



## WE GUARD THE BLACK PLANET!

Henry Kuttner

The stratoship dropped me at Stockholm, and an air-ferry took me to Thunder Fjord, where I had been born. In six years nothing had changed. The black rocks still jutted out into the tossing seas, where the red sails of Vikings had once flaunted, and the deep roar of the waters came up to greet me. Against the sky Freya, my father's gerfalcon, was wheeling. And high on the crag was the Hall, its tower keeping unceasing vigil over the northern ocean.

On the porch my father was waiting, a giant who had grown old. Nils Esterling had always been a silent man. His thin lips seemed clamped tight upon some secret he never told, and I think I was always a little afraid of him, though he was never unkind. But between us was a gulf. Nils seemed —shackled. I realized that first when I saw him watching the birds go south before the approach of winter. His eyes held a sick longing that, somehow, made me uneasy.

Shackled, silent, taciturn, he had grown old, always a little withdrawn from the world, always I thought, afraid of the stars. In the daytime he would watch his gerfalcon against the deep blue of the sky, but at night he drew the shades and would not venture out. The stars meant something to him. Only once, I knew, he had been in space; he never ventured beyond the atmosphere again. What had happened out there I did not know. But Nils Esterling came back changed, with something dead inside his soul.

I was going out now. In my pocket were my papers, the result of six years of exhausting work at Sky Point, where I had been a cadet. I was shipping tomorrow on the Martins, Callisto bound. Nils had asked me to come home first.

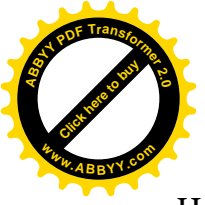
So I was here, and the gerfalcon came down wheeling, dropping, its talons clamping like iron on my father's gloved

wrist. It was like a w<sup>l</sup>corne. Freya was old, too, but her golden eyes were stil<sup>l</sup> bright, her grip still deadly.

Nils shook hands with me without rising. He gestured me to a chair. "I'm glad you came back, Arn. So you passed. That was good to hear. You'll be in space tomorrow."

"For Callisto," I said. "How are you, Nils? I was afraid—"

His smile held no mirth. "That I was ill? Or perhaps dying. No, Arn. I've been dying for forty years—" He looked at the gerfalcon. "It doesn't matter a great deal now. Except that I hope it comes soon. You'll know why when I tell you about —about what happened to me in space four decades ago. I'll try not to be bitter, but it's hard. Damned hard." Again Nils looked at the gerfalcon.



He went on after a moment, threading the cord through Freya's jesses. "You haven't much time, if your ship blasts off tomorrow. What port? Newark? Well—what about food?"

"I ate on the ferry, Dad—" I seldom called him that.

He moved his big shoulders uneasily. "Let's have a drink." He summoned the servant, and presently there were highballs before us. I could not repress the thought that whiskey was incongruous; in the Hall we should have drunk ale from horns. Well, that was the past. A dead past now.

Nils seemed to read my thought. "The old things linger somehow, Arn. They come down to us in our blood. So—"

"Waes had," I said.

"Drinc hael." He drained the glass. Knots of muscle bunched at the corners of his jaw. With a sudden, furious motion, he cast off the gerdalgon, the leash slipping through the jesses. Freya took to the air with a hoarse, screaming cry.

"The instinct of flight is in our race," Nils said. "To be free, to fight, and to fly. In the old days we went Viking because of that. Leif the Lucky sailed to Greenland; our ships went down past the Tin Isles to Rome and Byzantium; we sailed even to Cathay. In the winter we caulked our keels and sharpened our swords. Then, when the ice broke up hi the fjords, the red sails lifted again. Ran called us—Ran of the seas, goddess of the unknown."

His voice changed; he quoted softly from an old poet.

What is woman that you forsake her,

And the hearthstone, and the home-acre,

To go -with the old gray Widow-maker ....

"Aye," said Nils Esterling, a lost sickness in his eyes. "Our race cannot be prisoned, or it dies. And 7 have been prisoned for forty years. By all the hells of all the worlds!" he whispered, his voice shaking. "A most damnable prison! My soul turned rotten before I'd been back on earth a week. Even before that. And there was no way out of my prison; I locked it with my own hands, and broke the key.

"You never knew about that, Arn. You'll know now. There's a reason why I must tell you—"

He told me, while the slow night came down, and the bo-realis flamed and shook like spears of light in the polar sky. The Frost Giants were on the march, for a sudden chill blew in from the fjord. Overhead the wind screamed, like the trumpet cries of Valkyries.

Far beneath us surged the sea, moving with its sliding, resistless motion, spuming against the rocks. Above us, the stars shone brightly.



And on Nils' wrist, where it had returned, the gerfalcon Freya rested, drowsy, stirring a little from time to time, but content to remain there.

It had been thus forty years and more ago, Nils said, in his youth, when the hot blood went singing through his veins, and the Viking spirit flamed within him. The seas were tamed.

The way of his ancestors was no longer open to him. But there were new frontiers open—

The gulfs between the stars held mysteries, and Nils signed as A. B. on a spaceship, a cranky freighter, making the Great Circle of the trade routes. Earth to Venus, and swinging outward again to the major planets.

The life toughened him, after a few years.

And in Marspole North, in a satha-divs, he ran into Captain Morse Damon, veteran of the Asteroid War.

Damon told Nils about the Valkyries—the guardians of the Black Planet.

He was harsh and lean and gray as weathered rock, and his black stare was without warmth. Sipping watered satha, he watched Nils Esterling, noting the leatheroid tunic worn at cuffs and elbows, the frayed straps of the elasto sandals.

"You know my name."

"Sure." Esterling said. "I see the newstapes. But you haven't been mentioned for a while."

"Not since the Asteroid War ended, no. The pact they made left me out in the cold. I had a guerilla force raiding through the Belt. In another year I could have turned the balance. But after the armistice—"

Damon shrugged. "I'ttt no good for anything but fighting. I kept a ship; they owed\* me that. The Vulcan. She's a sweet boat, well found and fast. But I can't use her unless I sign up with the big companies. Besides, I don't want to do freighting. The hell with that. I've been at loose ends, blasting around the System, looking for—well, I don't know what. Had a shot or two at prospecting. But it's dull, sinking assay shafts, sweating for a few tons of ore. Not my sort of life."

"There's a war on Venus."

"Penny-ante stuff. I'm on the trail of something big now. On the trail of—" he smiled crookedly—"ghosts. Valkyries."

"Mars isn't the place, then. Norway, on Earth—"

Damon's gaze sharpened. "Not Norway. Space. Valkyries, I said—women with wings."



Esterling drank satha, feeling the cold, numbing liquor slide down his throat. "A new race on some planet? I never heard of winged humans."

"You've heard of Glory Hole and Davy Jones\* Locker. Mean to say you've been in space three years and never heard of the Valkyries—the Black Planet?"

Esterling put down his glass gently. How did Damon know that he'd been a spaceman for three years? Till now he had thought this merely a casual acquaintance, two Earthmen drinking together on an alien world. Now—

"You mean the legend," he said. "Never paid much attention. When a ship cracks up in space, the crew go to the Black Planet after they die. Spaceman's heaven."

"Yeah. A legend, that's all. When wrecks are found, all the bodies are found in 'em—naturally! But the story is that there are winged women—call them Valkyries—who live in an invisible world somewhere in the System."

"You think they exist?"

"I think there's truth behind the legend. It isn't merely a terrestrial belief. Martians, Vesuvians, Callistans—they all have their yarns about winged space-women."

Esterling coughed hi the smoky atmosphere. "Well?"

"Here it is. Not long ago I met up with an archeologist, a guy named Beale. James Beale. He's got a string of degrees after his name, and for ten years he's been going through the System, checking up on the Black Planet, collecting data all over the place. He showed me what he had, and it was plenty convincing. It added up. A scrap of information from Venus, a story from beyond lo. Legends mostly, but there were facts too. Enough to make me believe that there's an invisible world somewhere in space."

"How invisible?"

"I don't know. Beale says it must be a planet with a low albedo—or something of the sort It absorbs Kgbt The winged people live on it. Sometimes they leave it Maybe they have ships, though I can't tell about that, of course. So we have legends. Beale and I are going to the Black Planet."

"All right," Esterling said. "It sounds crazy enough, but you could be right. Only—what do you expect to find there?"

Damon smiled. "Dunno. Excitement, anyhow. Beale's sure there are immense sources of power on the black world. I don't suppose well lose anything on the deal. Hell, I'm fed up with doing nothing, knocking around the System waiting for something to happen—and it never does. I'm not alive unless I'm fighting. This is a fight, in a way."



"Well?"

"Want a job?"

"You short-handed?"

"Plenty. You look strong—" Damon reached across the table and squeezed the other's biceps. His face altered, not much, but enough to convince Esterling of what he already suspected.

"Okay, Damon." He rolled up his sleeve, revealing an arm-bracelet of heavy gold clasped about his upper arm. "Is this what you're after?"

The captain's nostrils distended. He met Esterling's stare squarely.

"You want the cards on the table?"

"Sure."

Damon said, "I just got back from Norway, on Earth. I went there to look you up. Beale found out about that bracelet."

Esterling nodded. "It's an heirloom. Belonged to my great-grandmother, Gudrun. I don't know where she got it."

"It has an inscription. A copy of it was made about a hundred years ago for the Stockholm Museum. Beale ran across that copy. He can read Runic, and the bracelet carries an inscription—"

"I know."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Something about the Valkyries. Part of an old Edda, I suppose."

Damon made a noise deep in his throat "Not quite. It gives the location of the Black Planet."

"The hell it does!" Esterling removed the bracelet and examined it carefully. "I thought it was merely symbolism. The rune doesn't mean anything."

"Beale thought it did. He saw the copy, I said, and it was incomplete. But he found enough to convince him that the complete inscription gave the location of the Black Planet." "But why—"



"How should I know? Maybe the winged people visited Earth once, maybe somebody found the Black Planet by accident and remembered his space-bearings. He wrote it down where he'd have it safely—on an arm-bracelet. Somehow your great-grandmother got it."

Esterling stared at the golden band. "I don't believe it." "Will you sign on with me, as supercargo, to look for the Black Planet? You can use a job, by the looks of your clothes."

"Sure I can. But a job like that—" "Talk to Beale, anyway. He'll convince you." Esterling grimaced. "I doubt that. However, I suppose I can't lose." He looked again at the bracelet. "Okay, I'll see him."

Damon rose, tossing coins on the stained metalloy table. Esterling finished his satha, conscious that the treacherous Martian distillate was affecting him. Satha did that. It gave you a deceptive cold clarity that disguised its potency. Martians could take it, with their different metabolism; but it was dangerous to Earthmen.

It was doubly dangerous for Esterling now. He walked beside Damon along the curving street, the ornate, fragile-seeming buildings of Marspole North towering above him—the ones that were not in ruins. It was possible to build tall towers on Mars, because of the slight gravity-pull, but the frequent quakes that shook the ancient planet often brought down those towers in crashing wreckage.

Near the spaceport a man was waiting, thin, dwarfish, and with a pinched, meager face. He was fingering a scrubby mustache and shivering with cold in his thin whites.

"You kept me waiting long enough," he said complain-ingly, his voice a high-pitched whine. "I'm nearly frozen, drat it. Is he Esterling?"

Damon nodded. "Yeah. Esterling—Beale. He's got the bracelet."

Beale's fingers fluttered at his mouth. "Heavens, that's a relief. We've been tracking you all over the System, man. A week ago we learned you'd shipped out of lo for Marspole North, so we came here by fast express to wait for you. I suppose the captain's told you about the Black Planet."

Esterling was feeling a little sick in the icy air. He had a

moment's qualm, wondering if Damon had doped his drinks. Automatically his hand went to his belt, but he'd pawned his gun that morning.

Damon said, "You talk to him. I'll attend to the ship." He slipped off into the shadows.

Beale peered up at the Norseman. "Would you mind letting me see the bracelet? Thanks . . ." He blinked nearsightedly at the golden band. The two moons gave little light, and Beale took out a tiny flashlight. His breath hissed out.



"Good heavens, Mr. Esterling, you can have no idea what this means to me. That copy in the Stockholm museum was incomplete, you know. Some of the runes were illegible. But this—"

"It tells where to find this—this black world? I'm a little drunk, but the whole yarn sounds crazy to me."

Beale blinked. "No doubt. No doubt. The legends about the Valley of Kings in Egypt seemed crazy till the tombs were finally discovered. The legend of the Valkyries—the flying women—is extremely widespread in space. There are clues ... I reasoned by induction. It added up. I'm firmly convinced that there is such a planet, and that a hundred thousand years ago the winged people visited our own world. They left traces. Perhaps they've died out by now, but their artifacts remain."

"So?"

"I picked these up on Venus. They were found floating free in space. What do you make of them?" Beale fumbled in his pockets and drew out a bit of bone and a thin, pencil-like rod.

Esterling examined them with puzzled interest.

"It looks like a human shoulder-blade—or part of it."

"Yes, of course! But the extension—the prolongation! The osseous base for a wing, man! Notice the ball-and-socket arrangement, and the grooves where tendons have played, tendons strong enough to move wings."

"A freak?"

"No scientist would agree with you," Beale said shortly, and put the bone back in his pocket. "Look at the rod." Esterling could make nothing of it. "Is it a weapon?"

"A weapon without power, at the moment. I took it apart. It's based on an entirely different principle from anything we've known. Atomic quanta-release, perhaps. I don't know. But I mean to find out, and there's only one place where I can do that."

The Norseman rubbed his jaw. "So the clue's on my bracelet. And you want me to join you, eh?"

"We're short-handed. There are difficulties—" Beale shivered again, glancing toward the dark spaceport. "I am a poor man, and it takes muefr-rnpney to outfit a ship."

"I thought Damon had a boat—the Vulcan."

Before Beale could answer, a faint whistle came out of the dark. The scientist caught his breath. "All right," he said. "Come on." He gripped Esterling's arm and urged the big man toward the field.



A ship loomed there, dull silver in the light of the double moons. Silhouetted against the entrance port was Damon, waving. Beale said, "Hurry up," in a tight voice, and started to run.

Satha had dulled Esterling's senses—or Damon had drugged his liquor. He sensed something amiss, but a heavy, languid blanket lay over his mind, making thought an intolerable effort. He let himself be guided toward the ship.

Damon reached down, seized his hand, and drew him up. The man was remarkably strong, for all his slight build. Esterling, off balance, went lurching against a bulkhead, and brought up sharply against the wall of the lock. He turned in time to see Beale clambering up, spider-like.

Footsteps sounded. A man in port officer's uniform came racing across the field, his voice raised in a shout. Esterling saw Beale turn, biting his lips nervously, and draw a gun. He shot down from the air-lock, the bullet striking the officer squarely between the eyes.

The shock of that sobered Esterling abruptly. But before he could move, Damon thrust him back into the ship. In the distance the faint wail of a siren began.

Beale said, "Drat it!" and came scrambling into the cabin. The valves slid shut with a dull thud. Esterling, his body numb with liquor or drugs, took a step forward.

"What the devil—"

Damon snapped, "Watch him, Beale! I've got to blast off."

The scientist's gun leveled at Esterling. Beale licked his lips. "Good heavens," he burst out. "Why does everything always go wrong .... Don't move, Mr. Esterling."

Damon had eased himself into the control seat. He spoke briefly into the mike, and then stabbed at the rocket jet buttons. The floor pressed hard against Esterling's feet.

Beale reached up and gripped a strap. "Hold on," he commanded. "That's right. We haven't time to take a smooth orbit out. They'll be after us—"

"They are after us," Damon said dryly. Esterling stole a glance at the visiplat. Marspole North was dropping away

below, and a patrol ship was taking off with a burst of red rocket-fire. The ground swung dizzily as Damon played the controls.

Esterling said, "Obviously, this isn't your ship, Captain."





"Of course not," Beale snapped. "But we had to get one. They don't guard the spaceports. Damon picked up a dozen drifters and armed them—enough to take care of the skeleton crew. So—"

"So you killed the crew. I get it."

Without turning, Damon said, "Right. And we're manned by drunken roustabouts who don't know a jet from an escape valve. You'll come in handy, Esterling—You're an A. B."

The ship lurched sickeningly. The plates were red-hot in the atmosphere, and the visiplate was useless now. But speed was necessary to provide escape velocity. The hull was strong enough, Esterling knew; there was no danger through friction. The real peril lay in the patrol ship.

Damon grunted. "This is a fast boat. Once we're beyond the gravity-pull, we'll be safe. Nobody can catch us. Now—"

He jammed on more power. The red flare on the visiplate faded. They were beyond the atmosphere.

The patrol vessel was visible, specks of light flaming from its sides. Beale grimaced. "Magnetic torpedoes, eh? We— we'll be killed, Damon. Did we have to take such chances?"

Then it happened. The Vulcan seemed to stop in mid-course, a grinding, shaking vibration jolting through its hull. Esterling felt the floor drop away beneath him. He was slammed against the wall, the breath going out of his lungs in an agonizing rush. He saw Beale still clinging to the strap, his lean body jerking and tossing like a puppet on wires. Damon was hurled forward against the instrument board. He pushed himself half erect, blood streaming from a pulped face. Somehow he was still alive. His fingers went out towards the buttons.

Beale was screaming, "Torpedo! The air—"

Damon cursed him thickly, indistinctly. He dashed the blood from his eyes and peered at the visiplate. Under his swift hands the ship lurched again, jolted, and leaped forward like an unleashed greyhound.

It seemed faster now.

"Any leaks?" Damon asked quietly.

Beale was clutching the strap, eyes closed, face gray. Esterling hesitated a moment and then made a circuit of the control cabin, listening at the doors and valves for any betraying hiss of air.

"Try a cigarette," Damon said. "Got one? Here." He extended a blood-stained pack.



Esterling watched the 'smoke curl out of his nostrils. The only draft was toward the ventilator system, so that was all right. He nodded briefly.

Damon's black eyes were like glacial ice.

He indicated the mike.

"Been trying to raise the men. They were in the bow. No answer. Suppose you put on a suit and check up, eh?"

"Okay," Esterling said. He went to a locker and took out a regulation spacesuit, slipped into it with the ease of familiarity. "What about the patrol boat?"

"We're losing it."

Beale dropped down <to a sitting position on the floor-plates, gripping his gun with both hands. He was praying in a low whisper, but interrupted himself to mumble, "Take off the rockets, Mr. Esterling. We don't want you to leave us."

The Norseman compressed his lips, but a glance at the gun muzzle, aimed directly at his heart, made him nod with sardonic resignation. He shrugged out of the rocket harness and let it drop to the floor.

He went out through the hull hatch, Beale handling the levers. Already Mars was far behind, a dull red ball against the black sky. The magnetic soles on his boots held him firmly against the hull, and Esterling clumped laboriously toward the bow. If he had his rocket harness. ...

Without it, the ship's gravitation prisoned him. He could not escape. Where was the patrol boat?

He could not locate it among the star-points. Well, it scarcely mattered now. He was in for it. Breath misted the face-plate of his helmet, and he turned on the heater coils.

Esterling felt a little sick when he reached the place where the bow had been. The entire nose of the ship had been blown off. Fragments of scrap and parts of bodies were plastered against the hull, covered by a treacly black fluid which Esterling recognized as rocket fuel. He paused on the jagged edge of the gap, peering down into the hole that had been blasted out of the ship. After a moment he took a deep breath and swung into the darkness.

Ten minutes later he returned to the control cabin and stripped off his suit. Beale was still praying. Damon was at the controls, mopping at his face with a crimson handkerchief. He looked up.

"Well? What damage?"

"Nobody's alive but us three."



"What damage to the ship?" Beale shrieked. "Good heavens, man, that's the important thing!"

Esterling grinned unpleasantly. "Did you know the Vulcan carried a full cargo of rocket fuel?"

"What of it?" Beale asked.

Damon turned sharply, a cold rage in his eyes. He showed his teeth in a snarl.

"Damn!" The oath exploded from him.

"Yeah," Esterling said. "The nose of the ship is blown off, and the inside bulkheads won't stand atmospheric friction. When we hit air again, the plates will get plenty hot. Rocket fuel won't explode without heat and oxygen, so we're safe as long as we're in space. But the minute we touch atmosphere, we go up like a rocket."

"Good heavens!" Beale gasped, fingers fluttering at his lips. "Damon, we've got to unload that fuel!"

The captain snorted. "In space? We can't. The ship's gravity would pull it right back again."

"Then we've got to land on an airless planet and unload it!"

Damon pointed at the visiscreen. "The patrol boat's following our jets. We're faster, but the minute we slow down, they'll be on our tail. Nope. We've just got to keep going till we lose the patrol. After that—"

"Yes. I suppose so. We'll head out, eh?"

"It's the safest course. We'll jet toward Pluto."

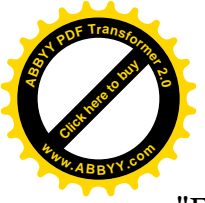
Esterling lit a cigarette. "You're spacetight. You can't dodge the patrol. Why not call it a day and send out a white jet?"

Beale shook his head. "We can't do that. Once we reach the Black Planet we'll be safe."

"We'd better be," Damon said. "Just to make you feel better, I might as well tell you the Vulcan's washed up. Our bow tubes are gone. We can make a crash landing, with space-suits, but we can't take off again. You still think we'll find spaceships on the black world?"

"Yes. Yes, indeed. The winged people visited Earth, as well as other planets, in the past. It's a gamble, of course, but—"

"It's a gamble we've got to take." Damon looked at Esterling sardonically. "Want a gun?"



"Eh?"

"Here." The captain tossed over a compressed-air automatic. "I don't know what we'll find on the Black Planet, but it may be trouble. You won't use that blaster on us, anyway. D'you think the patrol would believe we'd kidnaped you?"

Esterling slowly bolstered the weapon. "I suppose not. But you're taking a chance,?;

"I don't think so ^Wef!! split with you on whatever we find on the black world. According to Beale, that'll mean big money. Enough to buy off the law. Try any tricks, and the best you can expect is a patrol trial, with the cards stacked against you. Hell, keep the gun," Damon finished, with a careless shrug. "You're no fool. You'll play along."

"Yeah," Esterling said. "There's not much else I can do, I guess."

Damon chuckled.

Crippled, broken, a deadly time-bomb, the Vulcan thundered on into the eternal night of the void. The Asteroid Belt lay behind, with its flickering glare-dance of sunlight on the tiny worlds. Immense Jupiter grew larger, a pearly globe with a scarlet wound raw upon its surface—and Jupiter faded and dwindled.

Ringed Saturn was on the other side of the System, but Uranus watched them from the visiplate. They were beyond the Life Zone now. It was too cold, too far from the sun, for life to exist except under artificial conditions. Here and there on frigid moons a few space domes were spotted, outposts of lonely pioneers. But there were not many. Uranus was the borderline, the invisible wall beyond which it was not safe to venture.

The deadly emptiness of the interstellar wastes had reached in with fingers of fiery cold and touched the worlds that swung too far from the sun. They were accursed. Stones from ruined cities had been found here, artifacts so old that no remotely human race could have built them. The freezing tides of space and time, pulsing in eonlong beats, had swept up and buried them, and receded for a little while.

He had never been this far out. In the long weeks on the Vulcan a change came upon Nils Esterling, a blood heritage that fought its way to the surface and brought out all the latent mysticism of his race. He was plumbing uncharted seas, as his forefathers had done, and something deep within the man, atavistic and powerful, woke to life.

There's a legend that spacemen get their souls frozen on their first voyage. Esterling had been away from Earth for only a few years, but those years had been deadly ones. Planetary voyages are gruelling, racking jobs for the men who work the ships, and, on the far-flung, exotic worlds of the System, there is nothing akin to the green meadows and blue oceans of Earth. The red ochre of Mars blasts the vision; the stinging yellow fogs of Venus creep into your pores; the shift-



ing rainbow light of Callisto shocks your nerves into jolting madness. Men do not live long in space—no! So, while they live, they make the most of the little they possess.

There are flaming brews from Blueland moss, distilled and potent with dreams. There is cold, .stealthy satha, and there is the sweet mznaga-liqueur they make in Ednes, on Venus. There is segzr-whiskey that turns the mind into red fire. There is absinthe from Earth and Fruit o' Worlds made by the dbrk monks of lo. And there are drugs. The sins of all the Systems are at the call of those who can pay.

Nils had gone down that dark path, for there was little choice. In a few years he had grown cold, reckless, embittered. He had tasted the exultation of space flight, and after that Earth would have seemed dull. Ahead of him lay more years alternating periods of arduous voyages and wild sprees. Nothing else. In the end, death, and space burial.

The life had toughened him, building a harsh shell under which the old idealism had died to an ember. But now—there was a difference.

Three thousand years before his ancestors had gone Viking, their red-sailed ships driving out from the Northland fjords. Recklessly they had pushed on into unknown seas. The lure of mysteries, of exploration, drove them on. That touched Nils Esterling now.

The patrol ship had been lost long since. They were utterly alone, in an emptiness almost inconceivable to the human mind. The old motionless brilliance of the stars merely enhanced their isolation. Day after day the ship roared on through the void, and nothing changed; the sun remained a small yellow star, and the Milky Way lay across the dark sky like Bifrost Bridge that reaches to Asgard. Bifrost, the Bright Rainbow, across which the Valkyries thunder, bearing the souls of warriors fallen in battle.

Legend was not far from fact in this inhuman place, the airless void where man penetrated only by suffrance, venturing in tiny ships that a meteor could destroy easily. Nils Esterling felt the mysticism of far places stealing into his soul. He had felt thus before, once in the Euphrates Valley where the Garden of Eden had been created; and again on Easter Island, facing the silent carved titans whose origins are hidden by the past.

There were gateways and barriers, he thought—walls built to keep intruders from venturing too far. Man had not conquered space. He had reached the nearer worlds, but beyond, in the vastoess of the galaxies, lay mysteries. Closer even than

that! A black planet, rolling majestically, invisible, on the edge of the System, holding its secrets . . . .

What were those secrets?;

Sometimes skepticism came back, and Esterling sneered at his own credulity. How could a planet have remained undiscovered through the ages, beyond the orbit of Pluto?

It would have to be invisible.



But even as long ago as the Twentieth Century astronomers had suspected the existence of a trans-Plutonian world, one so far out from the sun that its influence was negligible, a world unseen, lost in the incredible immensity of space.

Yes. The Black Planet could exist

Beale spent hours on abstruse calculations. He had figured dead reckoning by the runes on Esterling's bracelet, and Damon changed the course accordingly. The little scientist peered into the visiplat, using the telescopic attachment, but he could catch no glimpse of his goal.

"It must be invisible," he said. "That's a good sign."

Esterling stared at him. "Why?"

"In the plan of nature nothing is normally invisible, at least nothing of planetary size. That means the camouflage was created artificially. Physicists have speculated about the possibility of a negasphere—"

"I've seen dead-black planetoids," Damon broke in. "You never saw them till you were within a few hundred miles."

"Planetoids are small. And their presence could be detected by occlusion. An artificial negasphere would have the property of warping light-ray. Dwarf stars can draw light toward them, you know. A negasphere could bend it away—around the planet. The world wouldn't hide any stars with its bulk."

They watched the visiplat, but there was nothing there except the frozen rivers of stars in the night sky.

Monotonously time dragged on. There was neither sunrise nor sunset; they ate when hungry, slept when tired. Always the doomed ship fled on into the darkness. Until—

There was no warning. One moment they were in empty space; the next, Damon, at the controls, cried out harshly and cut the jets. The screen flamed white. A bell began to ring shrilly.

"What is it?" Beale hurried toward Damon, leaning over the captain's shoulder. He gasped. Esterling pushed him aside, eying the visiplat.

On the field a world was visible, huge, luminous, distinctly limned against the misty background of the stars. It had sprung out of nothingness. But it was not black. It blazed with cold, swirling radiance, tides of living light rolled across it.



"The Black Planet," Damon said. "But—"

Beale's voice was shrill with excitement. "There was a neg-aspherel We went through it without realizing. Of course! It isn't a tangible barrier; it's just a hollow shell of darkness around the planet. Out here, on the edge of the System—" He was silent, staring at the immense jewel-world that lay before them.

Esterling said. "We're in atmosphere. Look at those stars— misty, see? We can't stay with the ship."

Damon put the Vulcan at automatic controls, circling inward in a narrowing spiral. The alarm bell was still ringing.

"Yeah. We'd better get into our suits. Come on!"

They struggled with the fastenings. A jolting shock wrenched the vessel. Esterling snapped his helmet shut, looked to see that he had his rocket harness and gun, and lumbered toward the lock, awkward in the heavy spaceboots. He swung open the valve.

On the lips of empty space he paused, looking down. Far beneath him the shining planet lay. He could not gauge its size. There were fewer stars now; the negasphere did not seem to block their light, but the atmosphere did. There was an instant of sickening giddiness before he stepped out.

Then he was hurtling down, and panic clutched at his throat. Instinctively he pressed the stud that activated his rocket-harness, and his flight was arrested. Two figures shot past him, grotesque in their suits, Beale and Damon. They were gone.

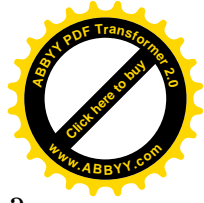
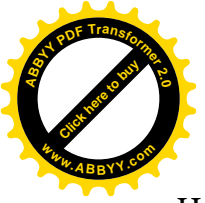
He dropped again; there was still a long way to fall, and he did not wish to exhaust his fuel. The Vulcan slowly passed him, its tubes firing spasmodically, driving it down to destruction. From the smashed bow a tongue of flame licked up. There was oxygen in this atmosphere, then.

A Viking funeral for the dead men on the ship, Esterling thought. Against the blackness of the sky red fire blazed suddenly. It was like a beacon—

Struck by a new thought, he glanced down. The flames would certainly attract attention, if there was any life on the Black Planet. But what life could exist on that pearly, shining globe, seething with luminous tides?

Still he fell. The Vulcan blazed, red against the dark. How many spacemen had watched similar sights, watched their vessels crack up while they remained alone in space, without hope of rescue? No marooned sailor could ever have felt one-tenth of the utter desolation that pressed in from the

void. The seas of Earth were wide, but the seas of space had no shores. •'!



He could not see Beale or Damon. What would happen when he reached the world below? Would those shining tides swallow him? There could be no life there!

Emptiness, and falling, and an hypnotic languor that dulled Esterling's brain.

Across the sky the Milky Way flamed. Bifrost, where the Valkyries rode, the spear-maidens of Asgard. The Valkyries—

Wings beat soundlessly past him.

For a timeless second a face looked into Esterling's. The blood drummed in his temples. Hallucination, he thought. For she could not exist!

Her hair was corn-yellow, her eyes as blue as the southern ocean. No curve of her slender body was hidden by the single gossamer garment she wore, and in all his life Esterling had never seen a girl half so lovely.

Nor half so strange!

Pinions lifted from her shoulders; wings, shining with coruscating light, upheld her in emptiness. She was winged!

One moment the girl hung there, her gaze probing into Esterling's. Then a touch of elfin malice came into the blue eyes. She made a quick gesture—and Esterling was swung off balance by an abrupt tug at his harness. Still falling, he revolved slowly in midair, in time to see another girl, almost a duplicate of the first, holding his rocket harness.

She had ripped it away—and Esterling was falling free, with nothing to halt his plunge to the glowing world beneath!

His mouth was dry with sudden panic; he wrenched out his gun. Apparently the winged girls knew the meaning of the weapons. The one holding the harness let it drop, and in perfect unison they dived toward Esterling. Handicapped as he was by his bulky suit, he had little chance. A hand gripped his arm. The gun was forced up and back. Falling through space, he could get no leverage, no way of exerting his strength.

Helpless, he fought the Valkyries.

It was useless, as he knew from the start. They were in their own element, agile, strong, deft. In the end he let them tear the gun from him, a suicidal hopelessness overcoming him. But the girls did not wish him to die, it seemed. Their arms wrapped about him, while the great pinions pulsed and beat. Esterling's fall slowed.

Far below, the planet grew larger. The tides of light swept

across its surface. It filled half the sky. The Vulcan, still afire, plunged down and was swallowed by the luminous glow.





The world grew concave, then flat. Perspective changed. The sphere no longer hung in the void; it was an immense, seething ocean beneath. On that glowing sea were islands— and they drove with the mighty tides like ships.

Cities were built on the isles, fragile-seeming, with a curious architecture, unlike anything Esterling had seen before. There was no regular pattern. Some of the islands were huge, others tiny. But all were garden places, spotted with clusters of towers and minarets that were like lustrous jewels.

The Hesperides—the Isles of the Blessed. Oceans of living light washed those strange shores. Across the rolling, seething seas the islands moved majestically, flotsam of a lost planet.

Toward one of them Esterling dropped, a prisoner of the Valkyries.

He saw above the towers a myriad darting shapes, flying with graceful, easy movements. The winged people! Nor were they all women; there were men among them, their wings stronger, darker.

Walls lifted above Esterling. He was being carried down a shaft. There was an instant of dizzying confusion, during which he was half-blinded by wings flailing and beating about him. Then he felt the strong arms relax.

Solid ground was under his feet. He stood on a little platform of some plastic, blue-tinted substance. Behind him a passageway gaped in the wall. From his feet the pit dropped down to unknown depths.

The Valkyries alighted beside him. He felt slim fingers fumbling with his helmet, and, too late, made a gesture to halt the girl. The face-plate swung back. The air of the new world rushed into his lungs.

One breath told him that there was no danger. It was pure, fresh, and sweet, with a subtle tingling exhilaration that was almost intoxicating. Blue eyes laughed into Esterling's.

"D'rn sa asth'neeso." The words were meaningless, but the gesture that accompanied them was significant. Esterling hesitated. A Valkyrie slipped past him, folded her wings like a cloak about her. She moved into the depths of the passage.

"lyan sa!"

He followed, the other girl at his heels. A tapestry was flung aside, and he found himself in an apartment, obviously a sleeping-chamber, though not built for humans. The walls were transparent as glass.

He was, apparently, in one of the tallest towers. Beneath



him lay the city. Beyond that, a luxuriance of rainbow forest, and, farther away, the, blazing turmoil of the sea of light. The winged people swoopfc'd'aiid glided among the towers.

The Valkyrie Esterling had first seen came closer. She murmured a few liquid, trilling syllables, and her companion vanished. Then, smiling fearlessly up into Esterling's eyes, she tapped the chest of his spacesuit and made a movement of inquiry.

His voice sounded harsh in the silence.

"Yeah. I don't need this, I guess." Gratefully he unburdened himself of the awkward overall garment and helmet.

The girl touched her breast. "Norahn." She repeated it. "Norahn—Norahn."

"Norahn," Esterling said. Her name? He imitated her gesture. "Nils."

There was a scuffle behind them. A group of Valkyries appeared from beyond the curtain, among them two struggling figures—Beale and Damon. They paused at sight of Esterling. Damon snapped open his helmet.

"What's this? Did they get your gun, too?"

"Take it easy," Esterling said. "They're friendly. Our being alive now proves that."

Damon grunted and began to remove his suit. Beale, his lips moving silently, did the same. The Valkyries drew back, as though waiting.

"Norahn—" Esterling said, rather helplessly. The girl smiled at him.

"Vanalsa into,"

She pointed to the door. A Valkyrie entered, carrying a great basket loaded with fruits, unfamiliar to the Earthmen. Norahn picked up a scarlet globe and bit into it, afterward offering it to Esterling.

The taste was strange, but acidly pleasant. Damon grunted, squatted on the floor, and began to eat. Beale was more hesitant, sniffing at each fruit warily before he tried it, but soon the three men were gorging themselves. It was a welcome change from space rations. They scarcely noticed when the Valkyries slipped out.

Only Norahn remained. She touched the red sphere Ester-ling was eating and said, "Khar. Khar."

"Khar. Norahn."



His mouth full, Beale mumbled, "A good sign. They're taking the trouble to teach us their language. Good heavens, I still can't quite believe this. A whole race of flying people—"

"Khar, Nils. Khar."

Time did not exist on the world of the Valkyries. The floating islands drifted with the shining tides, borne by an unchanging current that swept around the world. What the strange sea was Esterling never learned. It was not water, though one could bathe in it. The winged folk swooped down, dipped below the surface, and came up with glowing star-drops limning their bodies. Radio-activity, perhaps. Or some less understandable source of power, the alien force that had made the Black Planet unlike any other in the System.

It had come from outside, Norahn said, after they had learned to speak her tongue. In the old days, beyond the memory of the winged people, the planet had revolved around another sun, light-years away. That had been the age of science. There was no need for science now, though the tools still remained.

Beale's eyes brightened.

"We have no records, no memories. It was too long ago. There was a war, I think, and our people fled, moving this world like a ship. Across space we went. Long ago we visited the planets of this System. They had life but—that life was not intelligent. And we were afraid our enemies would follow and destroy us. So we made the negasphere, to hide ourselves from those who might pursue. We waited. The years passed. The centuries passed, and the ages. And we changed."

Norahn's wings swept wide. "Science was forgotten; we had no need for it. We fly. We fly!" Briefly her eyes were luminous with ecstasy. "It is decadence, perhaps, but we ask nothing more from the universe. It has been very long since any of us ventured beyond the negasphere. Indeed, it is forbidden. A curse falls on all who leave this world."

"A curse? What—"

"I do not know that. There have been some who ventured out in ships, but they did not return. The life is good here. We have our wings, and our cities. When we drift near the Darkness, we migrate."

Esterling said, "I don't understand. What is the darkness?"

"You will soon know. The tides bring us near to it now, and soon we must find another island. You will see—"

It was a wall of blackness looming upon the horizon. A monstrous pile of cloudy dark, lit luridly by red flashes sparking intermittently through the gloom. The isle swept on toward it—and the bird-people made ready to depart.



"No life can exist in the Darkness." Norahn said. "The only land on this world are the floating isles, and they follow the tide. While they are on the lightside, we can dwell on

them. When they enter the darkness, we find another isle, tm they have half-circled the planet and emerge once more."

Esterling stared at,the "great cloud. "What about your cities? Aren't they harmed?"

"No, we find everything as we left it. Our wise men say there is a certain radiation in the Darkness that destroys life —^-just as there are radiations here, in the sea, that give us power, and make us winged."

"How—"

"I do not know. There are only legends." Norahn shrugged. "It does not matter. In a few hours we must leave for another isle. Be ready."

Esterling would never forget that strange migration across the glowing sea. Like a cloud the winged people rose, carrying the few belongings they needed—there were not many, Two Valkyries supported Esterling; others took charge of Beale and Damon. Their great wings carried them easily above the ocean.

Behind them the deserted islet drifted on into the Darkness.

Looking back, Esterling felt a tiny chill strike through him. His Norse blood thrilled to sudden warning. He thought of Jotunheim, the place of night, where the Frost Giants wait their time to break forth against the Aesir. . . .

The new isle was like the first, though larger, and with a greater expanse of forest. And the life was unchanged.

The three Earthmen took little part in it; without wings, they were handicapped. The existence of the winged people went on without touching them though Esterling was not so far withdrawn as the others. He did not chafe. He was content to watch, and to talk with Norahn; to see her gliding above the shining sea.

Norahn told them they were prisoners. "If you can call it that, when the freedom of our world is yours. But you cannot leave. In the past, ships from your System have sometimes crashed here, and men have survived. Not for a long time, though. We treated them well. We took them with us to safety when the isles reached the Darkness—and in time they died. You will remain here, too."

"Why?" Damon asked.

"You would bring down the rest of your people upon us. We are happy; we have passed the Age of Science, and no longer need it. We are perfectly adapted to our environment. But



we have great sources of power here. Your race would want that power. Our planet would be ruined for us. You

would take our islands to build huge, ugly machines. Nor could we fight. We have forgotten how."

"You must have some weapons," Beale said.

"Perhaps—but we do not need them. We have hidden our world; we guard it against intrusions—that is our greater safety. We could not fight, nor do we wish to. Ages ago all that died out of our race, soon after our science reached its peak and froze there. All we need lies ready to our hand, without further effort on our part."

"But the machines—" Beale persisted. "Don't they ever break down? Don't they ever need repair?"

Norahn shrugged her shining wings. "They are so simple a child could make repairs. That was the last interest that held our scientists, so legend says—they worked until no further need remained for invention, and then they worked to simplify. Even one of you, who never saw a food-maker or a noyai-loom before, could repair it in a few minutes if it broke down. No, we have no need any longer for weapons or invention of anything except—flight." Her great wings lifted away from her body and quivered a little. "It tires me to be still and talk, even to you, Nils. I shall be back." She dropped from the tower and was gone into the cool, pearly light.

Beale said, "They have spaceships here, then." His voice was eager. "That's obvious, or Norahn wouldn't have bothered to tell us we were prisoners. And we could fly them if we could find them. I wonder where—"

"We'll find out," Damon told him.

Then the incredible happened. For a long time Esterling had been conscious of a curious sensation centering around his shoulder-blades. But he did not realize its significance till the day when, stripped to the waist, he was shaving before an improvised mirror. Damon, lounging by the balcony, said something in a surprised voice.

"Eh?" Esterling scraped at his cheek. "What's up?"

Instead of answering, Damon called for Beale. The scientist came out of the adjoining room, rubbing his eyes.

"Look at Esterling's back," the captain said. "Do you—"

Beale caught his breath. "Good heavens! Don't turn around, man; let me see."

"What is it?" Esterling squirmed before the mirror. . "Something's growing on your shoulder-blades. I'll be damned!" Damon murmured. "It can't be. Norahn!"



The girl's slim figure appeared above the balcony. "Es-tan'ha? Oh!" She leaped lightly to the floor and ran forward. "Be still, Nils." He felt her cool hand touch his back.

A queer, tingling excitement was pulsing within Esterling. Even before Norahn spoke, he guessed the truth.

"Wings," she said. "Yes—that is how they grow. From the buds, slowly expanding till they reach full size."

Damon had stripped off his shirt and was at the mirror. "Funny," he muttered. "I haven't got 'em. Have you, Beale?"

The scientist blinked. "Of course not. I haven't any such recessive characteristics in my background. Nor have you."

Esterling looked at him. "What d'you mean?"

"The answer's obvious, isn't it? I'd wondered how the bracelet, with its rune about the Black Planet, came into your possession. It belonged to your great-grandmother, didn't it?"

"Gudrun. Yes. But—"

"What do you know about her?"

"Damned little," Esterling said. "She was supposed to be blonde, with blue eyes, and very lovely. There was some mystery about her. She didn't live long, and the bracelet was given to her son."

"There was space-travel in your great-grandmother's day," Beale said. "And Norahn said some of her people used to leave this world in their ships. They never came back. It's pretty obvious where Gudrun came from, isn't it?"

"She—she had no wings."

"Wings can be amputated. They're apparently a recessive characteristic, handed down to you from your great-grandmother."

Esterling was trembling a little. "Then why should they grow now? Why wasn't I born with them?"

Beale nodded toward the window, beyond which the shining sea rolled. "There are certain radiations on this planet—radiations that don't exist elsewhere in the System. You were born with wing-buds on your back. But they needed the right kind of environment to develop. That particular radiation exists here. If you'd never come to this world, you'd never have grown wings."



Norahn smiled happily into Esterling's eyes.

"Soon you can fly, Nils! I will show you the way—"

It was like recovering sight after being blind from birth. Flight, to Nils Esterling, unfolded vistas he had never known. The trick of it came with surprising ease. After the wings had reached their full development, the supporting muscles grew stronger, too. He never forgot that first flight. It was not long, but the feeling of complete and absolute freedom, the abrupt and easy checking of his fall, sent the blood singing through

his veins. Flight was a heady drunkenness. The wine of it was stronger than any liquor Esterling had ever tasted.

And Norahn taught him, as she had promised.

He understood now the intoxication the winged people felt.

Earthly humanity had dropped from Esterling. He was one of the winged people now. Flight was his heritage, the high, keen delight of utter freedom, not bound by dimensions.

The islet swept on inexorably toward the Darkness'.

It was time for the migration again. The winged folk rose and sped away, in search of a new home. Beale and Damon delayed, however. They were determined to remain with the island when it entered the Darkness.

At the window-opening Norahn watched the sky, where the great blackness grew momentarily more menacing. "It is dangerous. You will die."

Damon grunted. "The radiation might not harm us. And I'd like to know what's in the Darkness. Beale thinks—"

"Don't be a fool," Esterling said roughly. "You know damned well you can't live where the winged people can't. I can't stop you from committing suicide, I suppose. But what can you hope to gain by staying with the island?"

Illogically, Beale and Damon persisted in their arguments —persisted, while the Darkness grew nearer. Norahn's two companions grew more and more uneasy. At last they took flight, white-faced at their closeness to the barrier of the dark.

Esterling watched them go. "Okay," he said. "Maybe Norahn and I can carry you. Make up your minds. Because we're leaving too—right now!"

Damon capitulated with surprising suddenness. "All right. I suppose we'll have to. If you won't wait till we get nearer to the Darkness."



"We're near enough. You'll have to forget your curiosity, Beale. Norahn, can you call back some of your people to help?"

She shook her head. "They are too far. They will not remain on the isle when it drifts near the Darkness. But I can carry the little man easily."

"Okay. Get on my back, Damon. That's it. Lock your legs around my waist. Now—"

The wings were powerful. Beale was a small man, and Damon no giant. Esterling and Norahn dropped from the balcony, flung their pinions wide, and swooped up, gaining altitude. The islet slid away beneath them.

They flew on above the shining sea. Far in the distance was

a smudge that showed where the bird-people were, in a close band. y^

"Listen," Damon slid, into Esterling's ear, "those people have spaceships, don't they?"

"They used to."

"Where are they?"

"On some of the islands. None we've ever lived on, though."

"But you've seen them."

"From above—yeah."

"So have I. Once, when they carried us off to visit another island. I know where they are from here, allowing for tidal drift." There was a pause. Damon went on, "How'd you like to get off this world?"

Esterling smiled a little. "Funny. I've never thought of that. This place—I like it here."

"Well, I don't. How about dropping us where we can get at a spaceship?"

"One of theirs, you mean? Not a chance. For one thing, you couldn't fly it. For another, what about fuel? Remember, they haven't used the ships for ages."

"Oh, yes they have. Norahn told us about how some of them go out into space and never return. And about how simple everything here is to operate. I'll gamble on the fuel. My guess is it's there ready—that's how machinery on this world seems to operate. And if the ship's that simple—well, I can handle anything that flies."

"And you'd be back with an army, wouldn't you? Norahn was right, Damon. This world should be kept isolated. The people here are happy."





"Happy, hell! Beale!" Damon's voice was sharp. "Now!"

Esterling saw the scientist, a dozen yards away, move quickly. There was a gun in his hand. He pressed its muzzle against Norahn's temple. Simultaneously the Norseman felt a cold ring of steel touch his own temple.

"Take it easy," Damon said quietly. "Don't try any stunting. I can fire before you can drop me. So can Beale."

Esterling's face was white. "It's all right," he said, his voice unsteady. "Just keep on, Norahn."

"Yeah," Damon seconded. "Keep on. But in a different direction. You're going to take us to a spaceship, Esterling, or you and Norahn get your heads blown off."

"Where'd you get the guns?" he asked.

"Where they'd been hidden," Damon said. "I've been planning this for some time. I couldn't buck the whole gang of you, but I figured if I could get you and Norahn alone—"

"Yeah," Esterling said. "Yeah."

It was a long flight. Wing muscles were tired and aching when an islet grew in the distance from a tiny speck to a broad expanse. Beale shouted something and pointed.

Damon said into Esterling's ear, "I can see ships down there. No winged people, though. I guess they stay away from anything that reminds them of science. Go 'down— easy."

Obediently Esterling glided down the slopes of shining air, Norahn beside him. The silvery, torpedo-shaped rows of ships grew larger. Damon whistled at their design. "I'll bet they're plenty fast!"

Esterling landed lightly. Damon leaped from his back, gun ready, waiting till Norahn and Beale were down.

"Keep your gun out," he said to the scientist. "I want to check up on this ship."

Its lock was childishly simple. In a moment he had vanished into the ulterior. The others waited tensely. Presently Beale reappeared, smiling.

"I was right. Simple instructions and controls. Anybody could operate who could astrogate. And there's plenty of fuel. Now, Esterling, what about going with us?" The Norseman looked at Norahn. "No," he said. "I'm staying."

Beale bit at his thin lips. "Drat it," he mumbled. "Damon, we should take some proof back with us—" "We've got the ship."



"Sure. But when we bring men back here, it'll help to know as much as possible about the winged people. Perhaps they can't fight, but they've inherited weapons. We've never been able to locate them. Now Norahn could give us plenty of information—"

Esterling yelled, "Norahn! Get out of here! Quick!" He jumped Damon, his fist striking at the captain's gun. There was a rush of footsteps behind him, and something crashed down on his head with sickening force. Weakness ran like water through his body. He scarcely felt Damon's fist jolt against his jaw.

Dimly he heard Norahn scream. There was the thud of a valve closing, and then a fiery blast of rockets and a shriek of cleft air. Esterling, flat on his face, groaned weakly and tried to rise. It was useless. A black speck dwindled in the sky. "Norahn!" he said hoarsely. "Norahn—" Somehow Esterling dragged himself to his hands and

knees. He was blind and, sick with pain, and his skull felt as though it had been fractured. But there was another spaceship looming through the rees, and he had to reach it^-

Somehow he did. He never knew how. Somehow he stumbled along shining corridors and found an instrument board that swam before his eyes. Afterward he knew that he must have done the requisite things his reflexes were trained to do on any ship that plies the spaceways. He must have closed the valves and fallen into the astrogator's seat and found the proper instruments ready to his fumbling hands. But it was sheer will-power that did it.

When his head cleared the starry emptiness of space filled the visiplate before him. Already he was through the nega-sphere. Norahn's world had vanished. And for an instant he remembered the curse that was said to fall upon all natives who left that world.

After that was eternity. Esterling could not leave the controls; he scarcely dared glance away from the visiplate. And a throbbing, blazing ache inside his skull pounded at his brain.

Damon fled sunward. Esterling followed doggedly. They reached the orbit of Pluto.

And now at last, slowly, by infinite degrees, the fleeing ship grew larger in the visiplate.

Esterling manipulated the controls with dizzy recklessness. Now they were almost together, the hunter and the pursued. And now—now—

With a surprisingly light impact he crashed his ship against Damon's, and without pausing to see the results, turned to the rack where the spacesuits hung.

It was while getting into the suit that he noticed for the first time what had happened to his wings. The great shimmering pinions that had carried him over the glowing seas of Norahn's world were colorless—limp.



Out in the void, he kicked himself across to the other ship. He didn't head for the entrance lock; Damon would be expecting that move. Instead, Esterling drew himself, hand over hand, to the emergency escape hatch in the bow. He levered it open.

Beale was waiting for him.

Esterling looked to see that the bow compartment was airtight, the door sealed. Norahn was in this ship, and he had to be careful. But the valve was right.

Beale fired. The bullet went through Esterling's suit and shoulder as he lurched aside. But it was only a flesh wound. He plugged the tear in the suit by bunching the fabric to-

gether with one hand, and with the other he reached back and opened the escape hatch.

Beale was not wearing an air-helmet.

He managed one more shot before his breath was wrenched out of his lungs, but the bullet went wild, spattering against metal. The blasting gust of wind racing out of the hatch pulled Beale with it, smashing him against Esterling. The scientist's finger clawed frantically at the other's suit.

Beale slide down, his eyes glaring, his tongue protruding. Esterling looked at the dead man without emotion.

He closed the hatch behind him, opened the door to the rest of the ship, and quickly removed the encumbering suit and helmet. Already fresh air had replaced the vacuum. Esterling picked up Beale's gun and stepped across the threshold.

Four strides took him to another door. He thrust it open.

He was facing Damon. In a corner of the control cabin lay Norahn, bound. Her wings were—withered.

Damon fired. The bullet struck Esterling somewhere. He took a step forward. Norahn was crying, very softly, like a hurt child.

Damon whispered, "Get back. Stay where you are. I'll—"

He thrust the gun forward, his finger contracting on the trigger. Esterling threw his own weapon straight at the other's face as he sprang. His right hand found Damon's gun-wrist His left touched the corded muscles of a throat.

Norahn was crying bitterly, hopelessly—

"I killed him," my father said. "With my hands. But he died only one death."



Breakers crashed beneath us in Thunder Fjord. The sky had grown light. Freya, the gerfalcon, hooded and asleep, stirred on Nils Esterling's shoulder.

I looked out at the dark sea. "You couldn't go back?"

"No. Those wings would never grow again. Only on the Black Planet could they ever have grown. Once withered—" he made a hopeless gesture—"Norahn and I were earth-bound. It was the legendary curse that fell on any of her folk who left that world. And—and she had been born to flight."

The sun's rim loomed on the horizon. Nils stared up into the burning rays.

"She wouldn't let me take her back. The Black Planet is for those with wings. Not for the earthbound. I brought her to Earth, Arn. I brought her here. She died when you were born. Scarcely a year. . . . We had happiness, but it was bitter-sweet. For we had known flight."

Nils unhooded the gerfalcon. Freya moved, ruffled her feathers, blinking a golden eye.

"Flight," my father said; "To stop flying is to die. Norahn died in a year. And for over forty years I have been chained here, remembering. Arn—" He slipped something from his arm and dropped it into my hand—"this is yours now. You're going into space. Your heritage is out there, beyond the orbit of Pluto, where the isles of the winged folk drift on the bright tides of Norahn's world. It's your world as well. In you are the seeds of flight"

He looked at the gerfalcon. "I have no words to tell you of your heritage, Arn. You will never know, till you have wings. And then—"

Nils Esterling stood up, casting the gerfalcon free. Freya screamed harshly. Her wings beat the air. She circled, mounted, climbing the winds.

My father's gaze brooded on me as I slipped the golden bracelet on my arm. He dropped back into the chair, as though exhausted.

"That's all, I suppose," he said wearily. "It's time for you to go. And—I'll say good-by."

I left him there. He did not watch me go. Once I turned, far down the path above Thunder Fjord, and Nils Esterling had not moved. He was looking up at Freya, wheeling in the blue.

The next time I looked, the outthrust of the crag hid the Hall. All I could see was the empty sky, and the gerfalcon circling there on splendid wings.