
The Passing of Ku Sui

Anthony Gilmore



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The Passing of Ku Sui

A Complete Novelette

By Anthony Gilmore

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CHAPTER I

The Plan

A screaming streak in the night—a cloud of billowing steam—and the climax of Hawk Carse's spectacular "Affair of the Brains" is over.

Like a projectile Hawk Carse shot out in a direction away from Earth.

The career of Hawk Carse, taken broadly, divides itself into three main phases, and it is with the Ku Sui adventures of the second phase that we have been concerned in this intimate narrative. John Sewell, the historian, baldly condenses those adventures of a century ago together, but on research and closer scrutiny they take on an individuality and significance deserving of separate treatment, and this they have been given here. For fictionalized presentation, we have spaced the adventures into four connected episodes, four acts of a vibrant drama which ranged clear from Saturn to Earth, the core of which was the feud between Captain Carse and the power-lusting Eurasian scientist, Dr. Ku Sui—that feud the reverberations of whose terrible settling still echo over the solar system—and in this last act of the drama, set out below, we come to its spectacular climax.

The words of John Sewell's epic history sit lightly on paper; easy words for Sewell, once the collection of data was over, to write; not very significant words for the uninitiated and casual reader who does not see the irresistible forces beneath them. But consider the full meaning of these words, and glance for a moment at the two figures conjured up by them. We see Hawk Carse, a man slender in build, but with gray eyes and lithe, strong-fingered hands and cold, intent face that give the clue to the steel of him; we see Dr. Ku Sui, tall, suave, unhurried, formed as though by a master sculptor, in whose rare green eyes slumbered the soul of a tiger, notwithstanding the courtesy and the grace that masked always his most infamous moves. These two we see looming through and dwarfing Sewell's words as they face each other, for they were probably the most bitter, and certainly the most spectacular, foe-men of that raw period before the patrol ships swept up from the home of man to lay Earth's laws through space.

Carse and Ku Sui, adventurer and scientist, each with his own distinctive strength and his own unyielding character—those two were star-crossed, fated to be foes, and whenever they met there was blood, and never was quarter asked nor quarter expected. How could it have been otherwise? Ku Sui controlled the isuan drug trade, and Carse was against it, as he was against everything underhanded and unclean; Ku Sui had tricked and, by a single deed, driven Carse's loved comrade, Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, from his honored position on Earth, and Carse was sworn to bring Ku Sui to Earth to clear the old scientist's name. Either of these alone was enough to seal the feud, but there was more. Carse was sworn to release from their bondage of life-in-death Ku Sui's most prized possession, his storehouse of wisdom—the brains of five great Earth scientists, kept alive though their bodies were dead.

These, then, were the forces glossed over so lightly by John Sewell's words. These the forces that clashed in the episode set out below: that clashed, then drew apart, and knew not one another for years....

I

It will be recalled that, in the second of these four episodes, "The Affair of the Brains,"^[1] Hawk Carse, Eliot Leithgow, and the Negro Friday broke free from Dr. Ku's secret lair, his outwardly invisible asteroid, and in doing so thought they had destroyed the Eurasian and all his works, including the infamous machine of coordinated brains. In the third episode, "The Bluff of the Hawk,"^[2] it will be remembered that the companions came in Dr. Ku's self-propulsive space-suits to Satellite III of Jupiter; and that there Carse learned that in reality the Eurasian and the brains had survived, and that Dr. Ku might very possibly soon be in possession of a direct clue to Leithgow's hidden laboratory on Satellite III. We saw Carse take the lone course, as he always preferred, sending Leithgow and Friday to his friend Ban Wilson's ranch while he went to erase the clue. And we saw him achieve his end at the fort-ranch of Lar Tantril, strong henchman of Ku Sui, and, in brilliant Carse fashion, turn the tables and escape from the trap that had seemingly snared him, and proceed towards where, fourteen miles away, Leithgow and the Negro were waiting for him.

[1] See the March, 1932, issue of Astounding Stories.

[2] See the May, 1932, issue of Astounding Stories.

His three friends were waiting very uneasily that day. Eleven hours had passed since Leithgow and Friday had parted from the Hawk, and they had heard nothing from him. They knew he was going into high peril: Leithgow had in vain tried to dissuade him; and so it was with growing fear that they watched the hours pass by.

With Ban Wilson, they sat near dawn in the comfortable living room of the ranch's central building. Although largely rested from the ordeal of the journey to Satellite III, the huge Negro was fidgety, and even Leithgow, more controlled, showed the strain by continually raising his thin white fingers to his lined face and stroking it. Wilson's men were on watch outside in the graying darkness, but often Friday supplemented them, going to the door, staring down to the beach of the bordering lake, staring up to the skies, staring at the black and murmurous flanks of the jungle—staring, scowling and returning to sit and look gloomily at the floor.

B

an Wilson was the most active physically. He was a miniature dynamo of a man, throbbing with a restless, inexhaustible tide of energy. Short and wiry, he stared truculently at the universe through wonderfully clear blue eyes, surrounded by a bumper crop of freckles and topped by a mat of bristly red hair. His short stub nose had prodded into countless hostile places where it most emphatically was not wanted. It would be hardly necessary to old acquaintances of his to say that he was now speaking.

"No, sir! I say the Hawk's safe and kicking! Can't kill *him*! By my grandmother's false teeth, I swear I'd follow him to hell, knowin' I'd come out alive and leavin' the devil yowlin' behind with his tail tied into pretzels! He said he would meet you here? Well, then, he will."

Friday looked up mournfully.

"Yes, suh, Cap'n Ban; but Cap'n Carse was going into a pow'ful lot of trouble. An' he was worn an' tired, an' he only had a space-suit an' a raygun, an' you know he wouldn't stop for anything till he'd done what he set out to. I kind of feel ... I dunno ... I dunno...."

"By Betelguese!" swore Ban Wilson, "if he doesn't come soon I'll take that damned Porno apart till I find him!"

Eliot Leithgow gave up the late radio newscast from Earth he had been pretending to read. A brief silence fell, and through it the old scientist seemed to feel something, seemed to expect something. And he was not mistaken.

"*Who's there?*"

It was a cry from one of the watchers outside. Friday leaped out of his uneasy seat and was through the door even before Ban, who followed with Leithgow. They heard the Negro roar from ahead:

"Cap'n Carse! Cap'n Carse! Sure enough, it's Cap'n Carse!"—and they saw his great form go bounding down to the gray-lit beach of the lake, to a slight, weary figure that came stumbling along it.

H

awk Carse had come as he said he would, but he was a sore figure of a man. Though he was not in it now, for days he had worn the harsh, grating metal and fabric of a space-suit, and its marks were left on him. Even from a distance the others could see that his once-neat blue trousers and soft flannel shirt were torn through in many places, revealing ugly purplish bruises; on his haggard face was a nap of flaxen beard, and in his blood-shot gray eyes utter exhaustion, both mental and physical. The Hawk had been acting at high tension for days past, and now the reaction was exacting its inevitable toll.

He came stumbling heavily along the beach, his feet dragging through its coarse sand, and it seemed as if he would drop any moment. With a slight smile he greeted Friday, then Eliot Leithgow and Wilson, all running down.

"Hello, Eclipse," he murmured, "and Eliot—and Ban—"

There he wavered and half fell against the Negro's body. Friday wished to carry him, but he would have none of it: by himself he walked up to the ranch-house, where he slumped into a chair while

Ban Wilson went shouting into the galley for a mug of hot alkite.

After draining it, Carse revived slightly. Again aware of the three men grouped around him, and recognizing their eagerness for his news, he forced himself to speech.

"Sleepy—must sleep. But—yes—some things I'll tell you." In quick, staccato sentences, his tired eyelids shut half the time, he sketched his adventure at Lar Tantril's ranch, explaining how, even though captured, he had destroyed the figures, telling of the location of Leithgow's laboratory; and a slight smile appeared on his lips as he told of the ruse by which he had escaped. "Got away. Told them the lake-front was very dangerous to them. Made them let me show them. I walked out—dozens of them round me, guns on me—walked out till I went under water. Could do it in the suit. I walked under water half a mile or so, then came up and cached the suit. I guess they're still watching! Easy!"

H

e chuckled, and then, after a short pause, went on:

"But here's what's important—Ku Sui is alive. Yes, I know it. He has an assignation with Tantril at Tantril's ranch. In five days. And the coordinated brains I promised to destroy—they still exist. So, Eliot, these are orders: prepare plans for infra-red and ultra-violet devices—they ought to do it—so we can see Dr. Ku's invisible asteroid when it comes. Friday, you go down and get my space-suit: it's cached ten miles down the beach, beneath a big watrari tree. And then—" His head slumped over; he appeared to have abruptly fallen to sleep.

"Yes, Carse? What is your plan?" Eliot Leithgow asked softly. But the Hawk was only making a great last effort to gather the threads of his idea.

"Yes," he responded, "the plan. Ban stations a man to keep watch on Tantril's ranch, while we go back to your laboratory, Eliot, where you'll make the devices and repair the gravity-plates of my suit. Then, four nights from now, if the watcher's seen no one arrive, Ban, Friday and I return and lie in ambush round Tantril's ranch. Awaiting Dr. Ku. When he comes, he'll surely leave his asteroid somewhere near. And while he's at Tantril's, we capture the asteroid—and my promise to the coordinated brains will be kept.

"Then—but that's enough for now; I am so tired. Ban, will you please—some food—"

Wilson, who had been listening eagerly and, at the end, grinning in prospect of action with the Hawk, darted off like a spark. A few minutes later, after his third mouthful of food, Carse murmured:

"We'll use your ship to go to Eliot's lab in, Ban, but I think you'll—have to—carry me—aboard. So sleepy. Wake me when we get to—lab."

On this last word his sleep-denied body had its way, and at once he was deep in the dreamless slumber of exhaustion.

While he slept, the others rapidly carried out his orders. Within two hours Friday, in the ranch's air-car, had retrieved the cached suit. Ban Wilson had manned and made ready his personal space-ship for the trip to the laboratory, and Eliot Leithgow had jotted down a few preliminary plans for the infra-red and ultra-violet instruments which Carse would need in order to see the invisible asteroid of Dr. Ku Sui.

CHAPTER II

Three Figures in the Dawn

T

he fourth night after the Hawk had met his friends at Ban Wilson's was sunless and Jupiter-less, nor was there the slightest breath of wind; and in the humid, dank jungle surrounding on three sides the isuan ranch of the Venusian Lar Tantril the sounds of night-prowling animals burst full and loud, making an almost continuous babel of varied and savage noise.

In the midst of this dark inferno, Tantril's ranch was an island of stillness. Within the high guarding fence, the long low buildings lay quiet and were [illegible] brushed periodically by the light from the watch-beacon high overhead as it swept its shaft over the jungle smother and then around over the black glassy surface of the Great Briney Lake, bordering the ranch enclosure on the fourth side. And, vigilantly, the eyes of three Venusian guards followed the ray.

They stood on the three lookout towers which reared at equal intervals up above the circumference of the ranch; and though the buildings below seemed deserted, in reality wide-awake men were stationed at posts within them, waiting for the clang of the alarm which the pressing of a button in any one of the lookout towers would effect. Lar Tantril's ranch was not asleep. It was as alert and wary as the beasts tracking through the jungle outside its fence, and all its defensive and offensive weapons were at the ready.

No one within the ranch knew it, but within two hundred yards lay the foe Lar Tantril and his men feared most.

R

egularly around the watch-beacon swept, slicing the blackness with an oval white finger, the farthest edge of which reached a hundred and fifty yards. Over the "western" lake—and its inky ripples sparkled somehow ominously. Over the jungle's confusion—and trees, great bushes, spiky vines and creeper-growths leaped into momentary visibility, and then were again swallowed up in the tide of night. Here a cutlas-beaked bird, spotlighted for an instant, froze into surprised immobility with the pasty, bloated worm it had seized twisting and dangling from its mouth, to flap squawking away as the ray glided on: there the coils of a seekan, in ambush on a tree limb, glittered crimson for the sudden moment of illumination; or a nameless huge-eyed pantherlike creature was glimpsed as it clawed at a nest of unfledged haris, while the frantic, screaming mother beat at it with wings and claws....

But all this was usual and unalarming, merely the ordinary routine of the jungle at night. Could the beacon have reached out another fifty yards, the guards on their towers would have seen that which was not usual—and would have summoned every weapon of the ranch beneath.

Or could the guards have heard, besides the cries and crashings and yowls of the jungle folk, the man-made sounds which sped silently back and forth across the ranch within their tight and secret radio beams—then, too, the alarm would have clanged.

Had the beacon suddenly stretched its path outward another fifty yards, it would have fallen upon a massive, leafy watrari tree, taller than most: and the guards, looking close, might have caught in one notch of the tree's many limbs a glint of metal: might have seen, had the light held on that glint, a bloated monster of metal and fabric braced there, hiding behind a screen of leaves.

This giant, not native to the jungle, was posted due "north" from the ranch. Another waited to the "south," in a similarly large tree; and another to the "east."

Hawk Carse and his friends were abroad again and waiting to strike.

B

an Wilson, hot, itching and uncomfortable inside the heavy space-suit that he wore, and supremely aware of his consequent awkwardness, watched the ranch's beacon sweeping past him thirty or more yards away, and again sought relief from the tedium in conversation.

"Jupiter should be rising soon, Carse. It's the darkest hour—seems to me he'll come now if he comes at all. What do you think?"

He was the one posted in a watrari tree "south" of Tantril's ranch. Flung on the tight beam of his helmet-radio, which had been tuned and adjusted by Eliot Leithgow so as to reach only two other radios, the words rang simultaneously in the receivers of Friday, who was "east" of the ranch, and Carse, who was "north."

The Hawk responded curtly:

"I don't know when he'll come; I suspect not before full morning."

Ban Wilson grunted at receipt of this discouraging opinion, and then once more, as he had been doing regularly all through the night, raised to his eyes the instrument that hung by a cord from the neckpiece of the suit. Through it he scanned slowly and methodically the portion of black heaven that had been assigned to him. The instrument would have resembled a bulky pair of electro-binoculars with its twin tubes and eyepieces, had not there been, underneath the tubes, a small, compact box which by Leithgow-magic revealed the world through infra-red light by one tube, and ultra-violet the other.

"Nothing!" Ban muttered to himself, lowering the device. "And damn Ku Sui for makin' these space-suits so infernally uncomfortable! Might as well have made 'em space-ships, while he was at it!... Say, Carse," he began again aloud into his microphone, "maybe Dr. Ku's come already. I know my men said no one had arrived at the ranch in a suit like these we've got on—but, hell, if his whole asteroid's invisible, why couldn't he make his space-suit invisible, too?"

"I don't think he's done that. Otherwise he would have—" The adventurer's level tone raised incisively. "Now, both of you, still! Conceal yourselves with great care—Jupiter's rising!"

T

he "western" horizon, a moment before indistinguishable, was now faintly flushed, a flush which deepened quickly into glowing, riotous crimson, causing long streamers to shoot out over the surface of the Great Briney, tingling it, sparkling it. The light reached the jungle: and when the first faint reflected rays filtered down through the matted gloom of tree and vine and bush the creatures that had tracked for prey all night looked to their lairs: and gradually, the tenor of the jungle noises waned off into a few last screams and muttered growls, and then died altogether into the heavy, brooding hush that comes always with dawn over the jungles of Satellite III.

Jupiter thrust his flaming arch upwards over the horizon, and climbed with his whole vast blood-blotched bulk into a sky turned suddenly blue. Lake and jungle shimmered under the rapidly dissipating night vapors. The ranch-beacon paled into unimportance. Day had come.

And now the three bloated figures of metal and fabric that were men crouched closely back beneath the leaves of the trees that concealed them, and waited tensely, not daring at first to move for fear of discovery. Each one could see, through the intervening growth, the watch-towers of the ranch; but Friday, from his post in the tree to the "east," could see the area best, and it was Friday to whom Carse's next words were addressed.

"Eclipse?" his terse voice asked. "Do the guards in the towers seem to notice anything?"

The big Negro strained cautiously for a better view.

"No, suh, Cap'n Carse. Sure they can't see us at all. Just pacin' round on their towers, kind of fidgety."

"Anyone else in sight?"

"No, suh.... Oh, now there's somethin'. Two of the guards are looking below, cupping their ears. Someone down there must be tellin' them somethin'. Now they're lookin' up to the sky—the northern sky. Yes, suh! All three of 'em! They're expectin' someone, sure enough!"

"Good. He must be coming. Use your glasses."

T

hen in all three trees the instruments that Eliot Leithgow had shaped were raised, and the whole sweep of horizon and the glowing, clear blue dome of sky subjected to minute inspection through their detecting infra-red and ultra-violet. Ban Wilson, perhaps, stared most eagerly, for he had never seen Ku Sui's asteroid, and despite himself still only half-believed that twenty craggy, twisted miles

of rock could be swung as its master willed in space, and brought down bodily to Satellite III.

But he saw nothing in the sky; nothing looming gigantically over any part of the horizon; and he reported disgustedly:

"Nothing doing anywhere. Carse."

"Don't see nothing either, suh," the Negro's deep voice added. And both of them heard the Hawk murmur:

"Nor do I. But he must be—Ah! There! Careful! They're coming!"

"Where? Where is it?" yapped Ban excitedly, jerking the instrument to his eyes again.

"Speak low. Not the asteroid. Three men."

For a tense minute there was silence between them, until, in a low, crisp voice, the Hawk added:

"Three men in space-suits like ours, coming from the "north" straight for Tantril's. Ban, you may not be able to see them till they get to the ranch, so you keep hunting for the asteroid with your glasses. Friday, you see them?"

"Yes, suh! Three! One ahead of the others!"

"Keep your eyes tight on them. No talking now from either of you unless it's important."

The steely voice snapped off. And carefully, in his tree, Hawk Carse brushed aside a fringe of leaves and concentrated on the three figures the dawn had brought.

H

ard and sharp they glittered in the flood of ruddy light from Jupiter, great grotesque figures of metal and bulging fabric, with shining quartzite face-plates and the abnormally large helmets and boot-pieces which identified them as being of the enemy. At a level fifty feet above the jungle's crown they came in fast, horizontal transit, and there was much of beauty in the picture that they made—sparkling shapes flying without sound or movement of limb against the blue sky, over the heaped colors of the jungle below. One flew slightly in the lead, and he, the watching Hawk felt positive, was Ku Sui, and the other two his servants—probably men whose brains had been violated, dehumanized—mere machines in human form.

Straight in the three figures flew, without hesitation or swerving, closer and closer to the watching man in the tree. The Hawk's lips compressed as his old enemy neared, and into his watching gray eyes came the deadly cold emotionless look that was known and feared throughout space, wherever outlaws walked or flew. Ku Sui—so close! There, in that even-gliding figure, was the author of the infamy done to Leithgow, of the crime to the brains that lived though their bodies were dead; of the organized isuan trade. Go for him now? The thought flashed temptingly through Carse's head, but he saw sense at once. Far too dangerous, with the powerful, watching ranch so close. He could not jeopardize the success of his promise to the brains.

And so Dr. Ku Sui passed, while two pairs of eyes from two leafy trees watched closely every instant of his passing, and one man's hand dropped unconsciously to the butt of a raygun.

Quickly, the Eurasian and his servitors were gone, their straight, steady flight obscured by the trees around Tantril's ranch, below which they slanted.

Dr. Ku Sui had arrived at his assignation. But where was the asteroid?

T

rough his instrument, Carse sought horizon and heaven for the massive body, but in vain. He spoke into his helmet-radio's mike.

"Ban?"

"Yes, Carse?"

"See the asteroid anywhere?"

"Nowhere, by Betelgeuse! I've looked till my eyes—"

The Hawk cut him short. "All right. Stand by. Friday?"

"Yes, suh?"

"Can you see anything special?"

"No, suh—only that the three platform guards keep lookin' down towards the center of the ranch."

"Good. That means Ku Sui's being received," said Carse; and then he considered swiftly for a minute. Decided, he continued:

"Ban and Friday, you both wait where you are, keeping a steady lookout. None of us can see the asteroid, but it must be somewhere comparatively near, for Dr. Ku has no reason to bother with a long journey in a space-suit. I think the asteroid's close down, hidden by that distant ridge in the direction from which they came. I'm going to find it. When I do, I'll tell you where to come meet me. Inform me at once if Ku Sui leaves or if anything unusual happens. Understood?"

The assenting voices rang back to him simultaneously.

"Right!" he said; and slowly his great bulging figure lifted.

C

autiously, the adventurer made through the watrari tree to the side facing away from the ranch. There, poising for a second, he manipulated the lateral direction-rod on the suit's chest, and, still very slowly, floated free from the shrouding leaves. Then, mindful of the lookouts on the towers behind, he employed the tactics he had used before, and kept constantly below the uneven crown of the jungle, gliding at an easy rate through the leafy lanes created by the banked tree-tops.

In that fashion, in the upthrust arms of the jungle, twisting, turning, sometimes doubling, but following always a path the objective of which was straight ahead, Hawk Carse soared soundlessly for miles. He maneuvered his way with practised ease, and his speed increased as the need for hiding his flight decreased.

He was familiar with the landmarks of the region, and it was towards the most pronounced of them that he flew. Soon it was looming far above him: a long, high ridge, rearing more than three miles above the level of the Great Briney, and crowded with trees even taller and sturdier than those of the lower jungle plains. Beyond it was the most likely spot....

The Hawk paused at the base of the ridge. There had been no warning from Ban or Friday, but, to make sure, he established radio connection.

"Friday?" he asked into the microphone. "Any activity on the ranch? Any sign they're aware of our presence?"

Clear and deep from miles behind, the Negro's voice answered:

"No, suh. Dead still. I guess they're inside the buildings—except the guards, and they're taking things easy. Where are you, suh?"

"About ten miles from you, 'north' and a little 'east,' at the foot of the ridge. I think I'll know something soon now. Stand by."

Then Carse moved forward again, slowly winding up between the trees to the summit of the ridge.

At the top he stopped. His eyes took in a long, wide valley, of which the ridge where he hung was the southernmost barrier. He knew at once something was wrong. Through his opened face-plate he was aware of a breathless hush that hovered over the valley, a hush which embraced its fifty miles or more of jungle length, a hush which was rendered actually visible in several places by the unmoving, limp-hanging leaves of the trees. Below, in the valley, all the myriad life of the jungle seemed to have frozen, and only occasionally was the pause of life and sound disturbed by the faint, muffled cry of a bird.

What had wrought the hush? Nothing showed to the naked eye.

From the summit of the ridge, Hawk Carse lifted Leithgow's glasses to his eyes. And the valley was suddenly changed, and the hush explained. The miracle lay before him.

CHAPTER III

The Raid

A

dim, shimmering outline through the infra-red, the valley lay revealed as a great natural cradle for a mammoth body of rock which had been swung down from the deeps of space to the surface of Satellite III.

Titanic, breath-taking in its majesty of sheer bulk, the asteroid of Dr. Ku Sui was made visible.

It hung suspended, low over the tree-tops of the valley, and it filled the valley with rock and towered above it. This was the asteroid, exploded into a separate entity by the cataclysm that gave birth to the planets, which Dr. Ku Sui had wrenched from the asteroidal belt between Mars and Jupiter and built into a world of his own, swinging it through space as he willed, and cloaking it with invisibility to baffle those who marveled at how he came and went, unseen, on his various errands. This was the mighty rock fortress in which lay the key-stone of his mounting power. This his lonely, unsuspected home, come for a while to rest....

Hawk Carse scanned it closely.

It lay roughly head-on to him, its nearest massive, craggy end lying some three miles from where he hung. On that end lived the life of the asteroid, and were located all Ku Sui's works. On a space planed flat in the rock, rested the dome, like an inverted quarter-mile-wide bowl of glittering glasslike substance, laced inside with spidery supporting struts—the half bubble from inside which men guided the mass. Therein an artificial atmosphere was maintained, even as on any space-ship, and there lay the group of buildings, chief of which was the precious laboratory in which were the coordinated brains to whom the Hawk had made his promise.

Carse lowered the glasses, and again the Jupiter-light poured normally around him, the valley hushed and seemingly empty once more. He put through his call to Friday and Ban, giving them simple directions how to find him. And twenty-five minutes after that, he saw, looking back down the ridge, their two giant metallic figures come twisting and turning in noiseless flight through the top lanes of the jungle below, and they were together.

I

It was seldom that Friday would intrude his thoughts when with his master and his master's friends, so when he arrived he merely surveyed the asteroid through his glasses and was silent. But Ban Wilson, after a long, comprehensive stare, during which one could almost feel the amazement leaping through him, sputtered:

"By jumping Jupiter, Carse—I never would've believed it! That Ku Sui's sure a genius! To have that whole asteroid there, man, and to take it with him wherever he wants to go! Look at it! Fifteen, twenty miles long, it must be! And that dome—"

"Yes," said the Hawk shortly, "but easy on that now. We've work to do, and it's got to be done quickly. Now listen:

"There are two main port-locks in the dome for space-ships, and the starboard one has a smaller man-size lock beside it. We're going to the smaller one. There'll no doubt be a guard on watch at it, so to him we're Ku Sui and the two men who accompanied him. We'll have to chance recognition; but at least there's no difference in the suits we're wearing, and we'll clasp our glasses on all the way to the lock, for surely Dr. Ku has to use some similar device. Keep your faces averted as much as you can though, when near, and your rayguns in your belts. If there's to be gunplay, leave the first shot to me. You'll both follow me just as those two followed Dr. Ku."

Ban Wilson asked: "Will you go down into the valley between the trees, then up the face of the rock? The guard wouldn't see us until we were right at the lock."

"No, he wouldn't: but he'd wonder why Ku Sui was being so cautious. We'll go straight across, in full view. We'll get in easily, or—well, that depends. Ready?"

They fastened the glasses over their eyes, keeping the helmet face-plates partly open. The rayguns they eased in their belt holsters, and slid back the hinged palms of their mittens, to give exit if need be to their gun-hands. They were ready.

Switching on the helmet gravity-plates to swift repulsion, the three soared out of the trees, soared

up on a straight, inclined line for the dome on the asteroid, a steady, rapid climb that soon raised them one mile, a second and a third, where they leveled off and sped straight ahead. Now they could look right into the dome.

Rapidly the port-lock that was their objective grew in size. Behind it were the buildings: the large, four-winged central structure and the supplementary workshops and hangars, coolie-quarters and outhouses, all dim and shimmering through the infra-red—the mysterious, lonely citadel of Dr. Ku Sui. There it all was, inside the dome, with the rest of the asteroid looming massive behind.

A quarter-mile away, and swiftly half that, and half again the three grouped figures arrowed ahead without hesitation. And the Hawk said curtly:

"I see no men—do either of you? It looks deserted."

"There!" cried Ban, after a second. "There! Beside the port-lock. Just now!"

B

Beside the smaller port-lock's inner door a figure had appeared, clad in the neat yellow smock of a servitor of Ku Sui. It was a smooth, impassive Oriental face that turned to stare out at the approaching men; and even Ban knew that this sentinel stationed at the lock was one of the coolies whose brains Dr. Ku had altered, turning him into a mechanicalized man who obeyed no orders but his. He watched closely the three who swept on towards him, his hand at a raygun in his belt. The same questions were in the minds of all three of the raiders. Would he recognize something as being different, or suspicious? Would he summon others of his kind from the small guard-box he had come out of?

But the coolie evinced no alarm. It would have been difficult for anyone to have discerned distinguishing features inside the cumbersome helmets, behind the instruments clamped to the faces of the men who wore the suits. He called no others, but merely watched.

Soon the opaque metal plates of the small lock's outer door had neared to within a few feet of Hawk Carse, and he stopped short, Ban and Friday following suit. They hovered there outside the door, gently swaying like flies against the great gleaming sweep of the dome, the craggy rock face dropping sickeningly down for miles beneath them. And, like flies, they were powerless to open the door to gain entrance. Only the coolie inside could do that; and he, through the dome to one side, was peering at them.

Apparently he was satisfied with his scrutiny. After a moment, bolts shifted and the door stirred and swung out, revealing the all-metal atmosphere chamber and the inner door at the far side. Immediately Carse floated into the chamber, and the two others pressed in behind. They saw the outer door swing shut, and heard its locks thud over.

They were sealed from sight inside the port-lock's atmosphere chamber.

"Looks to me," whispered Ban Wilson, "like a very sweet trap. If that fellow inside wants to—"

The Hawk's cool voice cut him off.

"We can take off the glasses now," he said casually. "Keep alert."

And for a full minute they waited.

A

At length a circle of light showed around the rim of the inner door, and it grew quickly into the full flood of Jupiter-light as the door opened.

Carse floated through, no longer attempting to avert his face.

The coolie, standing just outside the chamber, saw the adventurer's features and remembered—and drew the raygun in his belt.

Carse did not shoot. He never killed unless he could not avoid it; this was as much a part of his creed as his remorseless leveling of a blood-debt. He struck with the suit. Under a quick turn of the control, the great heavy bulk of fabric-joined metal lunged forward. The move was quick, but not quite quick enough, for just before the coolie was bowled headlong to the ground, he got out a high-

pitched warning yell; and then, as he lay sprawled out, apparently unconscious, a thin hot orange streak sizzled by Hawk Carse's helmet from the left.

This time Carse shot. His gun leaped from belt to hand, and had twice spoken from the hip before one could quite grasp what had happened. Seemingly without bothering to take aim, his deadly left hand had stricken into lifeless heaps two coolies who had come running and shooting from the nearby guard-box.

As Carse stood looking down at their bodies he was startled by another sizzling spit. He wheeled to see Friday holding the raygun that had spoken.

The Negro said apologetically:

"Sorry, suh—I had to. The other coolie, the one you knocked down, came to and was aimin' at you. Guess they're all three dead now, sure enough."

H

is master nodded, and said in a low, thoughtful voice: "In spite of what some men have said, I never like to kill; but for these robots, more machines than men, with nothing human to live for, it's release rather than death.

"Well," he began again, more briskly, "we're inside, and whoever else is here apparently doesn't know it yet. I expected more of a commotion. I wonder how many coolies Ku Sui had, altogether? Fourteen or fifteen were killed when we broke through the dome, before, and now these three. There surely can't be many left. Of course, there are the four white men, his surgical assistants."

Ban Wilson spoke after what was for him a long silence. He had watched the Hawk's gunplay with an awe-stricken face; its speed never failed to amaze him. He observed:

"These buildings certainly look lifeless. Well, what now, Carse?"

"A search." He planned it out in his head, then gave quick orders. "Ban," he directed, "you go through all the out-buildings, your gun ready. The five main ones are a workshop, a power-house, storehouse, a ship hangar and a barracks for coolies. Whoever you find, take prisoner. Keep in touch with me by radio."

"Friday," he continued, "I'm leaving you here. First get these bodies in that guard-house they came out of. Then keep sharp watch. I don't think Ku Sui will return within fifteen minutes, but we must take no chance. At the first sign of him, warn me."

"Yes, suh. But what are you goin' to do?"

"Take over the central building," said the Hawk. "And then, when the whole place has been reconnoitered, fulfil my promise to the brains."

"And what about Ku Sui?"

"Later," he said. "It should not be hard to take him prisoner... Now, enough!"

The three parted.

CHAPTER IV

The Voice of the Brains

T

he central structure of the group of buildings was shaped like a great plus-mark, each of its four wings of identical square construction, with long smooth metal sides and top, and with a door at the end giving entrance to a corridor that ran straight through to the chief central laboratory of Dr. Ku Sui.

Carse skimmed swiftly, two feet off the glittering metallic soil, towards the end of the nearest wing, where he gently landed. He tried the door giving entrance. It was open. He cautiously floated through into complete darkness.

The Hawk was prepared for that. He drew a hand-flash from the belt of his suit, and, standing motionless, his raygun ready in his left hand, he probed the darkness with a long white beam. Spaced evenly along the sides of the corridor were many identical doors, and at the end a larger, heavier door which gave entrance to the central laboratory. He found no life or anything that moved at all, so, methodically, he set about inspecting the side rooms.

The doors were all unlocked, and he moved down the line without alarm, like a mechanical giant preceded by a sweeping, nervous flow of light. Such he might from the outside have appeared to be, but the man within himself was more like a cat scenting for danger, all muscles and senses delicately tuned to alertness. Door by door, a cautious and thorough inspection; but he found nothing of danger. All the rooms of that wing were used merely for stores and equipment, and they were quite silent and deserted. When he came at last to its end, Carse knew that the wing was safe.

He paused a minute before the laboratory door. He had expected to find it locked, and that he would have to seek other means of entrance; but it was not. By pushing softly against it, it easily gave inward on silent well-oiled hinges. He entered.

C

arse found himself in a place of memories, and they were sharp and painful in his brain as he stood there. Here so much had happened: here death, and even more than death, had been, and was, so near!

The high-walled circular room was dimly lit by daylight tubes from above. The damage he, Carse, had wrought when besieged in it, a week before, had all been repaired. The place was deserted—it seemed even desolate—but in Carse's moment of memory it was peopled. There had been the tall, graceful shape in black silk; there the operating table and the frail old man bound on it; there the four other men, white men and gowned in the smocks of surgeons, but whose faces were lifeless and expressionless. Dr. Ku Sui and his four assistant surgeons and his intended victim, Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow...

They were all gone from the room now, but there was in it one thing of life that had been there before. It lay behind the inlaid screen which, standing on roller-legs, lay along the wall at one place. The Hawk did not look behind the screen. He could see under it, to know that no one lurked there. He knew what it was meant to conceal. There his promise lay.

But his promise could not be fulfilled immediately. There were four wings to the building, four doors leading into the laboratory, and he had inspected but one.

An open door to his right revealed a corridor similar to the one he had reconnoitered. He repeated down it his methodical search and found no one. Then he returned to the laboratory.

Surely there were men somewhere! Surely someone was behind one of the two closed doors remaining! Gun and flashlight still at the ready, Carse listened a moment at the nearest one.

Silence. He grasped the knob, turned it and quickly threw the door open. A rapid glance revealed no one. Wary and alert, he passed through, and discovered that in this wing were the personal living quarters of Dr. Ku Sui.

The quarters were divided into five rooms: living room, bedroom, library, dining room and kitchen, and the huge metal figure passed through all five, the cold gray eyes taking in every detail of the comfortable but not luxurious furnishings. There was a great interest to him, but it would have to wait.

He reentered the laboratory and went to the remaining door. Bending his head he again listened. A sound—a faint whisper? He fancied he heard something.

Ready for whatever it was, Carse pulled the door wide. And before him he saw the control room of

the asteroid, and the men for whom he had been hunting.

T

They were white men. Carse recognized them immediately as the four assistants of Dr. Ku Sui. Once, they had been eminent on Earth, respected doctors of medicine and brain surgery, leaders in their profession: now they were like the mechanicalized coolies. For their brains, too, the Eurasian had altered, divested of all humanity and individuality, so as to utilize unhampered their skill with medicine and scalpel.

They were clad in soft yellow robes and seated at ease at one end of a room crowded with a bewildering profusion of gauges, machines, instruments, screens, wheels, levers, and other nameless controlling devices. They did not show surprise at the huge clumsy figure that stood suddenly before them, a raygun in one hand. Like the coolies, their clean-cut features did not change under emotion. All they did was rise silently, as one, gazing at the adventurer out of blank eyes, saying nothing, and making no other move.

Carse tried simple measures in dealing with them. His voice gentle yet firm, he said:

"You must not try to obstruct me. You have seen me before under unfortunate conditions, yet I want you to know that I am really your friend. I mean you no harm; but you must realize that I have a gun, and believe that I will not hesitate to use it if you resist me. So please do not. I only want you to come with me. Will you?"

They were simple words, and what he asked was simple, but would the meaning reach these violated brains? Or would there instead be the desperate reaction of the coolies, who had tried to kill him? Carse waited with genuine anxiety. It would be hard to shoot them, and he knew he could not shoot to kill.

A moment of indecision—and then with relief he saw all four, with apparent willingness, move forward towards him. He directed them through the laboratory and, without sign of resistance, herded them down the corridor he had first searched to the outside.

T

The light of Jupiter, flooding undiminished through the dome, dazzled him at first. When he could see clearly, he distinguished the great form that was Friday standing motionless by the small port-lock, and, an equal distance away, moving around one of the out-buildings, another similar figure. He spoke by radio.

"Find any, Ban?"

Cheerful words came humming back.

"Only one coolie, Carse. Had no trouble after I disarmed him. He's now locked inside a room in this building. Safe place for prisoners."

"Good," said Carse. "You can see I've got four men—white men. I believe they're unarmed and quite harmless, but I want you to take them, search them and put them away in that room too."

"Coming!"

The distant form rose lightly, skimmed low over the open area between, and grew into the grinning, freckle-faced Ban Wilson. He bounced down awkwardly, almost losing his balance, then surveyed, wonderingly, the four assistants of Ku Sui.

"By Betelgeuse!" he muttered, "—like robots! Horrible!"

"Yes," said the Hawk shortly. "You had no trouble, eh?"

Ban grinned again. "Nothing to mention. This has been soft, hasn't it?"

"Don't be too optimistic, Ban. All right—when you've put these men in the room, please relieve Friday. Send him to me in the laboratory—he knows where it is—and stand watch yourself. If Ku Sui appears—"

"I'll let you know on the instant!"

Hawk Carse nodded and turned back into the corridor from which he had just come. Now he would fulfil his promise. With no possibility of a surprise attack from anyone within the dome, and Ban Wilson posted against the return of Ku Sui, he could attend unhampered to the vow which had brought him there.

H

e returned to the central laboratory. Quickly he rolled back the high screen lying across one part of the curved wall and stood looking at what was behind it. The monstrosity of that dead-and-alive mechanism overwhelmed his thoughts again.

Before him stood a case, transparent, hard and crystal-like, as long as a man's body and half as deep, standing level on short metal legs. What it contained was the most jealously guarded, the most precious of all Dr. Ku Sui's works, the very consummation of his mighty genius, his treasure-house of wisdom as profound as man then could know. And more: it held the consummation of all that was so coldly unhuman in the Eurasian. For there, in that case, he had bound to his will the brains of five of Earth's greatest scientists, and kept them alive, with their whole matured store of knowledge subservient to his need, although their bodies were long since dead and decayed.

For some time the adventurer stood lost in a mood of thoughts and emotions rare to him—until he was startled back into reality by a heavy, clumping noise coming down the corridor through which he had entered. His gun-hand flickered to readiness, but it was only Friday, coming as he had been ordered. Carse greeted the Negro with a nod, and said briefly:

"There's a panel in this room—over there somewhere—you remember—the place through which Ku Sui escaped when we were here before. It's an unknown quantity, so I want you to stand watch by it. Open your face-plate wide, and warn me at the slightest sound or sight of possible danger."

The Negro nodded and moved as silently as was possible in his space-suit to obey. And Carse turned again to the thing to which he had made a promise.

T

he icy-glittering case was full of a colorless liquid in which were grouped at the bottom, several delicate, colored instruments, all interconnected by a maze of countless spidery silver wires. Sheathes of other wires ran up from the lower devices to the case's main content—five grayish, convoluted mounds that lay in shallow pans—five brutally naked things that were the brains of scientists once honored and eminent on Earth.

Their bodies had long since been cast aside as useless to the ends of Ku Sui, but the priceless brains had been condemned to live on in an unlit, unseeing deathless existence: machines serving the man who had trapped them into life in death. Alive—and with stray memories, which Ku Sui could not banish entirely, of Earth, of love, of the work and the respect that had once been theirs. Alive—with an unnatural and horrible life, without sensation, without hope. Alive—and made to aid with their knowledge the man who had brought them into slavery unspeakable....

Hawk Carse's eyes were frigid gray mists in a graven, expressionless face as he turned to the left of the case and pulled over one of the well-remembered knife switches. A low hum came; a ghost of rosy color diffused through the liquid in the case. The color grew until the whole was glowing jewel-like in the dim-lit laboratory, and the narrow tubes leading into the undersides of the brains were plainly visible. Something within the tubes pulsed at the rate of heart-beats. The stuff of life.

When the color ceased to increase, Carse pulled the second switch, and moved close to the grille inset in a small panel above the case.

Slowly, gently he said into the grille:

"Master Scientist Cram, Professors Estapp and Geinst, Doctors Swanson and Norman—I wish to talk to you. I am Captain Carse, friend of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow. Some days ago you aided us in our escape from here, and in return I made you a promise. Do you remember?"

There was a pause, a silence so tense it was painful. And then functioned the miracle of Ku Sui's devising. There came from the grille a thin, metallic voice from the living dead.

"I remember you, Captain Carse, and your promise."

A

voice from living brain cells, through inorganic lungs and throat and tongue! A voice from five brains, speaking, for some obscure reason which even Ku Sui could not explain, in the first person, and setting to mechanical words the living, pulsing thoughts that sped back and forth inside the case and were coordinated into unity by the master brain, which had once been in the body of Master Scientist Cram. A voice out of nothingness; a voice from what seemed so clearly to be the dead. To Hawk Carse, man of action, it was unearthly; it was a miracle the fact of which he could not question, but which he could not hope to understand. And well might it have been unearthly to anyone. Even to-day.

Still thrilling to the wonder of it, he went on:

"I have returned here to the asteroid with friends. Primarily I came to keep my promise to you, but I intend to do more. Dr. Ku Sui is not here now, and will not be for at least fifteen minutes; but when he does return, I am going to capture him. I am going to take him alive."

He was silent for a moment.

"Perhaps you do not know," he continued levelly, "but the people of Earth hold Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow responsible for your disappearance. He is therefore a fugitive, and there is a price on his head. It is my purpose to restore Eliot Leithgow to his old place by returning Dr. Ku to Earth to answer for the crimes he has effected on you.

"I am now ready to fulfil my promise to you. I expect no interruption this time. I regret exceedingly my inability to destroy you when I was here before, but I simply could not in the little time I had. I still do not know how best to go about it. Perhaps you will tell me. I will wait...."

An afterthought came to him. He added into the grille:

"There is no hurry. Your extraordinary position—your thoughts—I understand...."

Then there was a long silence. For once the Hawk was not impatient; in fact there was in him the feeling that the pause was only decent and fitting. For before him were the brains of five great scientists, who as captive remnants of men had asked him to end their cold and lonely bondage. Limbless, his was to be the hand of their self-immolation. The present silent, slow-passing minutes were to be their last of consciousness....

And then at last spoke the voice:

"Captain Carse, I do not wish you to destroy me. I wish you to give me new life. I wish you to transplant me within the bodies of five living men."

T

he words, so unexpected, took Hawk Carse by perhaps the greatest surprise he had ever known. For a time he was completely astounded; he could hardly credit his ears. It required a full minute for him to summon even the most halting reply.

"But—but could that be done?" He strove to collect himself, to consider logically this course that he had never dreamed would be requested. "Who could do it? I know of no man."

"Dr. Ku Sui could transplant me."

"Ku Sui? He could, but he wouldn't. He would destroy you, rather."

Almost immediately the artificial voice responded:

"You have said, Captain Carse, that you will soon have Ku Sui captive. Will you not attempt to force him to do as I desire?"

Carse considered the suggestion, but it did not seem remotely possible. Ku Sui could not be prevented from having endless opportunities for destroying the brains while enjoying the manual freedom necessary to perform the operations of re-embodiment.

"I do not see how," he began—and then he cut off his words abruptly.

Something had come into his mind, a memory of something Eliot Leithgow had told him once, long before. Slowly the details came back in full, and at their remembrance his right hand rose to the

odd bangs of flaxen hair concealing his forehead and began to smooth them, and a ghost of a smile appeared on his thin lips.

"Perhaps," he murmured. "I think ... perhaps...."

He said decisively into the grille:

"Yes! I think it's quite possible that I can force Ku Sui to transplant you into living bodies! I think—I *think*—I cannot be sure—that it can be done. At least I will make a very good attempt."

The toneless, mechanical voice uttered:

"Captain Carse, you bring me hope. My thoughts are many, and they are grateful."

But the Hawk had made a promise, and had to be formally freed of the duty it entailed.

"You release me, then," he asked, "from my original promise to destroy you?"

"I release you, Captain Carse. And again I thank you."

The adventurer returned the switches motivating the case, and the faint smile returned to his lips at the thought that had come to him.

But the smile vanished suddenly at the quick, excited words that came crackling into his helmet receiver.

"Carse? Carse? Do you hear me?"

He threw over his microphone control.

"Yes, Ban? What is it?"

"Come as fast as you can. Just caught sight of three distant figures flying straight towards here. It's Ku Sui, returning!"

CHAPTER V

"My Congratulations, Captain Carse!"

A

few minutes later the trap was in readiness.

It had been swiftly planned and executed, and it promised well. Both the inner and outer doors of the smaller port-lock lay ajar. Hawk Carse was gone from view. The only figure visible there was that which lay sprawled face-downward on the ground close to the inner door of the port-lock.

The figure seemed to have been stricken down in sudden death. It was clad in the trim yellow smock of a coolie of Ku Sui. It was limp, its arms and legs spreadeagled, and it lay there as mute evidence that the dome of the asteroid had been attacked.

To one entering from outside, the figure was that of a dead coolie. The coolie that had worn those clothes was dead; his clothes now covered the wiry length of freckle-faced Ban Wilson.

Ban played the game well. His face lay in the ground, pointed away from the lock, so he could not see what was going to happen behind him: but before the Hawk had directed him to take off his suit and don the yellow smock, he had glimpsed, rising swiftly over the southernmost barrier of hills that edged the valley, three black dots coming fast toward the asteroid in straight, disciplined flight, and he knew that the leader of the three was Dr. Ku Sui.

As he lay limp on the ground, playing his important part as the decoy of the trap, he knew that his life depended on the action and the skill and the timing of Hawk Carse. But he did not worry about that. He had implicit faith in the Hawk, and trusted his life to his judgment without a tremor.

Still, it was hard for Ban to throttle down his excessively nervous nature and maintain the dead man pose for the long silent minutes that crawled by before there came any sound from behind. The Jupiter-light, flooding down on him from the glittering blue sky above, was hot and growing hotter, and of course he began to itch. Had he had the freedom of his limbs, he would not have itched, he knew; it happened only when he had to keep absolutely still; he cursed the phenomenon to himself. Minute after minute, and no sound to tell him what was happening behind, or how close the three approaching figures had come, or whether Carse was at all visible or not—and the mounting, maddening itch right in the middle of his back!

A

t last Ban's mental cursings stopped. His straining ears had caught a sound.

It was quickly repeated, and again and again—the heavy, grating noise of metal on metal. The boots of space-suits on the metal floor of the port-lock. They had arrived!

Ku Sui would be there, close behind him; probably gazing at his outflung figure; probably puzzled, and suspicious, and quickly looking around for the enemies that had apparently killed one of his coolies. With a raygun in hand—and guns in the hands of the two others with him—glancing warily around over the guard-chamber close to the port-lock, and the main buildings beyond, and the whole area inside the dome, and seeing no one.

And then—approaching!

Ban could tell it by the silence, then the harsh crunch of the great boots against the powdered, metallic upper crust of ground. But he lay without an eyelash's flickering, a dead coolie, limp, crumpled. He heard the crunch of boots come right up to him and then pause; and the feeling that came to his stomach told him unmistakably that a man was looking down on him....

Now—while Ku Sui's attention was on him—now was the time! Now! Otherwise the Eurasian would turn him over and see that he was white!

It seemed to Ban centuries later that he heard the welcome voice of the Hawk bark out:

"You are covered, Dr. Ku! And your men. I advise you not to move. Tell your men to drop their guns—*sh!*"

The sound of the voice from the guard-chamber was replaced by two spits of a raygun. Unable to restrain himself, Ban rolled over and looked up.

He saw, first, the figure of the Hawk. Carse had stepped out from where he had been concealed, in

the guard-chamber, and was holding the gun that had just spoken. Standing upright, close to the inner door of the port-lock, were two suit-clad coolies. Ban saw that they had turned to fire at Carse, and that now they were dead. Dead on their feet in the stiff, heavy stuff of their suits.

Dr. Ku Sui was standing motionless above him, and through the open face-plate of the Eurasian's helmet Ban could see him gazing at Hawk Carse with a strange, faint smile on his beautifully chiselled, ascetic face.

The Hawk came towards them, the raygun steady on his old foe; but while he was still yards away, and before he could do anything to prevent it, the Eurasian spoke a few unintelligible words into the microphone of his helmet-radio. Carse continued forward and stopped when a few feet away. Dr. Ku bowed as well as he could in his stiff suit and said courteously, in English:

"So I am trapped. My congratulations, Captain Carse! It was very neatly done."

T

he two puffed-out, metal-gleaming figures faced each other for a moment without speaking. And in the silence, Ban Wilson, watchful, with a raygun he had drawn from his belt, fancied he could *feel* the long, bitter, bloody feud between the two, adventurer and scientist, there met again....

Carse spoke first, his voice steel-cold.

"You take it lightly, Dr. Ku. Do not rely too much on those words you spoke in Chinese. I could not understand them—but such things as I do not know about your asteroid I have already guarded against; and I think we can forestall whatever you have set in action.... You will please take off your space-suit."

"Willingly, my friend!"

"Watch close, Ban," said the Hawk.

Dr. Ku Sui unbuckled the heavy clasps of his suit, unscrewed the cumbersome helmet, and in a moment stepped free. At the suit slid to the ground, there stood revealed his tall, slim-waisted form, clad in the customary silk. He wore a high-collared green silk blouse, tailored to the lines of his body, full trousers of the same material, and pointed red slippers and red sash, which set the green off tastefully. A lithe, silky figure; and above the silk the high forehead, the saffron, delicately carved face, the fine black hair. Half-veiled by their long lashes, his exotic eyes rested like a cat's on his old enemy.

The Hawk moved close to him, and swiftly patted one hand over his body. From inside one of the blouse's sleeves he drew a pencil-thin blade of steel from its hidden sheath. He found no other weapon. Stepping back, he quickly divested himself of his suit also.

"And now, Captain?" the Eurasian murmured softly.

"Now, Dr. Ku," answered Carse, once again a slender, wiry figure in soft blue shirt and blue denim trousers, "we are going to have a little talk. In your living room, I think.

"Ban," he continued. "I don't believe there's anyone else who can even see the asteroid, but we have to be careful. Will you stay on guard here by the port-lock? Good. Close its doors, and yell or come to me if anything should occur."

He turned to the waiting Eurasian again.

"You may go first, Dr. Ku. Into the laboratory, and then to the living room of your quarters."

T

hey found Friday on guard where he had been stationed in the laboratory. The big Negro, on recognizing the Eurasian, grinned from ear to ear and gave him what he considered a witty greeting.

"Well, well!" he said with gusto, "—come right in. Dr. Ku Sui! Make yourself at home, suh! Sure glad to have you come visitin' us!" He laughed gleefully.

But his words were wasted on Dr. Ku. His eyes at once fastened on the case of coordinated brains, standing at one side. Carse noticed this.

"No. Dr. Ku," he said. "I have not touched the brains. Not yet. But that's what we're going to talk about." He motioned to one of the four doors connecting the central laboratory with the building's wings. "Into your living room please, and be seated there. And no sudden moves, of course: I have a certain skill with a raygun. Friday, keep doubly alert now. Better take off your suit. I will call for you in a few minutes."

Ku Sui walked on silent feet into the first division of his personal quarters, the softly-lit living room. A lush velvet carpet made the floor soft; ancient Chinese tapestries hid the pastelled metal of the walls; books were everywhere. It was a quiet and restful room, with no visible reminder of the asteroid and its controlling mechanics.

Dr. Ku sank into a deep armchair, linked his fingers before him and looked up inquiringly.

"We were going to talk about the brains?" he asked.

C

arse had closed the door behind him, and now remained standing. He met the masked green eyes squarely.

"Yes." He was silent for a little, then, quietly and coldly he went to the point.

"You'll be interested to hear that I have talked with the brains and been relieved of my premise to destroy them. They requested something else. Now I have committed myself to attempt their restoration into living bodies."

"So?" murmured the Eurasian. "So. Yes, Captain, that is very interesting."

"Very." The Hawk spoke without trace of emotion. "And some courtroom on Earth will find more than interesting the testimony of your re-embodied brains."

Dr. Ku Sui smiled in answer. "Oh, no doubt. But, my friend—this transplanted—you accept its possibility so casually! Won't it prove rather difficult for you, who have never even pretended to be a scientist?"

"Not difficult. Impossible."

"And Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow—I have unbounded respect for his genius, but brain surgery is a specialty and I really think that this task would be outside even his capabilities. I am sure he himself would admit it."

"You are right, Dr. Ku: he has admitted it. We both realize there is only one person in the universe who could achieve it—you. So you will have to perform the operations."

"Well!" said Dr. Ku Sui. The smooth, fine skin of his brow wrinkled slightly as he gazed up at the intent man facing him. "Is this just stupidity on your part, Captain? Or do you attempt a joke at which in courtesy I should smile?"

The Hawk answered levelly: "I was never farther from joking in my life."

W

ith a delicate shrug of his silken shoulders, Ku Sui averted his eyes. As if bored, he glanced around the room. Slowly he unclasped his hands.

"I am a very fast shot, Dr. Ku," whispered Carse. "You must not make a single move without my permission."

At that the Eurasian laughed aloud, a liquid laugh that showed his even teeth between the finely cut lips.

"But I am so completely in your power, Captain Carse!" He held on to the last syllable, a low, sustained hiss—and then he snapped it off.

"S-s-stah!" His mood had changed: the smile vanished from a face suddenly thin and cruel; the green eyes unmasked, to show in their depths the tiger.

"What insane talk! You say such things to me! Don't you know that to coordinate those brains I

worked for years with a devotion, a concentration, a genius you can never hope even to comprehend? Don't you realize they're the most precious possession of the greatest surgeon and the greatest mind in the universe? Don't you understand that I've fashioned a miracle? Realize these things, then, and marvel at yourself—you who, with your gun and your egotism, think you can make me undo their wonderful coordination!"

The tiger returned behind the veil, its power and fury again leashed, and Dr. Ku Sui relaxed his green eyes once more masked and enigmatic. Hawk Carse asked simply:

"*Could* you transplant the brains?"

"You insist on continuing this farce?" murmured the Eurasian. "I would not be rude, but really you try my patience!"

"*Could* you transplant the brains?"

Dr. Ku Sui looked at the colorless face with its eyes of ice. With a trace of irritation, he said:

"Of course! What I have once transplanted, I can transplant again. But I will not do it—and my will no one, and no force, can alter. Perhaps it is clear now? In no way can you touch my will. I am sorry that I so grossly insulted you, Carse, for there are certain things about you that in a small way I respect. But here you are helpless."

"Not entirely," said the Hawk.

K

u Sui leaned forward a trifle. In that moment, perhaps, he first felt real concern, for Carse's quiet voice was so confident, so assured. He attempted to sound him out.

"A gun?" he asked. "Torture? Threats? These against my will? Absurd! Consider, my friend—even if I seemed to consent to the operations, could I not easily destroy the brains while ostensibly working on them?"

"Of course," said Carse, with a faint smile. "And threats and torture would be absurd. Against your will, Dr. Ku, a more powerful weapon will have to be used."

The Eurasian's eyes were brilliant with intuition.

"Ah—I see," he murmured. "Eliot Leithgow!"

"Yes, Dr. Ku!"

The two gazed at each other, Carse still with the faint smile, the other with the face of a statue. Presently the adventurer went on:

"Unfortunately for you, Eliot Leithgow can provide a method of compulsion neither you nor any other man could ever resist. Not guns, torture, threats—no. A subtler weapon, worthy of your fine will."

As he spoke, Carse saw the Eurasian's green eyes narrow, and in the pause that followed he knew that the swift, trained mind behind those eyes was working. What would it evolve? What move? And those Chinese words, uttered out by the port-lock—what would they result in, and when? Dr. Ku Sui was concerned now, the Hawk knew, seriously concerned, and inevitably, would take serious steps. What was growing in his resourceful brain? He would have to ward off any trouble when it came, for he could not know now. He said curtly:

"But enough of that. Now, I have a trifling favor to ask of you—something concerning the laboratory. Will you please return to it."

A strange light glimmered for an instant in Dr. Ku Sui's eyes—a mocking of the slender man before him. Only for an instant; then it was gone. Gracefully he raised his tall figure.

"The laboratory? Of course, my friend. And as for the favor—almost anything."

CHAPTER VI

The Deadline

F

riday greeted them with another wide grin, and would again have bludgeoned the Eurasian with his wit had not the Hawk motioned him to silence. Looking at Dr. Ku, he said:

"I have Friday posted here because of the secret panel somewhere in this wall. You escaped through it before—do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. And if I'd had merely a fraction of your luck then, my present situation would be quite different."

"Perhaps," said the Hawk. "This panel is now the unknown quantity so far as I'm concerned, and I don't like unknown quantities; so I am asking you to show me where it is and how it works. That's my favor. Of course you can refuse to reveal it, but that will not delay me very long. The method of compulsion I mentioned...."

Dr. Ku-Sui appeared to reflect a moment, but his decision was not tardy in coming. He smiled.

"You terrify me, Captain, with your ominous hints about compulsion. I suppose I'd better be reasonable and show it to you. Really, though, your concern over the panel is rather wasted, inasmuch as it conceals nothing more than a small escape passage leading out of this building. Nothing important at all."

But his words, Carse somehow felt, were a screen; something else lay beneath them. He watched the tall figure with its always present odor of tsin-tsin blossoms move forward in a few indecisive steps, then back again, considering. The smile and the easy words were a camouflage, surely—but for what?

"Nothing important at all." Dr. Ku Sui repeated pleasantly. "Come. I will show you. Friday—if I may so address you—over on that switchboard you will find a small lever-control. It is the one with a Chinese character above it. Will you be so kind as to throw it?"

The Negro glanced inquiringly at his master. Grimly Carse nodded.

An enigmatic light glimmered in the Eurasian's green eyes as they watched the Negro go to the switchboard and put thumb and forefinger on the control.

"Only a small escape passage," he said deprecatingly as the Hawk crouched, gun ready, his eyes on the suspected place in the wall.

Friday threw the switch.

Immediately there sounded a short, sharp explosion. And acrid smoke billowed out from under the case of coordinated brains!

C

arse sprang to Ku Sui, gripped one arm and cried harshly:

"What have you done?"

"Not I, Captain—your obedient servant, the Black. Please, your fingers—" He removed them from his arm; and then, smiling, he said:

"I am afraid that all your assurance, your threats, are now but so much wasted breath."

"You mean—?"

"Surely, Captain," said Ku Sui, "you must have known I would provide for such an emergency, as this. I chose not to risk your darkly-hinted method of compulsion, and so had Friday remove the need for it. The Chinese character above the switch stands for 'Death.'"

Frigidly the Hawk asked: "You've destroyed the brains?"

"I have destroyed the brains." The Eurasian's voice was deep with a strange, unusual tone. "No matter: it was time. I am far, far ahead of that work, great though it was; it has destroyed itself with its inherent, irremediable fault. Yes, far ahead. Next time...." He appeared to lapse into profound

and melancholy reflections; seemed to forget entirely the two men by him.

But the Hawk acted.

"We'll see," he said curtly. "Friday, watch the Doctor closely; this trick may be only the first." An intent, grim figure, he strode to the case of coordinated brains, pulled over the first of its two controlling switches, and stood silent while slowly the pulsings of light grew through the inner liquid and very slowly irradiated the five gray, naked mounds that were human brains. The light came to full, and Carse threw over the second switch. He said into the grille:

"I am Captain Carse. I wish to know if you are aware of what has just happened. Do you hear me, and did you feel anything a minute ago?"

S

ilence. Friday, close to the Eurasian and watchful, hung breathless, hoping that words might come from the grille in answer. But the silken figure he watched was there only in body; Dr. Ku's mind was in a far space of his own.

Cold, unhuman words spoke out.

"Yes, Captain Carse, I hear you. I felt the vibrations of the explosion that occurred a minute ago."

"Hah!" grunted Friday, immediately relieved. "All bluff, suh! No damage to 'em at all!"

Carse asked quickly into the grille:

"You felt the explosion, but do you know what it meant?—what it did?"

Again a pause; and again the toneless voice:

"A vital part of the machinery through which I live has been destroyed. I have left only some three hours of life."

The Hawk returned to Ku Sui. "Is that true?" he snapped.

"Yes, Captain." The words made a whisper, gentle and melancholy, coming from afar. A man was turning back from the scanning of the long years of one phase of his life. "Three hours is all that is left to them.... But there was a fault inherent in such coordinated brains; it is just as well that they are going.... Ah, Carse. I am so far ahead of you ... but I tell you it is a painful thing to destroy so wonderful a work of my hands...."

Silence filled the laboratory. It was broken by the awful voice of the living dead.

"I release you from your second promise, Captain Carse. No doubt what happened was beyond your control.... I will soon be dead. Although there is still nourishment in my liquid, I grow weaker already. I am dying...."

Harshly, the Hawk asked a final question into the grille:

"Within what time will you retain the vitality necessary to undergo the initial steps of the transplanting operations? Do you know?"

Dr. Ku raised his head at this, though he seemed only mildly interested in what the reply would be.

"I think for two of the remaining three hours."

"All right!" said Hawk Carse decisively. He threw off the case's switches. "Dr. Ku," he said, "you've only succeeded in accelerating things. Now for speed! Friday, we're taking this asteroid to Eliot Leithgow's laboratory. Go see that the port-lock doors are closed tight, then you and Wilson hurry back here! Fast! Run!"

CHAPTER VII

To the Laboratory

W

hen the Negro returned, panting, with Ban Wilson, it was to discover Carse in the control room of the asteroid. He was studying the multifarious devices and instruments: and they, seeing his face so set in concentration, did not disturb him, but went over to where Dr. Ku Sui sat in a chair, and posted themselves behind it.

The apparatus in the control room resembled that of any modern space-ship of its time, except that there were extra pieces of unguessed function. Directly in front of Carse was the directional space-stick above its complicated mechanism: above his eyes was the wide six-part visi-screen, which in space would record the whole "sphere" of the heavens: while to his right was the chief control board, a smooth black surface studded with squads of vari-colored buttons and lights, These were the essentials, familiar to any ship navigator; but they were here awesome, for they controlled not the one or two hundred feet of an ordinary craft, but twenty miles of this space-ship of rock.

"Yes ... yes...." Carse murmured presently out of his study, then turned and for the first time appeared to notice Friday and Ban. He gave orders.

"Eclipse, you see the radio over there? Get Master Leithgow on it for me—protected beam. Ban, you bind Dr. Ku Sui in that chair, please."

Wilson was surprised.

"Bind him? Isn't he going to run this thing?"

"No."

"*You're* going to, Carse?"

"Yes. I don't quite trust Dr. Ku. The asteroid's controlled on the same principles as a space-ship: I'll manage. Please hurry, Ban."

"Cap'n., suh! Already got the Master Scientist!" called Friday from the radio panel. The Hawk strode swiftly to it and clamped the individual receivers over his ears.

"M. S.?" he asked into the microphone. "You're there?"

"Yes. Carse? What's happened?"

"All's well, but I'm in a tremendous hurry: I've only got time, now, to tell you we're on the asteroid with Dr. Ku prisoner, and that I'm undertaking to transplant the coordinated brains into living human bodies.... What? Yes transplant them! Please, M. S.—not now: questions later. I'm calling primarily to learn whether you have any V-27 on hand?"

Eliot Leithgow, in his distant laboratory, paused before replying. When his voice sounded in the receivers again, it was excited.

"I think I see, Carse! Good! Yes, I have a little—"

"We'll need a lot," the Hawk cut in tersely. "Will you instruct your assistants to begin preparing as much as they can in the next hour? Yes. And your laboratory—clear it for the operations, and improvise five operating tables. Powerful lights, too, M. S. Yes—yes—right—all accessories. Have someone stand by your radio; I'll radio further details while we're on our way."

"Right, Carse. All understood."

The Hawk remembered something else. "Oh, yes, Eliot—is everything safe in your vicinity?"

"There's a small band of isuanacs foraging around somewhere in the neighborhood, but otherwise nothing. They're harmless—"

"But possibly observant," finished Carse. "All right—I'll clear them away before descending to the lab. Until later, Eliot."

C

arse switched off the microphone and turned to catch Friday's shocked expression. Carse looked inquiringly at his dark satellite.

"What's wrong?"

"Lordy, suh," the Negro whispered, "Dr. Ku could hear all you said! He'll know where Master Leithgow's laboratory is!"

The Hawk smiled briefly. "No matter, Eclipse. I'm quite sure the information will avail him nothing. For this ride to the laboratory will be his last ride but one." He turned. "We're starting at once. Ban, you've bound him well?"

"If he can get out of those knots," grinned Wilson, "I'll kiss him on the mouth!"

The Eurasian's nostrils distended. "Then," he said. "I most certainly will not try. But Captain Carse, may I have a cigarro before we start on this journey?"

Carse had gone over so the space-stick and his eyes were on the visi-screen, but he now turned them to his old foe for a moment. "Not just now, Dr. Ku," he said levelly. "For it might be that all but two puffs of it would be wasted. Yes—later—if we survive these next few minutes."

The remark did nothing to ease the tension of their leaving. Ban Wilson could not restrain a question.

"Carse, are you going to risk atmospheric friction all the way to the laboratory?"

"No. Haven't time for that. Up and down—up into space, then down to the lab—high acceleration and deceleration."

He grasped the space-stick, then in neutral, holding the asteroid motionless in the valley. He glanced at the visi-screen again, checked over the main controls and tightened his hand on the stick.

"Ready everyone," he said, and gently moved the stick up and forward.

T

here was, to the men in the control room, little consciousness of power unleashed: only the visi-screen and the bank of positional instruments told what had happened with that first, delicate movement of the space-stick. It was an experiment, a feeler. The indicators of the positionals quivered a little and altered, and in the visi-screen the hills of the valley, that a moment before had been quite close and large, had diminished to purple-green mounds below.

Then the accelerating sensations began. Carse had the "feel" of the asteroidal ship and his controlling hand grew bolder. The steady pressure on the space-stick increased, it went up farther and farther, and the whole mighty mass of the asteroid streaked out at a tangent through the atmosphere of Satellite III toward the gulf beyond.

With dangerous acceleration the gigantic body rose, and from outside there grew a moaning which was quickly a shrieking—a terrible, maddened sound as of a Titan dying in agony—the sound of the cloven atmosphere. Twenty miles of rock were hurled out by the firm hand on the space-stick, and that hand only increased its driving pressure when the screaming of the air died away in the depthless silence of outer space.

In one special visi-screen lay mirrored the craggy back-stretch of the asteroid, half of it clear-cut and hard in Jupiter's flood of light, the other half lost in the encompassing blackness of space. Over this shadowed portion a faint, unearthly glow clung close, the result of the terrific friction of the ascent. In miniature, in the regular screens, was Satellite III, but a distorted miniature, for its half-face appeared concave in shape, and dusted with the haze of its atmosphere.

T

he Hawk was visibly relieved. He turned to the silent Ku Sui.

"I must congratulate you, Dr. Ku," he said, "on the operation of the asteroid. It's as smooth as any

ship. And now, your cigarro. Ban, have you one?"

Wilson produced a small metal case from which he extracted one of the long black cylinders.

"You will have to put it in my lips, please," murmured Dr. Ku. "Thank you. And a light? Again thanks. Ah..." He drew in the smoke, exhaled a fine stream of it from his delicately carved nostrils. "Good." Then he looked up pleasantly at the Hawk.

"And my congratulations to you, Captain. Not only on your expert maneuvering of my asteroid, but on everything: your resourcefulness, your decision, your caution. I have long admired these qualities in you, and the events of to-day, though for me perhaps unfortunate, increase my admiration. My own weak resistance, my attempt to frustrate your plans in connection with the brains—how miserable in comparison! It would seem, Captain, that you cannot fail, and that you will indeed succeed in giving the brains new life, so swiftly do you move. Yes, my congratulations!"

He drew at the cigarro, and the smoke wreathed gently around his ascetic saffron face. A faint, queer glint was visible under the long lashes that half-veiled his eyes as he continued:

"But I have a question, Captain. A mere nothing, but still—"

"Yes, Dr. Ku?"

"The living bodies into which you propose to transplant the brains—where are they?"

Hawk Carse's face was stern and his voice frigid as he answered:

"Fortunately, those bodies are right here on the asteroid."

"Here on the asteroid, Captain? I don't understand. What bodies are here?"

"The bodies of your four white assistants, whom I have safely confined, and one of your robot-coolies, also confined. I did not intend to use these five, but, because you put a premium on time by your attempted destruction of the brains, it cannot be helped."

D

r. Ku Sui's impassive demeanor did not change. He did not seem in the least surprised. He puffed quietly at the cigarro and nodded.

"Of course, of course. You have five bodies right here on the asteroid. Yes."

"At least," continued Carse levelly, "I do not regret having to use the bodies of your men. They are no longer human: they are not men: they are in effect but machines of your making, Dr. Ku."

"Quite. Quite."

"I suppose you find it an unpleasant thought, to have to be the means of re-making them into whole, normal human beings?"

"On the contrary," breathed the Eurasian, "you inspire a very pleasant thought in my brain, Captain Carse—though I must confess it is not exactly the thought you mention." A smile, veiled by the smoke of the cigarro, appeared on his lips.

The Hawk looked at him closely: the words had a hidden meaning, and it was clear he was not intended to miss the implied threat. But what was Ku Sui's thought? Back in his mind an anxiety grew, indefinite, vague and devilish.

And that vague anxiety was still with him when, fifty-seven minutes later, the asteroid returned from its inverted U-flight, slowed in its hurtling drop from space and hovered directly over the secret, hidden laboratory of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow.

CHAPTER VIII

White's Brain—Yellow's Head

T

o Friday it was a bad mistake to reveal the location of the laboratory to Dr. Ku Sui. From him above all men had that location up to now been kept. Just a few days before, Hawk Carse had risked his life to preserve the secret. And yet now, deliberately, he was showing it to the Eurasian!

Nervously, Friday watched him, and he saw that his eyes were alive with interest as they scanned the visi-screen. It was too much for the Negro.

"Captain Carse," he whispered, coming close to the adventurer, "look, suh—he's seein' it all! Shouldn't I blindfold him?"

Carse shook his head, but turned to Dr. Ku, where he sat bound in the chair scrutinizing the visi-screen.

"Yes, Doctor," he said, "there it is—what you have searched for so long—the refuge and the laboratory of Eliot Leithgow."

"There, Captain?" murmured the Eurasian. "I see nothing!"

And true, the visi-screen showed nothing but a hill, a lake, a swamp, and the distant, surrounding jungle.

That spot on Satellite III had been most carefully chosen by the Master Scientist and Carse as best suiting their needs. It lay at least a thousand miles—a thousand miles of ugly, primeval jungle—from the nearest unfriendly isuan ranch, and was diametrically opposite Port o' Porno. Thus it allowed Leithgow and Carse to come and go with but faint chance of being observed, and the steady watch kept through the laboratory's telescopic instruments lessened even that. And even if their movements to and from the laboratory had been observed, a spy could have discovered little, so ingeniously was the camouflage contrived to use to best advantage the natural features of the landscape.

At this spot on Satellite III there was a small lake, long rather than wide. At its shallow end, the lake lost itself in marshy, thick-grown swamps; at its deep end it washed against the slopes of a low, rounded hill. Topping the hill was a rude ranch-house, which to the casual eye would appear the unimportant habitation of some poor jungle-squatter, with beds of various vegetables and fruits growing around it, and guarded against the jungle's animals by what looked like a makeshift fence. The ground inside the fence had been cleared save for a few thick, dead stumps of oxi trees, gnarled and weather-beaten, which made the whole outlay look crude and desolate.

So desolate, so poor, so humble, as not to deserve a second glance from the lowest of scavenger or pirate ships. So misleading!

C

arse had brought the invisible asteroid to a halt perhaps a half mile above the hill. The minutes were slipping by, bringing the two-hour deadline ever closer, but he did not skimp his customary caution on approaching the laboratory. From the control room, he swept the electelscope over the surrounding terrain, and soon sighted the band of isuanacs Eliot Leithgow had mentioned.

Through the 'scope's magnifying mirrors they seemed but yards away, though they were wandering knee-deep in the marshes at the far end of the lake. All their repulsive details stood out clearly.

More beasts than men, were such isuanacs (pronounced ee-swan-acs), so called from the drug that had betrayed them step by step to a pit in which there was no intelligence, no light, no hope—nothing but their mind-shattering craving. In many and unpredictable ways did the drug ravish their bodies. They were outcasts from the port of outcasts, driven out of Porno into the wilderness, where they tracked out their miry ways searching ever for the isuan weed until some animal ended their enslavement, or the drug itself finally killed them in convulsions. They were the legion of the damned.

This band of half a dozen was typical, grubbing through the slime of the swamp, snarling at each other, now and again fighting over a leaf, then squatting down in the mud where they were, to chew on it, their torture of mind and body momentarily forgotten. Rags, mud-caked and foul, partly covered their emaciated bodies: their hair was matted, their eyes blood-shot....

Carse noted their position and looked up at Friday.

"Get the Master Scientist for me, please," he requested. The radio connection took only seconds: and then he said into the microphone:

"Eliot? We're directly above you, as you probably have seen. All well?"

"Yes, Carse. The laboratory's in readiness. But those isuanacs—they're still outside."

"I've seen them, and I'm going to drive them away. Then I'll be down to you. Have the upper entrance ready."

T

he Hawk turned back to the controls. Taking the space-stick out of neutral, he moved it very slightly down and to one side. Ban and Friday, not understanding his intention, watched the visi-screen.

The whole mass of rock that was the asteroid changed position at a gentle speed. The band of isuanacs came nearer and nearer, and then were to the right. Completely oblivious of the great bulk hovering above them, they continued their grubbing through the swamp; and then the asteroid was over the jungle beyond them, and lowering its craggy under-side.

The under-side brushed the crown of the jungle. The trees bent, crackled and broke, as if swept by a vicious but silent hurricane. Only a moment of contact; but in that moment a square mile of interwoven trees and vines was swept low—and to the isuanacs the effect, as was intended, was terrifying.

They stared at the phenomenon. There had been no sound, no whip of wind, nothing—yet all those trees had bent and crashed splintering to the ground. Their slavering lips open, the isuan weed forgotten, they stared: and then howling and shrieking they broke and went splashing off panic-stricken through the marsh.

In five minutes the band had disappeared into the jungle in the opposite direction and the district was cleared; and by that time Hawk Carse was again in his space-suit, out of the control room and busy at the mechanism of one of the great ship-sized port-locks in the dome, having left behind him both Ban and Friday to guard Dr. Ku.

He mastered the controls of the port-lock quickly, and swung inner and outer doors open. He glided through, and then, a giant, clumsy figure, poised far out in the air, a soft breeze washing his face as he gazed down at the hill five miles below, judging his descent. As he did not use the infra-red instrument hanging from his neck, the asteroid might not have been there at all.

A moment or so later, after a straight, swift drop, Carse landed on the hill, close to a particular, gnarled oxi-tree stump. The nearby ranch-house looked deserted, the whole place seemed desolate. The Hawk waddled over to the stump, pressed a crooked little twig sticking out from it, and a section of the seeming-bark slid down, revealing the hollow, metal-sided interior of a cleverly camouflaged shaft.

There were rungs inside, but Carse could not use them. He squeezed himself in, closed the entrance panel, and, carefully manipulating his gravity controls, floated down. A descent of twenty-five feet, and he was on the floor of a short, level corridor with gray walls and ceiling.

Carse clumped along to the door at the other end of the corridor, opened it, and stepped into the hidden underground laboratory of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, which, with its storerooms, living quarters and space-ship hangar, had been built into the hollowed-out hill.

W

elcome back, Carse!"

"Hello, Eliot," the Hawk nodded, rapidly divesting himself of the suit but retaining his infra-red device. "You've lost no time, I see."

The elderly scientist, his frail form clad in a buff-colored smock, turned and surveyed the laboratory. In the center of the square room five improvised operating tables were drawn up, each one flooded individually with light from focused flood-tubes above in the white ceiling. Flanking them were tables for instruments and sterilizers, and, more prominent, two small sleek cylindrical drums, from

one of which sprouted a tube ending in a breathing-cone.

"The best I could do on such short notice," Leithgow commented.

"Where are your assistants?"

"At work on the V-27. All I had on hand is in those cylinders."

"Much?"

"Enough for twelve hours for one man, but the process of its manufacture is accelerating; fortunately I had plenty of ingredients. Of course I've divined your intention, Carse. Ku Sui to perform the operations under the V-27. And it's possible, possible! It's stupendous—and possible!"

"Yes," said the Hawk, "but more later. I'm going up now to get Dr. Ku. I'll use the air-car. It's ready?"

"Yes." Leithgow answered. "But, Carse—one question I must ask—"

The Hawk, already halfway to the door in the opposite wall of the laboratory, paused and looked back inquiringly.

"What bodies are to be used?"

"The only ones available, Eliot," the adventurer replied, "since Ku Sui, in his attempt to destroy the brains, left us only two hours—now one hour—to complete the first steps of the transfer. They'll be those four white assistants of his—those men, you remember, whose intellects he's dehumanized—"

"Yes, yes?" Leithgow pressed him eagerly. "And the fifth?"

"A robot coolie."

"Good God!"

"I know, Eliot! It won't be pleasant for one of those brains to find itself in a yellow body. But it's that or nothing."

The scientist nodded slowly, his first expression of shock leaving his old face to sadness: "But, a coolie. A coolie...."

"Come, Eliot, we need speed! Speed! We've but an hour, remember, to complete the first steps! I'll have Ku Sui and the five men down immediately."

The Hawk opened the door and strode down the long corridor beyond. His footsteps were swiftly gone: and then the sound of another door opening and closing. In the laboratory there was a murmur from the old man.

"A coolie! A scientist's brain in that ugly yellow head! When consciousness returns, what a cruel shock!"

CHAPTER IX

Four Bodies

H

awk Carse had gone into Leithgow's ship hangar.

It was a vast place, occupying most of the hollowed-out space of the hill. Seventy feet high and more than two hundred feet long, it was, and, like the rest of the rooms, metal-walled and sound-proofed. Eliot Leithgow's own personal space-ship, the *Sandra*, rested there on its mooring cradle, and by its side was the laboratory's air-car, an identical shape in miniature, designed for atmospheric transit.

The adventurer, a silent, swift figure, went straight to the air-car and climbed into its control seat. He tested the controls, found them responsive, then pressed a button set apart from the others: and the huge port-lock door set in the farther wall of the hangar slid smoothly open, revealing a metal chamber similar to that of the ship port-lock on Ku Sui's asteroid. But whereas the chamber of the asteroid's port-lock was for vacuum-atmosphere, this was for water-atmosphere.

The clamps of the mooring cradle were released, and the air-car moved gently into the lock chamber. The door swung shut behind. On the pressing of another button there sounded a gurgling and splashing of water, and quickly the chamber was filled. The air-car was now a submarine. All these operations were effected by radio control from within it.

When the water filled the inside of the chamber, the second door opened automatically, and the car started forward through a long steel-lined, water-filled tube. It continued on even keel until Carse, watching through the bow window, saw a red light flash in the ceiling of the tube: and then he tilted the car and rose.

A second later, the shiny, water-dripping shape of the car broke through the surface of the lake that edged on the hill, and forsook the water for the air.

To an outside observer, the appearance of the air-car and its subsequent movements would have been incomprehensible. There lay the hill, desolate, barren, apparently lifeless: and there, washing against its slopes, the lake; nothing more. Then suddenly a curve of gleaming steel thrust up through the muddy water, rose swiftly almost straight into the cloudless blue of the sky, and as suddenly disappeared, and remained gone from sight, as if the ether had opened and swallowed it.

U

sing his infra-red device, Carse brought the car in neatly through the ship-size port-lock of the dome, and sped it across to the central building, to land lightly beside one of the wings. Debarking, he ran down the wing's passage and in a few seconds was back in the asteroid's control room.

Friday was sitting in a chair close by the bound Eurasian; Ban Wilson, more restless, was pacing up and down. The Hawk nodded in response to their looks of welcome and issued curt orders.

"All ready. Ban, the air-car's just outside; go over and get those four men and the coolie and put them in it. Have your raygun ready, but don't use it if humanly possible. We're going down to the laboratory. I want speed. Please hurry."

"Right Carse!"

"Friday," the Hawk continued, "help me untie Dr. Ku."

They stooped to the chair and the impassive, silken figure sitting in it, and in a moment the bonds were ripped off; all save those on the wrists. Stretching himself, the Eurasian asked:

"You are taking the brains down now, Captain Carse?"

"No—just you, your assistants and that one coolie, this trip. Master Leithgow and I wish to have a talk with you."

"I am always agreeable, my friend."

"Yes," said the Hawk, "you'll be surprisingly agreeable. And truthful and helpful, too. Now—outside, please, and do not attempt to delay me in any way. I am in a great hurry, and consequently will not be patient at any tricks." He turned to the Negro. "Friday. I'm leaving you here on guard. Stay alert, gun handy, and keep in radio contact. I'll be back soon."

"Yes, suh!"

W

alking behind his captive, the Hawk left, passing down the wing to the air-car outside. There, Ban Wilson was waiting with the four white assistants of Dr. Ku and the one robot-coolie, all unarmed, stolid, emotionless. Carse placed them all in the rear seats of the car's compartment, Ban facing them with drawn raygun. Then with a hum from its generators the car raised, wheeled, slid forward, until through the large port-lock, and swooped down to the lake.

Dr. Ku Sui watched everything with an interest he did not attempt to disguise. There was being revealed to him the secret entrance to Eliot Leithgow's laboratory, and long had he sought for that laboratory, long pondered on its probable location. No doubt, at various times, passing over, he had seen the barren hill and its flanking lake, but had never given them a second glance. Yet here, right in the lake, was the doorway to Leithgow's refuge!

The air-car lowered like a humming bird to the lake's surface, paused and dipped under. The light left the sealed ports and entrance hatchway, and the water pressed around, dark and muddy. Down the car sunk, apparently without direction, its course very slow, until ahead, out of the blackness, a spot of red winked.

At once the air-car made towards it and slid into the tube leading through the hill. Quickly it was in the chamber of the lock, the outer door closed automatically behind, the water was drained out, and then the inner door opened and the car, dripping, emerged into the brilliantly-lit hangar and went to rest in its mooring cradle beside Leithgow's space-ship.

A minute later its passengers were in the laboratory of the Master Scientist.

D

r. Ku Sui took in the arrangements made in the laboratory with a swift glance, and then his eyes went to a door that opened in the opposite wall and to the slight, smock-garbed figure that came through it. He smiled.

"Ah, Master Leithgow! A return visit, you see. At Captain Carse's invitation. It is very interesting to me, this home of yours: so cleverly concealed!"

Leithgow vouchsafed his archenemy no more than a look, but turned to the Hawk.

"You are ready, Carse?"

"Some preliminaries first, Eliot. These men, the four whites and the yellow, must be put in some place of safety. You can take care of them, Ban. One of the storerooms; lock them in. You remember your way? Then, better take off your suit."

Ban nodded, and led the five robot humans out. Leithgow, Hawk Carse and Ku Sui were left alone in the laboratory, and for a minute there was silence.

How much had passed between these three! How many plots, and counter-plots: how much blood: how many lives affected! The feud of Hawk Carse and Dr. Ku Sui—and Eliot Leithgow, who was the chief cause of it—here again had come to a head. Here again were all the varied forces of brains and guile, science and skill, marshaled in the great, vital game on whose outcome depended the restoration of Eliot Leithgow and the lives of the coordinated brains and, indeed, though more distantly, the fate of all the tribes of men on all the planets. For if Ku Sui won free he would go on irresistibly, and his goal was the domination of the solar system....

Three men, alone in a room—and the course of the creature Man being affected by their every move. Large words: but the histories of the period bear them out. Though, doubtless, Ku Sui alone knew how great were the stakes as they stood there in the laboratory.

H

awk Carse was uneasy. The odds seemed all on his side—yet there was Ku Sui's strange, almost imperceptible smile, his mysterious words up on the asteroid, his smooth, unruffled assurance!

What did these things mean? He intended now to find out. He said, tersely:

"Eliot. I have informed Dr. Ku that he is to be the means of the transplanted brains to living human bodies, since he is the only person capable of performing the operations. He does not believe that we can force him to do our will, yet all the same he is taking no chances: he started the death of the brains. We shall have to work very fast—all right. But Dr. Ku has other cards to play against us, and I don't know what they are. You and I must find out now."

"I somehow feel that you mistrust me," interposed the Eurasian with mock sadness. "Ah, if you could only read my mind.... Or can you? Is that what you are coming to?"

The Hawk glanced at Leithgow; and Leithgow nodded, and placed a metal chair close to one of the cylindrical drums—the one fitted with a tube and breathing cone.

"Will you sit there. Dr. Ku?" Carse asked.

The green eyes scanned the drum.

"A gas, Master Leithgow?"

"That is all. Not harmful, not painful."

"I see. I see...." the Eurasian murmured. And suddenly, he smiled at the two men facing him, and said pleasantly to Carse:

"Things repeat! Not long ago I asked you to sit in a chair and submit to a treatment of mine, and you did as I asked. After so gallant a precedent, how could I refuse? All right. Now, Master Leithgow, your gas!"

W

With gentle fingers Eliot Leithgow fitted the cone on the Eurasian's face and fastened it there. The fingers and thumb of one hand he kept on Dr. Ku's pulse; with the other he pulled over slowly a control set in the side of the drum. A ticking and slight hissing became audible, and two indicators on the drum quivered and crept downward.

A minute of this—the ticking and soft hissing, the indicator's slow fall, the silk-clad figure in the chair, watched closely by Carse on one side and Eliot Leithgow on the other—and a change was apparent. A ripple flowed over the Eurasian's silken garments; the body appeared to loosen up, to become free of all muscular and mental tension. The gas hissed on.

"The first step," murmured Leithgow abstractedly, out of his concentration on dials and patient. "The muscles—notice—relaxed. The will—the ego—the nexi of emotions and volitions which oppose external direction—all being worked upon, submerged, neutralized—but not his knowledge, not his skill. No—all that he will retain! You'll notice nothing more until you see his eyes. A few minutes. What says the red hand? Thirteen. At nineteen it should be completed."

Carse watched intently. It was wonderful to know that when the correct amount of this substance, which he knew only as V-27, had been administered, and Ku Sui awoke, there would be no enmity in him, no opposition to their demands, no fencing with wits; that this same Ku Sui, his great mentality unimpaired, would be subservient and entirely dependable.

"Seventeen," murmured the old scientist. "Eighteen ... now!" With a flick of his fingers he shut off the stream of V-27 and gently unloosened the cone from Dr. Ku's face.

The ascetic features were in repose, the eyelids closed, their long black lashes lying against the delicate saffron of the skin. Dr. Ku Sui seemed resting in dreamless, unclouded sleep. But for only a moment. Soon the eyelids quivered and slowly opened—and a great change was immediately visible in the man's green eyes.

Many observers have recorded that under the veiled, enigmatic eyes of Dr. Ku Sui there lurked a sultry glimmer of fire; or perhaps it was that the observers who met these eyes always imagined the fire, being conscious of the devil and the tiger in the man. But Carse and Leithgow now saw that all that was gone.

No mask lay over the green eyes now, no spark of fire glinted deep in them. They were clear and serene; they hid nothing; almost they were the eyes of a fresh, innocent child. Dr. Ku Sui, he of a hundred schemes, a score of plots, he of the magnificent capacity and untiring brain bearing ever toward his goal of lordship of the solar system—it was as if he had slipped into a magic pool whose waters had washed him clean and given him innocence and eyes of peace....

T

he Eurasian breathed deeply, then smiled at the two men standing by him.

"Now," whispered Eliot Leithgow. "Ask him anything. He will answer truthfully."

The Hawk lost no time. He asked:

"Dr. Ku, you will perform the brain transplantations for us?"

"Yes, my friend."

The man's tone was different. Gone was the suaveness, the customary polite mockery; it was frank, open, genuinely pleasant.

"Is it true, Dr. Ku, that your coordinated brains will die, if left in their case?"

"Yes, they will die if left there."

"Within what time, to save them, must the operations to transplant them into human bodies be started?"

"Within twenty-five, perhaps thirty, minutes at the most."

"Can all five brains be given the initial steps for transplantation into the heads of your four white assistants and the coolie prisoner within one hour—the remaining half of the two hours the brains said they would retain the necessary vitality?"

Dr. Ku smiled at him. There was no malice in the thunderbolt that he unleashed then. He simply told what he knew to be the truth.

"By fast work they could be, and so saved, although the subsequent operations will take weeks. But the brains cannot be transplanted into the heads of my four white assistants."

"What?" Both the Hawk and Leithgow cried the word out together. "They cannot?"

D

r. Ku looked at them as though astonished.

"Why, no, my friends! I wish I were able to, but I cannot perform the operations by myself, unaided. That would be impossible, absurd.... You seem startled. Surely you must have known that those assistants would be vital to the work! I have taught them, you see; trained them; they were specialists in brain surgery to begin with, and I do not believe there are any others this side of Mars who could take their place in operations of this type. Without them, I could never transplant the brains."

This, then, had been the trick up his sleeve! This was why, in the control room of the asteroid, he had shown relief when the Hawk told him what bodies were to be used for the transplantation! For he had known that, whatever Eliot Leithgow's method of forcing him to perform the operations might be, and no matter how efficacious, the coordinated brains simply could not be put in the heads of his four assistants—because the assistants were themselves needed for the operations!

"Then—it's hopeless!" said the Master Scientist bitterly. "All this for nothing! You might find other bodies in Port o' Porno, Carse—condemned men, criminals—but Porno's an hour away, two hours' round trip, and in thirty minutes the brains will be too weak to save...."

"I am sorry," Ku Sui continued. "I should have told you before, perhaps. If there were any way out I knew of, I would tell you but there does not seem to be...."

"Yes," broke in Hawk Carse suddenly. His left hand had been pulling at his bangs of flaxen hair; his brain had been working very fast. He added coldly:

"Yes, there is a way."

L

eithgow and Ku Sui looked at him inquiringly.

"We need four bodies," he went on. "We have one—the coolie; he is not needed to assist in the operations. Four bodies—and here, ready, in twenty-five minutes. Not the bodies of normal men, of those with life ahead of them. No. That would be murder. Four bodies of condemned men—men with no hope left, nothing left to live for. I can get them!"

He brushed aside Ku Sui's and Leithgow's questions. He was all steel now, frigid, intent, hard. "Ban!" he called. "Ban Wilson!"

"Yes, Carse?" Ban had been waiting outside the laboratory.

"Put on your propulsive space-suit. Hurry. Then here."

"Right!"

Carse ran over to where he had left his suit and rapidly got inside. As he did so, he said:

"Eliot, there's fast work to be done while I'm gone with Ban. You must take your assistants and Dr. Ku up to the asteroid in the air-car and transfer down here all the equipment Dr. Ku says he'll need. Be extremely careful with the case of coordinated brains. If you possibly can, have everything in readiness by the time Ban and I return with the four bodies."

Ban Wilson, in his suit, entered the laboratory. The Hawk gestured him to the door which led to the tree-shaft to the surface.

"But, Carse, *what* bodies? Where can you get four more living human bodies?" Leithgow cried.

"No time, now, Eliot!" the Hawk rapped out, turning at the door. "Just do as I say—and hurry! I'll get them!"

And he was gone.

CHAPTER X

The Promise Fulfilled

A

lthough puzzled by the Hawk's promise, Leithgow could only put his trust in it and go ahead with the preparations as he had been directed. He took two of his three laboratory assistants off their hurried manufacture of quantities of the V-27, and with Ku Sui went out into the air-car. Passing by way of tube and lake and air, they were quickly inside the dome on the asteroid, and then into Ku Sui's laboratory, where Friday waited on guard.

Completely docile and friendly, the Eurasian indicated the various instruments and devices he would need for the operations, and these were transported quickly. Then came the case of coordinated brains. Dr. Ku detached in connections with expert fingers, and all but Leithgow took a corner and carried it with infinite care to the air-car outside.

"Do I stay here, suh?" Friday asked the Master Scientist in a whisper. Though informed of the change in Dr. Ku effected by the V-27, he was still very suspicious of him. "Seems to me he's a bit too meek and mild, suh. I think I ought to go down and watch him."

Eliot Leithgow did not quite know what answer to give. The Eurasian forced the decision.

"I will need," he observed, in his new, frank voice, "all the assistance you can possibly give me. I am faced by a tremendous task, and the use of every man will be necessary. I would suggest, Master Leithgow that the Negro be brought down."

And so Friday came and the asteroid was left unguarded. A mistake, this turned out to be, but under the circumstances Eliot Leithgow could hardly be blamed for it. There was so much on their minds, so much work of vital importance, so desperate a need for speed, that quite naturally other considerations were subordinated. The asteroid, to the naked eye, was invisible; it could attract no attention; its occupants had all been disposed of. Certainly it seemed safe enough to leave it unguarded for a while.

However, Eliot Leithgow took one precaution. Down in his own laboratory again, in the midst of the work of transferring Dr. Ku's operating equipment from the air-car, he called aside one of his assistants and instructed him to go and survey the asteroid through the infra-red device every ten minutes: and with this order the old scientist dismissed the matter from his mind, and turned all his energies to preparing the laboratory for the operations.

U

nder Ku Sui's directions his cases of equipment were brought in and arrayed, and the various drills and delicate saws, and such other instruments as worked by electricity, were connected. Everything was sterilized. Rapidly the plain, square room assumed the appearance of an operating arena, the five tables in the center, spotlessly white and clean under the direct beams of the tubes hanging from the ceiling, at the head of every table a stand on which were containers of antiseptics, bottles of etheloid, a breathing cone, rolls of gauze and other materials, and along the edge of the stand identical, complete sets of fine instruments.

The case of coordinated brains was brought into the laboratory last. The inner liquid was now dark and apparently lifeless; to the casual eye, it would not have seemed possible that the five grayish mounds immersed in the liquid held life. And, indeed, Leithgow looked at them doubtfully.

"Are you sure they're still alive? Do you think there's still time?" he asked Dr. Ku.

The Eurasian picked up a long, slender, tubelike instrument with a dial topping it. Then, going to the brain-case, he touched a cleverly concealed catch and a square pane set in the top of the case swung back. He dipped the instrument he held into the liquid, and for a moment stood silent, watching the dial. Then he took it out, re-closed the pane and turned to Leithgow.

"A test," he explained. "The indicator, interpreted means we have about forty-eight minutes in which to complete the first phase of the transplantation of the brains into human heads. It might be done if we start in eight minutes. But the human heads—?" He paused.

"Eight minutes!" said Leithgow worriedly. "Eight minutes for Carse to come! He promised the bodies, but ... well, we can only go ahead with the preparations and trust to him. Is everything ready?"

"All but my assistants. I had better see them now."

T

he Master Scientist issued an order to one of his men, and presently the four white assistants of Dr. Ku were led into the laboratory. For these men, no V-27 was needed; their brains were utterly subservient to Dr. Ku Sui, and his orders they would obey unquestioningly, no matter what the work. There was no danger from them.

They stood motionless, their eyes fastened on their master, as he spoke to them.

"Brain operations," he said. "These"—he indicated the case—"are to be transplanted again into human heads. You have done work similar to it before; you know the routine. But now it must be quick. Synchronize your speed with mine; I will be working very rapidly, and it is vital that you be in harmony with me every instant. When the bodies come, you will prepare the heads: and then you will attend me through every step. You understand." He turned to the old scientist. "Operating gowns, gloves, masks, Master Leithgow?"

"I have your own. Over there. Your black costume is among them."

But Leithgow's answer was abstracted. Four minutes for Carse to come! Or else, everything lost! He busied himself helping the four surgeons and two of his own assistants into the white, sterilized gowns, and the masks that left only the eyes free and the skin-tight rubber gloves, but his mind was not with his actions. The old man looked very frail now; his age showed in the deep lines now eminent on his face. Three minutes—swiftly two....

"At least," observed Ku Sui, "we have one body ... the coolie. I had better start immediately on him."

"Bring him out," Leithgow instructed one of his men. "One brain will be saved. But—*there!* Thank God! Hear that? Coming down the passage? It's Carse, returning!"

I

t was Carse. He and Ban Wilson, coming down the passage from the top of the tree-shaft. Everyone in the laboratory could hear plainly the heavy, sliding tread of the great space-boots. Eliot Leithgow was first to the door. He opened it, peered through eagerly and called:

"Carse? You've got them?"

"Yes, Eliot. Here—we need help."

The Hawk's voice sounded weary. Friday and the scientist ran down the passageway until they reached the adventurer. In the faint light, they saw he was carrying a limp body. He laid it carefully down on the floor.

"Ban's coming down with another," he said, "and there are two more above. Go up and get them, Friday."

The Negro started to obey. But Eliot Leithgow did not move, did not utter a sound. He stood staring at the body Carse had laid down. The parchmentlike skin of his face seemed to whiten; that was all; but he winced and slowly brushed his eyes with his hands when, in a moment, Ban Wilson floated down the shaft and, approached with a second unconscious body.

At last Leithgow whispered:

"They're all—like that, Carse?"

"Yes," answered the emotionless voice. "There were two others, but we let them go. They were worse." The gray eyes looked steadily at Eliot Leithgow. "I know," the Hawk said. "It's horrible—but it can't be helped. It was these or nothing. There was no choice."

Hawk Carse had fulfilled his promise. He had brought back four isuanacs.

CHAPTER XI

Ordeal

F

ive bodies lay on the operating tables in Eliot Leithgow's laboratory. The air, hushed and heavy, was pervaded by the various odors of antiseptics and etheloid. The breathing cones had been applied to each of the bodies, and they were now locked fast in controlled unconsciousness.

On the first table lay the body of the robot-coolie, a man of medium size, sturdy, well-muscled, with the smooth round yellow face and stub nose of his kind. His short-cropped, bristly black hair had been shaved off; the head was now bald. That head was destined to hold the mighty brain of Master Scientist Raymond Cram.

On the second table lay a twisted, distorted thing, an apelike body with which fate had played grotesque pranks. It was hairy, of middle height, and its dark skin all over was wizened and coarse, almost like the bark of a tree. The legs were short and bowed, the hands stubby claws; the face, puckered even in unconsciousness, was that of a gargoyle in pain. The long matted hair had been shaved away; the large pate washed with antiseptics. Soon, were the operation successful, that head would hold the brain of Professor Edgar Estapp, world-famous chemist and bio-chemist.

On the third table lay a shape skeletonlike in appearance, so emaciated was it, so closely did the bones press into the dry, fever-yellowed skin. Of one leg, only the stump was left; this creature had been forced to hop or crawl his way through the isuan swamps. The head, too, was no more than a skull, with great sunken dark-rimmed eyes, discolored fangs and loose, leathery lips. There had been no hair on this death's head; it had long been bald, and now, washed, clean for the first time in months or even years, it was to hold the brain of Dr. Ralph Swanson, Earth's one-time leader in the science of psychology.

On the fourth table lay a giant's body—but a hollow giant, a giant made thin and pitiful by the ravages of his destroyer, isuan. A roistering, free-booting space-ship sailor, this man may once have been, but, from the drug, the mighty arms had been twisted and shrivelled, the strong legs wasted away. One ear had been torn from the skull in an old brawl, and what was left was naked and ugly to the eye. Behind that bitter, drug-coarsened face would be the new home of the brain of Sir Charles Esme Norman, wizard of mathematics and once a polished, charming Englishman.

On the fifth table lay a dwarf. Its ridiculous body was not over four and a half feet long, though the head was larger than that of a normal man. In the old dark ages on Earth this body would have served for the jester of a lord, the comic butt of a king; in more recent times as the prize of a circus side-show. The huge, weighty head with its ugly brooding mask of a face, the child's body below—this was for the brain of Professor Erich Geinst, the solitary German who had stood preeminent on Earth in astronomy.

T

hese creatures were the result of Hawk Carse's desperate search. They had composed, with one other, the band of isuanacs that had been rooting in the swamp at the end of the lake when the asteroid had first arrived. The Hawk had remembered them, and had quickly seen that they were the only answer to the problem. And so, with Ban Wilson, he had gone out for them, his mind steeled to the ghastly thought of the great scientists' brains in such bodies. In space-suits they had swept down on them. There had been no time for considerate measures: the four isuanacs had been abruptly knocked out by the impact of the great suits swooping against them, and carried back to the laboratory.

Eliot Leithgow had been shocked at the idea of a scientist's brain in the head of the robot-coolie; how much greater, then, was his horror when confronted by the need of using these appalling remnants of men! But he could not protest. What else was there? Ku Sui, under the V-27, had spoken the truth: the operations would be impossible without the aid of his four assistants. The brains even now were dying. The choice was: bodies of isuanacs or death for the brains. The scientist and the adventurer had chosen.

Circumstances had required their use. Ku Sui's attempt to kill the brains, thus inflicting a time limit: the presence of the band of isuanacs near the laboratory; each circumstance with a long train of other, minor ones behind it. Chance or Fate—whatever it is—whether predetermined or accidental—men must wonder at its working, and know awe from its patterns and results. Seldom, certainly, was there a pattern more strange than this now being worked out in the laboratory of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow.

The bodies lay there, washed, shaved and swathed in customary loose operating garments: globules of etheloid dropped steadily down into the breathing cones, of hunchback, living skeleton, twisted

giant, dwarf and robot-coolie. One by one the isuanacs dropped with the falling of the etheloid into unconsciousness—and that was their farewell to the brains, each one debauched either by isuan-drug or skill of genius, that they had known.

And movement began in the laboratory. White-clothed figures, masked and capped, used gleaming instruments in their gloved hands; and all the figures were mute—mute from their great concentration on the delicate work in progress—or mute from horror that would not die....

S

o began the ordeal.

Of its details, Hawk Carse knew little. They were not of his world. Only for the first half-hour could he follow intelligently what was being done. He too had put on a white robe, as had Ban Wilson and Friday; and he stood at one side of the room, a silent, intently watching figure, with the two other men of action, Ban and the Negro, while the rest moved in a kind of rhythm. The center-piece was the black-garbed Ku Sui, moving from this table to that, slim gloved hands flying, pausing, flying again, steadying, concentrating on a detail, once more sweeping forward. No more than single words came from him; he and his assistants worked almost as a whole, in perfect sympathy and coordination, and a constant stream of instruments flowed to him and then away, their task done.

The first table, and then to the second, with one white figure staying behind at the first, finishing off details of the work, left by the master. The third table; the fourth; the fifth; and then back to the first, while two white figures detached themselves from the main group and went to the nearby case of coordinated brains. An object held in a specially formed type of pan was lifted out and carried to the first table; and Carse sensed a crisis in the attitudes of the working men. This, he knew, was the first great, step. A brain was being re-born. The fingers of men, and one man in particular, were fashioning a miracle.

How could he hope to understand? He could only hang on the movements of that group of figures, and feel relief as he saw them settle into smoothness again. Evidently the first crisis was past. A few minutes more were spent at the first table; then once more Dr. Ku Sui went to the second, and another object was carried from the coldly gleaming case.

And in a long, deep pan standing on short legs beside the case, something gray and shapeless and warm was placed.

The first phase came to an end when there were five similar things in the open pan, and nothing, except the liquid and a multitude of spidery, disconnected wires, in the case that but shortly before had harbored the brains of five scientists....

A

pause. Relaxation. Tests. The black-clad figure spoke to one in yellow in a tone of pleased relief.

"Successful so far, Master Leithgow! We may congratulate ourselves on the consummation of the first step. It has been done, I believe, well within the time limit."

"Yes, Dr. Ku; yes. And now—how long will be needed to finish?"

"That is up to you. Normally, I would require a month. In that time all could be done safely, with small chance—"

"Too long!" said Leithgow.

Carse intervened:

"Why too long, Eliot?"

The old scientist went over close to him, and, in a lowered voice, explained:

"Ku Sui would develop immunity to the V-27 in a month. Two weeks of it would give him part immunity. Even ten days might. He has to be re-gassed four times a day."

"But, letting him come out of it every night and resting normally?" the Hawk objected.

"I have allowed for that. The gas would still be in his system. No—nine or ten days is the limit." He raised his voice again to reach the Eurasian. "Can you complete the work within nine days, Dr. Ku?"

Ku Sui considered it. At last he said:

"That is a lot to ask, Master Leithgow. But—it might be possible. However, it would mean prodigies of sustained, concentrated labor; work and skill never-ceasing. We'll have to work in shifts, naturally."

So it was arranged. All the assistants, both Ku Sui's and Leithgow's, were portioned off into shifts of four hours' sleep and eight hours' work: Carse, Ban Wilson and Friday, too, for now every one of them was needed.

Nine days for the work of a month—and work as delicate and vital as could possibly be! Small wonder that in the minds of all of them, the Hawk and the old scientist, and Ban and the Negro, that period, when remembered later, seemed no more than a confused, unreal, hazy dream; rather, a nightmare connected imperishably with the odors of an operating room, antiseptics, etheloid, and the glint of small, sharp instruments.

It was a titanic task, an ordeal that stretched to the limit the powers of the men working in that confined space. Normal life for them ceased; the operating room became a new universe. Swiftly they lost consciousness of time, even with the routine of the changing shifts and the food which was brought in at regular hours. Antiseptics, etheloid, the never-ceasing flow of the instruments, the five bodies lying still and deathlike on the tables, the hard white glare of the light beating down on them—all this and nothing more—all sealed away underground from the life of the forgotten world above. On and on and on....

I

It is impossible even to conjecture how the mind of Ku Sui saw the colossal work that he was doing to aid his most bitter enemies. Even when he was normal there are only moments when, through some recorded speech or action of his, we can peer past the man's personality into his brain; how great a sealed mystery must his thoughts remain to us when held in that abnormal state by Eliot Leithgow's V-27! Envision it: this arch-foe of Hawk Carse and Leithgow helping their designs, lending all his intellect, his great skill, to their purposes, aiding them in everything! Certainly, afterwards, the memory of what he had been forced to do must have occasioned Dr. Ku many bitter moments. Regularly, every four waking hours, he was led to the metal chair and gassed afresh with the V-27; and his expression remained pleasant; his eyes were always friendly. But the artificial state in which he was kept showed soon on his face. It lost its clearness and became a jaundiced yellow in color: and also it grew peaked and drawn.

But the other faces around him were peaked and drawn, too. The terrific strain told in definite terms on all, no matter what stimulants they took to keep going. Many a man would have been driven to insanity by their sustained, terrible concentration, and the knowledge that five lives hung on every action, however minute....

On and on and on, science made into a marathon. Four hours of exhausted, deathlike sleep; eight hours more of the smells, and the glaring light, and the moving instruments. Days of this, sealing the brains permanently into their new homes, into their hideous new bodies....

But finally came the climax, and the last exhausted spurt of work. For the concluding twelve hours there was no sleep or rest for anyone; and at the end a breathless, haggard tension held them as Dr. Ku Sui, a shell of his former self, reviewed the results of the nine days' ordeal. His verdict was:

"Four have come through, I think, safe. The fifth—I do not know. His body was near death when he was brought here. He may live or die; it is impossible to tell now. But it is finished."

Then the men slept. Some slipped to the floor and slept where they were. In nine days, the work of a month had been done, and a miracle wrought. The brains had been born again.

CHAPTER XII

Flight

I

It was to Hawk Carse that the news of imminent danger came first.

He had staggered from the laboratory into a sleeping room and, clad as he was, fallen over into a berth. He would have wakened in a few hours, such was his custom of years to four-hour watches on ships, but he was permitted less than an hour of sleep. A hand pulled at him; a voice kept calling his name. Awareness returned to him slowly as his brain roused from the coma of sleep.

"Captain Carse! Captain Carse! Wake up, sir!"

It was one of Leithgow's assistants, a man named Thorpe. His tone was excited and his manner distraught.

"Yes?" the Hawk muttered thickly. "What is it?"

"It's the asteroid, sir! I was instructed to watch it at intervals, but I—I guess I fell asleep, and just now—"

Carse sat up. "Yes? What?"

"—when I looked, through the glasses—it was gone!"

"Gone? You're sure? Let me see."

Swiftly, Thorpe at his heels, Carse strode out from the room to a cubby just off the laboratory, the watch-post, where observational electelscopes and visi-screens provided a panorama of the surrounding territory.

He gazed through the electelscope, which had been equipped with an infra-red device and trained on the asteroid, and saw that now, where the massive body of rock had been poised, there was nothing. Only the brilliant light of mid-afternoon, the cloudless sky. Carse swept the glass around. The search was fruitless. The heavens were bare. The asteroid had gone.

In half a minute Carse had reasoned out the disappearance, saw the consequences and made the inevitable decision. Gone was the torpor of sleep, the weariness of the laboratory; this was a crisis, and this was his work. During the operations, he had been able merely to obey orders and do manual work. Now he assumed command.

"Your lapse has imperilled us all," he said curtly to Thorpe. "From now on we're in great danger. Stay here and keep on watch, and sound the alarm immediately if the asteroid reappears."

"Yes, sir. I—I'm sorry—"

The adventurer cut him off with a frigid nod and ran on silent, rapid feet to the laboratory, where both Ban Wilson and Friday lay fast asleep. Roughly Carse shook them into consciousness. Trained to shipboard routine and the sudden emergencies of space, they needed but little time to return to full wakefulness. In staccato sentences the new situation was outlined to them.

"The asteroid's gone. That means danger to everything here. We will have to evacuate. Ban, wake all the men, including Ku Sui and his assistants, then come to me for further orders. Friday, see that Leithgow's ship is ready for instant departure. Quick!"

Alarmed, but without questions, the two parted on their separate errands. Carse went to the room where Eliot Leithgow lay asleep.

T

His pallor and weariness of the old scientist's face were emphasized by the alarming news his friend brought him, but he took it with spirit, and his voice was level and controlled as he asked:

"What does it mean, Carse? What must we do?"

"Leave, Eliot, and at once. We have no choice. Our danger while here is immense. The asteroid, in the hands of enemies, could crush us like a fly, simply by coming down on the top of the hill."

"But who could have taken it? There was no one on it, was there?"

The Hawk said wryly: "I thought not, but well, you remember the secret panel in Dr. Ku's laboratory?"

"Through, which he escaped before? Yes."

"I suspected that he might have someone hidden behind it, and I intended to question him when he was under the V-27, but in the terrific rush of things it slipped my mind. Sheer carelessness, Eliot; I'm very sorry. I should have known, for when we captured Ku Sui he spoke some words in Chinese through his helmet-radio. Now I can see that they must have gone to some man of his hidden there; and that man, obeying instructions, simply lay low, heard all that passed in Dr. Ku's laboratory, and then, at a suitable opportunity, took the asteroid away in search of allies. He knows his master is a prisoner here and unquestionably he will be back to release him. We must be out of here and far away by the time he arrives."

"Yes," Leithgow nodded slowly. "As you say, there is no choice."

"But your work here is finished, Eliot," Carse went on. "If only we can get to Earth safely, with Ku Sui and the brains in their new bodies, we will have achieved everything we wanted to achieve. We have proof of the crime done you, and we have Ku Sui, too. Your position will be restored and the blame put where it belongs. But we must leave for Earth at once! God knows how near the asteroid is, or who's on it."

"All right, Carse." The scientist got up. "What are your instructions?"

Ban Wilson appeared in the door, reporting that all the men had been accounted for and awakened. Carse started the wheels moving.

"Everything of value here must be transported aboard the ship. Eliot, you know better than I what to take, so you'll assume charge of the loading. Ban, you and all the men save two of Eliot's assistants will help. I'll need them to move the bodies. Send them to me in the laboratory. But first, be sure Ku Sui and his four men are safely confined. All right; let's go."

Within half an hour the general evacuation was finished and the ship loaded.

T

he *Sandra*, Leithgow's ship, bearing his daughter's name, was a sturdy vessel designed more for comfort and utility than speed, and so her appointments, including offensive and defensive weapons, though modern were limited. Her commodious cargo-holds were easily capable of accommodating all of the Master Scientist's laboratory instruments and devices, the volumes of his extensive library, his great mass of personal papers and more intimate effects; all the more important stores of the place, too, and its furnishings. The laboratory and its surrounding rooms were pretty well stripped.

The largest of the *Sandra's* cabins was transformed under the direction of Leithgow into a hospital bay, and the five cots bearing the prostrate, unconscious bodies of the patients put there. Though hastily improvised, this hospital was complete, as fully equipped and nearly as efficient as if it were on Earth and not in the belly of a space-ship. The chances of the patients for complete recovery were not diminished in any way by the sudden necessity for flight.

In a second, much smaller cabin, Dr. Ku Sui was confined by himself. Its walls, of course, were of metal, and there was no possible means of exit from it save by the door, which bore double locks. The Eurasian, silent and drugged and stupid, immediately stretched his tall form out on the single berth and in seconds was again sound asleep. A third cabin was made over to his four assistants.

With everything completed, the underground refuge bare of articles of value and the *Sandra* stored and made ready for the long trip, the inner door of the exit tube swung open, and the ship slid slowly out of her cradle and into the water chamber for the last time. Her flight to Earth had begun.

Eliot Leithgow stood near the Hawk in the control cabin, and his old face was made sad by many memories. For years, this place that he was now leaving had been his only home, his one sure haven. How carefully, long ago, had he and Carse planned it and built it! How many times had they met there, often when danger was close and enemies near, and cemented still more firmly the bonds between them! To Leithgow, the hill symbolized safety and friendship and his beloved work. Dangerous, weary years, those he had spent in the hill, but priceless nevertheless, warmed as they were by his achievements and the friendship of Hawk Carse.

Now he was leaving it and going back to Earth. The outlaw years, it seemed, were ended: Ku Sui was a prisoner, and the proof of his great crime, which had been laid to Leithgow, was aboard. Earth

—green Earth! Separate, distinct, peerless in the universe; home of men, of his kind! He had loved and worked and known honor and respect on Earth; it held the grave of his wife, and the fresh, warm young love of his wife reincarnate, his daughter Sandra. He was at last going home to Earth from his exile on this desolate, raw frontier post.

There was a choking in Eliot Leithgow's throat at leaving the hill, and he turned away, afraid at that moment of being observed by the steel-gray eyes of his friend, Hawk Carse....

T

he *Sandra* swam up through the lake's muddy tide and launched herself, dripping, into the warm air of afternoon. Her generators hummed with life given them by the firm hand at the controls, and swiftly she arrowed forth into the blue. With a few words as to the visual course, Carse handed the space-stick over to Friday, and devoted himself to the matter of the watches.

Satellite III dropped swiftly to concavity, as the *Sandra* was expertly jockeyed through the rare outer layer of the stratosphere, became a true globe again. The Negro reported:

"Through the atmosphere, suh. Orders?"

"Full acceleration. Continue visually for the present. I'll work out the true course in a few minutes."

"Yes, suh!"

The hum of the generators deepened. In a matter of ten minutes, shipboard routine was arranged, Carse, Friday and Ban splitting the watches. The Hawk, as was his custom, took the first. Friday was relieved of the space-stick and immediately went back for sleep, as did Wilson. Eliot Leithgow did not retire right away, however.

He watched Carse snap on the automatic control and go to an electelscope which had been equipped with an infra-red device. He directed it rearward on Satellite III, back along the course the *Sandra* had described, and peered through its eyepiece for several minutes. Then he turned to the old scientist.

"Nothing," he said. "No sign of the asteroid as yet. We'll have to keep careful watch. The visiscreen's useless against the invisibility of the asteroid; and the high magnification of this scope, with its resulting small field of view, will require us continually and methodically to search through a wide circle behind, in the attempt to pick up the asteroid, should it appear. A tedious job, with chances of sighting it about even.... At any rate, we'll have some sort of a head-start," he finished.

T

his was the opportunity Leithgow had waited for; he wanted a few frank words with his friend.

"Carse," he said slowly, "I wonder just where that man concealed behind the secret panel would take the asteroid?"

"I've thought about that too," replied the Hawk. "We may be sure that he went for allies: Dr. Ku has several on Satellite III. Of them all, I think he would go for Lar Tantril."

"Tantril?"

"Yes, I think so. Lar Tantril, the Venusian. A fellow of much self-confidence and one of Ku Sui's chief agents, and who at present"—he smiled faintly—"nurses a special bitterness against me. I told you how I tricked him on his ranch. He'd be very eager to pursue us in the asteroid simply for the opportunity of repaying me for that trick." The adventurer's left hand rose to the bangs of flaxen hair combing down over his forehead, and he murmured, musingly: "I rather hope it is Lar Tantril...."

"You hope so?" Leithgow repeated, surprised. "When he hates you so? And would be on the lookout for tricks? Why?"

"I would guess, Eliot, that Lar Tantril is not notable for intellect. Blustering, domineering—pretty much of a braggart, you know. Certainly he is not a model of caution; and he is not acquainted with Dr. Ku's asteroid, for he did not even know it existed. He will be able to run it, of course, with the advice of this hidden man, but surely he will not have the perception to discern the weakness in it. Yes, I hope it is he."

Leithgow went on to the main thing on his mind.

"I'm a little unsettled, Carse," he admitted. "I've been imagining this as the end of my outlaw years, and the beginning of my re-establishment on Earth. But this ship is slow, and I see now that if the asteroid does pursue us and capture us.... What do you really think of our chances?"

T

he Hawk pursed his lips slightly, and for a little while he looked away and did not answer. When his voice came, it was tinged with bitterness.

"Eliot," he said, "I've been trying to find an excuse for my lapse. But there is none. It was the blunder of a novice, my not remembering to question Ku Sui about that secret panel. That was the cardinal point, yet it slipped my mind, in my preoccupation with the emergencies connected with the restoration of the brains.

"Our chances are only fair, Eliot; I'm telling you frankly how it appears to me. I believe we'll be pursued, and if we are the odds are greatly against us. The asteroid's far more powerful than we. And Jupiter only knows what new offensive resources Ku Sui may have given it: I had no time to study the several strange mechanisms I saw in its control room. Then, no nearby patrol ship would help us if we were attacked, for to them our enemy would be invisible, and they'd think us crazy."

He paused. But seeing the somber expression on the other's face, he smiled and cuffed him on the back.

"But maybe we won't even be pursued, Eliot! Maybe we'll be too far ahead for them to catch us! No doubt I've made it look too serious, so cheer up! We're alive, we've got everything we wanted, and we're hitting at full speed for Earth! And you know the luck of that space-adventurer they call the Hawk!"

Leithgow smiled gently in answer, then left the cabin for the sleep he needed so badly. Hawk Carse was left alone on watch in the fleeing *Sandra*.

A lonely, intent figure, he stood over the chart-table, working out their best course to Earth. Presently, however, he went back to the infra-red electroscope and swept it over the leagues behind. Carse could not detect any sign of the asteroid, but he remained for a little while at the eyepiece, staring at Satellite III. There it lay, a diminishing globe, three-quarters of it gleaming in the light flung by Jupiter. Dark patches mottled it: they would be the jungles. And there was the scintillant sheet that was the Great Briney Lake, with Port o' Porno nearby. On the other side of the little world, now, lay the hill containing Leithgow's laboratory. All going ... going ... falling swiftly behind. Satellite III, scene of so many clashes, plots and counter-plots, where so many times he and Eliot Leithgow had fought off the reaching hand of Ku Sui—soon it would be a million miles away. What adventures would he have before he saw it again?...

A little sound came from the Hawk, a half-sigh. Abruptly he called one of the men on his watch and stationed him at the 'scope, and then he returned to the chart-table and the work of calculating their course to Earth.

CHAPTER XIII

In Earth's Shadow

H

our after hour and day after day, for a week the *Sandra* tracked on through the boundless leagues, the waxing sunlight beating steadily on her starboard bow and her silent gravity-plates and singing generators bringing Earth ever nearer. Friday, who possessed an extensive knowledge of all the practical sciences, did extra service in the role of cook, and his regularly served meals disguised the undifferentiated hours of space into Earth-mornings, noons and nights. Watch in and watch out, and nothing to disturb the even routine.

As for the ever-feared pursuit, there was no sign of it. Systematically and carefully the men stationed at the electroscope turned it through the region behind, but never did their watching eyes discern the bulk of the asteroid. Its disappearance, and the kindred mystery of who had been on it, remained unsolved.

Therefore peace came to Eliot Leithgow's face, and the tiredness left his eyes. The long, hunted years were beginning to be washed from him, and daily, to Carse, he appeared younger. Often in the control cabin or over a meal he talked of what lay ahead, and the happiness Earth held waiting for him. There was his daughter, Sandra, whom he had seen last as a girl of fourteen, and even then interested in his work. She would be matured now, and she would perhaps be eager to help him in the work he intended to resume. There was so much of it! Discoveries, theories, evolved during his fugitive years—now he could complete them and give them to his old circles of brother scientists. All this was in his conversations; but secret and unworded in his thoughts were anticipations of the old dear beauty of Earth, that beauty for which his ageing heart had pined so long....

And Earth was drawing nearer.

A

nother week passed.

Twice a day the door of Dr. Ku Sui's cabin was unlocked and he was brought out under guard for several turns through the ship. Though for safety's sake they continued to dose him with the V-27, it was apparent that the gas had less and less effect on him. Four, then eight, then twelve times a day they re-gassed him—as often as they dared, considering its ultimate destructive mental effect—but more and more of the frankness and serenity foreign to his green eyes melted away. Gradually the normal veil came to hide their depths and make them enigmatic; and sometimes there was again on his face the hint of something strong and tigerish and cruel lying waiting. They no longer trusted him to attend to the five patients. He spoke seldom. A tall, reserved figure in black silk, attended either by Ban Wilson or Friday, he strolled through the ship for fifteen minutes and was returned to his lonely cabin. Of all the marks his experience must have left upon him, the only one apparent was his silence.

It was on the seventeenth day that he forsook that silence and directly accosted Carse. He had a request. The saffron face impassive, the long lashes lying low over the eyes, he said softly:

"I wonder, Captain Carse, if I might be permitted a glimpse of the subjects of my transplantation?"

Leithgow and Wilson were at the time with Carse in the control cabin, and they regarded their friend intently, curious as to what the reply would be. They saw his steel-gray eyes meet Dr. Ku's gaze squarely; and the two men looked at each other: Hawk Carse, complete victor at last, and Ku Sui, the vanquished.

The adventurer answered:

"Your request is only natural, Dr. Ku. Certainly you may see them, and perhaps offer an opinion on their progress, which has so far been in the hands of your assistants. But I shall have to accompany you."

"You are kind."

"Take the controls, Ban," Carse directed, and together they left the cabin.

T

here was no visible change in the five bodies. They lay stretched out in cots, sheets drawn up to their necks, and it seemed almost as if they were quietly slumbering and would presently wake up; though in reality consciousness would not return to the fine brains in their hideous, distorted bodies for many weeks, and then only if the healing processes were successful. Bandages swathed the heads, leaving eyes and nostrils alone visible. An assistant of Leithgow's, at present on watch there, moved occasionally with instrument in hand to time the fevered pulses.

"I must ask you to stand back here, Dr. Ku," said the Hawk, indicating a spot some five feet from the nearest cot. His left arm hung easily by his side, the hand resting by the butt of his holstered raygun; and the position was not accidental.

Ku Sui nodded and doubtless noted the gun, but his eyes were on the bodies. He stood regarding his own handiwork in silence, his face inscrutable, and Carse did not disturb him. At last, in a low tone he asked the assistant:

"The food injections take successfully?"

The man nodded.

"I remember," the beautifully modulated voice went on. "I was not sure of one subject. Swanson's brain, was it not? Is his condition any better?"

"We are not sure."

"Ah, yes ... yes...." He appeared to muse, and no one disturbed him in the minutes of silence that followed. Finally he looked away and said:

"It was a great feat. Thank you, Captain Carse. I am pleased by this glimpse of the miracle my hands were made to perform. I am ready to return."

But at the door of his cabin he paused, and his eyes rested again on the cold, firm face close to him. He said:

"I suppose, Captain Carse, you intend to bring me before Earth's World Court of Justice?"

"Yes. Along with our living proof of your abduction of the five scientists."

The Eurasian smiled. "I see. And since there is no questioning that proof, it would appear that Earthlings will soon levy punishment on Dr. Ku Sui.... So.... You know, Captain Carse, I find your caution a great handicap. You keep gassing me; I am locked in; and since I have observed no excitement aboard the ship, apparently there are no friends anywhere near me. You have stripped me of everything." His eyes lowered for a moment. "Everything save this ring."

On the forefinger of his right hand, set simply in a platinum band, was a large dark stone.

"A black opal," said Dr. Ku. "I have worn it for years and I prize it highly. Perhaps at the last I will give it to you as a memento of these past years, Captain Carse." And he went into the cabin, where they gassed him again.

T

he third week passed.

Crossing the orbit of Mars, now approximately in opposition to Jupiter, the *Sandra* streaked on into the last leg of her long voyage. The sun was a vast, flame-belching disk on her starboard side, and ahead lay Earth, growing each hour. Cheerfulness pervaded the ship, nerves were relaxing, faces lightening. Carse could not remember when Eliot Leithgow had worn a smile so constantly. It was only natural, for to the old scientist and his personal assistants Earth was home, the fulfillment of every desire, the reality and symbol of normal life and love of man.

But to Hawk Carse the Green Planet was not home. He was the adventurer, and wanderer, the seeker of new places with the alluring lustre of peril. Earth was to him little more than a port of call, and it brought him sadness to see how eagerly Leithgow stared at her growing face. Their parting was not far away now.

The *Sandra* logged off the miles. Then came the day when only ten thousand were left, and, soon after, five thousand. Deceleration had long since been begun. Slightly but unvaryingly the ship's momentum slackened until she arrived at the two thousand mile mark, where the great curving stretch of the planet filled her bow windows, and the well-remembered continents and seas stood

out as clearly as on a tilted classroom globe.

Carse leaned musing in a corner of the control cabin, oblivious to the well-meaning but toneless voice with which Ban Wilson, at the electelscope was butchering a song. A gentle tap on the shoulder summoned him out of his study.

He turned and saw that Leithgow had come to him. Carse smiled at the old scientist, and said:

"Well, Eliot, we'll be in soon now. Apparently we've made it safely, and there's nothing to stand between you and the day you've waited for so long."

Y

es. But Carse—what of you? How long will you stay? I only wish I could persuade you—"

"To retire, Eliot? Settle down? Become a humdrum landlocked Earthling?" He chuckled, and shook his head. "No, no, old friend. Oh, I'll stay on Earth for a few weeks; I suppose I'll have to, to testify before the World Court of Justice when it takes up your case; but after that's settled, I'll be going back. You know me, Eliot: I'll never change. There are a number of things I must attend to at once. My ship, the *Star Devil*, is still on Iapetus, remember; I must find her and get her tuned up again. She's the fastest craft in space, bar none. Then I must make the round of my ranches and see that things are running smoothly. I've a lot of work on the Iapetus ranch, particularly. Then, there's that Pool of Radium—not that I need the wealth, if it really exists; but the job has killed so many who have sought for it that I'd like to take a crack at it myself. Oh, plenty to do!"

Leithgow looked at him, and there was all affection in his eyes, and friendship as close as it can be between men.

"No, Carse," said Leithgow softly. "I suppose Earth will never get her gravity on you for keeps. But I hope you will come down occasionally to see me, and perhaps once a year, say, spend a month with Sandra and me in our—"

"Carse!"

Ban shouted the name out. His face, turned from the electelscope, was alive with excitement.

"Here! Look!"

"What is it?"

"The asteroid! It's close!"

In two strides Carse was at the eyepiece of the infra-red glass attached to the instrument. One look through it served to verify Ban's report. The asteroid of Dr. Ku Sui had at last appeared.

I

t was not more than fifty miles from the *Sandra*, a craggy fragment of rock, peanut-shaped, and tipped by its gleaming dome. Its speed seemed the same as theirs, but its course was different; and to Carse, that fact immediately explained its sudden appearance. He turned from the eyepiece with a face grown hard and cold.

"Well, it's happened," he said. "Instead of a stern chase, which would give us some chance of spotting them, they at once got off to the side and have all this time been flanking us. Now they're cutting in, straight behind, no doubt ready for business. All right. Ban, sound the alarm."

Like a gladiator about to step sword in hand into the arena, the *Sandra*, though a ship never designed for space duels, girded her loins and made herself ready for what at its best could only be an unequal struggle. She was outclassed in weapons, weight and speed—in all save pilots. She had Hawk Carse at her helm.

The harsh alarm bell at once rang through the ship, an emergency call to stations. Carse, at the controls, rapped out another order.

"Defensive web on, Ban, and build up power for the ray batteries."

As the echoes of the bell died, a piercing whine grew amidships, and shreds of blue light swiftly scattered by the *Sandra's* ports. They were quickly gone, but they left behind an almost invisible

envelope of blue which enwrapped the ship completely. The defensive web against attacking rays was on.

Friday tumbled into the control cabin, and on his heels two of Leithgow's assistants, the third being on duty with the patients. Carse briefly explained what had happened. "Friday," he ordered, "you take the stern ray batteries. Ban—"

But Ban Wilson had returned to the electroscope, and it had given him more news. Interrupting, he cried out:

"They must be attacking! A light just flashed in the dome!"

With his words they all saw the light. The visi-screen, though it did not reveal the asteroid, showed the first weapon with which it struck—a lustrous ray of purple which in a blink had leaped out to the *Sandra* and enfolded her. A shower of sparks crackled out from the ship's defensive web, but the purple ray continued.

"I don't know that ray, Eliot." Carse said. "What's on our speed indicator?"

The scientist's gasp was plainly audible as he read the dial. "Why, it—it's dropping! Much faster than our deceleration accounts for! That ray—why, it must have magnetic properties! Carse, the asteroid's stopping us!"

CHAPTER XIV

The Hawk Strikes

N

o surprise showed on the Hawk's face, though the others were visibly shaken. He, at the helm, merely nodded and continued with further orders.

"Williams," he said to one of Leithgow's assistants, "get Thorpe and go and dose Ku Sui with V-27. Give him plenty. Then both of you station yourselves, ray guns in hand, outside his cabin. We'll take no chances with him, gassed or not. Friday, open our radio receiver to the general band. Just the receiver, not the mike.... Our speed, Eliot?"

"Down to seven hundred, and falling steadily."

Carse went to the electelscope, after giving the controls over to Ban.

Squarely behind the *Sandra*, and within twenty-five miles, the peanut-shaped body had come. It was an ominous and silent approach. The *Sandra* remained pinned by the purple ray for minutes while the Hawk studied her aggressor. As he watched the asteroid, the others watched him; Ban Wilson fidgety, Friday clenching and unclenching his big hands. Eliot Leithgow with whitened face and shoulders that seemed to have bowed a little.

The forward speed of the *Sandra* decreased to four hundred miles an hour, and still the Hawk studied the massive body behind....

A sputter sounded in the radio receiver. Carse turned away from the electelscope and listened to the heavy Venusian voice that was suddenly speaking to him from it.

"Carse, I've got you! You've seen our ray, of course, but have you looked at your speed-indicator? You're caught—and this time you're going to stay caught. You cannot possibly resist the magnetic ray I have on you, and in a few minutes you will be drawn right into me. I advise you to surrender peacefully. No tricks—though there's no trick that could do you any good! Nothing! I have you this time!"

A frosty smile tightened the Hawk's lips.

"I was right, Eliot," he murmured. "The man behind the panel took the asteroid to Lar Tantril. He is our opponent."

T

hose were his words, but he did nothing. He seemed content to stand with cold, intent face looking back through the infra-red electroscope. The *Sandra's* speed sank to three hundred, two hundred and soon a hundred, and the asteroid, which was of course also decelerating, crept up remorselessly. Ban Wilson had every confidence in the Hawk, but finally the inaction grew too much for him to bear.

"Jumping Jupiter, Carse!" he sputtered. "—aren't you going to do anything? Use our rays! Try maneuvering to the side! Damn it, we're just letting them take us!"

The adventurer might not have heard, for all the sign he gave. The Earth-clock on the wall ticked on; seconds built minutes, and the minutes passed. The asteroid was only ten miles astern.

"Eliot," said Carse quietly, "get me one of your infra-red glasses."

He took over the controls again. Carefully he varied the forward repulsion and sent current to the side gravity-plates, and slowly the *Sandra* answered by rotating, longitudinally, reversing her position. Still maintaining a slight and dwindling speed toward Earth, her bow swung from that planet's eye-filling panorama and came to face, instead, the invisible asteroid. When turned completely around, the men in her control cabin looked through the bow windows right into the brilliant cone of the purple ray.

Lar Tantril's voice again boomed from the broadcasting shell, and this time it was harsh with anger.

"Try no tricks, Carse! I see what you intend. You plan to suddenly *answer* my ray, instead of continuing to resist it, and so drive right past me and escape. But I warn you I have terrific power, and if you move towards me of your own volition, I can burn you to a cinder in three seconds, and I'll do it. You can't escape! If I have to destroy Ku Sui, all right—but I'll get you!"

T

he Hawk strapped over his eyes the infra-red glasses Leithgow now gave him.

Reversing the *Sandra's* ends had neither increased nor decreased the rate at which the asteroid's purple stream was bringing her closer. Obviously the magnetic stream was being varied. The spaceship's forward momentum merely continued to drop normally until the moment came when she had no Earthward velocity at all; and then more quickly she moved toward the restraining asteroid.

With his infra-red glasses, through the bow windows, Carse could now see the massive body in full detail. There was the dome, a huge, gleaming cup of transparent stuff now showing wisps of blue, from the defensive web around it; and inside were the several buildings, and minute black dots which were the figures of men. There was a great number of them. The largest group was clustered inside one of the large ship-size port-locks in the dome. The lock's outer door was open, and it was from there that the purple ray seemed to originate. Obviously the intention of the enemy was to draw the *Sandra* right in. Five miles now separated asteroid and ship.

Again the Venusian chief spoke.

"I warn you once more, Sparrow Hawk, try no tricks. You can see the men I have here, but you can't see my ray projectors. They're hidden, but they're centered on you, every one, and my hand's at the control that fires them. They have terrific power, Carse. Better not attempt anything!"

The Hawk switched on the extension microphone at his side. He said levelly into it:

"Lar Tantril, I'll make a bargain with you: a favor for a favor."

"What?" shot from the loudspeaker.

"I will agree to surrender peaceably when you've drawn my ship inside if, for your part, you promise to free Eliot Leithgow, who is aboard with me, and the five patients on whom Ku Sui operated. If you don't grant me that, I will oppose you to the last pull of my finger on trigger."

"But, Carse—" the Master Scientist began, horrified: but his expression of amazement faded when the slender man at the radio turned his head and half-closed one eye in a wink.

"You will agree to that—and no tricks?" Tantril's voice repeated.

"I will agree to it. And as for tricks, what could I possibly try? Your rays could burn through the maximum power of my web in three seconds, as you say: I know it as well as you. I only wish there

was a chance to get out of your range in time."

"All right!" the Venusian replied decisively. "I agree. I'll release Leithgow and the five patients. Keep away from the controls and I'll draw you in."

C

arse switched off the microphone.

"A hell of a lot Tantril's word is worth!" muttered Ban Wilson. Once more, surprisingly, the Hawk winked. Friday was grinning now. For once in his life he had guessed his master's strategy before the others.

A mile and a half to the front lay the dome-end of the asteroid. Perhaps nine hundred miles to the rear lay the tremendous mottled curve of Earth with her dangerous upper layers of the stratosphere all too close. In the very face of Earth, all three on a line, the ship lay linked by a stream of purple to the great rough-hewn, errant asteroid. Half the bulk of all three lay sharply outlined against the black of space by the intense yellow light of the flaming distant sun.

The asteroid neared to a mile, then a half-mile. Hawk Carse said curtly:

"Ban, when I give the word, put all the power we've got into our defensive web. Load the generators; overload them; tax them to the limit. That web must be as tough as possible for five seconds."

"Got you, Carse."

"You've—a trick?" ventured Leithgow timidly.

"I think I have, Eliot. Lar Tantril might have caught on when I turned the ship, but unfortunately for him his brain is incapable of proceeding past a certain point.... All right, Ban."

"Feel it!"

In answer to Ban's hands, the deck of the control cabin was literally vibrating under the mounting speed of the generators in the power-room. The generators could not stand that terrific overload long; they would burn out. But Carse needed only a few seconds of it.

The asteroid was a quarter of a mile away, seen through the infra-red. The dome loomed large.

"All right!" whispered Hawk Carse. "Hold on!"

With the words he unleashed the *Sandra's* full acceleration.

I

It was a risk and a big one, but the Hawk had it calculated to a fraction of a second, and so, without hesitation, he took the chance. A little less than four seconds to reach his objective, he reckoned; a little more than one second for Tantril to release the asteroid's disintegrating rays as he had threatened; therefore about two and a half seconds for the *Sandra* to be exposed to those rays. The chance that her defensive web could resist them for that long would decide it.

From almost a standing start, the *Sandra* swept ahead, generators humming, her web a blue mist around her, acceleration at the full. Straight down through the heart of the narrowing purple ray she sped, a hurtling metallic projectile, hundreds of tons in mass, her stub bow levelled dead at the dome.

After a second the asteroid bared its fangs.

A cone of brilliant orange flamed and washed around the *Sandra's* bow, and a storm of soundless sparks engulfed her. She was caught in a maw of fire, and held there for the remaining terrific seconds of her wild forward dash. But the seconds passed; the hands of Hawk Carse were delicate on her controls; and the *Sandra*, curving slightly upward, struck, crashed, wrenched terribly in every joint; and then the jolt and the protesting wrench and the spluttering sparks were gone from her, and there was around her only the deep silence of lifeless space.

At three hundred miles an hour the *Sandra* had nicked the upper plates of the dome and streaked on, unharmed!

It was not necessary now to use infra-red glasses to see the asteroid. It was there in the visi-screen for naked eyes, but for seconds not one of the men in the ship's control-cabin thought to look. The awful acceleration and shock had dazed them. They had not known what was coming, except Friday and the Hawk, and only the latter was able to retain reasonable alertness. He, almost immediately after the impact, cut down the load on the generators, and brought the *Sandra* out of her mad drive forward, rotating the ship until she was facing back towards the asteroid. Then all of them looked through the bow windows, and what they saw told the story in an instant.

"It's visible! See—the invisibility's gone!" cried Friday.

A

score of miles away the body lay, fully revealed, its starboard half gleaming hard and sharp in the sunlight. Cautiously the *Sandra* drew closer. Carse gave the controls to Ban and examined it carefully through the electlescope, after removing the infra-red attachment.

He saw that the keel of the *Sandra* had torn a great, mangled rent in the dome and through this the air had rushed out. Space had taken possession. The disintegrating rays which had been burning at the *Sandra* had been snapped off with the sheathing of invisibility; in that one wild second of impact, all the asteroid's functioning mechanism had been destroyed. Lar Tantril had not thought quite far enough: he had not sealed the buildings air-tight against a possible crashing of the dome, and for that reason alone he and his men had gone down in full defeat under the drive of the Hawk.

Shreds of flotsam drifting and turning in space around the dome now became visible—bits of wreckage hurled out from the tear, and also a number of white, bloated things which once had been the bodies of men. The outrushing tide of air had taken them along, and now they drifted, shapeless, all of a kind, in the lifelessness of space.

"Merciful heaven!" whispered Eliot Leithgow, staring at the desolation. "Gone! Just snuffed out!"

The Hawk took over again and brought and held the *Sandra* in a position a quarter of a mile above the now rapidly falling asteroid.

"They're all dead, I'm sure," he said in a voice hard and emotionless as his graven face. "They must be, for the asteroid is now visible, and that means that the doors of the power building were open. Inside and out, all there is dead, machinery and men.... Still, it had to be done. It was they or we. A variation of the trick we used to escape from the dome before, Eliot; and Tantril of course didn't expect it and protect himself as Ku Sui did that other time. It's all done now—yes, its gravity-plates too, for see, it's turning."

"And fast!" murmured Friday.

The body was rotating around its longer axis at about twice the speed of an Earth-watch's second hand. Now the dome was sliding under, out of their sight, the craggy rock belly coming up to take its place. Nine hundred miles away was Earth—rather, less than that, for the body was now free to accept the tremendous gravity pull of the planet so near. Soon it would plunge to destruction there....

A

thought came to Carse, and he said:

"Perhaps Ku Sui would like to see what has become—"

On the last word he stopped and whirled around. His eyes were suddenly intense and his face startled.

"I heard a hiss!" said Friday.

"You too? Then it was a port-lock!" Carse turned to the visi-screen. "Look there!" he cried.

In the screen Earth made a titanic background against which, a falling, dwindling figure in a clear-cut in the sunlight, gleamed space-suit. Down it went, rapidly, even as they stared, until it hung just off the also-falling asteroid. It was obviously preparing to enter the dome.

"Take the helm, Ban, and watch him!" Carse ordered harshly, and ran aft from the control cabin.

Leithgow and Friday, following at once, found him inside the open door of Dr. Ku Sui's cabin, examining two figures stretched limp at his feet. The men were Thorpe and Williams, who had been set to gas and guard the Eurasian. Carse said:

"Both dead. Poison. Look at Thorpe's wrist."

On the right wrist of the dead man was a line of red, a scratch, and swollen, discolored flesh was ugly around it. One cheek of Williams bore a similar patch. Both had been armed with rayguns, but now they were gone. Half to himself, the Hawk murmured:

"Yes, poison. It might have been in the ring. Everyone else was in the control cabin. The men entered the door, Ku Sui was waiting—quick death.... Well, I'm going after him."

Not understanding, still horrified by the contorted face of the man on the deck, the other two gazed at the adventurer.

"But, Carse!" Leithgow broke out. "How can you? How can you possibly—"

"He's gone back to the dome," the Hawk cut in frostily. "He can't make it to Earth as he is now, for we'd see him and easily be able to pick him up. No; he's got some reason for returning, to the dome. Something important. He thinks he's escaped.... He's mistaken."

A shudder passed over Friday, for Hawk Carse's eyes had fallen on him, and they were deadly.

"Let me by, Eliot," the man whispered. "This time he goes or I go, but by the gods of space it'll be one of us!"

CHAPTER XV

There Is a Meteor

H

his face set and cold, Carse ran to the stores cabin, just as the Eurasian must have hurried there a few minutes before. He took one of Dr. Ku's self-propulsive space-suits down from the rack and slipped into it, sticking a raygun in the belt. Still not speaking, he glided to the rear port-lock, Leithgow and Friday running alongside and attempting to dissuade him from the dangerous pursuit. Their words were wasted. Carse gave them only a faint smile and a few directions.

"Keep the ship as close as you can without danger. No, Eclipse; I'm going by myself; there's no need to risk two. If I don't come out, you've everything needed to prove your case. Eliot—the re-embodied brains, Ku Sui's four white assistants—"

"I tell you you're going to your death! You'll be caught inside! Earth's attracting the asteroid now, and in a few minutes it will be plunging through the atmosphere with terrific speed! The friction will make it a meteor, and you'll burn. Carse! You'll die in flames! You haven't but a few minutes to do the whole thing!"

"Have to risk that, Eliot." He swung open the inner door of the lock and stepped into the chamber. "Remember, keep as close to the asteroid as possible, and a steady watch for Ku Sui and me." He looked levelly at them, white man and black, for a moment, then turned his face away. "That's all. Good-by," he said.

The door swung shut in their faces with a hiss of compressed air.

The Hawk closed the face-plate of his helmet and rapidly spun over the controls. Another hiss, and the outer door moved wide. He stepped with force into space.

T

he panorama below him was breath-taking: Earth seemed almost to hit him in the face. He had not realized it was so close. The sheer, mighty stretch of the globe filled his eyes, and for seconds he could not focus on anything else, so overwhelming to his vision was the colossal map. It reached away to left and right, before and behind, and he was so near that it seemed almost flat, a sun-gleaming plain on which stood out in sharp outline the continent of Europe, the Atlantic Ocean and, bordering it, the edge of North America.

To his left was the flaming orb of the sun; and directly underfoot, rotating against the vast background of the North Atlantic, he now saw the asteroid, glinting metallically along its craggy length as it swung over. Carse centered every bit of power he had on it, and at maximum acceleration began to overhaul his objective.

The asteroid was plunging free to Earth, and the rate of its uncontrolled plunge was second by second mounting tremendously; but Carse's power-fall quickly enabled him to overtake it. As the dome swooped up in front of him, and the sunlight washed briefly over its desolate buildings, he looked hard for a shape moving amongst them, without success. Doubtless the Eurasian was well inside by now.

The job of getting into the dome was a hazardous one. About every thirty seconds the asteroid described a complete rotation, making the rim turn at a speed of half a mile a second, and that made the task of entering extremely dangerous to a man whose only protection was the metal and fabric of a space-suit. Misjudgment would either rip the suit or dash him to instant death. He had to slip cleanly down through the jagged tear in the dome, planning his swoop accurately to the fraction of a second.

Never cooler, the Hawk made it. Building a parallel speed equal to that of the rotating dome, he followed it over in a dizzy whirl; and as the rent came below he shot curving down and in with sufficient precision, and at once swiftly adjusted his gravity to offset the asteroid's great centrifugal force.

F

or alternating fifteen-second periods the sunlight filled the dome and its buildings; and on the tail of

the first of these, even as the sable tide swept all vision from him, the Hawk arrived at the door of one wing of the central building. He had not seen Ku Sui, and he had no time for exploration, but he did have a hunch as to where the Eurasian had gone, and he followed that hunch. A silent, giant-gray thing in the black silence of the corridor, grim, intent and seeming irresistible, he swept along it; and every second he knew that a raygun might spit from where it had been waiting in ambush to puncture his suit and kill him. For whether or not Ku Sui was aware that he was being tracked by his old, bitter foe, Carse did not know.

The asteroid plunged down faster and faster. Earth's atmosphere, with all its perils of friction, coming ever closer, and the great bosom of the planet lying waiting to receive and bury the rock hurtling towards it. Throughout most of the leagues of space that asteroid had tracked on its master's diverse errands, and in many distant places the trails of Hawk Carse and Ku Sui had crossed and left blood and crossed again; and now those three—asteroid, Eurasian and the Hawk—were drawn once more together for the spectacular and epic climax, now only minutes away. No power in the universe was to stop the plunge of the asteroid; it remained to be seen how one or both of the two living humans on it could get out in time....

But of all this, nothing was in Hawk Carse's mind except the beating, driving realization that few minutes were left in which to play out the last scene. With reckless haste he sped to where his hunch led him, the secret panel in Dr. Ku's laboratory. As he reached it, faint sunlight came filtering in from somewhere and he saw that the panel was open.

He looked within and dimly saw a ladder reaching down into black depths. Without hesitation he thrust through the opening and dropped into the blackness. He dared not lose a second.

H

He hit bottom with a thud, changed his glove controls and reached out in the darkness. He felt that he was in one end of a passageway. As rapidly as he could, his arms stretched wide, all his nerves and muscles and senses alert, he pressed along it.

Continually he was thrown into the rough wall at his right by the centrifugal force of the asteroid. How far did the passageway extend? Was Ku Sui at the end of it? It occurred to the Hawk that the asteroid was a developing shooting star, eating up the few hundred miles of life that remained, streaking down into the atmosphere, where waited quick friction and incandescence—and he down in the heart of it, blind, without clue to what lay in front of him, ignorant of everything, and with only minutes in which to achieve his end. There'd be no heat-warning through his insulated suit. Even now, perhaps, there was no time to get out; already the deadline might have been crossed; he could not know. He went on....

How far? A hundred yards; two hundred? Easily that, he thought, and still no variation in the blackness around him! The passageway seemed straight, so he might now be past the rim of the dome above.

Then, for just a second, he saw a faint wisp of light ahead!

Automatically Carse's raygun came up, but in the time that simple motion took the light was gone and the blackness was as deep and lifeless as before. But he was coming to something. He went on, perhaps a little faster, hot to discover the last emergency resource of Dr. Ku. He took no pains to avoid making noise, for he knew Ku Sui could not hear him through the airless space between.

After another hundred yards or so the light from ahead winked again. It was stronger. Only a second of it, but he now suspected that it came at regular intervals. It was a machine, perhaps, working under the hands of the Eurasian. On—on! With the seconds fleeting by, building to the small total which would bring friction to the asteroid, and incandescence, and scalding death for him within it!

Again, suddenly, the mysterious light. It left instantly as usual, but not before it revealed, well ahead, the end of the passage. Quickly he traversed the remaining distance and felt around with his hands. He found what he half expected. There was an opening, a doorway, to his right. The room beyond surely held the final secret of the asteroid. And if Dr. Ku Sui were anywhere, he was in there.

C

Carse restrained an impulse to rush in, deciding to wait for the recurring light. Everything in him told

him that this was the climax, that through the door to his right lay the object of his chase; and in spite of his consciousness of the plunging asteroid, and the up-leaping skin of Earth's atmosphere, now so close, he stood full in the doorway, gun ready, waiting. Seconds were precious, but this was the part of common sense. He needed the light to show him what perils he must face; he could not go into that chamber ignorant of the situation there.

For what seemed ages the fantastic figure stood there. The great rock turning over and over, with awful speed dropping down. Earth nearing, death ever closer—and he standing in silence and darkness, waiting to finish the feud! He might never escape; he knew that; it might already be too late to try; but the core of the man, his grim and steely will, would not let him think of retreating towards safety until he had faced Dr. Ku Sui and decided the account between them forever.

The wall of darkness melted. A ghostly light filtered through. He stared, and in its brief maximum saw before him a high, bare rectangular room, hewn out of the rock—and at its far side a man in a space-suit. Ku Sui, brought to bay!

But Carse, for one of the few times in his life, doubted his eyes. What trick were they playing him? For it was not a real, sharp figure that he saw; it was an indefinite one, shimmering and elusive, like a mirage. A prank of the strange light, perhaps. But Ku Sui nevertheless! Ku Sui trapped!

The Hawk leaped forward with outstretched arms to seize and hold the Eurasian's motionless figure. As he moved, the second of ghostly light dissolved away, and in the blackness his eager reaching arms closed on—nothing!

Surely Ku Sui had been there! Surely he had not just imagined he saw him!

B

affled and coldly raging, the Hawk whirled and groped frantically. The centrifugal force caught him off balance and hurled him into a wall, but dizzy he continued his desperate search, sweeping his arms all around him, over walls and floor and, rising, the ceiling. The tumbling asteroid banged him unmercifully into the six sides of the room, but even as he was flung he reached and felt in every direction—felt without result.

In some incredible way, Ku Sui had eluded him. The second the light failed, he must have slipped by and escaped down the passageway behind. The Hawk could hardly understand how it might have been achieved, but there was no other explanation. So, with lips firm set in his cold, grim face, he felt to the doorway, ready to track back through the long, unlit passage. He might still overhaul and capture the other. If there was still time....

But *was* there?

The passing seconds had not been idle. Inexorably they had brought him to Earth's atmosphere. He stared around the room in sheer horror.

For its blackness was relieved by the faintest of glows. It was not that of the recurring light; it came from the whole rock ceiling above. Carse was overwhelmed by the realization that within numbered seconds the surface of the asteroid would reach incandescence.

Thoughts raced like lightning through his head. He could not get free through the corridor and dome behind: that would take at least three minutes, and not a quarter of a minute was left. Ku Sui too, if he were in the corridor trying to reach the dome, was trapped and finished. A meteor flaming to Earth would be their common grave!

A searing, hideous death! Trapped within fiery walls of melting rock!

At that moment the regularly re-recurring flash of light came, and under pressure of his great need the phenomenon meshed with understanding in Carse's mind. That light was sunlight! It came at definite intervals as the dome side of the asteroid rotated to face the sun.

And that light could reach the room only by way of some channel in the ceiling!

I

in the waxing glow of the rock above him, Carse swiftly found the channel—a vertical bore several feet wide, in one corner of the ceiling. Its rock sides glowed redly, and at their end was a round black patch that caused his heart to leap with hope. Outer space!—and a short, straight escape to it!

In a flash he saw how Ku Sui perhaps had eluded him.

The Eurasian's prepared emergency exit would also be his!

He lost not a fraction of a second. Turning his glove controls to maximum acceleration, he rose with a rush into the bore. Despite his good aim the asteroid's centrifugal force threw him heavily into one red-hot side. His heart went cold; would the fabric of the suit burn through? No time for such worries—must make the frigid air outside—fast—fast—never mind bumps—quick out—and must stay conscious—*must* stay conscious to exert repulsion against Earth!

Like a projectile Hawk Carse shot out of that tunnel of hell at a tangent to the asteroid and in a direction away from Earth, and in an instant the doomed body was far below him, and streaking faster and ever faster to the annihilation now so near.

He fought to come out of his dizziness. Shaking his head, he glanced back for sight of a minute, suit-clad figure. Had Ku Sui preceded him through the emergency exit, his shape should be visible somewhere, etched by the sunlight.

There was no sign of him.

Carse's eyes dropped to the asteroid. He saw it already miles below, a breath-taking celestial object, a second sun, brilliant and increasingly brilliant as it diminished over the watery plain waiting to receive it. His mind saw the Eurasian, caught in the long corridor to the dome, already dead on this last flight of his extraordinary vehicle of space....

The end came at once. The sun was quickly a great, brilliant shooting star, then a blinding smaller one: then its straight mad flight through the heavens was over, and it was received in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and buried deep.

A cataclysmic burial. A titanic meteor, an incandescent, screaming streak in the night—a cloud of billowing steam—a wall of water rearing back from the strange grave of the asteroid, so far come from its accustomed orbit around Mars.... The thought came to Carse that Dr. Ku Sui had died as he lived, spectacularly, with a brilliance and a tidal wave and an earthquake to disturb the lives of men....

And a sadness fell over the heart of the Hawk....

H

He roused from it in a moment. He felt heat! In the rush of events he had not before noticed that his space-suit had started to burn from the friction of his own passage through the atmosphere. Fortunately, it was already cooling off.

For in spite of his own leaving speed and the added centrifugal velocity the asteroid had given him, he had hurtled down after the doomed rock; and only then was his building repulsion neutralizing Earth's gravity and his initial Earthward velocity. He had slowed down just in time to keep his space suit intact.

He came to rest, in relation to the Earth, and hovered there. Again he scrutinized the black untenanted wastes of space above. Far out, approaching as rapidly as it dared, was the *Sandra*.

He wanted to be sure, so he cut in his mike and asked Leithgow if they had, through their electroscope, seen, Ku Sui leave the asteroid.

The anxious scientist told him they had not.

With a slight sigh Hawk Carse snapped off his contact and waited till the sharp, growing spot that was the *Sandra* should come dropping down to pick him up, and his friends learn from his own lips the story of the passing of Ku Sui....

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