

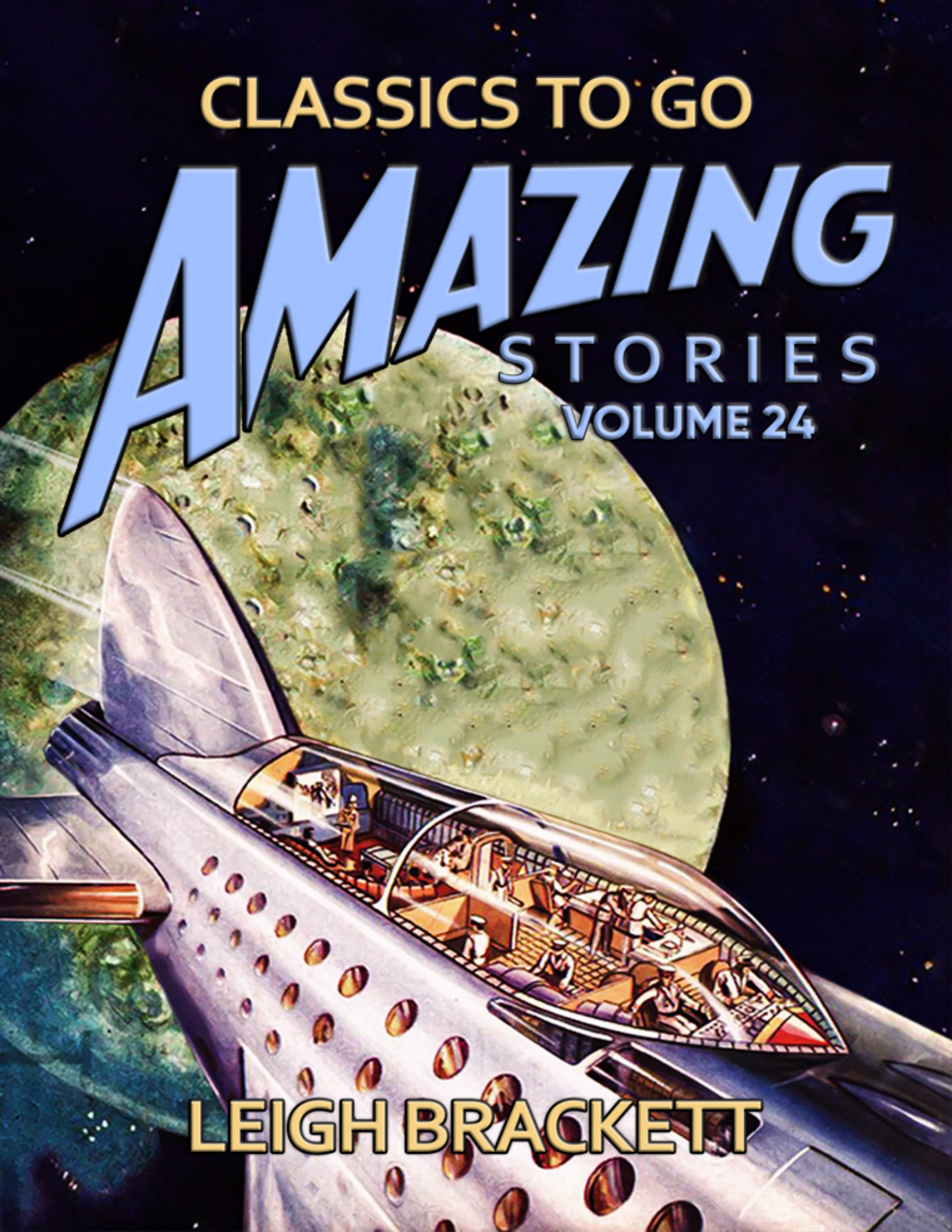
CLASSICS TO GO

AMAZING

STORIES

VOLUME 24

LEIGH BRACKETT



Amazing Stories

Volume 24

Leigh Brackett

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Terror Out of Space

**An eerie story of a silver land beneath the black
Venusian seas. A grim tale of brooding terror whirling
out of space to
drive men mad, of a menace without name or form,
and of the man, Lundy,
who fought the horror, his eyes blinded by his will. For
to see the
terror was to become its slave—a mindless automaton
whose only wish
was to see behind the shadowed mysterious eyelids
of "IT".**

Lundy was flying the aero-space convertible by himself. He'd been doing it for a long time. So long that the bottom half of him was dead to the toes and the top half even deader, except for two separate aches like ulcerated teeth; one in his back, one in his head.

Thick pearly-grey Venusian sky went past the speeding flier in streamers of torn cloud. The rockets throbbed and pounded. Instruments jerked erratically under the swirl of magnetic currents that makes the Venusian atmosphere such a swell place for pilots to go nuts in.

Jackie Smith was still out cold in the co-pilot's seat. From in back, beyond the closed door to the tiny inner cabin, Lundy could hear Farrell screaming and fighting.

He'd been screaming a long time. Ever since the shot of *avertin* Lundy had given him after he was taken had begun

to wear thin. Fighting the straps and screaming, a hoarse jarring sound with no sense in it.

Screaming to be free, because of *It*.

Somewhere inside of Lundy, inside the rumpled, sweat-soaked black uniform of the Tri-World Police, Special Branch, and the five-foot-six of thick springy muscle under it, there was a knot. It was a large knot, and it was very, very cold in spite of the sweltering heat in the cabin, and it had a nasty habit of yanking itself tight every few minutes, causing Lundy to jerk and sweat as though he'd been spiked.

Lundy didn't like that cold tight knot in his belly. It meant he was afraid. He'd been afraid before, plenty of times, and he wasn't ashamed of it. But right now he needed all the brains and guts he had to get *It* back to Special headquarters at Vhia, and he didn't want to have to fight himself, too.

Fear can screw things for you. It can make you weak when you need to be strong, if you're going to go on living. You, and the two other guys depending on you.

Lundy hoped he could keep from getting too much afraid, and too tired—because *It* was sitting back there in its little strongbox in the safe, waiting for somebody to crack.

Farrell was cracked wide open, of course, but he was tied down. Jackie Smith had begun to show signs before he passed out, so that Lundy had kept one hand over the anaesthetic needle gun holstered on the side of his chair. And Lundy thought,

The hell of it is, you don't know when It starts to work on you. There's no set pattern, or if there is we don't know it. Maybe right now the readings I see on those dials aren't there at all....

Down below the torn grey clouds he could see occasional small patches of ocean. The black, still, tideless water of

Venus, that covers so many secrets of the planet's past.

It didn't help Lundy any. It could be right or wrong, depending on what part of the ocean it was—and there was no way to tell. He hoped nothing would happen to the motors. A guy could get awfully wet, out in the middle of that still black water.

Farrell went on screaming. His throat seemed to be lined with impervium. Screaming and fighting the straps, because *it* was locked up and calling for help.

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, and opened his pale green eyes.

"I'm cold," he said. "Hi, Midget."

Lundy turned his head. Normally he had a round, fresh, merry face, with bright dark eyes and a white, small-boyish grin. Now he looked like something the waiter had swept out from under a table at four A.M. on New Year's Day.

"You're cold," he said sourly. He licked sweat off his lips. "Oh, fine! That was all I needed."

Jackie Smith stirred slightly, groaned, to joggle himself. His black tunic was open over his chest, showing the white strapping of bandages, and his left hand was thrust in over the locked top of the tunic's zipper. He was a big man, not any older than Lundy, with big, ugly, pleasant features, a shock of coarse pale hair, and a skin like old leather.

"On Mercury, where I was born," he said, "the climate is suitable for human beings. You Old-World pantywaists...." He broke off, turned white under the leathery burn, and said through set teeth, "Oi! Farrell sure did a good job on me."

"You'll live," said Lundy. He tried not to think about how nearly both he and Smith had come to not living. Farrell had put up one hell of a fight, when they caught up with him in a native village high up in the Mountains of White Cloud.

Lundy still felt sick about that. The bull-meat, the hard boys, you didn't mind kicking around. But Farrell wasn't that kind. He was just a nice guy that got trapped by something too big for him.

A nice guy, crazy blind in love with somebody that didn't exist. A decent hard-working guy with a wife and two kids who'd lost his mind, heart, and soul to a Thing from outer space, so that he was willing to kill to protect It.

Oh, hell! thought Lundy wearily, *won't he ever stop screaming?*

The rockets beat and thundered. The torn grey sky whipped past. Jackie Smith sat rigid, with closed eyes, white around the lips and breathing in shallow, careful gasps. And Vhia was still a long way off.

Maybe farther off than he knew. Maybe he wasn't heading toward Vhia at all. Maybe *It* was working on him, and he'd never know it till he crashed.

The cold knot tightened in his belly like a cold blade stabbing.

Lundy cursed. Thinking things like that was a sure way to punch your ticket right straight to blazes.

But you couldn't help thinking, about *It*. The Thing you had caught in a special net of tight-woven metal mesh, aiming at something Farrell could see but you couldn't. The Thing you had forced into the glassite box and covered up with a black cloth, because you had been warned not to look at *It*.

Lundy's hands tingled and burned, not unpleasantly. He could still feel the small savage Thing fighting him, hidden in the net. It had felt vaguely cylindrical, and terribly alive.

Life. Life from outer space, swept out of a cloud of cosmic dust by the gravitic pull of Venus. Since Venus had hit the cloud there had been a wave of strange madness on the

planet. Madness like Farrell's, that had led to murder, and some things even worse.

Scientists had some ideas about that life from Out There. They'd had a lucky break and found one of The Things, dead, and there were vague stories going around of a crystalline-appearing substance that wasn't really crystal, about three inches long and magnificently etched and fluted, and supplied with some odd little gadgets nobody would venture an opinion about.

But the Thing didn't do them much good, dead. They had to have one alive, if they were going to find out what made it tick and learn how to put a stop to what the telecommentators had chosen to call The Madness from Beyond, or The Vampire Lure.

One thing about it everybody knew. The guys who suddenly went sluggish and charged off the rails all made it clear that they had met the ultimate Dream Woman of all women and all dreams. Nobody else could see her, but that didn't bother them any. They saw her, and she was—*She*. And her eyes were always veiled.

And *She* was a whiz at hypnosis and mind-control. That's why *She*, or *It*, hadn't been caught alive before. Not before Lundy and Smith, with every scientific aid Special could give them, had tracked down Farrell and managed to get the breaks.

The breaks. Plain fool luck. Lundy moved his throbbing head stiffly on his aching neck, blinked sweat out of his bloodshot eyes, and wished to hell he was home in bed.

Jackie Smith said suddenly, "Midget, I'm cold. Get me a blanket."

Lundy looked at him. His pale green eyes were half open, but not as though they saw anything. He was shivering.

"I can't leave the controls, Jackie."

"Nuts. I've got one hand. I can hang onto this lousy tin fish that long."

Lundy scowled. He knew Smith wasn't kidding about the cold. The temperatures on Mercury made the first-generation colonists sensitive to anything below the range of an electric furnace. With the wound and all, Smith might, wind up with pneumonia if he wasn't covered.

"Okay." Lundy reached out and closed the switch marked A. "But I'll let Mike do the flying. He can probably last five minutes before he blows his guts out."

Iron Mike was just a pattycake when it came to Venusian atmosphere flying. The constant magnetic compensation heated the robot coils to the fusing point in practically no time at all.

Lundy thought fleetingly that it was nice to know there were still a couple of things men could do better than machinery.

He got up, feeling like something that had stood outside rusting for four hundred years or so. Smith didn't turn his head. Lundy growled at him.

"Next time, sonny, you wear your long woolen undies and let me alone!"

Then he stopped. The knot jerked tight in his stomach. Cold sweat needled him, and his nerves stung in a swift rush of fire.

Farrell had quit screaming.

There was silence in the ship. Nothing touched it. The rockets were outside it and didn't matter. Even Jackie Smith's careful breathing had stopped. Lundy went forward slowly, toward the door. Two steps.

It opened. Lundy stopped again, quite still.

Farrell was standing in the opening. A nice guy with a wife and two kids. His face still looked like that, but the eyes in it were not sane, nor even human.

Lundy had tied him down to the bunk with four heavy straps. Breast, belly, thighs, and feet. The marks of them were on Farrell. They were cut into his shirt and pants, into his flesh and sinew, deep enough to show his bare white ribs. There was blood. A lot of blood. Farrell didn't mind.

"I broke the straps," he said. He smiled at Lundy. "She called me and I broke the straps."

He started to walk to the safe in the corner of the cabin. Lundy gagged and pulled himself up out of a cold black cloud and got his feet to moving.

Jackie Smith said quietly, "Hold it, Midget. She doesn't like it there in the safe. She's cold, and she wants to come out."

Lundy looked over his shoulder. Smith was hunched around in his seat, holding the needle-gun from Lundy's holster on the pilot's chair. His pale green eyes had a distant, dreamy glow, but Lundy knew better than to trust it.

He said, without inflection, "You've seen her."

"No. No, but—I've heard her." Smith's heavy lips twitched and parted. The breath sucked through between them, hoarse and slow.

Farrell went down on his knees beside the safe. He put his hands on its blank and gleaming face and turned to Lundy. He was crying.

"Open it. You've got to open it. She wants to come out. She's frightened."

Jackie Smith raised the gun, a fraction of an inch. "Open it, Midget," he whispered. "She's cold in there."

Lundy stood still. The sweat ran on him and he was colder than a frog's belly in the rain; and for no reason at all he said thickly,

"No. She's hot. She can't breathe in there. She's hot."

Then he jerked his head up and yelled. He came around to face Smith, unsteady but fast, and started for him.

Smith's ugly face twisted as though he might be going to cry. "Midget! I don't want to shoot you. Open the safe!"

Lundy said, "You damned fool," with no voice at all, and went on.

Smith hit the firing stud.

The anaesthetic needles hit Lundy across the chest. They didn't hurt much. Just a stinging prick. He kept going. No reason. It was just something he seemed to be doing at the time.

Behind him Farrell whimpered once like a puppy and lay down across the little safe. He didn't move again. Lundy got down on his hands and knees and reached in a vague sort of way for the controls. Jackie Smith watched him with dazed green eyes.

Quite suddenly, Iron Mike blew his guts out.

The control panel let go a burst of blue flame. The glare and heat of it knocked Lundy backward. Things hissed and snarled and ran together, and the convertible began to dance like a leaf in a gale. The automatic safety cut the rockets dead.

The ship began to fall.

Smith said something that sounded like *She* and folded up in his chair. Lundy rubbed his hand across his face. The lines of it were blurred and stupid. His dark eyes had no sense in them.

He began to crawl over the lurching floor toward the safe.

The clouds outside ripped and tore across the ship's nose, and presently only water showed. Black, still, tideless water dotted with little islands of floating weed that stirred and slithered with a life of their own.

Black water, rushing up.

Lundy didn't care. He crawled through Farrell's blood, and he didn't care about that, either. He pushed Farrell's body back against the cabin wall and began to scratch at the shiny door, making noises like a hound shut out and not happy about it.

The ship hit the water with a terrific smack. Spray geysered up, dead white against the black sea, fell back, and closed in. Presently even the ripples went away.

Dark green weed-islands twined sinuously upon themselves, a flock of small sea-dragons flapped their jeweled wings down and began to fish, and none of them cared at all about the ship sinking away under them.

Not even Lundy cared, out cold in the space-tight cabin, with his body wedged up against the safe and tears drying with the sweat on his stubbled cheeks.

II

The first thing Lundy knew about was the stillness. A dead feeling, as though everything in creation had stopped breathing.

The second thing was his body. It hurt like hell, and it was hot, and it didn't like the thick, foul air it was getting. Lundy pushed himself into a sitting position and tried to boot his brain into action. It was hard work, because someone had split his head open four ways with an axe.

It wasn't really dark in the cabin. A wavering silver glow almost like moonlight came in through the ports. Lundy could see pretty well. He could see Farrell's body sprawled out on the floor, and a mess of junk that had once been equipment.

He could see the safe.

He looked at it a long time. There wasn't much to look at. Just an open safe with nothing in it, and a piece of black cloth dropped on the floor.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh, my Lord!"

Everything hit him at once then. There wasn't much in him but his stomach, and that was tied down. But it tried hard to come up. Presently the spasms stopped, and then Lundy heard the knocking.

It wasn't very loud. It had a slow, easy rhythm, as though the knocker had a lot of time and didn't care when he got in. It came from the airlock panel.

Lundy got up. Slowly, cold as a toad's belly and as white. His lips drew back from his teeth and stayed there, frozen.

The knocking kept on. A sleepy kind of sound. The guy outside could afford to wait. Sometime that locked door was going to open, and he could wait. He wasn't in a hurry. He would never be in a hurry.

Lundy looked all around the cabin. He didn't speak. He looked sideways out of the port. There was water out there. The black sea-water of Venus; clear and black, like deep night.

There was level sand spreading away from the ship. The silver light came up out of it. Some kind of phosphorescence, as bright as moonlight and faintly tinged with green.

Black sea-water. Silver sand. The guy kept on knocking at the door. Slow and easy. Patient. One—two. One—two. Just off beat with Lundy's heart.

Lundy went to the inner cabin, walking steadily. He looked around carefully and then went back. He stopped by the lock panel.

"Okay, Jackie," he said. "In a minute. In a minute, boy."

Then he turned and went very fast to the port locker and got a quart bottle out of its shock cradle, and raised it. It took both hands.

After a while he dropped the bottle and stood still, not looking at anything, until he stopped shaking. Then he pulled his vac-suit down off its hook and climbed into it. His face was grey and quite blank.

He took all the oxygen cylinders he could carry, emergency rations, and all the benzedrine in the medicine kit. He put the limit dose of the stimulant down on top of the brandy before he locked his helmet. He didn't bother with the needle gun. He took the two Service blasters—his own, and Smith's. The gentle knocking didn't stop.

He stood for a moment looking at the open safe and the black cloth dropped beside it. Something cruel came into his face. A tightness, a twitching and setting of the muscles, and a terrible look of patience.

Being under water wouldn't bother a Thing from outer space. He reached up and lifted the net of tight-woven metal-mesh down off its hook and fastened it on his belt. Then he walked over and opened the airlock door.

Black water swirled in around his weighted boots, and then the door opened wide and Jackie Smith came in.

He'd been waiting in the flooded lock chamber. Kicking his boots against the inner door, easy, with the slow breathing of the sea. Now the water pushed his feet down and held him upright from behind, so he could walk in and stand looking at Lundy. A big blond man with green eyes, and white bandages

strapped under his open black tunic, looking at Lundy. Not long. Only for a second. But long enough.

Lundy stopped himself after the third scream. He had to, because he knew if he screamed again he'd never stop. By that time the black water had pushed Jackie Smith away, over to the opposite wall, and covered his face.

"Oh, Lord," whispered Lundy. "Oh Lord, *what did he see before he drowned?*"

No one answered. The black water pushed at Lundy, rising high around him, trying to take him over to Jackie Smith. Lundy's mouth began to twitch.

He shut his teeth on his lower lip, holding it, holding his throat. He began to run, clumsily, fighting the water, and then he stopped that, too. He walked, not looking behind him, out into the flooded lock. The door slid shut behind him, automatically.

He walked out across the firm green-silver sand, swallowing the blood that ran in his mouth and choked him.

He didn't hurry. He was going to be walking for a long, long time. From the position of the ship when it fell he ought to be able to make it to the coast—unless *it* had been working on him so the figures on the dials hadn't been there at all.

He checked his direction, adjusted the pressure-control in his vac-suit, and plodded on in the eerie undersea moonlight. It wasn't hard going. If he didn't hit a deep somewhere, or meet something too big to handle, or furnish a meal for some species of hungry Venus-weed, he ought to live to face up to the Old Man at H.Q. and tell him two men were dead, the ship lost, and the job messed to hell and gone.

It was beautiful down there. Like the dream-worlds you see when you're doped or delirious. The phosphorescence rose up into the black water and danced there in wavering whorls

of cold fire. Fish, queer gaudy little things with jewelled eyes, flicked past Lundy in darts of sudden color, and there were great stands of weed like young forests, spangling the dark water and the phosphorescent glow with huge burning spots of blue and purple and green and silver.

Flowers. Lundy got too close to some of them once. They reached out and opened round mouths full of spines and sucked at him hungrily. The fish gave them a wide berth. After that, so did Lundy.

He hadn't been walking more than half an hour when he hit the road.

It was a perfectly good road, running straight across the sand. Here and there it was cracked, with some of the huge square blocks pushed up or tipped aside, but it was still a good road, going somewhere.

Lundy stood looking at it with cold prickles running up and down his spine. He'd heard about things like this. Nobody knew an awful lot about Venus yet. It was a young, tough, be-damned-to-you planet, and it was apt to give the snoopy scientific guys a good swift boot in their store teeth.

But even a young planet has a long past, and stories get around. Legends, songs, folk tales. It was pretty well accepted that a lot of Venus that was under water now hadn't been once, and vice versa. The old girl had her little whimsies while doing the preliminary mock-up of her permanent face.

So once upon a time this road had crossed a plain under a hot pearl-grey sky, going somewhere. Taking caravans from the seacoast, probably. Bales of spices and spider-silk and casks of *vakhi* from the Nahali canebrakes, and silver-haired slave-girls from the high lands of the Cloud People, going along under sultry green *liha*-trees to be sold.

Now it crossed a plain of glowing sand under still black water. The only trees that shadowed it were tall weeds with brilliant, hungry flowers, and the only creatures that followed it were little fish with jewelled eyes. But it was still there, still ready, still going somewhere.

It was headed the same way Lundy was. It must have made a bend somewhere and turned to meet him. Lundy licked cold sweat off his lips and stepped out on it.

He stepped slow and careful, like a man coming alone down the aisle of an empty church.

He walked on the road for a long time. The weeds crowded in thicker along its edges. It seemed to run right through a dense forest of them that spread away as far as Lundy could see on either side. He was glad of the road. It was wide, and if he stayed in the middle of it the flowers couldn't reach him.

It got darker, because of the weeds covering the sand. Whatever made the phosphorescence didn't like being crowded that way, and pretty soon it was so dark that Lundy had to switch on the light in the top of his helmet. In the edges of the beam he could see the weed fronds moving lazily with the slow breathing of the sea.

The flowers were brighter here. They hung like lamps in the black water, burning with a light that seemed to come out of themselves. Sullen reds and angry yellows, and coldly vicious blues.

Lundy didn't like them.

The weeds grew in thicker and closer. They bulged out from their roots, in over the stone edges. The flowers opened their bright hungry mouths and yearned at Lundy, reaching.

Reaching. Not quite touching. Not yet. He was tired. The brandy and the benzedrine began to die in him. He changed

his oxygen cylinder. That helped, but not much. He took more dope, but he was afraid to go heavy on it lest he drive his heart too hard. His legs turned numb.

He hadn't slept for a long time. Tracking Farrell hadn't been any breeze, and taking him—and *It*—had been plain and fancy hell. Lundy was only human. He was tired. Bushed. Cooked. Beat to the socks.

He sat down and rested a while, turning off his light to save the battery. The flowers watched him, glowing in the dark. He closed his eyes, but he could still feel them, watching and waiting.

After a minute or two he got up and went on.

The weeds grew thicker, and taller, and heavier with flowers.

More benzedrine, and damn the heart. The helmet light cut a cold white tunnel through the blackness. He followed it, walking faster. Weed fronds met and interlaced high above him, closing him in. Flowers bent inward, downward. Their petals almost brushed him. Fleshy petals, hungry and alive.

He started to run, over the wheel-ruts and the worn hollows of the road that still went somewhere, under the black sea.

Lundy ran clumsily for a long time between the dark and pressing walls. The flowers got closer. They got close enough to catch his vac-suit, like hands grasping and slipping and grasping again. He began using the blaster.

He burned off a lot of them that way. They didn't like it. They began swaying in from their roots and down from the laced ceiling over his head. They hurt. They were angry. Lundy ran, sobbing without tears.

The road did him in. It crossed him up, suddenly, without warning. It ran along smoothly under the tunnel of weeds, and then it was a broken, jumbled mass of huge stone

blocks, tipped up and thrown around like something a giant's kid got tired of playing with.

And the weeds had found places to stand in between them.

Lundy tripped and fell, cracking his head against the back of his helmet. For a moment all he could see was bright light flashing. Then that stopped, and he realized he must have jarred a connection loose somewhere because his own light was out.

He began to crawl over a great tilted block. The flowers burned bright in the darkness. Bright and close. Very close. Lundy opened his mouth. Nothing came out but a hoarse animal whimper. He was still holding the blaster. He fired it off a couple of times, and then he was on top of the block, lying flat on his belly.

He knew it was the end of the line, because he couldn't move any more.

The bright flowers came down through the dark. Lundy lay watching them. His face was quite blank. His dark eyes held a stubborn hatred, but nothing else.

He watched the flowers fasten on his vac-suit and start working. Then, from up ahead, through the dark close tunnel of the weeds, he saw the light.

It flared out suddenly, like lightning. A sheet of hot, bright gold cracking out like a whipped banner, lighting the end of the road.

Lighting the city, and the little procession coming out of it.

Lundy didn't believe any of it. He was half dead already, with his mind floating free of his body and beginning to be wrapped up in dark clouds. He watched what he saw incuriously.

The golden light died down, and then flared out twice more, rhythmically. The road ran smooth again beyond the end of