounds, faint whispers in the stillness.

Then, abruptly, light again—a blaze of it, dazzling and incandescent.

The bubble halted.

A crash of silent thunder, more felt than heard.

Its impact pitched Boone and Eileen forward into the dirt. The globe split into segments like a quartered orange.

Half-stunned, they stared about.

It was a chamber such as Boone had never seen before—a great, bare bubble-room whose very walls radiated chill white light.

Lurching to his feet, he stumbled down from the tumbled earth.

Two steps he took. And then, incredibly, he could go no further, for out of nowhere, a new bubble, crystal clear and barely large enough for him to stand erect, had formed around him.

He spun about.

Like him, Eileen stood in a solitary global prison. Stiff-faced with fear, she gestured to him—helpless, hopeless.

He hammered at the shimmering wall in furious frenzy. But to no avail. The casing gave no more than had that of the cell in which he and Eileen had come.

His sphere began to move away from Eileen's, then. Like a huge ball it rolled, spinning out in an arc that carried it through some unseen exit that led from the chamber of chill white light.

Darkness again.

But only briefly, this time. Then, once more, the globe halted. New light came, a warm and golden glow.

Again, Boone peered forth.

Now he lay in a sort of amphitheatre, it seemed—a bubble joined on all sides by a thousand other, smaller bubbles.

Each lesser sphere held one of the Helgae.

Fascinated, Boone studied them through the clear walls of his cage; and never did man look on stranger creatures.

For their bodies were mottled, shapeless blobs—limbless, with no visible trace of sensory organs. They could as well have been lumps of mud or metal, for all that Boone could see.

Perhaps the men at the Titan base had been right. It outraged human reason even to dream that such things could have intelligent, independent life.

Only then an alien thought flashed through Boone's mind—a thought without meaning, couched in terms no mammalian brain could ever have defined.

Boone groped; floundered.

Another thought-tendrils reached him, even less translatable than the first. He felt an uneasiness, a twinge almost of conscience, as if this were a thing that duty demanded he should grasp.

But effort made no slightest difference. Though he strained till his temples throbbed, the concept remained beyond his powers to understand.

Shaking, he gripped his head between his hands.

Now the patterns came in dozens, hundreds. Boone's brain reeled under their impact. He staggered, cried out in helpless fury.

As swiftly as they had come, the alien intellects withdrew.

Weak, drenched with sweat, Boone slumped to the bottom of his sphere.

As he did so, the golden glow that bathed him changed to deepest purple.

Taut, eyes flickering, Boone watched and waited.

Slowly, a new sensation came.

This time, there was no alien thought-projection—if, indeed, it had been that which he had felt before.

Rather, now, the other minds were probing his own brain-cells—searching his cortex with tendrils a thousand times more delicate than Man's finest nerve-ends; wringing out his thoughts as one might squeeze water from a

sponge. There was a laying-bare of dreams dredged from the deep subconscious, a draining off of skills and knowledge.

And agony came with it—an agony that rose from soul, not body; a pain that seared beyond all human ken. Through a thousand years it stretched, that pain—a thousand years when seconds lasted eons.

Boone writhed and screamed. At least, he thought he did. For never, never, so long as he should live, could he be quite sure.

Yet he knew, somehow, that, lacking a universe of discourse, the things the Helgae sought most were still locked in his brain. Like him, they could not bridge the chasm that yawned between such different minds.

Then it was over and the glow of purple, too, was fading. The probing minds drew back their tendrils. Boone's sphere dissolved into a place of glorious, delirium-born darkness and he was falling ... falling....

CHAPTER IV

It was a wondrous world. He walked in halls of polished marble and looked out through colonnades across a bright blue sea. Gentle breezes carried flowers' perfumes to him. Wine warmed his throat. Music rippled in faint, nostalgic waves.

Yet he knew no joy, for loneliness ached dull underneath his breastbone. First listless, then feverish, he wandered in and out among the columns, ever seeking. Servitors brought rare foods, sun-blushing fruits, to tempt his palate; and there were women who pressed themselves upon him, seducing him with eye and voice and touch.

But he brushed by; he would have none of them. He saw the blue sea as a wasteland. The wine turned bitter in his mouth.

Then, suddenly, *she* was there, a fairy figure far off amid the towering pillars. With a glad cry, he ran towards her.

But she laughed and flitted away before him. And when he tried to follow, dusk came, casting ebon shadows, and he could not find her, and he threw himself down on the hard bed of the marble, bruised and broken.

"Eileen—!" he moaned. "Eileen...."

As from afar, a voice said, "That's right. Another shot of vorghon."

He turned his head, ever so slowly. He forced his burning, heavy-lidded eyes to open.

A man in the white jacket of the medcorps stood beside him, smiling. "Good," the man said. "I knew we'd do it. Vorghon always brings them around."

"You hit it, all right." It was another medman speaking. "For awhile there, I'd begun to wonder. But that last shot turned the trick."

Again Boone whispered: "Eileen—where is she?"

"Eileen, did you say? The first of the medmen came down closer. Some girl? You were alone, you know, aboard the carrier."

"The ... carrier—?"

"You don't remember that part, even?" The medman's brow furrowed deeper. His eyes flicked to his fellow for the fraction of a second as if in wordless exclamation, then came back to Boone again. "You were aboard a sphere-ship bound for Titan. Then the monsters hit it and all hands took off. When we picked you up, you were in an EC carrier, drifting just out of Hyperion's orbit." He chuckled. "You were out of your head at the time. Someplace along the line you'd gotten pretty sick."

Boone tried to drag himself up but found his arms were pinioned. "I was on Hyperion!" he mumbled. "I didn't leave the ship; it crashed down through the ice-shell. Eileen was with me—"

But the medman had straightened. He was not listening. "Another shot for this lad," he clipped briskly. "Make it equal parts of vorghon and anhalsax."

"Right, sir," the second medman nodded. Boone glimpsed an aerojet descending.

Then he was off again—off on another nightmare chase, following Eileen through sifting spheres of light and darkness.

This time, at last, he caught her. Only when he would have put his arms about her, she suddenly changed into a faceless, somehow leering Helgae.

But the haze was gone when he roused again, and he felt better.

Then the medmen came in, looking not quite so jovial as before. A frozen-faced ship's officer entered with them.

There was the usual routine check. At its conclusion, the medman in charge turned to the officer. "All right. You can talk to him now." He stepped back.

The officer moved in closer. "Your name's Fred Boone, EB rating, attached to the Ganymedan base." He said it as if it were an accusation.

"That's right."

"On September 3, 2156, adjusted Earth dating system, you forced the base director, Martin Krobis, to pass you onto the base grav-ramp, then

paralyzed him with a nerve-shock and stowed away aboard sphere-ship XL-230, bound for Titan, in direct violation of his specific orders."

Boone studied the officer thoughtfully, but said nothing.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

The officer's ears grew pink. "Affirm or deny."

"I'd rather not do either till I have advice of counsel."

"Oh. One of those." The officer's lips drew tight. "All right, then, if that's the way you want it. But I warn you, it won't help."

Turning on his heel, he stalked out the door. The medmen followed.

Still Boone lay unmoving. There was a tension in him now, and of a sudden he felt old and weary.

So even here, even now, after all that had happened, Krobis was bound to get his pound of flesh.

Almost idly, he wondered how it would end.

Not that it mattered. Not now with Eileen still back on Hyperion, a captive of the Helgae.

If she'd lived this long.

Bleakly, he wondered what had happened that day—or was it night?—in the weird domed city. Were the Helgae living entities, as it had seemed? Had they really tried to probe his brain by some strange thought-wave system? Or was that all imagination?

For that matter, had he ever actually been beneath the ice-shell? Did it even exist? And was there a warm, lush world inside it—a world where huge, six-sexed flowers bloomed and held their colors in spite of ammonia and methane; where Helgae bubbles formed in a flash to trap invaders?

Above all, how had he come to be aboard a carrier, drifting beyond Hyperion's orbit?

Those were questions to which, some day, he'd have to find the answers.

Such questions—! And so many of them!

Yet in his heart he knew that they were academic, almost. For they only concealed the true core of his tension.

Eileen.

Again he saw her as in those last long moments—sealed in her separate sphere, her pale face fear-straight.

The memory woke new fever in him. Why was he lying here, with her in danger? Now, above all, seconds were precious!

And there was only one road for him to take to help her.

A bitter road. Yet he had no choice.

He shifted; twisted; fumbled for the buzzer button.

A medman came. Boone said, "I want a space-phone."

"Who are you calling?"

"The Ganymedan base director. His name is Martin Krobis."

"I'll see." The man went out again.

When he came back, he brought an audio-visual com-box with him. "The call's allowed. I've placed it for you." Setting down the unit on the stand beside Boone's bed, he left the room.

Taut-nerved, Boone waited.

Then the signal blinked. Krobis' face flashed on the receptor-screen, sharp features set in an expression that was half gloating smirk, half chill, bleak menace. "Well, Boone?" His voice came brittle.

Boone hunched forward. "Let's not waste time on things past, Krobis. We know how we feel about each other. What counts now is that Eileen's in trouble."

Tersely, he told his story.

But Krobis' expression stayed the same. The black eyes showed no slightest flicker of emotion.

"That's all, Boone?"

Boone's palms were sweating. "'That's all'—?" he echoed. "Isn't that enough? What more do you want."

For the first time, Krobis' facial muscles shifted. Hate boiled in his eyes. His lips peeled back in a raging grimace. "I want *you*, Boone!" he slashed out fiercely. "I want you, and I'm going to get you! Before I'm through, you'll be booted out of Cartel service and rubbing *djec* in Venus barracks. This nonsense you've told me—"—he laughed, a harsh, contemptuous laugh—"—do you think I don't see through it? Not even a cadet on his first trip would swallow it! You're trying to save your own neck, that's all. But it won't work, not for a minute—"

"But Eileen—"

"To hell with her, too! Even if I believed you, my job's in Mekronal, not Rescue Service!"

He broke off sharply, as if unable to find words harsh enough to vent his fury. His hand blurred as he flicked the switch.

The screen went dead.

Belly quivering, Boone turned off his own unit and slumped back on the bed.

But before he could even sort out his own feelings, the com-box signal blinked again.

For the fraction of a second Boone hesitated, nonplussed and frowning, then threw the switch.

This time the face on the screen was one he hadn't seen before: a stern-faced man with greying hair, all dignity.

The other said, "I'm Douglas Schilling, specialist in space law at Thelema. A mutual friend heard about your current difficulties. He suggested that you might like to have me serve as counsel."

Boone stared. "A mutual friend—"

"Yes," Schilling nodded. "He prefers that I not use his name over the space-phone, but he said you'd remember him as the man to whom you were talking in Gandor City just before you left for Titan."

Gandor City—! Boone rocked. That could only be Terral, the representative of Associated Independents!

"Do you remember?" Schilling prodded.

Boone made his face a mask. "Yes. I remember."

"Then if you'd care to have me represent you—"

"I would." Boone leaned back and smiled thinly. "That is, if you're still willing after you've heard my story. Krobis has already turned it down."

"Krobis—!" The other's keen eyes flickered. "You mean you've talked to him, given him the details as to what happened?"

"Yes."

"I can't say that I'm glad to hear it. However..." The lawyer shrugged. "Let's make it that I'll see you when your ship grays down at the Cartel's Thelema headquarters base on Mars tomorrow."

"Good enough."

"Till tomorrow, then...." Already, the lawyer's face was fading.

Tomorrow. To Boone, it seemed that the hours dragged on beyond measure. Yet then, when at last the new day had come, he found himself almost regretful—dreading the things he knew that it must bring; fighting down an ever-growing tension.

Because he knew in his heart that he wasn't going to take it. Not with Eileen's life perhaps at stake; not with Hyperion's ice-shell beckoning.

Somewhere, somehow, he'd find a way....

There was a final routine with the medmen. They pronounced him sound, turned him over to the guards.

Then the ship slowed, hovered. Gravving down through the great Thelema airlocks, it settled to the ramp.

Flanked by two guards, Boone strode from the lift-shaft.

Schilling stood outside. Coolly, he extended documents to Boone's captors. "A temporary order for release of your prisoner to my custody for pre-hearing consultation, gentlemen."

The guard in charge checked through the papers, then stepped back. "He's all yours, Mister."

Schilling led the way to a surface carrier without speaking.

Boone eyed him curiously. "How does it look?"

The lawyer leaned back, and the carrier slid smoothly into motion. "Frankly, I don't like it. Krobis wants blood. He's come in all the way from Ganymede himself, instead of sending a deposition or testifying on the com-box; and he's persuaded the Cartel to try you before a general board so that you can be discharged from the service, with release to the Federation for criminal action if you're convicted."

"So it's double trouble." Boone smiled wryly. "I might have expected that from Krobis."

"You're not convicted yet," retorted Schilling. "Besides, I got that release order so you'd have a chance to talk with someone who's in a spot to help you."

"Terral?"

The lawyer nodded and brought the carrier to a halt beside a building. "You'll find him in my office, there. I'll drop back later."

It was Boone's turn to nod. He got out and went into the building.

And there was Terral—lean, grey, shrewd-eyed Terral, the man empowered to speak for Associated Independents.

He gripped Boone's hand. "Glad to see you, man—even though the circumstances could be better."

"Oh, I don't know." Boone held face and voice alike noncommittal. "Anyhow, thanks for getting Schilling."

"You're wondering why, of course." Terral's lips drew thin. "Believe me, it wasn't altruism, Boone; not one bit of it."

Boone frowned. "Maybe I just don't understand."

"You will," the other clipped. And then: "Boone, how much do you know about Titan fever?"

"Titan fever—?" Boone shook his head. "Not too much."

"Are you aware that it's reached the epidemic stage on half-a-dozen satellites and planets?"

"What—!"

"The Federation's keeping the statistics under cover; otherwise there'd be a panic." Terral paced the floor like a caged lion. "The catch is, Boone, we're all like you: No one knows too much about the whys and wherefores of it, except that the original cases came among IC men who worked in the Helgae cities on Titan back when mekronal was first developed."

Boone ran his thumb along his chin. "I'd heard that part. But I thought we had it licked with chandak extract."

"Chandak extract!" The independents' agent spun around, grey eyes blazing. "That's just the trouble! Chandak's a byproduct of mekronal—and all mekronal comes from Titan! So with IC assigned monopoly rights there, the rest of us are stuck."

"But the Federation—"

"The Federation's run by blithering idiots and IC stooges! Sure, with this epidemic they've set up a quota system. But how much does that mean, when Cartel inspectors make out the production reports?"

"So—?"

"So IC's using chandak the same way they've used mekronal—as a weapon against the Independents!" Terral hammered his palm with a bony fist. "Just look at the pattern! With mekronal, their crews can work in all atmospheres,

set up bases at a hundredth the cost of anyone else, and claim satellite monopoly rights from the Federation on grounds of prior colonization."

Boone nodded slowly. "Yes. I know how that works."

"All right. That's straight commercial rivalry, so even though it cuts our throats we've got no come-back. But now comes Titan fever—a disease that kills men like flies when you treat it with any of the mill run of specifics. If you don't treat them—" Terral broke off; looked square at Boone. "Boone, do you know the story on that?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Then read this—a report from the top labs of your own damned organization! Don't ask me how I got it."

The Independents' rep was fumbling in a briefcase as he spoke. He drew out a thick blue-covered folder and handed it to Boone.

Boone stared down at it. "*Titan Fever: An investigation of Untreated Cases*," the title read. The binder was stamped "MOST SECRET" in big block letters, and it bore the official seal of Interplanetary Cartels' central research unit.

But the thing that held his eye was the signature on the submission.

The signature of Martin Krobis.

Frowning, he riffled through the document to the final page:

"... In summary, then, the following tentative conclusions may be reported:

"1. Although occasional deaths due to complications sometimes result from Titan fever, most untreated cases may be expected to recover.

"2. However, there is definite evidence that such cases undergo an extreme mutation of the gametes.

"3. While no adverse physiological effects of this mutation are apparent in infants born to parents one or both of whom have been infected, significant mental changes and/or deterioration stand out clearly.

"4. No such mutative effect is evident in cases treated with chandak extract or their offspring.

"On the basis of available data, therefore, it is considered urgent that all cases of Titan fever developing among Interplanetary Cartels personnel or their families be given prompt treatment with chandak extract.

"All base administrative chiefs are explicitly made responsible for seeing that such treatment is carried out as directed."

Stiff-fingered, Boone closed the folder. Again, his eyes met Terral's.

The lean man's face had grown bleak as Mars' windswept deserts. "Do you know what it's going to mean when that report gets out?"

"I can imagine."

"Can you? I wonder." The other raised a clenched fist; shook it. "Boone, it means a Cartel-dominated solar system, the end of human freedom! IC's got a monopoly on chandak and they intend to hold it, Federation or no Federation. The rest of us won't have any choice but to come to them on their terms, or else gamble that our children will grow up gibbering idiots."

In spite of himself, Boone shuddered.

Terral kept on talking: "The production records tell the story. They say that chandak's in short supply—so short that it comes in dribbles. But that report you read doesn't mention any shortage, does it? All it gives is an order—a flat directive to see that all IC's people are protected."

Wearily, Boone nodded. "All right. You've sold me. Now tell me just how I fit in. What am I supposed to do?"

"Good!" The other slapped Boone's shoulder. "As to what you do, it's the same proposition that we talked about at Gandor City. The thing we're buying is your training. There's an Independent ship ramped in the main port, ready to grav-off. It's equipped for mekronal production. You take it out and find some Helgae."

Boone's heart leaped. "You mean—I break and run? I don't stand trial?"

"That's why we had Schilling get that release order."

The room seemed suddenly distorted. Boone paced the floor to hide his shaking.

He'd left Eileen on far Hyperion, a prisoner of the Helgae.

No, in spite of all Krobis' machinations, fate had thrown him a wild gambler's chance to reach her.

Terral's voice drummed at him: "That order cost us, Boone. Who cares, though, if it breaks the Cartel? Sure, you'll be a fugitive for awhile. But you'll be safe so long as nobody thinks to tie you in with us, and we can smooth the whole business over once we get our own source of mekronal and chandak...."

Pushing his jumbled thoughts aside, Boone pivoted. "What are we waiting for? Let's get started."

"Already?" Terral chuckled dryly. "Slow down! This is going to take a little doing." He bent over the desk, scribbled swiftly on a note-pad, and then straightened. "Take this to the manager at Triangle Freight. Hot as you are, we're going to have to crate you up and send you out onto the ramp as cargo."

"Right." Boone slipped the scrawl into his pocket. "I'll be on my way, then."

"Good luck!"

Boone answered with a wordless salute and, turning, strode from the office and the building.

He still felt a little dazed. How could it all have worked out so perfectly and so simply?

Only then, suddenly, a man appeared out of a doorway, hurrying in Boone's direction with head down—almost running.

Too late, Boone tried to sidestep. The man crashed into him and they both reeled, clinging to each other for support.

The next instant, hands gripped Boone from behind. A hard, unseen something rammed against his backbone. "Don't move, Boone!" clipped a tight, familiar voice.

Boone stiffened. "Krobis—!"

"Correct." The thing against Boone's back withdrew. Krobis stepped round into view, nerve-gun in hand, leaving his aides to hold the prisoner. His black eyes glittered. "For the record, you're under Cartel arrest again, in accordance with IC regulations."

Boone held his voice flat. "I can't stop you, Krobis. But when trial-time comes, the Federation may not think much of this."

"You think not?" The Ganymedan base director smirked, and took a stand with too-short legs wide-spraddled. "Personally, I'm more inclined to believe they'll cite me for a commendation—once they've heard my recording of your little talk with Terral!"

For the fraction of a second, Boone stopped breathing. His lips were all at once so stiff he couldn't speak.

"That hit you, eh?" sneered Krobis. "You should have been more careful. All I was interested in to start was finding out who pressured through that release order for you. I didn't guess you had ties to the Independents, or that you planned to run out. But I'm glad you tried it. The recording makes your conviction certain, and puts us where we can jump the gun on Terral."

"Meanwhile, you stay where you belong—in IC's own Thelema guardhouse!"

CHAPTER V

Boone waited till the guard had left the cell-block to let in the group scheduled to conduct the preliminary inquiry. Then, with one last look out across the darkening ramp to where the Independent sphere-ship lay interned, he climbed onto the bunk, looped the end of the torn cloth noose up through the ventilator grating, twisted his collar still more awry, and stepped off into space.

The noose cut his neck, but not too badly. Most of his weight hung from the extra loop he'd run under his arms and round his chest. Yet the turned-up collar made it look like he was truly hanging by his neck alone.

There was a drone of voices from the hallway. Words drifted to him as the speakers paused outside the locked door.

"It's all set up," came the clipped tones of Martin Krobis. "We'll push through the special session of the board tonight, with a quick decision in favor of disciplinary discharge from Cartel service. The Federation court can hear the criminal case next cycle. By the end of the week he'll be on his way to Venus barracks."

Someone laughed raucously. A third voice crowed, "Leave it to Krobis!"

Then the bolt was snicking back, the block door opening. Quickly, Boone twisted his head to an appropriate angle. Closing his eyes, he let himself swing limp and motionless as he could.

The fraction of a second later one of the visitors choked, "Krobis! Look—"

"Damn him—!" This in tight fury from Krobis. "He can't cheat me this way! I won't let him!" Shoes slithered on the flooring. "Quick! Help me!"

Hands lifted Boone. A knife hacked at the cloth noose.

The fabric ripped through at last. Still limp of limb, head lolling, Boone let himself be lowered to the bunk.

Then Krobis' voice rang close beside him: "This noose—! There's something funny—"

Stubby fingers tugged apart the double loops.

Boone slumped sideways, away from Krobis, so that the other was strained far forward and off balance.

Then, in one swift, convulsive movement, he drove his elbow deep into his enemy's unprotected midriff.

The wind went out of the base director's lungs in a gust. He bent double ... hung tottering, face shock-contorted.

Twisting, Boone whipped his hand up ... chopped down with all his might on the back of Krobis' neck.

Krobis slammed forward on his face on the floor.

As he landed, the spell of startlement that had held the others broke. With an incoherent roar, the man at the left lunged forward.

Boone jerked back. Writhing, flat on the bunk, he jackknifed his legs up and lashed out with both feet, straight at his attacker's face.

The man tried to dodge. Barely, in time, his head flicked aside.

But it was too late for him to twist his shoulders.

There was the brittle *Crack!* of a collar-bone snapping. The man catapulted back, clear across the cell-block.

But now the third man was upon Boone, swinging a nerve-gun. The guard crowded close behind him.

Before Boone could move, the barrel gashed open his forehead. A fist hammered at his temple. The guard clawed at him ... crushed his flailing legs in a mighty bear-hug.

Spasmodically, Boone clutched the nerve-gun; jammed it upward.

A grunt of pain echoed as trigger-guard wrenched forefinger. The man who held the weapon reared back sharply and let go of it.

Boone backhanded the butt, striking for the man's Adam's-apple.

The blow hit home. Choking, Boone's assailant tried to break free, tripped, and pitched backwards to the floor.

Boone spun the gun, reversed it, blazed a charge at the guard, dangerously close to his own legs.

The burly jailer gave a single paroxysmic jerk, then crumpled.

Blood from the barrel-gash spilling into his eyes, Boone lurched up and lunged for the open doorway.

Someone clutched at his ankle. Kicking free, not even turning, he charged on into the corridor and broke for the building exit—half-running, half-staggering.

Then the last door was swinging shut behind him. He plunged into the shadows along a warehouse.

Behind him, chaos and rising voices. A com-box blared, "All guards alert! Escape! This prisoner's dangerous! Don't let him get off the ramp! All guards alert!..."

Forspark lights flared at the gates. Somewhere a surface carrier rumbled into clattering motion.

Boone sagged back against the warehouse and swabbed the blood from his eyes. Then, still breathing hard, running almost doubled, he raced not towards the gates, but away from them, towards the black block that was the airlock power station.

Shadows again, and another pause for breath. Sirens blasting. The rumble of more carriers.

In spite of his tension, Boone smiled thinly. Swinging round, he moved warily on towards the station entrance.

The two men on duty stood in the doorway, peering out across the ramp.

Back flat to the wall, Boone silently edged towards them ... closer ... closer...

One said, "What's that—?" and started to turn.

Boone leaped forward, triggering a beam from the nerve-gun.

The two duty men went down as one. Dragging them inside, Boone kicked the door shut, then turned to the lock control equipment. In seconds, he had levered out the gear that prevented the outer locks from opening till the inner were closed and sealed.

Crossing to the emergency control bank, then, he threw the first switch.

Heavy-duty motors spun to droning life. A red light flashed on the board.

Ten seconds later the red light clicked off. A green light blazed in its stead, and the motors cut off.

The inner locks were open!

Dry-lipped, Boone threw the second switch.

Motors. Red light. Green light. Silence.

Or almost silence. For now a whistling sound came dimly, apparent even within the building.

The sound of the ramp-bubble's precious atmosphere escaping!

Swinging up a heavy beryllium wrench, Boone smashed the switches.

That made his gamble good for fifteen minutes' leeway ... a quarter of an hour at least that the locks would stay jammed open.

Boone threw down the wrench. Then, pivoting, he strode to the door and jerked it open.

On all sides, in the distance, men were running, shouting. There was a low roar of atmosphere compressors, trying to compensate for the changing pressure. Now sirens blasted.

While he watched, a surface carrier skidded around a warehouse and hurtled towards the airlock power station.

Ice-nerved, Boone waited, weapon ready.

The carrier screamed to a stop beside the door. Men leaped down.

Boone stepped from the shadows, swung his nerve-gun. "Back, damn you!"

The men froze, staring.

Vaulting aboard the vehicle, Boone jammed the gun against the back of the driver's neck. "We're going onto the ramp—out to that Independent ship!"

Wordless, the man pressed buttons, swung the steering lever. The carrier jerked forward.

More dragging seconds. The great sphere on the ramp looming ever-larger.

Boone clipped, "Pull in beside the lift-shaft!"

The driver obeyed.

Stunning him with a beam-edge, Boone jumped down, gun concealed once more, as a uniformed Federation trooper stepped from the lift. He made his voice harsh, peremptory: "Who's in charge here?"

It brought the trooper up short. "Sergeant Martov, sir."

"The crew's aboard?"

"Yes, sir. Security ordered them interned on the ship so word wouldn't get out that we'd taken over."

"Then take me to the sergeant. Fast!"

"Yes, sir." The man spun about.

Boone waited till they were both inside the lift, then hit the other behind the ear with the nerve-gun's barrel.

The trooper went down, unconscious.

Rolling him out of the shaft, onto the ramp, Boone shoved the lift control lever to the fifth stop, the crew quarters.

The lift ground upwards.

There was another trooper on duty on the fifth level exit. Boone paralyzed him with the nerve-gun, not even speaking, and ran on down the corridor to the wardroom.

Two Independent ensigns sat playing N'rlan with a navigator. One glanced up as Boone burst in; half-rose, mouth gaping. "My God! The mek-man!"

Boone's heart leaped. "Then—you know about me?"

"Of course!" This from the other ensign. "Terral had the whole ship readied to take off on two minutes' notice. Only then they grabbed you, and the damn' Cartel nailed us down here with a secret internment order from the Federation."

"But you still could make a run? Everything's aboard and ready?"

"Sure, if the locks would only open. There's just a sergeant and three troopers on duty."

Triumph surged through Boone—a wild, raw-nerved elation that left him sagging back against the door-frame, dizzy.

In a voice that didn't even remotely resemble his own, he said, "The locks are open."

The others took over, after that. As from afar, Boone heard the terse commands, the bellowed orders.

Then lights were flashing, hatches slamming. There was the grav-off's momentary lurch and wallow; the swift rush up, the hiss of passage through the airlocks while the sphere rocked like a cork in the vortex of the bubble's escaping atmosphere.

By the time the medmen had sealed the gash in his forehead, the ship was hurtling out across the void on its appointed course, away from Mars, towards far Hyperion.

Hyperion, and Eileen Rey.

Though there was little enough time for Boone to think about her.

And perhaps that was best, also. For the memory of her was with him every moment, like a shadow, and when he paused even for a second, dark fantasies rose and his belly knotted.

So he was glad when the Independents' wizened, thong-tough captain called him in for consultation in the chart-room.

The hurtling heavens flashed on the wall-screen, sharp-focussed by the microreel projector. The captain raised a long light-pointer. "This is our track. To save time, we'll cut short through The Belt and Jupiter's orbit. It's dangerous, but it may fool them."

A chill touched Boone. "You think they'll follow?"

"After what you did—those crippled airlocks?" The captain's laugh was curt and mirthless. "They'll have the whole Federation fleet out hunting for us. The only chance we've got is to find cover."

"And even if we do, we'll still be outlawed?"

"That's right." The captain shrugged. "So far as I'm concerned, I might as well tear up my ticket."

"But if we get mekronal and chandak—"

"That's why I chanced it."

Boone's backbone prickled. He stared at the screen in aching silence.

Overhead, the com-box crackled: "Detector room reporting. We are getting blips off Ceres."

"The asteroid station," the captain muttered. He turned to Boone. "You may as well know: I doubt we'll make it. Because the Cartel ships will hunt us, right along with the Federation fleet. The Europa units, Ganymede, Callisto—they'll all be out. With that many ships, they can set up a screen and follow us on their detectors. Even though we sneak through, they'll still track us and close in as soon as we grav down."

Boone remained tensely silent.

Now the microreel image showed Saturn rising.

Saturn, mother planet of bleak Titan.

Somewhere in the shadow of those vast, shimmering rings Hyperion, too, moved in its orbit.

Hyperion: Another potential source of the precious mekronal and chandak. Another world of strange domed Helgae cities.

Only Hyperion was turning out to be a trap, not refuge. With Cartel and Federation ships alike spread out in a filter-screen across the void, there'd be no chance for this lone Independent ship to land or hide there.

Unless—

Boone all at once was rigid. "Captain," he asked, "could you run to Uranus?"

"Uranus—!" The wizened officer swung, stared at him. "Are you crazy, man? Why would anyone in his right mind want to go there?"

"That's not the question. Could you make it?"

The other's eyes narrowed. "Yes. I suppose so."

"And could you think up a reason for it—some excuse that the Fedfleet might find convincing?"

"Maybe."

Boone drew in a breath. "Then start getting your story together." He strode to the screen, traced a course with his finger. "If you are it right, we'll pass through Hyperion's field of attraction. When that happens, you can shoot a handful of us down in carriers without even stopping. You'll take the ship on towards Uranus. The Federation, the Cartel, won't even know we've left you."

The captain rocked. "Boone, you *are* crazy!"

"No!" As if by magic, the chill had left Boone. He burned with sudden, feverish excitement. "The only trick will be to breach the ice-shell. For that, you can rig an unmanned carrier or two with warheads. They'll blast a hole. The rest of the party can go down through it."

"But why?" the captain spluttered. "Why Hyperion, of all places? I've come this far because my orders from Terral were to do exactly what you wanted. But this—this gibberish about an ice-shell—"

"—Isn't gibberish!" Boone finished for him fiercely. "You thought this was to be a prospecting expedition, Captain. But that's not so; not really. Because I've been down on Hyperion before—and underneath the surface ice is a warm world with at least one big Helgae city! All we have to do is set up a base, start processing mekronal, and claim the whole satellite for Associated Independents!"

The captain's eyes distended. "Boone, do you mean it?"

"Of course I mean it! I was aboard a sphere that crashed after monsters hit it. That's why we've got to work fast. Martin Krobis knows about it. Unless we hurry, the Cartel may beat us to it with a unit."

But the captain was no longer listening. Face flushed, brow furrowed, he was studying the microreel-projected wall-chart. "I can pass the word to headquarters to send out a sphere-load of equipment. And I've got enough mekronal aboard to give maybe half-a-dozen men protection without a bubble; Terral bribed some Cartel hand to steal a little for him...."

He swung to the com-box, then; snapped orders.

The quiet of the chart-room dissolved into seething bedlam.

While Boone stood by, warheads were fitted to two carriers. With five mekronal-treated men, he crowded aboard a third.

Then, on the visiscreen, bleak Hyperion was looming. Boone waited, taut and strain-straight, hand on the carrier-release lever.

Now, slowly, the mountain peaks so far away began to form a pattern ... a distortion and projection of the same pattern Boone had seen before, looking up at the crags that pierced the ice-shell.

For a moment he almost thought that in a prick of black he was seeing the rift made by the fallen Cartel sphere-ship.

Not that it mattered; enough that he had a mark to shoot at.

The captain's voice rasped from the com-box: "Boone! You'd better hurry. Our detectors show Federation ships approaching!"

The last lingering fragments of Boone's hesitation vanished. He pressed the button set to trigger the first carrier.

Like a scarlet lance, the sleek craft shot from its cradle—speeding out from the sphere; hurtling down towards the ice-shell, faster and faster.

Boone pressed the second button.

Another explosive-laden carrier speared through the void upon its mission.

Boone turned in his seat. "Hatches—?"

"Secured and sealed," a brawny, blond-haired giant behind him grunted.

For the fraction of a second Boone stared at the rocky face, the grim-set jaw.

The others, too: four stone-featured crewmen, each waiting in silence despite the tension.

A tightness came to Boone's throat.

Only then, once again, the sphere-ship captain's voice was rasping: "Boone, those blips are coming closer!"

Tight-lipped, Boone pressed the third button ... the button that triggered this final carrier.

He jarred back, then, as the pressure of the craft's swift acceleration hit him.

But it only lasted for a moment. Free of the sphere-ship, the carrier sped out into space along the path slashed by the two before it. Behind it, the hurtling mother-globe was already fading, as it raced on across Saturn's orbit towards Uranus.

Down, down the carriers lanced, straight for Hyperion's ice-masked surface ... closer and closer, faster and faster.

Then, while Boone held his breath, the first struck.

A flash of fire; a vast exploding cataclysm. Ice spraying out like splattering water....

Before the cloud of icy splinters could even settle, the second carrier crashed home. New jets of spray leaped skyward. Great cracks appeared, from here a tracery of fine, shimmering lines against the satellite's frigid surface.

Boone slowed the third carrier till it hung almost motionless. Taut-nerved, he waited.

Slowly, the drifting blast-cloud cleared. A pit yawned in the ice.

With wary patience, Boone dropped the carrier closer to the surface ... hovered momentarily above the pit-edge.

Color flashed in the depths—the color of flower-fields, of verdure.

Of a sudden the jagged ice-claws didn't matter. Boone zoomed the carrier in a great loop, then dived it back again straight for the pit, the color.

Death's own tension rode with them. Once Boone thought he could hear the echo of a choked-off prayer.

Then the pit's ice-walls were closing around them. The target below seemed so very tiny....

The carrier struck ice, an out-thrust fragment. A shudder ran through its strain-racked structure. Veering, it crashed into the razor shards along the lower lip of the hole.

The impact flung Boone savagely against his belt. His head snapped back so hard that for a moment he thought his neck was broken. Behind him, through the scream of torn and tortured metal, a man shouted shrilly.

Then the carrier was falling. Barely in time, Boone caught the globe-control and spun it.

End for end, the carrier flipped over in the air. Swinging like a pendulum by its nose, it settled to earth with a jarring shock that would have torn the ramping-fins from a craft less sturdy.

Boone sagged in his seat. Then, rallying, he peered upward.

Ice still was falling. Apparently the force of the carrier's down-thrust—coupled with the earlier blasts—had shaled off great chunks of the ice-shell's under-surface.

As for the ship and the others—Boone loosed his belt; scrambled round to see.

The blond giant already was bending over another crewman.

Boone stiffened. "Is it bad?"

The other straightened, shook his head. "I don't think so. He's just out cold; I think he hit his head on something."

"Good." Boone breathed again. "I think I'll chance an all-clear to the sphere-ship."

Turning to the visiscreen, he twisted dials, pressed buttons. Dimly at first, the mother-craft appeared, far out in space.

Only then, while he watched, another sphere swept across the shining panel, followed by yet another and another.

Cartel ships.

There could be no escape from them. Not when they rallied in such numbers.

Even in that moment, the Independent ship was slowly swinging.

A numb sickness came to Boone. He'd counted on days alone here ... days to lay waste the Helgae city till at last he found Eileen.

Now that margin was reduced to cycles. For once Krobis found that he—Boone—and three carriers were missing from the sphere-ship just after it left Hyperion's orbit, it would be mere hours before Cartel ships were landing.

After that, there'd be Venus Barracks, as well as the emptiness of failure.

If he could only find Eileen before it happened....

He flicked off the visiscreen's main switch.

Like the hideous magnification of an echo, a scream rang through the carrier.

Boone whirled.

As he did so, the blond giant's head appeared, framed in the power-converter hatchway. His eyes were white-rimmed, staring, his left arm limp and bloody.

"Monsters!" he shrieked. "Monsters—!"

Those were the last words that he ever spoke. For as he shouted, six great clawed hands stretched through the hatch behind him and convulsed around his body.

The two top ones tore his head off....

CHAPTER VI

Boone died a thousand times in that one moment. Then, shouting a warning to the four remaining crewmen, he caught up an axe from the rack of emergency equipment and crept towards converter-room and monster.

The thing had withdrawn now, dragging the dead man's body with it—for what awful purpose Boone could not even guess.

Yet the question that lay implicit in the thought made him pause just short of the door for the fraction of a second. It turned out to be a pause that saved his life.

For in that same instant a claw-hand snaked back through the hatchway. Filth-encrusted nails scraped along his arm, endeavoring to seize him.

Boone jerked back with a hoarse, involuntary oath. Wildly, he swung the axe.

The keen blade bit into the monster's extended arm. A muddy sludge of blood gushed forth. The claw-hand jerked back.

Yet the thing made no sound—not a single groan or snarl or murmur.

Boone hesitated, even more wary than before. He kicked a fallen spanner towards the doorway.

Like lightning, the monster lunged from its hideout—and now Boone saw why it had made no outcry.

The thing had no head! It consisted of arms only—six hairy, humanoid arms radiating out from a central core that looked like an enormous mushroom button.

Careening, the creature changed course. The arms clawed out to clutch Boone.

Leaping wide, he slashed with the axe—a savage blow with all his strength behind it, straight for the central core, the button.

There was a sound like a watermelon bursting. The button broke and flew apart, not so much sliced as shattered. A sickening stench erupted through the cabin. The arms sagged, limp save for spasmodic twitchings.

Half-sick with the sight, the smell, Boone stumbled back.

But before he could even drop the axe, a new cry came.

It rose behind him, this time—from the cabin's other end, the hatchway to the landing ladder.

Boone spun, ran towards the ladder.

From the bottom of the narrow shaft, a white-faced crewman beckoned in a frenzy. "Out—! Get out!" He vanished through the exit port.

Boone dropped the axe and, sliding, plummeted down the ladder. In seconds he, too, was stumbling through the port.

The crewman who'd shouted crouched on the ground in the shadow of the ramping fins beside one of his fellows, the man who'd lain unconscious since they landed. "Look!" His whole arm shook as he pointed.

Boone veered, then froze.

If what had gone before were nightmare, surely this was utter madness! For from beyond the circling hills, a hand was stretching towards them—a hand vast beyond all human concept! Like living columns carved in flesh, the fingers reached out, nails glittering in the filtered sunlight of the ice-shell.

With a mighty effort, Boone forced himself to motion. Lunging back through the port, he tore a long-range blaster from its wall-clip, then leaped to the ground once more and raced away, off to one side where there was space clear of the ship for him to use the weapon.

His action seemed to break the paralysis of the crouching crewman. Jumping up, the fellow disappeared for a moment into the carrier, then rushed out again with a second blaster and darted after Boone.

The giant hand's shadow fell upon the ship. The circling fingers closed about it.

Boone stumbled to a halt. Twisting, he swung round the blaster ... triggered a bolt at the clutching hand.

For the barest instant the hand stopped short. Then, in one savage, spasmodic motion, the great fingers clamped down on the carrier, clenching.

There was a clash and crash of rending metal; a roar of compressor tanks exploding. Flame spurted out between the crushing fingers.

Wrist-muscles bulging, the hand whipped high into the air, then down again with earth-shaking force. The fingers opened ... spilled out the crumpled mass of wreckage that had been the ship.

... Wreckage, and the pitiful, broken bodies of the two crewmen who had been trapped inside.

A hoarse cry burst from the throat of their comrade, the man who'd followed Boone. Whipping up his blaster, he blazed bolt after bolt into the hand.

As a human might slap at a mosquito, the hand smashed down and crushed him, then started towards Boone.

Shock-rocked, quaking, he dived into the closest flower-clump's cover ... rolled and writhed through the foliage, flat against the earth.

Overhead the hand paused, searching.

Then, bare yards from him, suddenly, it fell.

But not in a blow. No. This was different. For it fell limp and sagging, as if the muscles all at once had lost their power.

Boone lay like a statue—frozen, waiting.

Nothing happened.

The tension in him grew moment by moment, till he could hold it down no longer. He surged to his feet, blaster at the ready.

But the hand did not move. Before his eyes, as he stood there, it was ... melting ... oozing away into the ground in stinking rivulets of slime.

Numbly, Boone moved along it; and now, incredibly, he could see its termination, just below the rim of the nearest hills.

For it was an arm without a body—an arm that trailed off into nothing, like a figure cast in wax.

Yet there too lay the carrier, crushed and crumpled ... the broken bodies of the men.

This limp, dead arm had done that....

It was more than human mind could take. Boone slumped to the ground and cowered there, shaking.

Nor would the seizure pass. It was as if he suddenly were chilling. Cold crept through his veins in icy tendrils to the very marrow of his bones.

Harder and harder he shook. Yet still no surcease came. His whole body was aching now and it dawned upon him, dimly, that no shock alone could leave him thus yet still alive.

Then, at long last, the chills and cold departed, driven out by a quick, fierce heat. His mouth grew dry. His tongue took on new thickness. Flowers, hills, wreckage—all seemed distorted. He burned as with a flaming fever....

Fever—?

He knew, then.

Titan fever!

What else could it be, here on Hyperion, but that strange pyrexia that mutated Man's gametes?

So there was no hope for him, no answer....

He never knew for sure what happened after that—how much was reality, how much fever-madness.

For delirium came, and in that state he wandered. The hills rolled down in lowering barriers of menace, and flowers talked to him, and he walked beside strange streams.

And then, sometimes, it seemed that Eileen stood beside him ... that he could hear her rippling laughter echo, and taste her lips, and smell the fragrance of her hair.

But Eileen was still a prisoner of the Helgae, sealed in a sphere somewhere within their weird, domed cities.

That meant he had to find her.

So he wandered on, babbling of mekronal and chandak ... precious chandak, the only remedy that could save him from his fate.

And Krobis was there, too, and Terral—all the others. Sometimes they mocked; sometimes they helped him.

Not that it mattered. For now, all at once, he could get away from his own body, floating cloud-like in space beneath three great green suns.

The monsters came, then.

The first was in the image of the Helgae—lumpish, mottled, but with a yawning orifice that he knew somehow was meant to be a mouth. Twice it tried to swallow him as he floated, then faded away again when he rolled away beyond its reach.

The second took the appearance of his own father. Its face pressed close, all clipped mustache and burning eyes and shiny skin.

He shrank before it.

But the face kept following him, pressing closer, and the feeling grew within him that if the tight grey lips should ever open, he would surely die.

So he surged away in utter terror ... fled through the green-tinged sky-sea around him.

But his muscles were all at once like water, his movements as inadequate and slow as only the responses in a dream can be.

Desperately, he tried to move faster ... faster....

The face rushed in. He screamed aloud.

Then he was falling. Head over heels, he pitched down into depths at once black as night and shining white and shimmering with weird iridescence.

The third monster rose out of the mists beneath him.

It was a thing of horror beyond the telling, with a body Boone sensed more than he saw.

But from that body rose a long and sinuously slender eyestalk, surmounted with a huge human eye.

It was the eye that held Boone; for as he stared into it in mute, numb fascination, he knew that it would draw him ever closer till at last the slime-mass that was the body could swirl out and suck him in.

A black wave of despair engulfed him. Of a sudden his palms, his whole body, were drenched with sweat. The feeling that he was falling faded. Vaguely, he became aware of roughnesses beneath him. A breeze washed over him and he chilled.

Slowly, painfully, he opened his eyes ... stared up into the murk of night.

But it was a night that was already dying. Far off to one side, a dim glow marked the coming of the day.

Cords of tension fell away. Once again, at last, he lived in a world of reality, not nightmare.

He hugged it to him; drew in the chill security of it with gusty, lung-expanding breaths.

The grey glow in the distance spread. Weakly, he sat up to look about him—and stared instead into the pale malevolence of a great, baleful, swaying eye!

He froze, not daring to move or speak.

For the thing before him was the monster of his fever-madness—the eyestalked horror from the dream.

Yet he knew—*he knew!*—that he had left delirium's valley. This was reality! Without question, the fever had waned and gone.

Then what—?

He had no answer. Not here; not now. He could only wait, and hope, and perhaps pray.

But while he watched, not daring to so much as flick an eye or move a muscle, the thing before him began to eddy slowly closer.

New sweat rilled down Boone's spine. A knot of tension drew tight within his belly.

Sinuously, the monster's eyestalk swayed. The huge orb atop stared at Boone unblinking.

Stiff-fingered, too fear-straight to even look away, he slid his hands out in arcs along the ground.

But they touched no stick, no stone, no clod, no debris. He remained as he had been, a warrior sore beset, without a weapon.

And still the monster eddied closer....

He could not even break and run. Weak as he was, he dared not even trust his muscles.

Spasmodically, his nails scraped at the dirt.

The dirt—!

He dug his fingers deep into it ... sucked a ragged breath to ease his hammering heart.

Like a serpent poisoning to strike, the monster paused. The horror that was its body drew together.

With a wild shout, Boone hurled the dirt square into the glaring eye.

The eyestalk whipped back, quivering and pulsing. Then, in an instant, recovering, the creature spilled forward in a rush.

But already Boone was twisting, scrambling, clawing his way along the ground.

Then there was a rock beneath his hands, big as a man's head. In spite of his weakness he clutched it, swung it up.

The monster swept down upon him as he pivoted.

Boone hurled the rock.

It struck at the base of the weird thing's eyestalk. With a snapping sound, the orb's stem broke.

Twitching, writhing, the body halted. Then, as with the giant arm, the other monsters, the creature's whole structure began to shrivel and ooze away in slime.

Panting, shaking, Boone slumped back to the ground, his brain a cauldron bubbling with inchoate thoughts.

Like a mosaic, then, the pieces fell into place.

This whole void-area—and this area only—seemed to crawl with mad phantasms ... lunatic life-forms like none that Man had ever seen before. Out of nowhere, they materialized aboard the Cartel's sphere-ships. Here, on Hyperion; Titan, too.

Those were the facts. Now, suddenly, they took on form and pattern.

For in his delirium, Boone knew he'd had nightmares of this specific slime-drenched horror.

Awakening, his fever gone, he'd faced the hideous thing on reality's plane.

And the Helgae could play strange tricks with human minds....

The Helgae—they were the correlating factor!

The Cartel had come and raped their silent cities for the sake of mekronal and chandak.

So lacking the power of discourse, words to protest, they'd struck back in their own dark way.

Somehow, they'd reached into men's deep subconscious and dredged up monsters—the paranoid delusions of fevered brains.

Then, as the mediums of another day had claimed to give spirits ectoplasmic body, so now the Helgae materialized nightmares into life!

What armor could turn aside such a weapon?

Yet beyond it lay the threat of Titan fever. For that, too, could be a blow struck by the Helgae—the main attack, designed to cripple the mass-mind of the whole, far-flung human race!

Boone shuddered.

Yet strength rose in him, not despair. For with knowledge, the fears he'd felt of the unknown vanished. He looked about in the growing light with new, fresh eyes.

The landscape had changed from that which he last remembered. This ground lay in altogether different contours.

Frowning, he turned.

Now, with a shock, he found himself staring out on a familiar scene: the arcs and domes and bubbles of the self-same sprawling Helgae city where he and Eileen had lain entombed.

... Where Eileen still might lie.

It was a thought to make his belly churn, his heart pound, wrenching cruelly at every atom of his being. He sagged, gripped his head between his hands.

The sleeve of his shirt fell across his face, ripped wide. Incredulously, he discovered that everything he wore hung in rags and tatters. Even his shoes were slashed and mud-caked.

How far had he strayed in his fever-wanderings? How long had it been since delirium struck?

He ran his fingers over cheek and chin: a three days' growth of beard at least ... maybe more.

Not that it mattered. For he was alive; and out of horror, hypothesis had been born. If, truly, the materializing monsters and Titan fever were weapons of the beleaguered Helgae, then a truce must somehow be arranged, even if it meant complete human withdrawal from all satellites of Saturn.

That called for action by the Federation: action which the Cartel's chiefs would fight with tooth and nail.

Yet IC might well defeat itself by its own opposition. All apart from any Helgae menace, the Independents would rally instantly to whatever cause should threaten to disrupt the Cartel's mekronal production.

But that could wait; Eileen could not. Here, now, somehow, he had to save her.

Or was that hopeless?

Only time and fate could give the answers. Meanwhile, the least that he could do was try.

Unsteadily, Boone rose. He cursed the fever that had drained his strength.

It was then he heard the crashing blaster bolt beyond the ridge, off to his right, away from the Helgae city.

Again, his heart leaped. Blasters spoke for men, not Helgae—human help, here on Hyperion with him!

Lurching, stumbling, he dragged himself up the hill.

At last, the crest.

Below, the hull of a ramped Independent carrier, scarlet and silver, came into view.

Now strength surged through Boone. He broke into a staggering run, straight down the slope.

Only then, as he careened too fast past a brushy thicket, something thrust out between his flying feet. He spilled forward in a bruising, sliding fall.

A voice rasped, "Don't move! I've got you covered!"

Painfully, Boone twisted.

A man stood in the shadow of the thicket—a man with a blaster, a man who wore the blue-grey field outfit of an Interplanetary Cartels guard.

The other's lean face split in a mirthless grin as he stalked forward. "You're Boone, aren't you?" And then: "Krobis had you figured. He said you'd come in if you spotted an Independent ship."

"Krobis—?" Boone's lips went stiff. "You mean, he's here?"

"Of course he's here." The guard chuckled. "You told him about this Helgae city underneath the ice-shell yourself, didn't you? So he set up a base but pronto, with manpower enough to fight off monsters. He plans to start blasting the domes before next cycle, get a mekronal unit into production, and claim Hyperion for the next Cartel."

He broke off; gestured to Boone with the blaster. "Get up! We're going in. The way Krobis feels about you, catching you's good for Earth leave and a

sergeant's rating."

Numbly, Boone heaved himself to his feet, stood swaying.

Was this to be the end of all his sufferings—back where he started, a prisoner en route to a cell in Venus Barracks? Was the Cartel to go on butchering the Helgae till opposing life-forms clashed in full-scale war?

Above all, was he never to know the truth as to Eileen's fate? Did this mark the end of his last dim chance to save her?

For all illusion had died in him. Whatever else might be, there was no mercy in Martin Krobis. Ego, vengeance, ambition—those were the man's three key dynamics. Nothing else mattered to him; not truth, nor justice, nor even the life of Eileen Rey. He'd laugh at theories ... gloat over his triumphs ... sacrifice the rest of the human race if need be for the sake of the Cartel and his own fame and power.

"Get moving," the guard clipped. "We're going in."

Wearily, Boone turned and stumbled down the slope through the brush towards the ramped carrier.

But for all despair, fatigue, a spark still burned within him.

Krobis must not win! He must not!

Ahead, the ground fell away more sharply; and there were trees and bushes, saplings.

With cold deliberation, Boone tripped—pitched forward—let himself fall headlong.

But as he fell, he caught the limb of a slender treelet.

It bent almost double.

Prone now, Boone clung to it.

The guard ran to him, blaster ready. "Get up, you!" Face a mask of wary menace, he stepped closer.

Too close.

Boone let go of the limb.

The treelet snapped back. Branches slashed into the guard's face.

Out of reserves he had not known existed, Boone drew strength to hurl himself into spasmodic action. He twisted, kicked for the guard's legs with all his might.

The man went down with a hoarse, choked shout.

Boone lurched down upon him. His elbow smashed at the other's temple.

The guard sagged, glaze-eyed and groggy.

Snatching up the blaster, Boone hit his adversary with the butt, a savage blow.

The guard went limp, unconscious.

Sick, sobbing for breath, Boone slumped beside him.

But only for a moment.

Then, rallying, he fumbled the rations from the other's belt-case, gulping down the concentrates in great, gagging, half-chewed bites.

His protesting stomach writhed. For long seconds he thought he was going to vomit.

But that, too, passed. The sugars, the ectoids, began to reach his bloodstream.

Strength came with them.

Tight-lipped, clutching the blaster, Boone began the long, weary climb back up the hill.

... Back, and beyond, to the strange, domed city of the Helgae ... and to Eileen Rey....

CHAPTER VII

He saw the light-shafts first—two glowing cones of color that speared down from a single halo-source high in this vastest of all the bubble-chambers. The beam on the left shone rich with hues of deepest purple. The other, the one on the right, shimmered golden as Earth's September sun.

Numb, wordless, Boone moved forward with unsteady steps.

Now he saw the cones' bases as well as source; and all at once his heart was pounding, pounding, till he thought that it must surely burst.

For each light played on a separate transparent sphere that floated, somehow invisibly suspended, at eye-level in the bubble-room.

A nude human body lay within each sphere.

Shaking, Boone made his way to the gold-bathed globe.

But the figure inside was that of a man, a stranger, with a calm, vaguely-familiar face.

Boone turned to the second sphere, that on which played the cone of purple light.

This time, he looked upon a woman.

Eileen!

He swayed, still not daring to allow himself to believe it.

How had he found her in this weird maze, this bubble-catacomb? How long had he wandered through dim-lit passageways and domed, echoing chambers? How many times had he despaired?

It was as if destiny had walked beside him, guiding.

Destiny, or ... other minds. Alien minds, perhaps greater than his.

But whatever the answer, he'd kept on, and he'd found her. That was what counted.

Now, while he watched, new radiance suffused the chamber. The light-cones dimmed; and as they faded, the spheres floated slowly, gently, to the floor.

Then, as on that other, dream-like day that seemed so long ago, there was a crash of silent thunder. The globes split, fell apart.

Boone dropped to one knee. With trembling fingers he touched Eileen's bare breast.

Her flesh was warm, her heartbeat steady. Like a child awakening, her lashes fluttered. Then, lids already lifting, she turned and looked up at him with calm, untroubled eyes.

A sob rose in Boone's throat. He pressed her to him.

She laughed, ever so softly; and tenderness was in it. Cool fingers smoothed his brow, his hair. "Fred, you sound so—worried...."

His words came in a jumble, then: "You—you're all right? There's—nothing's happened?"

"No, of course not." She sounded not even quite certain of his meaning. "I only went to sleep for a little while; that's all."

The last tension drained from Boone's taut body. Weak, tremulous, unsteady, he slumped beside her amid the segments of the shattered sphere. "There's been so much, so many things—" He groped for words.

Only then, before he could say more, a distant impact rocked the chamber.

The impact of a demolition charge exploding.

In spite of emotional drain, exhaustion, Boone went rigid. "Krobis—!"

"What—?" Eileen's blue eyes distended. "Fred, you mean he's here?"

"Yes, with plans for blasting apart this whole cursed Helgae city!" Boone stumbled erect. "Quick! We've got to go!"

The girl rose beside him, then looked down in sudden, swift abashment. A flush swept up her throat. Her face turned scarlet. "My clothes—! Where are they?"

A man's voice answered, "Here."

As one, Boone and Eileen spun around.

The stranger, he who had lain in the golden sphere, was getting up. Calmly, he strode to a low ledge on the far side of the bubble and picked up one of two bulky bundles; tossed it deftly to Eileen. "Everything is there."

Boone gripped his blaster. He moved a quick step forward. "You! Who are you?"

"They call me Lor."

"A name's no answer. Where'd you come from? How'd you get here?"

The other bent to pick up the second bundle, then straightened and, turning, stood full-face to Boone. "You ... do not know? You cannot guess?"

Boone studied him ... stared narrow-eyed at the calm, strangely-familiar face.

A youthful face, yet with eyes somehow old beyond all years.

A prickling ran up and down Boone's spine. "You—look—like me!"

"Of course." Lor smiled, turned to Eileen. "Surely you can tell?"

Her hand rose to her throat. Her face grew pale. "I—I don't know. You're like Fred ... or—or—my father—"

"Yes." The sphere-man nodded gravely. "Indeed, I am—can only be—like both of you."

The silence echoed, then.

But it was a silence too taut to last for long. It had to break.

"You—can only be—like us?" Boone forced out the words.

Again, the other nodded. "Yes." And then: "Because—I am your son!"

Somewhere too close, another demolition charge exploded. But for Boone, the room rocked more with the stranger's words than from the blast.

"No!" he choked. "No!" Beside him, Eileen had slumped dazed-faced to the floor.

The sphere-man sighed. "I know. They told me it would be hard for you to understand."

"They—?"

"The ones you call the Helgae." For the first time, emotion seemed to grip Lor. He stared down at the bulky bundle in his hands; then, opening it, spread out an array of Cartel crewman's clothes. "They are an old race, older than you can know; and wise. They wanted no war with anyone, but there was no way for them to speak to a life-form so unlike theirs. So, when your ships attacked their cities on the world called Titan, they drew

monsters from your minds to slow your onslaughts, then sought some way to bridge the barrier between your different brains."

Boone caught his breath. "You mean—mutation—?"

"It was the only answer." The man who claimed him father bent to slide on shoes. "By casting their powers of mind in human bodies through the contagion you call Titan fever, the source of conflict between your separate species once and for all could be removed."

"Of course!" Of a sudden Boone was pacing. "Only then, our sphere-ship hit Hyperion, broke the ice-shell—"

"—And menaced another whole Helgae world." Lor shrugged into a jacket. "It made the danger too great for them to wait on normal human reproduction and maturing.

"But you two were on that sphere-ship—and you were male and female, man and woman."

"Then—that's why they trapped us!"

"Yes. While you lay in your sphere here, in the state you call unconscious, your seed was planted in the woman. When growth began, the egg itself was taken, processed. By science beyond your human dreams, they speeded the whole cycle of gestation, then brought me on to manhood in days instead of years. The mind-rays drained all knowledge from both of you, gave it to me, that I might be able properly to play my role."

Boone stopped short in his pacing. "Your role—?"

"You'd call it that." Now fully dressed, the other straightened. "I am a messenger, a human spokesman for the Helgae, with no other goal than to help our race live at peace."

"There'll be men who take convincing of that."

"You mean—men like the one named Martin Krobis?"

Boone stared. "Krobis—? You know about him?"

"Of course." His mutant son still smiled. "The mind-rays poured your every thought into me—even those too utterly alien for the Helgae themselves to

understand. So, I know of Krobis: the things he's done; the way he thinks; the fact that he is here now, blasting at this very city—"

Like an exclamation point, new impact came. Thread-like cracks shot through the radiance of the bubble-chamber's inner surface. The floor shook till Boone could hardly stand.

Lor's face went grim. His voice rang with sudden tension: "Come, quickly! We dare not die in this mad destruction! We dare not!"

He pivoted as he spoke; moved swiftly towards the bubble's exit.

Gripping his blaster, Eileen trembling beside him, Boone followed.

Now they walked another world—a world of weird translucence, bubble-cells and tunnels, pitch-blackness and colors too brilliant for human eyes to bear.

Yet through it all, the man called Lor strode swiftly, surely. Not once did he hesitate or falter. It was as if the whole, vast, maze-like pattern were etched in acid on his brain.

Then, at long last, they were on a ramp and climbing in slow spirals, ever upward. Ahead, a pale light glowed ... the light of Hyperion's ice-shell-filtered outer day.

Lor led them out a low-roofed cave-mouth ... helped them up the slope of a brushy rise. Bitterly, he flung his arm out: "Look—the city!"

Boone looked, then shuddered; and suddenly Eileen was sobbing.

For they gazed on a holocaust, a ruin, strewn with the smouldering shards of a thousand shattered domes.

"So these are the ways of men!" Now there was wonder in Lor's voice; and sadness. "They have so much to learn!"

"Oh, Lor—!" Eileen choked on her tears.

The mutant turned to face her. "You need not cry, my mother. We—I—shall teach them better." Then, once more smiling: "Think of some living thing—"

a thing of beauty. Picture it sharp and clear within your mind."

She stared up at him—face puzzled, eyes still brimming. "I—I'll try...."

"Then close your eyes."

She did as he had ordered.

Lor stood unmoving, placid. Yet while Boone watched, mists seemed to rise and gather, swirling. Then, in their midst, a flower took form, a perfect blood-red rose.

The sphere-man reached out, plucked it. "Here, my mother."

Eileen's eyes went wide with awe and sheer delight. She gasped aloud and held the opening bud close, drinking in its fragrance.

Lor faced Boone. "You asked for proof to convince doubters. Would such serve?"

Boone ran his tongue along dry lips. "Do I even need to answer?"

"Then let us go. We must reach those who can stop the blasting of these Helgae cities."

"That means the top men of the Federation. No one else could act against the Cartel."

"So, we must have a carrier." Lor smiled thinly. "Even one of Krobis', perhaps...."

Boone's blood quickened. "Yes. It might be. His base camp's near."

"Then—why are we waiting?"

Wordless again, they left the rise; and now there was new, silent tension in them—tension born of looming dangers yet to come ... of the very world-shaking import of their task.

Yet other factors, even more, churned Boone to turmoil.

Could he believe the man called Lor—the incredible tale he'd told, the things he'd said?

Or, even assuming belief, could he yet trust the other? What proof did he have of the real effects of the mutation, or of the Helgae's motives? True, they'd not harmed either him or Eileen. But might not that be a mere trick to

lull suspicion? Perhaps Lor himself did not even know the facts. It could be that he was only a pawn—a being created as part of some dark plan to bring the whole human race down in disaster.

As for Eileen—Boone frowned and pondered. She was changed, somehow, from the girl he'd known. It was as if her basic drive, her fierce ambition, all at once had vanished. Now she was woman. Woman only.

Questions, questions. Seething, they loomed ever-larger, till at last they were more than his aching brain could cope with. Of a sudden it came to him that sometime, somewhere, there must be an end to thinking, indecision.

For him, that moment had already come. From here on, if he were not to find himself forever immobilized by doubt, there could be no choice for him but action.

So, he would act.

They topped another rise as Boone reached his decision ... looked out across a flower-field into the valley where the familiar scarlet outlines of the ramped Independent carrier rose.

It would be only simple justice were they to steal that captured craft back from Krobis.

Boldly, Boone strode forward. It was as if, suddenly, all fear had left him.

Or perhaps he knew instinctively, somehow, that here audacity might win where stealth had failed.

The flower-field fell behind them. They moved down a brushy draw into the valley. On, to the outskirts of the base camp.

And still no guards rose up to halt them. A strange, deserted air hung about the place. There was no sign of life, no human movement.

On, through the camp grounds. Across to the carrier. Around the great ramping-fins to the yawning hatchway.

Still naught but silence. An echoing silence, too complete to believe.

Eileen pressed against Boone. "Fred, I'm afraid!"

Only it was too late for fears now; too late for panic. He climbed through the port, not even answering.

Lor crowded behind him. "Let me go, my father—"

"You'll follow." Boone clipped it. "You've got a job; me—I don't matter."

On, up the ladder; then through other hatches.

Still silence. Still no sign of crewmen.

At last, the control room. Boone's heart pounding, pounding.

He stepped through the entrance.

But this cell, too, lay empty.

Slick-palmed, taut nerves quaking, Boone waved on the others.

They came in. Their breathing rasped loud in the stillness. Boone tightened his grip on the blaster.

Lor moved to the rear, to the converter chamber. "Perhaps here—" He pushed open the hatch-door.

The silence broke, then.

A thousand ways it broke: in the *Whish!* of a club, and the thud of a heavy blow landing; the quick scrape of feet, the blurred whirl of fast movement. A curse and a clanking, a raw ring of metal.

Lor went down as a rock falls, blood spurting from a head-wound.

Eileen screamed.

And then, there was Krobis: tight-lipped, sharp-featured Krobis of the too-short legs and too-slicked black hair.

Guards crowding past him, he stood in the converter-room hatchway, and never had Boone seen such malice on any human face.

"So, you traitor!" Now Krobis was laughing. "I swore that I'd get you, and by Rega, I have!"

Boone stood wordless, gripped by sick numbness.

"Chelan, take that blaster!"

A guard shuffled forward.

"No!" Boone grated. His finger went tight on the trigger. He backed to the wall-plates.

"So—?" Krobis leered at him. "Think of the girl, Boone—your precious Eileen! What chance would she have, if you let go a blast-bolt?"

Eileen—! Boone turned to stare at her.

She stood slumped, face covered. Her shoulders were shaking. Wearily, Boone let the guard take the blaster.

"Good!" Krobis stalked forward, still leering. "But not for you, Boone! This time you don't get off with just Venus Barracks!"

Boone raised his head slowly. "Not Venus Barracks—?"

"No, damn you!" Krobis' voice rang with elation. "I'm in command here—and this is an uncharted base! Under space law, that gives me full power to try and pass sentence." A pause, electric with tension. "I'm condemning you to death!"

It was the strangest of moments. For all at once Boone's heart was no longer pounding. The tension drained from him. It was as if he had known from the start what was coming. The words in themselves brought only relief, not more panic.

Krobis wouldn't even be censured. He stood too high in the Cartel for that. Federation officials could be counted on to go along, too, if for no other reason than the trouble at the Thelema base, the wrecking of the airlocks.

Now Krobis was turning. He spoke to a sergeant: "Get a squad ready. They die in five minutes."

"'They'—?" Boone went rigid. "What do you mean, 'they'? I'm the one who's condemned, not Eileen and Lor!"

"Is that so?" Krobis' sharp-featured face was like granite. "You were in this together."

Fury rocked Boone. "You're afraid, Krobis; that's the answer—afraid that this whole dirty business will backfire—"

"Is that quite all?" Krobis' eyes, his voice, had never been colder. "If so"—this to the guard—"sergeant, you may proceed with the execution!"

Sweat chilled Boone. "Wait..." In spite of himself, all at once he was pleading. "Kill us both, then—Eileen and me. But not Lor, there. He's a mutant—"

"A mutant—?"

"Yes. The Helgae, those structures we process—they're living, not dead. They sent him to tell us, to give us their knowledge—"

"Their knowledge? What knowledge?" Of a sudden Krobis' black eyes were gleaming and wary.

Boone sucked in a breath. "How much would the Cartel give to learn mekronal's structure—the true chemistry of it?"

"Mekronal—? This creature can make it? From basic elements found outside Saturn's system?"

"Yes."

"Then he *must* die!"

Boone rocked under the onslaught. He groped for words; found none.

The other kept on talking: "There are things you should know, Boone—and these guards here are men I can trust, so I'll tell you." Martin Krobis smiled thinly. "You always forget that I stand for the Cartel. We're reaching for power, those of us high in it. Mekronal is our weapon. So long as it's ours alone, that power keeps growing. Make it free to all comers, and IC's backbone is broken."

"You mean that you'd wipe out a whole culture to hold it? You'd bring war with the Helgae for the sake of the Cartel?"

"Are you stupid enough that you have to ask me?" Krobis' words dripped contempt. "We'd do even more, you fool—as witness our gambit with

chandak?"

"Your gambit—?" Boone rocked again.

"So I term it." Now the other was chuckling. "Consider that report Terral showed you, for instance. I meant him to have it."

"Then—chandak—"

"—Is a fraud, pure and simple. It has no effect at all on mutation. For that matter"—once more, Krobis chuckled—"our tests show that the mutation itself brings new mental powers, not loss of old ones. But a contrary report could bring panic, help to break our opponents. So...." He shrugged.

It was a world out of nightmare, a moment to madden.

"Damn you, Krobis!" Boone choked. "Damn you!"

He flung himself forward, then, heedless of weakness, and the guards, and the weapons.

If only his hands could reach Krobis' throat, rend it—!

But a clubbed blaster hit him. He sprawled to the floor-plates. Krobis' laugh rang out above him, harsh and vindictive. Death's chill fingers touched him.

Only then, in the shadows where Lor lay, his eyes caught strange movement—a slithering, a rustling, a swirling of vapors.

Numbly, he wondered....

But guards seized his arms and dragged him up roughly. Martin Krobis spat, "Kill him!" and bloodied his cheekbone.

The guards jerked him backwards, stumbling and reeling.

As they did so, the movement surged out of the shadows—and now it was more than mere vapor.

A monster, it rose up—a weird, insectile monster! Great mandibles speared out, clacking and slashing.

A guard saw it, cried hoarsely and leaped back.

Too late. The thing was upon him. Claws ripped at his belly. A stinger-shaft pierced him.

Someone fired with a nerve-gun.

He died the monster's second victim.

Panic roared through the room, then. The guards trampled each other in their rush for the hatchway, Boone swayed off balance, deserted.

Only five in the room now: Lor, Eileen, Krobis, Boone—and the monster.

The thing swung towards Krobis.

But Krobis spun aside, not even attempting to flee; he snatched up the fallen guard's nerve-gun.

Then, pivoting, ignoring the monster, he aimed the gun straight at Lor's prone figure.

Eyes open now, the mutant jerked back—trapped, cornered.

Boone and Eileen lunged as one.

The girl was closest. Her hand hit the nerve-gun as Krobis pulled the trigger.

The charge burned out against the wall-plates off to one side of Lor.

Before Krobis could fire again, Boone was upon him. They went down together, rolling and wrestling and panting. Boone could feel his strength begin to go.

But now it was not for himself that he was fighting. The fate of two races hung on the outcome.

With a curse, he writhed suddenly upward, then threw himself back, smashing Krobis' head down to the floor.

The other's muscles went slack. Sobbing, Boone kicked clear.

Then something whipped past him—the monster, all claws slashing.

Its stinger speared through Martin Krobis' brain.

There was darkness after that, for Boone; a shadowy darkness that somehow was more of his mind than in the room. Dimly, he knew that the

carrier all at once was hurtling upward; that the monster had vanished back into whatever realm from whence it came.

Not that it mattered at this moment. Who cared for monsters? The thing was Lor's creation, surely—a Helgae weapon he'd materialized to save them, just as for his mother's—Eileen's—pleasure he had made a rose.

Lor, their son, the mutant. Lor, first clear-eyed champion of a new and higher race.

How many battles would they fight together? What perils would they face before the war against the Cartel's greed was won?

And then, Eileen....

As if in answer to his thought, she came now; knelt beside him, cradling his weary head close to her breast.

"Eileen," he whispered, "Eileen, we have a mission...."

She answered softly, "My mission is with you, Fred, now and always."

He liked that thought, Fred Boone decided. It was one on which a man could rest at peace.

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