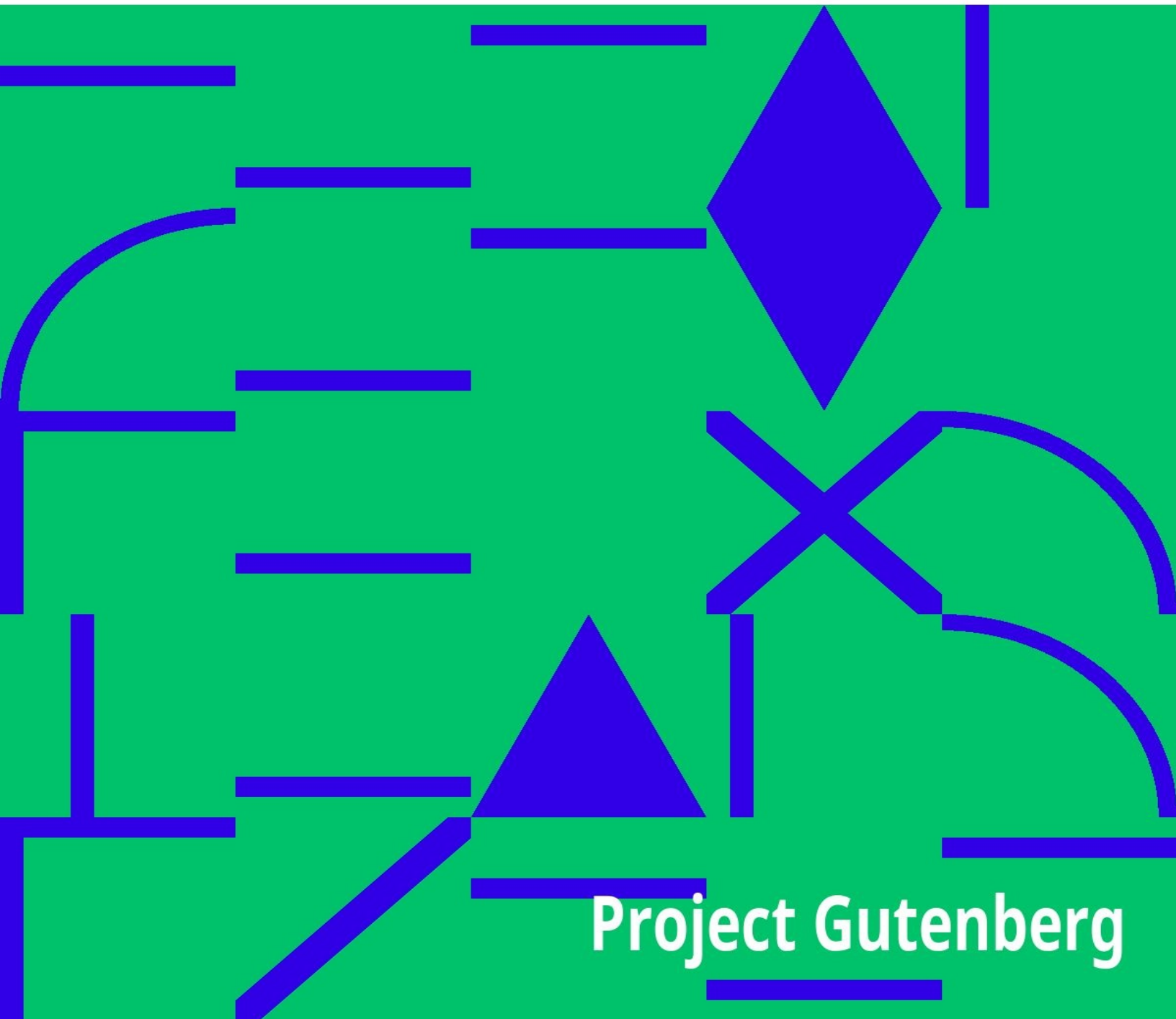


Creatures of Vibration

Harl Vincent



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He was running toward the crater's edge.

Creatures of Vibration

A Sequel to "Vagabonds of Space"

By Harl Vincent

The Vagabonds of Space are cast into the hands of the vibration-maddened natives of Titan, satellite of Saturn.

Carr Parker sat day-dreaming at the *Nomad's* controls. More than a week of Earth time had passed since the self-styled "vagabonds of space" had left Europa, and now they were fast approaching the great ringed orb of Saturn with the intention of exploring her satellites.

Behind him, his Martian friend, Mado, was manipulating the mechanism of the *rulden*, that remarkable European optical instrument which Detis had installed in the vessel before they left. Mado was utterly fascinated by the machine, having spent most of his time during the voyage searching the surfaces of Saturn's moons for signs of human habitation. Now, as they headed directly for Titan, the sixth satellite, he was completely absorbed in an examination of the heavy cloud layer that covered it.

But Carr's thoughts were of his bride, who still slumbered in their stateroom amidships. In his bachelor days he never had imagined he could find such contentment as had come with his marriage to Ora. He had fought shy of the fair sex on Earth. Somehow, the women he knew back home had bored him; angling for a man's money and position, most of them, and incapable of giving real love and companionship in return for the luxuries they demanded. He was resigned to his single state.

But all that was changed by the little blue-eyed girl he had met in Paladar. She was a different sort; worth a hundred of those others and fulfilling to perfection the ideal he had always set up. On her world, Jupiter's satellite, Europa, he had neither wealth nor influence; he'd left these behind when he deserted Earth for a life of vagabondage among the stars. But, to the daughter of Detis, this lack meant less than nothing; his love, and hers, meant everything.



And, what a good sport she had been! When they were threatened by Rapaju and

his minions; when they barely escaped being swallowed up by that monster of space which Mado had likened to the Sargasso Sea of Earth; when she herself proposed joining them in their roving throughout the universe.

She was a companion of whom even the phlegmatic Martian was proud, she brought with her presence on the *Nomad* a subtle something that made of the coldly mechanical space-ship a thing of new beauty and a place of cheerfulness—a home. And, to think he had won her for his own. To think....

"Carr!" Mado's sharp exclamation startled him from his pleasant thoughts. "Come here and take a look at this," the Martian demanded, his voice betraying an excitement unusual for him. "Something is wrong on this satellite we're heading for."

Locking the controls in the automatic position, Carr turned to join his friend at the viewing-disk of the ruden. Mado had found an opening in the heavy cloud layer, and before them was an unobstructed view of a rugged countryside where huge boulders had been scattered by the mighty hand of creation and where the sun shone weakly on the rim of a yawning crater in which sulphurous vapors curled. They saw this strange land as from an altitude of a few hundred feet, though the *Nomad* was still more than a million miles from the satellite.

"What's wrong about that?" Carr grunted. "Excepting that it's just another of these barren and useless bodies that doesn't even provide us with an attracting interest."

"Wait," Mado replied, "You'll see in a moment. Something—"



At that instant there came a puff of blue flame from out the pit, carrying on its heated breath a drifting sheet of incandescence that fluttered and pulsated like a thing alive. Mado switched on the sound mechanism of the ruden and the roaring of the pillar of flame came to their ears. There were other sounds as well; the babble of alien voices and the rumble of drums.

Immediately the rough ground in the vicinity was filled with creatures of human mold, half naked red-skinned beings that rose up from behind the boulders and rushed toward the pit of fire and the uncanny heat mantle that wandered ghost-like along its rim. Two of them carried something between them, a struggling

writhing something which they stood erect at the crater's edge. It was a girl!—a slim, bronzed figure that swayed there an instant uncertainly as the throb of the drums rose high and the voices of the assembled savages swelled in a monotony of exultant chanting.

"Good Lord!" Carr gasped. "A human sacrifice!"

A quick push, a piercing scream immediately drowned out by the cries of the multitude, and the girl was flung headlong into the welcoming folds of the white-hot ghost-mantle which hovered there like some greedy monster of the lava pools of Mercury. The thing closed in around the wildly struggling body, enwrapping it with exultant constrictions of its hell-born substance and diving, flapping, smoking heat devil, into the flame from whence it had sprung. Mado touched a lever with quick trembling fingers and the ruden's disk went blank.



Sickened by what they had seen, the two friends stared at one another, white-faced.

"No place for us," Mado said, after a moment. "Not with Ora."

"Right!" Carr agreed grimly. "But I'd like to get in close enough to see more of Titan. How high is this cloud layer?"

"About a mile above the surface. We can dive through and look them over; perhaps give them a taste of the disintegrator."

"Attaboy! You took the words out of my mouth. The devils! Who'd ever dream of such a horror in the twenty-fourth century—even out here?"

"What's the reason for this serious discussion?" The voice of Detis broke in on them from the door of the control room.

"Plenty!" Carr exclaimed. And the European listened gravely as he described the awful thing they had witnessed.

"I am not surprised," he said calmly, when the Terrestrial ended his recital. "There are certain emanations from the mother planet that most certainly will affect the mentality and baser instincts of a race living within their influence. I have been studying these vibrations for several hours."

They turned to the forward port as the scientist indicated the great orb of Saturn with its gleaming rings. Now, as they drew near to the enormous planet, it did indeed seem that there was a sinister quality in its shifting luminosity. Carr shivered, thinking of Ora.

"You mean," Mado asked, "that there are vibrations in the ether hereabouts that are set up electrically by the planet?"

"Precisely. Or rather I should say they are set up by the vast number of whirling particles of which its encircling rings are composed. The wave form propagated is of a characteristic that is in tune with those portions of the brain which control the savage impulses. We may certainly expect to find superstition-ridden ignorance and all manner of vice prevalent in the races of Titan."

"You think these vibrations will affect us?" Carr inquired anxiously.

"Not if we make our visit short. The intensity is quite low."

"It'll be a short visit, all right. We'll be in Titan's atmosphere in about forty minutes now, and, if I have my say, we'll be out of it and away again inside of an hour."

"Best thing you've said today," Mado approved. "But let's have another look in the ruden. We may find other gaps in the clouds."



The mechanism of the radio telescope whirred into life as he spoke and its disk shone bright with the reflected light of Titan as it pictured the body. The *Nomad* was speeding toward the ill-omened satellite at the rate of more than a thousand miles a second.

But the surface was nowhere visible and Mado adjusted the focus so that the view of the billowy cloud-covering fell rapidly away. Though actually they were approaching the satellite with tremendous velocity, it receded swiftly in the ruden's disk until the entire body showed as a perfect sphere of uniform brilliancy. All surface markings were concealed by the blanket of clouds.

"Just a moment, Mado," said Detis. "I believe I saw something."

The Martian pressed a button and the image was stationary. A tiny black spot had

appeared near one edge of the satellite's disk and this now spread rapidly like a blot of spilled ink. Then it stretched out into a wriggling line that quickly streaked its way across the equator, completely banding the body as they watched. A moment it lay there like a great serpent encircling the globe, and then it vanished in a flash of intense light that left them blinking in amazement. It was as if a trail of gunpowder had been laid across the surface and then set off by a torch in the hand of some unseen giant of the cosmos. A strange electrical storm that agitated the cloud blanket mightily, then left it more densely closed in than before.

Through the forward port the satellite could be seen with the naked eye, growing larger now and resolving itself into a tiny globe. To Carr it seemed that the diminutive moon winked provocatively as he turned to regard it without the ruden's aid. Off to the west, Saturn and her rings almost filled the sky, and their baleful light shone cold and menacing against the black velvet of the heavens.



Mado took the controls when the *Nomad* entered the atmosphere of Titan and drifted over the sea of clouds. He corrected the altimeter for the mass of this body of three thousand miles diameter, and noted that they were up about six thousand feet. Test samples indicated that the outside air, although thin, was pure. But they did not open the ports as they had no intention of landing.

Ora had not yet awakened and Carr hoped fervently that she would not do so until they had left the immediate vicinity of Titan. It was vastly better if she missed seeing anything of the barbarians of the cloudy satellite. Besides, with her adventuresome and fearless nature, she'd not be satisfied merely to look on from afar—she'd want them to land. And that must not be done.

Something tinkled metallically against the hull plates of the vessel. Again and again the sound was repeated, and soon they saw that the air was filled with driving particles which clattered on the thick glass of the ports and contacted resoundingly with the hull. A vast cloud of black loomed directly ahead, springing up from the tossing cloud banks; and Mado yanked at the controls, swerving the *Nomad* sharply from her course.

But there was no escaping the fury of that sudden squall; they were in the thick of it in an instant, and the ship was buffeted and tossed about as if it were a toy.

Millions of the driving particles battered the *Nomad* and the din of their pounding was terrific as the ship was whirled deeper into the midst of the tempest.

Carr saw that the black particles were piling up around the rim of the port, sticking fast to the metal of the hull. They were bristling in fantastic array, like iron filings adhering to the poles of a magnet. In a flash it came to him that these particles were magnetic; the *Nomad* was covered with them and they piled on ever more thickly, soon weighting her down so heavily that she lost altitude. They were at the mercy of a furious electrical storm of mysterious nature.

"Imps of the canals!" Mado shouted above the din. "We're finished! The machinery is paralyzed. This iron hail is charged."

The viewing port was completely covered over now with particles that arched across from rim to rim, slender rod-like things about two inches long and of the thickness of heavy wire. Black, they were, as black as graphite. Detis worked frantically with Mado at the useless controls, vainly endeavoring to stabilize the pitching vessel.

Dazed by the suddenness of the calamity, Carr turned to look at the altimeter. Five thousand feet, forty-five hundred, four thousand! Nose down, and reeling drunkenly, the *Nomad* was diving to certain disaster on the rocky ground of Titan. He dashed from the control room, calling distractedly to Ora as he raced along the passageway.

She staggered from the stateroom and into his arms, a slim, boyish figure in her snug leather jacket and breeches. Together they were flung violently against the partition by a heavy lurch of the vessel.

"What is it?" she gasped, clinging to him for support.

"A freak storm, in Titan's atmosphere. Guess the *Nomad's* done for." Carr drew her fiercely close as an awful picture flashed across his mind—of Ora's body mangled in twisted wreckage; of the savages finding it, down there....

The metal floor-plates seemed to buckle and hurl themselves aft with a grinding crash of disrupted joints. Holding desperately to the precious little body within

his arms, Carr was thrown off his feet. There was a detonation as if the universe had been blasted into oblivion—then darkness, and numbed silence.



"Carr, you're hurt!" Ora moaned.

He was—a little. His head was splitting and the taste of blood was in his mouth, but it was nothing serious. He'd been half knocked out, but his head was clearing already. Of far greater importance was the fact that Ora was unharmed; he satisfied himself of that immediately.

"I'm all right," he grunted, struggling to his feet and feeling around in the blackness.

The lights in the passage were out and he groped blindly along the partition, the metal of which had suddenly become very hot to the touch. There was a curious feeling of lightness as if his body had no weight at all; the ship rolled gently and he knew they were falling swiftly to the inevitable crash. Yet he clung fast to Ora, and, together, they made their way to the control room.

Faint daylight streamed in through the ports there and he saw Mado and Detis, both bleeding from injuries they had received when the mysterious shock hurled them amongst the control mechanisms. They were working furiously with the exciter-generator, which had stopped. The *Nomad* was without power and helpless to exert her anti-gravity energy.

"The iron hail!" gasped the European scientist. "It gave up its charge, Carr—exploded. Here, give us a hand and see if we can get the generators started."

The ports were clear of the black particles and Carr saw that the outer surface of the glass was cracked and darkened from the heat of the blast. He understood, remembering the black band and the flash they had seen across the cloud layer from afar. And in the instant of remembering he saw that the ground was very near, rushing upward to meet them. A coil of the exciter-armature broke away in his fingers; the thing had been burned out by the electric storm, and the *Nomad* was doomed.

The altimeter needle moved with sickening speed and already registered but little more than five hundred feet. Four hundred! Carr braced himself for the

impending crash and gathered Ora in his arms.

And then a strange thing happened. Four light rays, dazzling in intensity, stabbed up at them from the forest beneath them and converged on the vessel's hull. The *Nomad* staggered, then came to an even keel and slackened in her mad dash to the surface. She vibrated from stem to stern under the mighty conflict of energies and they felt themselves pressed hard against the floor-plate. But the mysterious energy beams had come too late to save them. A densely wooded slope loomed directly ahead. There was a crashing of branches and the rending of mighty trunks, and the *Nomad* came to a jarring stop.



"Devils of Terra!" Mado ejaculated. "We're in a fine fix now. We'll have to set foot on Titan whether we want to or not."

Carr had laughed, somewhat shakily, in relief. They were safe, all of them, and no one much hurt. And the generator coils could be rewound. But he sobered instantly at Mado's words; they'd have to produce copper and insulating materials for the job.

"Right," he agreed. "And that's not so good."

"What's so terrible about landing here?" Ora inquired. "I thought we were expecting to explore this satellite." She looked up from her ministrations to Detis, who had a nasty scalp wound.

"The people here are dangerous savages," Carr answered gravely. "At least some of them are; we saw them in the rulden. You'll have to remain aboard while we look up the ones who projected those rays and do some bargaining with them."

"What! You expect me to hide in the vessel while you're at work outside? Not much! I want to see something of Titan while we are here." Her pretty chin was set in that determined manner she had.

"I tell you it's too risky!" Carr was firm, but he looked at Mado beseechingly, signaling for his support.

But the Martian only grinned owlishly. He knew as well as did Carr that Ora would have her way.

"Risky—pooh!" she returned. "I'm not afraid. We have our ray pistols and the funny torpedoes you brought from Mars. Besides, I don't believe it's as bad as you think."

Carr shrugged his shoulders. After all, they probably would not encounter any of the savages here in the forest. Beings of far greater intelligence were responsible for those rays, that much was certain. Besides, they'd be three able-bodied men out there to watch over her, and he'd make sure she didn't get too far away from the ship.



Carr was first to step from the opened manhole to the soft carpet of the Titanese forest. He found the air cool and crisp, with a tang of ozone assailing his nostrils. There was a pulsating motion in it that he could hardly define; it seemed that it massaged his cheeks and raised the short hairs at the nape of his neck and on his forearms as if they were electrified. Those vibrations Detis had told them about were actively at work.

The gravity was even less than on Mars, though slightly greater than that of Europa. Mado was entirely at ease, and the Europeans would not be bothered by the slight change in their weight. But Carr would have to take it easy, as he'd done ever since leaving Earth. His muscles were too powerful for his body on these smaller worlds, though this was a mighty advantage if he took care not to over-exert.

A melodious whistling note rose high somewhere in the depths of the forest and trailed off into eery silence. The sky was overcast with gray clouds and the light was poor, of little more than twilight intensity on Terra, this being partly due to the masking of the sun by the clouds and partly to their tremendous distance from that radiant body. Odd that it was not colder, he thought. Probably those vibratory radiations of Saturn's rings had something to do with the temperature in addition to their other effects.

Detis was on his knees, examining a queer specimen of purplish moss which had drawn his eye. The eternal scientist in the man could not be downed. Mado had come out armed with one of the bulky kalbite torpedo-projectors and was looking around belligerently.

Ora drew herself erect and took a deep breath as soon as her feet touched the

ground, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed with excitement. "Oh, Carr," she breathed, "it's marvelous; an honest-to-goodness virgin forest. We've neither of us ever seen one, you know. Aren't you thrilled?"

"We-e-ll," he admitted, "I've always looked forward to wandering in just such places. But, with you along, and thinking of those barbarians we saw—"

"Silly. I'm as capable as any of you. And, even if I couldn't look out for myself, I know that you will be at my side." She pursed her lips and tossed back her head provocatively.

What was a man to do?



A deep-toned booming note came then from the hills, commencing like the warning siren of a space liner approaching its berth and swelling to a bombilation of ear-shattering sound that set the steel of the *Nomad's* hull vibrating and their very flesh and bones a-tingle. Then it died away as had the bird note which was the first sound of this world to greet them.

"Jupiter! What's that?" Mado unslung his torpedo-projector.

As if in answer to his startled question, a weird object drifted over the treetops and poised directly above them, about fifty feet up. An egg-shaped thing, six or seven feet in length, and seemingly made of white metal. It swayed there gently, without visible means of support, and they could make out a transparent disk on its side, back of which there was a human head with eyes that regarded them curiously.

Mado raised his torpedo tube and took aim.

"Hold it!" Carr warned him. "This fellow's no savage. Probably he's one of those who tried to break our fall. Friendly, perhaps."

Two more of the ovoids drifted in from the woods and joined the first one, all three settling a few feet lower and their occupants staring intently at the intruders.

"I'll get the psycho-ray apparatus," Detis said excitedly. "We may be able to get thought contact with them." He dived through the *Nomad's* entrance-manhole as

he spoke.

"Nothing so frightening about these creatures," Ora murmured, her eyes reproaching Carr. "Why, they seem anxious to know that we are not enemies."

And, indeed, this seemed to be the case, for the strange ovoids wafted still lower, dropping until a faint humming of the internal gravity mechanism came to their ears. These were a highly developed people of scientific attainment; civilized beings. But Mado kept firm hold of his torpedo tube, and Carr fingered the ray pistol at his belt.

The booming note from the hills came then, frightfully near this time, and the three ovoids moved with sudden roaring of their motors, literally hurling themselves skyward. But the menace they sought to escape was real, and not to be outdone in speed. A vast black something whirred out from beyond the treetops and flung itself upon them.

"A pterodactyl!" Mado gasped. "One of the prehistoric monsters of Terra!"

"Carr, there are men riding it!" Ora exclaimed. "Red men!"



It was true; the pteranodon, a horrid bat-like thing with a wing-spread of fully twenty feet, carried three of the bronzed savages clinging to a sort of harness that encircled its body just back of the crested head. The huge flying reptile whistled raucously as it flew and one of the savages was whirling a sling which held a stone as large as his own head. They watched in amazement as the swift aerial steed flapped its way after the rising ovoids. And then the savage let loose an end of his thong and released its missile, which crashed full against the transparent disk of an ovoid and tore its way through.

The damaged ovoid careened violently and then fell end over end, crashing in the forest. With a bellow of fury, Mado fired with the kalbite tube at his hip. There was the twang of the propelling ray, and the slender arrow-like torpedo sped forth on its message of death, singing spitefully as it cleaved the air of Titan.

It was a fair hit, catching the pteranodon just ahead of its trailing legs and exploding with the characteristic screaming roar of the deadly kalbite. The

monstrous reptile and its crew of barbarians vanished in a blaze that lighted the clouds above them and brought a babble of excited shoutings from the depths of the forest on all sides. They were surrounded by the uncivilized ones of Titan! And those of the ovoids had run off at the first sign of danger.

The din from the forest was augmented by the whistlings of a second pteranodon which darted after the remaining ovoids, following swiftly as these retreated with ludicrous, wabbling haste.



Ora screamed and struck out at something with her fist. A naked arm had reached out from the underbrush and grasped her wrist. Carr wheeled and his ray pistol spat crackling flame. The savage, an undersized red man with an enormous head, rose unsteadily from his hiding place, a look of terrible hate in his contorted features. Then, like a punctured balloon, his body collapsed into the nothingness of complete disintegration.

"Back, back to the *Nomad*!" Carr roared, dragging Ora with him and leveling his pistol at a group of the bronze brutes who rushed into the space where the vessel lay amongst the trees.

Mado was busy with his torpedo tube and a vast explosion shook the ground beneath them as a trio of the savages were blasted out of existence. A great tree toppled and crashed across the nose of the *Nomad*, its roots ripped from the soil by the concussion.

Ora had whipped out her own pistol and was firing as they fell back. Game kid, she was! Carr gloated as he saw she was making each shot tell. But this couldn't last; there were hundreds of them now, long-armed and big-headed red devils swarming in from every direction. Carr dodged none too quickly to save his skull from a swift-flung stone, which clanged against the *Nomad's* hull. There was a perfect hail of the missiles now: one struck his left arm a numbing blow, and he heard a sickening thud and Ora's moan as she was hit. And there were winged darts, from blow-guns.

A dusky moon-face leered into his own, horribly close, and he yelled his rage as he drove it back with a swift uppercut. But the horde of savages came on in ever increasing numbers and with renewed vigor.

"Quick—inside!" Carr hissed in Ora's ear as his fingers found the rim of the manhole. He'd have her safely within in a moment.

Detis clambered out with the thought machine in his arms, and a singing dart from one of the blow-guns pierced him through and through. A look of astonishment spread over his kindly features, and he fell forward, dying.

And then Carr looked up into a grinning face behind a huge club that was swinging downward. He threw up his arm to break the force of the blow, but the club fell too swiftly; the enormous weight of it crashed down on his skull, and he knew no more.



When he awakened it was to stare for a dazed moment into a pair of blue eyes that looked down upon him in a place of dim light and stuffy atmosphere. The eyes were only vaguely familiar in his befuddled memory. Beautiful eyes, though, and incredibly dear....

"Ora!" he exclaimed, in wondering remembrance, trying to sit up as he grasped her hand.

"Hush!" she warned him, placing a finger-tip to his lips. "Be quiet now and perhaps they'll leave us alone for a while."

"They! Did they capture us?" he whispered. "Are you hurt?"

"We're prisoners, all right, excepting poor father. But they didn't harm *me* much, outside of the rough handling."

"The devils. What of Detis?" He was growing stronger by the minute and now saw that they were in an open-mouthed cave and that Mado was sitting hunched dejectedly in a corner, his massive shoulders drooping and his proud head bowed on his chest.

"Father—they killed him," Ora sighed almost inaudibly. "Have you forgotten? We saw the dart strike him and I—I saw it sticking from his chest. Oh, Carr!" A dry sob caught in her throat.

"Yes—yes. Lord!" Carr groaned, sick at heart with the sudden recollection and full of compassion for the stricken girl.

He patted her hand with clumsy tenderness as she turned her head and gazed out through the cave mouth in silence that was fraught with intense pain. She would take it like that: with little to say but with much inward suffering.

And then he noticed a fourth occupant of the cavern, a young lad of Titan. Like one of the savages in his small stature and in the large size of his head, he was much lighter in color and his body was encased in a snug one-piece garment of shimmering material of silky texture. And there was a different light in his eyes, the light of intelligence and culture.

"Who is that?" Carr whispered.

Ora stared when she saw that the stranger was on his feet. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I'm glad he has recovered. He's one of the civilized ones; they captured him with his ovoid when the second pteranodon went out after them."



Mado was standing now, endeavoring to communicate with the lad by means of signs and the drawing of crude pictures in the red sand of the cavern floor. The graceful little fellow watched him with understanding and with a smile of amused tolerance. Then he halted the big Martian with an imperious motion, addressing him in velvety voice.

"Nazu," he said simply, placing a forefinger on his breast and bowing before the astonished Mado.

"Imps of the canals!" the Martian exclaimed, grinning delightedly as he cast a swift look at Carr and Ora. "He's telling me his name." "Mine's Mado," he said, turning his eyes to the keen gray ones that smiled up at him. "Mado," he repeated, placing a huge fist against his own chest and bending his body in awkward imitation of the lad's courtly gesture.

They made no attempt to converse in tongues that would convey no meaning, but there was no mistaking the quick friendship that sprang up between the incongruous pair. Mado was the boy's slave from that moment, and Nazu looked up to the Martian with all of youth's admiration for his vast bulk and rippling muscles.

Suddenly they were without light and Carr saw that a curtain of woven rushes

had been dropped over the mouth of the cave. There were soft padding footsteps on every side and he drew back against the rock wall with Ora clasped in his arms. A sinewy hand grasped his wrist and twisted his right arm free. He lashed out in the darkness and was rewarded by a grunt of pain as his fist contacted with an unseen face. Nazu's voice rose in anguish, and Mado's wrathful bellow was followed by a frightful commotion as he tore into his assailants.

They were everywhere in the blackness, these slippery little savages of Titan, their half naked bodies crowding him and stifling him with their sweaty nearness. Again and again Carr struck out, but it was like fighting a horde of squirming and clawing feline creatures that swarmed over him and bore him down by sheer weight of numbers. They dragged Ora from his arms and quickly overpowered him. Thongs of rawhide twisted deeply into the flesh of his wrists and he was hauled forth into the daylight.



Securely tied, hand and foot, Carr was propped sitting with his back to a huge boulder. He saw they had been carried to the place they had viewed in the disk of the rulden. A dozen paces away, Ora and Mado sat similarly bound. The Martian had been gagged as well and Carr was forced to smile despite the seriousness of the situation. His mad bellowings must have proved as painful to the ears of the red dwarfs as had his fists to their bodies.

Nazu, unbound and walking proudly erect, was being marched to the edge of a smoking fissure by two of the savages. No others of the red men were in sight.

Carr shuddered. It was the place of sacrifice they had seen in the rulden, and the natives were in hiding as before. Nazu would be first to go; then Ora, most likely. He strained desperately at his bonds when he realized the awful significance of their position. It was incredible that Ora was here and in the hands of these unspeakable monsters. Why, she'd be thrown into the incandescent folds of the flapping fire-god, along with the rest of them! He groaned in an agony of self-recrimination; he should not have allowed her to come on this mad voyage.

Then came that roaring column of flame from out the crater, and the weird fluttering thing whose intense heat radiated across the intervening space like the breath of a blast furnace. The rumble of drums commenced, and thousands of the

red men dashed over the rocky area to worship at the shrine of their pitiless god.

As their monotonous chant rose high, Nazu was rushed to the edge of the pit. The ghastly, shimmering heat-ghost drifted hungrily to await the flinging of the slight form into its consuming embrace. Carr was glad to see that Ora had turned her head.



And then there came a sucking noise from the depths of the crater, and the pillar of blue flame vanished abruptly, the incandescent ghost-shape flapping disconsolately in its wake. The chant of the savages trailed off into a chorus of disgruntled murmurings and the booming of the drums died down in disappointment. The worshippers had been cheated of their sadistic pleasure. There was something wrong with the timing of the rite; their mysterious fire-god had granted the captives a reprieve.

But the prisoners were not deceived by the solicitous treatment accorded them by their captors when they were returned to the cave and their bonds were severed. For well they knew that at the next appearance of the phenomenon of the pit they would be dragged off to the sacrifice. Sooner or later all of them were to meet the fate of those given into the embrace of the heat-demon.

A guard of fifty or more of the savages, armed with blow-guns and stone hatchets, paraded continuously before the mouth of the cave as one of their number returned with a huge woven container of fruits and nuts of strange form and color. This was set before them and the bearer withdrew.

"Humph!" Mado grunted. "Seems like they want to fatten us up for this heated sheet of theirs. Like hogs fattened for the market."

But he reached for the striped yellow melon atop the heap, and, at a bright nod of approval from Nazu, bit into its smooth skin.

Carr's stomach rebelled when he looked at the food. He could not bear the sight of the stuff, sitting there in the damp cavern with Ora's blue eyes regarding him in the dim light. Those wide eyes held a gleam of hope and trust that would not be discouraged.



He gazed out through the cave mouth and calculated their chances. There were none. Not against that horde of barbarians; there were too many of the devils to fight with their bare hands. If only they had their ray pistols, or a torpedo projector. At least they could sell their lives dearly. His eyes narrowed speculatively when they came to rest on a peculiar egg-shaped object that stood out there in the open. It was Nazu's ovoid. Here was an idea!

But he saw that its entrance door was open and that the space inside was too small for any of them excepting one of the small stature of the Titanese. It was crammed with machinery. Nazu was the only one of their number who could squeeze into the thing; in fact he alone knew how to operate the queer flying machine. There must be others of his kind, plenty of them; another country, or a city full of them at least. Perhaps he might obtain aid if only he could be made to understand, and if they could get him out there safely somehow.

"Mado," he called, pointing, "do you suppose we could dope out a way of getting Nazu aboard his sky vehicle to go for help?"

The Martian stared, his mouth stuffed with food and his jaws in full action. He strained suddenly to swallow the huge mouthful so he could make reply.

"Not a chance," he grunted. "Why, there's a million of them out there. You won't catch them napping."

But he turned his attention from the basket of fruit and made a desperate effort to convey the idea to Nazu, whose bright eyes took in his every significant motion and whose sensitive fingers traced images in the sand that conveyed his own thoughts to the mind of the Martian in rapid succession.

"He's got it!" Mado gloated. "The game little cuss would go in a minute if we could get him to the ovoid. He's got a picture of a big island here, so help me! An island covered with circular dwellings, made of metal like the ovoids, he indicates. Look here."



Carr and Ora moved over to watch the swift sketching of the Titanese lad. By means of pantomime and his carefully drawn pictures, he told them of his people, making it clear that they were forced to live in insulated dwellings and travel only in the ovoids, which likewise were insulated against the devastating

vibrations that emanated from Saturn's rings. He sketched those rings, illustrating the vibrations and tapping his own forehead in explanation of the effect on the brain; pointing to the savages to indicate the ultimate fate of his kind. The protective insulation, it appeared, was not permanent; sooner or later, all of them would become barbarians like the others.

The savages out there were their fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, gone mad; their skins darkened by continued action of the vibrations after they fled their insulated homes. His pictures of the family life were meticulously drawn. His people never warred upon these savage kin of theirs—naturally—though the reverse was not always true. However, Nazu pointed to the ovoid and showed his willingness to help the strangers. But he shook his head sadly as he counted the barbarians on his fingers, multiplying the number endlessly by clapping his hands. There were too many of them; the thing was impossible.

"Good Lord!" Carr exclaimed. "He's a marvel at communicating his thoughts without words. But I'd think his people would beat it for the hills without waiting. Might as well have it over with."

"But, they're still working on the problem," Ora objected. "With their wisdom, they'll finally get the thing under control. And they probably hope to discover a way of restoring their maddened relatives."

She was doing something with the red sand; wetting her fingers in a trickle of water that oozed from the wall and making a red paste which she smeared on her white forearm and then rubbed off.

"I guess you're right," Carr admitted. Then, watching her strange performance, he asked, "What are you doing?"

She looked up with sparkling eyes and stretched forth her arm. "It stains, Carr, see!" she exclaimed excitedly. "We can fix up Nazu to resemble one of the savages. It is the exact color of their skin."

"Mado!" he called, sensing at once the possibilities of her discovery. They could make up Nazu to perfection. Mingling with the barbarians unsuspected, he might get possession of the ovoid.



The Titanese lad fell in with the idea at once and the two men started work on him with water and the powdery stuff they had taken for red sand. They stripped him of his silken garment and smeared him from head to foot, Carr taking especial care to see that his upper body and face were thoroughly covered. Then, after using his own clothing to swab off the coating, they stepped back to view the result. He was exactly like one of the red men in color now, and he stood there twisting his face in a wicked grin to heighten the similarity.

"The little devil!" Mado chuckled. "He gets the idea perfectly. We'll have to muss his hair now and fix him up with a kirtle like theirs."

Removing his suede jacket and turning it inside out, he draped it about the slim hips of Nazu, then slapped his chest approvingly. "There you are, lad," he told the grinning youngster. "A tough-looking kid we've made of you, too."

The words were lost on the young Titanese, but his bright eyes showed that he fully comprehended the humor as well as the gravity of the situation. The improvised covering would pass without question as one of the untanned hides the barbarians wore dangling from their waists. The disguise was faultless.

Ora had been watching at the mouth of the cave. Now she called out in low-voiced warning, "Hurry! One of them is coming."

Carr moved forward swiftly to face the opening, while Mado stood with his great bulk hiding the now unrecognizable Nazu. The savage entered, proceeding directly to where Carr was standing. He bent over the fruit basket and then the Earth-man was upon him.

The wiry red man struggled furiously, but Carr had a grip on his windpipe that stopped his attempts to cry out and quickly reduced him to a state of flabby subjection. Then he bound and gagged his captive, tearing strips of linen from his own shirt to provide the necessary material. In a moment they had bundled the trussed-up dwarf into a dark corner of the cavern, and Nazu stepped forth blithely to lift the basket to his shoulder.



Everything seemed to happen at once after that. Nazu stalked boldly out among the savages, who paid him no attention whatsoever. He passed out of their field of vision for a moment, and then they saw him at the circular door of the ovoid.

In a flash he was inside and the thing soared speedily into the air and out of sight. The red men broke forth in a babel of excited jabbering and then they were crowding into the cave, hundreds of them it seemed, shrieking their rage as they attacked the hapless prisoners.

Carr went down fighting madly but to no avail. He hadn't counted on this; he should have known better. A crushing weight of them was upon him, clawing and beating at him as he struggled to rise. They were suffocating him with their rank animal odors.

And then he was dragged into the open air. Battered and dazed, he saw they had found their fellow, the one he had bound and gagged. Ora was considerably mussed up, but unharmed, he observed with relief; but Mado lay there inert. This was the first time Carr had ever seen him take the count at the hands of man.

When they had untied the one whose place had been taken by Nazu, he came straight for the Earth-man and would have brained him with a huge stone had not his fellows interfered. He objected strenuously, his eyes red with hate and a torrent of harsh gutturals pouring from his lips. But the others held him off; this strange white giant from the machine of the skies was to be saved for the embrace of the fire-god.



With the entire blame for Nazu's escape thus placed upon the Terrestrial, Ora and Mado were returned to the cavern and left unmolested. But Carr was prodded into moving over against a boulder and was surrounded by a semi-circle of the dwarfs who squatted calmly to watch him, blow-guns in their hands and stone hatchets on the ground within easy reach. They were taking no more chances with this one.

The long day of Titan dragged interminably but the watchful eyes of his guards never strayed from their prisoner. At any moment the fire-god might make an appearance and the rite of sacrifice take place. Carr supposed that the thing made more or less regular appearances, like a geyser of Earth. And, next time, there would be no escape.

Night fell, and still those eyes watched intently in the light reflected against the low-flung clouds from the seething crater nearby. Nothing had been seen of Nazu or any of the ovoids. Probably it was useless to expect them; they could

not bring themselves to do battle against these savage kin of theirs. Anyway, he was glad the little fellow had gotten away; he hoped he was safely in bed—if they had beds in those insulated dwellings.

He could not sleep. All through the night he sat with bowed head, alternately planning rescue attempts and cursing himself for bringing Ora to this horrible end. Detis was dead; the *Nomad* was hopelessly beyond repair for many days, even if they could make their escape and locate it; Nazu had saved his own skin, and they were left to the mercy of these vibration-crazed brutes who waited there in the flickering red twilight all around him. It was a revolting ending for an adventure that had started so auspiciously.



With the first faint light of dawn came the roaring of the pillar of flame from out the crater. Instantly there rose the hollow booming of the drums and the chanting of thousands of the barbarous worshippers. The place was swarming with them almost instantly, and Carr's guards closed in on him with evil glee.

Ora was brought out into the open, her arms held fast by two of the red devils who yanked her roughly along between them. Carr roared out in blind rage and in awful fear for the girl. He struck out viciously into the first grinning face that pressed near. Something in his brain seemed to snap then, and he became a snarling, fighting animal, battling against overwhelming odds in defence of his mate. A dart buried itself in his arm and a stone hatchet bit into his shoulder, but he scarcely felt the hurts. All that mattered now was Ora; they were taking her away—taking her to the folds of that incredible hot thing that flapped there at the crater's rim. An arm snapped like a pipestem in his fingers and he heard the squeal of pain from somewhere in the tangled mass of savages around him.

And then they were falling back; easing up on him. The din was increasing, but it seemed that a note of fear had crept in to replace the exultant frenzy of those chanting voices. The drums were stilled.

Wiping the blood from his eyes with the back of his hand, he saw the barbarians running everywhere; they were screaming in superstitious terror and fighting one another in their desperate anxiety to escape the vicinity of their precious fire-god. A tremendous voice boomed out over the hubbub, a voice that came from the crater in vast commanding gutturals that struck terror into the souls of the

panicky barbarians. Yet somehow that mightily sonorous voice carried a familiar ring.

Carr raised astonished eyes to the pillar of blue flame and was seized with a well-nigh uncontrollable impulse to flee with the red men. For a monstrous image of Detis swayed there in the hot vapors, a massive arm raised menacingly and an equally Brobdingnagian voice issuing from his lips in fierce syllables of the red man's tongue!

"Detis!" Carr shouted. "Detis! Ora—Mado!"



And then he was running toward the crater's edge in bounding strides that carried him twenty feet at a leap. He understood now. Detis had recovered from his wound and was reversing the ruden's energy. He was projecting his own image and voice, many times amplified, into the column of fire to terrify the savages!

Ora was lying there, on the rim of the pit. She had fainted at sight of the ghost-shape, whose white-hot folds flapped there, reaching to engulf her in their all-consuming embrace. Carr babbled like a madman as he pulled her away from the horrible thing that pulsed with eager flutterings not three feet away, its hot breath singeing her silken lashes and brows.

Mado was there, encouraging him and yelling something else he couldn't understand; pointing skyward. And then he saw it; the *Nomad*, with its sleek, tapered cylinder of a body nosing down toward them with the silvery aura of its propulsive energy gleaming like a beacon of hope against the dull clouds of the satellite of terror. And there was something else: one of the ovoids of Titan, clinging there to the vessel's hull plates, alongside the open manhole. Nazu had not failed them after all. His mind refused to question the miracle further.

Somehow, when the vessel landed, he managed to reach the manhole with his precious burden. He staggered through the passageway and into their stateroom, tenderly stretching Ora on her own bed. In the next instant he was rummaging in the medicine closet. He found ointment for her burns; smelling salts; damp cloths. With trembling fingers he ministered to her, a great joy welling up within him as he saw she was recovering. Another minute, back there at the crater, and he'd have lost her forever. He swallowed hard at the thought, his eyes misty as he looked down at her and remembered.

Impatiently he jerked the barbed dart from his arm and poured a powerful antiseptic into the open wound, unmindful of the pain. As best he could, he disinfected his other cuts and bandaged them. Ora had raised herself and now sat there, swaying weakly and regarding him with anxious gaze.

A little later they made their way forward to the control room. The *Nomad* had taken off and was drifting slowly higher. At the controls sat a strange, bedaubed figure. Nazi!

Mado was peering through the coils of a helix of silver ribbon that had been erected beside the rulden.

"Father!" Ora darted past him and dropped to her knees on the floor-plates at the Martian's side. The body of Detis was slumped there a ghastly corpse within those gleaming coils. But his kind features were fixed in a serene smile. He had gone to his reward with content in his heart.

Only then did Carr remember. One could not subject his body to the reversed energies of the rulden without certain expectation of death. A few short seconds with those terrible oscillations surging through his being, carrying the amplified visual and oral reproduction through the ether, and the European scientist had perished. Knowingly, willingly, Detis had given his life that the rest of them might live! Recovered miraculously from his first serious injury, he had done this magnificent thing deliberately and gladly....

A great lump rose in Carr's throat as Ora's sobbing came to his ears. With his vision blurred by tears, he turned to the pilot's seat, where Nazi faced him with solemn eyes.

"Nazi go now," the amazing young Titanese stated. He spoke in halting syllables of Cos, the language of the inner planets!

Carr stared agape, scarcely believing his ears.

"Detis great man," Nazi continued, relinquishing his seat to the dazed Earthman.

"Nazu find him in ship. My people already there with him. They want to help when you come. Return after capture and heal dart wound of Detis. Bring wire and help him fix motors. Work very quick, my people. Detis have brain machine. Talk with Nazu; teach him words, also very quick. Nazu tell where you are and we come to help. Then he scare away red men—and die. That is all. Now I go—and you go also. Quickly."

"So that's how it happened," Carr muttered, slowly mulling over the amazing things he had heard. He watched the Titanese lad keenly as his eyes wandered in Mado's direction. He saw the admiring light that came into them as the big Martian removed the body of Detis from the helix and carried it gently away.

"Wait a minute," he interposed, as Nazu made as if to leave. "Mado would like to talk to you."

"Must go soon." The youngster drew himself up proudly. "Nazu is prince of his people. They need him. And you—you must go at once. Vibrations of mother planet's rings work on you too long already. Must be quick. Else you be wild men—like those down there."

He waved his arm in a gesture that embraced all Titan. Anxiety was written large on his countenance and his gaze traveled nervously to the door through which Mado must return.

The big Martian was not long in coming. He had carried the body of Detis aft, leaving Ora there with her dead. Carr's heart ached for her; he knew how silently and terribly she suffered. Knowing that her father had been healed of his deadly wound by the friendly Titanese, only to be taken from her afterwards by his own heroic act, made the blow doubly hard.

Later they would give Detis a decent burial, sending him through the airlock to drift aimlessly in space, preserved through the ages by the intense cold and the absence of air. A fitting tomb for the noblest of the vagabonds!



Mado chattered endlessly with Nazu, who was impatient to be off. Seeing that it was impossible to detain him, and realizing at last the stern necessity of hastening their own departure, he finally let him go. The youngster bid Carr a sober, friendly farewell and followed Mado to the airlock.

Carr heard the clang of the manhole cover as it swung home, and was bolted to its seat. The ovoid drifted away from the vessel and dropped toward the forest beneath them. Nazu had gone to rejoin his people.

His fingers strayed to the controls. They must get away from the evil influence of those vibrations; he had felt something of their degrading power in the fighting down there. He had almost become a savage himself, he remembered with a revulsion of feeling.

The feel of the levers brought to him a renewed sense of confidence and responsibility. A while back he thought he'd never perform such simple duties again. The *Nomad* responded instantly and rose swiftly to hover over the pit of the fire-god. The flame had partly subsided and the ghost-shape wobbled there, changing form rapidly with darkening colors. Some weird phenomenon of nature that those brutes had set up as a deity.

Carr increased the repulsion energy once more and the *Nomad* shot skyward like a rocket. Through the floor port he saw Nazu's tiny ovoid scudding over the treetops. Then it had vanished.

"We're getting away none too soon," said Mado, rejoining him.

"Right." Carr watched the temperature indicator as he increased speed to the maximum they could withstand in the atmosphere.

They were out above the cloud layer then and he cast apprehensive eyes on the enormous flat disks encircling the great globe that was Saturn. Something like a hundred and seventy thousand miles across them, he remembered. But the astronomers of the inner planets had little actual knowledge of their composition; they knew nothing at all of their terrible power or their strange inhabitants.



The *Nomad* left Titan with tremendous acceleration now, as he increased the speed of the rejuvenated generators. They'd go on, on toward Uranus, Neptune—anywhere, away from this ringed planet that was responsible for the death of one of their number; away from the region that was soon to become the tomb of Detis.

There was silence then as the *Nomad* raced on through the blackness. Mado gripped the rail of the port and peered long and earnestly at the tiny pinpoint of light that now was Titan.

"Great kid, that Nazu," the Martian said, after a while. "Too bad he couldn't come along with us."

"Yes." Carr was thinking of the different life there would be on board the *Nomad*; and well he knew that Mado was thinking of the same thing. The Martian had missed the close companionship of his Terrestrial friend since his marriage to Ora; missed it more than he would admit, even to himself. And the lad, Nazu, had appealed to him; he would have fathered him as only a lonely bachelor can. Suddenly Carr's own friendship for the big fellow seemed a wonderful thing.

"Never mind, old man," he whispered, reaching over and gripping Mado's hand mightily, "We'll be a three-cornered family, Ora and you and I. And, who knows but that you'll find the one and only girl yourself, some fine day?"

"Oh, shut up!" Mado grunted.

But a big hand closed down hard on Carr's fingers, and the Earthman knew that their friendship was more firmly cemented than ever before.

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