



Salvage in Space

By Jack Williamson

To Thad Allen, meteor miner, comes the dangerous bonanza of a derelict rocket-flier manned by death invisible.

His "planet" was the smallest in the solar system, and the loneliest, Thad Allen was thinking, as he straightened wearily in the huge, bulging, inflated fabric of his Osprey space armor. Walking awkwardly in the magnetic boots that held him to the black mass of meteoric iron, he mounted a projection and stood motionless, staring moodily away through the vision panels of his bulky helmet into the dark mystery of the void.

His welding arc dangled at his belt, the electrode still glowing red. He had just finished securing to this slowly-accumulated mass of iron his most recent find, a meteorite the size of his head.

Five perilous weeks he had labored, to collect this rugged lump of metal—a jagged mass, some ten feet in diameter, composed of hundreds of fragments, that he had captured and welded together. His luck had not been good. His findings had been heart-breakingly small; the spectro-flash analysis had revealed that the content of the precious metals was disappointingly minute.^[1]

[1]The meteor or asteroid belt, between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, is "mined" by such adventurers as Thad Allen for the platinum, iridium and osmium that all meteoric irons contain in small quantities. The meteor swarms are supposed by some astronomers to be fragments of a disrupted planet, which, according to Bode's Law, should occupy this space.

On the other side of this tiny sphere of hard-won treasure, his Millen atomic rocket was sputtering, spurts of hot blue flame jetting from its exhaust. A simple mechanism, bolted to the first sizable fragment he had captured, it drove the iron ball through space like a ship.

Through the magnetic soles of his insulated boots, Thad could feel the vibration of the iron mass, beneath the rocket's regular thrust. The magazine of uranite fuel capsules was nearly empty, now, he reflected. He would soon have to turn back toward Mars.

Turn back. But how could he, with so slender a reward for his efforts? Meteor mining is expensive. There was his bill at Millen and Helion, Mars, for uranite and supplies. And the unpaid last instalment on his Osprey suit. How could he outfit himself again, if he returned with no more metal than this? There were men who averaged a thousand tons of iron a month. Why couldn't fortune smile on him?

He knew men who had made fabulous strikes, who had captured whole planetoids of rich metal, and he knew weary, white-haired men who had braved the perils of vacuum and absolute cold and bullet-swift meteors for hard years, who still hoped.

But sometime fortune had to smile, and then....

The picture came to him. A tower of white metal, among the low red hills near Helion. A slim, graceful tower of argent, rising in a fragrant garden of flowering Martian shrubs, purple and saffron. And a girl waiting, at the silver door—a trim, slender girl in white, with blue eyes and hair richly brown.

Thad had seen the white tower many times, on his holiday tramps through the hills about Helion. He had even dared to ask if it could be bought, to find that its price was an amount that he might not amass in many years at his perilous profession. But the girl in white was yet only a glorious dream....



Gigantic claws seemed to reach out of empty air.

The strangeness of interplanetary space, and the somber mystery of it, pressed upon him like an illimitable and deserted ocean. The sun was a tiny white disk on his right, hanging between rosy coronal wings; his native Earth, a bright greenish point suspended in the dark gulf below it; Mars, nearer, smaller, a little ocher speck above the shrunken sun. Above him, below him, in all directions was vastness, blackness, emptiness. Ebon infinity, sprinkled with far, cold stars.

Thad was alone. Utterly alone. No man was visible, in all the supernal vastness of space. And no work of man—save the few tools of his daring trade, and the glittering little

rocket bolted to the black iron behind him. It was terrible to think that the nearest human being must be tens of millions of miles away.

On his first trips, the loneliness had been terrible, unendurable. Now he was becoming accustomed to it. At least, he no longer feared that he was going mad. But sometimes....

Thad shook himself and spoke aloud, his voice ringing hollow in his huge metal helmet:

"Brace up, old top. In good company, when you're by yourself, as Dad used to say. Be back in Helion in a week or so, anyhow. Look up Dan and 'Chuck' and the rest of the crowd again, at Comet's place. What price a friendly boxing match with Mason, or an evening at the televue theater?

"Fresh air instead of this stale synthetic stuff! Real food, in place of these tasteless concentrates! A hot bath, instead of greasing yourself!

"Too dull out here. Life—" He broke off, set his jaw.

No use thinking about such things. Only made it worse. Besides, how did he know that a whirring meteor wasn't going to flash him out before he got back?

He drew his right arm out of the bulging sleeve of the suit, into its ample interior, found a cigarette in an inside pocket, and lighted it. The smoke swirled about in the helmet, drawn swiftly into the air filters.

"Darn clever, these suits," he murmured. "Food, smokes, water generator, all where you can reach them. And darned expensive, too. I'd better be looking for pay metal!"

He clambered to a better position; stood peering out into space, searching for the tiny gleam of sunlight on a meteoric fragment that might be worth capturing for its content of precious metals. For an hour he scanned the black, star-strewn gulf, as the sputtering rocket continued to drive him forward.

"There she glows!" he cried suddenly, and grinned.

Before him was a tiny, glowing fleck, that moved among the unchanging stars. He stared at it intensely, breathing faster in the helmet.

Always he thrilled to see such a moving gleam. What treasure it promised! At first sight, it was impossible to determine size or distance or rate of motion. It might be ten thousand tons of rich metal. A fortune! It would more probably prove to be a tiny, stony

mass, not worth capturing. It might even be large and valuable, but moving so rapidly that he could not overtake it with the power of the diminutive Millen rocket.

He studied the tiny speck intently, with practised eye, as the minutes passed—an untrained eye would never have seen it at all, among the flaming hosts of stars. Skilfully he judged, from its apparent rate of motion and its slow increase in brilliance, its size and distance from him.

"Must be—must be fair size," he spoke aloud, at length. "A hundred tons, I'll bet my helmet! But scooting along pretty fast. Stretch the little old rocket to run it down."

He clambered back to the rocket, changed the angle of the flaming exhaust, to drive him directly across the path of the object ahead, filled the magazine again with the little pellets of uranite, which were fed automatically into the combustion chamber, and increased the firing rate.

The trailing blue flame reached farther backward from the incandescent orifice of the exhaust. The vibration of the metal sphere increased. Thad left the sputtering rocket and went back where he could see the object before him.

It was nearer now, rushing obliquely across his path. Would he be in time to capture it as it passed, or would it hurtle by ahead of him, and vanish in the limitless darkness of space before his feeble rocket could check the momentum of his ball of metal?

He peered at it, as it drew closer.

Its surface seemed oddly bright, silvery. Not the dull black of meteoric iron. And it was larger, more distant, than he had thought at first. In form, too, it seemed curiously regular, ellipsoid. It was no jagged mass of metal.

His hopes sank, rose again immediately. Even if it were not the mass of rich metal for which he had prayed, it might be something as valuable—and more interesting.

He returned to the rocket, adjusted the angle of the nozzle again, and advanced the firing time slightly, even at the risk of a ruinous explosion.

When he returned to where he could see the hurtling object before him, he saw that it was a ship. A tapering silver-green rocket-flier.

Once more his dreams were dashed. The officers of interplanetary liners lose no love upon the meteor miners, claiming that their collected masses of metal, almost helpless,

always underpowered, are menaces to navigation. Thad could expect nothing from the ship save a heliographed warning to keep clear.

But how came a rocket-flier here, in the perilous swarms of the meteor belt? Many a vessel had been destroyed by collision with an asteroid, in the days before charted lanes were cleared of drifting metal.

The lanes more frequently used, between Earth, Mars, Venus and Mercury, were of course far inside the orbits of the asteroids. And the few ships running to Jupiter's moons avoided them by crossing millions of miles above their plane.

Could it be that legendary green ship, said once to have mysteriously appeared, sliced up and drawn within her hull several of the primitive ships of that day, and then disappeared forever after in the remote wastes of space? Absurd, of course: he dismissed the idle fancy and examined the ship still more closely.

Then he saw that it was turning, end over end, very slowly. That meant that its gyros were stopped; that it was helpless, drifting, disabled, powerless to avoid hurtling meteoric stones. Had it blundered unawares into the belt of swarms—been struck before the danger was realized? Was it a derelict, with all dead upon it?

Either the ship's machinery was completely wrecked, Thad knew, or there was no one on watch. For the controls of a modern rocket-flier are so simple and so nearly automatic that a single man at the bridge can keep a vessel upon her course.

It might be, he thought, that a meteorite had ripped open the hull, allowing the air to escape so quickly that the entire crew had been asphyxiated before any repairs could be made. But that seemed unlikely, since the ship must have been divided into several compartments by air-tight bulkheads.

Could the vessel have been deserted for some reason? The crew might have mutinied, and left her in the life-tubes. She might have been robbed by pirates, and set adrift. But with the space lanes policed as they were, piracy and successful mutiny were rare.

Thad saw that the flier's navigation lights were out.

He found the heliograph signal mirror at his side, sighted it upon the ship, and worked the mirror rapidly. He waited, repeated the call. There was no response.

The vessel was plainly a derelict. Could he board her, and take her to Mars? By law, it was his duty to attempt to aid any helpless ship, or at least to try to save any endangered

lives upon her. And the salvage award, if the ship should be deserted and he could bring her safe to port, would be half her value.

No mean prize, that. Half the value of ship and cargo! More than he was apt to earn in years of mining the meteor-belt.

With new anxiety, he measured the relative motion of the gleaming ship. It was going to pass ahead of him. And very soon. No more time for speculation. It was still uncertain whether it would come near enough so that he could get a line to it.

Rapidly he unslung from his belt the apparatus he used to capture meteors. A powerful electromagnet, with a thin, strong wire fastened to it, to be hurled from a helix-gun. He set the drum on which the wire was wound upon the metal at his feet, fastened it with its magnetic anchor, wondering if it would stand the terrific strain when the wire tightened.

Raising the helix to his shoulder, he trained it upon a point well ahead of the rushing flier, and stood waiting for the exact moment to press the lever. The slender spindle of the ship was only a mile away now, bright in the sunlight. He could see no break in her polished hull, save for the dark rows of circular ports. She was not, by any means, completely wrecked.

He read the black letters of her name.

Red Dragon.

The name of her home port, below, was in smaller letters. But in a moment he made them out. San Francisco. The ship then came from the Earth! From the very city where Thad was born!

The gleaming hull was near now. Only a few hundred yards away. Passing. Aiming well ahead of her, to allow for her motion, Thad pressed the key that hurled the magnet from the helix. It flung away from him, the wire screaming from the reel behind it.

Thad's mass of metal swung on past the ship, as he returned to the rocket and stopped its clattering explosions. He watched the tiny black speck of the magnet. It vanished from sight in the darkness of space, appeared again against the white, burnished hull of the rocket ship.

For a painful instant he thought he had missed. Then he saw that the magnet was fast to the side of the flier, near the stern. The line tightened. Soon the strain would come upon it, as it checked the momentum of the mass of iron. He set the friction brake.

Thad flung himself flat, grasped the wire above the reel. Even if the mass of iron tore itself free, he could hold to the wire, and himself reach the ship.

He flung past the deserted vessel, behind it, his lump of iron swung like a pebble in a sling. A cloud of smoke burst from the burned lining of the friction brake, in the reel. Then the wire was all out; there was a sudden jerk.

And the hard-gathered sphere of metal was gone—snapped off into space. Thad clung desperately to the wire, muscles cracking, tortured arms almost drawn from their sockets. Fear flashed over his mind; what if the wire broke, and left him floating helpless in space?

It held, though, to his relief. He was trailing behind the ship. Eagerly he seized the handle of the reel; began to wind up the mile of thin wire. Half an hour later, Thad's suited figure bumped gently against the shining hull of the rocket. He got to his feet, and gazed backward into the starry gulf, where his sphere of iron had long since vanished.

"Somebody is going to find himself a nice chunk of metal, all welded together and equipped for rocket navigation," he murmured. "As for me—well, I've simply *got* to run this tub to Mars!"

He walked over the smooth, refulgent hull, held to it by magnetic soles. Nowhere was it broken, though he found scars where small meteoric particles had scratched the brilliant polish. So no meteor had wrecked the ship. What, then, was the matter? Soon he would know.

The *Red Dragon* was not large. A hundred and thirty feet long, Thad estimated, with a beam of twenty-five feet. But her trim lines bespoke design recent and good; the double ring of black projecting rockets at the stern told of unusual speed.

A pretty piece of salvage, he reflected, if he could land her on Mars. Half the value of such a ship, unharmed and safe in port, would be a larger sum than he dared put in figures. And he must take her in, now that he had lost his own rocket!

He found the life-tubes, six of them, slender, silvery cylinders, lying secure in their niches, three along each side of the flier. None was missing. So the crew had not willingly deserted the ship.

He approached the main air-lock, at the center of the hull, behind the projecting dome of the bridge. It was closed. A glance at the dials told him there was full air pressure within it. It had, then, last been used to enter the rocket, not to leave it.

Thad opened the exhaust valve, let the air hiss from the chamber of the lock. The huge door swung open in response to his hand upon the wheel, and he entered the cylindrical chamber. In a moment the door was closed behind him, air was hissing into the lock again.

He started to open the face-plate of his helmet, longing for a breath of air that did not smell of sweat and stale tobacco smoke, as that in his suit always did, despite the best chemical purifiers. Then he hesitated. Perhaps some deadly gas, from the combustion chambers....

Thad opened the inner valve, and came upon the upper deck of the vessel. A floor ran the full length of the ship, broken with hatches and companionways that gave to the rocket rooms, cargo holds, and quarters for crew and passengers below. There was an enclosed ladder that led to bridge and navigating room in the dome above. The hull formed an arched roof over it.

The deck was deserted, lit only by three dim blue globes, hanging from the curved roof. All seemed in order—the fire-fighting equipment hanging on the walls, and the huge metal patches and welding equipment for repairing breaks in the hull. Everything was clean, bright with polish or new paint.

And all was very still. The silence held a vague, brooding threat that frightened Thad, made him wish for a moment that he was back upon his rugged ball of metal. But he banished his fear, and strode down the deck.

Midway of it he found a dark stain upon the clean metal. The black of long-dried blood. A few tattered scraps of cloth beside it. No more than bloody rags. And a heavy meat cleaver, half hidden beneath a bit of darkened fabric.

Mute record of tragedy! Thad strove to read it. Had a man fought here and been killed? It must have been a struggle of peculiar violence, to judge by the dark spattered stains,

and the indescribable condition of the remnants of clothing. But what had he fought? Another man, or some thing? And what had become of victor and vanquished?

He walked on down the deck.

The torturing silence was broken by the abrupt patter of quick little footsteps behind him. He turned quickly, nervously, with a hand going instinctively to his welding arc, which, he knew, would make a fairly effective weapon.

It was merely a dog. A little dog, yellow, nondescript, pathetically delighted. With a sharp, eager bark, it leaped up at Thad, pawing at his armor and licking it, standing on its hind legs and reaching toward the visor of his helmet.

It was very thin, as if from long starvation. Both ears were ragged and bloody, and there was a long, unhealed scratch across the shoulder, somewhat inflamed, but not a serious wound.

The bright, eager eyes were alight with joy. But Thad thought he saw fear in them. And even through the stiff fabric of the Osprey suit, he felt that the dog was trembling.

Suddenly, with a low whine, it shrank close to his side. And another sound reached Thad's ears.

A cry, weird and harrowing beyond telling. A scream so thin and so high that it roughened his skin, so keenly shrill that it tortured his nerves; a sound of that peculiar frequency that is more agonizing than any bodily pain.

When silence came again, Thad was standing with his back against the wall, the welding arc in his hand. His face was cold with sweat, and a queer chill prickled up and down his spine. The yellow dog crouched whimpering against his legs.

Ominous, threatening stillness filled the ship again, disturbed only by the whimpers and frightened growls of the dog. Trying to calm his overwrought nerves, Thad listened—strained his ears. He could hear nothing. And he had no idea from which direction the terrifying sound had come.

A strange cry. Thad knew it had been born in no human throat. Nor in the throat of any animal he knew. It had carried an alien note that overcame him with instinctive fear and horror. What had voiced it? Was the ship haunted by some dread entity?

For many minutes Thad stood upon the deck, waiting, tensely grasping the welding tool. But the nerve-shattering scream did not come again. Nor any other sound. The yellow dog seemed half to forget its fear. It leaped up at his face again, with another short little bark.

The air must be good, he thought, if the dog could live in it.

He unscrewed the face-plate of his helmet, and lifted it. The air that struck his face was cool and clean. He breathed deeply, gratefully. And at first he did not notice the strange odor upon it: a curious, unpleasant scent, earthly, almost fetid, unfamiliar.

The dog kept leaping up, whining.

"Hungry, boy?" Thad whispered.

He fumbled in the bulky inside pockets of his suit, found a slab of concentrated food, and tossed it out through the opened panel. The dog sprang upon it, wolfed it eagerly, and came back to his side.

Thad set at once about exploring the ship.

First he ascended the ladder to the bridge. A metal dome covered it, studded with transparent ports. Charts and instruments were in order. And the room was vacant, heavy with the fatal silence of the ship.

Thad had no expert's knowledge of the flier's mechanism. But he had studied interplanetary navigation, to qualify for his license to carry masses of metal under rocket power through the space lanes and into planetary atmospheres. He was sure he could manage the ship if its mechanism were in good order, though he was uncertain of his ability to make any considerable repairs.

To his relief, a scrutiny of the dials revealed nothing wrong.

He started the gyro motors, got the great wheels to spinning, and thus stopped the slow, end-over-end turning of the flier. Then he went to the rocket controls, warmed three of the tubes, and set them to firing. The vessel answered readily to her helm. In a few minutes he had the red fleck of Mars over the bow.

"Yes, I can run her, all right," he announced to the dog, which had followed him up the steps, keeping close to his feet. "Don't worry, old boy. We'll be eating a juicy beefsteak

together, in a week. At Comet's place in Helion, down by the canal. Not much style—but the eats!

"And now we're going to do a little detective work, and find out what made that disagreeable noise. And what happened to all your fellow-astronauts. Better find out, before it happens to us!"

He shut off the rockets, and climbed down from the bridge again.

When Thad started down the companionway to the officers' quarters, in the central one of the five main compartments of the ship, the dog kept close to his legs, growling, trembling, hackles lifted. Sensing the animal's terror, pitying it for the naked fear in its eyes, Thad wondered what dramas of horror it might have seen.

The cabins of the navigator, calculator, chief technician, and first officer were empty, and forbidding with the ominous silence of the ship. They were neatly in order, and the berths had been made since they were used. But there was a large bloodstain, black and circular, on the floor of the calculator's room.

The captain's cabin held evidence of a violent struggle. The door had been broken in. Its fragments, with pieces of broken furniture, books, covers from the berth, and three service pistols, were scattered about in indescribable confusion, all stained with blood. Among the frightful debris, Thad found several scraps of clothing, of dissimilar fabrics. The guns were empty.

Attempting to reconstruct the action of the tragedy from those grim clues, he imagined that the five officers, aware of some peril, had gathered here, fought, and died.

The dog refused to enter the room. It stood at the door, looking anxiously after him, trembling and whimpering pitifully. Several times it sniffed the air and drew back, snarling. Thad thought that the unpleasant earthy odor he had noticed upon opening the face-plate of his helmet was stronger here.

After a few minutes of searching through the wildly disordered room, he found the ship's log—or its remains. Many pages had been torn from the book, and the remainder, soaked with blood, formed a stiff black mass.

Only one legible entry did he find, that on a page torn from the book, which somehow had escaped destruction. Dated five months before, it gave the position of the vessel and her bearings—she was then just outside Jupiter's orbit, Earthward bound—and concluded with a remark of sinister implications:

"Another man gone this morning. Simms, assistant technician. A fine workman. O'Deen swears he heard something moving on the deck. Cook thinks some of the doctor's stuffed monstrosities have come to life. Ridiculous, of course. But what is one to think?"

Pondering the significance of those few lines, Thad climbed back to the deck. Was the ship haunted by some weird death, that had seized the crew man by man, mysteriously? That was the obvious implication. And if the flier had been still outside Jupiter's orbit when those words were written, it must have been weeks before the end. A lurking, invisible death! The scream he had heard....

He descended into the forecastle, and came upon another such silent record of frightful carnage as he had found in the captain's cabin. Dried blood, scraps of cloth, knives and other weapons. A fearful question was beginning to obsess him. What had become of the bodies of those who must have died in these conflicts? He dared not think the answer.

Gripping the welding arc, Thad approached the after hatch, giving to the cargo hold. Trepidation almost overpowered him, but he was determined to find the sinister menace of the ship, before it found him. The dog whimpered, hung back, and finally deserted him, contributing nothing to his peace of mind.

The hold proved to be dark. An indefinite black space, oppressive with the terrible silence of the flier. The air within it bore still more strongly the unpleasant feter.

Thad hesitated on the steps. The hold was not inviting. But at the thought that he must sleep, unguarded, while taking the flier to Mars, his resolution returned. The uncertainty, the constant fear, would be unendurable.

He climbed on down, feeling for the light button. He found it, as his feet touched the floor. Blue light flooded the hold.

It was filled with monstrous things, colossal creatures, such as nothing that ever lived upon the Earth; like nothing known in the jungles of Venus or the deserts of Mars, or anything that has been found upon Jupiter's moons.

They were monsters remotely resembling insects or crustaceans, but as large as horses or elephants; creatures upreared upon strange limbs, armed with hideously fanged jaws, cruel talons, frightful, saw-toothed snouts, and glittering scales, red and yellow and green. They leered at him with phosphorescent eyes, yellow and purple.

They cast grotesquely gigantic shadows in the blue light....

A cold shock of horror started along Thad's spine, at sight of those incredible nightmare things. Automatically he flung up the welding tool, flicking over the lever with his thumb, so that violet electric flame played about the electrode.

Then he saw that the crowding, hideous things were motionless, that they stood upon wooden pedestals, that many of them were supported upon metal bars. They were dead. Mounted. Collected specimens of some alien life.

Grinning wanly, and conscious of a weakness in the knees, he muttered: "They sure will fill the museum, if everybody gets the kick out of them that I did. A little too realistic, I'd say. Guess these are the 'stuffed monstrosities' mentioned in the page out of the log. No wonder the cook was afraid of them. Some of them do look hellishly alive!"

He started across the hold, shrinking involuntarily from the armored enormities that seemed crouched to spring at him, motionless eyes staring.

So, at the end of the long space, he found the treasure.

Glittering in the blue light, it looked unreal. Incredible. A dazzling dream. He stopped among the fearful things that seemed gathered as if to guard it, and stared with wide eyes through the opened face-plate of his helmet.

He saw neat stacks of gold ingots, new, freshly smelted; bars of silver-white iridium, of argent platinum, of blue-white osmium. Many of them. Thousands of pounds, Thad knew. He trembled at thought of their value. Almost beyond calculation.

Then he saw the coffer, lying beyond the piled, gleaming ingots—a huge box, eight feet long; made of some crystal that glittered with snowy whiteness, filled with sparkling, iridescent gleams, and inlaid with strange designs, apparently in vermilion enamel.

With a little cry, he ran toward the chest, moving awkwardly in the loose, deflated fabric of the Osprey suit.

Beside the coffer, on the floor of the hold, was literally a mountain of flame—blazing gems, heaped as if they had been carelessly dumped from it; cut diamonds, incredibly gigantic; monster emeralds, sapphires, rubies; and strange stones, that Thad did not recognize.

And Thad gasped with horror, when he looked at the designs of the vermilion inlay, in the white, gleaming crystal. Weird forms. Shapes of creatures somewhat like gigantic spiders, and more unlike them. Demoniatic things, wickedly fanged, jaws slavering. Executed with masterly skill, that made them seem living, menacing, secretly gloating!

Thad stared at them for long minutes, fascinated almost hypnotically. Three times he approached the chest, to lift the lid and find what it held. And three times the unutterable horror of those crimson images thrust him back, shuddering.

"Nothing but pictures," he muttered hoarsely.

A fourth time he advanced, trembling, and seized the lid of the coffer. Heavy, massive, it was fashioned also of glistening white crystal, and inlaid in crimson with weirdly hideous figures. Great hinges of white platinum held it on the farther side; it was fastened with a simple, heavy hasp of the precious metal.

Hands quivering, Thad snapped back the hasp, lifted the lid.

New treasure in the chest would not have surprised him. He was prepared to meet dazzling wonders of gems or priceless metal. Nor would he have been astonished at some weird creature such as one of those whose likenesses were inlaid in the crystal.

But what he saw made him drop the massive lid.

A woman lay in the chest—motionless, in white.

In a moment he raised the lid again; examined the still form more closely. The woman had been young. The features were regular, good to look upon. The eyes were closed; the white face appeared very peaceful.

Save for the extreme, cadaverous pallor, there was no mark of death. With a fancy that the body might be miraculously living, sleeping, Thad thrust an arm out through the opened panel of his suit, and touched a slender, bare white arm. It was stiff, very cold.

The still, pallid face was framed in fine brown hair. The fair, small hands were crossed upon the breast, over the simple white garment.

A queer ache came into his heart. Something made him think of a white tower in the red hills near Helion, and a girl waiting in its fragrant garden of saffron and purple—a girl like this.

The body lay upon a bed of blazing jewels.

It appeared, Thad thought, as if the pile of gems upon the floor had been hastily scraped from the coffer, to make room for the quiet form. He wondered how long it had lain there. It looked as if it might have been living but minutes before. Some preservative....

His thought was broken by a sound that rang from the open hatchway on the deck above—the furious barking and yelping of the dog. Abruptly that was silent, and in its place came the uncanny and terrifying scream that Thad had heard once before, on this flier of mystery. A shriek so keen and shrill that it seemed to tear out his nerves by their roots. The voice of the hunter of the ship.

When Thad came back upon the deck, the dog was still barking nervously. He saw the animal forward, almost at the bow. Hackles raised, tail between its legs, it was slinking backward, barking sharply as if to call for aid.

Apparently it was retreating from something between Thad and itself. But Thad, searching the dimly-lit deck, could see no source of alarm. Nor could the structures upon it have shut any large object from his view.

"It's all right!" Thad called, intending to reassure the frightened animal, but finding his voice queerly dry. "Coming on the double, old man. Don't worry."

The dog had reached the end of the deck. It stopped yelping, but snarled and whined as if in terror. It began darting back and forth, moving exactly as if something were slowly closing in upon it, trapping it in the corner. But Thad could see nothing.

Then it made a wild dash back toward Thad, darting along by the wall, as if trying to run past an unseen enemy.

Thad thought he heard quick, rasping footsteps, then, that were not those of the dog. And something seemed to catch the dog in mid-air, as it leaped. It was hurled howling to the deck. For a moment it struggled furiously, as if an invisible claw had pinned it down. Then it escaped, and fled whimpering to Thad's side.

He saw a new wound across its hips. Three long, parallel scratches, from which fresh red blood was trickling.

Regular scraping sounds came from the end of the deck, where no moving thing was to be seen—sounds such as might be made by the walking of feet with unsheathed claws. Something was coming back toward Thad. Something that was *invisible*!

Terror seized him, with the knowledge. He had nerved himself to face desperate men, or a savage animal. But an invisible being, that could creep upon him and strike unseen! It was incredible ... yet he had seen the dog knocked down, and the bleeding wound it had received.

His heart paused, then beat very quickly. For the moment he thought only blindly, of escape. He knew only an overpowering desire to hide, to conceal himself from the invisible thing. Had it been possible, he might have tried to leave the flier.

Beside him was one of the companionways amidships, giving access to a compartment of the vessel that he had not explored. He turned, leaped down the steps, with the terrified dog at his heels.

Below, he found himself in a short hall, dimly lighted. Several metal doors opened from it. He tried one at random. It gave. He sprang through, let the dog follow, closed and locked it.

Trying to listen, he leaned weakly against the door. The rushing of his breath, swift and regular. The loud hammer of his thudding heart. The dog's low whines. Then—unmistakable scraping sounds, outside.

The scratching of claws, Thad knew. Invisible claws!

He stood there, bracing the door with the weight of his body, holding the welding arc ready in his hand. Several times the hinges creaked, and he felt a heavy pressure against the panels. But at last the scratching sounds ceased. He relaxed. The monster had withdrawn, at least for a time.

When he had time to think, the invisibility of the thing was not so incredible. The mounted creatures he had seen in the hold were evidence that the flier had visited some unknown planet, where weird life reigned. It was not beyond reason that such a planet should be inhabited by beings invisible to human sight.

Human vision, as he knew, utilizes only a tiny fraction of the spectrum. The creature must be largely transparent to visible light, as human flesh is radiolucent to hard X-rays. Quite possibly it could be seen by infra-red or ultra-violet light—evidently it was visible enough to the dog's eyes, with their different range of sensitivity.

Pushing the subject from his mind, he turned to survey the room into which he had burst. It had apparently been occupied by a woman. A frail blue silk dress and more intimate items of feminine wearing apparel were hanging above the berth. Two pairs of delicate black slippers stood neatly below it.

Across from him was a dressing table, with a large mirror above it. Combs, pins, jars of cosmetic cluttered it. And Thad saw upon it a little leather-bound book, locked, stamped on the back "Diary."

He crossed the room and picked up the little book, which smelled faintly of jasmine. Momentary shame overcame him at thus stealing the secrets of an unknown girl. Necessity, however, left him no choice but to seize any chance of learning more of this ship of mystery and her invisible haunter. He broke the flimsy fastening.

Linda Cross was the name written on the fly-leaf, in a firm, clear feminine hand. On the next page was the photograph, in color, of a girl, the brown-haired girl whose body Thad had discovered in the crystal coffer in the hold. Her eyes, he saw, had been blue. He thought she looked very lovely—like the waiting girl in his old dream of the silver tower in the red hills by Helion.

The diary, it appeared, had not been kept very devotedly. Most of the pages were blank.

One of the first entries, dated a year and a half before, told of a party that Linda had attended in San Francisco, and of her refusal to dance with a certain man, referred to as "Benny," because he had been unpleasantly insistent about wanting to marry her. It ended:

"Dad said to-night that we're going off in the *Dragon* again. All the way to Uranus, if the new fuel works as he expects. What a lark, to explore a few new worlds of our own! Dad says one of Uranus' moons is as large as Mercury. And Benny won't be proposing again soon!"

Turning on, Thad found other scattered entries, some of them dealing with the preparation for the voyage, the start from San Francisco—and a huge bunch of flowers from "Benny," the long months of the trip through space, out past the orbit of Mars, above the meteor belt, across Jupiter's orbit, beyond the track of Saturn, which was the farthest point that rocket explorers had previously reached, and on to Uranus, where they could not land because of the unstable surface.

The remainder of the entries Thad found less frequent, shorter, bearing the mark of excitement: landing upon Titania, the third and largest satellite of Uranus; unearthly forests, sheltering strange and monstrous life; the hunting of weird creatures, and mounting them for museum specimens.

Then the discovery of a ruined city, whose remains indicated that it had been built by a lost race of intelligent, spiderlike things; the finding of a temple whose walls were of precious metals, containing a crystal chest filled with wondrous gems; the smelting of the metal into convenient ingots, and the transfer of the treasure to the hold.

The first sinister note there entered the diary:

"Some of the men say we shouldn't have disturbed the temple. Think it will bring us bad luck. Rubbish, of course. But one man did vanish while they were smelting the gold. Poor Mr. Tom James. I suppose he ventured away from the rest, and something caught him."

The few entries that followed were shorter, and showed increasing nervous tension. They recorded the departure from Titania, made almost as soon as the treasure was loaded. The last was made several weeks later. A dozen men had vanished from the crew, leaving only gouts of blood to hint the manner of their going. The last entry ran:

"Dad says I'm to stay in here to-day. Old dear, he's afraid the thing will get me—whatever it is. It's really serious. Two men taken from their berths last night. And not a trace. Some of them think it's a curse on the treasure. One of them swears he saw Dad's stuffed specimens moving about in the hold."

"Some terrible thing must have slipped aboard the flier, out of the jungle. That's what Dad and the captain think. Queer they can't find it. They've searched all over. Well...."

Musing and regretful, Thad turned back for another look at the smiling girl in the photograph.

What a tragedy her death had been! Reading the diary had made him like her. Her balance and humor. Her quiet affection for "Dad." The calm courage with which she seemed to have faced the creeping, lurking death that darkened the ship with its unescapable shadow.

How had her body come to be in the coffer, he wondered, when all the others were—gone? It had shown no marks of violence. She must have died of fear. No, her face had seemed too calm and peaceful for that. Had she chosen easy death by some poison, rather than that other dreadful fate? Had her body been put in the chest to protect it, and the poison arrested decomposition?

Thad was still studying the picture, thoughtfully and sadly, when the dog, which had been silent, suddenly growled again, and retreated from the door, toward the corner of the room.

The invisible monster had returned. Thad heard its claws scratching across the door again. And he heard another dreadful sound—not the long, shrill scream that had so grated on his nerves before, but a short, sharp coughing or barking, a series of shrill, indescribable notes that could have been made by no beast he knew.

The decision to open the door cost a huge effort of Thad's will.

For hours he had waited, thinking desperately. And the thing outside the door had waited as patiently, scratching upon it from time to time, uttering those dreadful, shrill coughing cries.

Sooner or later, he would have to face the monster. Even if he could escape from the room and avoid it for a time, he would have to meet it in the end. And it might creep upon him while he slept.

To be sure, the issue of the combat was extremely doubtful. The monster, apparently, had succeeded in killing every man upon the flier, even though some of them had been armed. It must be large and very ferocious.

But Thad was not without hope. He still wore his Osprey-suit. The heavy fabric, made of metal wires impregnated with a tough, elastic composition, should afford considerable protection against the thing.

The welding arc, intended to fuse refractive meteoric iron, would be no mean weapon, at close quarters. And the quarters would be close.

If only he could find some way to make the thing visible!

Paint, or something of the kind, would stick to its skin.... His eyes, searching the room, caught the jar of face powder on the dressing table. Dash that over it! It ought to stick enough to make the outline visible.

So, at last, holding the powder ready in one hand, he waited until a time when the pressure upon the door had just relaxed, and he knew the monster was waiting outside. Swiftly, he opened the door....

Thad had partially overcome the instinctive horror that the unseen being had first aroused in him. But it returned in a sickening wave when he heard the short, shrill, coughing cries, hideously eager, that greeted the opening of the door. And the quick rasping of naked claws upon the floor. *Sounds from nothingness!*

He flung the powder at the sound.

A form of weird horror materialized before him, still half invisible, half outlined with the white film of adhering powder: gigantic and hideous claws, that seemed to reach out of empty air, the side of a huge, scaly body, a yawning, dripping jaw. For a moment Thad could see great, hooked fangs in that jaw. Then they vanished, as if an unseen tongue had licked the powder from them, dissolving it in fluids which made it invisible.

That unearthly, half-seen shape leaped at him.

He was carried backward into the room, hurled to the floor. Claws were rasping upon the tough fabric of his suit. His arm was seized crushingly in half-visible jaws.

Desperately he clung to the welding tool. The heated electrode was driven toward his body. He fought to keep it away; he knew that it would burn through even the insulated fabric of his suit.

A claw ripped savagely at his side. He heard the sharp, rending sound, as the tough fabric of his suit was torn, and felt a thin pencil of pain drawn along his body, where a claw cut his skin.

Suddenly the suit was full of the earthy feter of the monster's body, nauseatingly intense. Thad gasped, tried to hold his breath, and thrust upward hard with the incandescent electrode. He felt warm blood trickling from the wound.

A numbing blow struck his arm. The welding tool was carried from his hand. Flung to the side of the room, it clattered to the floor; and then a heavy weight came upon his chest, forcing the breath from his lungs. The monster stood upon his body and clawed at him.

Thad squirmed furiously. He kicked out with his feet, encountering a great, hard body. Futilely he beat and thrust with his arms against the pillarlike limb.

His body was being mauled, bruised beneath the thick fabric. He heard it tear again, along his right thigh. But he felt no pain, and thought the claws had not reached the skin.

It was the yellow dog that gave him the chance to recover the weapon. The animal had been running back and forth in the opposite end of the room, fairly howling in excitement and terror. Now, with the mad courage of desperation, it leaped recklessly at the monster.

A mighty, dimly seen claw caught it, hurled it back across the room. It lay still, broken, whimpering.

For a moment the thing had lifted its weight from Thad's body. And Thad slipped quickly from beneath it, flung himself across the room, snatched up the welding tool.

In an instant the creature was upon him again. But he met it with the incandescent electrode. He was crouched in a corner, now, where it could come at him from only one direction. Its claws still slashed at him ferociously. But he was able to cling to the weapon, and meet each onslaught with hot metal.

Gradually its mad attacks weakened. Then one of his blind, thrusting blows seemed to burn into a vital organ. A terrible choking, strangling sound came from the air. And he heard the thrashing struggles of wild convulsions. At last all was quiet. He prodded the thing again and again with the hot electrode, and it did not move. It was dead.

The creature's body was so heavy that Thad had to return to the bridge, and shut off the current in the gravity plates along the keel, before he could move it. He dragged it to the lock through which he had entered the flier, and consigned it to space....

Five days later Thad brought the *Red Dragon* into the atmosphere of Mars. A puzzled pilot came aboard, in response to his signals, and docked the flier safely at Helion. Thad went down into the hold again, with the astonished port authorities who had come aboard to inspect the vessel.

Again he passed among the grotesque and outrageous monsters in the hold, leading the gasping officers. While they marveled at the treasure, he lifted the weirdly embellished lid of the coffer of white crystal, and looked once more upon the still form of the girl within it.

Pity stirred him. An ache came in his throat.

Linda Cross, so quiet and cold and white, and yet so lovely. How terrible her last days of life must have been, with doom shadowing the vessel, and the men vanishing mysteriously, one by one! Terrible—until she had sought the security of death.

Strangely, Thad felt no great elation at the thought that half the incalculable treasure about him was now safely his own, as the award of salvage. If only the girl were still living.... He felt a poignantly keen desire to hear her voice.

Thad found the note when they started to lift her from the chest. A hasty scrawl, it lay beneath her head, among glittering gems.

"This woman is not dead. Please have her given skilled medical attention as soon as possible. She lies in a state of suspended animation, induced by the injection of fifty minims of zeronel.

"She is my daughter, Linda Cross, and my sole heir.

"I entreat the finders of this to have care given her, and to keep in trust for her such part of the treasure on this ship as may remain after the payment of salvage or other claims.

"Sometime she will wake. Perhaps in a year, perhaps in a hundred. The purity of my drugs is uncertain, and the injection was made hastily, so I do not know the exact time that must elapse.

"If this is found, it will be because the lurking thing upon the ship has destroyed me and all my men.

"Please do not fail me.

Thad bought the white tower of his dreams, slim and graceful in its Martian garden of saffron and purple, among the low ocher hills beside Helion. He carried the sleeping girl through the silver door where the girl of his dreams had waited, and set the coffer in a great, vaulted chamber. Many times each day he came into the room where she lay, to look into her pallid face, and feel her cold wrist. He kept a nurse in attendance, and had a physician call daily.

A long Martian year went by.

Looking in his mirror one day, Thad saw little wrinkles about his eyes. He realized that the nervous strain and anxiety of waiting was aging him. And it might be a hundred years, he remembered, before Linda Cross came from beneath the drug's influence.

He wondered if he should grow old and infirm, while Linda lay still young and beautiful and unchanged in her sleep; if she might awake, after long years, and see in him only a feeble old man. And he knew that he would not be sorry he had waited, even if he should die before she revived.

On the next day, the nurse called him into the room where Linda lay. He was bending over her when she opened her eyes. They were blue, glorious.

A long time she looked up at him, first in fearful wonder, then with confidence, and dawning understanding. And at last she smiled.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SALVAGE IN SPACE ***

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