

“The Woman in Skin 13”

by

Paul W. Fairman

Fantastic Adventures

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THE LION'S MOUTH By STEPHEN MARLOWE

fantastic

ADVENTURES



Hatred of the Green Menace
turned Mary into

THE WOMAN IN SKIN 13

By Gerald Vance

The Woman in Skin 13

Paul W. Fairman

*To do this job in the best Mata Hari tradition, was to incur a "fate worse than death".
But Mary Winston was a girl who had a lot of faith in fate.*

The ship came down into Lake Michigan around four o'clock in the morning early in the month of June. It came very quietly for so large a ship, and the people riding it were amazingly swift and dreadfully efficient. Like a deadly plague they moved in on Chicago, and before anyone got around to doing anything about the invasion, it was too late.

They had a vast assortment of weapons. On the basis of results achieved, the Army certified to: (1) a hand weapon, utilizing heat as ammunition, which left little of its target in recognizable condition; (2) a portable ray mechanism which functioned as a hypnotic inducer, turning crowds of angry, bewildered, or hostile, people into little better than docile cattle herds; (3) some device for doming over a given area under, a thickness of vibration - probably ultrasonic - capable of prematurely exploding any missile known to the Army. This curtain was also lethal.

The invaders obviously moved by a carefully preconceived plan. Their first objective was the complete ejection of native population from a pre-fixed area - this area being the City of Chicago and suburbs, to a perimeter of farm land, forest, and open country. They were markedly humane during this operation, killing as few of the residents as possible, and showing every consideration so far as was practicable to the aged, babies, mothers, small children, and cripples.

They were chillingly inhuman in their insistence on complete evacuation, even to the sick from the hospitals and the insane from asylums both public and private. They were masters in the art of swift, competent administration, achieving the complete evacuation in less than two days; protecting themselves the while from outside attack, and carrying out every detail of the invasion and ejection with an efficiency beyond belief.

The nation seemed to rally to its own defense with a surprising, lack of panic and disruption. This, however, was probably the fault of the invaders themselves, the swift completion of their self-appointed and seemingly impossible task having had a shattering effect upon the mind and morale of the people; thus causing a state of stunned bewilderment that could easily be misinterpreted as quiet courage.

The rallying and the counter attack had little constructive effect, however. It resulted in nothing more than the drawing of a tight military ring around the invaded area.

One got the uneasy impression, however, that the tight circle was allowed to exist only by courtesy of the invaders; that it was tolerated because they did not desire - at least at the time - to expand their holdings.

Their defense perimeter was so solid and impenetrable as to constitute complete isolation of the invaded area. No branch of the American government even pretended to know what was going on inside the perimeter.

The period of invasion, evacuation attempts and complete failures at counter-invasion, lasted somewhat over two weeks. During the attempted counterassault, the intruders made no hostile gestures other than those of defending themselves. And finally the Army was forced to pause and reconsider - much as a stunned and bloodied man must pause and reconsider after butting his head against a stone wall.

The invaders, according to the refugees and the counter-attackers, were of two colors. The males were of a violet hue; the females, all the same shade, of green. Physically, both sexes were, according to Earth

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standards, magnificent specimens. They wore little clothing, but seemed entirely comfortable even in the comparative chill of night and early morning.

That, was about all anyone knew of them - or so the general public thought.

MARY WINSTON had been on call for over a week when her phone rang. To a C4 agent, "on call" meant staying home within reach of the telephone, until summoned to headquarters. Mary had spent periods as long as thirty days in this boring state. But under present circumstances, the inactive week had seemed like six months.

Her-call came at one p.m. on the eighth day. She snatched up the phone and tried to sound impersonal; tried to keep the elation out of her voice.

"This is Mark Clayton," the voice said. "We're ready for you."

"I'll be right down."

"Twenty minutes?"

"Ten."

The answer might have been a chuckle. "Fine. Come straight to my office."

Mary overestimated her own speed by two and a half minutes, but there was no censure from the chief as she entered his office.

Mark Clayton looked young for his job. Head of C4, the top echelon of Government Intelligence, the department always depended on him when the going was toughest.

He put his pipe into an ashtray and said, "Sit down, Mary. I don't think they're quite ready for us yet. We'll use the time for a short preliminary briefing."

Mary Winston had not spoken as yet. She took the chair indicated, crossed her ankles, and waited. Mark Clayton let his eyes travel slowly downward, from her blonde head to the brown-and-white pumps she wore so effectively.

An observer would never have suspected these two had dined and danced together not two weeks before; that Mark had kissed Mary good night and had been kissed in return. The look in his eyes as he surveyed her now was impersonal, calculating, analytical.

He said, "We have a job that fits you to a T. This is a clause-five proposition, though. I wish you'd turn it down."

A clause-five job was one which came under certain of the small type in an agent's commission; a job - entailing hazards which an agent was not required to undergo.

"I've never invoked the clause yet, Mr. Clayton," Mary said, "and I never intend to." *Mr. Clayton!* That was the name she'd used the night she'd kissed him back. But they'd been two other people at the time. Now they were chief and subordinate, and one of the basic requirements of an agent was a sense of proportion.

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Mark sighed. “No, you haven’t. Nor did I expect you to this time. My statement was just a required formality.”

MARY DID-not reply. But in her mind there was a certain satisfaction; a knowledge that she affected him more than his casual front indicated.

She remained silent and Mark said, “We’ve gotten a break in Chicago.”

“I’m glad.”

“Maybe, I’m optimistic in calling it a break. Let’s say we’ve been given a slight advantage that we may be able to turn into, a break. It depends on you.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Mark’s smile was fleeting, barely perceptible. He said, “It will entail your removing your clothing and going around practically naked.”

“If it’s necessary, I can do that too,” Mary replied evenly.

Mark sat down behind his desk, tipped, his eyes to the ceiling, and began talking. “About a week ago, one of the females of the Chicago invaders strayed outside their ray-curtain. Our men captured her. She was brought here. She’s in the building now.

“We drugged her and put her under the monitor. In two days we had everything we could get from her: a broad though somewhat sketchy background-concerning her race and where she came from.”

“Nothing of their plans and objectives?”

Mark frowned. “She didn’t know a great deal about that; only that they plan to stay.”

“Did you learn anything of their weapons?”

Mark shook his head. “No. She appears to be one of the foot soldiers straight out of the ranks. She knows how to use both their hypno-ray and their heat weapon, but she hasn’t got the foggiest notion of what makes either of them tick.”

“I take it then that both males and females are active fighters. Are they rated equally?”

Mark smiled. The twinkle in his eyes was almost personal. “It would appear that the female is rated the higher; that is, if we haven’t underestimated the girl’s ego.”

Possibly this was supposed to draw a spark, but it didn’t. After a moment, Mark went on; “You probably have a pretty good idea already of what your assignment entails.”

“The one I’d naturally assume presents obstacles. You said these people had a definite and unmistakable coloring.”

Mark arose from his chair. “Let’s go on with the second phase of the briefing.”

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He led Mary through an inner doorway and down a long corridor. He stopped finally and opened another doorway. They entered a small room in which two other people awaited them.

“You’ve met Prof Halley,” Mark said.

“Of course. How do you do, Professor.”

Halley’s bright eyes took Mary in with appreciation and complete lack of impersonality. “Hello, darling. Long time no see. Have they picked you for this suicide run?”

Mary smiled. Halley was a fussy little chemist - privileged as all geniuses are privileged - and the people who knew him lost the ability to be offended at his frank eyes and franker speech.

“That’s what they tell me,” Mary said.

HER EYES moved naturally to the fourth occupant of the room. A girl lying wide-eyed upon a table, covered from the neck down by a white sheet. The sheet outlined a long, symmetrical body with which any Earth girl would have been delighted. Also, the contours of the finely molded face met all Earth standards of feminine beauty.

Only the complexion set this female apart. It was of a soft apple-green. Strangely, it was not repulsive. Rather, the effect was that of an exquisite and beautiful mask over a lovely face. The only unpleasant touch - the only flaw - was in the open, staring eyes - unnatural, vacant. But this did not detract too much from the perfection of the over-all picture, because one sensed that the resuming expression. was unnatural.

Without preamble or ceremony, Professor Halley jerked the sheet from the girl’s body, revealing uncovered symmetry and the soft, apple-green coloring broken only by two white bandages around, the thigh of the left leg.

Professor Halley chuckled in delight. “This one was a lulu. Really a lulu, but I licked it. By heaven I licked it! In less than a week I analyzed the pigmentation, got a formula in only thirteen attempts, and made up a dye that’s identical in every respect. The dye stands up even under ultraviolet.”

Halley’s boasting was excusable in that it was more an expression of delight than of ego. He turned to Mary, surveying her critically. “And now, darling - if you’ll just shuck off your duds; we’ll get to work.”

A little of the sudden fright within her mirrored through Mary’s eyes. “You mean - ”

Mark stepped close and laid a hand gently upon her shoulder. “There’s still clause five,” he said.

Mary stiffened. “I wish you’d stop implying that I’m afraid of this assignment. I’m just asking that it be put into plain words. I take it I’m to be dyed green.”

“Not now - not this minute,” Halley said cheerfully. “There’s some preliminary work. Measurements, so we’ll be absolutely sure you fit the physical requirements; skin tests, so we won’t be floundering around in the dark when we do the actual dying job. But there isn’t too much time, darling. Get your clothes off.”

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Mary glanced at Mark, her look eloquent. She had no great objection to stripping before Halley, not if it came in the line of duty. There was something entirely sexless about the little chemist that made for a lack of embarrassment. But Mark ...

The C4 Chief understood. "I'll run along and leave you in the Professor's hands. Come back to the office when you're through."

He left the room without looking back. Halley bent over and picked up the fallen sheet, tossing it to Mary. "You can strip behind that screen," he said unconcernedly. "Then take the other table."

Mary went behind the screen, and as she undressed she saw Halley leaning over the green girl, minutely studying a section of her breast under a large reading glass.

TEN MINUTES later, after exhaustive measurements had been taken, Mary also lay upon a table with Halley's high-powered glass trained upon her skin. Halley seemed delighted with what he discovered.

Halley said, "The dying job will be a cinch. The least of your worries. The important thing is whether or not you'll have the mental strength to retain your own, personality under the conditioning."

"Then they plan to go - all the way?"

"Of course. Anything short of that would be more dangerous calculated mental risk. You see, we're in the dark concerning these people. They may have ways of learning true identities that we know nothing about. The only answer is to *be* the party under whose colors you're masquerading."

Mary smiled in spite of herself as Halley stepped back and laid down his instruments. "That's all for now. I'll make some lab-checks, but things will work out fine."

He was now bending over the green girl and called after Mary who was dressing behind the screen. "Oh, darling, I forgot to tell you. You'll be in bed, blindfolded, for two days. That's when we'll inject the deeper shade of green onto your irises."

Suddenly Mary wanted to get out of the room. Ready to leave, she brushed past Halley and deliberately avoided looking at the green girl.

Once in the long corridor, she stopped to compose herself. She stood for a moment biting her lip; sternly telling herself she wasn't afraid - that it was just the strangeness, the newness of the assignment. Possibly she did not convince herself, but there was no sign of faltering as she marched into Mark Clayton's office.

THERE WAS a delay, however, before she completed the act of entering. A voice over Mark Clayton's interoffice visiphone brought Mary to an unconscious halt with the well-oiled door open only slightly.

Mary was not given to eavesdropping, but the incident was precipitated so suddenly that she found herself doing it without thinking. Then, a few moments having, passed, she hesitated to either back, away and let the door close, or to enter Mark's office. Now she became lost in the conversation beyond the door.

The President of the United States was saying, "The news from the Army is pretty bad, Mark. I get the feeling we're absolutely at the mercy of these creatures."

"They seem satisfied with what they, have, sir."

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The President's voice was a trifle sharp. "That sounds to me like the wrong attitude, Mark. Chicago is an American city - remember? They threw American citizens out bodily -"

"I didn't mean it that way, sir. I consider it an advantage in that it gives us time. Acceptance of the situation is of course out of the question."

The President seemed mollified. "Oh, I see. Well, you've got a point there."

"I've got more than that, sir. I've got the girl we need. Halley just phoned me that the tests are favorable. We'll have her in their camp within a week."

There was a pause. Then, "I don't know, Mark. I'd say it's a long shot; a tremendously long shot."

"Of course it is, sir - but -"

"Does she know about — the other half of the plan?"

"No. I haven't told her. By the way - what's the latest on the South American bloc? Any word?"

"None at all. It looks to me as though the fools consider this action a break-in their favor - as though they are still playing Earth politics. We can't, of course, bid for a healing of the rupture. With Asia tottering in the balance, that would be suicidal."

MARY COULD visualize Mark biting solemnly upon the battered stem of his pipe. "I'd say our only hope is to solve this Chicago problem and regain our territory. For some unaccountable reason, the whole world seems to view; it as our personal misfortune. They don't view it as a world threat at all."

"I think I know the reason for that."

"I'd appreciate hearing it, sir."

"They think we can contain and lick it. Regardless of present alignments, we're still looked upon as the first world power. They're all afraid of us. Even Sargo wouldn't dare attack openly."

"But the longer these attackers from outer space hold Chicago, the lower our stock falls on the world market. We've got to get in and find out something about them."

"You're absolutely sure of your operator?"

"I'd back her to the hilt," Mark said.

"And you're sure complete conditioning is a good idea? What if our scanners aren't able to penetrate that ray curtain of theirs?"

"It's a calculated risk, sir. But I've checked exhaustively with our top brains on the subject. They say it can."

"Very, well, Mark. I'll leave it up to you. Keep me posted."

Mary pushed open the door in exact coincidence with the fading of the president's image on Mark's video-screen. Mark looked up and gave her a brief, impersonal smile. "All finished with Halley?"

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“For the time being.”

“Fine. Sit down. I hope he wasn’t too rough on you.”

Mary dropped into a chair. “No one minds Professor Halley. He’s a - I guess you’d call him a character.”

“That about sums him up. Have you decided you want to take this assignment?”

“I was never in doubt.”

“Then I’ll really get down to brass tacks. As you’ve of course figured out, we plan to dress you in an attractive shade of green and send you behind the enemy lines. We’ve got to find out the nature of the weapons holding us helpless. We’ve got to get some data on the plans of those beautiful green and purple people. We’ve got to go on the supposition that they have a weakness. And we’ve got to find that weakness.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Mark frowned, hesitated. “I want you to undergo complete conditioning, Mary. There’s so much at stake. I’m not saying you couldn’t achieve your objective without it, but - but we don’t know these people. We don’t dare underestimate their cleverness.”

“I’m perfectly willing to go all out.”

Mark got up suddenly, rounded his desk and took Mary’s hands into his own. “Sometimes I get sick of this thing called patriotism - this doing the job in spite of heart, hell, or high water.” He dropped her hands and took a quick turn around the room. “I wish you weren’t an absolute natural for the job. The only agent we’ve got with both the looks and the brains.”

Mary smiled at him, and a trace of tenderness slipped into the smile. “Let’s get on with it, Mr. Clayton.”

COMPLETE conditioning. Mary lay on a cot under a white sheet. Beside her lay the beautiful green girl. Between the two cots was a compact, though complicated, unit which had been rolled in on four rubber-tired wheels. It was in the complete charge of two white-coated young men who had impersonal efficiency written all over them.

One of the young men sat before a board covered with dials, a headset over his ears. He touched the dials at various times and with various pressures.

The other young man held a position at the upper ends of the cots, giving concentrated attention to the two subjects. He wore a stethoscope which he applied to each chest periodically, checking against a large second-dial on the wall. At intervals he took from his vest pocket a pencil light that flashed a rhythmic beat when pointed at the flesh under the subject’s eyelids.

Nearby stood Mark Clayton, taking in the scene in brooding silence.

Complete conditioning. The transfer of an entire consciousness-image from one mind to another. The creation of a complete new personality in one brain pattern, superimposed over the memory, the subconscious, and the consciousness in the brain tissues of the receiving subject. The taking of a brain-picture from one skull and its secure anchoring into another.

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The creation of mental twins with the aid of new science.

Mary closed her eyes and deliberately composed her features in order that the panic in her heart be hidden. She was familiar with the implications of complete conditioning, but this was her first actual experience as a receiving subject.

She comforted herself with thoughts of the scanner. It was a sure antidote. The scanner would always reflect her true personality. And when it was all over, the scanner would ...

FOR THOUSANDS of sectors, the *Narkus* - great self-sufficient steel world that it was - had swung in a wide orbit through space. Unnumbered sectors, during which time-the old Argans had died; new ones had been born; honored genealogies had been established.

A religion had sprung from the fiber of these people and a history supported their dignity. And the history and the religion were curiously intermingled. It was written in the book that: *In the beginning there was Argan, and much strife, because certain of the tribes became stiff-necked and contemptuous of their brothers.*

And the time when bitterness and hatred caused the tribes to split asunder and death and destruction lay over the face of the land.

And a time when evil triumphed over good and the good were driven into hiding while their gods forsook them.

And a time when the revered fathers of the beaten tribes put dirt upon their own heads and went into the caves to pray to the gods.

And a time when the gods heard the prayer of the fathers and took them by the hand and led them to a great cave.

And a time when the gods said, "We will not forsake a Just people. Call into this cave your enlightened sons. Bid them build a world of steel four hundred times larger than the little worlds in which you ride above the land of Argan. Bid them labor long and hard, and during the time of the building your gods will protect you from the hatred of your enemies.

And a time when the fathers rejoiced IN this favor from the gods and called in all the good and just technicians - all the good and just scientists all the good and just laborers who came and rejoiced also at this favor from the gods ...

MARY WRITHED under the disciplinary pain of the conditioning. Her eyes opened and she saw Mark standing by Mark? Who was Mark? Glan, that's not Mark. Then the sickening horror of realization.

Glan was dead.

She closed her eyes. The white-coated young man lifted her left eye-lid, and for a moment she saw the room blurred and out of focus.

She heard quiet voices - voices filled with concern - but none of them was the voice of Glan.

Somebody said, "Anything wrong?"

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“An overcharge.”

“What does that mean?”

“It could mean any of a dozen things, but it's probably the result of too strong an ultrasonic feed. This is a delicate process, Mr. Clayton. It doesn't go by blueprint. We have to feel our way at times.”

“Be careful. Please be extremely careful.”

There was no answer, only the subdued hum of the conditioner and the breathing of the white-coated man leaning over Mary. Mary's legs, the muscles across her abdomen, the cords of her neck, had stiffened. Now they relaxed. The sense of peace returned...

And a time when life in the great cave spanned several generations. But the good and the just people never lost faith in their gods and the gods kept faith with the good and the just. And this was the Second Epoch.

And a time when the new world was finished in all its mighty, steel-ribbed glory, and there was great rejoicing, although the revered fathers who had talked with the gods were long dead, and the first technicians and scientists were dust in the lower caves. But still the good and just people rejoiced because the instructions of the gods were clear. The revered fathers had written them down carefully in the book.

And a time when the book was read to the good and just people in the great cave. “Call your finest technicians into the new world which shall be called Narkus, and bid them plot a great orbit of four hundred thousand and ten segments. This orbit shall be plotted from the cosmic position of the day the revered fathers first put soil upon their heads and prayed for guidance.

And a time when this was done and all the other things were done that the gods had directed and all the good and the just people entered into the Narkus and started off on the great orbit as directed by the gods. And this was the Third Epoch.

MARY SHUDDERED as a wave of nausea brought her own personality back into her conscious mind. She heard a quiet voice: “Careful - an overcharge.”

The humming of the machinery lessened. Mary opened her eyes and found them focused on the profile of the green girl lying on the cot next to her. The girl's eyes were closed and her breast rose and fell evenly under the white sheet. “Is she - suffering?” Mary asked.

“No. She is completely unconscious. The receiver is the only one who experiences any discomfort in a conditioning.”

“Will she suffer any ill effects?”

“No more so than a person sitting for a photograph. We're merely taking a picture of her mind - or, rather, transplanting it.”

Mary closed her eyes. “I must be a poor receiver. I'm causing you a lot of trouble.”

“No, the contrary. It's going very well.”

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Mary wondered if Glan was still in the room. Glan? No; a different name. But who could it be except Glan? Again the hum of the machine

IN THE history and heritage of the Argans - nay, even in their religion - was a time in the future when the sealed pages of the book would be opened. This was known when the Narkus first settled into the great orbit - was known by people who would never live to discover what the sealed pages contained.

The ones who would witness that pivotal event were called the chosen ones, and were deeply grateful for their good fortune.

The news was given out by the leaders and all the citizens of the *Narkus* - some thirty-odd thousand souls - gathered outside the central temple to hear the words of wisdom. One of the leaders opened the book and read:

“Within forty segments of the great orbit, you will come to a family of planets moving around a yellow sun. The – great - orbit will interlock with the orbit of one of these planets. It was so ordained when one of the revered fathers, had a deep dream in which the gods spoke to him. He took the dream to the good and just scientists and it was interpreted by them and the great orbit was plotted from their interpretation of the words of the gods.

“This planet will be your future home. Thus will the Third Epoch begin.

“For full three thousand sectors, you have been trained in what you are to do. You are in the hands of your leaders. Our blessings go with you.”

And there was great rejoicing among the people.

And more. Wild rumors flew thick and fast through the *Narkus*. Word was that the leaders had decided to ignore the instructions in the book and find a different world. No. one knew why.

And word had it that the leaders had made contact with intelligent beings on the planet and were invited to make a home there.

The first rumor was proven groundless when the *Narkus* did set down on the huge water body on the new planet. And the second rumor was disproven when the natives gave no welcome. Surely they had not been invited.

MARY OPENED her eyes. The hum of the machine had ceased. The green girl lay sleeping on the other cot. Mary said, “I - I feel quite normal. Was the conditioning a failure?”

Only one of the white-coated specialists remained. “On the contrary. A complete success. Do you feel strong enough for a short briefing?”

“Of course.”

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“You are now under the scanner. As long as it is set to your brain vibration, the new personality and background will remain entirely subconscious. In short you will feel entirely normal. The scanner is effective from a distance of two hundred miles. It will remain much closer to you than that at all times.”

“Certain instincts - certain commands - have been hypnotized into your subconscious which will dominate when you are under the influence of your new personality: When you are under the influence of that personality, you will have no memory of your true entity. It will be while you are under the influence of the new personality that you will acquire - or attempt to acquire - the information your superiors must have.

“At certain set times each day, your subconscious will be scanned from beyond the perimeter of the area under siege and the information recorded. During the periods of scanning, you will return to your true entity wherever you are.”

The, specialist paused as though making sure he had missed nothing. “Is that quite clear?”

“Yes.”

“You seem doubtful.”

“Over another point. I’m not convinced all this was necessary. I could have been given the scannings from this girl’s mind through hypnotics. I see no reason why I shouldn’t have entered the area equipped with my own entity.”

“The reason for that, I believe, was your own personal safety. The invading race must be of a high order. They will have methods of checking a suspected spy. Infallible methods. To the best of our knowledge, complete conditioning defies all detection.”

“I see.”

“I believe Mr. Clayton is waiting for you.”

PROFESSOR HALLEY was in an excellent mood. “You will step into this tub, my dear.”

Mary dropped the sheet she’d held around her and slipped down into the tub of dark green liquid. Halley stood back and looked on with the air of a celebrated chef who had just finished concocting a new and savory soup.

“Twelve formulae,” he chuckled.

“Then the thirteenth and success. Are you superstitious, my dear?”

“No, but this stuff is pretty hot. I may be parboiled.”

“No danger of that. And when you come out, you’ll be the gaudiest thing outside the city limits of Chicago. The woman in skin thirteen.” Halley took time out to chuckle. He repeated the phrase. “Quite good, don’t you think I’m sharp today.”

“You’re always sharp, Professor. How long will this take?”

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“About an hour.”

Halley inserted the plugs deep in Mary’s ears. Then he saw to the tubes through which she would breathe during complete submersion. The cap came next. “We’ll do your scalp separately,” he said. “A very delicate operation.”

Then he sealed Mary’s eyelids with a narrow strip of gum. This done, he pushed her completely under.

She lay there in pleasant isolation. The liquid cooled and she grew drowsy. She tried to isolate and identify the presence" of the scanner ray and could not.

Then her mind went back to the conversation she’d heard outside Mark Clayton’s doorway. One particular part of it flared brightly in her memory:

“Does she know about - the other parts of the plan?”

“No, I haven’t told her.”

This was the first time Mary had had an opportunity to ponder on the cryptic words. They could mean only one thing. There was something in this situation the high brass knew but refused to state even in private conversations. Mary’s experience told her the reason for this seemingly unnecessary secrecy. In this day of brilliant scientific research, men never knew whether or not they were really alone. There were ingenious instruments. There were highly trained and conditioned spies who knew how to use the instruments.

The only place top secrets were discussed were in the soundproof, lead-lined booths in which not more than three men could sit at a time.

Yes, there was something the high brass knew that they weren’t telling.

MARY walked up to the full-length mirror and stood gasping. She was naked except for the brief feather costume - that had been worn originally by the green girl.

But now Mary herself was the green girl. The cosmetic specialists stood by holding photos, taken at various angles. Professor Halley wore a self-satisfied smirk. “A complete success in every detail. No one could possibly tell them apart. We’ve a right to be proud of ourselves.”

Mark Clayton was standing by. He removed his pipe from his mouth to say, “We haven’t got too much time. We’ll give you a few hours to get used to yourself. Then we head for Chicago.”

“I’m ready,” Mary said. She glanced again at the mirror, “it is a rather nice color - and a nice name, too. Mara - Mara Zo.”

Mark Clayton grinned ever so slightly. “Are you single, Mara? Or do you have a husband back in Chicago?”

Mary, turned startled-eyes. “I - I’m single, of course.”

“I agree with you,” Mark said, “it’s a very nice name. Let’s go.”

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TWENTY-FOUR hours later, under cover of darkness, a small group crossed an open pasture in the heart of the farmland southwest of Chicago. The group consisted of Mark Clayton, two military aides, and a beautiful woman - a woman almost naked, whose green coloring was not visible in the darkness.

“Right about here,” one of the military men said. “Their screen is about a hundred feet ahead. They’ve got one of those bat camps over on the other side of the pasture. They’ll see her lying here come dawn.”

There was no time for much in the way of goodbyes. Mark squeezed Mary’s hand. “This is it,” he said. “You know what you’ve got to do. As soon as they come for you, we’ll turn off the scanner. Then we’ll pick you up for an hour every night at ten.”

Mary returned the pressure. “Good-bye, Mark.”

“So long - Mara Zo.”

IT WAS very peculiar. Two *zants* were holding Mara’s arms. She was standing in open country near a *zor* roost and the *zants* had her, but she could not remember where she’d been, or how she’d gotten to the open country.

Both *zants* were grinning, still unable to believe their good fortune. “It’s her all right,” one of the *zants* said. “This is a fine day for us, Bon. The reward will be, great for this one.”

“It will take a great load off the minds of the leaders - getting her back. They will probably execute her immediately.”

“And reward us greatly. Careful - she’s full of tricks.”

The first thing Mara asked herself, of course, was: “*Is it safe to think?*” Could she bring her mind out from behind the protection of that silly historical background for a little while and use it for that for which it was intended?

She looked off toward the *zor* roost, and saw only *zants* - out in the early morning, for sport on the *zors*. No *gorts* were in evidence to pry into her brain with their powerful telepathic tentacles.

Feeling temporarily safe from them, she uncovered her mind. What could have happened? The last thing she remembered was breaking away from a squad of *zants* taking her out for execution. Escape inside the ray-cap was impossible, so she’d used the mental key and had gone outside.

The *zants* were now hauling her across the pasture toward the big round roost. Others of their kind had stopped activities to watch. Even though she herself was a *zant*, Mara’s lip twisted in contempt. The fools! The weak, spineless, mindless fools!

But Mara had no time to indulge in the luxury of a sneer. Furiously, her mind went back to her personal problems. Desperately, she probed her memory, seeking to fill the gap. But there was nothing there; nothing but the certainty that there *should* be something.

She had used the mental key - no; possibly she should go back further than that and try to establish a running continuity that would carry through....

After the white visitor - the native of this planet - boarded the *Narkus*, information had leaked out concerning his talk with the leaders, and the Resistance had flared into the open. It had been put down

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brutally, of course, and the leaders had had their way - the way of involving the Argans in the coming war on this planet.

THE LANDING had been made before the Resistance tried again to gain control; the results were bloody. Mara remembered hiding in the huge deserted buildings- in the city - hiding until one of the small party had dropped his mental block and the mind tracers had found them.

Running - ducking here and there like hunted animals. Glan shot down – running - running; then, out through the ray-cap.

It was no use. Mara hit the memory block again. Something had happened. She was sure of that. Something had to have happened. Possibly she'd been captured and her memory pattern blocked out back to that point.

No - these strange pale people did not have the science to accomplish such things.

Mara and her captors had arrived at the *zor* roost now. Many of the *zants* had given over their sport and were packed close around in stupid wonder.

Mara's captors were being very self-important. "Stand back there, please. Stand back now."

"We have captured a very important prisoner."

"The leaders will want us to bring her to them immediately."

"Stand back." - -

And, from the gathering, Mara could hear the low comments:

"They will be rewarded."

"...praised by the leaders."

"...given special dreams."

And Mara's heart bled for her people.

But she had little time to ponder, on the broad, ancient tragedy of the *zants*. Her own worries were more pressing. While crossing the pasture, she had become aware of strange, urges, new desires, and they perplexed her.

Why, for instance - with death facing her in the very near future - should she feel the urge to know what made the ray-cap work - the scientific facts behind the hypnotic, blaster and the various ray-guns?

Far more important to try and escape from the two *zants* who were leading her to her doom. One of them pushed her roughly into an air sled. They got in on each side of her while the groups around them dispersed and went back to their sport. Already several *zors*, with *zants* tight in the saddle behind the huge, leathery wings, were looping and darting above the pasture.

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One *zor* bulleted straight upward until its contact-sense told it the ray-cap was close. The *zor* reversed and went into a perpendicular dive, pulling out a scant fifteen feet from the ground, to angle horizontal with a fearful neck-snapping jerk.

NOW THE air sled lifted and started toward the cluster of tall buildings to the east. Mara turned her eyes on the *zant* at the controls. "You expect them to give you good dreams in return for my capture?"

He nodded. "Good dreams."

"But not the best."

The other *zant* leaned forward to get into the discussion. "Why not the best? You are a very important traitor."

"Because they no longer have the best dreams - or any others. The Resistance raided, the boxes one night during the last uprising. We hid the dream pellets in a place of trees to the north. No one will ever be able to find them. And it will take months to make more."

The *zant* at the controls frowned. He was of a delicate violet hue and was handsome, as were all the male Argans. That was the trouble; sometimes you, couldn't tell a *gort* from a *zant*, because the former often adopted the child-like, stupid attitude and bearing of the *zants*. These two were not *gorts* however; of that Mara was sure. A *gort* would never indulge in childish pleasures, such as riding *zors*.

"I am one of your kind," Mara said. "Why do you take me in to be killed?"

The *zant* at the controls thought it over, his lower lips protruding, as from intense concentration. "You caused trouble," he said finally.

"Yes - but -for the benefit of all of us. The *gorts* - since the two tribes joined forces long ago - have used the *zants* as slaves have exploited us."

"The *gorts* are favored by the gods," the left *zant* cut in. "They built the steel world in which we crossed space. They allowed us to come with them, lest the other tribes of Argan kill us all."

"They want us in order to dominate! They really hold us in the contempt we deserve." Mara's voice deepened in: bitterness as she allowed her mind to flare full force - entirely forgetful that it might be picked up by a mind tracer. "You've seen them cut us down in cold blood - you've seen how they crushed the last Resistance uprising."

"That's because the *zants* taking part were bad," the air sled driver said in the chiding tones of a child. "The *gort* leaders know what is best. They allow us our *zors* - they give us dreams."

MARA GROUND her teeth in an agony of frustration. Was it worth while trying to save a people too stupid to know they were being used? Was it merely a losing game, fighting eternally against a force too broad and too intelligent to be beaten?

"They give you bats and dream pellets," Mara said, her voice husky with contempt. "The playthings of children."

"But we like *zors* and dreams. When one likes a thing - "

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“Why do you like them? Because the *gorts* put mind-stunting chemicals in the dream pellets. You think they give them to you because you ask for them? That’s not true. The *gorts* know you will ask, but if you didn’t they’d insist you take the pellets. Without them your minds would develop. That’s how the Resistance was born. A group of us got together and swore to stop taking the dreams. Our minds grew strong and we could think for ourselves and see the *gorts* as they are, before they knew we weren’t taking dreams. They tried to force us, but it was too late. We had built mental strength and could overcome the drugs.”

The two *zants* listened stolidly. One of them said, “The *gorts* read to us out of the book. They tell us of our great heritage, of our - ”

“The book!” Mara spat. “A pack of lies concocted by the *gorts*. You know what we of the Resistance think of the book? We use it for a mind shield!”

“Then we didn’t come from Argan - in the beginning?”

Mara, turned wearily to the *zant* seated on her left. As she did so, she noted he was paying little attention to the controls; that, or else he was slowing the sled down deliberately. A spark of hope glittered in her mind.

“Certainly we came from Argan,” she said. “But most of the rest is lies. The text is colored so that even the truthful parts are twisted around.”

The other *zant* hadn’t seemed to be listening. Now he said, “Are you sure you stole all the dream pellets?”

“Why do you ask?”

He looked at the driver of the sled. “It just came to me. We haven’t been given our ration of pellets. We should have gotten them yesterday. The *gorts* were never behind in the distribution before.”

“Listen,” Mara said, in sudden desperation. “Will you join the Resistance? Will you stop taking the pellets and become strong of mind? Then you’ll see what the *gorts* do to your people. The knowledge comes with the new strength. You’ll realize they take your women and use them like animals for their own unspeakable pleasures - that your, men are killed and tortured daily in horrible laboratories where they carry on their brain experiments.”

There was no response. “Don’t you *want* to grow up? Do you want to remain children until you die?”

“Are you telling the truth? Did you really steal all the dream pellets?”

Mara saw it was no use. There was a moment of silence broken only by the purr of the drive unit in the sled. Then she turned to smile at the driver. “Yes. Even the ones they give out, for special merit; the ecstasy dreams they would give you for capturing me.”

THIS WAS something beyond the, ordinary - beyond the routine. Both the *zants* puckered their brows as they pondered it.

Mara said, “So I am in a better position to reward you for letting me go than they are for taking me in. I’ll give you all the ecstasy pellets - all of them.”

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It was a terrible temptation for the type of minds, which rode with Mara. The *zants*' eyes glowed. There was eagerness in the handsome, purple faces.

"It would be wrong," said one.

"Very wrong," the other stated.

"Ecstasy pellets. All we want."

"All we could ever use."

"You could hide them," Mara suggested, "and have dreams for the rest of your lives."

"That would be wonderful."

"Or give them to your friends and get much praise."

"Where are the pellets?"

"In the wooded land to the north. Point the sled forty-five degrees to your left. I will tell you when to change it."

"We are not agreeing, of course," the driver said firmly.

"I understand."

"No, not agreeing," the other assured her - and himself.

"We will just look at the pellets."

"Make sure they are there."

Mara prompted no more conversation. The urge to do inexplicable things was again strong within her, filling her mind. One of the strongest urges was to locate the native who had met with the leaders here. She was suddenly thirsty for knowledge concerning him; something more solid than the rumors she had heard.

Hearsay in the Resistance had it that this planet, called Earth, was not the charted destination of the *Narkus* at all; that the leaders had hove to from curiosity before going on. While inside the atmosphere they'd made contact - or had been contacted - by this mysterious native - who sought aid of the Argans in a strictly planetary war.

It was through this native's instructions that the landing had been made on the water near the city. Now the *gort* leaders were waiting, ready to trade the lives of many *zants* for whatever advantages they could get. Rumor had it also that the natives slipped in and out of the city, at will. As a matter of fact, Mara herself had seen a pale stranger hurrying into the *gort* headquarters housed in a huge building called the Palmer House.

Too, Mara wanted to know about the weapons of the Argans; wanted to know technical details she had never cared about before. A deep-seated uneasiness laid its grip on her mind. There was something wrong - something different - some change had come over her -

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“Two degrees to the left,” Mara said. Then, a few moments later, “Wing over to that clump of -trees. You’ll find a small open space. Lower into it.”

The *zant* set the sled down carefully. Then both of them jumped to the ground. They made no effort to hide their eagerness. “We’ll just inspect them - make sure,” one told the other.

“That’s right. It wouldn’t be honest to take any of them.”

A HALF-SMILE of pity pulled at Mara’s lips as she walked swiftly toward a thicket to the south of the platform. The *zants* followed, trustingly.

Mara dropped to her knees beside a thick bush and thrust her hand in toward its roots.

“Ecstasy tablets - imagine that,” one of the *zants* said. “I’ve only seen one in my whole lifetime.”

From the corner of her eyes, Mara caught the other *zant* looking speculatively around. She, knew that, already he was searching for a secluded thicket in which to hide himself for the dream.

Mara turned suddenly, coming to her feet in the same motion. In her hand was a small gun.

The eyes of the *zants* widened. “A para-tube.”

“We - I don’t understand.”

Mara pressed the switch. There was only a slight buzzing sound; no fire, no visible rays. But the two *zants* stiffened, then tipped over like a pair of beautiful purple statues. Swiftly, Mara bent down to examine them. Their flesh was hard as rock. The gun had thrown an excellent charge. She’d gotten it from a cache placed there against such an emergency as this, and the Resistance had been careful to steal only the best weapons.



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Mara regarded the *zants* with a queer mixture of affection and pity. "Sleep well, my babies," she whispered, and thrust the small ray-tube into her bra - into the slight valley between her breasts.

Scarcely had she drawn her hand away when a voice said, "That's fine. Leave it there - and don't move."

TWO MEN sat in a small, lead-lined booth in the White House. One was the President himself, his face worn and haggard, his kindly eyes crow's-footed deeply. The other man was Mark Clayton.

Mark said, "We've kept a close check on him. There's no doubt in my mind that we have the right man."

"I wasn't thinking about that," the President said. "It's — well, the whole plan that worries me. I have a feeling it should have been handled differently. For instance, sending the girl in. I'm still not sure - "

Mark took the stem of his battered, pipe from between his teeth. The pipe was cold out of consideration for the narrow quarters. "As I saw it," he said, "she was absolutely necessary - as a decoy. Something to occupy his mind and to make him show his hand. He'll have to get in touch - warn them. That alone will verify what are now really nothing more than suspicions on our part."

"And if we're wrong - what about the girl? Then she's been sacrificed."

"I can't agree. If that comes about, it's still an honor so far as she's concerned. A job for her country. And if this angle hadn't entered into it, the basic job is still there to be done. We need information - technical data. We need it badly."

The President sighed. "You're right, of course. Guess I'm just a small-town politician. Can't get out of the habit of thinking in terms of the individual."

"I understand. But I keep remembering this is war. One of our cities is in the hands of alien invaders. Such a situation cannot be tolerated."

"You still have the male in a safe hiding place?"

"Yes - another case in point. It cost us eight American lives to get him."

"Who will handle - "

"A very competent man," Mark cut in. "We have a lot of competent men. There won't be any leaks and it won't be a complete conditioning job."

"Then you'll be gone for a while."

Mark smiled. "As short a while as possible."

"Goodbye. Take care of yourself."

"Thank you, sir. I will. Goodbye."

MARA'S first thought was that she had nothing to lose. Therefore she might as well take a chance and ignore the command. But then she turned her head and saw the *gorts* - two men and a girl - with their heat guns trained dead center.

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Mara revised her thinking. She did have something to lose. The time between this moment and the hour she would be executed if she allowed herself to be taken.

By facing three heat guns with a para-tube, she would most certainly commit swift suicide. She turned slowly and the girl stepped forward. She jerked the tube roughly from Mara's bra, bruising the green skin. Mara steeled herself and did not wince.

There was no physical difference between the two *gort* males and the paralyzed *zants*. The difference was spiritual - the radiation from within. The *gorts* were sharp of eye - quick of movement. And there was a grimness in their makeup which was the complete opposite of the open, childlike attitude of the *zants*.

Nor were they interested in dreams, although their first question concerned the pellets. One of the men came forward and took Mara roughly by the wrist. "It might go a little easier with you if you tell us where the pellets are. Where did your mob of traitors hide them?"

Mara smiled coldly. "So you're really worried. It *was* your total supply. And a pretty smart job on our part, wasn't it?"

"Smart? Stupid audacity, I'd say. And we'll find the pellets too. It's just a matter of time. I was just trying to show you an opening for possible leniency."

"Don't exert yourself."

The *gort* girl was regarding the stiffened *zants* with a look of disgust. She transferred the look to Mara. "Brutalizing your own kind, eh? It's about what we'd expect from a traitor. This proves the ideals you spout about are pure hypocrisy. You're interested in your own hides first, last and always."

"Are we going to stand here all day?"

One of the men motioned to the other. "Get the sled. We'll wait."

"Let's use this one," the girl said. "We can send somebody back for these two. They'll be stiff for hours."

THEY HERDED Mara into the air-sled, one of the men taking the controls while the other man and the girl kept their heat guns trained expertly. And again came Mara's thirst for technical knowledge. She stared at the heat gun in the purple man's hand. What made it work? From whence came the crackling power that burned through steel? Somewhere in the building of the leaders the information, could be found. They'd certainly possess records. Mara wondered about the possibility of getting her hands on them.

Then she laughed inwardly. How foolish! She wasn't going to get her hands on anything. Before too long she would be a pinch of blackened dust from facing those same guns.

Ahead, the tall buildings of the central area by the lake sprang closer as the air-sled shot forward like a small rocket. As they rode, Mara felt the almost imperceptible tickling within her head, which indicated the crossing of a brain tracer path. Instantly, she cleared her mind and threw up a screen — just in time.

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A minute passed, then the tracer came nosing back - seeking her out - seeking to check the suspicions aroused during the brief contact. It tingled for a full minute against her barrier, then went on its way.

Now the area of closely packed buildings was below. The air-sled settled onto a broad roof. Guards were there to anchor it, and Mara was led down a stairway and into an elevator.

One of the male *gorts* had remained above, leaving her in charge of the girl and the other man. Five minutes later, they faced a handsome, purple man over a huge desk. Mara cringed inwardly in spite of herself, for this was Morn - one of the most dreaded of the leaders - Morn, in charge of military operations and the putting down of rebellions.

Tales were told of him - his savagery with both men and women; savageries in both business and pleasure. Mara could well cringe.

Morn looked her over with an almost impersonal contempt. He allowed his eyes to rest upon her loins and then her breasts with what was obviously studied insult. He was silent for some time, dominating the room with his silence. If the captors of Mara expected praise they were doomed to disappointment.

WITHOUT glancing their way, Morn finally snapped, "Throw her into the jail downstairs with the rest of her kind. When we get a little time we'll have a grand killing. I'd like a few more gathered in first, though."

Mara had been waiting for queries relative to the location of the dream pellets. Either Morn had already found them - through mental weakness on the part of a captured Resistance member - or else his silence regarding them was a tribute to Mara. Possibly he knew it was a waste of time trying to break this girl down.

Mara was taken from the office and back to the elevator. Her captors opened the door just in time to block the entrance of a native - a small, worried-looking little man with pouting lips and an almost feminine cast to his eyes.

Entirely preoccupied with his own thoughts, the native brushed past the trio. But a peculiar thrill ran through Mara. Her interest in the native flared even above thoughts of her coming death.

Then he was gone, the door was closed, and Mara was being led toward the elevator.

Her second thrill came in a long, low passageway underground - which seemed to lead into another of the tightly packed buildings. There, the trio came upon four *zants* - two males and two females - busy scrubbing the stone floor.

But only apparently busy. Mara knew immediately the business of cleaning was only an act. She knew also that Glan had not been killed - or even captured. Because Glan was one of the four - the one kneeling near a pail over which was laid a scrubbing cloth.

The rescue was achieved with cold mathematical precision. At just the right instant, Glan reached under the cloth, into the bucket, and came forth with a heat gun. As though having been carefully rehearsed, the remaining three lunged forward, hitting the two guards low and knocking them to the floor.

Mara, her help not needed, plunged on past Glan, out of the heat gun's range. The three rescuers, after knocking down the guards, reversed directions with agile speedy to roll, sprint, and crawl out of range also.

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Then they turned to watch Glan do his deadly work. While the guards clawed desperately for their weapons, Glan's gun sputtered, a thin stream of white-hot flame. The bodies of the captors shriveled under the intense heat.

But they made no outcry - because Glan's heat gun stream cut first at their throats, severing their heads - sending their heads rolling on the hard floor.

SWIFTLY, silently, Glan continued his terrible work, spraying the heat stream, reducing the captors' bodies to-smaller and smaller piles of residue until nothing was left but some charred bone.

Now Glan snapped off the gun, and the bone residue was quickly swept up by the other three Resistance members and deposited in pail. And so carefully had Glan used the heat gun that not a mark showed on the stone floor.

The, grim, savage annihilation now finished, the party took up their buckets and moved off down the corridor, their skill and forethought demonstrated in the fact that a bucket had been provided also for Mara.

They did-not move swiftly; rather, their progress was remarkably slow; their, eyes dull and lifeless; their manner almost that of children.

Down, down they went, ever deeper into the basements and subbasements of the huge building. Nothing was said - no words passed - as each member of the group played a part.

In a lower passage they encountered three *gort* guards, all male, each carrying a brace of heat guns and each wearing a deep scowl.

The *zants* shuffled to a halt, stepped aside, and stared, dully at the *gorts*. Mara's acting was as clever and convincing as that of the others. But in her heart was a greater tension - a tension coming from long hours of fear and a sense of anticlimax. She hoped the *gorts* would continue on their way. She was disappointed.

The lead guard hesitated, then came to a halt. "Where are you going?"

A long moment of silence after which Glan mumbled, "To empty the pails. The water gets dirty. We must have fresh water."

The *gort* grunted contemptuously, then shrugged. As the trio moved on, Glan broke the silence again.

"Good dreams."

The *gorts* did not deign to acknowledge the greeting nor even to look back. When they were out of sight, Glan indulged in the luxury of a grin. "It's not far now," he whispered, and the shuffling forward was continued.

They came to what appeared to be a grating, over a sewer drain. "Here," Glan said, with urgency.

The two males lifted the grate. Then the members of the rescue party lowered themselves swiftly down through the small opening. Mara followed Glan, to find utter darkness, terrible odors, and a distasteful softness under foot.

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“It will smell better before long,” Glan said. He took Mara’s hand and led her through the darkness to a place where lines of light showed in the wall. Glan tapped on wood and a crude panel opened into a large cement room.

Glan turned and smiled at Mara. “Welcome,” he said. “Our new headquarters. The natives had a railroad under their city once. It went into disuse and was apparently forgotten. The *gorts* don’t know it’s here.”

Glan’s manner changed now. Gone. was the impersonal ruthlessness. While the other Resistance members went swiftly away to find business elsewhere, Glan put his arms around Mara and laid his head on her shoulder. Then he raised his head and Mara did the same thing, laying her head eagerly against Glan’s neck.

“I missed you,” she murmured. “I thought you were dead.”

Before Glan could reply, Mara did a strange, unexplainable thing. She drew Glan’s head down and placed her lips against his. She saw his eyes widen in blank surprise while - far above, and unheard by either of them - the clock in the Wrigley Tower boomed ten times.

MARY STIFFENED as she realized she was in the arms of a strange, purple man; that her lips were against his lips. She was disturbed by the feeling that she was in those arms from choice. She was on the verge of jerking away when memory came to her rescue.

Somewhere out beyond the deadly perimeter of the space-invader’s invisible shield, a mind scanner had been turned on - a scanner tuned to her individual brain wave.

Smothering her surprise by gargantuan effort, she smiled at the violet man and began drawing back very slowly. He made no effort to hold her. His face reflected surprise, bewilderment.

“Why did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Place your lips against my lips.

“What does it mean?”

An unconscious blush warmed Mary’s face, hidden fortunately by the apple-green complexion. Swiftly she realized there must have been a moment of merging between the two personalities as the scanner brought her own to the fore. A merging in which the inclination of one governed the instinctive-physical actions of the other.

“I kissed you,” she told him, smiling archly.

“Kiss? What is kiss? What does it signify?”

“I - I saw the natives do it while I was away.”

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ONLY HALF of Mary's mind was centered on the conversation. The other half was busy realizing the scanner had begun its work. She wondered if it was getting any information of value. Where had she been? What had she done? Who was this purple man whom she had just kissed?

Of course the scanner was taking all this information out of her subconscious, but that did her little good personally. She sensed, however, that this must be a first meeting between Mara and someone she loved. It had all the urgency of a first meeting. Had any confidences been exchanged? Had any information been given back and forth?

She hoped not, and she knew definitely that none must be exchanged until the scanning hour had passed. The face of the violet man had cleared somewhat of surprise. Rather, the surprise had been pushed into the background by more pressing emotion. "Tell me," he said eagerly. "Where did you go? What happened?"

In Mary's mind was the desperation of not having the least idea. She contrived a smile and passed a hand lightly over his face. The face was feather-smooth. "No — you tell me first."

"Very well. When we got trapped out there in the woods - "

The trap Mary was thinking of was the one she'd fallen into herself - right here in this strange room. Any information he gave her would be lost from the standpoint of personal value. He must be side-tracked for an hour. Mary knew of but one possible way to do this. She would steel herself to it, she thought - wondering vaguely at the same time just how much steeling would be necessary; and how much skill would be needed to ward off the ultimate. She took a deep breath and smiled, cutting the purple man off by laying a finger over his lips.

"Can't it wait, darling? It's been such a long time?"

He frowned. *Darling?* That's a new term. It wasn't in the hypno-in-diction they gave us on the language."

"I heard that from the natives, too. It's a love term. It is used by those dear to each other. Did you like the kiss?"

"The kiss?"

"The meeting of the lips. When I saw it, it looked ... interesting."

She drew his head close and repeated the kiss, hoping it would serve to keep this peculiar man's mind diverted. If she had any doubts, they must have come from underestimating her own ability in that direction. The man caught on quickly.

Mary felt a moment of panic. She could divert this fervent character with a new trick — maybe a couple of tricks, characteristic of the races on an individual planet. But the ultimate end was no doubt the same on all planets. And maybe he knew a few tricks of his own.

Mary smiled and put her arms around the violet man's neck and kissed him again. He was getting the knack of it; getting the knack too quickly to suit Mary.

I wonder who he is? She thought.

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MARK CLAYTON stood under the dim light of a sickle-moon and inspected his squad. There were four of them. They were - as was Mark himself - almost without clothing and expertly stained in a beautiful shade of violet.

And there was some of the griping to which all men of military bent are entitled. "If we had to be invaded, why didn't the Eskimos do it. I feel like a jay bird."

"Quit moaning. You'll probably be dead in a week!"

"Maybe so - but I'll bet I'm warm then."

"Quiet," Mark said. "Final briefing."

The men came closer. Mark said, "The initial scanning of the agent already inside reveals she saw our boy entering an office in the Palmer House. It didn't reveal much else except that she's located in the basement of that building - the agent, that is.

"As you know, our technicians have found some tunnels in their lethal curtain. The openings aren't large enough for invasion purposes and seem to be caused by certain rock formations. In spots where the surface is rocky, the curtain doesn't quite touch the ground. Our experts are studying this further, but that's not our affair. While they're studying, we wriggle in under the curtain and try for several objectives. One - we'd like to kidnap our boy and get him out of there so we could score a big win in the way of world opinion. Second - I've got a relay on the scanner. It will be lifted on signal so we can find our agent and be on tap to take advantage of any information she uncovers with the aid of the underlying personality."

Mark stopped speaking. There was a pause before one of the men growled, "Mother naked, and not even a table fork to fight with."

"We have to go unarmed. There's no place on your person to hide a weapon. This is a battle of skill and brains - not weapons. We wouldn't have a chance with ours against theirs, anyhow."

Mark paused. "Any questions?"

THERE were none. The men moved in single file toward a rocky knoll out across the fiat land. They reached the knoll and found a single technician squatting there awaiting them. In the dim light a chalk-marked path could be seen winding over the rock pile, following the line of a depression caused by some underground fault.

"That's it," the technician said. "You crawl along that line and you'd better scratch the hell out of your bellies rather than raise your fannies an inch more than necessary."

"Ouch," one of the men muttered in anticipation...

The technician seemed fascinated. "Lord - but you're a gaudy lot. Hope the rains don't come and wash your purple lipstick off."

"It's on for good," one of the men countered. "We caught one of them walking rainbows and copied the color of his underwear: It won't come off." "You guys are going to freeze your -"

Mark had been studying the contour of the hill. "All right men," he cut in. "Let's hit it. I'll go first."

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“Happy landings,” the technician said lightly. But there was a tightness to his lips - a tension in his muscles giving the lie to his outward casualness.

Mark went-down on the cold rock and started, wriggling forward. The rock scratched cruelly, but this annoyance was shouldered out by the knowledge that death lay a scant inch above the highest point of his anatomy. He did not look back, but he knew the men had fallen in behind him - four segments of a human snake. Slowly he wriggled forward. The air was cool, but sweat-beads appeared on his forehead.

It seemed hours later that he cleared the rock knoll but he kept on going, belly down, across the open pasture-land beyond. One hundred yards in, he decided he must take a chance. That or crawl on his belly dear through the suburbs and into the Loop. Slowly he came to his feet.

Turning, he looked back to see the three prone figures close behind him. “It seems to be all right,” he said.

But his mind and eyes were upon a single still form lying in the pathway on the knoll, rearward. The other three men came to their feet and looked backward also. There was a period of dead silence; silence one of the men finally broke with the grim remark: “Joe must have stuck his fanny up.”

By common consent, they turned away. Nothing could be done for Joe. It would be suicide to approach and touch the still form.

“What’s on the agenda now, Chief?” one of the men asked, turning away.

“We look around for a bat roost. There’s one about a mile south of here.”

“What for?” There was bewilderment in the voice.

“To get a ride to the Loop: On the basis of the memory pattern we picked up on the scanner, we four are going to be *zants*. That’s new information. It seems the subject we captured had a pretty strong mental block. All we got back in Washington was a history of their trip across space that we know now was mostly fiction.”

“Zants. That’s a hell of a name. It rhymes with ants in pants.”

“There seem to be two cliques in this setup.- The ups and the downs: The *zants* are the downs and the *gorts* are in the saddle.”

“Speaking of saddles - they got any on those damn bats?”

“You shouldn’t have too much trouble. The main thing to remember is to look stupid feel stupid - be stupid. That makes you a *zant*. If we run into trouble, just let your mouth hang open while I do the talking. Let’s go.”

“Just the opposite of the razor ad,” somebody said, and the party started off across the rolling land.

THE TIMING had been arranged so that the sportsmen might possibly have not yet arrived. There had been nothing in the scannings to indicate this one way or the other, but it seemed logical.

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They arrived at the huge round roost, and Mark allowed himself a moment to wonder at the ingenuity necessary in the swift assembly of the globes. Then he gave off wondering as a *zant* lying asleep by the entrance to the roost came erect, rubbing his eyes.

Mark was tensely alert. There could be trouble here - and danger; possible detection even before the foray had gotten a good start. Nothing in the scannings had indicated whether or not the *zors* were individually possessed or were common property; whether permits were needed, or whether there were set hours for the sport.

Observation had indicated some riding was done at night. Mark moved on that assumption.

The sleepy *zant* said, "You've come for a ride?"

"We got restless - couldn't sleep. We made up a party." Mark stood poised on his toes awaiting negative reaction. There was none. The *zant* yawned again. "I'll wait for the yellow sun to come up," he said. Then he lay back down and went to sleep.

Mark motioned and the party pushed on into the roost. Dim light bulbs on the walls gave sufficient illumination to show rows of great ugly birds, remindful of vultures gone wild in growth, sleeping on bars bisecting the globe.

"No saddles," one of the men whispered, "but there are a lot of bridles on these pegs." -

"I wonder how you get them to come?"

"Maybe you pull the rope on their leg. See? They've all got-a rope hanging down. We can reach the bottom ones."

One of the party was doubtful - highly so. "Why wouldn't it be smarter to just walk into town?"

Mark replied. "Because we might run into trouble. We don't know the setup well enough. But we do know they ride these things all over and don't seem to be challenged."

Mark went forward, grasped one of the hanging ropes and tugged at it. The bird took an ugly head from beneath its wing, looked down, croaked an obscenity. "Come on, boy - come on," Mark crooned.

IT ALMOST appeared as though the bird shrugged in resignation. It didn't, of course. It merely hopped from its perch and stood waiting with complete docility while it croaked swear-words in *zor* language.

"Hand me a bridle," Mark said.

The bridle was pushed forth and Mark held it up. The bird opened its beak, but whether to yawn or receive the bit wasn't entirely clear. Mark slipped in the bit and the *zor* lowered its head exactly like a well-trained horse.

"I should have known they'd be well-trained," Mark muttered. "These *zants* wouldn't be able to handle them otherwise."

Having set the pattern, Mark surveyed - five minutes later - his squad lined up in the pasture, each somewhat fearfully astride a bird, hard behind its wing roots. He climbed onto his own bird and raised his hand. "Follow me," he called, and dug in his heels.

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The *zor* gave forth an indignant cuss-word and flailed the air with wings that, lifted it into a smooth upward glide. One after another, the rest followed.

Over the tree tops, Mark experimented with the bridle, hauling back on the bit. Immediately, the *zor* levelled off and skimmed swiftly east-ward. Mark risked turning to look backward. Everything seemed to be going smoothly. Swinging his eyes forward, he picked out familiar landmarks in the semidarkness below and strove to pierce the gloom for a first sight of the tall Loop buildings.

Then an odd interior tickling penetrated his consciousness; a tickling seemingly inside his skull. It resembled nothing he had ever before experienced, but his instincts sounded a warning; his instincts didn't like it. That in itself was enough to generate an additional alertness. Therefore he was waiting, tense and expectant, when the hum of an approaching drive unit cut through the sky. There was a hostile tinge to the sound.

Then, the clumsy-looking flying platform was upon them. A harsh voice barked: "Set your birds on the platform. You have ten seconds. Do as we say or we'll burn the lot of you."

MARA LOOKED into Glan's eyes and experienced a feeling of having had a mental lapse. It was peculiar. Had some unknown experience outside the ray-cap affected her mind?

Glan leaned forward and placed his lips on hers. Mara jerked back, startled. "What - what are you doing?"

He gazed at her, slack-jawed. "What do you mean - what am I doing? You showed me how."

Something told Mara not to press the point. Deeply troubled, she said, "We've been wasting time. Tell me what has been happening since I saw you last."

Glan released her and backed away, shrugging. "Very well. As I was saying, when we were trapped in the woods and you broke through the wave-cap, I fell over a rock and was sprawled out helpless."

"I thought they'd killed you."

"Falling probably saved my life. They captured me and began asking questions about the dream pellets. About fifteen minutes later, one of our roving squads came to my rescue. We gave you up for lost until today when the word came down you'd been seen going into the military leader's office. Then we laid our plans quickly."

Glan stopped speaking and stared at Mara curiously. "You've changed somehow. I can't quite put my finger on it, but you are different. What happened during the segment you were away?"

It was Mara's turn to be startled. "The segment?"

"More than that - closer to one and a micro. What happened?"

"I — I can't remember. There is a complete gap between the moment I looked back and saw you lying on the ground, and the time I was seized by the *zor* roost. I don't know what happened."

Glan scowled. "I'd say they'd done something to you - something to your mind. But you're no different, really. And besides, they haven't the skill."

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Paul W. Fairman

“Tell me what happened here?”

“They’ve been trying desperately to get the dream pellets back. They’re afraid of trouble before new ones can be brewed. Already we’ve lost seven members to the heat guns.”

Mara leaned forward and laid a hand on Glan’s arm. “That native - have you found out anything about him?”

“Nothing more than we knew; that he comes in and goes out under guard to have talks with the leaders. We think he’s trying to get technicians to go to some fair section of this world and train the natives in making our weapons. Our leaders are holding back for several reasons. They don’t think it wise to give out the secrets, and they are wondering - if the natives are so stupid - why they can’t take over the world themselves.”

“The fools, there aren’t enough Argans to do that regardless of our weapons. We’ve hardly enough to hold this miserable little bit of land.”

“The native has them about convinced of that. He tells them, according to our secret scanners, that there are over a billion people on this planet.”

MARA’S INTENSITY increased. “Glan - isn’t it time to strike make a stand? Let’s gather all our forces and try to take the Palmer House. We’d catch them by surprise because because never made a real attack. Thy expect us to keep on sniping.”

Glan smiled again. “We’ve needed your enthusiasm, Mara. We’ve missed it a great deal.”

Mara paused. Again those unreasoning urges. Was it sharpened instinct speaking deep within her? Or something else. She said, “Glan, we must gather up all our hidden weapons and put them in one place. We must do it immediately. They’re of no value spread all over the country.”

“Where will we put them?”

“With the dream pellets. The *gorts* haven’t found the pellets, so that must be a pretty good place.”

The violet-colored man got up and began pacing the floor. Suddenly he stopped and faced her. “Oh, what’s the use, Mara. You’re the only really strong one in the Resistance. The rest of us are permanently stunted by the dream pellets; secretly we long for them, and I know many would go back with the slightest excuse. Let’s give it up. We weren’t meant to overcome the *gorts*.”

Mara sprang to her feet, eyes blazing. “We won’t give up; In fact, we’re closer than ever. I have a feeling something will happen, Glan. We mustn’t quit now. We can beat them and take the *Narkus*. Find an uninhabited! world, as we were meant to do.”

“We couldn’t run the *Narkus* if we had it.”

“No - but we can make the *gorts* run it for us.”

Glan threw up his hands in despair. “Why, even now I think there is treachery in our own ranks. I wouldn’t be surprised if our own side turned us in.”

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There was irony in the fact that the secret knock sounded that very moment on the panel. The door opened automatically from release by an attacked mechanism. Four members of the Resistance entered the room, followed swiftly by three gort guards. "There they are," one of the *zants* said. "And remember - the four of us get complete pardons for turning them in."

THE GORTS on the flying platform would have been amazed to know in advance how small a chance they had. Their disadvantage came from over confidence; from disbelieving the scanner.

They watched the four riders swing their *zors* in toward the platform. The clumsiness of the riders should have been a warning, but the *gorts* saw only what were obviously four *zants* out for a night ride. Their plan was to frighten them, as befit men of authority, and let them go.

Mark and his men dismounted, acting out the role of stupidity to perfection. This until they were within arm's reach of the *gorts*. And it was then that the intruders learned what a small chance they had.

The struggle was short and furious, but the fury was mainly on the side of Mark and his men. In a matter of seconds, one of the *gorts* had a broken leg and a ruptured pelvis. Another was unconscious from a split skull. A third screamed at the pain of an arm broken at the socket, and the fourth stood uninjured, in stunned surprise staring at his own gun in the hands of Mark.

"Don't hurt this one," Mark said. "I want to ask him some questions."

"What if he doesn't speak English," one of the men wanted to know.

The *gort* was no coward, basically. Mark saw the purple eyes, light up in the rays from the pilot board on the platform.

"I want to know where your arsenal is," Mark said.

The *gort* stared in simulated wonder; then pointed to his own lips.

"Don't give us that," Mark said. "You were all hyno-conditioned to our language. Talk."

One of Mark's men stepped, forward. "I'll make him talk."

Mark stepped back. The man moved in swiftly. His hands made swift motions, almost too fast to follow. The *gort* doubled over, emitting a choked scream. "He asked you a question," the man said.

"We have no central, arsenal except on the *Narkus*. And that's really not an arsenal. It's a manufacturing plant."

"Does the ray-cap emanate from a central point?"

"No," the *gort* moaned, holding his stomach. "It comes from twenty-five hidden outlets around the circle. You'd never find them. Besides - who are you? From the Resistance?"

THE MAN who had opened the *gort's* mouth grinned wickedly. "You've no idea how big a resistance, bub." He turned to Mark. "What now, Chief?"

Mark didn't answer for a full twenty seconds. He stood staring at the sky-line over the loop. Then he snapped his fingers. "I think I've got it. The big answer!"

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Paul W. Fairman

“Shall we dump these rats overboard?”

“No. We need this platform and one *zor* - no, wait a minute.” Mark stepped to the control panel and studied it swiftly. “We won’t need a *zor*. This thing has radar. Hook the four birds together by their reins and put a *gort* on each one - ”

“A *gort*? You mean that’s the name of these purple characters?”

“Yes. You - ” Mark pointed to the able-bodied leader. “Get on the front bird. We’ll strap the others into place with the hand straps and then you’re on your own.”

Several minutes later, the *zors* spread their wings and slipped off into space like an aerial pack train. As soon as they had cleared the platform, Mark returned to the control board. “This doesn’t look too complicated,” he said.

He moved one of the control rods. The platform swung too far around, he made an adjustment and the platform purred toward the Loop skyline - dark against the false dawn.

One of the men opened his mouth to speak. Mark gestured. “Quiet - there’s something coming in.”

They knew Mark was now listening to the tiny receiver built into a silver-lined pocket near the base of his skull. They were silent for several minutes while Mark listened and the platform slid toward the Loop.

“The scanning has been completely analyzed,” Mark said finally. “Things begin to look up - maybe. We’ve got to locate some people, but first we follow through on the brainstorm I just got.”

Mark found the platform controls relatively simple. He angled up and went over the Loop at a high altitude, while he and his men shivered in the cold night air. Then he angled down sharply.

He had been surprised at the lack of alertness from below; surprised that he was allowed to come down to the surface of the lake without being challenged. The platform touched the surface and Mark braked the unit almost to a halt, allowing it to inch slowly forward toward open water. When the radar clicked, he allowed it to move another ten feet, then stopped it completely.

“Hold on the alert ’til I get back,” he said. “I want to check something. I won’t be gone more than five minutes.” With that he dived overboard. He swam some few feet further toward open water, then went under in a flurry of purple legs.

AS THE WATERS of Lake Michigan closed over his head, he felt the peace of utter isolation. But he had not come here for peace. He swam lakeward with long, even, underwater strokes until he judged he could safely go no further. Then he reversed and went back as he had come.

The going got tough toward the end. His heart pounding in his ears sounded like a series of explosions. Finally he could stand it no longer and shot to the surface. The fact that he was still alive to take in a gulp of blessed air told him he had come up inside the ray-cap. And he’d learned what he’d wanted to learn.

Also, he now learned something else. The explosions in his ears had not been his pounding heart. A spotlight from above was centered on the platform - rather, on the place the platform had been. Now there was nothing there but a spot of boiling, steaming water. And the heat was fast spreading in all directions; so swiftly that Mark, well outside the circle of the spotlight, found himself taking a warm bath.

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He turned north and started moving away with long, powerful strokes. He had gone perhaps fifty feet when a voice, close by on his left, called out, "That you, Chief?"

Mark recognized the man as he pulled close. "Where are the others?"

"Gone. Crisped down to nothing. They didn't give any warning. They just blasted away. I took a long jump and was lucky. They got it right there on the platform."

Mark said nothing. There was nothing to be said. He continued swimming northward and the last man in his squad fell in beside him.

"Where we going, Chief?"

"To a place up by the river mouth - a location given me in the scanning report. I want to look it over."

They swam for an hour, and were not challenged, and came finally to a place where the still, dark hulks of several old-model submarines reared into view. The early false dawn was fast becoming reality now, and Mark increased the beat of the stroke to a point where his companion was laboring.

Then the submarines were above them. Mark rounded the first one and went in beside it to the hidden ramp, waited for the other to come up beside him.

"Let's rest a while Chief. I'm about beat."

"Sure," Mark said. "We want to be ready. Don't know what we'll find inside."

Their heavy breathing had subsided somewhat when Mark said, "You stay here. Cover my rear. I'm going inside."

HE WENT up the ramp, on tiptoe. Dim light came from the hatch in the conning tower. Mark peered inside. All was quiet. After a minute he went quietly down the ladder. Halfway down he stopped abruptly as he came within sight of two purple males and a green female asleep on cots. This was a breach of conduct he was sure. At least one of them should have been awake.

But he was glad of that breach. It gave him the opportunity of making a quiet exit. He went out as he had, come - tiptoed out of ear shot and took a tiny transmitter from under his loin cloth.

There was no necessity of setting it or establishing contact. He knew the people waiting for him to come in wouldn't be sleeping. He spoke in a whisper, "How long since you scanned me?"

The reply came instantly into the receiver in his skull. "An hour and a half, sir."

"Then the hunch I had was right. I've proven it out since. Pass the word along to the proper authorities. But tell them to hold up until I give the word. I haven't been able to go ahead on Project Friendship yet. I'll report."

"Yes, sir."

"And throw the scanner on 497X immediately."

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“Yes, sir.”

“That’s all.”

“Good luck, sir.”

Mark put his transmitter back into its hiding place where it had already chafed off a sizeable piece of skin.

MARY AWOKE with a start. But there was a hand over her mouth, so her cry, was smothered in her throat. She opened her eyes to see a handsome purple face close to her own. She tensed her muscles for a struggle.

But then the purple man spoke, whispered into her ear: “It’s Mark. Quiet! I’ve come to help you. Let’s get outside quietly.”

They went to the ramp where Mark’s companion sat hunched over. He looked up startled. “It’s all right,” Mark said. The man sank back.

“Mark!” Mary whispered. “I don’t understand. What are you doing here?”

“I came in to follow anywhere you led through this damn maze, and to cash in on any information you got. That was part of the original plan, you know. But I couldn’t tell you earlier. Didn’t want it in your mind in case they scanned. But now we have to work together.”

“Did I get anything important?”

“Plenty. There’s a Resistance here. The top men sitting on the majority - holding them down, through a mind stunting process. Some of this lower mob - *zants* they’re called - have kicked over the traces. I’ve got a plan, but you’ve got to stay under the scanner for a while.”

“It will be a pleasure,” Mary said. “And you know something?” She swayed close to him. “I’m damn glad to see you. If that’s unladylike — make the most of it.”

He grinned and kissed her swiftly. Then, “What’s your layout?” he asked.

“There’s a purple male I seem to hang close to. I think he’s Mara’s sweetheart. He’s in the Resistance.”

“I want to talk with him. Let’s go inside. Do you get my pitch, or do you need briefing?”

“I get it. Let’s go.”

Mark glanced down at his subordinate. “Cover our rear.”

Mary went down the conning ladder and Mark followed her.

ONCE INSIDE, Mark awoke the men, then stepped back, watching them narrowly. One evinced great guilt almost instantly. Mark quickly centered his attention upon the other.

Mary said, “Wake up, I have news. This is one of the natives. He came through the ray-cap to help us bea- the *gorts*.”

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The purple man stared in blank surprise. Mark said, "Hello, Glan." He checked the man's face for reaction and the reaction was satisfactory. "Mara has been telling me about you and the Resistance. We kept it secret until now, so you wouldn't have it on your mind if you were scanned. We will help you defeat your enemies and thus defeat our own."

Glan had nothing to say. He was still bewildered. He looked to Mara for guidance. "We got the guns here in time, then," he said. "Is that what you had in mind, Mara, when you said we should bring them here?"

"Of course," Mary smiled. "But there are other things to be done. We must cut off the ray-cap."

Glan frowned. "But, Mara — you know that's impossible. We'd be killed before we could - "

Mark knew, of course, that Mary was groping. She'd groped in the wrong direction. "Mara is just over-enthusiastic," Mark said. "It isn't necessary to cut off the ray-cap. But one other thing would help. Is there any guard against the hypno-ray?"

Glan was getting more bewildered with each passing minute. "Of course." He looked at Mara. "Haven't you told him?"

"We were discussing other things," Mark said, thinking how similar this was to walking on eggs. "Besides, I'd rather get that sort of information from a man. It's probably too technical for a woman to understand." Mark wished fervently that Mara's ego didn't submerge completely when the scanner was turned on Mary. It was the big flaw in the complete conditioning theory. No information could be scanned from the conscious mind if it was information gleaned by another ego.

Glan was still frowning. "There's nothing very technical about it. In an area of this size, two high-frequency cross-beams will nullify the hypno-ray."

Mark rushed on, trying to keep the purple man off, balance. "Another thing. A rumor must get to the *gorts* that we've solved the ray-cap and intend to attack from the air. Is there a solution to the ray?"

Glan shrugged, his troubled eyes still on Mary. "I don't know. They say there's a solution to everything."

"Here's what must be done," Mark said. "I think you'd better alert the Resistance and have them come here in ones and twos to get arms. Then you go to the *gort* headquarters and confess to being a Resistance man. But you've repented and are bringing them the information about the ray-cap and the coming attack. In-order to clinch it, you can tell them where the dream pellets are — that is, after we've gotten the guns out of here."

MARY LOOKED at Mark, then swiftly hid the surprise in her face. What, on earth were dream pellets? she wondered. It was Mark who sensed the true situation. This *zant* did not reflect the personality pattern found in the scannings. Therefore, he must have succumbed to temptation and was even now groggy from the dream-drug. That would account for his heavy-mindedness.

"They probably won't even scan you," Mary said. "If they do, can you throw up a barrier?"

"I - I - don't know. I could try."

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Mark could see that his purple man's acquiescence came from his love for Mara, his fear of displeasing her. He strove to rush the thing. "Then it's settled. Why don't you get going right away? Just leave everything else to us."

A few minutes later, they stood on the ramp. Glan had been dispatched to the Palmer House with instructions to present his revelations in exactly three revolutions of the Wrigley dock. The other *zant* was sent out to call the Resistance in to pick up weapons.

Alone with Mark and his subordinate, Mary surveyed them thoughtfully. Then she said, "I'll handle the weapon dispersals. You two get some sleep. If you don't, you'll keel over from exhaustion."

"There are things to be done. We've got to arrange to get our hands, on a friend, of ours - the man who walks in and out of Chicago as though it was his own personal bathroom."

Mary glanced up quickly; but asked no questions. "Nothing can be done about that now. You've got to have some rest."

Mark yawned. "Maybe it's a good idea. We'll crawl into one of the other subs so we're out of the way. Call us if we're needed - and in two hours in any case."

Mark and his one-man squad found cots in the third submarine to the west. If they were worried about inability to rest, they had little time for it. They were asleep in a matter of seconds. The last thought in Mark's brain was:

I wonder if any of us will be alive three hours from now?

Not that it mattered much. He was too tired to care.

MARK AWOKE with a sense of lateness. He awakened his subordinate and climbed out of the submarine. Ice-water coursed through his veins as he glanced at the Wrigley clock and saw the hands standing at eleven o'clock. Eleven o'clock. Four hours had elapsed since they'd descended that ladder.

Mark swung his eyes in a circle. There was no living thing in sight. The city, from where he stood, was utterly deserted. No one - white, green, or purple, walked the streets. It looked like a ghost town.

Mark leaped from the conning tower and ran down the ramp to the pier. His sense of alarm increased, even as he came to the ramp of the other submarine, and he was not as cautious as he should have been. So he found himself sending there looking into the barrel of a queer-looking gun.

There was only one person in sight. Mary was gone. None of the space intruders, could be seen. The man in sight was a native.

The man said, "Good day, Mr. Clayton. I've been waiting for you."

Mark said, "And greetings to you, Professor Halley. I surmised as much."

Professor Halley had changed a great deal. Gone was the half-feminine lightness of manner for which he had been famous. Gone was the soft, humorous light in his eyes; replaced now, by a flintiness which bespoke the egomaniac.

"You don't seem surprised," Halley said.

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Paul W. Fairman

“No. We’ve known about you - to some extent - for some time. And how is your friend Sargo? Planning to conquer any other worlds?”

Halley snarled, the snarl showing that he could carry light repartee just so far; that his deadly earnest fanaticism, when outside the bonds of necessary caution, had to come uppermost.

“You fools,” he grated. “You utter fools! How long did you think your inane and childish policy of individual freedom could last? Don’t you realize that therein you sowed the seeds of your own destruction?”

“Tell me more,” Mark said. His eyes were on Halley’s gun; his thoughts on the possibilities of overcoming him.

“Certainly. But first, tell your man to continue his descent. Otherwise I’ll be forced to blow his legs to dust.”

MARK GLANCED upward and the subordinate came sullenly down the ladder. He had been standing on a center rung awaiting developments.

“That’s better.”

“Yes - we’ve known for some time that we had a rotten spot in our apple barrel.”

Halley’s eyes glowed. “Then why did you let it remain?” he asked, too interested in that point to take issue with the insult.

“Because the damage you could do could be estimated. We had you pretty well contained and we knew where you were. That was the main point. Anything you’ve done in this project could have been done by someone else. If we’d picked you up, Sargo would have gotten another boy. And we wouldn’t have known what boy.”

Halley sneered. “You are making an excellent job of saving face. An amazingly nonchalant piece of second guessing. Tell me - what did you really know of Project Undermine?”

“That I suppose is Sargo’s code-phrase for world-treachery?”

“I asked you a question.”

“We knew very little for sure, but we surmised a great deal. That either you or Sargo contacted the space invaders and invited them to roost on a piece of our territory. That he plans to use their invasion as a means of making us lose world-wide face. That he hopes, in the near future, to throw a world alliance against us. The United States of America against the east, the west, the north, the south.”

“You hit it exactly. Of course, it was no great feat of projection. You merely took our aims and conceded that we could accomplish all of them. Your nation is doomed, Clayton.”

“Then you don’t consider it your nation also?”

“Of course not - in the sense you refer to. It shall be my nation, of course, but as a squirming little community to hold under my thumb.”

The Woman in Skin 13

Paul W. Fairman

“Would you mind telling me what happened to the people I left here?”

“The people?” The narrowing of Halley’s eyes, and the slight start, told Clayton what he wanted to know. By a stroke of great good fortune, the weapons had been distributed before Halley nosed out the hiding place. Otherwise, he would certainly have apprehended a few of the *zants*.

“What did you do with them?”

“If you refer to the green lady, she is in custody. As a matter of fact, you’ll see her soon.” Halley got to his feet. “Enough of this. We are going to take a little walk.” He motioned toward the ladder. “You gentlemen first. And if you have any idea of running, get it out of your mind. You wouldn’t travel fifty feet before I blasted you down.”

MARK AND Mary sat in a small, cement-walled room in the basement of the Palmer House. A steel door had been put in. They were alone.

“Why are they waiting?” Mary asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe they get a sadistic pleasure out of leaving us here together for a little while. It’s hard to figure them.”

“We tried, didn’t we?”

“That we did. Are you scared?”

“No. Not as long as you’re here.

Does that sound corny?”

“It sounds wonderful.”

They sat in silence for a long minute. Then Mark said, “It isn’t over, of course. We’ll get them in the end. But I guess, you and I won’t be around to see it.”

“It doesn’t matter too much. Others will take our places.”

“It was a good fight though. That’s the main thing. It was a good fight:”

Mark leaned, over and kissed Mary. Without passion - gently. But there was much in the kiss that was unspoken and understood.

Mark settled back into his place against the wall beside Mary. He took her hand. “No,” he said. “It isn’t over yet.”

As a matter of fact, it seemed just to have started. At that moment the door flew open. Glan stood there with several *zants* - all armed - all alert - all very grim.

“Come on,” Glan fairly shouted. “Things have been happening! We did the impossible! We smashed the ray-cap machines - four of them. It cost us twenty fighters, but then the natives came in.”

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Glan and the *zants* were rushing Mark and Mary up to street level. “And more than that,” he said. “A whole army of natives came in under the water - under the ray-cap. Between us, we took the city!”

Mark’s lips went tight. “Halley - the little native who used to come in and out - the one who brought me here - where is he?”

Above - in the hallway – a gun flared at that precise moment. Two of the *zants* went down, their bodies half burned away. “Here I am, Clayton,” Halley blazed. There was a gun in his hand, and madness in his eyes. “We haven’t failed! You’ll never beat us! We haven’t failed!”

The last words came as an echo from charred and, blackened lips in a face that was falling into dust. Halley was dead.

“Let’s go,” Mark shouted- “Let’s get going! Give me one of those guns.”

But there was nothing to do. It was over - finished. And everyone knew Sargo and his proposed alliance was over, also. Within twenty-four hours, he was dead at the hands of his own people, and the eastern tiger crawled, snarling, back into its lair.

NOW EVENTS moved swiftly. The *zants*, now in command of their own destiny, yearned for the void. In a few hours, with no announcement whatever, they began boarding their ferries to reach the great ship.

Mark and Mary stood by the water’s edge, having come there quickly as the news of the exodus spread. Mark turned to speak to Mary just as the latter jerked her hand from, his. “The girl in Washington - ” Mark began with concern. “There hasn’t been time to - ”

Mary was staring at him in blank surprise...

MARA STARED at the strange, pale native who had been holding her hand. He seemed deeply surprised about something. “Mary!” the native said. “What’s wrong?”

Mara continued to stare. Horror suddenly dawned in the native’s face. “The scanner!” he mouthed. “The scanner! It’s gone off!”

Mara wondered what he was talking about. She drew away from him and saw Glan running toward her. She smiled, and when Glan got there she ran into his arms.

“Mary! Mary!” the native cried, and Mara drew away from him.

Glan was smiling. “We’re going back into the void, he said. “We’re going to find a world that isn’t inhabited. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Wonderful,” Mara returned, laying her head on his shoulder.

The native seemed to be going mad. He took her by the arm, and tried to drag her away from Glan. She laughed, so high were her spirits, and jerked free. She ran to the ferry, calling Glan after her, and they stepped into the ferry.

The gate, closed and the ferry shot across the water toward the *Narkus*. The native on the shore had completely lost his mind now: He stood there screaming after her at the top of his voice.

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Mara watched him for a few moments, puzzled. Then she turned to listen to what Glan was saying, to listen to Glan tell her about the future. She forgot the native until they were far up in void. Then she glanced down through a port.

All she saw was a small green ball - far away.