

THE RED PERI

THE DUTCH ROCKET *Aardkin*—out of Middleburg, passengers and freight—dropped gingerly toward the mist and cloud-girt Earth some twelve thousand miles below, underjets cushioning the fall. This last leg of the journey from Venus was the ticklish part of the trip; for the great cigar-shaped rockets, beautifully swift in space, were anything but maneuverable in a strong gravitational field; and Captain Peter Ten Eyck had no particular desire to descend in either central Europe or mid-Atlantic, to the resultant disgust of the home office. He wanted to hit Middleburg in Zeeland.

Off to the right appeared a very curious shape, visible no more than a quarter of a mile away through the bridge room port. "*Donder!*" said Captain Ten Eyck feelingly.

At the same moment the annunciator beside him remarked, "Cut your jets!"

"*Aasvogel!*" rejoined the captain. "*Vaarken!*" His other epithets were somewhat too expressive for permanent record.

The apparition against the black sky was swiftly drifting closer. It was distinguishable now as a glittering, metal rocket, but in no way like the tapering, cylindrical *Aardkin*, nor like any other rocket—save one.

It was a tubular triangle, from each corner of which rose a strong girder to meet an apex above. In effect, its sides and girders outlined a skeleton tetrahedron, and from the apex of the girders, the blue atomic blast flared down to spread fanlike into the space below. As it approached, the strange vessel was dwarfed by the giant freighter; it was no more than a hundred feet on a side, not an eighth the length of the *Aardkin*.

Again the annunciator uttered its metallic tones. It was responding, apparently, to a beam from the stranger. "Cut your jets!" it repeated. "Cut your jets, or we'll top you!"

Captain Ten Eyck ended his mutterings in a heavy sigh. He had no wish to have his vessel exposed to the withering blast of the pirate. He grumbled an order into the box beside him, and the roar of the jets ceased. Whatever maneuverability the lumbering freighter possessed was gone now; there was no longer any chance of ramming the agile attacker.

With the cessation of the jets came also complete weightlessness, since they were in a free fall; but a twelve-thousand-mile fall takes considerable time to become serious. Ten Eyck sighed again, ordered the floor magnets on, and waited phlegmatically for further directions. After all, he reflected, his cargo was insured, and Boyd's Marine could afford the indemnity. Besides, Boyd's was an English concern, and he had no mind to risk a good Netherlands ship and—if he did say it himself—a good Netherlands captain to save an English insurance company from loss.

The door to the bridge room opened. Hawkins, the first officer, clattered in. "What's here?" he shrilled. "The jets are off—" He caught sight of the glistening shape beyond the port. "The *Red Peri!* The blasted pirate!"

Captain Ten Eyck said nothing, but his pale blue eyes stared moodily at the painted figure plainly visible on the attacker's hull—the figure of a crimson winged imp. He needed no sign to identify the pirate; the queer construction of the vessel was proof enough, for there wasn't another such ship in the sky.

The voice sounded again. "Open your air lock." Ten Eyck gave the order and stalked grimly out to receive the boarding party. He heard the thud of the extending gangway as it struck, and the faint grind as the magnet bit to the freighter's hull. There came a brisk pounding on the inner door of the lock. The captain gave the order to open, his voice curiously equable. He was thinking again of the insurance company.

Most of the *Aardkin*'s score of passengers were crowded along the passage. The cutting of the jets, and perhaps the sound of Hawkins' voice from the beam room as he called hopefully for assistance, had apprised all of them of the events, and the glittering triangle of the *Red Peri* indicated their nature.

The lock swung inward, opening upon the steel-ribbed, rubber-sheathed tunnel of the gangway.

Figures in space suits, worn either for disguise or simply as precaution against the possible need of cutting their way in, filed through the circular doorway, automatics and gas guns menacingly visible.

There were no words spoken; a dozen buccaneers clanked methodically away toward the aft bold, and one, a slighter figure, stood grimly guarding the lock. In five minutes they were filing back, dragging whatever loot they had found, with the queer movement of inertia without weight—much as if they floated the objects through water.

Ten Eyck saw the cases of *xixtchil* pods, valuable as so many diamonds, disappear into the lock; and the seventeen crated ingots of Venusian silver followed. He swore under his breath as he recognized the casket of emeralds from the mines in the Dutch Alps of Venus, and wondered blasphemously how they had managed to crack the Aardkin's safe with neither torch nor explosive.

Glancing into the purser's office, he saw a queer, jagged hole in the big steel box, that looked more as if it had rusted or simply broken away than as if it had been cut. Then the freebooters were silently passing back to their vessel, having neither addressed nor molested officers, crew, or passengers.

Except, perhaps, for one: among the group of watchers was young Frank Keene, American radiologist and physicist returning from the solar-analysis stations of Patrick's Peak in the Mountains of Eternity. He had edged close to the air lock, and now, as the departing marauders passed through, he suddenly leaned forward with narrowed eyes, and peered boldly into the cloudy visor of the guard.

"Huh!" he said. "A redhead, eh?"

The guard said nothing, but raised a steel-gauntleted hand. The metal thumb and forefinger bit viciously into Keene's suntanned nose, and he was thrust violently back into the crowd, with two spots of blood welling from the abused organ.

Keene grunted in pain. "O.K., fellow," he said stolidly. "I'll see you again some day."

The guard spoke at last in a voice that clinked out metallically from the helmet's diaphragm. "When you do, there'd better be two of you." Then this figure followed the rest; the outer lock clanged shut; the magnets released the gangway's grip; and the *Red Peri*, agile as a swallow and swift as a comet at perihelion, flared into the black void.

Beside Keene sounded the voice of Captain Ten Eyck. "What a ship! Mynheer Keene, is that not a ship—that *Red Peri*?"

He was still exclaiming over it at intervals during the laborious task of laying a new landing course; and when, an hour later, a blunt little League rocket appeared in answer to Hawkin's call, he informed its officers flatly that the pirate was hopelessly beyond reach. "Even if your fat *beeste* of a boat could match its acceleration, which it couldn't."

A year later Frank Keene had almost completely forgotten the *Red Peri* and the red-headed pirate, though occasionally, during the interval, mention of the famous marauder had brought his experience to mind. After all, when a freebooter has scoured the skyways for nearly fifteen years without capture, he becomes something of a legend, a figure of heroic proportions. Papers and broadcasts give daily references to him, and he is blamed for, or perhaps credited with, many a feat performed by some less-celebrated desperado.

The lair of the *Red Peri* remained a mystery, though League ships scoured asteroids, the far side of the desolate Moon, and even the diminutive satellites of Mars. The swift pirate, striking invariably as his victim inched gingerly through some planet's gravitational field, came and went untouched.

But Frank Keene had little time at the moment for consideration of the famous freebooter. He and his companion, fifty-five year old Solomon Nestor of the Smithsonian, were out where few men had ever been, and in a predicament that was perhaps unique. They were dropping their rocket *Limbo* toward the rugged, black disc of Puto, two billion miles from home, and they were not happy about it.

"I tell you," growled Keene, "we're got to land. Do you think I'm settling on this chunk of coal from choice? We've got to make repairs. We can't navigate with one stern jet gone, unless you have a notion to fly in circles."

Old Solomon was a marvel on hard radiations, stellar chemistry, and astro-physics, but hardly an engineer. He said plaintively, "I don't see why we can't zigzag."

"Bah! I told you why. Didn't I spend five hours figuring out the time it'd take to reach the nearest inhabited place? That's Titan near Saturn, just one billion—one billion, I said—miles from here. And at the speed we could make zigzagging, because we couldn't keep a constant acceleration, it would take us just exactly four years and three months. We've got food enough for three months, but what would we live on during the four years? Atomic energy?"

"But what can we do on Pluto?" queried old Nestor. "And why didn't we carry a spare jet?"

"Jets aren't supposed to melt off," muttered Keene disgustedly. "As for what we can do, maybe we can find a virgin deposit of some refractory metal—platinum or iridium or tungsten, or any other with a high melting point—and build up a jet long enough to keep the blast from melting our stern away. Because that's what it'll do if we try running it this way."

"There's tungsten here," observed the older man hopefully, gazing down at the black expanse. "Hervey reported it, and so did Caspari. But there isn't any atmosphere, or rather, what there is, is liquid or solid, except about half a centimeter's pressure of helium. Pluto has a diameter of about ten thousand miles, a surface gravity of about 1.2, and an albedo—"

"Not interested," grunted Keene, and then, relenting, "Listen, Solomon, I'm sorry. I guess I'm taking it out on you because we had a defective jet. But it's a hell of a mess all the same, and somebody's going to suffer for it when we get back. With all the money the institute has, you'd think they'd be able to afford respectable equipment." He glared down through the floor port. "There she comes!"

With a rasp and a jar, the *Limbo* came to rest. Outside, a mixed column of dirt and smoke billowed around the glasses, rose and then settled as quickly as a burst of sand, in the near vacuum that surrounded the ship.

Keene cut the blast. "Come on," he said, turning to a space suit swaying on its hook. "No use wasting time. We'll take a look around." He clambered into the heavy garment, noting irritably its greater weight on the surface of the black planet. The Plutonian gravitation added thirty-six pounds to his Terrestrial hundred and eighty.

"No gun?" asked Nestor.

"Gun? For what? This planet's dead as the brain of whoever tested that jet. How can there be organic life in no air and ten degrees absolute?" He pulled open the inner door of the air lock. "Well," he said, his voice sharply metallic through his helmet's diaphragm, "here goes the Smithsonian Expedition for the Determination of the Intensity of Cosmic Radiation in Extra-planetary Space. We determined it all right; now the only problem of the expedition is to get home with our statistics." He flung open the outer door and stepped out on the black surface of Pluto.

So far as Keene knew, he was the fourth man and Nestor the fifth to set foot on the black planet. Atsuki, of course, was the first, if one credits his figures and photographs, the intrepid Hervey the second, and Caspari the third. Here on this lonely outpost of the solar system, high noon was hardly brighter than full moonlight on Earth, and the queer, black surface that gives Pluto its low albedo made it seem still darker.

But Keene could distinguish the outlines of fantastic mountains beyond the hollow where the *Limbo* rested, and innumerable mysterious crags and hillocks, unweathered by wind or water, loomed closer. Directly to his right lay a patch of glistening, snow-like white; but he knew it wasn't snow, but frozen air. One dared not step in such a drift; for the cold would bite through his insulated space suit, since frozen air was a far better conductor of heat than the rocky ground.

Overhead glittered all the stars of the galaxy, as changeless as though he stood on a pleasant green planet two billion miles sunward, for what was two billion miles to the infinite remoteness of the stars? The landscape was bleak, black, desolate and cold. This was Pluto, the planet that circled at the very edge of the System.

The two started heavily toward a ridge where something glowed faintly, something that might be virgin metal. Strangely, their own footsteps were audible, for the substance of their space suits conducted the sound; but all else was a vast and ominous silence. They did not speak, for their suits, designed only for emergency repairs in space, had no radio; and to communicate it was necessary to touch hand or arm to one's companion; over such a material bridge, sound traveled easily enough.

At the ridge Keene paused, glowering down at a vein of bright, starlighted fragments. He placed a hand against Nestor's shoulder, "Pyritic," he grunted. "We'll have to look farther."

He turned right, treading heavily under nearly sixty pounds more than his Earth weight. Surely, he mused, old Solomon Nestor wouldn't be capable of an extended search in such circumstances. He frowned; Caspari had reported great quantities of heavy metals here, and they shouldn't need such a lengthy search. He stopped sharply; a stone came sliding past him on the rocky surface. A signal.

Off in the dusk Nestor was gesturing. Keene turned and hurried back, clambering along the uneven terrains with such haste that his breath shortened and his visor began to cloud. He clapped his hand on the old man's arm. "What is it?" he asked. "Metal?"

"Metal? Oh, no." Nestor's voice was triumphant. "What did you say about no organic life on Pluto, eh? Well, what about inorganic life? Look there!"

Keene looked. Out of a narrow chasm or cleft in the ridge something moved. For a moment Keene thought he saw a brook flowing, but a brook—liquid water—was an impossibility on Pluto. He squinted sharply. Crystals! Masses of crystals, gray-white in the dusk, crawling in a slow parade.

"I'll be damned!" he said. "Caspari didn't say anything about this."

"Don't forget," said Nestor, "that Pluto has thirty-six per cent more surface than the whole Earth. Not a ten-thousandth part of it has been explored—probably never will be, because it's such a task to get a rocket here. If Atsuki—"

"I know. I know," interrupted Keene impatiently. "But these things aren't tungsten or platinum. Let's move on." But he still stared at the crawling, faintly radiant mass. In the silence he heard infinitely faint rustlings, cracklings, and susurrations, transmitted through the ground to his feet, and thence to his helmet. "What makes them move?" he asked. "Are they alive?"

"Alive? I don't know. Crystals are as close as inorganic matter comes to life. They feed; they grow."

"But they don't live!"

Old Solomon Nestor was in his element now. "Well," he proceeded in professorial tones, "what is the criterion of life? Is it movement? No; for wind, water, and fire move, while many living forms do not. Is it growth? No; for fire grows, and so do crystals. Is it reproduction? Again no; for again fire and crystals reproduce themselves, if their proper food supply is present. Then just what differentiates dead matter from living?"

"That's what I'm asking you!" snapped Keene.

"And I'm telling you. There's just one, or perhaps two criteria. First, living things show irritation. And second, and more important, they show adaptation."

"Eh?"

"Listen," continued Nestor. "Fire moves, grows, feeds, and reproduces, doesn't it? But it doesn't run away from water. It doesn't betray the irritation life shows in the presence of a poison, though water's poison to it. Any living thing that encounters poison makes an attempt to throw it off; it develops antibodies or fever, or it ejects the poisonous matter. Sometimes it dies, of course, but it tries to survive. Fire doesn't.

"As for adaptation, does fire ever make a voluntary attempt to reach its food? Does it deliberately flee from its enemies? Even the lowest form of life known does that; even the miserable amoeba makes positive gestures of adaptation to its environment."

Keene stared more closely at the sluggish crystalline stream, which was now impinging on the black plain at his feet. He bent over it, and suddenly perceived a fact that had hitherto escaped him.

"Look here," he said, touching old Solomon's arm. "These things are organisms. They're not loose crystals, but masses of them."

It was true. The rustling crystals moved in glittering chunks from thumbnail size to aggregations as large as dogs. They crackled and rustled along, apparently moving by a slow shifting of the lower crystals, much as a snake moves on its scaly belly, but far stiffer and slower. Abruptly Keene sent his metal boot crashing into one. It shattered with a blue flash of released static electricity, and the pieces passively resumed their progress. "They certainly don't show irritation," he remarked.

"But look!" shrilled Nestor. "They do show adaptation. There's one feeding!"

He pulled Keene a few feet down the ridge. There was a small bluish deposit of something that looked like frozen clay, a product, perhaps, of the infinitely remote past when Pluto's own heat had maintained liquid water and gaseous air to grind its rocks to powder. A crystalline mass had paused at the edge, and before their gaze it was growing, gray-white crystals springing out of it as frost spreads over a winter-chilled windowpane.

"It's an aluminum-eater!" shrieked Nestor. "The crystals are alums; it's eating the clay!"

Keene was far less excited than old Solomon, perhaps because he was considerably more practical.

"Well," he said decisively, "we can't waste any more time here. We need refractory metal, and we need it bad. You try along the ridge, and I'll cross over."

He broke off suddenly, staring appalled at the foot with which he had shattered the moving crystals. On its surface glittered a spreading mass of tiny, sparkling points!

A break in the surface of his space suit meant death, for the oxygen generator could certainly never maintain its pressure against any appreciable leakage. He bent over, scraping desperately at the aluminum feeders, and then realized that the infection would spread—had spread to his gauntlets. While Nestor babbled futilely and inaudibly behind his visor, Keene rubbed his hands in the gritty, pyritic soil on which he stood.

That seemed to work. The rough substance scoured away the growing crystals, and with frantic vigor he rasped a handful along his shoe. If only no hole, no tiniest pin prick had opened! He scoured furiously, and at last the metal surface showed scratched and pitted, but free of the growths.

He stood up unsteadily, and placed his hand against the gesturing Nestor's side.

"Keep away from them!" he gasped. "They eat—"

Keene never finished his sentence. Something hard jarred against the back of his armor. A metallic voice clicked, "Stand still—both of you!"

II

"What the devil!" gulped Keene. He twisted his head within his immovable helmet, peering through the rear visor glasses. Five—no, six figures in blue metal space suits were ranged behind him; they must have approached in the inaudibility of a vacuum while he had been scouring his suit free of the crystals. For a moment he had an eerie sensation of wonder, fearful that he faced some grotesque denizens of the mysterious black planet, but a glance revealed that the forms were human. So were the faces dim in the dusk behind the visors; so had been the voice he had heard.

Keene hesitated. "Listen," he said. "We're not interfering with you. All we want is some tungsten in order to fix our—"

"Move!" snapped the voice, whose tones traveled through the weapon hard against Keener back. "And remember that I'm two thirds inclined to kill you anyway. Now move!"

Keene moved. There was little else he could do, considering the appearance of the threatening automatics in the hands of their captors. He tramped heavily along, feeling the thrust of the muzzle against his back, and beside him Solomon Nestor trudged with pace already showing the drag of weariness. The old man touched his arm.

"What's this about?" he quavered.

"How do I know?" snorted Keene.

"Shut up!" admonished the voice behind him.

They walked past the looming shape of the *Limbo*—five hundred feet past it, a thousand. Directly ahead was the other rim of the cup-shaped depression in which they had landed, high, black cliffs in fantastic shapes. Suddenly Keene started; what had seemed but a smaller cliff showed now as a skeleton, tetrahedral frame of metal, three webbed shafts rising to a point from a tubular triangle below.

"The *Red Peri*!" he gasped. "The *Red Peri*!"

"Yeah. Why the surprise?" queried the sardonic voice. "You found what you were looking for, didn't you?"

Keene said nothing. The appearance of the pirate ship had amazed him. No one had ever dreamed that the swift marauder could operate from a base as infinitely remote as the black planet. How could even the agile vessel scour the traffic lanes of the minor planets from dusky Pluto, two billion miles out in the empty cosmos?

To his knowledge only two ships—three, if Atsuki hadn't lied—had ever reached those vast depths before their own *Limbo*, and he knew what endless travail and painful labor each of those journeys had cost. In his mind echoed Captain Ten Eyck's words of a year and a half before. "What a ship!" he muttered. "Lord, what a ship!"

There was an opening in the cliff wall as they rounded the bulk of the *Red Peri*. Yellow light streamed out, and he glimpsed an ordinary fluorolux bulb in the roof of the cavern. He was shoved forward into the opening, and suddenly his visor was clouded with moisture. That meant air and warmth, though he had seen no air lock, nor heard one operate. He suppressed the impulse to brush a metal-sheathed hand across the glass, knowing that he couldn't wipe the condensation away in that fashion.

The voice again, still queerly sardonic, yet somehow soft. "You can open your helmets. There's air."

Keene did so. He stared at the figures surrounding himself and Nestor, some still helmeted, others already removing the uncomfortable space suits. Before him stood a figure shorter than the rest, and he recalled the red-haired pirate on the *Aardkin*. The short one was twisting the cumbersome helmet.

It came off. Keene gulped again at the face revealed, for it was that of a woman. A woman? A girl, rather, for she seemed no more than seventeen. But Keene's gasp was not entirely surprise; mostly, it was sheer admiration.

Her hair was red, true enough, if one could call red a lovely and subtle shade between copper and mahogany. Her eyes were bright green, and her skin was the silken, soft, and pale skin of one whose flesh is but seldom exposed to the sunlight, yet gently tanned by the violet-rich rays of the fluorolux.

She let the cumbrous metal suit clank away from her, and stepped out in the quite civilized garb of shirt, shorts, and dainty, laced buskins, such as one had to wear in a space suit. Her figure—well, Keene was only twenty-six, but even old Nestor's pallid eyes were fixed on her as she turned toward them. She was slim, curved, firm; despite her slimness, there was a litheness and sturdiness to her limbs, the result, perhaps, of a lifetime under the supernormal gravitation of Pluto.

"Take off your suits," she ordered coldly, and as they complied, "Marco, lock these up with the rest."

A tall, dark individual gathered up the clanking garments. "Yes, commander," he said, taking a key she held out and moving away into the cavern.

"Commander, eh?" said Keene. "So you're the *Red Peri*!"

Her green eyes flickered over him: She surveyed his own figure, which was still hard and brown and powerful from his swimming days at the university. "You," she said impassively. "I've seen you before."

"You have a good memory," he grunted. "I was on the *Aardkin*."

She gave him a momentary smile of amused remembrance. "Yes. Did your nose scar?" She glanced at the organ. "I'm afraid not."

People—two or three of them—came hurrying up the long corridor of the cave to stand staring curiously at Keene and Nestor. Two were men; the third was a pale, pretty, flaxen-haired girl. The *Red Peri* glanced briefly at them and seated herself on a boulder against the rocky wall.

"Cigarette, Elza," she said, and took one from the pale girl.

The scent of tobacco tantalized Keene, for such indulgences were impossible in the precious air of a space ship. It had been four months since he had smoked, in the frigid little town of Nivia, the city of snow on Titan.

"May I have one?" he asked.

The green eyes turned an icy glance on him. "No," said the *Red Peri* briefly.

"Well, I'll be— Why not?" He was angered.

"I don't think you'll live long enough to finish it," responded the girl coolly, "and our supply is limited here."

"Yeah, limited to what you find on looted freighters!" he snapped.

"Yes," she agreed. She blew a tormenting plume of smoke toward him. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll trade you a cigarette for the information as to how you managed to trace us here."

"Trace you?" he echoed, puzzled.

"That's what I said. It's a generous offer, too, because I'm quite capable of torturing the knowledge out of you."

Staring into her lovely, glittering green eyes, Keene was not disposed to doubt her capability. He said mildly, "But we didn't trace you here."

"I suppose," she retorted, "that you came to Pluto looking for a good business corner. Or perhaps on a little camping trip. Is that your story?"

He flushed under her cool insolence. "We came here by accident," he growled. "One of our afterjets melted off, and if you don't believe it, go look at it."

"Jets don't melt unless they're planned to," said the Red Peri coldly. "And what were you doing in the neighborhood of Pluto anyway? And I suppose that out of all the millions of square miles of surface, you just accidentally picked this valley as a landing place. Well, it won't do you any good to lie, because you're going to die regardless, but you might die a little less painfully if you tell the truth."

"It just happens that I'm telling the truth!" he blazed. "Whether you believe it or not, we landed in this valley by pure chance. We're the Smithsonian's expedition to study cosmic rays in outer space, and you can verify that by our clearance papers from Nivia."

"A good disguise for the secret service," she sneered. "You could get any sort of government papers you want, couldn't you?"

"Disguise! Listen, if we were hunting the Red Peri, do you think we'd come armed with cameras, interferometers, electroscopes, polariscopes, and fly-wing bolometers? Search our ship; you'll find one gun in it—one measly automatic. I'll tell you where it is. It's in the upper right-hand drawer of the navigation table. And we landed here because Pluto was the nearest solid place to where we burned off our jet—and that's the truth!"

The Red Peri's glance was faintly speculative. "I don't see," she said thoughtfully, "that it makes much difference. If you're telling the truth, it simply means that you're a very unlucky expedition, because I certainly can't let you go, and I haven't any particular desire to keep you here. In other words, it still looks very much as if you were destined to die." She paused. "What are your names?"

"This is Smithsonian's Professor Solomon Nestor," he said, "and I'm Frank Keene, radiation engineer."

Her green eyes shifted to the old man. "I've heard of Solomon Nestor," she observed slowly. "I really shouldn't like to kill him, but I don't see exactly what other course is open." She flashed her gaze back to Keene. "Do you?" she asked coolly.

"You could take our words not to give out any information," he grunted.

She laughed. "The Red Peri trusts very little to promises," she retorted. "Anyway, would you give your word to that?"

For a full half minute he stared into her mocking eyes. "I wouldn't," he said at last. "When I entered the Smithsonian's service I took their usual oath to uphold the law in the far places. Maybe many of their explorers consider that oath just so many words; I know some of them have found wealth at the expense of the institute. But I keep my oaths."

The Red Peri laughed again. "No matter," she said indifferently. "I wouldn't trust my safety to any one's word. But the question of your disposal still remains!" She smiled with a faint hint of malice. "Would you prefer to die instantly, or do you think you can stand the torture of suspense while I check your story and think it over? Because frankly, I think it will be necessary to kill you anyway. I see no alternative."

"We'll wait," said Keene stolidly.

"Very well." She flipped away the stub of her cigarette, crossed her dainty legs, and said, "Another, Elza."

Keene looked sharply at the yellow-haired girl as she held a light to the cigarette. There was something dimly inimical in her manner, as if she were struggling to suppress a hatred, a hidden enmity.

She withdrew the flame with an abrupt, irritable gesture.

"That's all," said the green-eyed leader. "I'll lock you up somewhere until I'm ready."

"Wait a minute," said Keene. "Now will you answer a few of my questions?"

She shrugged. "Perhaps."

"Are you the only Red Peri?"

"The one and only," she smiled. "Why?"

"Because you must have been born like Lao-tse at the age of eighty, then. These raids have been going on for fifteen years, and you're not a day over seventeen. Or did you start your career of piracy at the age of two?"

"I'm nineteen," she said coolly.

"Oh. You began at four, I suppose."

"Never mind. Any further questions?"

"Yes. Who designed your ship, the *Red Peri*?"

"A very clever designer," she said, and then murmured softly, "a very clever one."

"He must have been!" snapped Keene angrily.

"He was. Have you anything else to ask?"

"You haven't answered one question so far," he growled. "But here's another. What do you think will happen when the *Limbo* doesn't arrive in Nivia when due? Don't you know that the next government rocket will be out to look for us? And don't you realize that they'll look for us first on Pluto? Your base here is bound to be discovered, and if you murder us it'll go just that much harder with you."

The Red Peri laughed. "That isn't even a good bluff," she said. "Titan isn't a quarter of the way between the Earth and Pluto, and it's getting farther from us every day. The next conjunction of Saturn and Pluto is fifty years in the future, and about the only time your clumsy rockets can make the jump is at conjunction. You ought to know that.

"And what's more, by the time you're missed, there won't be a thing to do but give you up as lost, and you'll not be the first Smithsonian expedition to be lost. And finally, if they did send out a searching party, how would they expect to find you? By blind reckoning?"

"By radio!" grunted Keene.

"Oh. And have you a radio on the *Limbo*?" she asked gently.

He groaned and subsided. Of course there was no radio on the little expeditionary rocket; all its precious space was occupied by fuel, food, and necessary equipment, and besides, what possible use could a radio be to explorers out in the lonely vastness of extraplanetary space? The nearest settlement, Nivia on Titan, was hundreds of millions of miles beyond range of the most powerful beam yet developed.

The Red Peri knew as well as he how utterly hopeless was the expectation of any search for himself and Nestor. They'd simply be given up, called martyrs to science, regretted by the few experimenters who were interested in their results, and then forgotten,

"Any more questions?" asked the flaming-haired one inotingly.

Keene shrugged, but suddenly and unexpectedly old Solomon Nestor spoke. "That entrance," he squeaked irrelevantly, pointing to the arch of the cave. "How do you keep the air here from rushing out?"

Keene whirled and stared in amazement. It was true; the cave was open to the frigid, airless outdoors; he could see the dusky Plutonian twilight through an unglassed, unblocked archway.

"At least that question is sensible," said the Red Peri. "We do it with a field."

"A field!" echoed Keene. "What sort—"

"You've asked enough questions," she cut in tartly. "I answer no more." She turned. "Elza, take these two into any unoccupied room with a metal door. If they're hungry, send them food. That's all."

She rose without a glance at the prisoners. Keene's eyes followed the exquisitely graceful figure as she trod as lightly as if she walked an Earthly corridor, followed by the five men who remained. Her radiant hair glowed far down the length of the passage until she turned aside and vanished.

He and Nestor followed the flaxen-haired Elza, and behind them, grimly silent, came the two men who had first appeared with her. She led them past a number of niches, side aisles, and several obviously

artificial chambers. The cavern seemed to stretch indefinitely into the depths of the Plutonian mountain, and was undubitably a natural cave, though here and there the floor or walls showed signs of human workmanship. At last the girl indicated a chamber to the right, and they entered a small room, furnished comfortably enough with an aluminum chair, a table, and two couches. These last were covered with deep and gloriously beautiful brocades, beyond doubt plunder from some freighter's cargo.

"This is yours," said Elm, and turned toward the door. She paused. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

"No," said Keene. He saw the two men standing in the corridor, and lowered his voice. "But will you talk to us a while, Elza? Alone?"

"Why?"

"I'd like to ask you something."

"What is it?"

He dropped his voice to a whisper. "You hate the Red Peri, don't you, Elza? As much as we do?"

She turned abruptly to the door. "Father," she said evenly, "will you and Basil bring something to eat? I'll stay here; you can bolt the door on us."

There was a murmur without.

"Hush!" she said. "You heard. These two are gentlemen." The door closed and she faced them.

"Well?"

"Can we be heard here?" asked Keene, glancing around the rock-walled chamber.

"Of course not. The Peri has no need to spy on her followers. She's clever enough to read men's feelings in their glances and the tone of their voices."

"Then she must know you hate her, Elza."

"I haven't said that I hate her."

"But you do. Does she know it?"

"I hope not."

"But you just said that she could read—"

"I said men," cut in the flaxen-haired girl.

Keene chuckled. "Why do you hate her, Elza?"

Her blue eyes hardened. "I will not say."

"Well, it doesn't matter, I suppose." He shrugged. "Elza, is there any chance of our escaping? Would you help us to—say, to steal the Red Peri? Our own ship's useless."

"They've gone to repair it. As for the Red Peri, I don't think you could operate it. It doesn't control like your rocket. I don't know how to run it."

"I could make a good try at it," said Keene grimly. "It would have to be the *Red Peri* anyway. They could run the *Limbo* down in three hours and blast it." A thought struck him. "Unless we could cripple the *Red Peri* first."

"I don't see how you could," said Elza. "She has the key to it hidden somewhere. And how could you even reach it? The space suits are locked up, too. You can't even step beyond the entrance."

That brought a new thought. "How do they seal the air at the entrance, Elm?"

"I don't understand how."

Solomon Nestor spoke. "I know that. She said they used a field. She meant—"

"Never mind now," said Keene. "Elza, are there any others here that might—well, side with us against the Peri?"

"No men. All of them worship her and"—her face darkened—"half of them love her."

"For which you can hardly blame them," muttered Keene. "She's about as lovely a female devil as you'd find this side of hell. Still, one would think she'd have some enemies, if only because of her cruel nature."

"She isn't cruel," said Elm reluctantly. "She's ruthless and arrogant and proud, but she isn't cruel—not exactly. I don't think she really enjoys torture."

"Well, her green eyes look cruel enough. Say, Elza, that dark fellow she called Marco. What of him?"

The girl flushed. "He's Marco Grandi. Why do you ask me about him?"

"Because he looks like a sly, calculating, shrewd customer, and there's a big reward for the Peri. I thought we might work on him."

Elm's flush darkened to anger. "He's—he's wonderful!" she blazed. "And if you think money would tempt him—or any of us—you're wrong. Each of us has a dozen times the amount of the reward."

Keene saw his error. "I'm sorry," he said hastily. "After all. I just caught a glimpse of him." He paused. "Does he, by any chance, love the Red Peri?"

She winced. "He's no different in that way than the rest."

"I see. But you—perhaps—wish that he were different—in that way?"

Elza brushed a white hand across her face. "All right," she said sullenly. "I love him. I admit it. That's why I hate her. He's dazzled; he thinks she'll learn to care for him; he can't see how utterly heartless and indifferent she is. That's why I'll do what ever I can to hurt her, but nothing to endanger him. If I help you, you must swear to protect him. If you escape, you must swear to that."

"I'll swear to it, but—can you help us?"

"I don't know. I'll try. I don't think she really wants to kill you, or she'd have blasted you there in the corridor. It isn't her way to hesitate and temporize and think things over. But you are a problem to her."

"That's good news," said Keene. "Say, how many residents are there in this pirate's paradise?"

"A hundred and five, including the children."

"A hundred and—Lord! This must be a pretty well established colony. How old is it?"

"Sixteen years. Her father built it, and it's almost self-supporting. There are gardens off in the side passages." She frowned. "I've lived here since I was four. I'm twenty now."

"And have you never seen the Earth?" Keene saw a chance now to offer more tangible inducement for aid. "Elza, you've missed the most glorious planet in the system—green fields and white snow, great cities and rolling, blue oceans, life, people, gaiety—"

"I went to school there for five years, at Gratia," she interposed coolly. "Don't you suppose we all visit there? Only of late the Peri has refused to let me go. I—I suppose she suspects."

"If we escape," said Keene softly, "you'll be free to live there forever. There will be life and happiness for you, Elza, once this pirate queen is taken and her band destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Her face paled again. "Not Marco. Not my father and my brother Basil. You promise me that. Promise it!"

"I'll promise. All I want is to bring the Red Peri to justice. I don't care about the rest, but—he rubbed his nose—"I've a little score to settle with her. Just the Red Peri herself."

A knock sounded. "Elza!" came a voice.

"Yes, father. Unlock the door and I'll take the tray." She turned.

"But you'll help?" whispered Keene. "With the Red Peri gone, you and Marco—do you understand, Elza? Will you help—just against her?"

"To my last breath!" she whispered.

III

Keene woke with a sense of unaccustomed luxury, and for a moment was at a loss to account for it. Then he realized that it was the sweetness of the air, strange to his nostrils after so many months of an atmosphere that, despite the hard-working rectifiers of the *Limbo*, was anything but sweet. He wondered casually where the Red Peri secured her colony's supply of oxygen.

The Red Peri! He sat up sharply at the memory of the fantastically lovely pirate princess, for despite the reassurance of the girl Elza, he mistrusted the intentions behind the Peri's mocking green eyes. He rose, fumbled for the light switch, and glanced at his wrist watch. Though night and day were one in the cavern, he perceived that Pluto's ten-hour night was past, and that whatever daylight the black planet enjoyed was trickling over it.

Old Nestor still slept. Keene pulled a hanging aside and found water in a tiny pool; he bathed and pulled on the shirt, shorts, and shoes that were the only clothing he possessed. He ran his hand over his

sandy, one-day beard, but his razor was inaccessably remote on the *Limbo*. Then he turned to see old Solomon's pale-blue eyes blinking at him.

"Morning," he grunted. "Glad to see we weren't murdered in our sleep by our pleasant hostess."

Solomon Nestor nodded. "I haven't slept so well since we left Nivia," he quavered. "Fresh air is a blessing."

"Yes. Wonder where she gets it."

"Mines it, I don't doubt," said Nestor. "There are millions of tons of it frozen out on the surface."

"That's true."

"And," continued the old man, "did you notice anything queer about it?"

"No, except that it smells good and fresh."

"I did. When that yellow-haired girl—Elza—lighted the Peri's cigarettes, did you notice the cast of the flame? Purple, distinctly purple."

"So what?"

"Why, it means neon. Nitrogen is scarce here; Hervey and Caspari both said that, and so they use neon as their filler. No one can breathe pure oxygen, and neon is a good substitute for nitrogen, nearly the same density, and absolutely inert and nonpoisonous. That's important to remember. It may help us."

"Help us?"

The old man waggled his head. "You'll see."

"Say," asked Keene suddenly, "what is the explanation of the cave entrance? We walked right through it—vacuum on one side, air on the other. She said they did it with a field remember?"

"I remember. She meant an electrostatic field. You know that like charges repel, and the molecules of air, battering against the field, acquire the same charge. They're repelled; they can't cross the field. It's like the electric wind from a static discharge, but here the wind that tries to blow in just balances the wind that tries to go out. Result, no wind either way."

"But we walked through it. Motion through a field produces a current. I didn't feel any."

"Of course not. You didn't walk through at a mile per second like a gas molecule, did you? Whatever current your motion produced was instantly grounded through your body and space suit, which are conductors. Air at normal pressure is a very poor conductor, so it retains its charge. Gases do retain static charges, as witness ball lightning."

"I see," muttered Keene. "Clever. Better than an air lock as far as convenience goes, though heat must radiate away through the field. But if they use atomic heat, they can afford a little waste."

"There'd be less loss there," said Nestor, "than to the rock walls. Heat could radiate, true enough, but it couldn't escape by conduction. A vacuum is the best heat insulator there is; look at our thermos containers on the *Limbo*. Radiation at temperatures below red heat is a very slow process. And remember that, too."

"I will," grunted Keene, "but right now I'm remembering that we have had no breakfast. Do you suppose her method of execution is slow starvation?" He strode over to the door and pounded vigorously on it. "Hey! Hey, out there!"

There was no response. Irritably, he seized the knob and rattled it, and almost fell backward as the door swung smoothly open. It was unbarred!

"I'll be hanged!" he exploded. He peered into the deserted corridor. "Do you suppose this is Elza's doing?"

"If it is, it's not much help," said old Solomon.

"No. All the same, I'm going to take a look around. Come on; perhaps we can find some space suits."

"You'd need the key to the *Red Peri*, too, or at least the key to the *Limbo*, if they've locked it. I think"—old Nestor's brow wrinkled—"I'll sit right here and figure out something I've been thinking of. Even old heads sometimes get ideas."

"Suit yourself," grunted Keene, with very little faith in the potential ideas of the impractical old scientist. He strode boldly into the passageway.

There was no one visible. He turned left and proceeded toward the entrance of the cavern. Ahead of

him a figure came suddenly out of an aisle—a feminine figure. He recognized the girl Elza, carrying a bright aluminum spade, and called her name softly.

She turned. "Hello," she said briefly, as he fell into step beside her.

"Been burying some pirate treasure, Elza?"

"No. Just some seeds in the garden."

"Did you unlock our door?" he asked.

"I? Yes. The Peri ordered it unlocked."

"Ordered it! Why?"

"Why not? Can you escape from here?" She gestured at a massive metal door as they passed.

"Behind that is her room, and behind another within it are the space suits and the keys to both ships. You're as much a prisoner as ever."

"I know, but isn't she afraid—well, of violence? We could kill her."

"She isn't afraid of anything," said Elza. "Anyway, what good would killing her do? It would be simply committing suicide."

"That's true," said Keene. They were approaching the entrance with its invisible electrostatic seal; now they stood staring out over the dismal, black, airless, Plutonian valley, where a thousand feet away was the dark cylinder of the *Limbo*. Suddenly a flare of light appeared beside it, flashed a moment, then vanished.

"What's that?" he asked sharply.

"Father's out there welding your jet. She thinks she may have a use for your ship."

"For what?"

"I don't know. It has exactly the lines of a League guard rocket. Perhaps she plans to use it as a decoy."

"And perhaps," said a cool voice behind them, "as a flying mausoleum with you two among the occupants."

They whirled. The Red Peri was approaching with her steps muffled by the soft buskins on her feet; besides her stalked Marco Crandi. Keene did not fail to note Elza's flush as she met the gaze of the dark man, but he felt a surge of anger at himself as he realized that his own face was reddening under the green eyes and mocking smile of the red-haired girl. He spat angrily, "You're a pleasant player when you hold all the cards!"

She said only, "Have you eaten breakfast?"

"No."

"Well, perhaps that explains your ill temper. Elza, go order a tray for two sent to my room, and one to Professor Nestor. And you, Marco—suppose you leave me."

"Here with him?"

She laughed and tapped an automatic at her belt. "I can take care of myself. Do you doubt it? You can go, Marco."

He muttered, "Yes, commander," and backed reluctantly away. The Red Peri turned her glorious, taunting eyes on Keene, smiled again, and said, "I've checked over your ship. Your story's straight enough."

"Well? What about us, then?"

"Oh, I haven't decided. You may have to die; it's more than likely that you will, but with no malice on my part. Purely as a matter of convenience, you understand."

He grunted. "Why'd you have our door unlocked?"

"Why not? I'm sure you can't escape. Look here." She took the bright aluminum spade Elza had placed against the wall, and thrust it half through the field into the airless outdoors beyond. He stared at it; except for a slight change in color as its crystals rearranged under the slow radiation of its heat, it seemed unaltered. When the knuckles of her dainty hand began to whiten with the cold of the metal, she tossed the implement on the floor at her feet.

Now it changed. Instantly white frost formed on the part that had been exposed; glittering crystals grew an inch thick, fuzzy covering, and began to spread along the handle. They sprang out as swift as the

second hand on a watch, an inch—two inches deep.

The Peri laughed. "Would you like to stroll outside?" she gibed. "It's not cold—just ten above zero. Above absolute zero, I mean. Cold enough to liquefy and freeze all gases but hydrogen and helium. How long do you think it would take to freeze that hot blood and hotter head of yours?"

"Bah!" he said. "What's to keep me now from overpowering you, dragging you into some room, and using you as hostage to bargain for our safety?"

"If you could," she retorted coolly. "Even then it would be a poor idea; if you killed me your own death would follow very soon and very painfully; if you didn't, I'd never be bound to any promises you wrung from the others. Your wisest course is to leave things as they are until I decide what to do with you. And incidentally," she added, with a narrowing of her green eyes, "don't pin your faith on Elza."

"On—Elza?" He was startled. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I know she hates me. She's in love with Marco, or fancies so. I amuse myself by tormenting her, and I suspect that she'd go to some lengths for revenge, but she's quite as helpless as you. As a matter of fact, I'm doing her a good turn, for Marco is not particularly honorable. So I save her and insure his loyalty to me, all with one stroke."

"You—devil!" Keene gasped. "If there's one thing I'd like above all else, it's to drag you to justice. Ever since that day on the *Aardkin*—"

"When I pinched your nose?" she queried sweetly. "Here, then." With a rapid snap of her hand she twisted the same member with painful violence, laughed into his exasperated face, and turned away. "Come on," she ordered. "Here's breakfast."

"I'll be damned if I'll eat with you!" he snarled.

She shrugged. "As you like. This is all the breakfast you'll get, I promise you."

After all, breakfast was breakfast—he growled and followed her to the massive metal door; as it swung open he forgot a part of his anger in sheer amazement at the luxury of her chamber.

She had, apparently, culled the prize plunder of a score of raids to furnish this room. There were deep, silken rugs on the floor, rich tapestries, paintings from the salon of some luxurious Venusian liner, delicately worked aluminum furniture, even a carved mirror whose utter perfection must have originated in the incomparable lost art of Mars.

The man who bore the breakfast tray placed it silently on a table and withdrew. Here was another surprise. Eggs! And fresh ones, too, judging by the smell.

"Oh, we have a few chickens," said the Red Peri, reading his glance. "Enough to supply me, at least. Feeding them is rather a problem, you see."

Keene remembered his anger in time to reply with an irritable "humph!" For a moment he wondered why the exquisite presence of the Peri should affect him so violently, for he realized that much of his irritation was directed at himself. But of one thing he was certain, and that was that his most ardent desire was to humble the arrogant, self-sufficient, proud, and mocking pirate princess, to see her pay the assigned penalty for her crimes.

Then he frowned. Was he anxious to see her punished? What he really wanted was simply to see her arrogance and insolence humbled, to see her—well, frightened, or pleading with him, as a sort of recompense for the contemptuous way in which she treated him.

She spoke. "You're a silent table partner," she observed, "and yet I'm rather glad you two blundered in. I was getting frightfully tired and bored; I was considering paying a little visit to civilization."

"I suppose you realize," he growled, "that if we ever get back to Earth, your little visits are over. I'd be very glad to furnish a full description of the Red Peri."

"And do you think I'm the only red-head alive?"

"You're probably the most beautiful, and you know it."

She laughed contemptuously. "Keene, if you think you can play the sophisticated giver of compliments to my innocence, think again. I've been around. I've spend enough time in London, Paris and New York to know the social game. In fact, I have a carefully built-up identity there; my terrestrial friends think I live on Venus. So don't try what they call a fish net on me."

Her words gave him an idea. "Fish net?" he echoed with a deliberate air of sadness. "No. It's just that

I have the misfortune to be about half in love with you, while the other half is pure hatred." Suddenly he wondered how much of a lie that really was.

She laughed again. "I half believe you."

"Which half?"

"Never mind. But," she added derisively, "whichever half it is, remember that it takes a better man than you to win the Red Peri's love."

"I didn't say I wanted it!" he snapped. "All you are to me is a vicious law breaker, and all I want is the chance to see you taken."

"Which you'll never have," she returned coolly. She leaned back in her chair and slipped a cigarette from a box. "Smoke?" she asked.

It was in the nature of a peace offering. He accepted both the truce and the cigarette, and puffed with thorough enjoyment.

"Keene," said the Peri, "would you like to see our establishment?"

He nodded. If the girl were proffering friendship, or at least tolerance, he was in no position to refuse it while she held the upper hand. But he would not accept it under false colors.

"Listen," he said, "there are lots of things I like about you. You've plenty of courage, and you've the devil's own beauty. But get this. If I see any chance of escape or any chance to capture you, I'm taking it. Is that plain?"

She nodded. "Keene, if you ever outwit the Red Peri, you're welcome to your winnings. But you never will."

She rose, and he followed her into the stone-walled corridor, glancing briefly at the mysterious archway with its invisible electrostatic seal.

"If your power ever failed," he said, "what would happen to your air here?"

"It won't fail. It's generated directly from disintegration. No moving parts at all. But if it should"—she gestured to the cavern roof—"there's an emergency air door. It will close instantly if there's any appreciable outward current. There's plenty of power to retain our atmosphere; we only keep a pressure of eleven to twelve pounds,"

"About the same as the altitude of Denver," he muttered as he followed her. "Prepared for anything, aren't you?"

He was really impressed by the neat little gardens in the side aisles, raised on Plutonian soil carefully selected for the proper elements. "But nitrogen is a troublesome job," she explained. "There's little of it to be had, and what there is is all mixed with frozen argon. We fractionate it, and then form ammonia, and so finally get it into usable form."

"I know the process," he said.

They penetrated deeper into the series of caverns that pierced the black Plutonian mountain. The fluorolux lights were fewer now, and there were long stretches of dim side passages with no lights at all.

"They're sealed off," said the Peri. "We're approaching the seal of the main cavern now. Do you see where it narrows ahead there? That's an electrostatic seal, but the side passages are blocked with concrete to keep out the crystal crawlers."

"The crystal crawlers!" echoed Keene. He had almost forgotten those curious creatures of the plutonian Salley. "Why don't they come through the electrostatic seal?"

"They do, but they seldom get far. You'll see why."

"What are the things?" he asked. "Are they alive? No one —Atsuki or Hervey or Caspari—ever reported them."

"I think they originated in these caverns. This whole region is honey-combed, and those in the valley are just strays. Explorers wouldn't be apt to encounter them."

"But are they alive?" he persisted.

"No-o-o," said the Red Peri slowly. "Not exactly alive. They're—well—on the borderline. They're chemical-crystalline growths, and their movement is purely mechanical. There are half a dozen varieties—aluminum feeders and iron and silicon and sulphur feeders, and others." She smiled impishly. "I have a use for at least one sort. Do you remember, or did you notice, the safe of the *Aardkin*? An iron

feeder comes in very handy at times."

He grunted; somehow it pained him to hear the girl refer to her piratical activities. Before he could make any other reply they came suddenly into a large natural cavern beyond which showed the narrow opening which the Peri had indicated as the place of the electrostatic seal. A single light shed a dim radiance from far above, and in the faint luminosity he perceived a narrow, deep gash, a gorge or pit, that crossed the chamber iron wall to wall and even split the walls in dark tunnels to right and left.

"Here is our crawler trap," said the girl. She indicated a curious span across the chasm, a single heavy girder of metal that bridged the twenty-foot gap in four sharp zigzags. A precariously narrow bridge; the girder was no more than twelve inches in width.

"Copper!" he said.

"Yes. Apparently there are no such things as copper feeders to destroy our bridge. Do you see how the trap works? The crystal crawlers have no eyes nor sense of touch; they just crawl. The chances are infinitely against any of them moving at the proper angles to cross the gap. They go crashing down and crawl away below; although one blundered across once.

"Most of them aren't dangerous except to whatever they feed on." She gestured. "Beyond the seal is our air supply. There's a regular frozen subterranean sea of neon, argon, and oxygen, and we can draw on it almost forever. Don't you want to cross over and look at it?"

Keene stepped to the brink of the chasm and peered down. It was deep; the light from above trickled away into a mysterious darkness where only a few faint sparkles responded—crystals, doubtless, for a slow flicker of movement showed. He scowled at the precarious slenderness of the copper zigzag, and then, cautiously, he abandoned dignity, dropped to his knees, and crept slowly across on all fours.

It was only when he reached the far side and stood erect that he became conscious of the Peri's contemptuous sniff of laughter, and turned to see her walk casually and steadily across the angling span, balancing as easily as if she trod a wide roadway. He flushed a slow red; the girl had nerves of steel, true enough, but he realized she had done this as a deliberate taunt.

She strode to the narrow opening, where he now perceived the ring of copper points whence issued the electrostatic field, and above, on the roof, a suspended emergency lock like that at the outer arch. "There," she said, pointing. "You can see it."

He squinted into the darkness. A dozen feet away, the passage seemed to widen again, but into such a vast hollow that the light from behind him failed utterly to show its bounds. But dimly and faintly as a sea of ectoplasm, he made out a shimmering, illimitable expanse of white, a vast subterranean drift of Pluto's fossil air.

"There goes the pipe to it," said the Peri. "We can get all we need by the simple process of heat, but now and then we have to lengthen the pipe. That's why this end of our colony is sealed by electrostatic. Oh! O-o-oh!"

She broke off in a startled scream. Keene whirled; the cave floor between the two of them and the bridge was covered with a rustling, irregular parade of blackish crystals!

"What's the matter!" he gasped. "We can kick them aside." He moved as if to do so.

"No!" cried the Peri. She seized his arm, dragging him back. "They're carbon feeders! Don't you understand? They're carbon feeders! Your body has carbon. They're—Look out!"

IV

Keene started back, realizing that a gray-black, flat-crystallized, dully shining lump was almost at his feet. He stared at the crawling masses; they had come, apparently, from beyond a jutting wall of rock to his right. The floor was speckled everywhere with them, and now and again one slipped with a faint tinkle over the edge of the central pit. But there were hundreds more; one couldn't wait here until the floor had cleared. He skipped aside; another had silently approached almost to his feet.

He acted. Suddenly he seized the Peri, raised her bodily in his arms, and dashed in an angling,

irregular course for the bridge. The girl squirmed and said, "Put me—" Then she lay very still as he picked his way as delicately as a dancer, sidestepping, skipping, twisting, to the copper spars—and over it. Half running, he took the four sharp angles, and at last, breathless, he set the Peri on the rock on the far side.

She looked coolly up at him. "Well!" she said calmly. "Why did you do that?"

"That's pretty thanks for it!" he snapped.

"Don't you think I could have done as well?" she retorted. "I asked you why you did it"

"Because—" He paused. Why had he done it? He suddenly realized that he had no desire to see the exquisite Peri die. To see her humbled, yes. Even to see her punished—but not to see her die. "It was pure impulse," he finished grimly. "If I had thought a second or two, I'd have left you to die."

"Liar!" she said, but smiled. "Well, I thank you for your intentions, though I could have done quite as well alone. But you're very strong, and—Frank!" Her voice rose. "Your foot! Your shoe! Quickly!"

He blinked down. Scarcely visible on the leather, a grayish-black coating of crystals was spreading, and almost immediately came a prickling pain in his toe. With a growling oath he kicked violently. The skin buskin went sailing in an arc over the pit, to fall squarely among the crawlers. Instantly it was a fuzzy mass of needlelike crystals.

The Peri was on her knees. "Your toe!" she wailed. Swift as a serpent she planted her own dainty foot firmly upon the arch of his. From somewhere she snatched a tiny, jeweled penknife, its blade flashing sharp as a razor. Still resting her full weight on his foot, she cut.

Despite his bellow of pain and surprise, she sliced away half his toenail and a goodly strip of skin beneath, kicked the bloody strip into the pit, examined her own pink toes for a moment, and faced Keene. For the first time in their acquaintance she seemed shaken; her wild, green eyes were wide with concern.

But it passed instantly. "Fool!" she snapped. "Fool!"

He was staring aghast at his bleeding toe. "Good Lord!" he muttered. "That was a narrow escape. Well—I'm not so sparing in my thanks as you. I say thanks for it."

"Bah! Do you think I want carbon feeders on this side of the pit? That's why I did it!"

"You could have pushed me into the pit, then," he retorted. "And I wish I had!" she snapped. She turned abruptly, and padded, barefooted, up the cavern toward the colony.

Keene shifted his remaining buskin to his injured foot and limped after. He was in a turmoil of emotions. There was something splendid about this pirate princess, something more than the simple fact of her exquisite and fantastic beauty. He swore angrily to himself for even admitting it, but limped hastily until he caught her.

"What's your name?" he asked abruptly.

"If you need a name to address me," she said coldly, "let it be commander."

"The only person I'll call commander is one I'm willing to serve, and that'll never be the Red Peri."

She glanced sidewise at him. "What's a name, anyway?" she asked in altered tosses. "See here. You're Frank Keene, but you're neither keen enough to outwit me nor frank enough to admit you love me."

"Love you!" he snorted. "Love you! Why—" He broke off suddenly. "Even if it were true," he went on, "do you think I'd have anything to do with a pirate, a murderess? However I felt, I'd still exert every effort to bring you to justice. How many deaths have you caused? How much suffering?"

"I don't know," she said. "But murder? I never killed anybody except in sheer self defense."

"So you say. What about the atrocities on the *Hermes*?"

She looked up at him. "Frank," she said softly, "I had nothing to do with the *Hermes*. Don't you realize that people blame everything on the Red Peri? Every captain who suffers from some sneaking little freebooter blames me for it. Why, I'd need a hundred ships to commit all the crimes they've pinned on me."

"But you're a pirate, nevertheless."

"Yes, but I have my reasons. I have, Frank. And—Oh, why should I justify myself to you, anyway? I don't care what you think of me."

"All the same," he growled, "I'll tell you what I think. I think your parents should have given you a series of good spankings. You're nothing but a spoiled, reckless, dangerous child."

"My parents," she echoed.

"Yes. Do you think they'd be proud of you now?"

"I hope," she said slowly, "that one of them would be." She paused at the door of her chamber, unlocking it. "Come in here," she ordered sharply.

He followed her into the lavish interior. She disappeared into an adjacent room, returning in a moment with a bottle and a strip of gauze. "Here," she said. "Dress your toe."

"It's nothing. It needs no dressing."

"Dress it!" she snapped. "I want no cases of infection here."

"I might"—he observed as he took the bottle—"die of the infection and thus save you a murder."

Her green eyes seemed to soften. "Remember this, Frank," she said in a low voice. "I could have let you die back there at the edge of the pit. I could have, but I didn't."

He had no answer. For a moment he gazed thoughtfully at the exquisite delicacy of her face, and then, irrelevantly, he asked again, "What is your name?"

She smiled. "Peri," she said.

"Really? Peri what? That's a strange name."

"Yes. It's the Persian word for imp or elf."

"I know. I've worked in Iraq. But it means more than just that; it's the name given to the child of a disobedient angel, waiting to be admitted into paradise."

Her features grew suddenly wistful. "Yes," she murmured. "Waiting to be admitted into paradise."

"But Peri what?" he repeated.

She hesitated. "If I told you," she said slowly, "you might understand. I think I will tell you, Frank. Did you ever hear of Perry Maclane?"

He frowned. "Perry Maclane," he muttered. "I—think so. Wait a minute. Do you mean Red Perry Maclane, the inventor who had the famous legal battle with Interplanetary? But that was years ago, years and years. I was a child of seven or eight; you must scarcely have been born."

"I was just born. Perry Maclane was my father."

"Red Perry your father? And—the ship! I see—*Red Peri*, named after him."

"Named by him, after me. He built it. He built it purposely to be a pirate craft, and you can't blame him!"

"Can't blame him! Why not?"

"Listen to me, Frank." Her glorious eyes were intense and serious. "Perry Maclane was robbed by Interplanetary and their associates. Do you know how dangerous space travel used to be, twenty-five or thirty years ago? Even fifty years after the first colonies were founded on Venus, it was a gamble with death to travel there.

"Trade was all but impossible; because the rocket blasts kept failing, and ships kept crashing in trying to land, or even plunged into the Sun. And then the thermoid expansion chamber was developed; the blasts became steady, safe, usable. Trade was possible, and Interplanetary became an enormous, wealthy corporation. But do you know who invented the expansion chamber? Do you?"

"Perry Maclane did! He invented it and patented it. But Interplanetary wouldn't let a little thing like honor stand in their way. They copied the patent; they claimed one of their engineers had developed the chamber first; they fought the case through every court, and at last they fought Perry Maclane out of money, and won. It took four years to do it; and as the last year I was born and my mother died; and Perry Maclane was ruined.

"But he didn't give up. He worked at anything he could find—he, the greatest rocket engineer in the world! He dug sewers and planned drainage systems; he did any sort of work, but meanwhile, all the time, he was carrying the idea of revenge.

"Evenings he worked on the plans of such a ship as no one had dreamed of, a rocket with inherent stability, one that could flash through gravitational fields as easily as through interplanetary space, instead of teetering down on its jets, wobbling and compensating and inching lower. And when he had it—I was

three then—he found those who supplied money to build it.

"He wasn't the only man Interplanetary had ruined; others hated the corporation, too. So he built the Red Peri, and began raiding corporation ships. He had no trouble manning his ship; he could have had a thousand men; but he picked and chose among the best for his crew.

"At first he worked out of the Australian desert as a base, but that became dangerous. He thought of the Moon, and of an asteroid; but at last, because he had a ship to which planetary distances meant nothing, he came here to build his colony. Save for the years I spent at school, I've lived here ever since."

"But what of Red Perry Maclane?" asked Keene.

"He was killed three years ago. Do you remember when Interplanetary's Captain Thorsen of the Lucrece shot one of the pirates? That was my father; he died and was buried as he wanted to be—in space. It was I who killed Thorsen, with my own hand as he shot at me."

He stared at her. Those were certainly tears in the glorious, emerald eyes. "Peri," he said softly, "but what will be the end of it? Are you going on all your life pursuing revenge for your father? You're not really hurting Interplanetary, you know; they carry insurance. But you are slowing down the development of the planets. It's come to a point where people are actually afraid to travel."

"Good!" she flashed. "Then it's less trade and fewer fares to swell the coffers of Interplanetary."

"But—good heavens, Peri! With a design like that of your ship you could make millions legitimately!"

"Oh, of course!" she retorted sarcastically. "Just as my father did from the thermoid expansion chamber."

There was no answer to that. He shook his head sadly. "Then do you intend to live out your life as a pirate until you're finally captured, or until you die out here on this miserable black planet?"

"I do not. I intend to carry out the plans of Red Perry Maclane. He wasn't fighting out of blind passion, you know. He built up his organization, here and on Earth, for a single purpose. Little by little, the plunder we take from Interplanetary goes back to Earth, to be turned into cash and securities, in banks in New York, London, Berlin, Paris, Tokyo. When I have enough—and a hundred million dollars will be enough—do you know what I'll do?"

"I don't, Peri." His eyes were glued to her tense, lovely face.

"Then listen!" she said fiercely. "I'll open a line competing with Interplanetary. I'll build ships like the Red Peri, and I'll drive their corporation to ruin! I'll have them groveling and begging, but this time I'll have money enough so they can't fight with crooked lawyers and bribed judges. I'll annihilate them!"

For a long time he stared at her strange loveliness, her wild, green eyes and flaming hair. "Oh, Peri!" he said at last, in tones of sadness. "Don't you see how insane such a plan is? Don't you know that once you produce the design of this ship, you'll be known as the pirate? No one else knows of it."

"I don't care!" she blazed. "The law can't touch anyone with a hundred million dollars. My father learned that from Interplanetary." And at his continued silence, she snapped, "Your advice would be to take it lying down, I suppose. I prefer to fight."

"But you don't have to declare war on the whole Earth on account of an injury done your father."

"War on the Earth? I haven't. But"—her green eyes glowed fiercely—"if I ever should, I could give them such a war as they never dreamed of!"

"What do you mean, Peri?"

"I'll tell you! Suppose I were to take one of those carbon feeders, like the ones that nipped your toe. Suppose I took just one tiny Crystal and dropped it in the jungles of Africa or in Middle Europe or in the wheat belt of America. All life has carbon in it. What would happen to the pretty, green Earth, Frank? What would happen to the crooked lawyers and the bribed judges, and all the rest, honest and dishonest, right up to the heads of Interplanetary itself?"

"My Lord!" he said.

"Can't you see the crystal crawlers rustling their way along?" she cried. "Wheat fields, houses, horses, humans!"

"Listen!" he said huskily. "Do you know what I ought to do? I know what my duty is. It's to kill you, right now and here, while I've got you alone. Otherwise that mad and reckless spirit of yours may some

day drive you to do just that. I ought to strangle you now, but—by heavens—I can't!"

All the passion drained suddenly from her face, leaving it alluringly wistful. "I'm glad you said those last two words, Frank," she murmured. "Look." She raised her arms; he saw her hand resting firmly on the butt of her revolver. "Would it please you," she asked softly, "if I promised you never to think again of that particular revenge?"

"You know it would!"

"Then I promise. And now, tell me if you still blame me for being—the Red Peri. Do you?"

"I don't know. I think—perhaps—you are justified for feeling as you do, but, Peri, it's madness."

"What would you want me to do?"

"Why—the sane course, the honorable course, would be to make restitution, to return everything you've stolen; and then to give yourself up, to expiate the wrongs you've done, and so be free to live without the need of burying yourself out here at the edge of nothingness. I don't say you could do all of that, but at least you could return what you've taken and live as you were meant to live—honorably and happily."

"Honorably and happily!" she echoed bitterly. "Yes, except for the realization that I had failed my father."

"Your father was wrong, Peri."

She blazed in sudden anger. "Oh, you're too smug and self-righteous to live. I was going to offer you your freedom; I thought you'd understand and protect me, but now do you think I dare trust you to return to Earth? Now you'll stay as my prisoner!"

"Some day," he said evenly, "I'll drag you back to justice, Peri, and after you're free you'll thank me for it."

"Get out!" she cried. "You're stupid! I hate stupidity!"

He looked quietly at her angry, exquisite face, rose, and stalked out of the door. For a moment he stood irresolute in the corridor; then he strode toward the room he shared with Solomon Nestor, ignoring the glances of a number of residents as he went. And as he opened the door, the first person he saw was the girl Elza, in close conversation with the old man.

They looked up as he entered, and the flaxen-haired girl drew away, staring at him with a curious expression in her blue eyes.

"Oh, bosh!" said the old man. "Elza, you're simply letting your imagination make you nervous. Listen, Frank—this girl came running here to tell me that you've been spending hours in the Red Peri's company, and that you were probably falling under her magic charms; and now Elza's afraid you're going to betray her to the Peri. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

"Utterly!" snapped Keene, wondering how much of it was ridiculous. He felt himself reddening, and repeated hastily, "Utterly ridiculous!"

"You see?" said old Nestor triumphantly. "All right, Elza, let's get on with this. You say you're sure you can't smuggle space suits to us?"

"I'm sure I can't. They're kept locked up by the Red Peri, and I can't get to them."

"But your father and brother wear them when they go to either ship, don't they?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't dare ask them. They'd tell the Peri. I know that."

"Well," said old Solomon thoughtfully, "if we can't get space suits, we'll have to do without. But you can get the key to one of the ships, can't you?"

"Not to the *Red Peri*," said Elm. "To your ship, perhaps, because my father has that while he's working on it. I could steal it away from him, I think. He just keeps it in a desk."

"What good would the *Limbo* do us?" grunted Keene. "They could run us down with the other. They could blast us to bits."

"They could, but they won't," retorted the old man. "You leave this to old Solomon. Now Elza when will your father have the jet repaired?"

"I think he's finishing it now."

"And could you smuggle the key to us to-night?"

"I think so. I'll try. To-night or tomorrow."

"Good!" said Solomon Nestor. "You run along now, Elza. You'll have your revenge on the Red Peri—if you're a good girl."

The yellow-haired girl vanished. Old Nestor turned quizzical eyes on Keene and mid mockingly, "Ridiculous, eh! Utterly ridiculous!"

"What?"

"That you should be impressed by the Red Peri. How could so unattractive a being effect the redoubtable Frank Keene? Very ridiculous!"

"Oh, shut up!" growled Keene. "I admit she's beautiful, and I admit that what she told me has changed my opinion of her. All the same, I think she's arrogant and overbearing. I'm just as anxious as ever to see her take a fall, and if I can trip her, that's fine. But I don't see how the key to the *Limbo* helps."

"Yost will. Tell me what the Peri said to you:"

Keene recounted the story of "Red" Perry Maclane. Despite himself, he told it with a tinge of sympathy, and when, after concluding it, he described the events at the copper bridge, he was uncomfortable aware of old Nestor's steady gaze. He finished his tale and stared defiantly back.

"Well!" said the old man. "I suppose you realize that she risked her life for you—or at least the chance of having to cut off a finger or two. What if she'd touched the carbon feeders on your toe?"

"I-I hadn't thought of it."

"And now that you do think of it, are you still so bitterly determined to humble her?"

Keene considered. "Yes!" he snapped. "I am. I don't want to hurt her, but I do want to get back at her for the way she's insulted, browbeaten, and mocked me. I want to see her take a fall."

"Even though it means capture for her?"

Keene groaned. "Listen, Solomon. Right now I'm so puzzled that I'm not sure. But I do know that I want to see the Red Peri paid back for the way she's acted toward me."

"All right. I think you're in love with her, Frank, though it's none of my business."

"Damn' right it isn't!"

"But," proceeded Nestor, "just how badly do you want to do this?"

"With all my heart!"

"Would you risk your life and hers to do it?"

"My life," said Keene grimly, "but not hers."

"Good enough. Now the first thing to do is talk you out of a few superstitions."

"I haven't any."

"You have, but you don't know it. Listen, now." The old man bent closer and began to talk in a low, earnest voice. At his first words Keene paled and started; then he sat very still and very intent. After five minutes of listening, he drew a deep breath, expanding his mighty chest to the full.

"I used to plunge at the university," he said exultantly. "I could hold my breath for four minutes. I can still do three and a half!"

"That's plenty," said Nestor.

"Yes, if it works. If it works!"

"If I were you," said the old man, "I'd find out—now!"

For a full minute Keene stared at him. Suddenly he nodded, turned swiftly away, and darted out into the corridor. In five minutes he was back again, but sadly changed, for his lips were swollen, his eyes red, and his breath a rasping gurgle. But he was sniffing.

"It works!" he gasped triumphantly. "It's unadulterated hell—but it works!"

V

Elza did not appear that night, although Keene tossed and twisted wakefully far miserable hours. In the darkness the thing he had to do appeared grotesque, fantastic, impossible; and this despite the fact that he had already tested the truth of old Solomon Nestor's reasoning. His toe ached and his lips and

eyes burned, but more painful than all else was the idea of inflicting harm on the courageous and proud Red Peri.

When, well toward the end of the ten-hour Plutonian night, he finally fell into troubled slumber, it was but for a brief while, and he rose sullen and morose to pace the floor of the chamber.

The fluorolux light awakened old Nestor. For a few moments he watched the pacing Keene, and then asked, "Did Elea come?"

"No, and I hope she doesn't," snarled Keene. "I hope she couldn't get the key—and if she does get it, I'm not going through with this!"

"It's your business," said Nestor indifferently. "It doesn't mean anything to me, because I'd never live through it, not at my age. I have to stay here anyway, and I shan't mind, because Elza said they'd move my instruments into the cave; and I can work here almost as well as farther out in space. But if you love the girl so intently, why don't you act like a human being and tell her so?"

"Love her!" yelled Keene. "Just because I feel like a dirty dog at the thought of this, doesn't mean I love her! She's a girl, isn't she?"

"And a very beautiful one."

"Bah! She's a girl, and I hate to fight women!"

"Well, don't then," suggested old Solomon.

"Yet I want like the very devil to get back at her."

"Then do."

"And yet, in a way I can't blame her."

"Then don't."

Keene resuming his pacing. In another minute he stopped, faced the old man, and said defiantly, "Solomon, I can't do it. I know she's a pirate and a menace to trade and civilization, but I can't do it."

Before the other could reply, a knock sounded on the door. Keene whirled. "I hope," he muttered, "that it's breakfast—just breakfast."

It was. Elza brought it in silently, placed it on the table, and retired; and Keene felt a vast surge of relief. She hadn't managed to get the key! He was almost ready to sing until he picked up his cup of coffee and there it was—the familiar key to the outer door of the *Limbo's* air lock.

He met old Nestor's amused, blue eyes with a cold glare, and it was hardly softened by the other's murmur: "After all, Frank, you don't have to use it."

"I know I don't!" he snarled. "I have a fine choice, haven't I? I can stay here the rest of my life, if our hostess doesn't take a notion to kill me, or I can escape by following your scatterbrained plan of doing a thing I hate. I can't escape alone, for they'd simply run me down with their pirate ship."

"Or you could turn pirate," suggested Solomon Nestor.

"Gr-r-r!" said Keene amiably.

He was unaccustomed to this sort of agonized indecision. He had never encountered a situation that pulled so many ways at once; for in all his experience right had been right and wrong had been wrong—yet now he was not at all sure but that the laws of relativity operated in the moral field as well as in the physical. Certainly the Red Peri was not entirely in the wrong, yet equally certainly she was a pirate, a menace to progress, an antisocial being, and therefore a criminal. If she would only give up this mad purpose of hers; if she would make restitution; if she—He swore bitterly and strode out of the door, scarcely realizing that the *Limbo's* key was in his pocket.

He turned at random toward the outer arch of the cave. Figures in space suits were passing in and out through the electro-static seal, and he noticed that the outgoing men were laden with cases, boxes, cans, and bundles. He stood at the very edge of the seal and stared out into the dim, nightlike morning of the black planet. Beside him a row of metal-clad figures clanked outward, their footsteps dropping to sudden silence the instant they trod into the airless outdoors. He watched them carry their burdens to the *Red Peri*, where an air lock swung open to admit them. They were loading the ship.

Keene stared disinterestedly, without comprehension. Then, abruptly, the meaning dawned on him. He stiffened, peered closely through narrowed eyes, and spun to accost a metal-sheathed figure that approached, Marco Grandi, for he could see the dark, aquiline features behind the visor.

"What's this?" Keene snapped. "You're carguing the *Peri*. For what?"

Grandi made no answer, and Keene planted himself squarely in the other's way. "For what?" he blazed.

The metallic voice of the diaphragm clicked. "Stand aside. We're busy."

"I'll keep you busy!" he roared. "I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what?" queried the cool tones of the *Peri*.

Keene whirled. The girl stood at his side, clad in an all-enveloping, clinging robe of bright green that echoed the infinitely more brilliant emerald of her eyes.

"They're stocking the *Red Peri*!" he shouted.

"I know it."

"Why? For what purpose?"

"For purposes of business."

"Business! You mean for purposes of piracy!"

"Piracy," she said coldly, "is my business."

"It was your business, you mean!" With a great effort he controlled himself and faced the mocking, green eyes. "Peri," he said more calmly, "I want to talk to you."

"It isn't mutual."

"I want to talk to you," he repeated stubbornly, "alone." He glanced at the hostile eyes of Marco Grandi.

The *Peri* shrugged. "Go on out, Marco," she ordered, and then to Keene, "Well? What is it?"

"Listen," he said. "I want you to quit this business. I want you to be fair to yourself. You're capable of infinitely greater things than piracy."

"I know it. When I'm ready, I'll achieve those greater things."

"Oh, revenge!" he snapped. "Suppose you succeed. Do you think you'll be any happier?"

"And if I'm not," she countered, "what is it to you?"

He drew a deep breath. "It's a lot to me," he said soberly, "because you see, Peri, I happen to love you."

Her green eyes did not change. "What you call love," she said contemptuously, "isn't my conception. If you loved me you'd take me exactly as I am."

"I was brought up to believe in honesty, Peri"

"And I," she retorted, "was brought up to believe in honor. Red Perry Maclane's honor needs avenging, and there's none but his daughter to see to it."

Keene pounded his fist impatiently against the wall. "Peri," he said at last, "do you love me?"

She made no immediate reply. From somewhere in her heavy silken gown she produced a cigarette, lighted it, and blew a gray plume of smoke toward the seal. "No," she said.

"Why did you risk your life for me back there at the pit? What if you had touched the carbon feeders?"

She glanced out into the cold, black valley. "I may have thought I loved you then," she murmured, eyes still averted. "That was before I knew how little you could understand my feelings. We're just—not the same sort."

"I think we are," said Keene. "We've simply learned different moral codes, but—Peri—my code's the right one. Even you can see that."

"It's not for me. What my father wanted is the thing I want and the thing I'm going to do."

He groaned and abandoned that line of attack. "What do you expect to do with Solomon Nestor and me?"

She made a helpless little gesture. "What can I do? I have to leave you here." She turned her green eyes back to him. "Frank, if you'd promise to keep this place and my identity a secret, I think I'd be willing to release you."

"I can't promise that."

Her voice hardened. "Then here you stay."

"So you've given up the idea of killing us?"

"Oh," she said indifferently, "I'm always indulgent to those who claim to be in love with me."

Her attitude angered him. "You're pretty confident, aren't you? If you leave us here while you're off pirating, you know damn well we'll be doing our best to overcome you."

"And I know damn well that you'll never outwit me," she retorted.

Keene's hand suddenly encountered the *Limbo's* key in his pocket. "I won't, eh?" he muttered. "See here, Peri. Are you determined once and for all to stick to this scheme of yours?"

"Once and for all, I am."

"And it makes no difference that I tell you I love you?"

She turned abruptly and faced the grim outdoors, staring over the dead, cold, black Plutonian landscape. "It makes no difference, Frank."

"And nothing I can say will make a difference?"

She gestured impatiently, still staring far away. "Oh, what's the use of arguing? No, Frank."

He looked silently at her, seeing her, seeing her glorious hair flaming against the cold background of black mountains. He peered thoughtfully down the deserted corridor, and then at the *Red Peri*. The valley was lifeless; the men were within the vessel and the air lock was closed. Dim across the plain was the dull bulk of the *Limbo*, whose key was clutched in his hand.

"Well," he muttered sadly, "you've asked for it, Peri."

She did not turn. "For what, Frank?"

"For this!" he cried, and with a sudden lunge he sent her and himself staggering, unarmored, into the airless Plutonian plain, and into a temperature of ten degrees above absolute zero!

VI

Instantly he was in hell. The breath rushed out of his lungs in a faint expansion mist that dissipated at once, the blood pounded in his aching ear drums, his eyes seemed to bulge, and a thin stream of blood squirted darkly from his nose. His whole body felt terribly, painfully bloated as he passed from a pressure of twelve pounds per square inch to one of nearly zero. He fought his agony grimly; he had to hold consciousness as long as he could. But old Nestor had been right; he was living.

He had a momentary impression of the Peri's green gown billowing up from her glorious body like a balloon, to settle hack instantly as the bound air escaped. Then she whirled, eyes wide, mouth open and straining for air that simply was not there, hands clutching frantically at her gasping throat. She was in full command of her own agile mind, and she sprang convulsively for the archway and the seal. Grimly he thrust her back.

She was trying to scream. Her breast rose and fell in futile, soundless, panting gasps; moisture formed on her forehead and vanished instantly. Swift as a deer she darted again for the archway; and again he controlled his agony to smash her back.

For once in her life the Peri knew sheer panic. No longer had she the coordination of mind and muscle that might yet have encompassed escape. Fierce pain and utter fright had robbed her of it; and for a few seconds she could only thrust aimlessly against Keene's braced body, her hands fluttering frantically, her legs pushing convulsively, her lovely, pain-racked, wild, green eyes but inches from his own.

He had a double task now; he had to hold her back from the entrance and at the same time keep any part of her twisting body save her shod feet from contact with the searing cold of the rocky ground. He clutched her violently against him. Suddenly her struggles grew weaker, her hands went vainly to her tortured throat, her hands closed, and she collapsed.

They were almost at the air lock of the *Red Peri*. He saw it fly open, he glimpsed Marco Grandi's appalled face behind his visor, but he had no fraction of a second to lose. He swung the Peri across his shoulder and set off on a staggering run for the *Limbo*, more than nine hundred feet away across a vacuum and a cold only less than those of space itself. Grandi could never catch him; no one could run in a space suit.

The Peri was not light; on Earth she might have weighed a hundred and fifteen pounds, but here it was more like a hundred and forty. His own weight was greater too, but he felt none of that; the excruciating torment that racked his body erased all lesser tortures.

He crashed unseeing through a parade of aluminum feeders, and blood spurted wildly from a tiny scratch on his ankle, and then—then he was fumbling at the *Limbo's* lock.

The door flew open from its inner pressure; he bundled himself and the Peri within, pulled it to, and collapsed as the hissing of the automatic valve sent a heavenly stream of air against his face. He had crossed a thousand feet of vacuum and still lived!

The air pressure reached normal. He fought to his knees, opened the inner door, and dragged the girl through it. She lay with her magnificent hair streaming on the steel floor; blood trickled from her nose—but she breathed.

Keene had work to do. He thrust wide the feed to the under-jets, and the ship roared, rising shakily as he peered through the floor port at Marco Grandi plodding desperately across the plain. He let the *Limbo* rise aimlessly; later he could set a course.

He dragged the limp Peri to a chair. About her slim waist he twisted the iron chain from the aft ventilator, and locked it with the padlock of Nestor's empty bolometer case. The other end he locked carefully to a hand hold on the wall, and only then, laboring and gasping, did he turn his attention to the medicine kit.

He poured a half tumbler of whiskey and forced a good portion of it between the Peri's lips. Still pain-tortured, it was yet agony to him to see the lines of anguish on her unconscious face, and to hear the choking of her breath. She coughed weakly from the liquor, and moved convulsively as he sprang back to the controls and set the *Limbo* nosing sunward. That was close enough for the present; later he could lay a course for Titan.

The Peri stirred. Her uncomprehending green eyes looked vaguely toward him, and then about the chamber. She spoke, "Frank! Frank! Where am I?"

"On the *Limbo*."

"On the—" She glanced down; her hand had encountered the chain about her waist. "Oh!" she murmured, and stared at it a full half minute. When she looked up again her eyes were quite clear and conscious. "You—you've got me, Frank, haven't you?"

"Right where I want you," he said grimly. Strangely, there was no satisfaction in it. He had wanted to see her humbled, but now it was pure pain.

"Why—aren't we dead, Frank?" she asked slowly. "We were—in the airless valley, weren't we? How is it that we still live?"

"I'll tell you, Peri. It was old Solomon's idea. Everybody's been believing a lot of superstitions about space, but he figured out the truth. It isn't the vacuum that's dangerous, and it isn't the cold; it's the lack of air. We couldn't freeze, because a vacuum is the best insulator there is; we aren't like that aluminum spade of yours, because our bodies actually produced heat faster than we radiate it away. In fact, it really felt warm to me—as far as I could be conscious of any feeling in that hell.

"And as for all the gruesome stories of lungs collapsing and all that, every high school physics student sees the experiment of the mouse under the bell jar. An air pump exhausts the jar to the highest vacuum it can attain, the mouse loses consciousness—just as you did, Peri—but when the air returns, it recovers.

"Its lungs don't collapse because there's no outer pressure to crush them, and its body doesn't burst because the tissues are strong enough to maintain that much internal pressure. And if a mouse can stand it, why not a human being? And I knew I could stand lack of air longer than you."

"It seems you could," she admitted ruefully. "But still, Frank, that terrible drop in pressure! I see that we didn't explode from it, though it felt as though we should; but I still don't see why."

"I tell you because our tissues are too tough. Look here, Peri. The pressure at sea level on Earth is 14.7 pounds per square inch. The pressure on top of Mount Everest is four pounds per square inch. That's about six miles above sea level.

"A hundred and fifty years ago, way back in 1930, open airplanes flew over Mount Everest. The pilots didn't suffer much from lack of pressure; just as long as they had oxygen to breathe, they could live.

Yet from sea level to 29,000 feet altitude is a drop of eleven pounds per square inch—almost exactly the drop from the pressure in your cave to the pressure outside.

"The human body can stand that much of a drop; all it really does is cause altitude sickness. As a matter of fact, a pearl diver going down in four or five fathoms of water meets a greater variation than that. Plenty of South Sea skin divers work in that depth, utterly unprotected. What might have happened to us is the bends, but your own air system thoughtfully prevented that danger."

"M—my own air system?"

"Yes, Peri. The bends are the result of decreasing pressure, which ordinarily causes the blood to give up its dissolved nitrogen as bubbles. It's the bubbles that cause the disease. But your air doesn't contain nitrogen; it's made of oxygen and neon, and neon doesn't dissolve! So—no dissolved gases, no bubbles, and no bends."

"But—it's fantastic! It's impossible!"

"We did it. What do you think of that?"

"Why"—her voice was meek—"I think you're very courageous, Frank. You're the only man ever to see the Red Peri frightened, and you've seen that—twice."

"Twice? When was the other time?"

"When—when I saw the carbon feeders on your foot."

"Peri!" he groaned. "This whole thing has hurt me enough, but now if you mean—"

"Of course I mean it," she said, looking steadily at him. "I love you, Frank."

"If I dared believe you, Peri—you know I love you, don't you?"

A faint trace of her old mockery glistened green in her eyes. "Oh, of course," she said. "I could tell it because you've been so kind to me."

Her sarcasm tortured him. "I had to do it. I have to bring you over to my side of the fence, Peri—the honest side."

"And you think you can?"

"I can try."

"Really?" she taunted. "Frank, don't you know my ship will be alongside in a matter of minutes? You can't outrun the *Red Peri* in this tub. You have me helpless now, but I won't be so for long."

"Indeed? Well, tub or not, the *Limbo's* solid. They don't dare blast the ship with you aboard, and if they try to tie up and cut their way in"—he turned narrowed eyes on her—"I'll ram the Peri! As I said, this ship is solid, far more solid than your triangular speedster. I'll smash it!"

The faint color that had returned to the Peri's face drained out of it. After a moment she said in very low tones, "What are you going to do with me, Frank?"

"Peri, I'm going to take you back to trial. After you've expiated your crimes—and with your beauty in an American court the sentence will be light—I'm going to marry you."

"Marry? Yes, I'd marry you, Frank, but don't you realize piracy is tried under maritime law? The penalty is—death!"

"Not for such a woman as you. Three years—no more."

"But I'm wanted in every country on Earth, Frank. They'll extradite me. What if I'm tried for murder in an English court?"

"Murder?" he echoed blankly. "I—I hadn't thought of that. My Lord, Peri! What can we do?"

"What we do is in your hands," she said dully. He saw tears in her green eyes.

"I—don't know. I swore a solemn oath to uphold the law, I—can't break an oath. Peri," he cried fiercely, "I have money. I'll fight through every court in the country to prevent your extradition. You'll return all you've taken. They'll be lenient; they have to be!"

"Perhaps," she said tonelessly, "Well, I don't care. You've won, Frank. I love you for it."

Impulsively he dropped the controls, strode over to the chained girl, and kissed her. He had to make it brief, for his own eyes were suddenly misty. At the controls again, he swore bitterly to himself, for he realized now that he could never risk bringing the Red Peri to trial. He thought somberly of his broken oath; that meant nothing if keeping it endangered the girl he loved.

He formed a plan. At Nivia on Titan there'd be an inspection of the ship. He'd hide the Peri—in a

cool jet, perhaps—and tell his story without mention of her capture. He'd disclose the location of the pirate base and let the government rockets rescue old Solomon and destroy the colony. And then he—

Then? Well, he'd land the *Limbo* in Iraq. He had friends there who'd keep the Peri safe. He'd fly home and resign his damned official position, and so be free to marry pirate or murderess or any one he chose—and no one would ever know that the lovely Mrs. Keene had once been the dreaded Red Peri.

For the present he'd let the girl believe he was taking her back to punishment; at least that might frighten her into a respectable life. He smiled, and looked up to find the luminous green eyes fixed steadily and unhappily on his face.

Before he could speak the buzzer of the static field sounded the signal that warned of meteors. But meteors were rare indeed out here beyond the orbit of Jupiter. He stared back at the vast black disc of Pluto, and true enough, there was a little flare of light against the blackness that could mean only a rocket blast. Second by second the flame approached, and the Red Peri rushed toward him as if his own blast were silent.

The pirate ship paralleled his course. Suddenly the annunciator above him spoke; they had trained an inductive beam on it. "Cut your jets!" came the words in a cold metallic voice that was still recognizable as Marco Grandi's.

He had no means of reply, so he bored grimly on. The Red Peri flipped close beside him. "Cut your jets," came the order, "or we'll blast you!"

Keene thought suddenly of the communication system from the pilot room to the stern. If he spoke into that, and if their tubes were sensitive enough, it was possible that their receiver might pick up the induced current. He switched it on full.

"Red Peri!" he called. "Can you hear me? Can you hear me?"

Reply was immediate. "We hear you. Cut your jets!"

"I won't," said Keene. "If you come a single yard closer I'll ram you. The Peri's aboard, and if you blast this ship you'll kill her as well as me."

There was a silence. "How do we know she's alive?" asked Grandi's voice.

"Watch the forward port," said Keene. He unlocked the chain at the hand hold. The girl made no resistance as he led her to the port, following as meekly as a puppy on a leash.

"I'll have to make this look serious," he said. "I'm sorry, Peri." He twisted his hand roughly in her glorious hair and thrust her close against the port. After a moment he released her, led her back to her chair, and relocked the chain.

"Red Peri," he called, "move away or I'll ram you. Keep a quarter mile distance."

There was no reply, but the pirate ship slanted silently away. Like a child's model it hung in the void, tenaciously paralleling his course. But he knew it was helpless; Grandi dared not risk the Peri's safety.

Nearly an hour passed before the Peri spoke. "I don't understand you, Frank," she said miserably. "When your life was in danger I risked mine to save you, but you risk your life to destroy me. Is that what you mean by love?"

"I risked mine, not to destroy you, but to save you," he muttered. "Peri, I couldn't bear the thought of your living such a life as you have been living. I want you to be happy."

"Happy," she echoed mournfully. "If this is your idea of happiness—" She left the sentence unfinished.

Hour after hour the pirate clung grimly beside them. After a long time Keene slept, trusting to the buzzer to rouse him if Grandi should attempt to cut through. The last thing he saw was the luminescent eyes of the Peri, and they were the first thing he saw on awakening. She sat as if she had not moved.

Another day passed. Pluto was a pallid, tiny disk far behind them, Neptune and Uranus were beyond the Sun; but Saturn gleamed brightly. All day the Peri was mournfully silent, and when he kissed her before sleeping, she clung to him almost as if in panic. He remembered that later, for when he awoke she was—gone.

Gone! The chain was missing, and only a square of paper—a star chart—lay on her chair. She wasn't on the *Limbo*, and the *Red Peri* no longer hung silent on the left. He seized the note in a frantic clutch. He read.

Frank—dearest Frank—this is farewell. I love you; and the proof of it is that I could have escaped before this while you slept; but I wanted to stay. I was all but willing to suffer before the law if it meant having you—but I can't. Not even three years, because I'd die without freedom.

I had an iron feeder in my pocket, for I always carry them on raids, as you remember from the Aardkin. It's eating the chain now, but it won't attack chrome steel; your floors and walls are safe.

Frank, if you had weakened, if you had promised me safety, I think I should have stayed, but—perhaps—then I should have loved you less than I do now.

Good-by

The note was unsigned. She had taken a red chart pencil and drawn a creditable picture of a tiny, winged elf—a red peri. Keene knew what she had done. There were no space suits on the *Limbo*, for he and Solomon had worn them to the pirate cave. She had signaled her ship, opened the air lock, and braved once more the vacuum of space to fling herself across. When he had finally exhausted his vocabulary of expletives and blasphemies, when he had at last called himself all the varieties of fool he knew, Keene realized what he had to do. He couldn't find her on Pluto, since the Peri would certainly move her base elsewhere for fear he'd direct a government rocket there. But what he could do, what he had to do, was to get a job on an Interplanetary freighter, and then wait. Sooner or later—sooner or later, he repeated grimly—he'd meet the Red Peri again.