

Water Pirate

It was early in 2418 that the Solar System realized that there was a Water Pirate. The great tanker ships, carrying water to the rich dry-world mines and colonies, began to vanish from the space-lanes, with their convoys. The Trans-Galactic Convoy Fleet, which for two hundred years had kept the space-ways safe, was suddenly helpless. Ships and men vanished without a trace or an explanation, and there was no clue to be found.

For four solid weeks not a drop of water got through. The storage tanks dropped lower and lower; a panic fear of thirst swept the dry worlds. The Interplanetary Trade Marts shook in the wind of that fear, and the economic system trembled with it.

Old Johan Gray, Chief of Special Duty of the Convoy Fleet, played his last card. His son Jaffa went through the worst hell-spots of the System, searching for something that might show them some way to fight.

And on a moon-washed Martian night, Jaffa Gray stood in the shadow of the Valkis slave-market and cursed, bitterly and softly; a stocky, strong-boned man, his square face hard with the failure that he had at last to admit.

For the first time in the two days he had been in Valkis, he took off his peaked spaceman's cap, wanting the desert wind on his head and not giving a damn who saw his trademark—the broad streak where his hair had come in white over a scar. He raked his fingers through it, swearing out the last of his vocabulary; and a voice said out of the darkness: "Jaffa Gray!"

He whirled, his heat-gun blurring into his hand. A boy stepped into the moonlight. His arrow-straight body was clad like Jaffa's in dark spaceman's leather, but where Jaffa's dark hair was cropped short, the boy's rose in a shining crown, bound with the thin metal chains that marked him already a warrior in Kesh, a barbarian state in the Martian drylands.

Jaffa's face hardened. He had seen that gleaming pile of hair almost everywhere in Valkis. "All right, Keshi, you've caught up with me. Talk, and talk fast!"

The boy came closer, fearless of the gun, and his words were a breathless whisper. "I can take you to the Water Pirate!"

Jaffa stood like a graven image. He had risked his neck on an invisible trail. The last possible covert had drawn blank. He had been going home defeated; and now Fate dropped the whole thing neatly in his lap! His lips curled in a silent laugh. His left hand shot out to clamp the Keshi's tunic in a throttling grip; his right jammed the gun-muzzle in the boy's ribs. "Now," he said easily, "what's your game?"

The Keshi didn't flinch. "You are Jaffa Gray; I was sure when I saw your hair. You are hunting the Water Pirate. I can take you to him. There is no game."

Jaffa's eyes blazed. "If you were telling the truth. . . ."

The boy grinned in his face, a fighting grin. "Feel my chin, Jaffa Gray, if you want proof!"

Puzzled, the Earthman slid the fist of his gun-hand along the up-thrust jaw. His breath hissed in sharply. Intently he retraced the jaw-line, ran downward

along the smooth curve of the throat. Then he let go of the tunic abruptly, as though it had burned him.

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" he whispered. "A woman!"

"Now do you believe?" mocked the low voice. "Would I have risked Valkis to tell you a lie? What would those wolves do to me, if they found out? I need you, Jaffa Gray, and you need me!"

The white lock gleamed as Jaffa's blunt fingers rumbled it. Then he nodded shortly and shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"I'll take a chance," he grunted. "Let's go. We can talk aboard my ship."

The Kallman two-seater was ready to fly. Behind the bolted space-port they were safe from spying, and the warrior-girl of Kesh told her story in rapid sentences.

"My name is Lhara. My brother Lhar was pilot on one of the tanker ships that disappeared. The Water Pirate holds him prisoner, along with the men from the other ships, but one man escaped. My brother sent me a message by him; told me to find you, because you were the one man in the System who could bring the Water Pirate in.

"The pilot, who escaped in one of the Pirate's own ships, was to have helped us. But something went wrong; we crashed, and he was killed. You've got to fix the ship."

"Why not just use my own?" asked Jaffa.

"How close do you think you'd get to the Pirate's hideout?" returned Lhara impatiently. "Besides, it has much better weapons than any of our ships."

Jaffa's ears pricked. "Who exactly is the Water Pirate?"

"I don't know. None of the men has ever seen him."

Jaffa nodded. "Where did you crash?"

"Near the Teka range, about three hundred miles from here."

"Just a minute," demanded Jaffa suspiciously. "How'd you get across the desert to Valkis?"

The girl's grey eyes were contemptuous. "I am a Keshi." She touched the chains in her tawny hair. "I have earned these honestly. It was not hard to steal a thak from a village across the first range. I rode to Valkis."

Jaffa shook his head. "You win. But warrior or no warrior, if you're lying to me I'll wring your pretty neck. What's your position?"

He was admiring the pretty neck as he slid the strato-wings out of the hull and set the air-rotors going.

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!" Jaffa shoved back his cap and whistled. "Where did this crate come from?"

He was standing in the open port of a wrecked space ship, lying at a slight

angle in the red sand of the Teka desert. It was the weirdest ship he had ever seen, and he had seen plenty. A flattened oval, rather than the familiar cylinder of the System, the alloy of its metal and the use of various gadgets projecting from the hull were both a mystery. Inside, the control cabin was furnished with queer low couches and upholstered all over with a peculiar silky stuff that flowed in quavering patterns of green and blue and brown.

A small ship, carrying four at the outside on a long voyage.

To Jaffa's right as he stood was the control panel, and beyond it, the buckled bow-plates that had sustained the brunt of the crash. Ahead was a wall pierced with thick quartzite visiports. To his left was a bulkhead; the heavy door into the rear cabins was closed. And at his feet. . . .

At his feet was the maddest thing of the whole crazy ship. Covering most of the floor space was an oval pit some six feet deep, tiled in a pattern of outlandish marine growths. It was bone dry; whatever moisture had been there had long ago gone out into the dry Martian air. But it was undoubtedly a pool of some sort, and Jaffa wondered profanely what lunatic would cart a swimming pool through space.

He whirled as bolts shot to behind him. Whirled; and dropped in a jointless heap on the narrow floor. Lhara looked grimly down at him, the paralysis-gun that Jaffa had not taken from her steady in her hand. Mutely, Jaffa raged. He had not disarmed her, for there was no way beyond actual imprisonment to keep her from the Kallman's gun-rack; and Jaffa had been reluctant to risk alienating her help. Also, he had had no real reason to believe she lied. Now he could have kicked himself.

From a locker she produced manacles and chained him securely, wrist and ankle, taking his gun. "I'm sorry, Jaffa Gray," she said steadily, as she stood at last over him. "That was an unworthy trick. But I have told you no lie. My brother is a prisoner, I need your help, and I can take you to the Water Pirate!"

Then she was gone, out into the desert.

Jaffa glared bitterly after her. The paralyzing charge had not been strong, and the life came back into him quickly. He struggled against his chains, knowing it was useless. Then he lay still, too bitter against himself and Lhara even to curse.

After a bit there came a thundering shock that rocked the desert under the ship. Sand pelted against the ports, and the sagging bow-plates shook in the surge of ruptured air. Jaffa swore. Only one thing could have made that explosion; Lhara had bombed his Kallman. His only hope of escape now lay in this queer ship that he must make fly.

The girl came back, carrying a bundle of Jaffa's things, her hair shaken in a tawny veil across her shoulders and full of sand. Subconsciously Jaffa saluted the courage it had taken to heave a sub-atomic bomb into the ship and then lie in the sand with that explosion roaring over her.

Lhara freed his hands, lengthened the chain between his ankles so that he could walk after a fashion, the paralysis-gun ready to topple him if he made a false move.

"Go look at the damage, Jaffa. You'll find everything you need here. And I

advise you to hurry."

He went, grappling the problem of why, if Lhara had been telling the truth as she said, she was acting this way. She must have gone to a good deal of trouble to track him to Valkis, for he was not in the habit of leaving guide-posts behind him; and she hadn't done it simply because she needed a man to repair the ship, or even to fly it. Almost anyone else would have answered that purpose as well as he. There was something more behind it, something damned queer.

He tried to solve the mystery by the simple method of asking questions. But Lhara, along with the chains in her hair, had learned a warriors trick of keeping her jaw shut.

He learned nothing.

The damage to the ship was not great. The bow-plates had been broken so that the cabin was not space-worthy, but the instrument panel had not suffered much. The pilot had died of a broken neck, according to the girl. Jaffa studied the controls. Unfamiliar in pattern, they yet bore a resemblance to those he knew, and the ship ran on the same vibratory atom-smashing principle. He nodded in grim admiration as he saw what had made the disappearances of the tanker ships and their convoys possible. A powerful vibratory field was created by means of exterior electrodes, neutralizing the vibrations in the atom-smashing units of the System ships, rendering the engines useless. The vibrations also blanketed the radios, preventing communication. After that, the huge electro-magnets simply clamped on and towed the helpless ships like fish on a line.

A queer, wonderful ship. But he knew he could fly it; and given the proper materials, he could fix the damage in two days.

"Of course," he added, when he made his surly report to the girl, "if the mechanism of the ship has been sprung or damaged. . . ."

"It hasn't," she assured him, and he wondered how she knew.

That night the two of them bunked in the control cabin. Jaffa never thought of being alone with a woman. They brought up their girls to be men in Kesh. Lhara simply chained her prisoner securely, lay down and went to sleep. The door in the bulkhead remained closed. Jaffa tried more questions, but finally gave up and went to sleep too.

Sometime much later he came awake, not starting up, but simply ceasing to be asleep. Both moons were up, shooting crazy shadows across the narrow floor and the dry pool. Lhara's couch was empty.

Jaffa realized suddenly what had waked him. There was a sense almost of fog in his nostrils, a warm moisture faintly tinged with an unfamiliar smell. The dry, cold air sucked it up before he could analyze it. But it had been there; and Lhara was gone.

He sat up. His ankle-chain passed around a stanchion, but from where he was he could see that the bolts of the space-lock were shot from the inside, and the hatch into the engine-rooms below was locked.

His eyes fastened on the bulkhead door. Lhara was there, behind it; there was no place else for her to be. Something else was there, too, something that made warm moisture in a climate drier than the Earthly Sahara. What?

Jaffa lay awake, waiting, trying till his head ached to answer his own question. He lay so that he could see the door and still seem to be asleep; when at last the heavy door swung cautiously open, he held his breathing to an even rhythm, though he strained every sense to see what was beyond.

Nothing. Just darkness, against which Lhara's unbound hair shone like a silver cape in the moonlight. But there came again that gush of moist warmth that had wakened him, and the strange odor was a thought stronger. Then the door swung to again, and the thirsty air swallowed all trace.

Lhara stood over him a moment, listening to his breathing. Then she went back to her couch; and in spite of his rage against her, Jaffa dreamed of her, and pleasantly.

Two days of hard work saw the bow-plates once more tight. That evening Jaffa faced the Keshi girl.

"All right," he grunted. "Your crate will fly. Now what?"

"Now you try it." Lhara shot the space-bolts home. "Take her up. If she's all right, go on. If not, come back and finish the repairs."

"Had you thought we might not be able to get back?" asked Jaffa dryly.

Lhara's jaw set. "Those are the orders, Jaffa Gray."

"Yours—or someone else's?"

"That doesn't concern you." The ever-present paralysis-gun motioned him to the pilot's seat. Jaffa shrugged and obeyed.

He switched on the air-pumps and the purifying system, watching the gauges intently. The needles held steady for a moment, then wavered back to the danger point.

"What is it?" asked Lhara sharply. "Cut in your rockets!"

Jaffa pointed to the gauges: The girl's eyes hardened abruptly with suspicion. "The pumps were all right when we tested for tightness an hour ago."

"You can see them now," retorted Jaffa indifferently. "If you go up with them this way, you'll not live two hours."

She wavered a moment, for the first time uncertain. She suspected a trap, but she knew nothing of machinery. In the end, she gave in; there was nothing else to do.

"All right. You'll have to go below and fix them, and you well know there's only room for one down there. But hear me, Earthman!" Her grey gaze was steel-hard, her jaw stern. "You can't escape from there. And if you make a single false move, I'll drop you in your tracks!"

Jaffa shrugged and slid his manacled feet down the hatch.

A single narrow runway ran between the great bulk-headed power units, back to the fuel feed and the vibration chamber, where the special heavy atoms were smashed to power the rocket tubes. He found the air unit without any trouble, stood staring speculatively at the gleaming mass of machinery. There was

nothing wrong with it; he himself had caused the reaction on the gauges. But there was an idea at the back of his mind, an unformed thing made of closed doors and cryptic actions and warm moisture in cold, dry air. With the queer inventiveness of a man on the brink of a mysterious fate, something had occurred to him; a fantastic thing, that might, just possibly come in handy. Any way, it was all he could do, and anything was better than nothing.

He set to work with quick, sure hands. For nearly an hour he was at it, answering Lhara's shouted questions with surly plausibilities. When at last he climbed the ladder back to the control chamber, there was something in the air-unit that had not been there before.

He took the strange ship up, testing her in every way and finding her sound. Lhara gave him his course; he stared at it, raking the white streak in his hair with blunt fingers.

"The Asteroid Belt, eh? Trust the Water Pirate to do something no crook has done since the Fleet got its long-range detectors thirty years ago! I'll be interested to see how he does it!"

"By the Nine Red Hells of Jupiter!"

Jaffa said it, very slow and soft. Impossibility was manifest before his eyes.

Mars was back of them, across the curve of space. All around them the Asteroids hurtled on their far-flung way. Ahead, where Jaffa, under Lhara's pistol-enforced order, was steering, was a tiny world-pebble a mile or so in diameter. It seemed a long way to come to commit suicide, but Jaffa held the ship steady, straight for the barren surface.

Then the impossible happened. Emptiness yawned behind a backslid portion of the asteroid itself; Jaffa, goggling, took the ship in. The strange space-door closed behind them.

"We must wait until the air is replenished," said Lhara, as though she were reciting a lesson, and Jaffa waited, staring.

A vast space had been hollowed in the rock of the asteroid, probably with powerful disintegrators, and fitted out for a hangar. Ranged neatly in ranks were the convoy ships that had vanished with the tankers; of the clumsy tankers themselves, there was no sign. There was no other ship like the one he flew, and Jaffa smiled. That fitted his embryonic theory. The floor was sheeted in metal, and he guessed at magnetic gravity plates.

A green light flashed against the wall. The Keshi girl got up and shot the space-bolts back. "Come," she said, and Jaffa, shuffling in his ankle-chains, followed obediently.

Lhara guided him, muttering directions under her breath as though she had memorized them. There was a barrack room where men of the Convoy Fleet sat in strange, quiescent alertness, like robots of flesh and blood. Lhara's eyes went in anxious pain to a tall Keshi in the uniform of the tanker company; but there was no recognition in his face, and she did not pause. Then there was a little terminal room where a car waited on a curved trough. Lhara motioned her prisoner in. Then she pressed a button, and the car shot down a green-lit tube straight for the heart of the asteroid.

With a dizzying, vertiginous suddenness, the car shot out of the metal tube

into one of glass. Space opened around them—space filled with water, swarming with queer sea-creatures, suffused by a curious pale radiance. Jaffa realized, with a suffocating sensation, that the water filled the whole hollowed-out center of the asteroid.

Lhara's face was set and pale; he could not read her expression. But her knuckles were white on the grip of the ray-gun, and her breast rose to deep-drawn fighter's breathing.

There were glassite buildings ahead in the water's blur. The tube went straight into one, closing transparent walls around them. They went down a ramp and into a small room, furnished as the spaceship had been, and at Jaffa's feet there was a sunken pool, broad each way as two tall men.

Jaffa followed the Keshi girl through swinging doors into a room that stretched vastly under curving crystal walls. Intricate mechanisms, control panels, coils and vacuum tubes and gigantic things of cryptic identity filled every foot of available space; there were ray lamps and heating apparatus and rack upon rack of cultures in gleaming tubes.

And there was water, in a deep sunken pool tiled green and brown in a pattern of water-weeds.

Lhara led her captive to the brink of the pool and stopped. They stood waiting, and there was a silence like a holding of breath in the laboratory.

The water in the pool stirred suddenly, lapping against the tiles. Far down, cloaked in the rippling refractions, a solid something moved, sending a stream of crystal bubbles up along the surge of the disturbed water.

Something that was swift and sure and graceful; something that gleamed with a golden sheen as the light struck it; something that was panther-lithe and supple, and had areas of shimmering iridescence at its extremities. Jaffa's blunt fingers raked his white-streaked hair and did not feel it.

The head broke water.

A strange, unearthly face. Fine golden fur-covered features that were strong and clear and as streamlined as a space-cruiser. Eye and nostril were fitted with protective membranes, and there were no outward ears; but Jaffa, looking into fire-shot dark eyes, knew that this was a man, with no taint of the hybrid in his blood.

In one light surge the stranger gained the tiles beside the pool. The close golden fur that covered him shed the water in glistening streams down a smooth-muscled body, as human in shape as Jaffa's own, save that at wrist and ankle there were fanlike membranes. There was a strange, triumphant fire burning in the swimmer as he stood looking at Jaffa; and the Earthman realized abruptly that Lhara was trembling.

"You have done well, girl," murmured the golden Being, and Lhara's voice burst out of a tight throat.

"Give me my brother and let me go!"

The water-man might not have heard her. His dark gaze was fastened on Jaffa. "The gods are with me!" he said softly. "I shall succeed."

Jaffa's face was hard as carven stone. "I seem to be the sacrifice," he observed. "Is it permitted that I know for what?"

The golden swimmer swung about, reaching for a switch, "I'll show you, Earthman!" The light went out, leaving a suffocating blackness. After a moment a pale square of light gleamed; the strange voice, that had a liquid music in it, called them closer. "Look here, into this ultra-visor. It will explain better than any words."

Jaffa looked, hearing the taut breathing of the Keshi girl beside him. Something, a spinning blur, took shape in the screen, resolved itself into a planet, revolving about a triple sun. The focus drew in, blotting out the suns; the curve of the globe flattened, became a concave bowl of water, stretching to the limits of the screen. Here and there tiny islands raised swampy heads, barely above the face of the warm, teeming sea; in the shallows around them were domes of gleaming glassite, housing cities.

Closer still; into the streets of the under-water cities, where there were great buildings fallen to ruin and disuse, all save the temples. No children played, and the homes were desolate. Only the temples had life—and the taverns. There were as many taverns as there were temples, and here the sunken pools were filled with stuff that was not water; those who wallowed in them were mere sodden, licentious hulks.

The cities faded to show writhing undersea forests, growing on oozy mud. Amongst the towering fronds of weeds and the amorphous bulks of giant sponges swam monstrous shadows, things with gills and dorsal fins that were yet not fish. They were to the beings in the cities as the apes are to man, and their faces were bestial beyond anything Jaffa had ever seen. They swam around the glassite domes, nuzzling the transparent surfaces, glaring hungrily at the men within; and here and there a shining dome was cracked before the strength of their numbers. The sea-things rode the spurting water through the rifts, and the men who had time to drown were the lucky ones.

Lhara gasped, and Jaffa sensed her averted head. Then, as the screen flickered out and the light came up again, the voice of the golden swimmer spoke, low and somber.

"I, Rha, was the last child to be born on Vhila."

They stood waiting, the man and the woman. The alien one faced them, his muscles drawn taut.

"Vhila is a dying world. Once, as you saw, she was great. But we are an old people, and we have seen our doom approaching for centuries. The sea-dwellers out-breed us a thousand to one. One by one our cities fall, and my people have fallen too, under the load. You saw them; some wait for death in the temples, some in the kulha-tanks. But learning and work and hope are dead on Vhila.

"Can you understand that, Earthman? A world of living dead! No future, no life, just a dumb acceptance and an endless waiting. I revolted. I lived alone in the empty colleges, the laboratories, the museums; I learned all the ancient knowledge of my race. And I turned my eyes to your solar system, where I dreamed of a new life for what remains of my people. When I was ready, I took a spaceship from the museum, stocked it with the tools I would need, but no weapons, for we are a peaceful race."

"I landed first on Venus. You can guess why, Earth-man; we are amphibious,

taking water through the skin. We cannot live in a dry world. But instead of the peaceful welcome I had expected, I was attacked and driven off. The people feared me. They would have killed me if they could. I knew then that my people could not come in peace. We are alien."

"I found this asteroid, and changed it to suit me. Then I studied your system more thoroughly, by means of the ultra-visor, that I might find means to conquer it. I have no wish to kill, only to force recognition of my wishes and to gain the power to carry them out. I found that your civilization rests basically on the water trade that permits your far-flung colonies to live. Fitting, was it not? I could prey on this water trade, bring you to the brink of destruction, and then make my demands. Under the circumstances, there could be no refusal."

Again the fire-shot eyes rested on Jaffa. "The gods have been kind. So far I have succeeded."

Jaffa raised his head. "Where do I fit in?"

Rha smiled. "I need a hostage, to insure that my demands are believed, understood, and carried out promptly. You are the son of Johan Gray. The Chief of Special, I have learned, is really the most powerful man in the System, for he sits at the secret head of all the activities of the planets. To him, through you, I shall make my demands."

Jaffa nodded, his eyes hooded behind dropped lids. "And if he refuses?"

Rha sighed and spread his hands.

For the first time Lhara spoke. Both men started. Her voice was sharp and fearless as a sword, and the paralysis-gun was steady in her hand.

"I've been a fool, Rha! I knew none of this; only that if I brought you this man, you would cure my brother and let him go. I thought you were only a clever bandit, and I was willing to barter with you for my brother's life. If I had known, I would have killed Lhar with my own hands before I would have obeyed you!"

She flung quick words over her shoulder at Jaffa. "I am sorry, Earthman, for what I did. Stand by me now!"

Rha did not flinch. "You cannot escape. The doors are closed, and my pilots, who are my slaves since I injected them with a special hormone, guard the hangar. Only I can take you out of here."

Wills met and locked. Then Lhara bowed before the truth. Rha took the gun from her unresisting hand.

"Now," he said. "We will go out again in my spaceship, away from here so that my position cannot be traced by the radio carrier-waves, and contact Johan Gray. You will not be stubborn, Jaffa, I am sure."

Jaffa's eyes were still hidden, and there was a ghost of a smile on his lips. He asked: "Why did you come back here at all? You were aboard the ship back on Mars."

"You guessed it, did you?" Rha nodded as he led the way out of the laboratory. "The Martian air is so dry I couldn't leave my cabin, and I was afraid if you knew, you'd try something. An unfortunate thing, that smash-up, especially the pilot's death. But I had to have you, Jaffa, and I had to have Lhara to get

you.

"I came back here for two reasons. The water, air, and food were nearly exhausted; but particularly I wanted you to see my stronghold and my laboratory, so that you would know I made no idle boasts. Whila has scientific secrets your people won't guess at for several centuries yet."

They made a silent trio on the trip back to the hangar. Rha picked up three armed pilots from the barrack-room. He smiled at Lhara as he motioned her into his ship, saying: "I feel safer with you where I can watch you." Then the ship roared out through the space-door. The bulkhead door was closed, and the pool in the control cabin was newly filled.

At a safe distance Rha brought the ship to a standstill. And as the throb of the motors died, Jaffa came to his feet. His chains clashed as he hurled himself in a desperate dive for the control panel. Before anyone could stop him, he had landed all his weight on a knife-switch set beside the controls, smashed it down to the end of its slot.

Down in the bowels of the ship there was a grating clash. The water in the pool began to bubble and hiss, and a whitish gas rolled sluggishly over the brink to spread across the floor. In the time it took Jaffa to regain his feet, it had covered the floor-plates and was lapping the ankles of the thunderstruck people who watched it.

"That gas," said Jaffa steadily, "is highly explosive. I should advise the men not to fire their heat-guns."

Rha snapped his orders. "Take him—but don't fire!"

The three pilots moved forward like plastic robots. Jaffa faced them; without shifting his eyes he called to Lhara, "Keep your head above the mist!" Rha stood quietly, waiting, but his eyes were on a switch above the one Jaffa had thrown, and he said "Hurry!" very quietly.

The white gas billowed sluggishly at their wrists.

The rest, afterwards, was a blur to Jaffa's memory. One man missed his footing on the narrow floor and vanished into the pool. The other two came on, holding their heat-guns clubbed. The Earthman caught a glimpse of Lhara, stalking like a panther behind Rha. Then he had grappled the two pilots and gone lurching down into the sea of mist.

The swirling opacity blinded him; he held his breath while he struggled, praying that his chest wouldn't burst until he had what he wanted. The pilots fought doggedly to hold him while they regained their feet. But Jaffa had the desperation of a man clutching his last chance; and he knew that above the rising flood of gas, Rha was reaching for the switch that would mean defeat.

His hand closed on a flailing heat-gun. His head was ringing, his lungs burned with the agony of suffocation. Dimly he knew that one man had fallen limply to the floor, unconscious. He wrenched desperately at the gun, knowing he couldn't last much longer. The distorted face close to his loosed a burst of breath that set the white gas swirling. Then the empty lungs sucked in; the hand went limp.

With the last of his strength Jaffa surged upward. The gas had risen; how high? Above his head, perhaps. Perhaps it had choked all air from the cabin,

pouring up faster than the air-conditioners could work. Perhaps Rha and Lhara were lying under it, dying of anoxia. And suddenly, through his pain and desperation, Jaffa knew something. The hard-held air in his lungs broke from him in a cry.

"Lhara!"

Like a swimmer, his head broke the surface. The gas lapped his chin, but there was air still. He gulped it in. Rha's head was rigid above the rising tide, and behind it, Lhara's, her hair fallen in a bright cloak that gleamed through the mist.

Jaffa raised his gun and fired.

In a crackling fury of sparks the flying controls fused to a blackened ruin. Jaffa lurched forward, dragged at the switch above the one he had pressed before. The handle scorched his palm, so near had the destructive blast come to it. A gurgling rush came from the pool, and the gas sucked downward in a sullen whirlpool. Jaffa leaned weakly against the bulkhead, and knew that he was laughing at the two thunderstruck faces.

"Dry ice!" he gasped. "I diverted carbon dioxide from the air purifiers and improvised a compression unit with one of the pressure tanks. Then I connected the compression-tank release with a cut-in on the feed-pipe for this pool, the only one that can be emptied from the control panel. When I pulled that switch I dumped about ten pounds of dry ice into the water. That gas was the released carbon dioxide, perfectly harmless, except that it can suffocate."

Lhara released the arm she had been holding in a vise-grip behind Rha's back; the grip that had kept him from getting to that all-important switch and wrecking Jaffa's plans. Together they got the men up above the last of the gas that hovered above the empty pool. When they were breathing properly again, Jaffa turned to Rha.

"You realize your position. Very soon after I radio, Fleet ships will come to take us in tow. In the ordinary course of events, you will be destroyed as a danger to the welfare of the Solar System.

"But I don't think you are a menace, Rha. I think you're a very courageous man, and a great scientist; and on those grounds, I'll make a bargain with you. My father, as you said, has influence. I think, after I explain, that I can persuade him to arrange a colony for you, provided you give your word to live in peace. And that's what you really want, isn't it, Rha?"

"I ask only a useful life for my people." For a long, long moment Rha looked into the Earthman's eyes. Then he bowed his head, and his voice was deep as he answered:

"I accept your offer, Jaffa Gray."

Jaffa sighed relieved and turned to the radio. Lhara sat on a couch beside it.

"You'll go back to Kesh now?" he asked abruptly.

"As soon as my brother is free." She faced him frankly. "I'm sorry for what I did, Jaffa. But since it's turned out this way. . . ."

"I think," said Jaffa, "if I were to come to Kesh, and you were to try very

hard, I might forgive you."