

PLANET

stories



SUMMER
1947

20c



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WALTON
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GARSON

VASSALS *of the* LODGE-STAR

SNATCHED FROM SPACE AND TIME
TO SERVE A CRYSTAL FLAME!

Novel by **GARDNER F. FOX**

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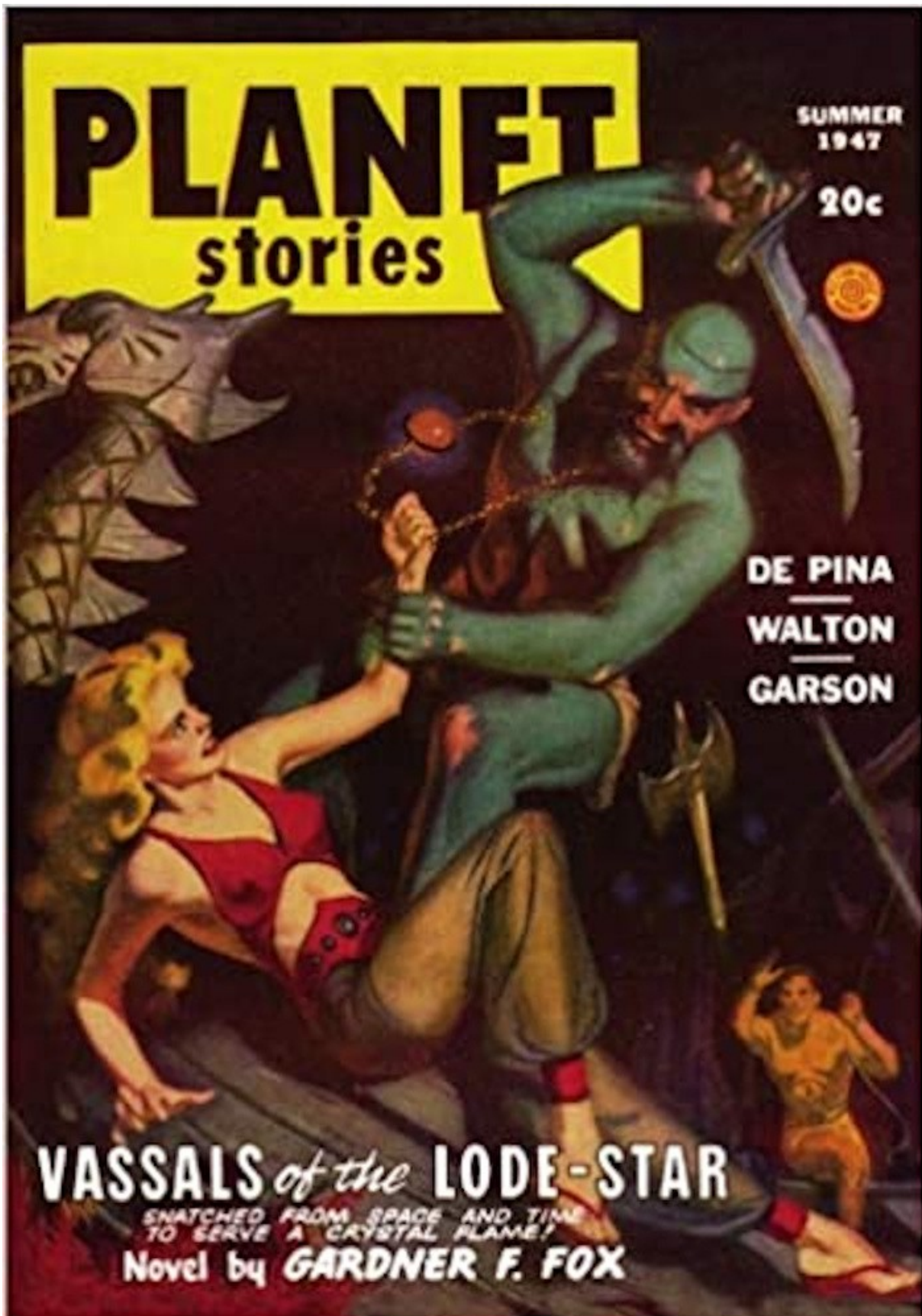


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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MARTIAN
CIRCE ***

The Martian Circle

By RAYMOND F. JONES

**Who was this sweet-voiced singer weaving a
spell of dreams and drugs that drove men mad
and threatened to smash the System? SBI
Captain Roal Hartford dared the death of the
Thousand Minds to learn her dreadful secret!**

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That's what they called her, Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars, and she was singing when Roal Hartford stepped into the Starhouse.

The setting was the same—the swirling blue smoke from scores of zhema cigarettes, the odor of stale alcohol and penetrating Valcoso. The setting was the same as in a thousand other taverns hovering in the backwash of man's advancing conquest of the planets. Only Alayna made this Martian tavern any different from the rest.

The silence while she sang was tribute. The brawling and the laughter and the loud curses stopped for no other tavern singer but Alayna.

As Roal Hartford stood motionless in the doorway, listening, he knew why they called her the Queen of the Silver Stars. She was a queen to these men. Those who listened were men who had no home, and she sang of home to them. She sang of green fields and blue skies and of lovers and of children. Her voice was so low and deep that it was like a husky sob in her throat and they had to strain to hear.

Roal glanced at a table where bearded, drunken space miners listened to the dream of which she sang. One of them with a livid burn scar across his face turned away from his companions and ran a finger over his eye.

For an instant Roal himself was lost in that dream. He thought of far Earth, which he had not seen for so long. The conquest of space seemed suddenly futile. It was nothing but a vain waste of lives and energy and brought no one happiness. Yet why should a man live except for happiness? Someone like Alayna could be happiness for him, he thought. The Queen of the Silver Stars could be happiness.

He dragged his mind abruptly out of the dream world of Alayna's song. He was Captain Roal Hartford of the Solar Bureau of Investigation. His world was the world of dope peddlers, thieves, and murderers that infested the starways. He was a little cog in a great machine and he knew that he had to keep going to keep the machine from breaking down. It wouldn't do for him to wonder why the machine should be kept running at all.

Alayna's song ended, but the silence hung on for an instant. Then slowly the spacemen and gamblers turned back to one another, avoiding each others' eyes until they were sure their own were dry.

Roal Hartford moved away from the doorway and picked his way among the tables. He was not here in the guise of Captain Roal Hartford of the SBI. His matted beard and space-worn garb was like that of the dozen meteor miners scattered through the tavern room. Miners who kept going day after day because of the yarns of occasional fabulous treasure found floating on the spaceways. But no one of them had ever seen such treasure—they had only heard of it, and kept going in the hopes of some day making a strike that would in turn create new fables of vast treasure.

Roal moved with the shambling gait of one worn and haggard by months among the meteors. When he sat down at a table he rested his head on his hands a moment until one of the shy little Martian girls came to take his order.

The Martians were like withered flowers. The little creature beside him must not be more than twenty of her planet's years, Roal thought, but her skin was like old and dried leather. The bones could be seen through the flesh almost. Only her eyes were bright and they peered at Roal with a staring glance that gave him uneasiness. All the Martians were that way. He thought it was as if he were a deadly enemy and they looked at him as if they were sure of eventual victory over him.

He shrugged the thought away. In the hundred years of Terrestrial association the Martians had not been guilty of a single overt act. At first, of course, there had been conflict, but a century of peace stood to assure continued amicable relations.

"Valcoso," Roal ordered.

Silently, the Martian moved away and Roal turned his eyes to the surroundings in the room. While he had pretended to be resting he had kept his glance on Alayna. It seemed incredible that after a year on the starways he should suddenly find her like this. He had listened to a thousand tales of

spacemen who had sworn to having visited the phantom tavern, Starhouse, of hearing the song of Alayna, who could shake the stoutest of spacemen with the tenderness of her songs in that husky, almost inaudible voice.

He had thought of a thousand things that she might be, but he had never pictured her like this. He had even begun to doubt the reality of her existence. Now he had found her he didn't know what he was going to do.

She was slender and sweet, and she could not possibly be the mistress of death and insanity that was sweeping through the planets and outposts. Surely she could not be the lure that enticed men into the gripping tentacles of the drug, *harmeena*.

But every clue he had picked up bore a thread that linked with the Queen of the Silver Stars. Miners with shattered minds had spoken in their last hours of Alayna, and in their croaking voices had tried to sing her songs before they died. Because of her they died with smiles upon their lips.

But, because of her, many of them died.

The SBI had a hundred agents scattered in every part of the System. No one took seriously the miners' and spacemen's yarns of a phantom tavern where a golden-haired girl sang songs that lured them into a dream world from which they could never return.

No one, that is, except Roal Hartford. He knew that somewhere in the tales repeated by a thousand dying throats there must be a thread of truth, regardless of how fantastic it might be. Somewhere there must exist the phantom tavern, Starhouse, though one spaceman told of visiting it in Heliopolis and another spoke of its existence in the swamp city, Tarma, while still others swore that it was in Vegrath across the planet from Heliopolis.

Roal had placed investigators at every point where Starhouse had been reported, but nothing had ever come of it.

Nothing—until he had walked along the night streets of Heliopolis and suddenly seen Starhouse there where it seemed to him that it had always

been.

And the moment that he had entered and heard the first note of Alayna's song he knew he had found the Queen of the Silver Stars.

Her beauty must have been exquisite and flawless, once, Roal thought. It was still the nearest thing to perfection that most men would ever see. But there were traces of strained lines, and hollows where her cheeks should have been more rounded. There was something, too, in her eyes that Roal could not bring himself to look upon for long as she suddenly caught his gaze and stared back at him.

He turned his eyes away. And, when he looked again, he swore. It seemed he had looked away only for an instant, scarcely long enough for her to have crossed to the nearest wall, yet she was gone. And the space miner she had been talking to had also vanished.

Without appearing to be concerned, Roal glanced about, searching the walls and side passages where she might have gone. From upstairs there came sounds from the gambling rooms. Elsewhere in the building were other rooms of doubtful uses. Passageways opened from the main tavern room to these other chambers, and there was no telling which way Alayna had gone.

Then abruptly she returned—alone. Roal saw her standing in a doorway leading from a hall opposite him. And she was going to come to him. The thought that he was at last to meet the mysterious Queen of the Silver Stars filled Roal with mixed feelings. Her eyes were upon him, speculating, weighing, he felt, his susceptibility to her charms that would make him her next victim.

As she came slowly towards him the transparent folds of the garments that thinly veiled her floated like a nimbus of light about her figure. And the eyes of the men in the room were upon her. She sat down beside Roal.

"You're a stranger here." Her low, husky voice made it a statement, rather than a question.

"The dream of every spaceman is to visit Starhouse and hear Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars, at least once before he dies."

"You're far from dead, miner."

"My good fortune in coming here so soon."

"Starhouse is a place of rest and dreams for weary spacemen. They all find their way here sooner or later."

"I have heard stories—from those who have found dreams here," Roal said cautiously.

"Yes—you would share the dreams of Starhouse?" Alayna spoke with even more caution. Roal felt her eyes trying to weigh and evaluate him in terms of the worn, haggard spacemen who were the regular habitues of Starhouse.

"I would like to know the dreams of Starhouse," said Roal.

"Come with me."

Heart beating more rapidly, Roal downed the last of the Valcoso and rose to follow Alayna. He did not miss the throbbing pulse that beat in the white column of her throat, nor did he miss the faint sweep of revulsion that crossed her face for an instant as she rose and felt the scores of eyes staring at her—through her filmy garments.

Seizing upon this faintly-revealed trait, Roal suddenly drew his heavy cloak from his own shoulders and laid it upon her. Instinctively, she grasped its protection and drew the collar tight about her throat. Then, realizing her betrayal of her role, she hurled the cloak to the floor and stamped upon it.

"Your insolence will find you trouble, miner!"

Silently, Roal reached down and picked up the cloak while guffaws rained upon him from nearby tables. But he had seen enough—enough to know that Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars, was putting on an act that was repulsive to her own instincts. Some compulsion was forcing her to remain in the stinking, smoke-filled tavern, exposing her loveliness to the lewd stares of starmen nightly.

She held her golden head high as Roal followed her past the tables into one of the halls leading out of the tavern room, but as they passed out of sight of the tables, her head inclined and her shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly.

"Poor little Alayna—" Roal whispered.

She whirled on him, her azure eyes ablaze, but whatever hot words trembled on her lips were not spoken. Nor did her hand that stretched back

come up to sting his cheek.

While her moment of rage persisted, Roal memorized every line of tension in her lovely face. Beneath her beauty and the husky tenderness of her voice, strong storms of conflicting motives surged with force enough to tear her slim body.

But the moment passed and Alayna subdued the storm, not daring to speak. She whirled her back upon Roal and continued to lead the way down the hall.

The passage was dimly lit and thickly carpeted. The sounds of the distant tavern room were deadened and only silence prevailed. Doors, silent and closed, lined the hall. Roal wondered what lay behind them. Abruptly, Alayna stopped and opened one and stood aside to allow Roal to enter.

"The place of dreams, miner. Pleasant dream to you." From a cupboard against one wall she took a bottle of wine and poured a glassful. Then two glistening white spheres like pearls were taken from a drawer and dropped into the wine. Instantly, a white smoke rose from the glass of wine and began to fill the room.

Alayna stared at it for a moment, then broke. "Miner, quickly! Don't inhale! Come with me, quickly." She was sobbing unrestrainedly now. She flung open the door to plunge into the hall. But she didn't leave the room.

In the doorway stood the biggest man that Roal thought he had ever seen. Not fat—*big*.

His bare biceps revealed by a sleeveless blouse were like huge brown logs. His great chest was like a slowly swelling drum of polished leather. Alayna's golden head collided with it as she darted outward.

The man made no move nor uttered any word. He merely remained in the doorway, arms akimbo. His hairless, polished skull was immobile as a brown boulder. Only the pin-point lights of his eyes betrayed life and fury.

Alayna gave a short gasp that ended in a sob of torment. Then she ducked under one of those great arms and left the room. Only then did the man

move. He stepped backward and slammed the door before Roal's astonished senses could lead him to make a motion.

He tried the door uselessly.

During all that long interval of Alayna's outburst he had held his breath against the rising smoke from the wine glass. Now he plunged down on the soft couch in the center of the room. Gladly, he noticed that the artificial lights in the room were dimming. From his jacket he extracted a brown capsule and broke it between his teeth, covering his act so that anyone spying upon him might not detect the capsule. Then, as his vision grew spotty from lack of oxygen, he allowed himself to breathe cautiously.

The secret antidote against the effects of *harmeena* had never been tried before.

It had been prepared by chemists of the SBI from analysis of the bodies of dead miners who were known to be addicts. Every agent of the SBI carried the antidote. None had ever had the opportunity to try it before. Roal prayed that it might work.

The lights had dimmed completely now. But the gas from the dissolving pellets in the wine glass was filling the room with luminescence. Its ghostly glow swirled and twisted like crazed demons and poured into every corner and crevice of the room.

Upon this ghostly screen Roal knew that the wild dreams and fantastic visions induced in his brain by the drug should be projected. He waited in tense anxiety, hoping they would not come, hoping that the antidote the SBI chemists had devised was correct.

The visions did not come. That screen of luminous gas remained blank. But it spun and swirled about him as if it were a living thing and realized the defeat he had administered to it.

It seemed to spin tentacles that leaped out and beat upon him, twisting and dragging at him as if to beat down his last resistance. A wild impulse to laugh back at the ghost demons possessed Roal. He almost gave way to it.

Then sweat broke out upon his brow. Perhaps *this* was evidence in itself that the drug was prevailing against his senses in spite of the antidote.

The ghost demons fighting against his senses were only phantoms of unreality, but he had to fight back their reaching fingers. He closed his eyes against them and told himself that they weren't there. But they were. They took on form and shape and horrid faces. Laughter rang in his ears until he couldn't stand the sound of it. He knew that he had work to do. He must make an examination of the place, find escape from this room somehow and search through the halls and rooms of Starhouse to find out its forbidden mysteries.

He rose from the couch and all the silver demons in the room pounced upon him, beating his skull with tenuous lashes. He made his way to the cupboard despite their onslaught and took out one more of the *harmeena* spheres and dropped it into the secret pocket in the lining of his jacket.

But more than this, he could not do. The devils beat him back to the couch and pounded his head with psychotic hammers until his senses slowly waned and died.

II

Blazing hot sun out of a Martian noon sky fell upon Roal Hartford when consciousness returned. He was lying face down upon the hot sand and it was in his mouth and eyes and stung his nostrils. It seemed as if he had been groveling in the sand, trying to burrow into it in his unconsciousness.

He struggled up, and the memory of those beating, silvery demons haunted him in the sunlight. But they were not to be seen now. Neither was anything else of the phantom tavern, Starhouse. Not that nor even Heliopolis itself.

He was alone in the barren desert and arid sand dunes stretched as far as he could see. Yet on the horizon was the faint suggestion of the towers that might be Heliopolis beyond the sands. But he knew it was no use trying to find his way there by walking. The mirages of Mars are treacherous beyond reason.

Roal got to his feet and felt at his waist for the tiny SBI transmitter that could place him in communication with the SBI office in Heliopolis. The

communication unit seemed not to have been disturbed by those who had dumped him in the desert, probably to die.

On the tiny instrument he dialed the call of Commander Calvin, head of the department on Mars. In a moment, answer came.

"Commander Calvin? This is Hartford. I've been taken for a ride."

There was a moment of violent sputtering on the other end of the circuit, then a trace of clarity came into the speech. "You dunderheaded idiot! How did you let yourself get into that kind of a jam?"

"I'll report if you will send out a pickup ship."

"I don't know if there's one in port or not. All we do is pick up you infants who get lost and can't find your way home. Where are you?"

"Out in the desert somewhere. I'll keep a carrier on for a direction finder if you can make it in an hour or so."

"Well, just between the two of us I hope your battery runs down and we can't find you."

Calvin cut off amid Roal's grin. The Commander would be burning up the channels right now ordering a plane to pick him up as quickly as possible, Roal knew.

There was nothing to do but wait, leaving the transmitter on to guide the ship. It didn't matter whether its power lasted or not. Once they got a bearing on him, they could find him as long as he stayed right there.

The sun was almost unendurable with his lack of water. He scooped out a deep spot in the sand until he came to a layer still cool from the night's radiation. He sat in the trench and covered himself up to his neck, then covered his head with his cloak. In relative comfort he could wait a considerable time, even if one of the treacherous sand storms should come up.

He let his mind drift back to the events of the previous night. The antidote of the SBI chemists had been only partially successful, he knew now. There had been no such fanciful, absorbing visions of peace and loveliness as he had heard described by others, but the effects he had seen were enough for

him. The demon attacks had been the natural conflict between the drug and the antidote.

The strange mystery of the phantom tavern and its mysterious Queen of the Silver Stars was no nearer solution than before, however. He knew only that they did exist and that was something.

But who was the fabled Alayna? Why was she playing the role of temptress in that ghastly place against her will? For Roal was certain that if she was not there against her will she was at least held by some force that overpowered her own real desires.

The Starhouse was a den of evil and vice, lust and violent death. But Alayna? Roal shook his head and wondered if he had been merely overcome by the same illusions that seized all who went to the Starhouse. Was Alayna herself only a part of the dream of peace and happiness that Starhouse doled out with the deadly drug *harmeena*? Or was her loveliness and hidden tenderness something real?

Roal remembered the slight, almost hidden gesture of loathing she had made when she rose before the hungry eyes of the patrons of Starhouse, the instinctive shrinking beneath his cloak when he had placed it about her. He remembered the throaty song of hers in which she painted dreams of green Earth and lovers under blue skies.

That dream was not part of her act. That dream was Alayna. It was the only real thing in the whole ugly fabric of Starhouse. He was going to gamble on that.

A sudden rustling in the sand brought his eyes darting about. It was too early for the patrol ship. Then he saw the source of the sound. Two brownish, desiccated Martians stood not ten feet away, staring down at him. They had seen him, so there was no reason for obeying the instinct to keep silent.

"Have you water?" he called in their native tongue.

"We have water, Earthman. We will help you. Come to the burrow of Toomar."

"I must wait here for my ship. Can you bring me water?"

"Our burrow is close. It is cool and we have much water."

In his mind Roal had been trying to cautiously avoid the subject of water. Now that he had allowed it in the forefront of his consciousness a parching thirst burned within him. He had to have drink, and soon.

He scrambled out of the hole and looked in the direction of the pointing finger of Toomar, the friendly Martian.

"Only a quarter of a mile," he estimated. "They can't miss me if I move that far. Let's go."

Taciturn, after the manner of their kind, the Martians made no conversation on the way. Their burrow was invisible on the surface to the untrained eye, but Roal's experienced vision detected its presence as they approached. A sand colored slab moved aside to offer them entrance.

Descending into the cool depths beneath the sand, Roal found himself in the near darkness which the Martians loved. This seemed to be an unusually large family and the chamber into which he came was crowded with the withered, shrunken creatures who made no comment as Toomar introduced him.

The cool of the burrow felt wonderful after the hours in the blistering sun, but after his drink Roal arose. "I've got to get to the surface. My plane might miss me if I remain. Good years to you for your services."

"Please remain," the guide said. "We have food."

Roal gagged at the thought of partaking of the repulsive soup of desert lizards which was the Martians' mainstay.

"It has not been long since I have eaten," he said. "Many thanks for the water. I must wait for my ship."

They crowded about him. Their foul smelling bodies pressed close. They seemed not to have heard what he said. Their fingers touched his arms and seemed to fumble at his clothing. Worried by the alien behavior, he glanced around the group. Their dried-prune faces told him nothing.

Then, abruptly, Toomar spoke, "Of course. We would welcome you to our hospitality. But you must go to your ship. Go with our blessings. You have graced our burrow."

The crowding Martians melted away and allowed him access to the ladder leading to the surface. He scurried out of the stinking burrow, glad to breathe again the clear, light air of the desert. But a sudden sound as he emerged from the shaft made him whirl his head about.

A low flying patrol plane was vanishing rapidly northward.

Roal switched on the controls of the transmitter which he had cut off in the burrow. "SBI patrol. Hartford calling. Directly behind you."

"Look, Bud. What's the idea playing hide and seek in that hole?"

Roal grinned into the mike. "Hi, Shorty. Lucky you didn't have to come dig me out of it. Calvin might have been real mad."

"Maybe you think he isn't anyway. He was sore enough when you called, but right after that something else stirred his dander and he's really off on a tear. You'd better have a good story for him."

"Maybe you think I haven't," Roal murmured.

Shorty Mullins, the SBI patrol pilot, landed his ship a moment later, flinging a sand cloud into the sky with his customary dramatic handling of the ship.

The ship required only a few minutes to make the trip to Heliopolis. Roal had been barely out of sight of it.

As yet, no explanation of his presence in the desert had occurred to him, except that he had been carried out there to die. But if that were the case, he wondered why he had not been killed in the Starhouse. Did it mean that the leaders back of the dope ring knew his identity and were afraid to murder an SBI man? He wasn't sure. And he couldn't think straight on the problem for the golden voice and the golden hair of Alayna pervaded his senses. He felt infinitely saddened by her connection with this ring of vice and murder.

The office of the SBI in Heliopolis was in the highest shimmering spire that looked down upon the chromium city. Every time Roal looked down upon

the splendor of the city from that high tower it reminded him of a fruit rotten at the core.

For Heliopolis was rotten. Rank vice and corruption filled its streets. And the Starhouse was the most vicious of all. But it would not remain long, now that its location was known. The only thing that puzzled Roal was that it had not been noticed before in Heliopolis. He thought every dive on seven planets was listed in the files of the SBI, but the Starhouse had evaded listing until now.

Landing on the rooftop, he went quickly to Commander Calvin's office. Shorty Mullins had made no mistake about Calvin's state of rage.

He greeted Roal. "Another of my double-barreled idiots back safely in the fold. I wonder why some of you can't stay permanently lost. Then maybe I could get me a good crew."

Roal knew he'd have to let the Commander roll on until his momentum was worn down.

"Imbeciles! Children losing their play-things. By all the stars and little planets it would seem that the SBI would attract the services of at least one pair of brains."

"Beside your own, of course," Roal said.

"Of course," Calvin snapped. "What are you here for? Put it in a written report. I haven't time to listen to your mouthings. Ignorant, stupid trash that call themselves operators—can't hang onto anything—"

"Something lost?" Roal inquired mildly.

"Oh, no! Nothing's lost—nothing at all. Just that that idiot Markham let his antidote capsule be stolen and he swears he doesn't know where it could have been pinched. Oh, why aren't there brains—??" Commander Calvin finished weakly.

"Perhaps this theft explains a part of the events in connection with my own troubles," Roal said.

"Put your troubles in a report and file them!"

"Perhaps you'd be interested to know that they started in the Starhouse, that I've sat at a table with the Queen of the Silver Stars."

Calvin's mouth dropped open and then clamped tightly. "So they got even you," he muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"Your rational mind is of course aware, my boy, that the Starhouse and the Queen are only myths of drugged minds. They do not exist in reality."

"The Starhouse is right here in Heliopolis, on Transite Street, the 800 Block."

"Where is your antidote?" Calvin roared suddenly.

"I ate it."

"You what?"

"I told you I was in the Starhouse. I found the drug, *harmeena*, and the manner in which it is used. I tried the antidote against it. It was only partially successful."

"Partially—a generous term."

"I have something else, too. The first sample of *harmeena* to fall into the hands of the SBI."

Calvin's eyes lighted in spite of himself. "If you're telling the truth—"

Roal fumbled in the secret pocket where he had hidden the sphere. His fingers roamed up and down. The pellet was not there.

In sudden anxiety he whipped out a knife and methodically ripped the coat to shreds. The *harmeena* was gone.

His mind went back over the intervening hours. He had felt the sphere when he had awakened on the desert. He couldn't have lost it in the meantime. Nothing could possibly get out of that secret pocket. Except by—

He sat down weakly as he remembered the Martians. He remembered their crowding in the dark burrow, their strange behavior and their fumbling fingers that touched him.

The withered Martians in the desert had stolen the *harmeena*. Somehow they had known he had it and had been ordered to get it. But how and by whom?

III

"You swear you cannot account for the antidote?" said Commander Calvin. His seriousness had overridden his rage now. "If that gets into the hands of the dope ring and they know we have it, we'll never catch up to them. It's possible that they don't have Markham's."

"I'm serious, Chief," said Roal. "I found the Starhouse last night. I ate the antidote and submitted to a dose of the drug. It finally knocked me out, but I know the antidote was a great help. Why I was dumped in the desert, I don't know. But come with me right now and I'll show you where Starhouse is. Why it should ever have become known as the phantom tavern, I don't know. It's right down on Transite Street."

"You've been a good operator, Roal," said Calvin. "But I can't believe a word you're saying. I know every dive on Transite. Starhouse is not there, but to show you I trust you and want to believe this wild tale I'll go with you right now and see what you have to show me."

They left the chrome and glass tower and descended into the core of Heliopolis, deep into its rotten core that centered on Transite street. Fumes of forbidden drugs drifted out into the streets from behind shuttered doors and windows; loud, drunken laughter and shrill voices spilled out even in midafternoon. Roal knew they must have passed a dozen murderers in their walk from the monorail stop to the 800 block Transite Street.

The dingy street looked just as it had the night before, except that daylight was not so kind to the dives and houses as were the vargon bulbs that lit the street at night.

There was Charley's Cafe, and Minna's Bar. The next was—no, it must be the next one.

Roal halted. Beyond Minna's bar was a battered warehouse, a relic of the days when Transite was a commercial street. The Jinx house was the next dive.

Roal swore softly. "It was right here, last night. I swear it was, Chief—and now—there's nothing but that old warehouse."

"Which has been there for thirty years," said Calvin.

"Yeah, I know it now, but last night it just seemed as if the Starhouse belonged there, that it had been there all along. I don't understand it. The Starhouse was here—it couldn't have been moved since last night. Chief, it *was* last night, wasn't it? Didn't I report in yesterday?"

Commander Calvin nodded. "I'm afraid I know exactly what happened, boy. You were on Transite Street, all right. But somehow they slipped you the drug and stole the antidote before you had time to use it. Then they found you were an SBI man and didn't dare kill you, so they dumped you in the desert. All this tale about the Starhouse and the beautiful, wondrous Queen of the Silver Stars is exactly the same tale that you yourself have heard from a thousand starmen. You ought to know that it was only induced by the drug."

For a moment Roal felt as if his mind were tottering. What if Commander Calvin were right and all this were merely the result of an actual dose of *harmeena*? He tried to think back, to retrace the events prior to the time he had gone into the Starhouse. But he could remember nothing except that he had gone directly from his hotel room for a walk along Transite to see what business for the SBI might be turned up. And the Starhouse had turned up right where this warehouse now stood. He would stake his life and reputation on it.

He whirled suddenly on Calvin. "I know how I can prove it! That cape I left in your office. Alayna touched it. If we can get her finger prints off it—"

The Commander did not share Roal's enthusiasm, but he patiently returned with Roal to the headquarters of the SBI. His own mind was puzzled and distracted by the mystery of Starhouse. He didn't believe Roal's story, but he didn't quite believe his own, either. He didn't know what to believe.

Roal took the cape into the finger print laboratory. The operating technician examined the collar at the point Roal remembered Alayna grasping it

impulsively.

"There're plenty of prints here," said the technician. "Let's see what yours look like."

He examined Roal's fingers minutely, then turned back to the coat. "There are some here that aren't yours, all right. Want pictures?"

Roal nodded. Calvin said, "It won't matter. Dozens of prints besides yours might be there."

"Not in that exact place unless someone had fastened my cape about his neck. And no one else had done that except—"

The Commander raised his eyebrows. "And how does it happen that this alleged Queen of the Silver Stars had your cape on?"

"Nuts!" Roal knew he was being baited. "Send the prints to the Identification Office and order a report sent direct to my office," he told the technician.

The report would not be ready until morning. Roal went to the physiological lab for a blood test in the hope his blood might betray the presence of the drug and the antidote. That finished the day. In the morning he had to wait impatiently until ten before the pictures and report came in.

He tore the envelope and read:

Memo to Hartford:

"The subject prints are those of one Mariana Sebours. Our files give the following information concerning this person: Age, 23; Race Terrestrial Caucasian; Height 5' 7"; Weight 125 lbs.; Hair, blonde; Eyes, blue...."

Detailed measurements, and skin and blood textures followed, but they were not of immediate significance to Roal. The fact was that his cloak bore the prints of someone named Mariana Sebours, and unless she and Alayna were the same he didn't know how the prints came to be there. This proved at least that his story was not the fiction or dream that Calvin assumed it was.

Roal considered showing the report to the Commander, but there was more to be done. The descriptive picture in the report fitted his memory of Alayna, but a photograph would tell him for certain. He called the Identification Office for a full report with pictures on Mariana Sebours.

It came through on the televise about an hour later. He was waiting for it.

"Hello, Roal?" said Tim Atkins, the identification clerk.

"Yes. What do you have?"

"I hope your interest in the Sebours girl is personal, rather than business."

"Why?"

"Well, from her photos she'd be something worth having a personal interest in. Except that she seems to have vanished."

"Give me the whole story. Where's the pix?"

"Coming up. Here you are. Mariana Sebours was born in the United States. Her father is of French-Greek extraction and her mother was American. Mariana herself had notable singing talent and made an operatic debut at sixteen. She went up fast, but always seemed to stop short of the top. For six years she was featured in opera houses throughout the system, and did much concert work. She was listed with the Brooks Agency here in Helio, but they haven't carried her on their books for more than two years. She did a lot of concert work and was last known in New York. Then there just isn't any more of Mariana Sebours."

"What do you mean, there isn't any more? The records should carry the last movement from place of residence. Everyone has to file that information."

"That's just it. No transfer notice from New York was filed. The last address has no record of her for over eighteen months. She's gone, vanished, disappeared."

"All right. I'll wait for the pictures. You may have to do some footwork on this case for me, so don't forget Mariana Sebours."

Even as Roal hung up the door opened and the messenger arrived with the pictures. Roal ripped open the envelope and the prints spilled out. Glossy, glamorous shots of a blonde opera diva slipped out onto the desk. And one look told Roal what he wanted to know.

Mariana Sebours was Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars, and her fingerprints were on his cloak. His dream was not a dream. It was cold reality. Except—

Where was the phantom tavern, Starhouse?

IV

Roal sent a work sheet down to Tim Atkins, but he started on the case independently. He would show Calvin something yet.

Harry Brooks was the nearest and most accessible lead, so Roal made a call at Brooks' office. Harry shifted his cigar as Roal entered. He lurched heavily to his feet. "Hi, there, Hawkshaw. It's been a long time since you've searched for crooks in my bailiwick. Who's done what, and when?"

"Hello, Harry." Roal sat down, refusing one of the black stogies. "I'm not sure what has been done or who has done it, but I want to know about a girl named Mariana Sebours."

"Mariana—" Brooks' eyes suddenly became starry. He blew a kiss to the winds, and stared far away. "Mariana. I'd give you ten thousand dollars if you could tell me where she is today. What a wonderful girl was Mariana. It was only that tiny fault in her voice that kept her from reaching the peaks that should have been hers, but it could be cured now. The doctors have told me—I think that must have been what discouraged her and caused her to abandon her career at its height. That and the ape she called her father."

"What was the matter with her throat?"

"Just some defect in her voice box. She had it worked on, but it didn't improve. It could be fixed now. Only an expert could detect the fault. She was a girl of exquisite beauty and talent. But, more than that, she was a great woman, was Mariana Sebours."

"Was she ever married?"

"No."

"Boy friends?"

"That's the one peculiar thing about her. After she became about eighteen and men really began to take an amorous interest in her she gave them all a cold shoulder. I asked her about it once, and she got in a terrible rage. She blurted out something about not being fit to think of men and marriage. I never found out what she meant by it. We never spoke of it again."

"Hereditary stain of some kind?"

"I don't know what it could have been. Her mother was a charming woman like herself. Her father was a healthy ape-like cuss. An anthropologist, but perfectly straightforward and normal. Mariana, however, developed a strange attachment for him that in itself was perhaps abnormal. She would never appear towards the last of her career unless he was present and many times she cancelled engagements because Sebours would not be in the same city. Finally, she gave up appearances altogether—in order to stay with him, perhaps. I don't know."

"Did it seem like a psychological abnormality?"

"I'm not qualified to say, but it seemed to me that she was afraid of something happening to him. Perhaps that was abnormal. I don't know."

"What was her father like?"

"I think I have an old snapshot of Mariana and him somewhere here."

Harry Brooks got up heavily and began rummaging through a file drawer. "Yeah, here it is."

Roal took the snapshot. It was small and not very good, but the identity of the man beside Mariana was unmistakable.

It was the giant who had appeared in the doorway of the room at Starhouse.

Roal took the picture back to the office with him and called in Ralph Bowen, a slender young artist who was head of the art department of Heliopolis SBI.

"Think you can do some front views and profiles of this gent from this snapshot," said Roal. "It's not much to go on, but I've seen him and can go along with you and give you descriptions of his features."

Bowen nodded, "I think so. If it doesn't come out the way you think it should look, I can touch it up to your specifications. The big boy done

something?"

"I wish I knew," said Roal.

Roal found it necessary to spend the rest of the day with Bowen, coaching him from his memory of that fleeting glimpse of Sebours in the Starhouse. In the late afternoon the drawings were finished to Roal's satisfaction, however.

"I'll want them reproduced," he said. "Distribution is to be made to every operator in the system, but first to those on Mars. I'll issue the necessary orders tomorrow if you can have the reproductions by then."

"First thing in the morning," promised Bowen.

In the dimming Martian sunset Roal Hartford watched the city below. Somewhere in its depths was the phantom tavern Starhouse, and tonight there would be new spacemen lured to the drug *harmeena* by the golden-haired Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars. A queen whose heart revolted at the role she was forced to play—Roal was sure.

But who or what was forcing her into it? Her father? Roal felt that he must be, but it appeared as if Sebours was the master mind behind the whole dope gang. And, as yet, no explanation of the mysterious, elusive location of the Starhouse appeared.

Roal had presented all his findings to Commander Calvin but the head of the department was still not certain that Roal had not been drugged and had dreamed up the story of Starhouse and Alayna. It was easy, he had said, to think that Roal's drugged mind would quickly associate the mythical Alayna with the first picture of a beautiful girl that he encountered. The fingerprints he dismissed as having come from a visit to one of the dives. Probably Mariana Sebours was a waitress or dancer in one of them and had accidentally picked up the investigator's cape.

Lacking support of the Chief, then, Roal was forced entirely upon his own initiative. And that had about run out. He had the forces of the SBI working

to bring in Mariana and her father, but he had little faith that they would be found.

Somehow he had to get back to Starhouse, the phantom tavern. He knew it was real, that it existed somewhere, but why he could not find it after having walked once directly to its doors was something he could not fathom. He knew he had not been drunk or drugged when he entered the place.

And through all the mystery there floated the husky, plaintive voice of Alayna with the golden hair. Should he never see her again, Roal knew that her song and her loveliness would haunt him for the rest of his life. But, somewhere, somehow, he would find her.

As the darkness grew and it became increasingly difficult to make out objects in the room the televiser flashed its light and rang shrilly in the silence.

He flicked it on. "Hartford speaking."

"Roal Hartford! Please help me. Come to Starhouse tonight on Transite Street. I need your aid. Be careful. You are known."

"Who are you?" Roal burst out. The screen had remained blank.

"I am Alayna, I—"

The soft, golden voice was suddenly cut off with a shrill exclamation. And then there was no more. Cursing, Roal switched off. There was no way of telling now where the call came from.

He called three of his agents, Sims, Parkhurst, and Riley, ordering them to the address on Transite street. He donned his cape and checked his flame lance. No need for disguise now. Alayna had said that he was known.

But by whom? That was the question. Obviously a break must have come between Alayna and those who held power over her, and Roal had not a doubt that she was in danger of her life at this very moment. And there was nothing he could do except go to Transite Street and hope that by some magic the Starhouse would again be there.

He drove swiftly through the brightening streets. But it was fifteen minutes before he arrived. The agents were already there lounging carelessly across the street from the address he had directed them to.

"I hope we didn't muff it, Captain, but I can't see anything here," said Parkhurst.

Roal stared along the length of Transite Street. There was no Starhouse with the garish crimson sign he remembered. But the old abandoned warehouse was still where it had always been—where he would have sworn Starhouse should have been.

Roal began to question his own sanity. Surely he could not be so wrong about it as this indicated. He knew he had received the phone call, but he couldn't be too sure it was Alayna's voice because the narrow circuits stripped away most of the golden overtones that made her voice a sound of such exquisite beauty.

Or someone might be playing a colossal joke on him. He didn't know—except he knew that somehow he had failed.

He circled the block, directing the deputies to cover adjacent squares. When they finally met again in front of the old warehouse full blackness had settled over Heliopolis and all the blaze of its million lights boiled skyward into the blackness of space.

"It must have been a bum steer," said Roal, "There's nothing more that we can do tonight. I'll check up on my information and let you know."

"O.K., Captain," said Parkhurst dubiously. His manner made it evident that they wondered if Roal were off the track a bit. He had never appeared so fumblingly on an investigation before.

When they were gone, Roal circled the block once again and then walked up and down the length of Transite amid the glare of the signs and the roaring bedlam of the street of crime.

There was simply no Starhouse. It was maddening to know he had followed this very path right to its door. He knew it was no illusion or drug-inspired dream. But it did not lead to Starhouse now.

Alayna was in deadly danger, and he knew of no way to find her or help her.

He was about to turn about and return to his office for a futile check on the progress being made by the Identification Office, when a thought formed in his mind. There was yet one clue that he had not exploited—a clue that stuck out so close to his face that he hadn't seen it.

The Martians—the Martians who had stolen the pellet of *harmeena* from him on the desert. They were in contact with the dope peddlers of Starhouse.

He raced to the nearest televise booth and called Commander Calvin's home. But as the signal rang at the other end of the line Roal slowly replaced the receiver.

He knew what Calvin's reaction would be. A hundred years of strict peace with the Martians could not be violated by forceful entry into one of the burrows. Calvin would never consent to that, especially since he believed that the whole mystery was only a pipe dream in Roal's mind anyway.

Roal abandoned the call and placed another one. In a moment he got an answer.

"Hello, Shorty," he said. "Do you feel like a job tonight?"

"Sure, if it's a shooting job. I haven't had any excitement for a long time."

"I'm serious, Shorty, and it may turn out to be a shooting job. Bring along your lance."

Shorty sobered. "Sure, Cap. When and where?"

"Right now. I want you to take me out to the desert to the same spot where you picked me up the other day. I want to visit again that Martian burrow located there."

"Waaait a minute. If this is a shooting job, are you visiting or invading?"

"I'm going in that hole again. Anyway I have to get there. We're on our own. Calvin knows nothing of it. If my hunch is wrong this will cost us our ranks, jobs, and probably land us in the pen. But I'm going and I need you badly. Are you with me?"

Shorty answered, "I'm with you, Roal. Your hunches have always been right with me."

V

The slim, torpedo shape of the patrol craft rose in a long slant over the glittering Heliopolis. From his logbook Shorty had checked the course taken on the previous trip to the desert. He reset the controls to the same course and carefully watched their speed.

"It won't be too easy to find this place in the dark," he said. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Roal rapidly outlined the situation to him. "There's not a tag end of a clue to hang onto except this burrow," he finished. "And I'm sure that Alayna has been captured for her attempted warning to me. If she's not already dead she hasn't much longer to live, I'm certain, unless we can find a clue to the mystery of Starhouse."

"I can't see how this desert burrow can lead anywhere."

"I'm not expecting much out of it, either, but it's all we have to go on. And we know the Martians are somehow in communication with the dope gang."

"Perhaps not. Maybe they just liked the smell of the stuff and lifted it from you."

Roal made no answer because Shorty suddenly busied himself with piloting the ship to the surface of the desert. He spiralled slowly down until he was as close as possible to the point where he believed the burrow to be.

The ship slid over the sands with a quiet hiss. Roal and Shorty darkened the craft and stepped out onto the dimly-lit sands. The undulating desert was like a frozen sea, trackless and featureless.

"The best way will be to walk in a spiral around the ship and see if we can cross my tracks," said Roal. "There has been very little wind since we were here. They might be visible."

Shorty disagreed, but they separated by about six feet and began walking in a spiral path. As minutes passed and lengthened they wound outward from the ship and the task seemed more hopeless than ever. Long ages of desert living had made the Martians masters of camouflage.

After an hour's search had yielded nothing Roal was nearly ready to admit defeat. "I think we had better go back to the ship and recheck our position."

"It's as close as we can possibly get it. Your tracks are gone, that's all. They wouldn't last more than half a day at the most. But how about this? Here is something that might be worth looking into."

Roal looked at the spot Shorty indicated. A wide, shuffled path in the sand looked as if a herd of sheep had passed that way.

"Fresh, too," said Roal. "Looks as if a whole congregation of Martians had come this way recently."

"Shall we follow it."

"We may as well. There's a chance it leads to the burrow of Toomar. Burrows are pretty far apart, you know."

The path was obvious because of its freshness, but the tracks were not deep and already the shifting sands were smoothing under the caress of the night wind. In half an hour they would be gone.

All at once they vanished and the sands were smooth as a sheet.

"Here it is," said Shorty. "Their hole must be right here somewhere."

Roal prodded the sands with his foot. After a moment he struck the hard surface of a door over a burrow shaft. He scooped away a spot and pounded forcefully on the stone door.

It echoed dully like the hollowness of a tomb. But after a moment there was a slow motion and the sand slid down as the slab rose.

A withered Martian head poked cautiously above the sand as Roal and Shorty darted behind the slab. "Who comes?" the Martian whispered.

"We seek Toomar," said Roal.

"Toomar is below. What business have you with him?"

"I was waiting on the desert a few days ago and Toomar was kind enough to offer water in his burrow. But when I emerged I found that someone below had stolen a small white gem from me. I have come to claim the gem."

"We are most sorry that such an unfortunate occurrence should be laid at our door," said the Martian humbly. "Come below. I know nothing of it, but I am sure that none among us was guilty of such a crime. You may make any demands you wish in procuring the gem again. If one of us is guilty, he shall be punished."

So far the Martian's acts were in accord with the habits of his race and the relationship established with Earthmen. But it seemed to Roal that he almost overdid it. The Martian was almost *anxious* to get them into the burrow.

But it was ridiculous, he told himself. He would find nothing here. And the Martian was only trying to avoid trouble.

Nevertheless, the Earthmens' hands strayed to their lances as they descended into the dark depths of the burrow. The narrow shaft was the same as the one he had previously entered, Roal was certain.

A few Martians were sitting against the walls in the first chamber to which they came. The dim light came from phosphorescent stones set into the walls. Despite the air of carelessness which appeared as the Martians' perpetual guise, there was a tension that Roal could not define. It wasn't in their stick-like limbs, nor was it in their dull eyes. But it was in the very air that Roal breathed and he could not help looking about warily.

In a moment the guide returned from his disappearance down a side tunnel. "Toomar comes," he announced.

The Martian who had offered Roal water appeared now and surveyed them. Roal repeated the story of the theft.

"It is indeed a grievous thing," said Toomar sorrowfully. "Come into the lower chambers and we will see all those who were present that day."

Shorty hesitated. "Aren't these—?"

Roal shrugged. He had spent his career in a job where identification of individuals was a critical factor, but he still could not tell if those Martians

now sitting about the room were or were not among the group that had been there on his first visit.

Toomar turned back into the passage from which he had come. Roal and Shorty followed closely.

The passage wound with interminable crooks and turns until their sense of direction was hopelessly lost, and still they kept going down. Roal believed they must have gone down five or six hundred feet at least when Toomar finally halted before a closed door.

"In here," he directed.

Roal hesitated, then stepped in as Toomar flung the door open.

In the moment that it took for the scene within the room to crystallize on the retinas of the two Earthmen, Toomar slammed the door and bolted it. And his dry, cracked voice announced, "The Earthmen have come, Master."

Roal and Shorty needed no other invitation to go for their flame lances. Even as their arms whipped up the dry limbs of the Martian's arms pinned Roal's hands. Shorty's lance swung from his hip in a single motion and burned a hole through Toomar's face as Roal hurled the Martian over his shoulder into the faces of the Martians in the room.

His gun up then, Roal still hesitated in the shock of recognition as the man across the room turned from a table to face him. It was the giant Sebours, father of Mariana—Alayna.

A vicious Martian word snarled from his lips as he leaped behind protecting shelves, drawing a gun. Then from doorways on either side, a stream of Martians flowed into the room like a pile of dry sticks on the breast of a wave. But they were like no Martians Roal had ever seen before. There were guns in their hands, spurting lines of flames toward the Earthmen.

"In here!" Roal shouted to Shorty. He leaped through an open door beside him into a sort of storeroom lined with shelves of chemicals and electrical equipment.

They were out of sight of the enemy for an instant and had time to catch a breath and a glimpse of their surroundings. The place looked like some biological or chemical laboratory. Sebours was dressed in a sterile garb as if about to perform some dissection or operation, they had noted. And he

seemed to be in complete charge, for the Martians called him master, and hastened to obey him.

Roal and Shorty stationed themselves on each side of the doorway. As the Martians made futile attempts to burn them down the Earthmen slew them as they appeared in the line of sight. They were safe enough for the moment, but they didn't have time or ammunition enough to kill all the Martians that could attack. It was only a temporary stalemate.

On Roal's side there was a small window, evidently for passing supplies from the storeroom to the laboratory. But it was at right angles to the doorway and did not look out upon the main part of the laboratory. Roal had avoided getting in line with the window, but he glanced towards it hoping to find a means of escape.

Beyond the window was a polished wooden cabinet in which the lights of the room reflected. The cabinet door was half open and moving slowly with the motion of the air in the room. As Roal watched it idly he saw in its polished surface a distorted reflection of the laboratory.

Suddenly, in the reflecting surface, he saw Sebours cautiously leave his place of hiding and warn the Martians to stand guard. Then he returned to the table where he had been working. The swinging door shifted the reflection out of Roal's vision, but in that instant he had seen something that turned him cold.

On the table where Sebours was working lay a still form. A human body graced with a head of golden hair like none that Roal had ever seen. Except once—

Alayna.

He wished the door would swing back. But as if in confirmation of his identification a low cry of terror suddenly shot through the room. And it was Alayna's voice. Roal knew that he could never mistake it.

He called to Shorty in a hoarse whisper. "They've got Alayna out there and that big ape is doing something to her. We've got to rush them."

"We can't. They'd mow us down before we got out the door."

"We can't let him maim her, either. I'm going out. Coming?"

"Don't be a fool!" Shorty pleaded. "We've got to use our brains. You're no good to Alayna dead."

"Yeah, you're right," Roal admitted. "What I just saw out there got me, but—if that window were only facing Sebours—"

"We could burn a hole through the wall. That might be our best bet. You could nail him in the back—provided a Martian didn't poke a lance through and blast your hand off the minute you got it through."

"Yeah, that wouldn't work."

Alayna's scream came once more and her cry of, "Roal, Roal—"

The sound quickened his pulses to maddening pace. So she had learned he was there. That polished door was swinging slowly again in the motion of the air. An inspiration seized Roal. Once he had seen an outlaw perform an incredible feat with a flame lance. If it could be done now—

It was dangerous, but he moved decisively to the window. It was the only way to save Alayna, a reflective shot from that wooden door panel.

He cut the charge of the lance down to a minimum. It would be sure to burn through the wood, but enough of the searing energy might be reflected. It was one of the peculiarities of the flame lance beam that it could be reflected from a wooden surface at a low angle of incidence.

The door panel slowly swung the image of Sebours into Roal's line of sight. He raised the lance. But the image was so distorted in the surface that the figure of Alayna mingled and flowed with that of her father. If the warped door forced the deadly energy a fraction of a degree away from its target Alayna would receive the full reflected blast instead of Sebours.

Roal waited. The door moved, then paused. It was not quite far enough—but it was moving back now in the wrong direction. In another instant it would be too late.

Roal jammed himself against the wall to get the best angle of reflection. The images wobbled and flowed on the uneven surface, but there was no time to wait for a better reflection.

He pressed the trigger.

A fury of flame leaped out towards the door and burst against it in a bloom of crimson fire. The charred wood that remained refused to tell Roal of the success or failure of his shot.

There was no sound from the laboratory to tell if the shot had hit or missed—or found the wrong target. Only a sudden great silence.

And in that silence Roal plunged out. He could not endure the waiting in ambush longer. He plunged out upon a scene of disaster—for his enemies. Closely following, Shorty came out blasting with his lance.

But the Martians were too dumb-stricken to fight back. They seemed to have lost all their nerve and some had even dropped their guns to the floor. They all faced the table where disaster had befallen them.

Roal saw at once that his daring shot had been successful. Sebours had fallen across Alayna and now he slumped slowly to the floor. The reflected fire of the lance had not been sufficient to burn through him, but rather had enveloped him in horrible consuming fire. His death had not been pretty and he had died over the bound form of his daughter.

Roal grabbed a scalpel and slashed at the bonds holding the girl to the table. Weakly, she rose and her eyes were filled with tears and thanksgiving.

"I couldn't believe you'd get here," she said weakly.

Roal looked down at the dead body of her father. "I'm sorry—about him," he said.

"It is no matter," said Alayna. "That is sorrow that is long gone. But come with me quickly. We must get out of here. The Thousand Minds will know of what has happened and we simply must attack them first."

Roal was bewildered by her words, but she gave him no time for questions. Clad in her filmy costume as if prepared for appearance in the Starhouse, Alayna jumped lightly to the floor and ran between the stupefied Martians held at bay by Shorty.

The Earthmen followed into a passage and barred the doorway. Then Alayna directed them to burn down the roof and the walls with the flame lances, sealing the passage completely.

As fleet as a patrol ship, Alayna darted down the passage ahead of them, making it difficult for Roal and Shorty to follow the winding tunnel beneath the desert sands. Their flame lances were kept ready, but no Martians appeared.

After a long time of breathless running through the passage ways, Alayna finally halted beside a small chamber.

Her breath came in gasps. "We can rest here for a moment," she said. "We'll be safe for a little while, I think."

She flung herself upon the floor as Roal and Shorty followed her in. Shorty stood guard at the door, but Roal sat down beside her, his eyes tasting the exquisite beauty and tender loveliness of her.

After a moment she rose to a sitting position, breathing more easily. "I suppose you wonder what this is all about?" she said.

"You read my mind on that," said Roal.

She took a deep breath. "My real name is Mariana Sebours," she said. "Perhaps you knew of me as a concert singer—"

"I looked up your record. Brooks gave me your story. I know that it was your father that I killed back there. I'm sorry, but there was no other way."

"Don't worry about *him*," said Mariana. "*They* killed him long ago only he wasn't actually dead. I'm thankful that the end came for him at last."

"Who are *they*?"

"The Martians. They are planning to rid the planet of Earthmen and conquer Earth in revenge for what Earth had done to Mars."

"But what have we done? I thought everything was serene and peaceful between us!"

"No. If you recall, history speaks of the Martians of a century ago as being much different from those around us now. They were not the skinny, dried-out creatures they are now. We have done that to them. Once they were as

robust and healthy as we. We have made them what they are and forced them into burrows beneath the desert in order to exist."

"But how?"

"Merely by being here. My father made a long study of the cause and determined that our two races are simply incompatible. The infinitesimal, almost imperceptible radiations that have long been known to emanate from human beings are nearly lethal to the Martians. They produce the desiccation that we see.

"As a result of his work my father was filled with a tremendous sympathy for the Martians and resolved to find a way out of the dilemma. It occupied years of his life, but he found no way.

"On the other hand, the Martians themselves found a way to defeat Earth and extract revenge. They discovered *harmeena*. I suppose I don't need to tell you about its effects, but what you know are only the surface effects. You don't understand the long-range results of use of the drug."

"What are they? The initial effects are bad enough."

"It is in the second generation of addicts that the true results appear. The children of anyone who has used *harmeena* a single time and obtained the full effect of it will have minds distorted so that they can be made subject to the telepathic controls of the Martians.

"The Martians are an old race, and time means nothing to them. For a century they have placidly carried on business and social life with us, all the time secretly planning to destroy us when the time was right and a weapon could be found. Now they have begun. *Harmeena* is being introduced into the lowest level of our society, but it will be carried to the highest levels if their plans are fulfilled. And then, in another century, perhaps, they will be ready to strike the final blow and take over Earth. All Earth will eventually become enslaved to the Thousand Minds when those who are robots under Martian control are finally directed to kill off all those who aren't."

"These Thousand Minds—the SBI has heard rumors using that term, but nothing concrete has ever come to our attention."

"The Thousand Minds are the secret ruling body of the Martians. The premier accepted by Earth is only a puppet. By mental control, the Thousand Minds are in direct contact with every Martian on the planet and it is they who are most expert in the science of mind control."

"What is the secret of the phantom tavern, Starhouse? Is it only an illusion?"

"The phantom tavern actually exists. I will take you there in a moment. Through their mental powers, the Thousand Minds can project an image of the Starhouse to any point on the planet, and when a person enters the door of that projected image of Starhouse, he is actually transported here beneath the desert by the power of the Thousand Minds."

Roal whistled softly. "So that is the explanation of the phantom tavern. It seems incredible that such power exists. But what of your father's part in this plot—and yours?"

The Queen of the Silver Stars hung her head for a moment, then looked frankly into Roal's eyes. "My first concern was to save my father from death and injury at the hands of the Martians. Perhaps I was selfish in this. But, secondly, he was the one man in the system who knew more about them than anyone else in the world. If anyone could know their vulnerable spots it was he.

"So I stayed with him as closely as possible during this long association with the Martians. He was so incensed by the thing that Earthmen are doing to the Martians that he even fell in with their plan to destroy through the drug. He knew that an appeal to Earth powers and governments would be futile. Commercial interests would not allow the withdrawal of Earthmen from Mars. He knew better than to ask for that.

"I gave up my career and came to Starhouse. It was a vicious, horrible existence, but I stayed to try to protect him and to persuade him to try to bring about a peaceful solution to the problem. I thought if this could eventually be done it would atone for the crimes I've committed in persuading men to use the drug.

"Now I know that I was wrong. For my father turned more and more against Earthmen and beat and lashed me at times when I tried to persuade him against his course of action. At last I gave up altogether and called you. The Thousand Minds knew of it, of course, and ordered me reduced to the status that my father had been in for so long."

"What was that?" Roal asked. "What was going to be done to you?"

"They told me then that long ago they had performed an operation on my father and it made him the same as if his parents had been *harmeena* addicts. His brain was totally under the control of the Thousand Minds. That was the reason I could not prevail against him. But at the same time he was aware of the wrong that he was doing to his countrymen and to me. He lived for years in a mental hell of torment. That is why I'm glad he is gone. There is peace for him now. But the Thousand Minds were forcing him to perform the operation on me.

"You see, he had become a great figure to the common people among the Martians. He symbolized their hidden revolt. Hardly any knew of the actual persons in the group of the Thousand Minds, but my father was their emissary to the people. To them he was the symbol of all that the Thousand were doing. That is why his death so demoralized those in the laboratory. It was as if their whole revolution were suddenly tumbling down."

When Alayna finished she was trembling as if with cold. Roal reached to his own shoulders and placed his cape about her. She looked up at him. "Thank you. Did you ever wonder why it was that I tried to warn you against the drug when you first came to Starhouse? It was because of the cape. It was the first true kindness that any man had shown me for so long that it made me want to cry."

Roal thought he understood, but he said, "There have been plenty to admire you in Starhouse."

Alayna shuddered. "The things I see in their eyes are not admiration."

Shorty had not relaxed his guard at the doorway, though he had strained to hear the words of Alayna's story. Now he gave a warning. "Martians down the passage. They act like they're on a hunt. We'd better move!"

VI

Alayna rose and then hesitated as if in indecision. "The only way to wipe out the Martian plot is to destroy the Thousand Minds and do it now. If we fail to attack now, it will give them a respite to re-establish themselves and our hopes will be lost."

"But there are only the three of us and two weapons," said Roal. "We cannot attack a thousand Martians with such powers as you say they have. We'll have to be concerned merely with escape now, and attack later."

"You'll never find the Thousand Minds again, if you fail to follow through now," said Alayna. "Would you attack if I could get you a hundred armed spacemen?"

"With a third that many I'd attack, but where can you find them? Surely not in the desert."

"Follow me."

The Queen of the Silver Stars stepped to the opening in the chamber and glanced down. "It's too late to go that way. We'll have to use the old air tunnel."

She came back into the room and approached an opening on the other side so small that the two men had not noticed it.

"I can squeeze through. If you can follow me we can get out through here."

Roal considered the width of his shoulders dubiously. "We can try."

He assisted Alayna into the narrow opening after she again discarded the cape which hampered her movement. Shorty followed. He was of small build, not very much larger than Alayna. Finally Roal wormed his own way into it, thankful he was not bothered by claustrophobia.

He lay on his side with one arm extended forward, the other down towards the mouth of the tube. This made it possible to guard the entrance with the flame lance.

It was stifling hot in the tube, and dust rose to choke them as the result of their struggles. Roal assumed Alayna was making good progress. And

Shorty seemed to be having no trouble but he was creeping forward by painful inches.

The opening was visible as a dim spot of light beyond his feet, but suddenly that spot of light wavered and darkened. Someone had passed before it. Roal stopped moving and stared down. It wasn't merely someone standing before the opening. A Martian was bending forward, looking into it. And Roal caught the glimmer of light on a gun as it was aimed down the tube towards him.

Quickly, he squeezed the trigger of his own lance at full power. A dozen bursts of flame plunged down the length of the air tube. The first one toppled the Martian in the mouth of the tube. Successive shots bit into the roof and walls near the mouth. A hiss of melting sand turned into a roar as the tube collapsed behind them. Waves of choking dust smothered them and threw them into coughing spasms.

Alayna gave a frantic cry of alarm and Shorty tried to squirm about to see what had happened. Roal explained to them. "And it means there's only one way to go, now—forward. Is there any chance of them cutting us off, Alayna?"

"Plenty. It all depends on how many controls the Thousand Minds may have near the other end. Fortunately, the main controls were there in the lab with my father and you killed many of them. But we'll soon be through. I'll try to go faster."

Roal could have said that she needn't hurry on his account. Already Shorty was a considerable distance ahead of him, and Alayna was probably much farther by the sound of her voice.

They were silent then until Alayna called that she had finally dropped into a chamber opening from the tube. Roal increased his struggles, but Shorty was out long before he was.

When he emerged, a gasp of recognition came to his lips. It was one of the dream rooms of Starhouse.

Alayna nodded as she saw Roal's eyes widen. "This is Starhouse," she said. "Follow me as if you were merely spacemen visiting here for dreams."

She led them into the hall outside. The noise of the tavern increased as they approached the main room. "Wait beside the door," Alayna asked.

Roal opened his mouth to question, but she was gone before he could speak. Spacemen looked up suddenly as she appeared in their midst, and the room became quiet as if Alayna carried an advancing wave of silence with her.

She took up her position on the little dais beside the old piano and nodded to the bleary-eyed player. And then her song began. With it came again that magic spell that Roal could hardly fight off. He wondered if it were entirely the song of Alayna or if the mighty power of the Thousand Minds were seizing the spell of her song, weaving, intensifying it until it called out to him to flee back to Earth and blue skies and green fields—to find someone like Alayna—to take Alayna with him.

And he knew within himself that the Thousand Minds had nothing to do with that dream. It was the dream of all spacemen who spend long years amid the cold and blackness of space and the wasteland of alien planets. Their dreams, concentrated and distilled to their strongest essence, flowed forth upon the low, husky notes from the throat of Alayna.

She sang of a sweetheart who waited for the return of a spaceman, and to each man in the room Alayna was the sweetheart and he was the one for whom she waited.

Her song ended and the spotlight upon her shifted from the warm pink glow to a sunny blue. She stood there watching them, keeping their eyes upon her.

Then she said, "Spacemen, what would you do for Alayna?"

There was a moment of silence. Strange, rash promises surged upon the lips of hardened spacemen who thought this was only more of the illusions of Alayna and hesitated.

"Would you fight for Alayna?" she said. "Would you fight for that green Earth with the blue skies?"

"Our guns would be yours, if you needed them," someone said fervently.

"I need them—every one of them, spacemen. At this moment, in the tunnels beyond Starhouse, the Martians are gathered. They are attacking Earthmen and seek to drive you from this planet. If they can be subdued quickly, the rebellion may end. If not, we are doomed, and all Earth with us."

The silence was charged, then a dozen men leaped up at once. "Show us where they are. We'll kill the dirty—"

"You are fighting men, not a mob," Alayna warned. "Ready your lances and follow me."

Swiftly, like a wraith of light she ran from the dais to the doorway where Roal and Shorty waited. "Here are your men, a hundred and more. I'll show you the chamber of the Thousand Minds."

Roal nodded. "We're with you."

He ran behind her, letting her remain far enough in the lead so that she was like an elusive, darting dream inspiring the cursing spacemen who roared out of the tavern room in a surging tide. Most of them were in poor shape as fighting men, Roal knew. Their minds were sodden with drink and some with *harmeena*, perhaps. But each represented a gun that could be turned against the Thousand Minds.

The passage turned abruptly at right angles into a darkened corridor. Something was wrong in that corridor, Roal knew instantly. He knew it should not be black. He sensed that the light tubes were still illumined. The farther they went, however, the more dense the blackness became. It was like a living, smothering essence that enveloped them and cloaked their souls.

Roal heard sounds of dismay from the spacemen behind. There were murmurings against going further.

"Alayna is in there!" Roal shouted.

At that moment there came the sound of her voice raised again in the song that she had sung in the tavern. Its dream of life and hope buoyed them on into the blind darkness.

What the blackness could be Roal could not guess. It was not merely absence of light. There was light coming from the tubes, but this blackness literally consumed all light before it reached the eyes.

That it was a manifestation of the Thousand Minds he did not doubt, but it did not seem to be harmful—at least so far.

Then abruptly the blackness exploded into light—searing, livid radiance that stabbed their eyes with even greater blindness. Roal flung an arm before his eyes and halted before that radiance. There was no heat, but the light was the very antithesis of the darkness that had gone before.

Yet amid the hoarse exclamations and angry cries of the spacemen the song of Alayna still persisted, urging them forward in the face of that radiant wall.

For it was a wall, Roal saw behind the shield of his arm. It was close to them. Alayna was standing before it as he came up to her.

"This is the doorway leading into the chamber. Beyond is the assembly of the Thousand Minds. Blast through the door and kill!"

Roal found the edge of the door and the handle. He placed the flame lance against it and as he pressed the trigger the door handle suddenly became a living, writhing snake in his grasp. An involuntary exclamation escaped his lips as he dropped the snake and released the trigger of the lance.

He tried again and found he had the point of the lance pressed against the back of Alayna as she stood flattened against the door.

"Press the trigger, quickly," her voice said. "It's only a trick of the Thousand Minds."

His head whirled. There was Alayna standing beside him. "I'm real," she said. She touched his arm to prove it.

He pressed the trigger against the image before him. Slowly the stuff of the door melted away in a mass that dropped to the floor and became great, writhing snakes. Each drop split into a thousand droplets and each became a thousand tiny snakes that writhed and swelled. They flowed back towards the crowd of spacemen in a streaming mass. Flame lances turned upon them to burn them down. Flames that made no impression upon the flood of serpents—but which found their marks in other spacemen. A dozen men went down before Alayna's voice reached them.

"Don't shoot! It's a Martian trick. These aren't real. You'll only kill each other. Now—look! The door is opening. There are our enemies. The

Thousand Minds. Kill them all! Let none escape!"

The door flung back under the force of Roal's and Shorty's push. They rushed in beside Alayna and found themselves on a ten-foot balcony overlooking tiers of seats arranged in concentric circles. There were enough of them to be a thousand, Roal thought. In each seat was an immobile, withered Martian. The entrance of the Earthmen caused no stir of movement among the Martians. They sat as if dead, but Roal sensed the tremendous, concentrated mental power of that immobile assembly—mental power that could conjure up the powers of darkness and of light which they had seen, and the flood of writhing serpents.

Roal raised his flame lance to turn it on the Martians. A sense of revulsion at such an attack upon the seemingly helpless creatures assailed him, but he knew they were far from helpless. And their purpose was deadly to Earthmen.

Before he could pull the trigger, a dozen Alaynas appeared beside him. Scores were in his line of sight. Those standing in the air before him were not real, he knew, but of those beside him he could not tell the difference between Alayna and the mental creations of the Thousand Minds. But one of them grasped his arm tightly.

"I'm real," she said. "Fire quickly."

He poured flame into the midst of the assembly. Behind him the other spacemen were pouring onto the balcony. Many of them, drunken, thought the visions that beset them were creations of their own minds and fired wildly.

The total effect was marked. Below, tens of Martians withered and died in the blast. But those who were left bent their mighty power of their minds to new creations of horror. As the Earthmen watched, there grew in the air over the assembly a monstrous head that swelled until it threatened to fill the whole space of the chamber. A hundred gaping mouths breathed out smoke and tongues of flame that licked hungrily towards the spacemen.

It was a harmless, unreal creation, thought Roal. He moved near to it, planning to fire through the monster into the assembly. But one of those flame tongues lashed out and flung itself about him. He cried out involuntarily at the unexpected pain.

The thing was far from harmless. The fire of those tongues burned with untold agony. A score of the others must have felt it, too, for their cries of alarm spread through the chamber. One by one they began to fall back, retreating towards the passage as the head swelled.

Alayna tugged at Roal's arm. "Down! Over the edge of the balcony before the head swells and fills the chamber. Get down into the midst of them!"

Roal saw she was right. He called hoarsely to the spacemen, who turned at his beckoning. He grasped the edge of the railing and leaped over as a tongue of flame reached for him.

Alayna called. "Follow him! It's the only way!"

Her voice was still magic to them and with shouts of fury they began leaping over to the floor below, scrambling over in a circle that spread about the seated Martians.

The Martians still did not move a muscle. They remained as if carved from stone, even as Roal poured his deadly flames into them.

He looked up to see what had become of Alayna. He thought that she had followed. But she remained there on the balcony, a symbol to urge the spacemen over its edge. Now that they had almost all come, she was nearly alone, and the fury of the monstrous head seemed to be turned on her alone.

Roal gave a hoarse cry. "Alayna! Jump!"

She saw the threatening tongue of fire too late. It was as if the fire of all the other tongues had combined in one. It covered her from head to foot.

Every spaceman in the chamber ceased firing and stared at the horror of her plight. Her screams rang through the chamber as she was lifted from the balcony and hurled into the air only to fall into the midst of a great, devouring maw that appeared in the side of the head. It closed over her, and the sound of the voice of golden-haired Alayna, Queen of the Silver Stars was heard no more.



Her screams rang through the chamber.

As she vanished from their sight the spacemen turned the unleashed fury of their very souls upon the Martians. How long Alayna could live within that horror hanging in the air above them, they did not know, but they knew the thing would vanish only with the last of the Martians.

With wild cries they leaped upon the seated creatures stabbing, burning, slashing a frenzy of killing and slaughter.

As for Roal, his own fury congealed into a single bright purpose beside which all else dimmed into insignificance. He selected a path from the outer

circle to the center of the assembly and slowly blasted his way forward. A thousand ghastly mental creations of the Martians now beset them. Great lizards slashing with fanged teeth, enormous slugs that dropped from above and encased them in suffocating slime.

But Roal gradually found himself in possession of a defense against them. He observed that if he gave way to fright and fear at their presence they were able to attack him. But those that came up without his awareness produced no effect until he saw them and let a moment's anxiety sweep over him. Then he felt the pain of their stabs. That was what had happened on the balcony.

"Shorty," he called to the patrol pilot who was fighting beside him. "It's only your imagination. Don't believe in the thing and it can't hurt you!"

Shorty was down on his back slashing vainly to get from under an enormous blob of living slime that was sucking the life from him. Shorty's own fear gave the thing life.

"Shorty. It's gone. There's only a blanket over your head."

For an instant, Shorty appeared, "Yeah?" Then the thing came back as his imagination powered it again.

But he had seen enough to know what Roal meant. He rose with the thing still about him and slashed out towards the Martians with his lance as if the slug weren't there. Gradually it vanished and he walked forward unhindered.

"We've got it!" he exclaimed. "They can't hurt us if we won't believe in them!"

"Right!" said Roal. "These are created by the Thousand Minds, but they are powered by our own! Let's get these devils!"

Shorty looked up. "The head is shrinking. We must be making headway."

Roal glanced up hopefully. Alayna was familiar with these things. She must know the secret of their vulnerability. If that were the case, then perhaps she

still lived unharmed within the mass of force and tenuous substance that formed the monster.

But if that were true, he wondered why it had been able to attack her at all. Perhaps it was because it represented the mightiest efforts of the Martians, or she had allowed a moment's fright to enter her mind.

The monster head was dwindling fast as the mental forces of the remaining Martians was insufficient to support it. The thing shrank and dropped down to the floor. Less than a hundred of the dry Martians remained and they were vanishing rapidly in the flames of the remaining starmen.

Then abruptly, the head was gone, and from out of that mass of horror fell the unconscious form of Alayna. The few remaining Martians came to life. They leaped from their seats and began running—straight into the flames of the starmen where they died.

Amid the shambles Roal slowly and tenderly lifted Alayna in his arms. She was miraculously alive and apparently unharmed. Her own knowledge of the monster and her refusal to believe in its ability to harm her had saved her life.

Within an hour a dozen SBI guards arrived at Roal's call. Then Shorty let Roal have the patrol ship to take Alayna to Heliopolis. Calvin exploded all over the place when he arrived. But his wrath finally died to a stammer as the truth was unfolded to him.

In the small patrol ship, Alayna sat beside Roal watching the sunrise on the desert. Her eyes were dew-bright and she seemed at once glad and shy.

"I've found out one thing that made me glad," she said.

"What's that?"

"My father was not a dope addict as I had believed. The Martians could never force it upon him and so they had to change his brain instead. I know that what I did was not under compulsion of the Thousand Minds."

Roal smiled down at her. She must be reading his thoughts, he supposed. "Your father was a great man," he said. "He tried to solve a problem that the human race has muffed for ten thousand years, the problem of how to make it possible for incompatible races to live together."

"Perhaps he accomplished something. This conflict will bring the problem to light. I think Earth will find a solution."

"The Martians will go the way of the Indian. Perhaps we may eventually find some worthless, barren planet and put a few hundred of them there on a reservation. But the problem is as old as man. There can be no solution. The strong overcomes the weak and man calls it progress."

"Some day there'll be a solution."

"You're a dreamer like your father. Don't ever lose sight of your dreams. That's the only thing that makes life worth while."

"Dreams sometimes come true, don't they?"

Roal drew her tight, drinking in her loveliness with his eyes. "I think mine is going to," he said slowly.

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