

Guardian of the Crystal Gate (1956)

Amazing Stories and its companion magazine, Fantastic Adventures, were big, shaggy pulps published by Ziff-Davis of Chicago. They featured fast-paced adventure stories aimed at adolescent boys, a group to which I belonged when I started reading them in 1948. I loved nearly everything I read, had fantasies of writing for them some day, and had no idea that the two books were staff-written by a dozen or so regular contributors whose work was bought without prior editorial reading and who worked mainly under pseudonyms that the editor, Ray Palmer, would stick on their material at random. (About fifteen different writers were responsible over the years for the stories bylined "Alexander Blade," who was one of my special favorites when I was about 14.)

While I was still an Alexander Blade fan Ziff-Davis moved its operations to New York. Editor Palmer preferred to stay behind in Chicago. The new editor was a big, burly, good-natured man named Howard Browne, who had been one of Palmer's stable of regulars, producing undistinguished stories for him in the mode of Robert E. Howard and Edgar Rice Burroughs under an assortment of names. Indeed, Browne thought that science fiction and fantasy was pretty silly stuff. What he preferred was detective stories. His own favorite writer was Raymond Chandler and he had written a number of creditable mysteries in the Chandler vein. Gossip had it that he had taken over Palmer's job mainly in the hope, never realized, of talking Ziff-Davis into letting him edit a mystery magazine as well.

By the time Browne had been on the job a couple of years my own tastes in reading had grown more mature, and I was no longer very enamored of the work of Alexander Blade and his pseudonymous colleagues. Truth to tell, I had come to think of Amazing and Fantastic Adventures as pretty awful magazines, and, with the high-minded fastidiousness common to young men in their mid-teens, said so very bluntly in a 1952 article that I wrote for an amateur magazine of s-f commentary named Fantastic Worlds. They were, I said, "the two poorest professional magazines of the field," magazines of "drab degeneracy" that were devoted to "a formula of adventure and 'cops and robbers on the moon.'" I said a lot of other things too, some of them fairly foolish. Fantastic Worlds allowed Browne to reply to my diatribe, and he did so quite graciously, under the circumstances, defending himself by pointing out that "magazines, like bean soup and bicycles, are put out to make money." He offered reasoned and reasonable arguments for his editorial policies and in general resisted matching my intemperate tone. He did call my piece "unrealistic and irresponsible" but added that "it is axiomatic that only the very young and very old know everything," and obviously I belonged to one of those two categories.

We now jump three years. It is the summer of 1955, and, thanks to Randall Garrett, I have unexpectedly become part of Howard Browne's stable of writers myself, turning in a monthly quota of formula fiction. I would deliver a story on Tuesday or Wednesday, Howard would let the accounting department know, and the following Monday my payment would go out. He rarely bothered to read them. Now and then he would check to see that I was maintaining the minimal level of competence that the magazines required, but he understood that I was, by and large, capable of consistently giving him the right stuff. In fact, after I had been part of his staff for six months or so, he paid me the considerable compliment of asking me to write a story around a cover painting that Ed Valigursky, one of his best artists, had just brought in.

The painting showed two attractive young ladies in short tunics fiercely wrestling atop a huge diamond. I produced a 10,000-word story called "Guardian of the Crystal Gate," which Howard published in the August, 1956 issue of Fantastic, the successor to the old Fantastic Adventures. My name was prominently featured on the front cover and an autobiographical sketch of me, along with a lovely drawing of me as the beardless young man I still was, went on the second page of the issue.

During one of my visits to the Ziff-Davis office about this time, Howard Browne greeted me with a

sly grin and pulled a small white magazine from his desk drawer. "Does this look familiar?" he said, or words to that effect. It was that 1952 issue of *Fantastic Worlds*, with my blistering attack on the magazines he edited. He had known all along that the bright young man he had hired for his staff in 1955 was the author of that overheated polemic of three years before, and finally he could no longer resist letting me in on that. He had, of course, calculated how old I must have been when I wrote that piece, and had gallantly chosen not to hold my youthful indiscretion against me.

That August 1956 *Fantastic* was pretty much an all-Silverberg issue, by the way. I had broken my personal record of the month before, because I was the author or co-author of four of the six stories it contained. Besides "Guardian of the Crystal Gate," there was a collaborative novelet called "The Slow and the Dead," under the "Robert Randall" byline, and I appeared as "Ralph Burke" with a short entitled "Revolt of the Synthetics." The fourth story, "O Captain My Captain," was one that I had written while still an unknown freelancer back in 1954; unable to sell it the normal way, I had eventually fobbed it off on Browne as part of my regular quota. The interesting thing here is that Browne published it under the byline of "Ivar Jorgensen"—a writer who had been one of my early favorites in the days before I knew that the Ziff-Davis magazines were entirely written by staff insiders using pseudonyms. "Jorgensen" had originally been the pen name of Paul W. Fairman, Browne's associate editor, but now the name was being spread around to the other contributors. So after having been an Ivar Jorgensen fan in my mid-teens, I had, four or five years later, been transformed into Jorgensen myself! It would not be long before I could lay claim to "Alexander Blade" as well.

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It started very simply, with the routine note on my desk, saying that the Chief had a job for me. Since there's generally some trouble for me to shoot ten or a dozen times a year, I wasn't surprised. The surprises came later, when I found that this particular job was going to draw me a hundred trillion miles across space, on a fantastic quest on a distant planet. But that came later.

It began quietly. I walked in, sat down, and the Chief, in a quick motion, dropped a diamond in front of me on his desk.

I stared blankly at the jewel. It was healthy-sized, emerald-cut, blue-white. I looked up at him. "So?"

"Take a close look at it, Les." He shoved it across the desk at me with his stubby fingers. I reached out, picked up the diamond—it felt terribly cool to touch—and examined it.

Right in the heart of the gem was a thin brown area of clouding, marring the otherwise flawless diamond. I nodded. "It looks—like a burnt-out fuse," I said, puzzled.

The Chief nodded solemnly. "Exactly." He opened a desk drawer and reached in, and grasped what looked like a whole handful of other diamonds, "Here," he said, "Enjoy yourself." He sent them sprawling out on the desk; they rolled across the shiny marbled desktop. Some went skittering to the floor, others dropped into my lap, others spread out in a gleaming array in front of me. There must have been forty of them.

The Chief's eye met mine. "Each one of those diamonds," he said, "represents one dead man."

I coughed. I've had some funny cases since joining the Bureau, but this was the fanciest hook the Chief had used yet. I started scooping up the diamonds that had fallen to the floor. They were of all sizes, all cuts—a million dollars' worth, maybe. More, maybe.

"Don't bother," the Chief said. "I'll have the charwoman pick them up when I leave. They're not worth anything, you know."

"Not worth anything?" I looked at the ones I had in my hand. Each was marred by the same strange brown imperfection, that fuse blowout. I closed my hand, feeling them grind together.

"Not a cent. For one thing, they're all flawed, as you can easily see. For another, they're all synthetics. Paste, every one of them. Remarkably convincing paste, but paste all the same."

I leaned back in my chair, put my hands together, and said, "Okay. I'm hooked. Put the job on the line for me, will you?" I was thinking, This is the screwiest one yet. And I've had some corkers.

"Here's the pitch, Les." He drew out a long sheet of crisp onionskin paper, and handed it to me. Neatly typed on it was a list of names and addresses. I ran down the list quickly without hitting any familiar ones.

"Well? Who are they?"

"They're missing persons, Les. They've all disappeared in this city between—ah—" He took the list back—"27 November, 2261, and 11 February of this year. The list totals sixty-six names. And those are just the ones we know about."

"And the diamonds?"

"That's where this Bureau comes in," he said. "They only send us the screwy ones, as you've no doubt discovered by now. In each disappearance case listed on this sheet, one of those burnt-out diamonds was found in the room the missing man was last seen in. In every case."

I frowned and scratched an ear reflectively. "You say there's a tie-in with the diamonds, Chief?"

He nodded. "One burnt-out diamond in exchange for one man. It's a recurrent pattern of correlation. Those men are going some-where, and those diamonds have something to do with it. We don't know what."

"And you want me to find out, eh?" I asked.

"That's only part of it." He moistened his lips. "Suppose I tell you where you fit into the picture, and let you decide what you want to do yourself. I can't force you, you know."

"I haven't turned down a case since I've been with the Bureau," I reminded him.

"Good." He stood up. "Let's see you keep that record intact, then. Because we've just found one of these diamonds that isn't burnt out!"

The vault swung open, and the Chief led the way in. He was a short, blocky little man, hardly impressive-looking at all. But he knew his job perfectly—and his job was to maneuver muscleheaded underlings like myself into positions where they were just about committed to risk life and limb for the good old Bureau without knowing quite what they were going into.

I was in that uncomfortable position now. It wasn't going to be easy explaining this gambit to Peg, either, I thought.

He crossed the shadowy floor to an inner safe, deftly dialed the combination, and let the door come creaking open. He drew out a little lead box.

"Here it is," he said.

I reached for it, in my usual melon-headed manner, but he drew it back quickly out of my grasp. "Easy," he said. "This thing is dangerous." Slowly, terribly slowly; he lifted the top of the box just a crack.

A pure, silvery beam of brightness shot out and lit up the whole room.

"It must be a beauty," I said.

"It is. Diamonds like these have lured sixty-six men to what we assume is their death, in the last three months. This particular one hasn't had a chance to go into action yet."

I took the box from him. It was hard to resist the temptation of lifting the top and staring at that wonderful diamond again, but I managed. I wanted to find out all the angles of the job before I got involved.

"One of our cleaning-women found the stone yesterday, right after I left. She called me at home. At first I thought it was one of the ones I was working with—one of the burnt-out ones. But from the way she described it, I knew it was something special. I had her box it up this way at once. No one's seen it yet, except in little peeks like the one I just gave you."

He tapped the box. "I'll tell you my theory," he said, "and you can take it from there." His voice ricocheted around unpleasantly in the silent vault. "This diamond is bait, in some way. The things have

been appearing, and men have been doing something with them; I don't know what. But the diamonds are directly connected with this wave of disappearance."

I started to object, but he checked me.

"Okay, Les. I know it sounds crazy. How would you like to prove otherwise?"

"You're a sneaky one," I told him, grinning. Then the grin vanished as I stared at the little lead box. "I'll do it," I said. "But make sure that Peg gets the pension, will you?"

"Don't worry," he said, matching my grin. "She'll get every penny she deserves—after I get through grabbing, of course." He started to lead the way out of the vault. I followed, and he closed the door behind me.

"You take that diamond along with you," he said, indicating the box. "Play with it. Do anything you like. But come back with a solution to this vanishing business. Here," he said. "Take a few of these burnt-out ones too."

"Yeah. Peg might like them," I said. "They'll look swell with black."

I turned to go. As I reached the door, something occurred to me, and I paused.

"Say—I think I've found a hole in your theory. How come that charwoman didn't disappear when she found the diamond?"

He smiled. "Take another look at the list I gave you, Les. All the names on it are men's names. Whatever this is, it doesn't affect women at all."

"Hmm. Thought I had you there, for a minute."

"You ought to know better than that, Les."

Peg didn't like the idea one little bit.

I called her right after I left the Bureau office, and told her the chief had a new project for me. I didn't tell her what it was, but from the tone of my voice she must have guessed it was something risky.

I saw her face in the screen go tight, with the mouth pulled up in the little frown she's so fond of making every time I get stuck into another of the Bureau's weirdies.

"Les, what is it this time?"

"Can't tell you over the phone," I said, in mock accents of melodrama. "But it's a doozie, that's for sure." I fingered the leaden box in my pocket nervously.

"I'll come over after work," she said. "Les, don't let that man get you doing impossible things again."

"Don't worry, baby. This new business won't take any time at all," I lied. "And the Bureau pays its help well. See you later, doll."

"Right," I broke the connection and watched her anxious face dissolve into a swirl of rainbow colors and trickle off the viewer, leaving the screen looking a dirty grey. I stared at the dead screen for a couple of minutes, and then got up.

I was worried too. The Bureau—that's its only name, just plain The Bureau—was formed a while back, specifically to handle screwball things like this one. In a world as overpopulated and complex as ours is, you need a force like the Bureau—silent, anonymous, out of the limelight. We take care of the oddball things, the things we'd prefer the populace didn't get to hear shout.

Like this one. Like this business of people fooshing off into thin air, leaving burnt-out diamonds behind. The only people on Earth who could have even a remote chance of worming some sanity out of that one were—us. More precisely, me.

I stopped at a corner tavern and had a little fortification before going home. The barkeep was an inquisitive type, and I rambled on and on about some fictitious business problems of mine, inventing a whole sad story about a lumber warehouse and my shady partner. I didn't dare talk about my real business, of course, but it felt good to be able to unload some kind of trouble, even phony trouble.

Then I caught a quick copter and headed for home. I got out at the depot and walked, feeling the leaden box tapping ominously against my thigh every step of the way. Peg was there when I came in.

"You made it pretty quick," I said, surprised. "Seems to me you don't get out of work till four, and it's only three-thirty now."

"We got let off early today, Les. Holiday." She looked up at me, with strain and worry evident on her face, and ran thin, nervous fingers through her close-cut red hair. "I came right over."

I went to the cabinet and poured two stiff ones, one for each of us.

"Here's to the Chief," I said. "And to the Bureau."

She shook her head. "Don't make jokes, Les. Drink to anyone else, but not to the Bureau. Why don't you drink to us?"

"What's wrong, Peg? The Bureau is what's going to keep us going, doll. The salary I get from them—"

"—will be just adequate to get you the finest tombstone available, as soon as he gives you a job you can't handle." She stared up at me. Her eyes were cold and sharp from anger, but I could also see the beginnings of two tears in them. I kissed them away, and felt her relax. I sat down and pulled out the handful of burnt-out diamonds.

"Here," I said. "You can make earrings out of them."

"Les! Where did these—"

I told her the whole story, starting at the beginning and finishing at the end. I always tell Peg exactly what each mission of mine is about. Doing that violates security regulations, I know, but I'm sure of Peg. Absolutely sure. When I tell her something, it's like telling myself; it doesn't get any further. Which is why I was able to keep company with her, with the eventual idea of marrying her. In the Bureau, you don't think of getting married unless you can find a woman who could keep her mouth shut. Peg could.

"You mean these diamonds are instrumental in the disappearances?" she asked wonderingly.

I nodded. "That's what we think, baby. And I have one other little exhibit for you." Slowly I drew out the lead box and opened it, only a crack, and let a single beam of radiance escape before slamming it shut again.

She gasped in awe. "That's beautiful! But how—"

"That's where my job begins," I said. "That diamond is an unused specimen, one that hasn't functioned yet."

"Just how do you fit into this?" she asked suspiciously.

I stood up. "I'll find out soon enough. I'm going to go into the next room," I said, "and see how this diamond works. And then I'm going to go wherever it takes me, and worry about getting back after I get there."

The words fell so easily from my mouth that it seemed as if that had actually been my plan along. Really, it hadn't; I didn't have any idea where I was going to begin this case, but certainly that wasn't any way to go about it.

But as I spoke the words, I saw that that was what I had to do. That was the way the Bureau worked. Go straight to the heart of the matter, and worry about the consequences to yourself later.

"Les—" Peg began, and then knocked it off. She knew it wouldn't do her any good to complain, and she didn't try. I loved her for it. I knew she didn't like my job, and I knew she'd give anything to have me go into some sane, safe industry—like jetcar racing, or something, I suppose—but at least she kept her mouth shut once I got going on a project.

"You wait here," I told her. "Fix a couple of drinks for us. I'm going to adjourn to the next room and play around with this piece of glitter for a while."

"Be careful," she urged.

"I always am," I said. I gave her a kiss, and as I felt her soft, responsive lips against mine I wondered just where in hell that diamond was going to lead me. I didn't want to get too far from Peg, I

thought suddenly.

Then I broke away, scooped up the lead box, and went into my tiny den, closing the door behind me.

I sat down at the desk and spread the burnt-out diamonds in a little semi-circle around the box. The room was cold, and I was shivering a little—not only from the draft, either.

I turned on my desk light and sat there for a while, staring at the glistening row of gems, staring at the odd little brown cloud disfiguring each one.

Then, slowly, I reached for the box.

Sixty-six men—only men, for a reason I didn't understand—had disappeared. The diamonds had something to do with it. I didn't know what. But I had an overriding feeling that I was slated to be Number Sixty-seven.

It's a job, I thought. It's my job. And there was only one way to do it. My fingers quivered a little, just a little, as I started to open the box.

Brightness began to stream from it as soon as the upper half had parted from the lower, and I felt a bead of sweat break out on my forehead and go trickling down back of my ear. With perhaps too much caution, I lifted back the lid and lay bare the diamond nestling within, like a pearl inside an oyster.

I had never seen anything so lovely in my life. It was emerald-cut, neat and streamlined, with uncanny brilliance lurking in its smooth facets. It was small, but perfect, symmetrical and clear. It looked like a tiny spark of cold, blue-white fire.

Then I looked closer.

There was something in the heart of the diamond—not the familiar brown flaw of the others, but something of a different color, something moving and flickering. Before my eyes, it changed and grew.

And I saw what it was. It was the form of a girl—a woman, rather, a voluptuous, writhing nude form in the center of the gem. Her hair was a lustrous blue-black, her eyes a piercing ebony. She was gesturing to me, holding out her hands, incredibly beckoning from within the heart of the diamond.

I felt my legs go limp. She was growing larger, coming closer, holding out her arms, beckoning, calling—

She seemed to fill the room. The diamond grew to gigantic size, and my brain whirled and bobbed in dizzy circles. I sensed the overpowering, wordless call.

Then I heard the door open and close behind me, and I heard Peg's anguished scream: "Les!"

There was the sound of footsteps running toward me, but I didn't turn. I felt Peg's arms around my shoulder. She seemed to be holding me back.

I tore loose. The girl from the diamond was calling to me, and I felt inexorably drawn. "Les!" I heard Peg call again, and then again, more faintly. Her voice seemed to fade away, and the diamond grew, and grew, and seemed to take up the entire universe. And within it, now life size, was that girl, calling to me.

I went to her.

There was greyness, and void.

I found myself alone. Somewhere.

I was flat on my face, breathing in a strange, warm, alien air, lying stretched out with my nose buried in a thick carpet of blue-green moss. I stumbled to my feet and looked around, still hearing the echoes of Peg's fading cries resounding in my head.

Strange twittering noises sounded from above. Still too stunned to do much besides react to direct stimuli, I glanced up and saw a vicious-looking black-feathered bird with gleaming red talons leap from one tree to another.

Once I recovered my mental equilibrium, my first feeling was one of bitter, irrational anger—anger at the Chief for having let me fall into this job, anger at Peg for not forcing me to turn down the assignment, anger at myself for letting that diamond suck me into its field.

I was Number Sixty-seven, all right. Lee Hayden, Vanished Man. I could imagine Peg's terror-stricken face as she saw me disappear before her eyes and then picked up—

A burnt-out diamond.

Wherever those sixty-six guys had gone, I had followed. I looked around again. I had landed on some alien world, evidently, and I took the realization a lot more calmly than I should have. I was pretty blasé, as a matter of fact.

It could have been the Congo, of course, or the Amazon basin—but that wasn't too probable. For one thing, most of the places like that on Earth are pretty well civilized-looking by now. For another, no place, not even the Amazon, had birds like the ones that were flitting through the trees here. No place.

After the anger had washed through me, I calmed down a little. I leaned against one of the gigantic trees and groped for a clue, something to pick on as a starting point for the investigation I was about to conduct, the investigation that would clear things up. I was here on business.

I was in the middle of a vast jungle. The air was warm and moist, and clinging vines dangled down from the great trees. There didn't seem to be any other animal life, except for the myriad infernal birds.

Overhead, behind the curtain of vines, I could see the sun streaming down. It wasn't the familiar yellow light of Sol, either; the sun here was small, blue-white, and hot. I was sweating—me, in my business suit.

I stripped the jacket off and dangled it on the limb of a tree nearby, as a landmark, and started to walk. Meantime, pounding away in my head, was the vision of that impossible girl inside that impossibly lovely diamond. She was the bait that had trapped me.

I saw how the process worked. These diamonds appeared, and the lucky recipient would stare at them, as I did, hypnotized by the unearthly beauty of the stone into thinking there was a beckoning girl inside.

Then, through some magic, the trap snapped, and the unsuspecting victim—me—got drawn in and carried across space to an uninhabited jungle planet—here.

Why? That was what I was going to find out—I hoped.

I started to walk, moving slowly through the thick haze of the steaming jungle. I kept hearing the twitter of the birds, as a sort of chirping mockery from above, and now and then a little animal jumped out from behind the trees and scurried across my path, but otherwise there wasn't a sign of another living being. I wondered if each victim of this thing got sent to a planet of his own; I hoped not. I was starting to feel terribly alone here.

The jungle seemed endless, and that blue-white sun was getting hotter and hotter with each passing minute. I began to think that I was moving in circles. One tree looked just like the next.

I walked for perhaps an hour, with the sweat pouring down my arms and shoulders and my legs getting wobbly from the strain and the heat, and floating in front of me all the time was the vision of Peg's face as she must have looked the moment I vanished.

I tried to picture the scene. Probably the first thing she'd do, when she got her balance back, would be to call the Bureau, get the Chief on the wire, and curse him black and blue. She wasn't a weak woman. She'd let him know in no uncertain terms what she thought of him for giving me this job, for sending me out to do and die for the Bureau.

But what would she do then? Where would she go? Would she forget me and find someone else? The thought chilled me. I kept slogging on through that infernal mudhole of a planet, and there was nothing in sight but trees and more of them. After a while longer, I peeled off my shirt and wrapped it around the bole of a lanky sapling. Another landmark, I thought.

I was starting to get dreadfully depressed by the loneliness, by the dead, paradoxical emptiness of this fantastically fertile world. There didn't seem to be any way out, any hope at all, and I was beginning to give in to my fears in a way I usually didn't do.

But just then a brown something came bounding out of the tangled nest of vines above me and struck me hard, knocking me to the ground. I hit the springy moss with a terrific impact, recoiled, and rolled over, feeling my lip starting to swell where I'd split it.

I found myself facing what looked like an ape, about the size of a small, wiry man. The beast had two pairs of arms, two glowing, malicious eyes, and as nice a pair of saber teeth as you could find outside the Museum of Natural History. I scrambled a foot or two back, and lashed out with my feet.

I wasn't alone here any more, for sure.

The animal fought back furiously, wrapping its four arms around me, bringing its two razor-sharp teeth much too close to my throat to make me happy.

But I had just been waiting for something like this. I needed something concrete on which I could take out all my fear and rage and resentment, and I met the animal's attack firmly and came back on the creature's own grounds, fighting with arms and legs and knees and anything else handy. Overhead, I heard the chattering of the birds grow to a tumultuous frenzy.

I pounded away, smashed a fist into those two gleaming yellow sabers and felt them crack beneath my driving knuckles, felt the teeth give and break beneath the impact. A hot lancet of pain shot down my hand, but the animal gave a searing cry and jumped back.

I was on him immediately. All its attention was being given to the two broken teeth; its upper pair of hands was busy trying to stanch the flow of bright blood from its mouth, and the other two were waving in feeble circles. I came down hard with my feet, once, twice, a third time, and then the arms stopped waving.

I walked away, looking cautiously around to see if the animal had any relatives in the neighborhood. Suddenly, the empty, lonely jungle seemed overcrowded; behind every spreading leaf, there might be another of these saber-toothed horrors. Breathing hard, feeling the blood dripping from my cut knuckles, I started to edge on through the jungle.

My face was set in a grim mask. It looked like life on this planet was going to be a permanent struggle for survival, judging from my first taste of its wildlife—with no way out. I thought of Peg, back on Earth, and wondered what she was doing, what she was thinking of.

I kept going, determined now to keep moving at all costs, determined to beat this world and find my way back to Earth. The fight had set my hormones rolling, apparently; the outpour of adrenalin was just what I needed to galvanize me out of the fit of depression I had been sinking into. Now I was fully alive, wide awake, and wanting out desperately.

Then I glanced up. There seemed to be a fire up ahead; white, brilliant light was streaming through the jungle, illuminating the dark recesses around me. I drew in my breath. If it really was fire, that meant people—savages, perhaps? I advanced cautiously, dying a dozen times whenever I scrunched down on a twig.

After about fifty yards, the path swivelled abruptly at a right-angle bend, and I found myself suddenly out of the jungle. I emerged from the thickly-packed trees and saw what was causing all the light. I whistled slowly.

It wasn't a fire. It was a diamond, planted smack in the middle of a wide treeless clearing—the

biggest diamond anyone ever dreamed of, looming ten feet off the ground, lying there like a gigantic chunk of frozen flame. It was cut with a million facets from which the bright sunlight glinted fiercely. All around it, the trees had been levelled to the ground. The great gem stood all alone, in solitary majesty.

Not quite alone, though. For as I stood there, at the edge of the jungle, staring in openmouthed astonishment, I saw a figure come up over the top of the diamond, poise for a moment on the narrow facet at the very peak, and then leap lightly to the ground.

It was the girl—the girl whose beckoning arms had enticed me into this nightmare in the first place. She was coming toward me.

The girl in the diamond had been nude, but I guess that was only part of the bait. This girl was clad, though what she was wearing took care of the legal minimum and not much more. Otherwise, it was the same girl, radiant with an incredible sort of magnetism. In person, she had the same kind of effect that the image in the diamond had had.

I stood there, dazzled.

"I've been waiting for you," she said. Her voice was low and throbbing, with just the merest echo of something alien and strange about it. "It has been so long since I called, and you did not come."

I just stared at her. Up till this moment I had thought Peg was about as sexy as a girl could be, as far as I was concerned. But I was wrong. This item made Peg look almost like an old washboard by comparison.

She was all curves, but with a rippling strength underneath that was a joy to see. Her hair was deep blue-black, with glossy undertones, and her eyes were deep and compelling.

"My name is Sharane," she said softly. "I have been waiting for you."

The sunlight kept bouncing down off that colossal diamond, and Sharane stood there, brilliant in its reflected light. Her skin seemed to glow, it was so radiant. She took another step toward me, arms outstretched.

I moved back a step. So much glamor in one body frightened me. The last time I had listened to this girl's call, it had drawn me across space and brought me to this planet. Devil only knew what might happen this time.

Besides, there was Peg. So I backed off.

"What do you want?" I demanded. "Why have I been brought here? Where is this place?"

"What does it matter?" Sharane asked lightly, and from the tone of her voice I started to wonder myself. "Come here," she urged.

I started to laugh, I'm afraid. It was all so preposterous, this whole business of diamonds that make people shoot off to some world in space, and this lynx-eyed temptress coming toward me—I dissolved in near-hysterical laughter.

But I was laughing out of the other side of my face a moment later, when Sharane stepped close to me and I felt her warmth near me. She looked up at me, with the same expression on her face that the image in the diamond had had. I was defenseless.

Peg, I thought. Peg, help me!

She put her arms around me, and I started to pull back and then stopped. I couldn't. She came close, enfolded herself around me.

Somehow at that moment the distant Peg seemed pretty pale and tawdry next to Sharane. I forgot her. I forgot Peg, I forgot the Chief, the Bureau, Earth—I forgot everything, except Sharane and the blindingly brilliant diamond in front of me.

She drew my head down, and our lips met. The contact was warm, tingling—

And I felt myself grow rigid, as if I were rooted to the ground.

Sharane pulled her lips away, and took a step back, She looked at me, strangely, half triumphantly and half sadly. I saw her sigh, saw her breasts rise and fall.

I strained to move, and couldn't. I was frozen!

"Sharane!"

"I am sorry," she said. Her musical voice seemed to be modulated into a minor key, as if she were really sorry. "This is the way things must be."

And then she lifted me up, slung my stiffened form over her shoulder as easily as if I were an empty sack, and started walking away!

I struggled impotently against the strange paralysis that had overcome me, and cursed bitterly. A second time, Sharane had trapped me! Once, when she called from the depths of the crystal; now, when she betrayed me with a kiss.

I rolled my eyes in anguish, but that was as close as I could come to motion. Sharane carried me lightly, easily, around to the other side of the gigantic diamond. "You will have friends here," she said softly.

I looked around, and blinked in surprise. For half a dozen other Earthmen lay, similarly frozen, behind the great diamond.

Sharane very carefully laid me down in their midst, and left me.

She had put me between two other frozen prisoners. Further away, I saw four more. All six were gripped by the same strange force that held me.

"Greetings, friend," I heard the man on my left say. "The name is Caldwell—Frederic Caldwell. What's yours?" It was almost as if we were meeting in a cafeteria, he was so casual.

"Les Hayden," I said.

"My name is Strauss," said the one on my right. "Ed Strauss. Glad to meet you, Hayden. Join our merry band."

Strauss—Caldwell—those were two of the names on that list of sixty-six vanishers. And I'm Sixty-Seven. Welcome to the fold, I thought.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"Ten days," said Strauss.

"A week," Caldwell said. "But you'd never know it. When you're frozen like this, you don't need food or anything. You're out of circulation, period. You just lie here, waiting for the next sucker to be deposited in the vault."

"Yeah," said Strauss. "There were about forty guys here when I came, but one day a ship came down and some huge things packed most of them up. That made things pretty quiet for a while. We've just been lying here, those of us that are left. Every once in a while Sharane catches someone new."

"Did both of you get snagged the same way?"

"I found a diamond on my desk one day," said Caldwell. "Came out of nowhere. I started staring at it—and I guess you know the rest of the story."

"It's Sharane's kiss that does it," Strauss said. "I think it sets up some kind of force field that freezes us. And we stay here, and wait for the alien ship to come pick us up and take us away."

"To the slaughterhouse," said Caldwell dully.

I pushed and struggled, but it was to no avail. I was efficiently straitjacketed. Above me, the big diamond stared coldly out, its radiant brilliance seeming to mock us.

Caldwell and Strauss had been trapped the same way I had—by the beckoning diamond. I wondered how many more Sharane would catch, would draw across space to this strange planet. And I wondered why? Who was this strange woman, what power did she have, why was she doing what she

did? What motivated her?

I didn't know. And it didn't look like I was ever going to find out.

All I knew was I was caught, and there didn't seem to be any way out. But I wasn't going to give up. I could still keep on hoping.

We lay there for hours, talking occasionally, more often remaining silent, staring up at the cloudless sky. I could see how the days would roll by, in empty, mindless waiting, until the mysterious ship returned for its next load of Earthmen.

By dint of much eyeball-rolling, I was able to make out what my two companions looked like. Strauss was balding, sandy-haired, middle aged, Caldwell much younger, dynamic-looking.

There wasn't much we could say, and after a while conversation ceased entirely. We were so placed that I could see the giant diamond clearly, and I started to pass the time by staring at its peak, wondering how many carats the thing could weigh. Millions, no doubt.

Then I began searching the sky, waiting for the ship to come, the ship that would carry us off to our unknown next destination. After a while longer I grew tired, and closed my eyes. I slept, uneasily, and no doubt I would have been tossing and turning if only I could move at all.

I was awakened by the sound of Caldwell's deep, sharp voice exclaiming, "Look! Here comes a new one!"

Then Strauss commented, "And it's a girl!"

I struggled to get my eyes open and keep them that way, and swiveled them around, searching for the newcomer. And then I saw her.

She was just emerging from the edge of the jungle. I saw her plainly, clad in sweater and tight-clinging khaki trousers; she had evidently had a rough time of it in the jungle, because her sweater was torn and shredded and her hair was wildly disheveled. But she kept moving onward, her eyes wide in amazement at the sight of the diamond.

She was Peg.

I watched her almost dazedly as she made her way across the clearing. I knew she couldn't see me yet, but I could see her. It was Peg, all right. How, why she had come, I could only conjecture, But she was here, madly, unbelievably, and I was glad to see her.

"Where'd she come from?" Caldwell asked.

"I thought only men came through," said Strauss. "Maybe she's an accomplice of Sharane."

"No," I said. "I know her."

I tried to call to her, to attract her attention in some way. I didn't know where Sharane was.

"Peg!" I called. My voice was a hoarse croak, barely more than a whisper. I tried again. "Peg! Peg!"

The third time she heard me. I saw her mouth drop open as she turned slowly and saw us spread out on the ground, and then she started running joyfully toward us.

"Les! Oh, Les!" she called, from a hundred yards away. Her voice came across clearly, and at the moment it seemed like the most wonderful sound I had ever heard.

I watched her as she ran, drinking in the sight of her—the smooth stride, the long, powerful legs, the bobbing red hair that fluttered up and down as she ran. And a hot burst of shame flooded my face as I remembered the kiss—Sharane's kiss.

Peg would forgive me, though. I knew she would.

She kept running, running toward us—and then, she stopped and recoiled back, as if she had struck a glass wall.

I saw her move back a few paces and rub her nose as if she had bruised it. Then she stepped

forward again, and, in perplexity, extended a hand in front of her. It stopped short at the same barrier.

She began to edge around in a wary semicircle, feeling in front of her, and everywhere it was the same. An invisible barrier, blocking us off from her. She wouldn't be able to reach us. Whoever had snared us really knew his business.

Tears of frustration came to her eyes, but she wiped them away and continued to search for some break in the barrier, while I shouted words of encouragement to her. It was a miracle that Peg was here at all, Peg whom I thought I'd never see again, and I wanted desperately to be holding her tight.

She completed the circle around us, without finding any way in. I saw her kick the barrier viciously, saw her foot stop in mid-air as the invisible field rebuffed the blow.

And then I saw Sharane come up behind her.

"Watch it!" I yelled, but there was no need of the warning. Peg turned, and the two women faced each other uneasily.

I felt torn apart when I saw the two of them together. Peg was a wonderful girl, wonderful to look at, wonderful to be with—but Sharane! Sharane was something different, something unearthly, something irresistible. No wonder she had trapped sixty-seven men so far. Sixty-seven, plus Peg—if Peg had been trapped.

The two women moved closer to each other, and then, incredibly, I heard Sharane say, in the same throaty, erotic voice she had used on me and on everyone else who had come through the crystal gateway, "I've been waiting for you."

Peg's sarcastic answer rang out sharp and clear. "I'll bet you have," she snapped.

"It has been so long since I called, and you did not come," Sharane said caressingly.

My eyes popped. Was Sharane trying to make love to Peg? What kind of thing was Sharane, anyway?

"Let me through that barrier," Peg demanded.

Sharane made no answer, but merely moved closer. "My name is Sharane," she said. "I have been waiting for you."

Word for word, the same routine she'd given me! Only how did she expect it to work on Peg?

It didn't. Sharane moved even closer, reached out her arms, started to embrace Peg—

And Peg knocked her sprawling with an open-fisted blow.

Sharane went reeling back on the ground, but picked herself up with no apparent bruises, and returned to her strange task. She moved back to Peg, turning on all her siren charms.

It was incredible, unbelievable. But Peg wasn't to be tempted as easily as a mere man would be. As Sharane approached, Peg whipped out at her with another blow, and followed with a neat fist to the dark-haired woman's stomach.

Sharane backed up, and apparently caught on that she wasn't getting the usual reaction from Peg. She charged in a mad flurry, failed to get much of a handhold on Peg's short-cut hair, and launched out in an attack of wild violence.

Peg parried most of the punches, but a stray fingernail got through the defense and raked down her cheek, leaving a long, bloody line, and one of Sharane's frantic blows landed in her mid-section, throwing her back gasping for breath.

I heard my own voice shouting encouragement, roaring as if I were at a prizefight. And, from around me, I heard the other men cheering Peg on too.

I had never seen two women fight before. It was quite a sight.

Sharane kept the upper hand for a few moments, forcing Peg back, and on the areas of flesh exposed where Peg's sweater had been torn in the jungle, I saw livid bruises starting to appear.

Then Peg regained the initiative, and with an outburst of kicks, punches, and slaps she drove Sharane back. Peg used every tactic in the book, and some that weren't—such as reaching out, seizing Sharane's lovely blue-black hair, and yanking.

Suddenly I saw Sharane break away out of a clinch and dash back, toward us, through the barrier. Peg followed on her heels, just a step behind.

Sharane must have dissolved the barrier she'd set up in order to let herself get through, but the maneuver turned out a flop, because Peg came right through with her. Sharane turned, glared angrily at her when she saw the strategy had been negated, and set out in a run—straight for the giant diamond!

"Go get her, Peg!" I shouted, almost breathless myself from the strain of watching the women fight while I myself was unable to move a muscle.

Sharane was climbing the diamond, pulling herself up by grasping the sharp corners of the facets, hauling herself up over that great shining eye. And Peg was right behind her.

I watched as Peg started the ascent, slipping and sliding, cutting her hands on the keen edges. Sharane was at the top, balanced precariously on the uppermost facet. The sun was beating down hard, shooting blinding flashes of light slashing off the diamond into our eyes.

As Peg approached the top, Sharane stooped and pushed her off. She went sliding back down, catching hold half way to the ground. I saw that she had ripped the leg of her slacks open, but she didn't appear to be cut herself. She dangled for a moment and then with dogged determination she climbed her way back to the top. My heart pounded as frantically as if I were taking part in the struggle myself.

Sharane kicked out viciously. I saw Peg start to lose her grip, begin to fall back—and then seize Sharane's flailing foot, and, holding on with an unbreakable grip, begin to haul herself to the top of the diamond!

She reached it at last, and the two of them stood here, rocking shakily back and forth in the narrow area, while the blazing sun burnt down fiercely on them, sending rivers of perspiration coursing down their bare flesh. They were locked in a double grip, shivering from exhaustion, neither one able to gain advantage over the other.

Then I saw Peg's muscles flex, and she began to bend Sharane back, back, until the other woman was almost doubled over. Suddenly Sharane's leg gave way, and she toppled; through some miracle, she landed on her back, still atop the diamond, and Peg pounced down on her. Peg clamped her hands on Sharane's lovely throat, and started to squeeze.

Sharane's arms began to thrash wildly—and then, then, as we watched dumfounded, Sharane began to change! As Peg kept up the relentless pressure, Sharane's shape began to alter; arms became tentacles, skin thickened and became something else, changed color from radiant white to loathsome purple. Where there had been a lovely seductress a moment before lay a ghastly thing.

Peg jumped back, startled at the transformation; Sharane, or the thing that had been Sharane, lashed out with a tentacle, and Peg, still clinging to the other, toppled back and off the diamond, pinwheeling to the ground.

The Sharane-thing lost its balance and dropped off the other side. I saw Peg lying unconscious on the ground, watched in impotent horror as the alien being started to rise—

And suddenly I discovered I was free! My arm moved, my leg! Apparently the alien had needed all its power to fight Peg, and had been unable to spare the concentration needed to maintain our imprisonment.

I was up and running in an instant, feeling strength ebb back into my stiff, cramped muscles. I leaped on the monster before it could rise, felt its strange, dry, alien odor, and then my hands were around its scaly throat. I looked down, searched for some trace of the loveliness that had once tempted me, and could find none. I saw a weird, terrifying face with glinting many-faceted eyes and a twisted, agonized mouth. I kept up the pressure.

I heard the creature's breath gasping out, and then I felt hands on my shoulders—Peg's, on one shoulder, and a man's hand, on the other.

I looked up and saw Strauss' pudgy face. "Don't kill the thing," he said. "Get up, and let's find out what's been going on."

"No," I said. But they pulled me off.

I stood up, and watched the alien writhing on the ground, struggling to recover its breath. A surge of hatred ran through me as I saw the strange thing down there.

"What are you?" I demanded. "Where are we?"

"Give me some time," it said, barely able to speak—but I could still detect in its voice the same underlying hypnotic tone that Sharane's voice had had. It was the only point the thing had in common with the girl. "Let me recover. I mean no further harm."

"I don't trust it," I said uneasily.

"Why not wait?" asked Strauss. "It can't make any trouble for us now—obviously there has to be some kind of emotional surrender or it can't take control of us. That must be how the girl was able to defeat it."

I nodded. "That sounds reasonable." I stared coldly down at the battered, suffering alien. "All right. Let's let it catch its breath, and we'll find out what's what."

I was glad, now, that they had pulled me off. Carried away the way I was, I would undoubtedly have throttled the creature—and the Chief would undoubtedly have throttled me for it when I got back—if I got back. For one thing, with the creature alive there was a chance we might find out what this was all about. For another, with the creature dead we might have no way of getting back to Earth.

So I stood back, letting the anger seep out of me, and turned to Peg.

She had come off on top in the fight, but she was pretty well battered. One of her lovely blue eyes had an even lovelier shiner, and she was thoroughly scratched and bruised. Her sweater was just about ripped clean off her, and she was holding the tatters together self-consciously.

"How did you get here?" I asked.

She smiled, and through all the blood and bruises it still looked wonderful.

"I went to the Chief, after you—disappeared."

"I wish you hadn't," I said. "I didn't want him to know I was letting you in on anything."

"He doesn't know. All I did was ask him to tell me what kind of job you had been sent out on. After I told him what had happened to you, he explained."

"And then?"

"Then I requested that the next unused diamond that was found be turned over to me. He didn't want to, but finally he agreed to it."

I looked at the slowly twisting creature lying on the ground, and back to Peg. "So?"

"So another diamond materialized that night, and the Chief called me. I came and picked it up, and when I was alone I looked at it. There was that girl in it, calling to me." She made a face. "It was disgusting."

"And then you were drawn in?" I asked, remembering the way Sharane had trapped me.

"Of course not, silly. I didn't respond to that posturing girl at all, and so I couldn't be caught. But I voluntarily came through. I willed myself to be drawn in, and I was. I landed up in that jungle, and wandered out here when I saw the light of the diamond."

I nodded. "And then Sharane came after you with her song and dance. Since Sharane was actually an alien with no real idea of the difference between the human sexes, she—it—thought her act would work on you too. But it didn't."

I walked over to where the alien was, and Peg and the six freed captives followed me. Sharane—the Sharane-thing—was sitting up.

"Hurry," it said. "We must talk before the Llanar ship arrives, or there is great danger."

"Who are the Llanar?" I asked, surprised.

"My captors," said the alien. Its weird face was twisted into an expression of cosmic sadness.

"What do you mean, your captors?"

"The Llanar," Sharane said, "are a great race from out there." She gestured at the sky. "They conquered my people, and they wish to enslave yours through us. They have placed me here, against my

will, and shown me how to disguise myself as a human. All who were drawn by the diamond were powerless against me—except—"

She pointed to Peg.

I smiled. "The only thing as hard as a diamond is another diamond. The only thing that could resist Sharane's womanly wiles would be another woman. Those diamonds were set up to trap men—and when a woman came through, Sharane here didn't know what to do with her. She had never experienced a human woman."

"I have now," the alien said weakly. "I hope to never again."

"How does this trap work?" Caldwell asked.

"The great diamond here is the focus," Sharane said. "The smaller ones serve as transmitting poles, at the other end of the channel. We send them to Earth, and when men find them they are drawn in. I then tempt them to surrender themselves—and as soon as they do, I freeze them." The alien broke into the alien equivalent of a sob. "Then the Llanar come, and take them away. They make them slaves, on their home worlds."

The alien sat up, and rubbed itself. "But you have won your freedom from me," it said. "You may return to your planet."

"And you?"

"I must sit here," the alien said. "I must continue to prey on Earth, or the Llanar will kill me."

"We'll close that damnable gateway, don't worry," muttered Caldwell, but I ignored him.

Suddenly all my hatred for Sharane had vanished. I saw the strange thing before us as a person, not a thing—a suffering, sensitive person. An alien, true, but very human under the to-me-grotesque exterior. In just those few minutes I learned a lesson: you don't have to have arms and legs and two blue eyes to be a human being.

I saw the whole picture now. Sharane's people were under the domination of still another alien race from deep in the galaxy—the dread Llanar. And the Llanar were forcing Sharane to operate this lonely trap on the edge of the universe, waiting like a spider to net the unfortunates who happened to find one of the treacherous diamonds she scattered.

"You can send us back to Earth?" I asked.

"Yes," Sharane said. "But—"

Then she looked upward, and I saw the sky darken. Coming down, straight above us, was a gleaming golden-hulled spaceship!

Suddenly Sharane came to life. "The Llanar!" she cried. "Run into the jungle—hide, or they'll carry you off! I'll stay out here and get rid of them."

Her form melted and coalesced weirdly, and once again I saw before me the woman-shape. She pointed toward the jungle, and I didn't waste any time arguing. I seized Peg's hand and we broke into a frantic trot, heading for the woods.

We got there breathless, and all six of the freed men came racing in right behind us. We squatted there, silently, watching the Llanar ship descend.

It came down in slow, graceful spirals, hovered overhead, finally settled to the ground—and the Llanar came out.

I won't try to describe them. They were huge, thick-bodied, and I still shudder when I think of what they looked like. They were hideous, hateful, fearsome creatures. I imagined what a whole world of them would be like.

Three of them emerged from the ship, came out, walked up to Sharane. They stood around her, dwarfing her lovely body among them.

They talked for a long while; I heard the low, booming rumble of their voices come crackling over the ground to us. After an extensive discussion, they turned and left. Sharane stood alone.

I watched, quivering with revulsion, as they marched slowly back to their ship, got in, and a moment later a fiery jet-blast carried them aloft. We remained in the forest for a moment or two longer, waiting until the Llanar ship was completely out of sight. Then we dashed out.

Sharane was waiting for us at the base of the great diamond.

"They wanted to know where the new batch of captives was," she said. Her breasts were heaving in obvious terror, and it was hard for me to remember, as I looked at her, that minutes before she had been a hideous alien being writhing on the ground. "I told them none had come through since their last pickup."

"What did they say?"

"They were very angry that no new slaves were on hand. But I promised to have some soon, and they left."

I looked at Peg in gratitude. "If it weren't for you, I'd be on my way in that ship," I said. "And all these other people too."

"It's lucky I came through when I did, darling."

"It certainly is, Miss," said one of the men. "We owe our lives to you."

I turned to Sharane. "Can you send us back?"

"It is simple." She reached up, pulled eight diamonds—small ones—from nowhere, and handed one to each of us. "Concentrate," she said.

One by one, the men blinked out and vanished, until only Caldwell and Peg and myself were left. Caldwell looked at me.

"You know," he said, "if you destroy that big diamond, I think it'll close this hellish gateway forever. No one else on Earth will be trapped the way we were."

"I know," I said. "But I don't intend to do it."

His eyes blazed angrily. "Why not? Do you want the Llanar to carry off everyone? For all you know, you'd be a slave on some stinking planet now if your girl hadn't shown up."

"I know," I said again. I turned to Sharane. "But I'm not going to close the gateway."

"They would kill me if you did," Sharane said.

"That's not the reason."

"What is, dear?" Peg asked.

"I'm leaving the gateway open so we can come back through. Someday we'll return, when we're ready—more of us, Sharane. And our people and your people together will end the Llanar tyranny." I thought of those gigantic creatures again, and shivered.

"Do you mean that?" Sharane asked.

"I mean it," I said firmly. "As soon as I get back to my world, to the Bureau, I'll start getting things rolling for the counterattack."

I smiled. This job was over; I had solved the mystery of where the sixty-six had gone. But a new job was beginning.

"I will be waiting for you," Sharane said. "But in the meantime—I must stay here, preying on all who come through. The Llanar will only kill me and replace me with another I don't." There was a note of genuine regret in the alien's voice.

"Go through," I said bluntly to Caldwell. He frowned in concentration and vanished, leaving just Peg and myself facing Sharane. The great diamond formed a backdrop for the scene.

"I am glad you defeated me," Sharane told Peg. "It may mean the beginning of a long friendship between our peoples."

"Many friendships begin after a deadly battle," I said. I turned to Peg. "Let's go through," I said.

"All right. Goodbye, Sharane."

"Farewell." The alien turned and walked away, slowly, toward the jungle.

We watched her go, standing there, watching that lovely false woman-form glide smoothly away. I was thinking, you never can tell. The normal thing would be to hate, to destroy the horrid alien thing that lurks in wait for unsuspecting Earthmen—but we couldn't hate Sharane. She was a tool, serving powerful masters. She was not evil in herself.

The Llanar were powerful, all right—but not so powerful that they couldn't be beaten. I took a last look at the gleaming diamond, and at Sharane's retreating form—the lonely, pitiful guardian of the crystal gate.

Then she was at the very edge of the jungle, and waving to us. We waved back. Grasping our diamonds firmly and holding hands, Peg and I concentrated on returning to Earth.

The giant diamond slowly faded into the greyness that swept over us, as did Sharane. We were on our way back to Earth at last.

But I knew I'd be seeing her again, someday. We'd be coming back through the gateway. We'll come back, all right.

And when we do, the Llanar will tremble.

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