

By FRANK R. KELLY

Men of Earth and girls of the Red Planet face a desperate horde of savages on a Martian desert!

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THE sun sank slowly down beneath the crest of razor-backed hills, its last long rays spilling out over the desert in a golden flood of light. Great piled dunes of scarlet sand took up the faint crimson beams and cast them back and forth in flashing cascades of eery brightness—they faded, vanished. Night, sudden and complete, dropped with soundless speed over the desert.

Armiston made a savage motion of despair, and tore his eyes away from the bleak scene. He turned, walked away from the huge glassite dome-port set like a great round eye in the smooth black metal of the tower wall.

His glance swung over the stark bareness of the tower rooms; the little stellite-glazed table; the five stiff-backed, metal-bound chairs. All of it sterile and dead as the desert outside, typical of the grim reality of the Tower Station, sole supply of the eca-radium that was man's greatest weapon in the never-ending fight against Cancer Four.

Armiston's eyes caught the straight taut figure, still standing beside the great dome-port., and tightened with sudden bitter anger. "Good heavens, R. G. Quit standing there with that accursed grin of yours! You can't—*like* this! It's driving me mad!"

The older man turned sharply from the lookout port, sudden concern in straight grey eyes. His hand caught Armiston's shoulder in a grip that made the younger man wince.

"Cut that. Come out of it! I know how you feel—but it's too late now, Bob. You should never have come here. Why did you?"

"I was a fool, R. G. It was a woman, of course. In Korna. I thought I loved her—I thought there was nothing left for me after she—tired of things. Nothing except this. So I volunteered."

"I'm sorry, Bob. I wish there was some way I could send you back. But I suppose you know that once here —always here."

The bitterness and despair came back behind Anniston's eyes. "I know. The thing's monstrous! Why do they condemn us to *this*? It's inhuman!"

"No," Weber said unwaveringly, "it's very human, Bob. It is for all humanity—on whatever world it may be. Have you ever seen a case of Cancer Four? Then you know what I'm talking about. Eca-radium, sealed in capsules of antonium-isotope, is the only hope, once you've got—*it*. With eca-radium, you live—without it, you die an undescrivable death. That's why we're here, Bob, just four of us. The Council would condemn no more to certain death. And no more are needed with the equipment and the Guards to help us. You understand, Bob?"

"Yes," Armiston said slowly. "What happened to the man before me?"

"He lost his grip. Tried to get away. They caught him before he'd gone half a mile. Do you want me to tell you any more?"

"No," Armiston said quietly. "No. I understand what you mean—perfectly."

AT THAT instant a bell tinkled musically in the wall behind them. A panel slid back into smooth metal, revealing a square of smooth vibra-screen. A man's face sprang with startling suddenness out of the vague shadows—a narrow, aquiline face with grave luminous dark eyes. The man spoke, his voice husky.

"Greetings, R. G. You two're on. Come down on Car V-Seven. Number Eight's cut off for a while—Council orders. I think something's up."

Weber nodded slowly, his face grave. A sudden uneasiness rose behind his eyes. "What have you been running, Ta?"

The other glanced at a narrow strip of metal fabric tape in one black-gloved hand. "Ninety tubes AC-Nine per minute. Other stuff running all the way up to two hundred. Things must be bad back in Korea."

"Yes. They must be." Weber shuddered, remembering the carnage of the epidemic of Cancer Four three years in the past. "We'll be right down."

Armiston forced a tight smile. "I saw that too, R. G. You needn't worry. I'm not going to crack up—for awhile yet."

Weber grinned. "That's the talk I like to hear from you, Bob! Let's go! While there's life, there's hope!"

"Yes," Armiston said. "Yes. Except here."

Weber said nothing more. He pressed a stud in the polished metal of the wall. A panel opened soundlessly, revealed the softly lighted interior of the lift.

They stepped in together. They sank swiftly downward. At the bottom a second panel opened from the smooth wall of the lift shaft—opened into a narrow airtight box of a room lined with doubly-thick coatings of black insulating metal. Ungainly metal fabric suits lay on narrow benches against one wall. Beside them perfectly fitting masks of dull crimson huddled shapelessly.

Armiston and Weber climbed into the suits in silence, slid the scarlet masks down over their heads, buckled connections fast—then surveyed each other through the translucent substance of the red metal fabric. They looked like a pair of weird metal monsters, hooded over with the scarlet masks.

Weber went to the vibra-tooth inset into the opposite wall, and angled for visual connection with Ta Rigo, the man who had summoned them. Presently he answered, from a dim booth in the cavernous vastness of the generating room. He showed long teeth in a white smile, brought his sister, Ona, into view for a flashing instant, waved gaily at Weber.

"All well, R. G. Come out."

Inexplicably as always, Armiston's body was shaking. A sudden revulsion swept over him. Beads of cold sweat broke out on his face. Then he glimpsed, just for an instant, the bravely smiling oval of the girl's face—and fear left him. If this little Martian girl could stand it, he could.

WEBER pressed a stud in the vv thick metal wall of the room; a great panel opened before them, disclosed a narrow chamber, triply reinforced by layers of the black metal—the entrance-lock. Together Weber and Armiston stepped into the lock. The panel closed silently after them.

After an instant the wall before them seemed to fade away. The two men crossed swiftly over the threshold of the lock, and found themselves standing on a narrow catwalk, staring down into the Room of Rays.

Armiston stared, as always, with fascinated wonder. His eyes swept over the towering masses of whirring, clicking machinery, found at last the things upon which all this vast activity was centered—the ray tubes!

Towering masses of fused quartz, ranged in two great ordered circles about the central generating chamber, the tubes lanced upward into the dimness of the roof. Constant flame, the white coruscation of 20,000,000 volts bridged the gap between the glowing hot points of huge stellanum electrodes.

They poured a scintillating cascade of power over into the central chamber of the whole vast system—whirling electronic streams, bombarding with terrific force the heavy atoms of the ectoranium in the center of the chamber.

All that vast outpouring of energy, gathered from the sun-mirrors on the desert above into the photocells, poured out upon the great block of blue-green metal that lay in the middle of the central-chamber—pure ectoranium, element 194, broken down by the titanic action of the electron stream into precious pools of eca-radium, most valuable derivative of radium!

Trickles of glowing white liquid dropped from the great block of metal, flowed sluggishly out through narrow vents of triply-braced zirconium into narrow tubes of crimson metal.

Laboring robot arms came down from the dim bulk of nearby machines. They caught the tubes, sealed them white-hot, thrust them swiftly into the openings of repulsion-tunnels, to be caught up into the never-ceasing stream of tiny projectiles hurtling half across Mars to the receiving depots of Korna.

A sudden thrill rocked Armiston's soul. None gave better service to the worlds than these four bitter exiles who labored in the subterranean pits of the rays, submitting uncomplainingly to the slow rotting death of ray-infection! In a glow of vicarious martyrdom, he swung down the catwalk by Weber's side, took his place beside the older man at the great central-control towers. He was even able to wave gaily at Ona as she passed him, tired and pale, going down to the entrance lock. The girl smiled back tremulously. Then she was gone.

Weber, sitting three feet away from him, eyes fascinated by the rhythms of the great mechanisms scattered over the room, each a smoothly-working cog in a vast whole. Weber, with a queer sensation of ecstasy, realized that the rays were conquering him.

He wondered if, after all these years, he was going mad. What did the Martians call this vast bleak desert whose heart held the room of rays? *En-o-Dah—En-o-Dah*, the Desert of Lingering Death. He glanced across once at Armiston, sat up sharply, alarm in his eyes.

Armiston was breaking under the constant onslaught of the rays, even though his time here was measured in days, Weber's in years. He'd have to do something about that. Why was it so hard to think?

HE SHOOK his head sharply to clear his brain, unstrapped himself from his control-board, glanced down once at the quiet surface of his switch panel, hurried across the narrow catwalk between the control towers. His metal gloved fingers closed hard on Armiston's shoulders. He shoved his face down close to the younger man's.

"Come out of it, you snivelling fool! You've *got* to stick! I won't *let* you go mad! You don't get out of things as easily as that!" Armiston waved a hand feebly. "Go on back. I'm—right as rain, now. It—just comes on me in—waves. Gone now."

Weber stared at him a minute, then gave his shoulder a fierce grip and was gone. Nothing else happened on their shift after that.

A bell rang in deep sonorous tones, its throbbing reaching even through the hollow thunder of the machines in the great room.

Armiston forced moist lips to split into a thankful smile. Shift over! He rose stiffly, stared out over the room, eyes fastened on the narrow platform, jutting out from the outward face of the entrance-lock.

The panel opened. Two black-clad crimson-hooded figures came toward them, laboring up spidery lengths of metal ladder.

Ta Rigo and Ona stood presently beside them, panting a little. Ta Rigo waved a gay hand. Nothing

seemed to affect this tough-skinned keen-witted little Martian. But the girl looked tired.

"How goes it, my friends? Still ninety, R. G.?"

Weber nodded gravely. He was himself again—master of the insidious fear that lived in all of them.

"Still ninety. I'm afraid something's up in Korna. Ona, you look tired. Let me take the first half of this watch. You go on up with Bob."

The girl flushed indignantly. "No, no I am not tired at all—really. I cannot let you do this for me, R. G."

He smiled at her, gave Armiston a little push. "Get on—both of you! It's not the first time I've taken double watch—is it, Ta, old friend?"

The lithe Martian grinned. "Indeed not. I am afraid, R. G., that you and I are a bit too tough to kill. Go on, Ona."

Armiston moved forward, pleading. "Please, Ona."

The girl laughed shakily. "Three against one—what can I do?" Armiston caught her hand. The two of them climbed past Weber and the silent Martian, vanished down the narrow ladder. Weber and the Martian watched until the panel of the entrance lock had closed behind them. Then a—single silent glance of understanding passed between the two men.

Armiston said, "Ona, I am afraid. I think I am going mad."

They were in the tower room again, sitting opposite each other at the little metal table. The girl looked at him with wide luminous eyes. Her thin hand came out and touched his fingers.

"I know, Bob. I am afraid, myself—always. Even R. G. is a little afraid, I think. The brave man, Bob, overcomes fear."

Armiston raised his head and looked at her. For the first time he really saw her as she was, saw the proud liveness of the small body, the aquiline intelligent little face, the glorious crown of sea-green hair.

"That's so," he said slowly, dully. "You're brave, Ona. More than brave—beautiful. Have you ever heard that word before? It fits you."

She met his straight glance with half-troubled eyes. "Am I really beautiful, Bob?"

"You are," he said softly and closed his big hand over her small one. "I love you, Ona."

She drew back from him abruptly, terror in her eyes. "You should not have said that! There is no room for love *here*, Bob."

"There is room for love everywhere," Armiston said and came around the table. He caught her in his arms.

The soft tinkle of a warning bell separated them. The vagueness of the vibra-screen vanished. Slowly the image of the caller showed on the little glowing square. There was no face. There was simply a half sphere of glinting white glassite, through which was dimly visible a gently throbbing mass of grey Jelly like substance.

The whole was mounted on an ungainly tripod-shaped metal mechanism, capable of swift movement upon the flexible metal tentacles it called legs. A metal man, one of the increasing thousands beginning to

throng Mars—once a being of flesh and blood, now a great brain mounted on metal. It was the last desperate resource of a dying race.

THERE was a bright-glinting object inset into the stark whiteness of the head dome and Armiston recognized the thing as M-Seven, Commander of the guard of metal men that surrounded the Tower Station—for protection against the hordes of desert vandals. Armiston had the uncanny sensation of a voice speaking in his brain:

"M-Seven, Commanding Twelfth Guard Squadron, reporting. I have —news."

The girl pushed Armiston aside. "Of course. Use lift V-Two, Commander. At once. We will await you."

A bell rang. Slowly, a long panel slid back into the metal wall and the metal Guard untangled his grotesque body from the crowded little lift car and came into the room, stood swaying gently before them. The girl snapped a question:

"There is—trouble?"

"Yes, High One. A raiding party of desert savages attacked the Guard Station at Zee-Boma; they carried it—but not before warning had been sent out. The vandals have taken a course directly across the Fire Mountains above us. No danger for here but the Twelfth Squadron may be ordered to pursue. I thought I would warn you."

"You did rightly," the girl said. She stood a moment in silence, thinking. Curiously, Armiston did not question her right to command. "We will go with you to the signal-room," the girl said suddenly. "Come, Bob."

Armiston followed without question. The queer ungainly thing before them swayed on its flexible tentacles, made an odd mechanical bow. A tentacle whipped out and pressed a stud in the wall, summoning the lift.

The panel opened in the wall before them. The metal Guard motioned with a tentacle that they were to go down first. The car sank.

Below a panel opened again into a metal wall and he and Ona came out into the dimness of the signal-room. There were two of the metal Guards here, working silently at giant vibra-screens and audio-detectors, sending and receiving, forming a link in the world-girdling chain of Guard, Stations. In one corner the hello apparatus was silent and unmoving. It was not often used, except in cases of extreme emergency.

They stood near the helio apparatus, staring out through the round opening of a small glassite port. Night, sudden and complete, had fallen over the desert. In here, dim and muted by distance, they could hear the soft whisper of a rising wind—a thin, high wind, howling the dirge of dying Mars. A shock stabbed Armiston's brain. There in the distance—had he seen that pinpoint of sudden white light cutting the velvet blackness—or was he going mad?

He was not mad. The girl had stiffened suddenly beside him, slim body taut, eyes intent upon the distance. She turned, flung a stream of words at the metal Guard Commander. He came closer, shoved Armiston impatiently aside. The grey substance of the brain was palpitating, stirring—suddenly Armiston was very sick, the room whirling before him.

BEFORE his gaze the thing had turned, twisted—and projected out of the quivering protoplasm of the

brain an eye! Armiston turned away. The brain was throbbing again: "Yes, High One. There is someone, something out there—signaling —using Guard Code. I can read parts of the message. I can get all of it now."

The girl gripped Armiston's shoulder with painful force. "What does it say?"

"It says, 'Guard Station, Aie-Tau. To all Guard Commanders, Sector V-Four, South—attacked by raiding party of desert savages. Leaders maddened by thirst—great numbers —more coming from hills—afraid can't hold out much longer. Using last charged—V-Tubes—now.' The message ends, High One."

Armiston met the girl's eyes. There was fear in them. "You are afraid, Ona. Why?"

She looked at him queerly. "I am not afraid for myself, Bob. But there are so many depending on us. So many who will die, horribly, without the tubes. If anything happens—"

He understood—and for the first time uneasiness seized him. They were almost defenseless and if the Guards left. . . .

"What could happen?"

The girl shrugged, eyes uneasy and worried. "I don't know. Nothing, I suppose. But if the Guards..."

Armiston looked across at the queer ungainly metal thing, felt sudden respect. He asked quietly, "You will have to go?"

The brain quivered. "Yes. It is the Code of the Guard, High One. I do not like it. But I must obey. I will leave two here to guard you. You will be safe."

"Of course we will be," Armiston said, looking at the girl.

The girl nodded slowly, her eyes troubled.

"I hope so, Bob."

The metal Guard Commander was giving swift orders. The helio apparatus began to swing and flicker, swing again, flicker again, back and forth. And out on the vast reaches of the desert small points of white light flickered in answer from night patrols.

Slowly, in ones and twos and threes, the patrols trickled in from the desert, formed in ordered rows below, at the ground-entrance of the tower. The Guard Commander snapped terse commands at the two Guards in the signal-room. He turned, stood before Armiston and the girl.

The brain quivered.

"I must go now, High One."

The girl nodded, her straight eyes facing the ungainly metal bulk. "Yes. We will be safe until you get back, M-Seven. Good hunting!"

Armiston and the girl were silent and abstracted, going up to the tower room in the lift. Neither thought of sleep. Swiftly Armiston donned heavy metal armor, slipped the crimson mask down over his face.

Somehow his fear was gone.

They stepped out together onto the catwalk leading down into the vast room, clambered past the jutting bulk of clamoring machinery, moved upward slowly into the control towers.

Weber flung them a searching glance. His hands played swiftly over a narrow keyboard inset into one corner of the giant switch panel, locking the automatic controls. Ta Rigo did the same.

"What is it?" Weber demanded. "Something's up?"

"Yes," the girl answered. "The Guards have been called away. There's been an attack to the north of us—desert vandals. M-Seven left us two Guards. R. G.—I'm afraid."

Weber said slowly, "So am I. Something's doing in Korna. And if that weren't enough to worry us we get *this!*"

"What are you running?" the girl asked, eyes suddenly widened. Weber answered tersely:

"Ninety-five AC-nine every minute. We'll leave control to the automats for awhile. We'll have to. I've got to talk to Korna."

TOGETHER they crowded into the car, rode upward swiftly to the signal-room. The panel closed behind them. Weber shot a quick glance over the dim outlines of the great room, took in the steady, certain movements of the two metal Guards in one corner, rested on the huge bulk of the darkened center vibra-screen.

He swung on the three behind him. "You'd better stand by the lookout port. There *might* be something to see. Ona, you have keen eyes. Use them. I'm calling Korna."

Weber strode forward, flung himself impatiently into the narrow control-seat of the great screen, worked rapidly at banked rows of control studs. He met the keen black eyes of Travisgane, Councillor in charge of Communications. Worried lines were carved deep into the Councillor's high white forehead.

"Weber! Thank God. I've been trying to get you for hours! Anything wrong?"

Weber shook his head. "Nothing definite. But M-Seven's been called away. A raiding party's struck across the Fire Mountains. All Guard Squadrons in this sector have been called out."

The Councillor did not look as if he were even listening. The half-mask of impassive restraint dropped away from him.

"There's trouble enough here, Weber. Gods of Space—the horrors I've seen this last hour I Weber, it's up to you—and Ta Rigo. We'll go under if you can't keep up that flow of ninety AC-nine per minute."

"You don't mean—you can't mean —another wave of Cancer Four?"

The Councillor nodded wearily. "But I do. Look."

The screen blurred, swung, flickered—and Weber stared with sickened eyes at a scene of unthinkable horror. Ward after ward of the great Hospitalization Centres in Korna was packed to overflowing with warped travesties of the human form.

The screen blurred again and presently the Councillor was back, eyes grim and tortured. "It's come again. You've *got* to keep supplying us with AC-nine. I won't think of what would happen if you fail—even for an hour."

"I see," Weber said in a hushed voice. "We won't fail, Councillor."

He cut off the screen controls and swung out of the operator's seat, stood up, turned. The girl was beside him, face pale as death. She swayed, toppled. He caught her, put her on her feet again.

"Steady on, Ona. We can't fail *now*."

"No," the girl whispered softly, "No." She made a sudden gesture toward the lookout port, where Armiston and the Martian stood frozen, staring out over the desert.

"Out there, R. G. We saw something."

Weber shoved her aside, hurried to the port.

JUST topping the crest of scarlet and dunes silvered by, the light of the racing moons, a vague, dark, rippling mass was flowing rapidly over the desert, sweeping down upon the tower. Weber felt despair crush him. Vandals. A raiding party of desert savages, maddened by thirst, coming to attack them!

He swung suddenly away from the port. Then he caught Armiston and the Martian in *a* savage grip.

"Come out of it, you two! We can't let them take us! I promised—"

Armiston stared at him helplessly. "But what will we do? What *can* we do?"

Weber's face was a granite mask of determination. "We'll fight," he said fiercely.

"We'll fight with what we've got—and beat them. We've *got* to."

The girl moved suddenly, spoke. "An idea, R. G.—why not use our insulation-armor, when we go out there to meet them? They'll find it hard to reach us through inches of entonium! And we can use the projector."

"You've struck it!" Weber cried exultantly. "And we've got our two Guards here to help us!"

He swung, faced the two metal men, who stood impassively waiting in one corner of the room. "We're going to fight, my friends. Out there. We four will handle the projector and you have your hand weapons. Use them."

The brain of the nearest rippled in sardonic approval. "Ai! May we find—good hunting!"

A little band of six figures crawled across a molten sea of rippling desert. In the lead were four metal-armored heavy-moving beings in human form, fingering the multiple controls of the glimmering, sharp-nosed ionic projector. Following on swift, lithe tentacles of metal came two ungainly monstrous things, topped by glassite cases in which rested two naked throbbing brains.

Awaiting them on the crest of the dunes was the enemy—a silent horde of savage creatures, begirt with fragments of metal armor—blunt-featured, heavy-browed—fingering crude flame-belching weapons of Earth's iron and steel. Here and there among them a compact little heat-gun, taken by battle from some Guard Station.

Savages, Armiston thought, climbing up to battle at the side of the tight-faced girl—savages of a strange planet, warring with madmen gone berserk in defense of their beloved science, fighting to uphold a dying civilization.

A heat-gun chuckled suddenly on the crest of the sand-hills, sent a sobbing stream of incandescent fire pouring down over the dunes. The six metal-armored figures walked on with contemptuous strides. One of the metal Guards lifted a tiny silver capsule in a lithe tentacle—hurled it full into the heart of the crouching horde on the hills above. An atomic bomb!

The capsule burst. Silver and green fire seemed to mushroom up out of the billowing waves of sand and brush away with hungry fingers a dozen ranks of savage figures. A great gap opened in the lines of the raiders. They fell back a little, dazed and stunned by that awful concussion.

Slowly the gap in the dark mass above was filled. And suddenly pandemonium burst over the desert. The horde broke up into a billowing, howling mass of madmen, poured down in incessant streams upon the six who stood back to back in the center of the maelstrom.

THREE times the hungry waves over and half engulfed the six—three times they were hurled back again in dismembered bloody fragments—impaled on the spitting electron stream of the projector.

The third time was the last. The horde suddenly retreated in wild rout.

Victory—but at a price. Ta Rigo was gone. Armiston was standing dazed beside a great gaping crater in the sand, looking down at the fused mass of what had been two metal men, once throbbing with tenacious life.

Ona was crumpled on the sand, sobbing over the tortured fragments of a man's metal armor. Weber brought her to her feet, shook her gently.

"Carry on, Ona. It's what he would have wanted you to do."

"Yes," the girl said dazedly, the light gone from her eyes. "I'll—carry on."

"Good girl!" Weber said huskily, and turned away to hide the sudden moisture in his eyes. Armiston fought off a mad desire to scream, laugh, do anything to relieve his insufferable tension. He caught the girl's arm on the other side from Weber and with the girl between them they made it slowly back to the tower.

They took the lift up to the signal-room, stepped across the threshold of the dim chamber in silence and in silence took places by the lookout port, staring out over the desert. The shattered ranks of the savages had already begun to reform slowly. Thirst, Armiston thought suddenly, is a mighty welder.

Weber made a little inarticulate sound and toppled forward on his face. Armiston caught him up and laid him out carefully on a narrow bench. He felt under the light tunic. There was a charred gash under his left armpit, cutting across the heart—a heat-beam had pierced his armor, and the wound had gone unnoticed in the fever of the battle. The girl met Armiston's eyes.

"Bad?"

"Very bad, Ona. We can make him comfortable—"

Together they cleansed and covered the gaping wound, chafed Weber's pale cheeks with cold, nervous hands. He came around, opened his eyes slowly.

"Tell me, Bob—and don't be a sentimental fool. How bad is it?"

Armiston looked at him with unwavering eyes. "You asked for it. I'm afraid you're through."

Weber fell back on the bench. "And I promised, Armiston. Are *they* coming back?"

Armiston was hardly listening. His eyes were staring through the thin glassite of the lookout port. Out on the desert a white pinpoint of light was beginning to wink sardonically—a sending hello!

"Ona—look!" Armiston said suddenly, tensely. "Over to the right a little more. Do you see it? A helio. Sending. Can you read the message?"

The girl strained forward, eyes tense upon the distance. "Yes. It says, 'Commander, the Tower. There is no escape for you. M-Seven was victim of a hoax. It was our signals he caught. He is too far away to return in time to save you. We offer you a chance to live. We know you have much water. Give it to us and you live. Refuse and we take it. Answer at once.' "

A sudden silence fell over the three of them. Weber's eyes opened. By a supreme effort of will he brought himself erect on the bench, met Armiston's eyes. "Armiston, can you handle the helio?"

He nodded.

"Send this message—'You are wrong. We have only a little water. Barely enough for ourselves. And there are many who will die if we die. We have nothing for you.' Send it!"

Armiston shrugged, looked across a long moment at the girl, went slowly to the helio. The great mirrors began to swing and flicker.

FAR out on the desert the white point of answering light leaped up again.

Armiston, very white, said slowly, "They give us five hours to reconsider. After that they attack."

And then the girl spoke, her voice a dry whisper. "But we will stop them. R. G., listen. I have a plan."

Weber's eyes opened again. He fixed the girl with a hot, impatient glance.

"Quickly, Ona! I have not long. What is your plan?"

"This," the girl said slowly and she did not meet Armiston's eyes. "One of us will take that suit of insulation-armor there, put it on. We will charge the projector directly from the storage cells of the generating room in the tower. It is dangerous, I know, but it is the one way left to us. Charged with the power those great cells will give it, it can destroy all of the enemy. One of us will take the projector and go out to meet them."

"No!" Armiston cried in horror. "*No!* You're mad, Ona!"

Weber swung on him fiercely. "Quiet, Armiston! She is right. It *is* the one way out. I will take it, of course. Get the suit"

Armiston helped the girl pick up the heavy suit, bring it near the bench. Slowly Weber rose, swaying on unsteady feet. Armiston extended a quick arm.

Weber struck it down fiercely. "No, man! Can't you see? I must do it alone." He gasped suddenly, toppled face downward to the floor.

The girl was the first to reach him. She straightened up slowly as Armiston caught her shoulder.

"He's gone?" the man asked and read the answer in her eyes. Armiston spoke fiercely, "I've got to take his place. We've got to go through. The projector's ready?" "Yes," the girl said slowly. "We have an hour before they attack." "I will go then," Armiston said, looking at her for a long moment, drinking in the vision of her loveliness. "You know what you have to do when I—wipe them out?"

The girl said in a flat dead voice, "I am to call Korna and have them send relief at once. Then I am to lock the automats and hold out until the relief comes. Is that right?"

"Yes," Armiston said, very close to her. He caught her for a long instant in a close embrace.

"That's goodbye, Ona. Remember—I loved you."

The girl choked back a dry sob. "Goodbye—Bob. Remember I said there was no room for love—*here?* I was right."

"No," Armiston returned slowly, a glorious vision rising in his brain. "You are wrong."

Armiston strode rapidly over the desert, the heavy little projector held easily before him. A curious lightness and freedom filled his brain. At last he was free from fear. And that was all that mattered.

He topped the crest of a sandhill, came slowly to a stop. Almost upon him, gathered in compact masses, the hordes of the freedmen crouched silently, watching him with eager eyes.

Calmly Armiston crouched against the faint glow of the racing moons above, his cool grip tightening about the squat bulk of the quivering projector.

He pressed the studs. Great bursts of searing white light leaped out all around him, swept out in a vast half-circle that engulfed the horde in an instant dissolution of flaring force, rebounded with a thunderous concussion upon Armiston's metal armor—and exploded in a searing wave of white flame. Armiston was gone.

Behind, high up in the towering silver bulk of a great tower, the girl watched with fascinated, horrorstricken eyes, her face pressed hard against the glassite of the lookout plate.

Moving like an automaton, she crossed the floor of the signal-room, sat down at the controls of the vibrascreen, and began to build up visual and audible connection with Korna. The face of Travisgane, the Councillor of Communications, looked out at her with questioning eyes.

"Ona! What is it?"

The girl looked at him dully. "They are all gone except me. They are all gone. All gone."

The Councillor said frantically: "Ona! Ona! Listen to me! Tell me what has happened! Weber and Armiston?"

"Dead," the girl said in a flat voice. "They're all dead except me. Send relief as quickly as you can. I am locking the automats. You've nothing to fear; they will supply you until you can send out some fools to take our places."

"Yes," the Councillor said in a stricken voice. "What happened?" "A trick," the girl muttered, "A trick to get M-Seven away and then attack here. They didn't win, though. Couldn't beat R. G.—and Armiston killed them all before he died."

"They were brave men," the Councillor said softly. "We are winning the fight here. Carry on, girl!" The girl looked at him a little stupidly. "You'll send the relief?"

The Councillor nodded. "Of course. In five hours."

The screen went dead. Slowly the girl got up from the control-seat and went to the lookout port, stared out at the bleak cruelty of the desert. The desert had won. The desert always won.

After a long time a sound invaded the silence of the room—distant, muted, the rising thunder of a fleet of rocket-ships slanting down over the hills. The relief.

The girl watched until the roaring ships were dimly visible silvery blobs on the horizon. Then she rose slowly and went up in the lift to the entrance-lock of the Room of the Rays—and entered, without armor.

Slowly she moved down the narrow catwalk, reached the control towers. She passed them by unheeding and walked grimly, doggedly, into the nimbus of white flame that lived and grew about the surface of the tubes.

Outside a thin wind rose over the desert, whispering.