

## FAREWELL TO THE LOTOS

BY A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

ILLUSTRATED BY ORBAN

Hooper's Snoopers were the most hated men in the Federation. But they knew they had the highest mission of all — saving the race from the contagious poison of alien paradises and one-way Edens.

Altair VI was a rotten world to be stranded on. It was damp and dismal, and the park that surrounded the bench was filled with shrubs that looked more animal than vegetable, with warty stems, fleshy black leaves, and blood red flowers. There was even a faint smell like that of carrion in the murky atmosphere that made the cigarette in Peter Quinn's mouth seem tainted.

He shifted his lanky six-foot body on the bench, and tried to close his pale blue eyes to the sights, while he sucked in on the smoke. He might as well enjoy it, he realized bitterly; there were only two other cigarettes in the case he'd just returned to the pocket of his wrinkled uniform. When they were gone. . .

Well, the Service would have nothing to do with him. From now on, all his past record would be blotted out, and he'd be listed as just another Second Pilot turned drunkard, who'd overstayed his shore leave and missed his ship. He hadn't been drunk, though he'd picked up a bit of a glow. And he'd kept his eye on the clock in the girl's apartment. But either it had been tinkered with or it stopped, as he found when he happened to look at his wristwatch. Then there'd been a wild ride to the spaceport, only to find that the Lady May had already blasted off, taking everything he owned with her. The girl, Annalyn, who'd thought so much of an officer of an interstellar cruiser, had indicated what she thought of him as a potential beachcomber, and had denied knowing a thing about the money he didn't have. And here he was, stranded on Altair VI, good for nothing except perhaps enlisting in the local garrison forces!

"Peter Quinn?" It was a woman's voice, low and husky, that brought him to his feet out of habit, even before he saw her.

Venus sea-silk stockings covered fine ankles and shapely knees. Beneath the weatherproof, transparent cloak was a costume that must have come from London or New York, and it was filled in all the right places. Under the hood, the hair was black and lustrous, worn shoulder length. Her cheekbones were a little too high, her mouth more than a little too wide. Her eyes were ice-blue, and the line of her jaw was graceful—and strong. She was almost as tall as he was: He was not sure that he liked the hint of ironic humor under her seemingly grave expression —or that he would ever like her.

"Sit down," she suggested, before he could fumble for words. She dropped onto the bench beside him, holding out one of the rare, delicately carved boxes found among the crumbling ruins of the once mighty Martian civilization; its use as a cigarette box argued money with a capital M. So did the cigarettes.

He took one of the expensive Nine Planets brand, lighted one for her, and then inhaled gratefully. He started to question her again, but again she beat him to it.

"I knew you'd missed the Lady May, Peter Quinn. I came looking for you. You can pilot a Spurling, of course?"

He nodded. "I should hope so."

"Good. I need a skilled pilot. . ."

Disgust flamed up in him. It was obvious enough now—the money, the hardness in her, the ostentation, and her suggestion all told their own story. Someone who'd won one of the Federation Lotteries, throwing money away, travelling around in a haze of false glory, going from monocars to Spurlings, and now willing to play Lady Bountiful to a down-and-out, spaceman—for a price, that is ; for someone to push around, play servant, and gigolo while the glamor of the Bountiful act went on.. .

Quinn rubbed out the Nine Planets, and took one of his own remaining cigarettes; he slammed it viciously into his mouth, and swung on his heel toward the distant, mist-shrouded towers of Port Van Campen.

"Stop!" There was a whiplash quality in her voice that surprised him. "Come back, Quinn!"

"Why?" he asked curtly.

"Because I've already spent too much work getting my hands on you to let you go now. I needed someone who was trained to obey orders, and from outside this beastly world. But it isn't personal occupation. Here!"

She did something quick and complicated to a compact, then suddenly glanced around sharply, before completing the deft motions of her hands. Suddenly, the back of the case flew open, and she handed it to him. As a space officer, he couldn't mistake the badge inside. "Federal Agent Jane Haldane, Number ZX7355- 668," he read. "Not too good a photograph."

"Skip it." She snatched the compact back, snapped it shut, and thrust it into her large bag. "And the name for my job is Jane Haley—about what you thought, too. From Centaurus VI, winner of the Far Centaurus Sweepstakes, blowing my winnings seeing all the Galaxy I can. I've bought a Spurling—looks like a crock, but she goes. And I know you; we used to be good friends when you were on the Centaurus run—remember ? Now I'm lucky, you've had bad luck, and I'm giving you a hand. But you insist on doing something to earn your keep. . ."

"Quinn, of Hooper's Snoopers?" he asked, and laughed with an ugly sound. "No thanks! I'd better enlist here—honestly."

She grimaced. "All right, nobody likes us. But it's time you learned the facts. We don't care about morals. We don't even care if some man-colonized world wants to kick over the traces and tell the Federation to go chase itself, though the Federation might take a dim view of that. Our job is simply to keep the human race ideologically pure—keep it

human! And on some of these worlds already inhabited, with their own cultures, things could get out of hand. Some of those cultures are poisonous to human minds—poisonous but attractive, like a drug—and contagious. We're trying to keep such deadly diseases from spreading!"

"Then why here?" Quinn pointed out. "This world was never inhabited by intelligent life."

"Maybe not. But there's—something! We never found artifacts, of course, but there was a biped here once, with a large brain case. . ." She stopped, then swung to him. "But that's enough, until I know whether you're with me. Are you?"

He took a cigarette from her, trying to think. He knew she could get his blacklisting ended, return him to the Service and the ships with a simple recommendation. The Federation Secret Service under Hooper had power enough. But spying, even for a good cause, was a dirty business. Sometimes the end justified the means, but he'd read enough history to have his doubts. . .

"You'll see the ships blasting off for the stars. . ." the girl murmured. "Bound for. Polaris, Alioth, Centaurus, Sol . . . But you won't be on them, unless I say so. Think of the hills of Earth, Quinn—sunlight instead of this dank drabness, people around you, ships waiting. Think, Quinn, think of Earth. . ."

She stopped suddenly, her face deadly pale except for the crimson mark on her left cheek left by his open hand. Her eyes were hard and cold, the eyes of a killer. Her handbag was open, and her hand was inside it. Then she laughed briefly, her eyes still cold and hostile, but with the tension broken. "All right, I hit below the belt. But it's true. You'd be doing your race a good deed and you could win reinstatement. Otherwise, there's no way back to the ships!"

"The price on the ticket!" He shrugged, and rubbed his hand against his trousers. "All right, you win. Spill the beans."

She looked relieved, but got up and walked around in a circle beyond the bench, tense and listening. Finally she sat down again. "They don't seem to be on to me, yet." She threw her cigarette away, and took out another. "It's a long story. But I need help, and it'll be too long before it can arrive. That's why you're it. And don't think it isn't important, Quinn. All I can give you now is a quick background."

The agents had stumbled on something first on Kalabon on Alioth III. The Kalabonians had been intelligent, but not humanoid; and they hadn't been behind it. They resented the alien ideas intruding on their antheap philosophy, and wanted to help. But while the investigation was going on, the local fort commandant set off a couple of rockets with atomic heads, and the focus of the trouble came to an end. The island where the cult, or whatever it was, had been was just a radioactive cinder.

But there'd been a survivor, bound for the island, but not close enough. Somehow, afterwards, she'd managed to fly her Spurling back, and the agents had snatched her when she landed. Before she died, she'd talked a

little, though she was stubborn. Some kind of esoteric cult, with hints of paradise of some kind. Only humans were involved, and the natives had nothing to do with it—and then just top executives and their friends. The mayor, the commandant, and a lot of others committed suicide before they could be questioned. That seemed to end all chances of finding anything more there, but routine investigation turned up a few bits.

There was the boss of Kalabon Ceramics, reported missing after the blow-up, who'd been on Kalabon only three years. The secret cult meetings had started about six months after his arrival—the secret comings and goings, the falling off of efficiency in all the Kalabonian human undertakings, and such. He'd been sent to Kalabon from Altair VI. And here, there were signs of the same slow corrosion, when they traced back.

Quinn helped himself to another smoke. "I've run across at least one alien cult," he said slowly. "I don't like them! After something like that—well, soap doesn't seem to clean very well for a while. Ugh. All right, I'm your man, I guess. But I still don't like Hooper's Snoopers!"

"Fair enough!" She grinned. "Then call a taxi to take us to the Aiglon—air taxi. We'll book you there, where I'm staying. Call me Jane—but don't forget the surname is Haley. And you might act a little embarrassed at accepting a woman's charity. Make it plain you're positively earning your keep." She looked at him quizzically. "As chauffeur, secretary, travelling-companion, that is."

"The other might not be too hard," he suggested.

"Neither hard nor easy—it won't happen. But it won't hurt if people put two and two together to get six!" She pressed a thick wad of notes into his hand. "And you'd better take this. Call it salary."

Quinn took it, realizing he'd sold himself definitely to the Special Service of the Federation.

But somehow, being a well-fed, well-dressed spy in civilian evening wear, sitting beside Jane Haldane in the Aiglon lounge wasn't too bad, when he could forget he was a spy. She was dressed in something black and simple from Paris that made every other woman there look like a frump. He could almost forget the whispers and the amused suggestions that were going around. And even though he knew they were untrue, he could dream a little

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Jane stood up suddenly, looking at her watch. "Bring my car around to the main entrance, Peter—there's a lamb. . ." she said, and began moving off.

He finished his drink and got up, walking with deliberate slowness to the door. The envy in the looks was mixed with scorn—and there was now something else that puzzled and worried him as he studied those about him—some undercurrent of hostility, just strong enough to ring little warning bells in his brain. Even the garage attendant was surly, though he did what was required.

Quinn waited until the gyroscope was spinning at the right rpm, withdrew the parking props, and eased the car along the covered driveway to the

entrance porch. After a few seconds, Jane came down the steps, wearing a white cloak and carrying what he saw was a man's raincoat. She got in, and he started as he felt something digging into his side—something hard.

Jane grinned. "A shoulder-holster—and not empty. You can put it on when we find some place to park. Now, Peter, LotosLand!"

Quinn whistled. The most exclusive and expensive of the city's night spots—hardly the place where lethal ironmongery was considered *de rigueur*. But he threw the drive into low until the big glass doors slid open at the car's approach. Then he gunned the motor. He knew the way to the nightery—beyond city limits along the main road, about five miles beyond the park where she had picked him up.

There was little traffic on the road. It was raining heavily now, an almost vertical downpour, shining like polished steel rods in the glaring beam of the headlight. Even inside the car the air was unpleasantly damp and chill.

Something droned slowly overhead. Quinn looked up, through the transparent roof of the car, and saw a blurred triangle of red, green and white lights that denoted a police 'copter. The mournful beat of its vanes blended with the shrill whine of the car's gyroscope, the steady drumming of the rain, into a dismal, monotonous melody that held all the damp misery of the night. The trees bordering the road shone wanly luminous—an unsteady, flickering light that hinted at decay and corruption. Something small and sinuous, with too many legs, scuttled across the road in front of them, turned to glare at them with red-glowing eyes.

"Turn right," ordered the girl. "Here's the park. We'll be able to get our pocket artillery sorted without any risk of observation. . ."

Not taking his eyes from the glistening road Quinn said—"Observation? I've been wondering why you didn't give me my gun back there in the hotel..."

"I don't trust that place. I haven't found anything—but there's far too much ornamentation in which microphones and scanners could be concealed. You should have seen the contortions I went into so as to cover your holster from every possible angle when I got it out of my trunk..."

The park was deserted. The dim, pale glimmering of grass and trees and shrubs conveyed the impression of a photographic negative—and of a scene that would still be unpleasant even with the normal tone values of the print.

Acting on Jane's instructions Quinn left the road. He drove slowly over the short, soggy grass, pulled up under the overhanging foliage of a huge, dim-glowing, isolated tree. He stopped—but left the engine and the gyroscope running, did not put down the parking props. It was something of a relief to have lost, even if only for a short while, the steady, heavy drumming of the rain on the car roof. The relief, however, was not unqualified. In spite of closed doors and windows the rank, carrion stink seeped in, beat down the faint, elusive fragrance of the scent that Jane was using. Quinn wrinkled his nose in disgust, took out and lit a cigarette.

The girl said—"I'll have. . ."

Then — "Where's that police 'copter?"

Something more than the drumming of the rain was missing. Quinn thought, hard—racking his memory for the little, seemingly unimportant things noted by the subconscious rather than the conscious mind. He said—slowly, hesitantly, pointing uncertainly towards the road they had left—"It went drifting off that way, I think. . . Behind the trees. . ."

"Never mind. But put the headlight out. And the dashboard lights. And your cigarette. . ."

At first it seemed very dark—then the wanly phosphorescent vegetation supplied working light.

"Take off your jacket, Peter." She brought the holster and what it held from under her cloak. "Here—this is the way you put it on. . ."

She adjusted the straps to her satisfaction—and to the man's discomfort. Quinn, curious, pulled the gun. He was surprised by the ease with which it jumped into his hand. It was an ugly thing—although not so ugly as the regulation blaster. Projectile firearms were not as deadly as the blaster. But if a man were wearing a radiation screen, bullets would penetrate it. And if he were wearing bullet-proof armor there was sufficient kinetic energy with each round from a heavy automatic to knock him down.

Jane asked—"I suppose you have fired one before?"

"Of course. At a target."

"Anything—or anybody—you fire at is a target. . ."

Experiencing a small-boyish pleasure in the feel of the weapon, Quinn hefted its not inconsiderable weight in his right hand. He made sure that the safety catch was on—then, with the pistol pointing outboard, experimentally pulled the trigger. For a moment he thought—so far as he was capable of thinking anything—that the catch must be defective. There was a sudden, staccato hammering and the whole car was shaken violently. From the undergrowth across the road came vicious, stabbing goutts of orange flame. The girl gasped, said shakily—"I've been half expecting this. It cost a small fortune to have this car armored—but it was worth it. . ."

She opened her handbag with a smooth, swift motion, pulled out a gun that was a twin to the one that Quinn was still holding stupidly in his hand. She lowered the window facing the attack a trifle, poked the muzzle of her weapon through the narrow aperture. The noise of her fire in the closed compartment was deafening. The acrid reek of her powder smoke overpowered the charnel stench of the unwholesome night. And the machine gun stopped firing—but not for long.

Jane muttered something under her breath, pushed a fresh clip into the butt of her pistol, squeezed the trigger with slow deliberation. There was a high pitched scream—and again the machine gun was silent.

She said, her voice low and even, "Get started, you fool. I don't know how long the armor's going to hold out—and they may get the tire. They may have something heavier. . ." Then, viciously—"Don't put that headlight on!"

Quinn set the car spinning on its single wheel until it was headed the way they had come. He threw the drive into top gear. He did not feel happy running without lights—but the road, wetly gleaming, in the phosphorescent glow from the trees, was clear enough when he reached it.

The gun started up again, and its bullets threw great splashes of water from the puddles ahead of them and on either side. But the aim was wild. Quinn concentrated on his driving, tried to ignore the shooting. Jane did ignore it—and peered forward with grim intensity, alert for a possible ambush.

A new note was added to the whine of the gyroscope, the drumming of the rain, the fast fading rattle of machine gun fire. It was the helicopter. It circled aimlessly for a few seconds and then, following the road, came after them. A searchlight stabbed down, catching the speeding car squarely in its beam, flashing alternately red and white. It was the signal to stop.

"Carry on," ordered Jane, her voice a little shrill. "Weave a little. . . "

"I didn't come down in the last shower," retorted Quinn rudely. The frenzied howling of a siren beat down upon them in panic-inducing waves of sound. "I wish we carried an anti-aircraft gun. I've always hated those things."

He saw, ahead and to his left, a black break in the glowing shrubbery. He put the wheel hard over, raced down the side road. Wet, rubbery branches slashed along the side of the car. The helicopter, its pilot taken by surprise, carried on along its original course, faltered in its flight and came around slowly and clumsily. Quinn risked a brief flash of the headlight, saw that the road was petering out into a rough track over which speed would be impossible. He stopped with a jolting shock, spun the car on its wheel, headed back for the main highway. On the opposite course the helicopter roared overhead.

"Back to town?" asked the man. "Or—still Lotos-Land?"

"Lotos-Land—if we can make it. But these buzzards are playing for keeps."

At the junction with the main road the car turned left. Quinn snatched a brief glance astern, failed to pick up the aircraft's lights. But he saw the salvo of rockets screaming down over the wet landscape—and the mathematician in his subconscious told him that the place and time of their impact with the ground would be already occupied by the car. He cut the drive and slammed on the brakes. The road ahead erupted in a flare of violet blinding light. When the sound wave struck them, before the first debris fell, the car was headed back for Port Van Campen. But not for long. Another side road offered a brief respite—and Quinn took it. As before, he stopped and turned the car. But, this time, he bundled the girl out into the wet night before she could protest. He stayed at the wheel, headed the vehicle along the straight stretch of the road back to town. He hoped that it would keep a straight course as he jumped through the still open door, aiming for a low, seemingly luxuriant shrub. He landed in a tangle of thin, resilient branches, rolled over until he was brought up hard and painfully by something rough and solid.

He felt sick, and there was a sharp pain in his side, and he wondered if

anything were broken. But he got to his feet, pulling himself erect by the branches that had broken his fall. He had to struggle to extricate himself from the bush. Before he was clear he heard the screaming roar of another salvo of rockets, saw the bright flare of their impact. The concussion wave almost knocked him back. He was out into the road in time to see the helicopter, its searchlight shining into a deep, smoking crater, drifting down to a landing. Shining in the brilliant beam were a few scattered shards of bright metal and polished plastic.

"It's a fool's game," he said to himself.

"What is?"

He turned, saw the white face and the white cloak of the girl glimmering pallidly in the pallid light of the roadside shrubbery.

He said, briefly, "Cops and robbers. And when you're both at once you get it from both sides, I suppose."

"Don't take it so hard, Peter. And come out of the road before you're spotted. Are you hurt?"

"I—don't know. . . My ribs, maybe. . ."

She slipped cool, efficient hands inside his shirt, ran them down his side. She said, with a confidence that he was far from feeling, "You're all right. But you'll get soaked. I don't suppose that you thought of your jacket or raincoat before you jumped. . ."

The man said stiffly, "I did well to think of as much as I did."

"Sorry. And here they are—and your pocket cannon. I managed to grab them when you threw me out."

"Thanks."

He took the pistol, slipped it into his shoulder holster. She helped him on with his outer garments. He winced a little as he pushed his arms through the sleeves. He thought that the girl was being needlessly rough—and thought, too, that she might have shown a little more gratitude.

She must have sensed his thoughts. She said, "You did well, really well. But I'm afraid that people like me are too apt to take this kind of thing as being all in the day's work. . ."

"And what now?" he asked.

She did not answer. She took her watch off her wrist, did something to it that he did not follow. She held it close to her mouth, said softly, "Calling Lotty. Calling Lotty. This is Lettice. . ." She paused, repeated the words. There was the faintest of tinny whispers in reply. "The police have been gunning for us. They've rocketted my car. They didn't know, of course, that I was an agent. Well—I'm going to take the bull by the horns and flash my badge and demand the use of their 'copter. . . Yes Lotos-Land . . . And if we don't come back. . . Yes, just that. . . Thanks—that's all. Out." To Quinn she said, "Have you any messages, Peter?"

"Any last messages, you mean. Give her my love and tell her Yes. I suppose it was a her. . ." Jane grinned—and there was rather more meaning in the grin than was called for by the inane remark. She said—"You'd be surprised. Anyhow—that's got us covered."

"What with? A shroud? If all that chatter means merely that whoever bumps us off is going to pay dearly for the privilege—I'm still no happier."

"Don't be so morbid. Come on, now. Show these dumb cops that you aren't scared of 'em. Don't forget you're packing a gun—and don't be scared of that either. As long as you're working for us—you can do anything."

"Or anybody—as long as they don't do us first. Well—it's your party, Jane. You lead and I'll follow suit. And I hope your hand has plenty of trumps in it."

"I've played the best one."

"And a fine, delayed action punch it packs, too. . ."

They took the police by surprise. The pilot of the helicopter, officially on watch, was too interested in watching his comrades searching the rocket crater to notice their approach. One of the men searching called up, "Not even enough left to make a hamburger!"

"A pity," the pilot shouted back, "she was a fine, tasty dish!"

"Excuse me," asked Jane. "Could I speak to whoever's in charge, please?"

The pilot started, turned quickly away from the crater to face the unexpected interruption. He pushed his head well out of the open window of the 'copter and stared rudely. He growled, "If you know what's good for you, lady, you an' your boy friend'll get to hell outa here—but fast!"

"But this concerns us, officer. Really, it does."

"What are you playing at up there?" bellowed somebody from the crater. A big man clambered slowly up—a big man, huge and formless in his glistening, hooded waterproof. "I told you, Clancy, to keep the public outa this. An' now I find you enjoyin' a teetateet with some fancy broad you've found yourself."

"Are you in charge?" asked Jane.

"Yeah, sister, An' I'm tellin' you right now that this locality ain't healthy. We're out tryin' to run down the Callan Mob—an' we think we got some o' them in this car. But there may be others around—an' in the twinklin' of an eye this here peaceful roadway may become a bloody battlefield. . ."

"With the number of rocket craters it's got now it isn't a bad imitation," volunteered. Quinn.

"An' who asked you to say your piece, sonny boy? Pipe down—an' let the grown-ups do the talkin'. . ."

The girl's left hand strayed up to the hood of her cloak, her right hand had

slipped inside the big handbag. Quinn saw the gesture, let his own right hand creep up to the shoulder holster. The hood fell in soft folds about Jane's neck and shoulders. She stood there for a second or so, her face and head bare to the pouring rain. "Chief!" shouted the pilot suddenly, "it's them!" He almost atoned for his past slackness by the speed with which he acted. But the girl was faster. Her shot ruined an expensive handbag—and the police pilot's face. The clatter of the policeman's weapon on the roadway, the slow dripping of some heavy fluid inside the cabin of the 'copter, were abnormally loud in the silence that followed the report of the heavy automatic.

"So," said the Chief slowly, a ham actor playing his part to the last, "Jenny Callan. And Rod Pendrick." He raised his big hands before the menace of Jane's levelled, rock-steady pistol.

Two of the men in the crater, fumbling in the folds of their waterproofs, pulled their guns. They were slow—slow enough for Quinn to pull his own weapon and fire twice, taking careful and deliberate aim. He had to struggle to prevent himself from picking off the last man who, arms lifted high above his head, was stumbling unsteadily over the rubble.

"Get back," Jane told the Chief. "Yes, there. To the edge of the crater. And you—" to the other survivor who had just succeeded in climbing out without the use of his hands—"stand beside him. Peter! Frisk 'em, will you? I'll keep 'em covered."

Both policemen seemed willing enough to give up their guns—each wore an automatic pistol and a blaster. Holding them gingerly Quinn backed away from the crater lip.

"All right. Put 'em down somewhere. Get your own gun and keep these cops covered. I want to talk to them."

The policemen, standing in the glare of their helicopter's working lights, fidgetted uneasily. Quinn made a threatening gesture with his pistol and they froze into immobility. The girl put her weapon back into her ruined bag, pulled out her powder compact. She pressed and twisted it between her hands until the secret compartment opened, then walked towards the police chief. She was careful to keep out of Quinn's line of fire. She said, her voice low and honey sweet, "So I'm Jenny Callan. . . Who told you that one? Or did you make it up yourself?" The fat man said nothing. Quinn wondered how much of the moisture streaming down the broad face was rain, how much perspiration. Jane held the open compact in front of the Chief's staring eyes. "This is who I am. And you know what happens to people who tangle with the Special Service. Satisfied?" The man nodded. "All right. You haven't answered my question. Did some one tell you that I was an interstellar gangster—or did you dredge it up from the muddy depths of your own feeble imagination? Answer, damn you!" The compact went back into the bag, the heavy pistol came out. The woman lifted it, struck the man across the face. The sharp fore-sight tore the skin over his right eye. She hit him again—and the bulbous nose flattened with an audible crunch. Quinn, watching, wanted to be sick. He hoped that somebody would make a hostile move—and give him the excuse to finish it all off cleanly and quickly.

"You'll pay for this, you witch!" The fat man cleared his throat and spat—aiming for the girl's shoes. His aim was good. She hit him again, viciously, still across the face. His knees sagged —then, suddenly, he collapsed into the mud.

"Get him up!" Jane Haldane ordered the policeman. "Jump to it, now! Keep him from falling. I haven't finished with him yet."

"All right," mumbled the Chief. "I made it up. So what?"

'So you knew, all the time, who I was?"

"I knew you were one of Hooper's Snoopers. . ."

"There are the radium mines on Polaris III," murmured the girl, her voice low and deadly sweet. "There are the fisheries on Delagon. . . Or—" and her voice suddenly cracked like a whip—"there is the mere dishonorable discharge and exile you get if I care to stress the fact that you helped me in my report. What do you say?"

The man managed a feeble grin—broken teeth beneath a bloody, pulped nose—and said quickly, "I'll take your offer, Snooper. And I'll insist on the exile—I'll not last long on this world if I'm seen in your company."

"Right. And you?"

"Whatever you say, lady," gasped the policeman, pathetically eager to please.

"Good. First of all—get busy with the first aid kit in the 'copter. You can't do much for your Chief right now—but cover the worst of it up with plaster. . ."

She turned abruptly, walked back to Quinn. He saw that her face was deathly pale—but there was a light in her eyes that he did not like. She said, "I hated having to do it."

"You're lying. Part of you may have hated it, but. . ."

"All right. Have it your own way. . . As soon as that big, fat slob has been patched up he and his men are going to take us to the Lotos-Land. They're going to come in with us—and introduce us. The way things are, my lad, we have only two alternatives. One is to get to hell out—the other, force a showdown. And there's no chance of getting out till Lady Pamela berths in a month's time."

"Hadn't we better park our bottoms in' the 'copter while we're waiting?"

"It'd be an idea. You! Patch your Chief up outside. The rain'll wash his face for him. We want to talk."

There were two dead men in the flying machine. One of them was the pilot—the other, judging by his stiffness, had been dead some little time. Quinn and the girl decided that he must have been the man behind the machine gun in the park—the one who had screamed suddenly when the gun stopped firing. The Chief had to wait still longer for his first aid while

the bodies were dragged out by his subordinate and disposed neatly in the bottom of the rocket crater. And it was there, too, that the subordinate had to busy himself with antiseptics and plaster and bandages. The girl was making it hard for the policemen to make a sudden break for freedom.

She and Quinn lit cigarettes, inhaled gratefully. They relaxed—but not too much. Their pistols were ready to hand, the door of the 'copter giving an arc of fire into the crater, was open.

Quinn said, abruptly—"Put me in the picture. I'm reeling."

"All right. It seems a mess, doesn't it? More confusion than anything else. But—bear this in mind. We aren't dealing with professional criminals. We're dealing with people who are—or were—respectable citizens, who've merely had the misfortune to fall foul of the Special Service. They aren't fools—they soon tumbled to me. I don't know how. It may have been some carelessness on my part but I don't think so. It may be that they have organized some really efficient counter espionage system—but, again, I don't think so. It may have been one of those pieces of sheer bad luck that bring the best of us to grief. Anyhow—they know. But they couldn't have known until tonight. And they acted fast, playing by ear, making up the story as they went along. The first attempt was to get us more or less intact—alive or dead, it didn't matter. You'd be surprised what a really expert criminologist can deduce from a reasonably fresh corpse, not too badly mashed. But that failed, So they tried to get us anyhow, probably reasoning that it would be less embarrassing not to have a couple of corpses to dispose of. . ."

"There's one thing I don't like," suggested Quinn. "That Police Chief. He's a tough guy and there's more to him than shows on the surface. Before you started on him he was talking like the dumbest of dumb cops—and then he dropped his screen and lapsed into more or less civilized English. And he's a tough guy, as I said. His sort don't give in so easily. Where's the catch?"

"There is a catch, Peter. I don't know what it is. But by playing a bold hand we stand a chance of throwing their game into confusion. It won't be a very skillful game—and I can improvise at least as well as they can."

"Could be. Another point—how do we sit on the way to Lotos-Land? Wouldn't it be better, perhaps, if I took the controls, with you holding a watching brief from the stern?"

"No. We'll have 'em both in front, where we can see 'em."

"But didn't quite a few high officials on Kalabon bump themselves off when you had the trouble there?"

"True. But what were their motives? They might, I admit, have died to keep their secret inviolable—but it seems to me that after their secret had been destroyed they just didn't feel like going on living. Whatever the secret is—it hasn't been destroyed here. They still hope that it won't be, that they'll be able to get rid of us somehow, to cover up. . ."

"Junior's finished patching his boss's face."

"Good." She raised her voice, called into the crater— "You can come up now. One of you take the controls—I don't care which one. The other sit beside him."

The subordinate police officer took the pilot's seat, his Chief lowered his clumsy bulk into the chair beside him. The vanes started to revolve, their steady swishing building up into a throbbing roar. The little craft lifted, rocking slightly.

"Lotos-Land, Chief, Captain, whatever you call yourself. And you're coming in with us."

"But why. . .?"

"I'm asking the questions. Do I have to get nasty again? But this Lotos-Land is the headquarters of whatever it is you people are hiding—and I'll find out what it is if I have to tear the dump apart with my bare hands!"

"All right. Do as the lady says, Moore."

The 'copter came around—and a distant light that had been shining almost right astern now showed ahead. It was a beacon of some kind, flashing alternately red and green. But its colors were soft, somehow, lacked the hard clarity to be expected from navigational aids. The rain may have been in part responsible—but only in part. The colors of the alternate flashes merged gently, did not succeed each other with harsh abruptness. It was a pulsation rather than a flashing. It was the first beautiful thing that Quinn had seen on this drab world.

The light was right beneath them now—and the opalescent glow tinted the, down-driving raindrops, making of them slim, straight pillars of shifting, changing light. And as the helicopter drifted slowly down its whirling vanes, above the transparent roof of the cabin, were an impossible rainbow hanging in the sky against all the laws of physics.

The 'copter grounded gently on a flat roof. Before them was a tower from the top of which the beacon glowed and faded, glowed and faded. A door opened and a flood of warm, amber light poured out, shimmering from the wet roof top like a golden river. The police pilot taxied his craft into the bare, unfurnished compartment thus revealed. The door shut behind them. There was a sighing of smoothly functioning machinery, a faint sensation of falling. The elevator stopped gently. Another door opened. As the two policemen stepped out, followed by Quinn and Jane Haldane, attendants hurried forward to take their damp outer clothing.

One of them—a girl, clad in a simple white tunic—gave a little gasp of horror. "Sir! Captain Clane! Your face—I didn't recognize you: Let me take you. . ."

"Never mind that." Jane's voice was all authority. "See that we're taken to a table—a good one. And I want plenty of people around us."

"But, Madam—the Commissioner. . . And this other gentleman—his face is scratched and his clothes are muddy."

Clane sighed. "Do as the lady says, Louella. She's the boss around here."

The girl shrugged shapely shoulders. She made a little gesture with her hands that said as plainly as words, that if the customers were nuts it was no concern of hers. Two of the other girl attendants vanished somewhere with the discarded coats. The fourth, a man, went into the elevator with the helicopter. The doors slid shut and a soft sighing of machinery told that the flying machine had been removed to the garage.

Quinn glanced at his reflection in one of the tall mirrors that formed the walls of this vestibule. As the attendant had said, his face was scratched. He had the beginnings of a black eye.

His trousers were torn just above the right knee and his shoes were filthy. But in comparison with Clane he was a tailor's dummy. The Police Chief's face had been bandaged with more enthusiasm than discretion, and from beneath the stained bandages blood had trickled and dried. The ornate, glittering uniform was neat enough—but the man's linen was badly soiled by a brown crust of dried blood. His subordinate was unmarked—bud in these surroundings he looked clumsy and ill at ease. Of them all only Jane Haldane was impeccably neat, assured, confident. She had refused to surrender her cloak, wore it with the hood falling about neck and shoulders, carried it with what was almost a swagger. Her face was pale and hard, colorless except for the vivid lips. Her eyes seemed a cold, steel gray rather than blue. She made no attempt, as she could easily have done, to conceal the ragged hole in her handbag through which she had shot the police pilot.

She said, allowing an undertone of impatience to creep into her voice—"Take us to a table. For four. And I want plenty of people around us."

"Certainly, Madam."

The girl led the way across the polished floor. At their approach doors opened upon a glowing haze of amber light. There were the soft, sensuous strains of Hawaiian guitars, a wave of warm, space-laden air that carried all the drowsiness of the lights and the music.

"But this is all wrong!" said Quinn loudly.

Jane Haldane turned to look at him, a wry smile flickering at the corners of her full mouth. "What's all wrong?"

"Only the name. Lotos-Land. I expected something all incense and temple bells, green eyes of little yellow gods and all the rest of it. The phoney Oriental motif."

"Lotos, with two 'o's, Peter, not Lotus. Don't you remember the poetry they tried to stuff into you at school?"

In the afternoon they came unto a land

In which it seemed always afternoon . . .

"But it's still wrong—I grant you that. The people who discovered the original Lotos-Land were on their way home from the Siege of Troy—and

that was in the Mediterranean, not Earth's Pacific. But why worry? Whoever designed this place has captured the essential spirit of it all quite well . . ."

"Your table, Madam."

"Thank you. This will do." They sat down. Quinn became aware that those around them were staring at them. He flushed—but stared back. The majority of the customers were native born—soft, flabby, yet with a suggestion of viciousness. Their women wore a not unpleasing air of decadence. But there was a sprinkling of officers from the fort, both men and women, although of these the seniors seemed, in some indefinable way, to have gone native. The juniors—fresh-faced lads not long from Earth—had yet to lose the hardness, the toughness instilled by Terrestrial military academies. Quinn could see why Jane had insisted on a table well surrounded by others. In the event of a showdown she could call upon the officers for aid—and could expect it from the juniors at least . . .

But this was a puzzling thing. His own pay, as Second Pilot, had been far in excess of that of a mere Ensign—and yet he, even with the money accumulated during the voyage to draw upon, had not been able to afford Lotos-Land. He remembered then—something that the girl, Annalyn, had told him during the course of an unimportant conversation. There were special rates here for officers—for military officers. They were stationed here permanently. They, it would seem, must somehow be seduced from their allegiance to the Federation, must be converted into loyal servants of whatever, or whoever it was that was running this world. So loyal that they would do as the Commandant did do Kalabon should the need arise ...

A waiter, a man attired in effeminate, softly flowing, pastel colored robes, was standing by their table. He bowed. "Captain Clane, your order? We have a fresh shipment of Salerian wine . . ."

"We'll have some wine," said Jane. "We need it. Bring the bottle from that table—the one that's just been opened."

"Madam!"

"Do as the lady says, Roberto," grunted the Chief.

"You can tell him if you like, Clane—who and what I am. I told you—I'm forcing a showdown. Better still—go up to where the band is playing—there's a mike there. Stop the music. Make a public announcement."

"But . . ."

"Do as I say." The pistol, ugly, incongruous, blued steel gleaming greasily—came out of the handbag. "Get going," she ordered. "Peter, I'll be covering Clane. You stand by to shoot anybody who makes trouble."

The waiter gulped, his face turned a dirty yellow. He expostulated feebly, "But, Madam . . ."

"That wine, Roberto," ordered Quinn. "The lady is thirsty. I'm thirsty." He

gestured with his pistol. "So what about it?"

The music ceased in mid, sighing note. There was a subdued clamor from the patrons and, high and clear, the angry voice of the woman from whose table the wine had been taken. Her escort got to his feet, walked a little unsteadily after the unfortunate Roberto and his booty. He was a big man—but a bigness of fat rather than of muscle. His Heavy jowls were quivering angrily. He said, to Quinn's dumb, embarrassed companion— "And you a policeman! To allow such doings! See that my property is returned!"

"I'm sorry," said Quinn, insincerely. "We took your wine because we were afraid that the management might have us poisoned . . ."

"Return it at once, you young hooligan! Don't you know who I am? I am Altairian Mines . . ."

"You'll be a lead miner yourself, if, you aren't careful," Quinn told him happily.

"Quinn! Stop being so damned childish!" Her voice was a slap in the face. "Don't argue with these people. Shoot quick if you have to—preferably in the belly."

The mining executive paled. He started to back away, back towards his own table. He brushed against another in his clumsy retreat, and a bottle fell, smashing noisily. But the occupants of this table paid no heed. They were staring steadily at Quinn—no, past Quinn, at Jane Haldane. The eyes of the man, dull glowing, held a bitter hatred. His hand toyed stealthily with the lapel of his coat—and Quinn had an uneasy feeling that it concealed a holster. He slipped back the safety catch on his own pistol. He heard the woman say, in a low yet carrying whisper. "No. No, I say. Aveling will handle her."

Jane called, her voice high and clear, "Well, what are you waiting for, Clane? Get it over with!"

The concealed speakers crackled slightly, then Clane's thick voice came booming out. "Attention, please, ladies and gentlemen. I have the pleasure to announce that we have distinguished guests with us tonight —Miss Jane Haldane, of the Federation's Special Service, and Mr. Peter Quinn, late Second Pilot of the, interstellar liner Lady May ..."

There was a sudden hush. The simulated thunder of the surf was low and ominous, the rustling of the artificial wind in the palm fronds had become suddenly sinister. Quinn knew that the announcement of his name and past rank—and he must settle with Clane some time for that over-emphasis of the word "late" —could never have had that effect. Neither could Jane Haldane's name. As a person—to anybody not aware of her ruthlessness—she would be no more than a rather attractive brunette. As an Agent of the Special Service she ranked, in the absence of any superior officer, as Viceroy for the central government with the power of life and death.

He stole a quick glance behind him, looked briefly at Jane sitting at ease, her right hand playing with the heavy pistol, coolly insolent and hard, in

this setting of sensuous warmth and softness. He saw, too, the tall man who walked slowly down an avenue between the palms, his feet sliding softly over the polished floor that had all the appearance, but not the texture, of wind-drifted sand. If Jane were Viceroy this man was king in his own world—and a king whose powers had yet to be discovered. He bore himself with an assurance in startling contrast to the uneasiness all around him. Like his staff he wore a long, flowing robe, glowing softly golden in the golden light—but there was nothing effeminate about either him or his attire. He bowed—with just a touch of condescension.

He said, "My name is Aveling. I am manager of this establishment, Perhaps I can help you."

Guiltily, Quinn resumed his watch. He saw that he could expect no further trouble from the mining executive, that the man whose eyes betrayed his hate so starkly no longer played with his lapel and whatever it concealed. He heard Jane say, "If an Agent of the Special Service calls upon you for help, Aveling, you will help. You know what I'm here for."

"Yes. There have been rumors, haven't there ? I can assure you, Miss Haldane, that I shall be able to convince you of the innocence of this world and all its people."

"Perhaps. Well—start convincing me."

"It must take time. But pardon me— isn't your friend permitted to join in this conversation?"

"He has his job. I have no wish to leave my back uncovered."

"But nobody will shoot you or stab you in the back. You have my word."

There was a short pause. "I'll take it. Peter—you can join the party. But don't put your pistol away. Keep our friend here covered. If anybody starts anything one of us should get him."

Aveling smiled. He was lounging easily in Clane's chair. The policeman had got to his feet, had surrendered his own seat to his superior, but the Police Chief remained standing. There was a hint of deference in his manner—he could have been some high military officer standing behind a throne.

Aveling said, "It's a long story. I can't tell it to you now. There's much that you must see for yourself before I can make things clear. But—this isn't the only Lotos-Land. There's another club, residential, about six hours' flying time from here. I'd like to take you there."

"Yes. You would."

"And I will give my word that no harm will come either to you or to your companion."

Jane smiled. She said, her voice soft and thoughtful, "I believe you. Funnily enough, I believe you. Yet—I know that there's something wrong, badly wrong, with this world and all its people. But you're sincere—and that's dangerous. Could it be, do you think, that our ideas as to what constitutes harm might not coincide?" She went on talking, half to herself. "But it's a

chance, and I'm taking it. I'm strong—that's why I'm in this job. Strong enough to fight any philosophy ever spawned by alien minds." She turned suddenly to Quinn, asked, her voice sharp, "But what about you?"

Quinn picked up the neglected bottle of stolen wine. He poured himself a generous goblet full. He sipped appreciatively—then said, "Pardon me. But I've been needing that." The alcohol brought memories to the surface of his mind: "I've attended a performance of the Martruskian Mysteries. Years ago, that was. The girl who took me was a convert—and a missionary. And all that I wanted to do afterwards was take a good, hot shower with plenty of soap—the disinfectant kind, not scented . . ."

"You see?" asked Aveling. "I know the type. The spaceman, pure and simple. All the poetry, all the philosophy of all the worlds held in one short phrase —Men against the stars. And anything not covered by that—just does not exist. Not for you, Peter Quinn."

Aveling smiled—but the charm of it was wasted on Jane. She snapped, "When you two have quite finished with the amateur psychiatry we'll get going. And give me that wine, somebody, before Quinn hogs it all . . ." Aveling

beckoned to one of his waiters. "No, thanks. Just half a goblet is all I need. Now, this other place of yours, six hours flying time from here. Is that by 'copter or Spurling?"

"Spurling, Miss Haldane."

"And you have a Spurling here?"

"Several. I . . ."

"Take us to your garage, then. And you're coming with us, Clane. And—is that the Fort Commandant there, Aveling? Tell him I want him. He's to come, too. I'm not going to risk any repetition of what happened on Kalabon—not when I shall be at the receiving end."

A waiter, at Aveling's orders, half ran to where the dapper little man in Brigadier's uniform was sitting, whispered a message. The soldier got slowly to his feet, walked with deliberate leisureliness to where Jane Haldane was waiting. He saluted—and although the gesture was impeccably correct it held a measure of that indefinable military crime known as "dumb insolence." Clane, anxious perhaps to assert himself, began, "Miss Haldane, this is Brigadier . . ."

"You needn't bother. I know his name. If I didn't—I shouldn't be interested . . ."

The soldier flushed angrily, said nothing. Quinn, watching him, saw that his anger had had to struggle to come to the surface of the dull, lack-lustre eyes. He realized that those eyes, or their like, were a distinguishing feature of half the population of Altair VI.

"Quinn!" Jane Haldane had risen to her feet, was tapping impatiently on the floor with one, polished shoe. "Are you sober enough to pilot a Spurling?"

The spaceman swept her a reckless bow. "To Far Centaurus if it please your ladyship!"

Aveling interceded. "He'll be all right by the time we get to the garage. Good Salerian takes some people this way—but the effects soon wear off . . ."

"I hope you're right. All right, Aveling—you lead the way. You next, Clane—and you, Brigadier. You—" The policeman, who was shuffling his feet unhappily stiffened to attention. "You can stay here. Don't put your gun away yet, Quinn—you may be needing it. Let's go."

There were, as Aveling had told them, several Spurlings in the garage. Jane inspected them briefly, selected a big eight seater. Quinn checked the controls. He did not anticipate any difficulty in handling the job—she was a recent model, well-kept, with turret drive and no unconventional features. He took the pilot's seat, forward. Clane and the Brigadier sat immediately behind him, then, by himself, Aveling. In the rear, covering them all with her pistol, was the girl.

The Spurling was already on the ramp leading up to the landing field—only the helicopters, of course, used the roof platform. The little auxiliary motor whined and the ship edged slowly up the incline. The big, double doors slid open before her. It was raining still outside—but the sky to the eastward was a dirty, pallid gray that told that sunrise was not far off. Above them, from the roof tower of Lotos-Land, pulsed the soft-glowing beacon, throwing a river of rainbow light over the wet, glistening tarmac. Quinn turned in his seat, called, "Where to, Ave-ling?"

"Get upstairs, Quinn, as soon as you like—then put her on a compass course of 270. Clane will give you directions after that. This isn't the first time he's made the trip."

The Spurling quivered and steam billowed around her as her down-pointing jets struck the wet ground. Slowly, carefully, he eased the turret drive from the vertical to the horizontal. There were no shocks, none of the crushing weight of sudden acceleration that is considered good airmanship by so many private pilots. And the glowing beacon of Lotos-Land flashed by under them in a split second that told that the roaring jets must already be exerting their maximum drive. Quinn hardly noticed it. He watched his glowing, clicking compass card, his hands steady on the control column, until he was satisfied—then switched over to automatic.

He turned in his seat, asked, "Well?"

"She'll do on this course for the next hour or so," Clane told him.

"Will she?" demanded Jane. "Have you any charts there, Peter? Perhaps if Aveling were to tell us where his residential club really is we could cut a few corners. We're not potential customers, you know, to be taken by a circuitous, confusing route. One visit, so far as we're concerned, will be plenty."

Aveling smiled. "It was silly of us, Miss Haldane, to have tried to confuse you. Just, shall we say, force of habit ... It will save time, I think, if you

take her back to Lotos-Land, take your departure from there. You'll find a chart—it's in a secret compartment under the chart drawer—with the Great Circle Course laid off . . . Do you mind, Miss Haldane? I'll have to go forward to open the drawer for him. . ."

"I suppose you have to. But let him swing her first."

It was almost full daylight ahead now and below them the drab rectangles of cultivated fields were plainly visible, as was the long, low graceful structure of Lotos-Land as it lifted over the ragged line of the horizon. Little black specks hovered over the roof of the building—hovered and then fled in the direction of Port Van Campen, the last of the homing helicopters, their owners doubtless hastening to the destruction of papers and other evidence so soon as they should reach their homes. It was a little like an upset beehive—but these bees were intent upon flight, never upon attack.

Moving cautiously, careful that none of his movements could possibly be construed as hostile by the girl with the gun, Aveling fumbled with the little, sliding chart table under the chart drawer on Quinn's right. There was a sharp click and the top of the-table lifted, revealing a small scale chart. There were the environs of Port Van Campen shown on it, and Lotos-Land, ringed with violet ink, and the arc of a Great Circle, its initial course 065, leading towards and over the twin, rounded peaks known as Simbala's Breasts. So much Quinn saw—but, good pilot that he was, he was giving Aveling only half of his attention. He was watching, too, a black speck against the gray sky ahead—a black streak, rather. It was another Spurling—a small two seater—and it came up fast, climbing as it came, on the reciprocal of their course. Quinn was suddenly uneasy. He kicked his ship around viciously with the steering jet. The other Spurling came screaming down —and the tip of its starboard wing just missed slicing off Quinn's stabilizer.

He heard Clane curse, heard Aveling say gaspingly, but with surprising calm, "This . . . none of our doing . . . Miss Haldane . . . Please put . . . that gun ... down . . . Another shock . . . and might go off . . ."

Quinn climbed—and the strange Spurling climbed faster. But he was able easily to avoid being rammed from beneath—there was not much difference in climbing speeds—although unable to keep his advantage of altitude. He looked into the cabin of the other ship as it roared past, saw the man from Lotos-Land—the man with bitter hate in his eyes and a shoulder holster under his coat. Clane must have seen him too, for he cursed. "Clementi-Smith! The fool!"

Behind him Jane gasped audibly. Her voice, for all its smooth, controlled calm, was excited. "An uncommon name, Clane. A brother, perhaps, on Kalabon ... Manager—Kalabon Ceramics . . ."

"Brother — hell! Clementi-Smith was Kalabon Ceramics ..."

Quinn cut the drive, put the ship into a steep fall. The shifting stresses sent a wave of pain flooding out from his bruised left arm and side and for a moment he blacked out. When the haze cleared from in front of his eyes he saw that Clementi-Smith had passed again, had barely missed again,

and, not more than a hundred feet below, was already pulling out of his power dive. Quinn kicked the ship around with the steering jet, cut in the drive with an audible, bone shaking thud, put the big, clumsy Spurling into a dizzy climb. Astern, Clementi-Smith roared up on his flaming jets, regained with discouraging ease his suicidal advantage of altitude.

In the rear of the Spurling, Jane was determinedly ferreting out facts. Quinn wondered vaguely if it were genuine detachment or if it were a device to hide the fear that she would hardly be human not to feel.

"But . . . Clementi-Smith posted as missing after blow-up ..."

"Yeah—he was missing, all right. He wasn't there. As soon as your people got too warm he took a powder."

Damn Clementi-Smith . . . thought Quinn, taking violent evasive action once more. He didn't like the way that his ship was creaking with every sudden dive or turn—she had never been designed for this kind of thing. Much more of this, he thought, and I shall be shedding wings all over the landscape. He called plaintively over his shoulder, "Isn't there a radio in this crate? Can't somebody call the police or the military?"

Quinn pulled the control column aft until it was vertical, until the roaring jets were pointing straight downwards. The Spurling seemed to jump straight up, her passengers were forced down into their cushioned seats. The pain in Quinn's side was sickening and he blacked out again, barely aware that the other ship had skimmed by a bare foot or so beneath them. When he recovered the Spurling was still climbing slowly, with no headway. And above, not more than a thousand feet, Clementi-Smith was peeling off into another of his suicidal, murderous dives.

The Brigadier, who must have been busy with the radio, suddenly broke his silence. He said, "They're sending two fighters from the fort. Sorry I've been so long—had to be sure of getting pilots who'll be on our side—not his . . . About fifteen minutes . . . Can you hold him off that long?"

"No. But I'll finish it now. I'm tired of this."

Quinn put the Spurling into a steep dive, pushed forward on the control column. The wet, gray earth rushed up to meet them, the grove of misshapen trees for which he was steering expanded in apparent size with terrifying rapidity. Somebody tried to reach around him to seize the controls—by the insignia on the sleeve he saw that it was Clane. And there was the sound of something hard connecting violently with something not so hard—a pistol barrel and the nape of a bull neck?—and the thick, hairy hand suddenly relaxed, hung limply. Aveling said, "Don't interfere. He knows what he's doing. I hope . . ."

Quinn turned in his seat, almost fainting with the 'pain of it. He looked past the unconscious Clane, the pale, set faces of Aveling and the Brigadier and the girl, saw that Clementi-Smith, not so far astern, was following fast with all the power of his jets added to that of gravity. He grinned weakly and turned back to his controls. The clump of trees was very close now. He could see individual branches, twigs—leaves almost. He gasped. "Now!" He pulled back on the column, saw the flame and smoke of his jets roaring out

ahead of him, managed to push himself to one side just in time to escape being transixed by the column as the sudden deceleration slammed him forward. In the rear of the Spurling something parted with a loud rending noise—he hoped vaguely that it was nothing important.

Just over them, barely ahead of them, Clementi-Smith came roaring in. Acceleration forced Quinn back in his seat and he did not see the tangled wreckage just beyond the trees. He saw the blinding flash reflected from his instrument panel, felt the blast that lifted the big Spurling all of five hundred feet. He started to speak—and the final thunder of Clementi-Smith's passing drowned his voice, forced the words back into his throat. Before the crashing echoes had died the Brigadier said hoarsely, "I can use pilots like you, Quinn. If you ever leave the Special Service . . ."

Said Aveling, his voice calm, unhurried, "Might I suggest a return to Lotos-Land for minor repairs? I am sure that we all need them. . ."

Jane's reply was contemptuous. "Perhaps Clane does—but we'll push on. What about you, Peter —and what about the ship?"

"I'll be all right—I can put her on automatic . . . But I heard something go. What was it?"

"Just a seat."

The Brigadier asked suddenly. "What about Clane?"

"H'm . . ." Aveling sounded mildly interested rather than regretful. "I'm afraid I hit him a little too hard . . ."

"Slow down, will you, Peter—there's too much slipstream to get this door open . . ."

"But . . . Miss Haldane!" Quinn heard the soldier expostulate.

"He's dead, isn't he?" asked Aveling reasonably.

The Spurling jumped slightly as the excess weight was jettisoned. Quinn did not look back —he didn't want to see what they were doing. He concentrated on getting the ship on to her Great Circle course, on making the necessary adjustments to the automatic pilot. He looked up from his work only when the two fighters from the fort screamed overhead, came around in a tight circle, fell into station one on either side of the Spurling.

"These pilots," Jane Haldane asked, "who can be trusted not to do a Clementi-Smith act on us. . .? They're fresh out from Earth, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Then tell them to follow us. After what's happened a fighter escort won't come amiss."

Quinn slept most of the way to the twin peaks. It was an uneasy sleep, for his arm and side were paining him and he was dimly conscious, throughout, of the clicking of the automatic pilot, of every creak and groan of the overstrained structure of the Spurling.

Somebody was shaking him. It was Jane. She was saying, "Wake up, Peter. Wake up. We're almost there."

He opened gummy eyelids, tried to stretch himself—but the pain and stiffness in his left arm and side made him abandon the attempt. He yawned hugely. He looked ahead and down—saw blearily through the rain-bleared forward transparency the twin, symmetrical masses of Simbala's Breasts. He heard Aveling explaining.

"Ordinarily, with strangers, we come in from the eastward. The peaks look altogether different from that angle, could pass for the Ass's Ears, hundreds of miles away. With the phoney courses we steer, it's easy to put the deception across. . ."

"I'm not interested in that now." Jane's voice was crisp, decisive. "We're here, Aveling. What next?"

"Shall I bring her in?" asked the Brigadier. "I know the marks."

"No," Quinn told him. "I may as well finish the job. Somebody tell me the courses and I'll manage."

The peaks were below them now, were sliding astern fast. There was no sign on their rounded slopes, covered with a lichenous growth, of any habitation, human or otherwise. The plains below and beyond them were bare of any life save the vegetable.

"Start bringing her around," ordered Aveling. "Bring her to 180." To the Brigadier, he said, "Tell your fighter pilots to drop astern and follow. . . You see that low, rounded hill? That's the Mole. Get it and the nipple of the South Breast in line. . . Yes, that's it ... Cut your speed, prepare for a landing. . . See that ledge, that flat ledge? Do you think you can set her down there?"

"Of course."

The big Spurling turned again, her speed slackening. The roar of the jets died to a muted murmur, and the venturis were now pointing straight wards rather than astern. The ship drifted down, slowly, slowly—and the dark gray mass of the South Breast filled ail the sky to starboard. She grounded with a barely perceptible jar and the billowing steam burst from wet ground and sodden vegetation at the flaming touch of the drive. And when the drive was cut and the quivering ship was still the steam clouds slowly condensed and thinned and formed an infinitesimal part of the light, drizzling rain—but the stench of burning carrion remained. Quinn looked astern. He saw the two fighters land, one after the other, saw each one shrouded in the evil-smelling mist of its own making.

"There's a cave there," said Aveling pointing. "Taxi her in."

"No," snapped Jane. "Leave her outside. You never know, Aveling—I might want to make a quick getaway."

"You won't Miss Haldane."

"And the promise you made?"

"I'm keeping it. That's one reason why you and Quinn won't need to leave in a hurry."

Jane shrugged. She opened the door of the Spurling, called to the two military pilots—two fresh, eager youths—who had climbed out of their ships, who had walked across to the big Spurling for further instructions. She said, "There's your general here—but I've superceded him. You know who I am, of course. You'll take your orders from me. Are you both armed? Good. Follow us to wherever Aveling takes us—and if he or anybody or anything else, makes a hostile move, shoot. Understand?"

"Yes," said one of the pilots, a little sullenly.

"Are you ready?" asked Aveling.

"As soon as you are. What about you, Peter? You look all in. What about staying in the Spurling, keeping her ready for a quick blast off?"

"No. It's been an interesting party so far—and I don't want to miss the last of it."

"You're a liability, you know, Peter, in your condition. I could order you. . ."

"And I would refuse."

"Oh—all right. You—" She turned to the more sullen of the two army pilots— "Stay with my Spurling. Keep her warmed up and ready!"

Aveling led the way across the short, pulpy grass. Quinn envied the man his air of ease and wellbeing. He, himself, was stiff and tired, was cold and wet and miserable. He almost wished that he had stayed with the ship.

Aveling, his manner easily conversational, flung out a possessive hand, began, "Of course, it wasn't altogether accidental my stumbling upon this place. I am, in such spare time as the Federation allows me, an archaeologist, and I was looking for traces of whatever race was here before we came. You've seen, of course, the few, pitiful bones that they've left—or you've read about them and seen pictures of them. They must have been humanoid, these people—as near human as makes no difference—and, if that is indeed true, they must have left something more than their own bones. Hills were a promising line of approach—hills and mountains. Hills and mountains mean—caves. Warm, dry dens for the tribe to huddle in without having to turn builder—and, along every wall, a canvas waiting for the primitive artist with his crude but effective pigments, for the vivid depictions of the highlights in the life of a simple, unspoiled people.

"I must have nosed around every hill and every mountain of this blasted, wet world—and I must have burrowed and scrambled through every cave under every one of them. This—" He pointed ahead to the dark opening, close now—"was one of the last. The last. Because I found here what I was looking for."

Jane, ever practical, asked, "Shouldn't we have brought lights? But I thought ... A residential club, you said."

"We shan't need lights. You answered your own question, Miss Haldane.

One does not take ropes and pickaxes and torches to explore a—residential club ... But, perhaps, the Special Service. . ."

"That's enough. Go on with your story."

"I found this cave." Aveling stooped a little, passed +into the opening. The Brigadier followed him. Jane pulled her pistol from her bag, slipped back the safety catch with an audible ominous click, followed the two men. Quinn pulled his own weapon, followed. The army pilot muttered, "I don't like this," and his bulk blocked out the last of the light behind Quinn.

Ahead, Jane complained, "It's dark. Why couldn't we have come in by that larger tunnel?"

"It doesn't lead anywhere, Miss Haldane. We use it just as a hangar for our flying machines. But there's no hurry. We'll wait a few minutes, let our eyes become accustomed to the dim light."

"I don't like this," complained the army pilot again in a loud, carrying whisper.

"There's some kind of light ahead," said Quinn. He could see the forms of the others in vague silhouette against a faint, golden glow—a glow that grew stronger as he watched, as his eyes became used to it.

"Shall we push on?" asked Aveling. He did not wait for reply but, stooping slightly, made off towards the dim, amber radiance. Like a little terrier, the Brigadier trotted after. Jane called softly, "Come on, you two. But be careful." Quinn, stepping cautiously, became suddenly aware that the fine sand underfoot was dry, that the air was dry and warm. There was an indefinable spicy scent, unfamiliar, that could have been either pleasant or unpleasant.

A little spark showed in the dimness ahead—a ruddy point of light that glowed and faded rhythmically. It lit Aveling's thin, young-old face as he turned to say something to Jane. He was smoking. The tobacco smoke, drifting back to Quinn on the outdraft from the cave, was acrid, bitter. He wondered what it was that the Altairian was smoking, pulled out his own case and took a cigarette. After two puffs he threw it down disgustedly. It had the same flavor as the tobacco that Aveling was using.

"And now," Aveling was saying, "we come to the cave itself." He pushed aside a screen of fronds and creepers that hung like a living curtain. The light, soft though it was, was for a moment, dazzling. It flooded out into the tunnel in a warm, amber haze. And with the, light came the strange, spicy scent—almost overpowering now, warm, intoxicating—and what sounded like the rhythmic beating of countless tiny drums.

"I call this — Lotos-Land," whispered Aveling. "My other Lotos-Land is only a pale shadow of this, is only the shoddiest ersatz. Art can never do more than imitate Nature—and I never even tried to imitate..."

Quinn saw the Brigadier reach for his cigarette case with a trembling hand, saw him put a cigarette between his lips with obvious distaste. He wondered why the man should spoil the ... the beauty of it all by the

performance of a meaningless, repugnant rite. For it was beautiful. Not the kind of beauty to which Quinn was accustomed—the beauty of clean lines that limned raw power, the stark beauty of the stars and the black gulfs between the stars. This was soft, and warm, all gold and glowing orange-green and misty crimson, curves that held grace in every line but lacked symmetry. It was like . . . like . . . Quinn's bemused brain searched for a simile. It was<sup>o</sup> like some paintings he had seen once, in an exhibition of Twentieth Century art, by a man called... Dali.

He relaxed then. The important point had been cleared up. Nothing mattered now. Aveling offered him a cigarette, smiled softly when he refused, took one himself.' Jane, beside him was saying, her voice deliberately harsh, "And is this your residential club, Aveling?"

"A part of it. It's lovely, isn't it? I don't know how many species of plant there are here—but they all seem to live in the happiest symbiosis. Some act as air-conditioning units, some supply light. And there are flowering plants, and others give fruit —and when once you've tasted the fruit of the lotos you'll want nothing else. But, when I found it, there was something missing. . . The flowers were beautiful, but not as beautiful as they are now. The moss underfoot was sparse, harsh to the skin. In many places the rocky ribs of the mountain showed through. There wasn't this softness, this luxuriance of curve and convolution, of pendant, glowing fruit clusters. It wasn't . . . strong then. That's how I was able to get away without becoming hopelessly enslaved from the very first. I got out to the wet, drab mountain slope, to my waiting Spurling. And I sat down in the soft-padded seat, that wasn't one quarter so soft as the moss in here even then, and I. . . No. I'll not tell you that now."

"You . . . will," said Jane with. difficulty. She seemed dazed.

"Will I, my dear? You dropped that ugly gun of yours some twenty paces back. . ."

"I don't like this," muttered the army pilot—but his voice lacked conviction.

"There was one thing lacking," Aveling continued, leading them on down an avenue of what could have been tree-ferns—but tree-ferns of a lush fleshiness never to be seen anywhere but here. "The creatures for whom all this loveliness was intended as a . . . bait. They weren't too unlike us, the humanoids who were here, who lived and died here, before our ships dropped down from the stars. They played their part in the symbiosis. They supplied . . . something. No—nothing crudely physical, I'm convinced of that. . ."

Quinn half tripped over something, saw that it was Jane's cloak. He became aware of his feet, wondered why he should be walking shod over this moss with a pile like that of the finest rug from the Matrabanian looms. He kicked off his shoes. He dropped his jacket beside them.

"This," said Aveling softly, "was an interesting experiment. A gamble. Clane didn't want to take the chance, wanted to dispose of you both by his strong-arm methods. I told him that it wouldn't work, that if it did it would bring the long arm of the Federation stretching out for us. But—you, my

dear, and you, Quinn, are the first of your kind who've been here. You are both the servants of a dream. The others who came, who find here the only Heaven they will ever know, have no dream. They are tired, my dear. The race is tired. And yet your Federation, with its empty visions of Galactic Empire, still pushes out and on to the more distant stars, still colonizes drab worlds such as this with poor exiles who would have led moderately happy lives on the kindlier worlds from which they were dragged on the orders of some soulless authority."

Again Quinn stumbled. He fell against Jane. The touch of her bare flesh against his tingled sweetly. He kept his arm around her. He was dimly aware that she responded—dimly. There was no urgency in their desire. It could wait—and the waiting itself would be part of the drowsy euphoria through which he was moving, through which they were both moving, as in some golden, shimmering dream. From far away came Aveling's voice.

But Quinn was trying to think, vaguely aware that this was wrong. He saw Jane's bag ahead. Cigarettes! Something about cigarettes and Aveling. Then the thought flickered away, and he kicked the bag aside into the thick moss. Jane laughed uncertainly and threw her watch after it. Aveling had turned aside, but Jane's laugh caught his attention. And Quinn stared with a last effort, trying to remember something. Aveling grinned at them.

"I will leave you now. There is food here, and drink—all in the lotos fruit. There is warmth and comfort that you will know nowhere else and, for music, the sweet drumming of falling water on the leaves and petals of the great, sweet scented flowers that flaunt themselves where the streams come tumbling down from the outside world. There are others here, many others, but they will not disturb you. Even if they knew who you were—they would not trouble you. For this is Lotos-Land.

"Sleep well. Sleep—and forget the grim, drab world that you have left behind you. . . Or, remembering, remember it only as a strange, unhappy dream.

"I will come back to you. When you have . . . rested there will, I fear, be work for you to do—for is not that the law of the Federation? There will be your report to make, Jane—a report that will clear this world and its people of all suspicion, that will set the hounds of the Special Service baying off on some other scent. There will be, perhaps, the work that Clementi-Smith started, and bungled so disastrously, to carry on. Why should we be selfish, keep our dream—no, our reality—to ourselves?"

The golden haze closed in around Aveling, his voice blended with muffled pulse of the little drums that, in turn, marched in rhythm with the slow rhythm of the blood. Quinn saw dimly the young-old face, gently smiling, the incongruous spark of the cigarette that glowed and faded, glowed and faded, in time to the drums. Then Aveling raised his hand in farewell, was gone. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered any more. There was the moss beneath him, softly resilient, and the air, warm and spicy drowsily intoxicating; and there was her mouth on his, and her body, all languorous desire. . . .

And the rhythm of the drums.

Jane and Quinn were reclining by the pool that served them for their simple toilet. Quinn was at ease, stretched out lazily, watching the slowly drifting spray of the waterfall that fell in a tenuous smoke from the cavern roof. He felt as well as he had ever felt in his life. He felt—when he thought of them at all—a vague pity for his comrades in the Service, for the slaves of control boards and plotting machines, the ill-rewarded servants of the ships. Yet he wondered, dimly, what was the cause of the strange, uncomfortable fidgetiness that came over him from time to time. He watched Jane roll over, edge herself towards the pool. She raised herself on her elbows, peered long and intently into the still, unruffled surface of the water.

She said, plaintively, "Peter—my hair. . . And my mouth. . ."

She got slowly and gracefully to her feet, looked down at him. Her black hair was tangled, was falling around her face—but it suited her. Her lips were well enough shaped not to need the aid of artificial coloring. Her body glowed softly golden in the golden light of Lotos-Land. She could have been a goddess from one of the kindlier myths of Earth's dim, long ago and far away youth.

"Your bag," he suggested. "Dropped it, somewhere. . ." There was something about the bag. . . "And a lot of other things."

She considered his reply. "There's a comb," she said. "And a pair of scissors. . ."

Quinn rose reluctantly to his feet. With Jane's hand in his he walked away from the pool. And it was pleasant enough to walk, not hurrying, over the soft, springy moss, to pause often to admire the shape and color and texture of a flower, to feel the warm, spicy air in gentle motion against the skin. It was a walk through Paradise—a sensualist's Paradise, but still—Paradise. They wandered on aimlessly, their original purpose almost forgotten, taking a drowsy delight in their surroundings and in each other. At times they rested, eating of the smooth textured golden fruit that hung always within easy reach. They talked but little—there was no need for words.

And they saw, for the first time, their fellow lotos-eaters. Some, like themselves, were wandering aimlessly, alone or in couples. Some greeted them briefly in low, musical voices—others stared past them with rapt, unseeing eyes, obviously inhabiting tiny private worlds of their own in which they were alone, in which they desired not even the most fleeting human contact. And all of them, all the golden skinned men and women moving slowly and gracefully, belonged. They were all a part of this strange, symbiotic union of plant and animal.

They came quite by chance upon the army pilot. He seemed pleased to see them, was glad to greet somebody that he had known, even briefly, in his old life. He was sprawling under one of the fleshy ferns. There was a girl with him—slightly built, red haired, attractive in her fragile way, and they were eating one of the golden apples, sharing it. . . It was an idyllic scene, and old, old. It was like an illustration from some ancient Bible—of Eve tempting Adam with the fruit of the Forbidden Tree. But this fruit wasn't—deadly. Where does knowledge get you, anyhow? Quinn asked

himself. But there was some knowledge he needed. Something about a bag, or a case...

"Why, hello," said the pilot, mildly surprised. "I didn't recognize you. . ."

"What does it matter?" asked the red haired girl.

"Oh, nothing, my dear. But I rather want to thank these people for bringing me here. I rather—care for this. . . And you. . ."

"We all—care far it. . ." the girl told him, lazily stretching supine on the soft moss. "I. . . I punch a comptometer—all day and every day—Outside. That's not . . . my life. This. . . is. . ." Her brow furrowed. "But there's one thing . . . wrong ... with it all . . . Going . . . back. . ." Her eyes cleared, suddenly became alive, intelligent. "It's Hell ... going back. Why should we? Why should we work the. . .the best years of our lives away for the damned Federation when this... all this. . . is. . . free? The Lotos feeds us, and gives us warmth, and shelter. . . It doesn't clothe us..." She smiled, showing very white teeth. "And does that. . . matter ?"

Jane sat down beside her. "I had... forgotten," she said. "But you. . . reminded me. Our clothes. . . Where do we. . .find them? I'm afraid that we just dropped them, any place, when we. . . came in. . ." She smiled apologetically. "You see, it was our first time. . . here. . ."

"Don't worry. When your ... holiday is finished they will bring your clothes. . ."

"It was," said Quinn, "her bag, really."

"You could," the red haired girl told her, "borrow my comb. But my lipstick—it isn't your color, my dear. Next time—chain your bag to your wrist. . ." Quinn saw what it was that had looked so incongruous with her slim nakedness. "Leave the key —Outside. You'll want," she said, suddenly practical, "wide sleeves. . ."

"There was," said the pilot, his voice sleepy, a little bored, "a bag. Big ... Brown leather. .. That way..." He waved a vague, languid arm to his left.

"The attendants;" said Gillian. "I saw them. . . looking." She yawned. "Can't say. . . when. No Time. . . here."

"They might not," the pilot told her, "have found it." He said, hopefully, "You can. . . look. . ."

Jane thanked him, rose languidly and gracefully to her feet. She smiled. "I am ... a nuisance, Peter. But. . ." She ran a hand over her tangled hair. "I want to be really happy, my darling, and I can't, until. . ."

They found the bag, where Quinn had kicked it aside into a tangle of thick ferns. They would never have found it had not Quinn's bare foot become entangled with the strap. But it was found—and Jane, exclaiming happily, sat down where they had found it, opened it, eagerly pulled out comb and cosmetics and mirror. In her haste she spilled the other contents of the bag on to the moss. Quinn, who had his tidy moments, sat down beside her, picked up the unwanted articles, started to put them back.

He picked up the cigarette case. And the old idea began to nag him again.

"Does this look better?" asked Jane.

"Damn you. Be quiet."

She knocked the case out of his hand. She demanded—as near to anger as she would ever be in this drugged, drowsy parody of living—"Don't look at that silly thing. Look at me!"

"I must get back," whispered Quinn. "I must get back. . ." But how? How?

Yet the way back must be easy. Aveling, by his own confession, had found it by accident. It must be something commonplace, absurdly simple. Aveling had stumbled out of his Lotos-Land—half drugged, yet sufficiently master of himself to be scared by something of unknown power and potentialities, shaken. He had sat down in the cabin of his plane and . . .

And ...

The answer was obvious. Blindly, roughly, he pushed the girl to one side, heard her whimper. He got to his feet, walked quickly to where the case had fallen, picked it up. He took out one of the two remaining cigarettes, put the end in his mouth, drew sharply. The tobacco ignited. He coughed violently, retched. The cigarette fell to the ground. He retrieved it, put it to his mouth again.

He fought down the urge to vomit. With each mouthful, he could feel his brain clearing. He looked around him with sudden distaste. It was all, he admitted, still beautiful—but it was a decadent beauty, more than a little obscene. He felt a sharp longing for the cold, clean tides of interstellar space to wash from him the taint of the scented air, the soft, diffuse light, the contagion of this weakling's Paradise.

"Don't, Peter," Jane was saying. "That filthy smell. . ."

He looked at her dispassionately. He saw, for the first time, little skin blemishes, minor defects of her figure. Yet—she was still desirable. He muttered, "To hell with it. . ." But he did not throw away the cigarette.

He found her watch almost at once, among the ferns where he had seen her throw it when they had first come in. Subconsciously, he had noted the spot. And the watch was, he knew, more than a means of merely telling the time.

He took his cigarette from his mouth, looked at it. It was almost half finished. He would have to be fast—for he did not know how long the effects of the nicotine would last. Aveling, when he brought them here, had chain smoked. But one cannot chain smoke for long on two cigarettes.

But he took the other one from the case, got it going. He strode quickly to the girl, knelt beside her, grabbed her by the shoulders. She tried to fight back. He let go of her with his right hand, clenched his fist, put all the strength he could into a short, sharp jab to the pit of her stomach. She collapsed, gasping. She looked up at him, the tears streaming down her face. "Peter! Darling! Why?"

"You'll find out. Smoke this."

"No. . . No!"

"Smoke this!"

He forced the end of the second cigarette into her mouth. Little crumbs of tobacco were smeared over her face. She gasped and spluttered, made unpleasant retching sounds. Then—

Her face was cold, hard. She spat out the words. "Aveling! That rat!"

"Never mind that. That fancy transmitter you had in your watch—can you reach the other agent from here?"

"I think so. And I'll make it the Prime Emergency call—whatever she's doing, wherever she is, she'll answer."

She did something to the watch, then held the little instrument to her ear, listening intently. A few seconds passed but Quinn heard no answering buzzing sound. Jane frowned brought her wrist down to mouth level.

"Calling Lotty. . . Lettice here. .. Not much time. . . Quinn and I in Lotos-Land. Not the club, the real place. . . Take over, Quinn, will you?" She gave it to him. He took it in his hand, raised it to his mouth. His articulation, when he talked, was a little indistinct—he did not dare to throw away his cigarette.

"Come," he said, "as soon as you can. The twin peaks, Simbala's Breasts. Get little hill called The Mole in line with nipple of South Breast, come in slowly on bearing. Ledge or terrace, landing for planes. Two caves—big one used as hangar, small one entrance to . . . here. Some kind gas—or maybe radiation. Drug. Antidote—nicotine. Bring plenty cigarettes. Watch Aveling. Watch Fort Commandant—and try to put rocket launching sites out of action. Don't forget. . . cigarettes." His own, now, was burning his lips.

There was no answer. The watch, he saw now, was damp. That might have shorted the tiny batteries. Or the set might be working, but too weak to pick up the distant answer. There was no way to tell.

Jane went limp, her body slumped against his. He looked down, saw the short, crumpled butt of her cigarette on the moss. He spat out his own. The watch fell from his hands, unnoticed.

And it was sweet to drift once more into sleep beneath the low, green firmament of Lotos-Land, beneath, the fleshly, luminous blossoms that were dimly glowing, opalescent suns. The golden haze washed over them, the golden tides bore them far and far away from the workaday world with which they had made fleeting contact. And when they awoke they remembered this brief interlude of purposiveness —but it was of no importance, a mere doubtful dream of a dream. More—it was something deliberately to be forgotten.

"Wake up," said the voice. It was a harsh voice, mechanically distorted. "Wake up, Quinn." A hard, rough hand took his shoulder, shook it violently. Another hand forced a cigarette between his lips.

Quinn involuntarily inhaled, gasped and choked. He tried to spit out the little, poisonous, evil-tasting cylinder—but the rough hand was clamped over his face, bruising nose and mouth and chin. He looked up—and felt all the embarrassment of the naked man confronted by fully clothed, inimical strangers. And these strangers—there were two of them—were more than fully clothed by any normal standards. They wore full regulation space armor.

"Feel better?" asked one of them, the one who was bending over him, who had shaken him into wakefulness. The gloved hand was removed from his face, but the cigarette remained. "No," said Quinn.

"They aren't very grateful, are they?" remarked the second space-suited figure—and even the mechanical reproduction of the voice could not hide a faintly ironical overtone—no more than the clear glass of the helmet visor could hide a slightly amused glint in the eyes. "Jane, my dear," went on the speaker, "we've rescued you—saved you from a fate worse than death. Here—we found these. I think they're yours. . ."

Quinn saw the girl slowly putting on the clothes that she had worn when she had come into Lotos-Land. She dressed herself, it seemed to him, with a certain reluctance. Her eyes were sullen. The lighted cigarette hanging from her lower lip glowed and faded sullenly. She said, "You took long enough about it."

"I did not. And I've had luck, my dear, the most incredible luck! Wait till we get outside!"

Quinn dressed. He felt happier, much less defenseless, when he had clad himself — especially when he had his shoes on. He felt as the hermit grub must feel when, having outgrown his old, commandeered shell, he finds a new one of the right shape and size, edges his soft, temptingly edible body gently into it.

"It was lucky," remarked the most talkative suit of space armor, "that you didn't wander far from where you ditched your watch. It was lucky, too, that you left the general call switched on —otherwise we might have wandered for days through this surrealist's dream of bliss without finding you. . . Funny sort of place, isn't it? Like something by Dali superimposed on something by the Douanier Rousseau —with trimmings. . . It makes me feel. . . itchy. . ."

"You talk too much," said Jane coldly. "Suppose you get us out of here."

"You're the boss, dearie. Give 'em a pack of gaspers each, Patrick—that should be enough to last 'em out to the fresh air. Come on!"

The smaller of the two in space armor led the way. Jane followed, then Quinn. He tried at first to walk beside her, but she edged away from him with distaste. He was not surprised. Seeing the shameless abandon of those that they passed on the way to the Outside, he was not surprised. He flushed hotly. He remembered something that he had read or heard once of a law passed in ancient Athens, a law making it illegal to walk through the streets naked—not because it was immoral, but because it was ugly. He felt a feeling very close to panic every time that he finished a cigarette,

in the brief seconds that it took to light a fresh, one.

It was a long way to the cavern entrance. Quinn was amazed at the extent of the place—wondered how much of it was natural how much, if any, the work of the race that had lived here—and died—before the coming of Man. He could see why and how it was that they had died. They must have drifted, slowly but inevitably, into racial extinction. The Lotos had been too—kind. It had given everything—on a grossly physical plane. It had taken away everything that made for survival. It was dangerous. The generality of Mankind takes the short term view—and is wrongly convinced that it is, somehow, clever enough to cope with anything. It would see only that the Lotos would give, now, what the Federation promised to Posterity. It would delude itself that somehow—by voting for it perhaps—a new dawn would follow the long, steady decline into extinction. Or—it just wouldn't care. . .

The two space-suited figures halted, conferred briefly in low tones. "This way," said one of them. Armored arms held to one side the screen of creeper and foliage. Jane, not looking back, passed through into the tunnel. Quinn paused. He turned and stared for the last time at the lush, dim-glowing Lotos-Land. He sighed. He knew that a chapter of his life had closed—and there had been worse chapters.

"Hurry up. We don't want a pillar of salt on our hands," said the one that Jane Haldane had rebuked for talkativeness. Quinn did not hurry, but he turned, ducked under the upraised arms, walked into the tunnel. Instead of moss under his feet there was gritty sand. The living screen dropped and the golden light was abruptly cut off—and ahead there was the circle of wan grayness that was the tunnel mouth. And, as he walked forward, he became vividly conscious of the carrion stench of the vegetation of the outside world, of the chill dampness that struck through his clothes, that struck upwards through the soles of his shoes.

Outside, it was not long after dawn. It was raining. The misty drizzle seeped down the mountainside, dripped from the misshapen bushes, gathered in little, muddy pools in every footprint. The throbbing drone of the two big, hovering helicopters was a dismal monotony, the roaring scream of the circling squadron of fighters was unendurably harsh in Peter Quinn's ears.

There were two big Spurlings on the terrace, huge planes, ugly, of the kind that are used as landing craft. On their sides was the insignia of the Federation's naval forces. Quinn stared. He had the idea that all operations of the Special-Service were one man—or one woman—shows. He saw an officer, with junior Captain's braid on his shoulders, detach himself from a little group by one of the Spurlings, stride towards them over the sodden grass. The officer saluted. He half asked, half stated, "Miss Haldane?"

"Yes."

"They have placed me under your orders, Miss Haldane, What do you want done?"

"Give me time, if you please, to talk with my colleague."

The Captain flushed, saluted again, stalked away. The two in space-suits who had brought Quinn and the girl from Lotos-Land put clumsy, gloved hands up to their necks, lifted off their heavy helmets. One of them—the taller of the two—was a young man, a stranger, probably a naval officer. The other was Annalyn Claire. Her straw colored hair was ruffled and she looked very fresh and wholesome. When she smiled Quinn noticed, for the first time, her freckles. She said to her companion, "That's all, Patrick. Thanks a lot. Run off back to your proper playmates now—there's a good boy. . ."

The young man grinned, gave her a salute that was more of a parting wave to a friend than an official gesture of courtesy, was gone.

"Annalyn," said Quinn.

"Who else? I'm sorry, Pete, for what I had to do. Believe me —I'm sorry. But—orders is orders. Especially when they come from my immediate superior." "I think I see. You wanted me—an outsider with some training, with some idea of service and discipline—here to give you a hand. Tell me, Annalyn—it was nothing so crude as knockout drops, was it? Wasn't it one of those comic drugs that play Old Harry with the time sense?"

"It was. But listen, Peter—I've made it up to you. As well as all these naval types there's another ship in port—Pathfinder, survey ship, calling in for fuel and stores. She's an officer short. Her Old Man—I told him as much as he needed to know—has agreed to take you. She's bound for the worlds of Capricorn—if there are any worlds revolving around those cockeyed suns. . . Suit you?"

"Suit me ? Why, Annalyn—the Survey Service! This is. . ."

"I — we — owed it to you. There's a naval pinnace laid on for you—she's just behind that landing craft. I've told the pilot to get you to the port at least one and a half times the speed of light."

"Miss Claire!" Jane Haldane's voice was icy. "You have overstepped the mark. You had no right to. . ."

"But I had, dearie. I was in full charge during your vacation? And, it was agreed, long ago, that Mr. Quinn was to be returned to his own service as soon as this job was over."

"And the job, of course, is of only minor importance."

"What else have you been doing? What's happened to Aveling, to the Fort Commandant? What are these naval craft and personnel doing here?"

"One thing at a time. Aveling is dead. He had a fast poison concealed in a hollow, false tooth. . ."

"You should have thought of that."

"I did. But he thought of it first—and the tooth was in his mouth. And the Brigadier shot himself—and a few of his senior officers got themselves shot as they tried to get to their rocket launching controls. As for the fleet—it was on a training cruise in this vicinity. I got in touch with their Admiral as

soon as I heard that they were around. I called them in when I got your message. For all I knew—you were in deadly danger. . . Perhaps—" Quinn, watching, her, was surprised at the bitterness of her smile. "Perhaps I should not have hurried. . ."

"Never mind that. Have I your permission, Miss Claire, to retain Mr. Quinn's services for a few moments longer? The job, you know, isn't quite finished..."

Annalyn made no reply. She looked down at the helmet of her spacesuit, turned it round and round in her hands, studied it with absurd intensity. A dull flush suffused the fair skin of her face. She, muttered something to herself—and one of the words sounded like witch ...

Jane's voice was hard, businesslike. She said—"You're a Reserve Officer, Peter. You're versed in naval technicalities. These landing craft of theirs—they can be used as bombers, can't they? They carry a torpedo apiece—with an atomic bomb as a warhead. Right? Good. Now—these bombs, what fuses have they?"

"Impact," Quinn told her. "Proximity. Time. Delayed action. All at once if you want it that way. But if they're being used as bombs, to get blast without radioactivity, the warheads are taken out of the torpedoes and dropped, and either the Time or the Proximity fuses are used. . ."

"I see. Now—suppose that there was one of those bombs here, with the time fuse set for —say—ten minutes time, could you do anything about it?"

"Yes. I'd jump into the fastest thing with wings I could lay my hands on and get the hell out. I don't think that any one could do any better. As far as I know any attempt to tinker with the fuse would only hasten the inevitable."

The girl lifted her hand, beckoned to the Captain. To Quinn she said, "You know what I have to do, don't you?"

Quinn swallowed. He felt a sickness that was not entirely due to the cigarette that he was smoking. He hated the idea of what was to come—but it had a bitter, unshakeable logic. It was as inevitable, perhaps, as the sequence of events that would come to pass when the time fuses were set going.

The Captain stood stiffly to attention on the wet grass, asked, "Yes, Miss Haldane?"

"Have your artificers," she said, "remove the atomic warheads from the two torpedoes carried by the landing craft. Have the bombs carried — inside. . ."

She gestured briefly. "The officer who was with Miss Claire can go to show the men the way. Have the fuses set for —say—half an hour. That will give your people just time to get out, will give us all time to get clear. . ."

"You haven't allowed much time," said Annalyn. "They'll have to hurry."

"That's all right. They'll have to hurry."

The Captain paled. His face set in stubborn lines. He said, "I don't like this. I will make a full report. . ."

"Make a full report. I shall make one too. And . . ."

"And. . . ?"

"Do you want to be commander of a second class cruiser for the rest of your service life?"

Quinn felt sorry for the man. The power vested in his rank, the power of the men and the machines and the weapons of his ship, only a few miles away at Port Van Campen, were not enough. Neither was the power behind him—that of the Admiral and his squadron, serenely circling in their closed orbit far above the eternal overcast of this drab, Altairian planet.

The Captain swallowed, his rather prominent Adam's apple wobbling visibly. He saluted sullenly and strode stiffly to his waiting men, resentment in every line of his rigid back. He started barking orders.

Quinn watched the men lifting projectiles from the Spurlings, watched them detaching the warheads with almost exaggerated care. But his display of interest was only not very convincing acting. So it had come, he told himself. His mind picked up all kinds of fantastic possibilities, examined them one by one, rejected them. He said slowly, "We could marry, of course. It would mean your giving up your service. . ."

Jane, standing close to him, not looking at him, asked, "Why?"

"Because, my dear, the spaceman home from the stars wants a wife, not a female bloodhound. He wants to know that he'll find companionship and a hot dinner waiting for him, when he gets home—not a hurried scribble saying that the woman of his choice is very sorry, but she's had to go and handle a case on Deneb VII, but that she hopes that she'll be around when he's back from his next voyage. . ."

"And you, of course, couldn't. . ."

"I could, but. . ."

"All right. Fair is fair. We'll both ask for our cards. There are other worlds than this in the Galaxy—pleasant worlds, kindly, where life is easy. We could be happy..." Her voice faltered. "Or—could we? At first, perhaps. But there'd be times. . ."

He said, "Wherever you are —there is Lotos-Land. . ."

She flared: "You fool! If that were true—it would be even worse. Go, Peter, back to your ships and the cold loneliness between the stars. Go—before we both of us do something damned silly that we shall regret all our lives!"

She turned to watch the men, spacesuited, carrying the two dull-gleaming metal cylinders on stretchers to the tunnel mouth. She said softly, "So that's the end of Aveling's long, golden afternoon. And it wasn't so long, at that. . . That's the dawn—the dawn of reckoning, perhaps. The dawn too bright to be seen, coming up in thunder, too loud to be heard. . ."

Quinn said softly, "They'll never know..." He added—"But we shall, my dear."

He took her roughly by the shoulders, turned her so that she faced him. He pushed back her hood. There was a harsh urgency in the embrace that had been entirely lacking from all their love making in the dim, softly glowing Lotos-Land. He tasted her sudden tears, bitter on his bruised lips.

She pushed him away, cried, "Go, damn you! Go."

He turned abruptly, walked rapidly to where Annalyn had told him that the pinnacle was waiting. He hoped that there would be no delay, that the Pathfinder would blast off immediately after his reporting on board. Already he felt a sense of release—and knew that he would be denied this doubtful solace once the reaction should set in.

He passed a group of officers. "God!" one of them blurted, "has that woman no sense of compassion? The few that we dragged out for questioning during the search are the lucky ones!"

Quinn stopped, faced the naval officers squarely. They stared at him curiously—and with a certain embarrassment.

He said, briefly and flatly: "You'd be surprised."

He climbed into the waiting pinnacle.

#### COMING UP

Next month—rather than merely next issue, since SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES will now be appearing monthly—will begin our first serial. No, this doesn't mean that we are automatically going to run serials; we intend to use them only when they're good enough to make their use a must. And we think this one definitely fits as such a must.

It's Erik van Lhin's held-over POLICE YOUR PLANET. Van Lhin originally meant this as several novelettes, but when he heard we were going monthly, he asked us to let him handle it as a straight novel. It makes a better story that way, and we were glad to have him redo it. The results more than live up to our expectations.

It's as fine an example of realistic, honest space-opera, as we've seen, where real people live real lives on Mars—and where a deadly grim and honestly urgent problem must be met by them. It's the story of a man who had no scruples or ethics, except the absolute devotion to his duty. It's the tale of a planet crushed between gangs on one hand and a civil war between two legal but warring police forces on the other—where anything can go, and everything does.

It's worth watching your newsstand for—or using the handy coupon on page 16 to be sure of! Don't miss it.