

CLASSICS TO GO

AMAZING

STORIES
VOLUME 22



STANLEY MULLEN

Amazing Stories

Volume 22

Stanley Mullen

Content

1. [The Pit Of Nymphons](#)
2. [Master of the Moondog](#)
3. [Shock Treatment](#)
4. [Mirage for Planet X](#)
5. [S.O.S. Aphrodite!](#)

The Pit Of Nymphthons

Locked in the mutant jungle of Venus were the horror-secrets of the universe. Here, into these thousand deaths, with a Tihar-trotting convict to lead her, went luxury-soft Kial Nasron.

Hailard, director of Venusian Exports, was not given to unnecessary elaborations or complexities of speech. He let his attention stray from the girl to a tiny scale-model of the first rocket ship to land on Venus, and reflected bitterly that after two hundred years the planet still held both problems and eery mysteries for the Earth colonists.

"But a convict," Kial Nasron protested. She was the daughter of Torkeg Nasron, Martian politician and the largest single shareholder in VE. As such she felt entitled to make a nuisance of herself. However, she did have a tragic problem.

Hailard sighed. "A man without deviltry in him has little capacity for wisdom, or sainthood either. Convict or not, Craig Alston is the man for your job."

The sharp sound of her indrawn breath puzzled Hailard. "I didn't know you knew him."

Kial shrugged. "I don't, personally. I've never seen him, though I know the name and remember something about the case. But we were talking about an expedition into the Tihar Forest to look for my sister."

Hailard studied her critically. "Yes, we were. But you don't really want my advice, and I doubt if you'll like it. Your request puts me in an awkward position."

"Be specific." Her expression was that of a woman used to having her own way. It reminded him of her father, and he had uneasy conviction that the interview was going to be difficult.

"All right, I will be. You don't understand Venus. If you were familiar with conditions here, you wouldn't need descriptions or explanations. This is a strange, savage planet, and the Tihar Forest is the most vicious part of it."

The girl stopped him scornfully. "But surely a well-equipped expedition...."

Hailard smiled. "There's no such thing as far as the Tihar Forest is concerned. After forty years on Venus I still know nothing about the interior. Nor does anyone else. The forests here are freaks. Ages ago, atomic holocaust got out of hand. In a few places certain forms of life survived. Nature went mad. The Tihar Forest is its laboratory of gibbering, unnatural experiments—half a million square miles of luxuriant, nightmarish wonderland. Not one living creature, plant or animal, is the product of sane, orderly evolution. It's an asylum for the cripples, freaks and lunatic-fringe of abnormal creation."

Hailard went on in his clear way. They claimed that once he had studied for the ministry. He had convictions and he knew what he was talking about.

"True, Venusian Exports holds a license for limited exploitation of its peculiar resources. But we nibble at the edges. We collect rare furs and leathers, some valuable hardwoods and minerals, but we don't even try to penetrate the forest depths, or develop any plantations there. It's too dangerous. There have been some hideously disturbing rumors recently, and a marked increase of casualties...."

"My sister is there," Kial Nasron said stubbornly. "In this place of horror you describe. As long as we thought she had

died in the crash of the *Krajulla*, we accepted the tragedy. But now that we have evidence she may be alive, neither my father nor I will rest until we locate the wreckage. She may be hurt or lost or a captive of savage natives. The Company assured us you would give us every possible aid in finding and rescuing her."

Hailard nodded wearily. "I have orders from the executive board to put all resources at your disposal. Our staff will give you every technical assistance, and a fast survey cruiser has been adapted for low-altitude scouting. I disapprove of the expedition, particularly of you or your father going along. It will be hard enough, and you are both rash, headstrong and inexperienced. And there'll be difficulty arranging for a crew."

"I don't understand. Aren't the men convicts?"

Hailard spoke angrily. "Convicts, yes—but not animals to be ordered around. They're paroled to the Company in my custody. I'm responsible, and I won't order anyone to take such risks. Your project is insane. If your sister is alive, after three months in the Tihar no one can help her and you probably couldn't recognize her. It would be cruel to bring her back. If she's dead, that's the best thing that could happen to her. Forget her. If she were my own daughter, my advice would be the same."

Kial Nasron was shocked. "You mean you won't help?"

"I didn't say that. I'll ask for volunteers. Your father's influence will help. If you're both determined to go, I can't stop you. In any case, you'll need Alston. He's just returned from Tihar and he knows more about it than anyone else. I'm waiting for his report. You can catch him at psycho, if you like. He'll be through soon."

She moved toward the door. "If I miss him there, I'll be back," she promised. "How'll I know him?"

"Ask anyone. Alston is well-known. But don't promise anything you can't make good. He's the most dangerous man on Venus."

"I believe you're afraid of him," Kial Nasron said, pausing at the door.

"I am," admitted Hailard.

The cubicle was small, stifling hot in spite of air-conditioning. Alston remembered groping to a chair and sagging into it. Armrests came together like clamps, enforcing physical immobility. Men had been known to go mad in the psycho-laboratories, and such precaution was necessary. Invisible robot arms reached out to fit the plastic helmet tightly on his head. Other clamps and electrodes gripped wrists and ankle with inhumanly icy precision of contact.

There was always momentary impulse to resist, physically and mentally. One strained against the manacles and tried to darken brain horizons, both useless effort. But for a muted humming of tubes, the place was soundless. Lightless, save for the brief swirls of flaring color on the audio-screen. An illusion of infinite space built around him. Tension released suddenly. Involuntarily, Alston relaxed, became dreamily aware of the metallic voice of the machine starting its ritual of questions.

"Who are you?"

Alston responded with name and number.

"How long have you been on Venus?"

"Why were you sentenced?"

"How long does it usually take you to recuperate from the prescribed two months of timber-cruising?"

"Can you explain why your present venture was prolonged so far beyond the legal limit for exposure?"

Alston could and did. It was an elaborate lie, but he did not even remember that he lied. He was conscious that something was wrong with himself and his memories, but the false structure of his recent adventures and emotions flowed from his subconscious without wavering. Desperately he tried to erase all dangerous recollection from his mind. But his conscious mind was alert, wary, attempting by plausible lies, evasions and half-truths to defeat the purpose of the examination.

Detection was certain, sooner or later. The machine would realize the artificial nature of his memory blocks and trace them to their source. A battery of electronic brains has more efficiency than emotion. Even primed as he was by a visit to the outlawed auto-hypnotic devices hidden in the old native quarter of Castarona, there was no real chance of deceiving the robot brains. He did not expect that, but he did hope to confuse the issue long enough, cause enough delay, to give him his one chance of escape. His plan was carefully worked out. Not foolproof, but a matter of extremely delicate timing. It could work. But now....

By a supreme effort, he tried to banish all thought of escape from his thought-patterns, tried to smudge-out the record of all recent emotion, tried to forget everything that had happened to him in the Tihar Forest. Especially...

At first Alston answered in words, speaking aloud from habit. Vocal response was not required, meant nothing to the machine. The sounds were noted and filed for future reference. Precise brain-wave pattern measurements and analysis of physiological reactions combined into far more exact information about him than any word or thought formed consciously by the subject. The robot psychograph was lie detector, encephalograph, and electronic calculator.

Its prying fingers reached into the human soul and came forth with stark truth.

Sharp, incisive, implacable, the psychograph probed with its mechanical voice. Alston responded, his mind dulling, drifting on the vagaries of memory stream, lulled by the drone of heating tubes, the rustling hiss of his own breathing, the click of relays. Naked danger lay in this state for Alston, yet he dared not brace himself against the questioning. Synthetic memories would serve better if he yielded to his subconscious. His voice descended to wordless mumbling, then died away in cushioned silence.

Above all, no thought of escape, of dying or disappearance.

Alston was no different from other men except for the dogtag. He was cast in the same mold of common humanity, but the identification dogtag fastened on an impervium wire round his neck made the difference.

A man with the VE convict dogtag broadcasting its invisible and inaudible signal cannot escape, cannot merely disappear. At any time, wherever he was, its signal could be tuned in and his exact position located. If the tag were forcibly removed by breaking the wire, almost an impossibility with impervium, the signal automatically became an alarm to summon patrol fliers from Castarona or Quanta City. The escapee would be picked up within a radius of five miles from the start of his break.

The field staff of Venusian Exports were a tough, hard-bitten, reckless crew, consisting largely of convict labor recruited from Luna Prison or the mines of Callisto. After serving part of their terms, they were permitted to volunteer and be paroled in custody of the company. In most cases, it was an escape from the frying pan into the fire. One year in the deep mines and five years on Venus in constant danger and under intolerable living conditions, Alston had

developed certain facets of his remarkable personality at the expense of social instincts which seemed of no further use to him.

Guilty or innocent, he had been sentenced and he was there. The abstract justice involved no longer mattered. He was vague about details that seemed several lifetimes ago, and six years of nursing a cumulative hatred of mankind had made him as wary, cunning and treacherous as any other wild beast.

The fact that his cage occupied over a million square miles of the northern hemisphere of Venus merely irritated him with the illusion of freedom. For a man serving an indeterminate sentence, legal release ceases to be even a vague dream. Except by death, few convict laborers left the company, legally or otherwise. The escape to actual outlawry might be another illusion, but Alston had worked out a plan which seemed a fair gamble. It hinged on three facts not known by the company, the most important of which was discovered by him on his recent expedition. And it began with his death, or with a reasonably exact facsimile of it....

Always supposing that the psychograph examination did not nip his plan in the bud. An hour or two would be the most he could hope for, but it might be enough.

Among other fantastic mutant plants of the Tihar Forest is a giant-sized pitcher-plant, or fly-killer. From its aromatic juices can be distilled a drug causing artificial catalepsy. Under proper dosage, the condition simulates death so convincingly as to defy medical detection. A microscopic overdose results in violent convulsions or actual death. But the real joker, as far as Alston was concerned, lay in the brevity of the cataleptic effect. Timing would be deadly important. His death must occur far enough from the incinerators to guarantee recovery before his body was

burned; yet close enough so that his dogtag could be removed and sent to the central records office before his dreadful awakening.

Afterward, it might be rough, and someone was very likely to get hurt. But with careful timing there was an excellent chance that he would get free minus the tag, and be well on his way to the Tihar Forest before his deception was discovered.

A harsh burr of sound from the screen roused him. The psycho test was over. There was no indication of findings. He slumped in the chair while the machine clicked and hummed and blinked signals. Invisible robot hands released the clamps and removed the helmet. Weak and strained, Alston had to be helped to his feet and guided gently to the door.

Outside, he blinked while his eyes adjusted to the lighted corridor. After the gloom of the cubicle, normal illumination was blinding.

The next two hours would tell the tale. He hoped the coming interview with Hailard would be brief. Every minute counted....

II

The girl had obviously been waiting in the lobby for Alston to come from psycho. She intercepted him purposefully, but with odd hesitation.

"You're Alston."

It was statement, not question. For a nasty moment Alston was afraid that she belonged to his blanked-out memories. Eyes like cloudy gray ice stopped him with a shock like recognition, and there was something familiar about her voice. The momentary hesitation was a clue that she was

not sure of him, and everything but the eyes and voice was a stranger. Relief made him weak.

Six years ago she would have been too young for his notice, and nothing since then could be important. She was tall, slender but shapely, with an angular face and creamy tan skin coloring no one ever gets on eternally overcast Venus. Honey-blond hair draped bare shoulders in a long bob, and the expensive gown of turquoise metal-cloth molded her body as if sprayed on. It was cut scant enough to show a lot of her skin, and a length of nyloned leg which might have stirred biological impulses in a man with less on his mind.

"People usually just point at me," he observed bitterly. "Yes, I'm Alston."

Tourists were always startled by the apparent freedom of the convict parolees on Venus. But this was no staring, curious tourist. She was somebody's spoiled darling, and her manner of casual arrogance grated on him. Rising irritation made him belligerent.

"Somebody just did, by request. I didn't want to miss you."

"All right," he snapped. "I'm one of the sights. Now that you've seen me, go away."

She stiffened, and the turquoise gown stiffened with her, but she deliberately ignored his rudeness. "Animals in cages don't interest me," she observed. "I'm Kial Nasron, if the name means anything to you."

Alston explored the temporarily limited range of his memory, drew blank. Until the hypnotic amnesia wore off, he was outclassed in guessing games. "Should it?" he asked cautiously.

"Perhaps not. Maybe it's better if you prefer to forget everything. Is there some place we can talk?"

Panic nagged Alston with the fleeting minutes. Just now any delay might be fatal to his plans. If he were nasty enough she might let him go. "Right here," he said viciously. "It's public enough so we won't run out of conversation too quickly."

She paled and sparks flickered in her eyes, but Kial Nasron controlled her anger and spoke swiftly. "Six years is not long enough for a man to forget my sister Annelle. They just don't. No matter. We'll talk about you. Director Hailard says you know more about the Tihar Forest than anyone else. He says you can help us, if you will. And I'm not asking favors for old times' sake. Whatever your personal feelings may be, you've got to help us. We'll be very grateful. My father is more important now than he was before. He can do you a lot of good, and I know he'll do anything in his power."

Alston was cautious. "What is all this about?"

Her voice was low. "She was on her honeymoon. A passenger on the *Krajulla*. It was a luxury excursion liner which crashed on Venus three months ago, in case you've forgotten that too."

Memory jogged Alston. "I remember hearing of it."

"Search parties found scattered wreckage in the Tihar Forest. Landing was impossible, for some reason I don't understand, but low-flying helicopters examined the area thoroughly. There was no sign of life. It looked as if everyone on board was killed since even the wreckage was burned almost beyond recognition. Then recently some evidence has been found that suggests a few passengers may have survived, either lost in the wilds or prisoners of the natives. A native killed by a grull-cat hunter was wearing some jewelry we identified as my sister's. We believe that she's alive. Director Hailard says you know more about the Forest

than any other living man. We want you to help find my sister."

Alston grunted. "Hailard knows better than that."

"He said you'd be difficult."

Alston shook his head impatiently. "I don't mean that. If he asks me to go, I haven't much choice. But the rescue party idea is insane. If there were survivors, they're dead now. It would take a large army to comb the Tihar, and even then, if the natives wanted to hide something, there are plenty of ratholes in the cities of the swamp area. You could never find anyone, except by accident. Aside from that, parts of the forest are deadly with radioactivity. You might not recognize your sister if you found her."

"But you will help us?" Kial Nasron pleaded.

Alston temporized. "I'll talk to Hailard." He brushed past the girl and reached the elevators.

A robot-attended elevator took him up. Director Hailard's office was on one of the upper floors.

During the ascent, memory snapped back like a rubber band and flicked him viciously in the face. He turned sick and dizzy as six years unreeled backwards in his mind like a reversed reel of film. Memories of Annelle and her promises, her father and his glib treachery. The trial. His own indecision in the emergency, following orders until too late to save his shipmates.

The past faded from his mind, assumed its relation to present realities. For four years he had planned escape, schooling himself to bleak patience, disciplining himself into an automaton, so that he would execute the necessary motions blindly. Now was the time, his last chance. The Nasrons and their problems did not exist for him any more. Forget them. Nothing was changed. His margin was

dangerously thin. See Hailard, quickly. Get it over. His fingers toyed with the tube of extract in his pocket. Then—

Hailard was busy on the visiphone as Alston knocked and entered. He nodded grimly. Alston settled himself in the victim's chair and waited. Evidently the report was not up from psycho.

The office was no different from a thousand others on Venus; decorated in tasteless, exotic luxury, it was meant to impress the important tourists or visiting Company officials. Alston was not impressed, but he liked the man enthroned like an idol behind a desk of chromium and magnificent Kru-leather. Older than he looked, the director had been a man of action, one of the real explorers of Venus after he had turned from the putty-soft civilization of Earth. Hailard clung to the reins of power and enjoyed contact with his dangerous charges. Alston half-sensed a secret sympathy for his own bleak anger.

Hailard rang off quickly and glowered at Alston. "That was Kial Nasron. She says you claim to have forgotten all connection with her family in the past. Is that correct?"

"That's what I told her," Alston fenced warily. "Sometimes a convict prefers to forget his past contacts. Besides, after four months in Tihar, a man is entitled to a convenient fit of amnesia."

Hailard classified and accepted the implied possibilities. "If you mean that it's wiser to overlook remembered grudges, you may be right. I'm not sure her father will want your help. Kial was away at school when you got into trouble, and knew very little about it or you. Her father's memory may be longer. I didn't realize any connection until I checked your files, or I'd never have suggested you. Either way, you're still the only man for the job. If they ask for you, what will you do?"

"You're asking me?"

"You don't have to answer. I can't order you to go. Neither can Torkeg Nasron. I want you to know your rights, that's all."

Alston was painfully aware of passing time. In imagination he could see the gigantic robot calculators at work in the psychograph laboratory, adding up his brain-wave patterns and collating other evidence to a danger-red question mark.

"I'll decide after they've asked me," he said hurriedly. "Now do you want my report on Tihar?"

Hailard studied him shrewdly. "Forget it. Kial Nasron will be here in a couple of minutes. I'd better tell her more about you, in case she prefers to make other arrangements."

"Good," Alston laughed. "I need some rest. Four months in Tihar is too long. I've felt ill. Nearly passed out in the psycho room...."

Then he was out the door and on his way to the elevators. It was now or never. The tube was in his fingers; a quick jab with the built-in hypo needle. His thumb pressed the plunger and the job was done. Forcing open the elevator door, he tossed the empty tube down the echoing shaft. A car was coming up, but it might not stop on this floor. It was essential that his body be discovered at once. Waves of whirling black nausea roared through him. His last conscious act was to smash an automatic thermocouple fire alarm.

The elevator door was opening. Kial Nasron stood framed against the interior of the car. Her mouth was open in a scream.

Alston's body crumpled suddenly. Light exploded into intolerable bright fragments in his brain. Darkness, endless, complete....

Sharp awake, naked, covered with rough canvas, Alston lay on a slab. Consciousness had returned suddenly. By instinct, fingers reached for his dogtag. It had been removed. His death had been accepted.

Bewildered, he evaluated his surroundings. This was not the vault for bodies consigned to the incinerator. Something had gone wrong.

Explanation came to him. His lips twisted in wry grimace. Of course, all bodies were tested for radioactivity, especially those of convicts who worked in the Tihar Forest. Prolonged exposure had caused pathological change in his body. Enough to arouse clinical curiosity. He had been brought to the dissecting laboratory. This was an unlooked for development. It complicated his escape plan.

It was a large, bare room. Around him were other slabs set on trestles, each occupied by a covered, shapeless form. At the far end, in an alcove were curious flickering lights. Patterns of movement resolved into figures cowed and draped in radiation-proof armor. It was easy to guess at their tasks.

A figure moved toward him through the labyrinth of benches and slabs. At intervals the attendant paused over an uncovered body, extending a hand-sized radiation detector over the lump of cold flesh. After each test, the robed and hooded attendant made a notation in his notebook and marked the chart on each slab. In breathless strain, Alston watched the man's progress toward him.

From the alcove came the whine of an atomic bone-saw, nagging Alston's nerves.

The attendant was close. Alston's turn was next. Eyes closed, he lay still, taking one deep breath and holding it till his brain neared bursting. He sensed physical nearness. A shadow crossed his eyelids. The attendant bent above him,

extending the detector. Its buzzer snarled angrily. Canvas rustled, was withdrawn.

Alston moved. His arm curved in one slashing arc. It was a trick blow learned in his space academy days. One swift slash with the edge of a hand could paralyze a man, stun him for hours. Alston caught the falling body and rolled with it to the tiles.

In silence he dragged the unconscious man under the slab and rapidly stripped off his robes. Swiftly, quietly, Alston donned the radiation-proof garments. The body was hard to lift, but with a minimum of noise and bustle, he got it to the slab, replaced the canvas covering. For jewelled seconds, he waited to see if this disturbance had been noted from the alcove.

Steeling himself to patience, Alston pretended to continue the task of the attendant, working his way from slab to slab and slowly edging toward the swing doors at the end of the loft. It was a grueling, nerve-tightening process. At the last slab he paused, darting a quick survey at the activities within the far alcove. Attention there seemed to be focused upon an immense vat in which flickering lights played. Boldly, Alston stepped through the door.

From a small landing a spiral ramp descended. It was the one visible exit.

As he remembered, the clinical laboratories and dissecting rooms occupied the two top floors, beneath the landing stages on the roof of the VE Building. Apparently there was no direct outlet to the roof from this landing. He would have to risk a descent to the office-floors below. It was a long chance, garbed as he was, but there seemed no help for it. His robes and cowl might disguise him but they were sure to attract attention. He must get other clothes somehow before making his break.

His previous escape plan dealt with the underground tunnels connecting the various buildings. Now a new plan must be made up as he went along, grasping whatever opportunity arose. Probably the best trick would be to reach the roof-landings by elevator and try to steal a 'copter.

Down the ramp he went, abandoning stealth. The first landing he reached was empty, but seemed to open into laboratory rooms. Down again. The ramp opened into a corridor leading to a central landing. Alston tried to remember if Hailard's office were on the floor just under the lofts. At any rate, there were elevators here.

Pressing a stud, he waited for the whine of the car. One was ascending, but he could not guess how close it was.

Waiting, he pressed close against the wall, out of vision range of the opening door. A weapon would be a help, but he might as well wish for the moon.

A hiss of releasing air announced the elevator cage. Silently the door opened, and a humanoid robot emerged. Blank but sensitive metallic eyes fixed on Alston.

Suddenly alarms rang through the echoing corridors. A blinker red signal flashed in the cage, its reflection a splash of blood on the polished frame. The robot hesitated, reaching for the portable transmitter to report below for instructions. Alston barked quick command. Half-turned, the robot touched the transmitter. Alston struck.

His fist crashed into the face plate, numbing his arms to the elbow. A jingle of small mechanical parts rained inside the robot, but the automaton caught at the man. Man and machine fell in a loud tangle, locked in savage, struggling embrace. Alston broke free and smashed in the face plate with a series of blows. His fingers clawed at intricacies of wiring inside. Acrid smoke and a smell of scorched insulation

spiralled forth. The robot sprawled in weirdly human attitude of death.

No use now to descend. Hope of bypassing the guarded lower floors to the tunnels must be abandoned. And unarmed, he could not hope to get past the guards on the roof-landings. The alarm was out.

Inside the cage, he jammed the controls on nonstop descent and sprang back to the landing. Forcing shut the safety door released the car for a shrieking express drop. Uncontrolled, it would crash into fearful wreckage at the tunnel levels.

It would confuse the search momentarily while the debris was examined for his body.

He looked quickly around the landing, found a tablet numbering the rooms and giving directions. He was on the floor of Hailard's office. It gave him an idea. Perhaps he could hold the director as hostage for his escape. At least it would be no worse than his present predicament. Hailard's office would be the last place they would expect him.

He hurried down the corridor.

Hailard's door was closed. Alston flung it open and leaped inside. Kial Nasron and the director faced each other across the desk. Both faces froze, staring at the intrusion. Hailard's hand dipped toward an open drawer.

In tigerish movement, Alston scooped girl and chair from the floor and flung them over the desk into Hailard's lap. The heat gun flamed at random, melting a section of plastic wall. Alston sprang, went over the desk top into a belly-slide. All three of them crashed in a squirming heap on the floor.

Alston wrenched free first and came up with the heat gun in his hand. Pale and furious, Kial Nasron writhed back to the

wall, glaring at the man. Hailard sat up, staring in dazed fixation at the pointing gun.

"It won't do you any good, Alston," he said. "Security police are searching the building."

"We'll see about that," Alston grinned at the girl. "Mr. Hailard and I are exchanging clothes."

After the exchange, Alston smashed the visiphone and inter-office communicator.

"The lady is leaving with me," he warned the director. "So use judgment. If anything happens to me, it happens to her. If anyone gets in my way, I'll blast through. Is that clear?"

Hailard nodded. "Clear to me. Maybe not to the guards on the roof."

Alston's face lighted savagely. "You can come along and explain it to them."

Herding his prisoners before him, Alston marched to the elevator-landing. Hailard pressed the stud for the surviving cage. The car stopped, its door slid open.

Alston gestured toward the transmitter. "Give them your orders and make it good."

Hailard shrugged....

III

Five hours and approximately 1,800 airline miles from Quanta City, Alston switched back from rocket power to the atomic motors. Not daring to use radar for navigation or altitude soundings, he was not certain exactly where he was. Climbing swiftly into the murk, he flew blindly by dead reckoning, and most of the journey was accomplished in or above the miles-deep canopy of dust and vapor which eternally shrouds Venus from all view of other worlds.

On the silver, skimming over the limitless expanse of cloud banks, rainbow-tinted with reflected light, the ship had a view of breath-taking extent. They were somewhere over the Tihar Forest, he knew, and within striking distance of his destination. But until he descended below the obscurity of unbroken mist-seas, the exact position was guesswork. Blades flailing in the thin, stratospheric air, the 'copter slanted downward, settling swiftly. It hovered for seconds above a roil surface of blinding brilliance, then churning grayness enveloped them, limiting vision to a few yards radius.

Temptation to use the sounding device was overwhelming, but he knew that hundreds of spotters were tuning detectors eagerly, hoping for just such a lapse, to triangulate his position. With muttered profanity, he restrained the impulse.

Sparing a moment from peering anxiously below, he eyed Kial Nasron resentfully.

"You should have 'chuted down when I gave you the chance," he told her morosely. "It was a better risk than this."

"I wanted to come," she replied, with a toss of head. "This is the Tihar Forest, isn't it?"

He grinned. "I think so. We'll know in a few minutes if the ceiling is high enough to give me a chance to pull this crate out of the fall. If not, I don't think we'll care."

"I'm an easy pick-up, but hard to shake. Since we're landing, you might untie my hands."

"And have you get foolish notions of grabbing the controls?"

"What good would that do me? I can't fly a 'copter."

Alston stared through the viewports. The ship appeared to be descending a well of infinite depth with featureless gray

walls in which flickered eery light.

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," he admitted. "I had a vague idea of turning you loose with the ship, later on, after I'd smashed the radar and wireless. How d'you expect to get back?"

"We'll figure that out when we come to it," the girl said confidently. "Maybe we can still make a deal. If we find my sister and take us both back, you'll have something to bargain with. My father will make them meet any terms you say."

Alston disillusioned her brutally. "Don't count on it, sister. I'm on a one-way ticket. The penalty for attempted escape is death, in the disintegrators. I've added kidnapping, stealing a ship, and some assorted violence to my record. The least I'd get is life in the deep mines, and I'd prefer the disintegrators to that. You'll have to find yourself another hero."

Kial Nasron fell silent while Alston returned his attention to the controls. Dark rifts appeared in the grayness, became restless mobile patterns, like smoke swirling in a glass. The rotating blades overhead caught denser air and set up curious disturbance areas in the mist. Except for the lessened gravity, like the first moments in a rapidly descending elevator, there was no sense of motion at all. The ship might have been suspended in a dim, mist-shrouded pocket of space.

Tense at the controls, Alston did not turn as she spoke again.

"Perhaps, then, I can make contact with the searching parties, and bargain with them. You don't know my father's influence. He can protect you."

Alston grunted savagely. "No, thanks. I've had dealings with your father. Maybe you don't remember. You were just a kid,

away at school on Earth. He helped railroad me. Figured I was not good enough for Annelle, and that was one way to be rid of me. As if I had a chance, anyhow. That was the joke. They called it sabotage, when the charge should have been negligence under extenuating circumstances. Annelle stood by and let him do it."

He was conscious of her voice, but it sounded distant, unreal.

"Then you did remember. I didn't know much about it. You were a forbidden topic in the house. But you're wrong about Annelle. She cried a lot before she forgot, and even Father talked of having the case re-opened. Nothing came of it. I supposed you were guilty."

"I was. There was a choice of following orders or saving the ship. I waited too long to decide. Men died. They were my friends. That was important, the rest isn't. You're welcome to both your father and your sister. I could even enjoy your predicament if I cared. But I'm past that, long ago. None of you even exist to me."

"Then you won't mind if I try to reach the searching parties? They could take me back—"

He laughed grimly. "And have you lead them to me? I'd be a fool to trust you. Besides, none of them will get this far. None on the surface. And the air patrols can't land. You're stuck with me, sister. And don't expect any favors. I'm not in the mood."

Dark curtains parted suddenly below.

Immensity of somber desolation spread in all directions. The scene was savage, monstrous, rich in vegetation, fitfully lighted by distant volcanic flares. Jungle had stormed and over-run the visible countryside. Like a vast green map it unrolled below them. Directly beneath the plunging 'copter, and perilously close at hand, was a jagged upthrust of bare