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# ASTONISHING

STORIES

JUNE

## STORM CLOUD ON DEKA

A "VORTEX BLASTER"  
NOVELETTE

by **E. E. SMITH, PH.D.**

## THE CRYSTAL CIRCE

by **HENRY KUTTNER**



## OUT OF THE SEA

by **LEIGH BRACKETT**

**ALFRED BESTER**  
**R. M. WILLIAMS**  
AND MANY OTHERS

10¢

# ASTONISHING STORIES

ALL STORIES NEW

VOL. 3

JUNE, 1942

NO. 4

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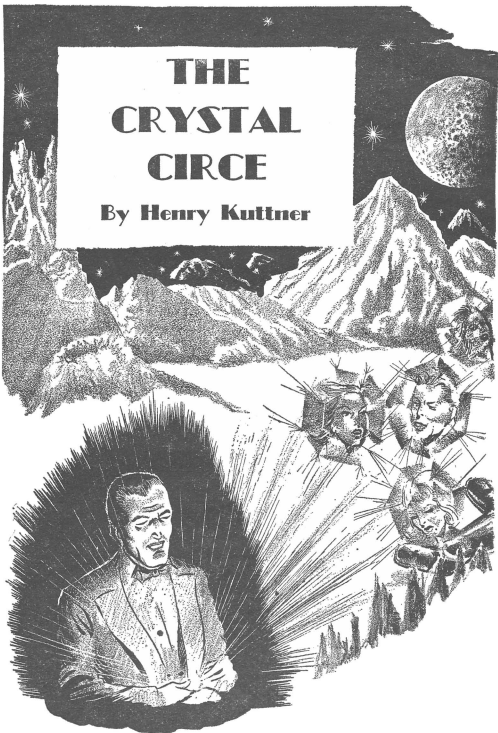
Cover by Virgil Finlay, illustrating scene from "The Crystal Circe"

Inside illustrations by Bok, Giunta, Morey, J. B. Musacchia

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# THE CRYSTAL CIRCE

By Henry Kuttner



A Full-Length Novelette of Outer Space

The weak ones fell back, the strong ones fought on—  
toward the crossroads of the past and the future where  
the crystal Circe waited to keep her dreadful tryst—"A  
man and a jewel—but the man will die!"



*Prologue*

**T**HE stratoship from Cairo was late, and I was wondering whether the newsreel theatre or a couple of drinks would make time pass faster. It was early dusk. Through the immense,

curved wall-window of the Manhattan Port Room I could see the landing field, with a silvery ship being rolled over the tarmac, and the skyscrapers of New York beyond.

Then I saw Arnsen.

It was Steve Arnsen, of course. No

doubt about that. No other man had his great breadth of shoulders, his Herculean build. Ten years ago we had been classmates at Midwestern. I remembered rakehell, laughing, handsome Steve Arnsen very well, with his penchant for getting into trouble and out of it again, usually dragging Douglas O'Brien, his room-mate, along with him like the helpless tail of a kite. Poor Doug! He was the antithesis of Arnsen, a thoughtful, studious boy with the shadow of a dream lurking always in his dark eyes. An idealist was Douglas O'Brien, as his Celtic ancestors had been. Strong friendship had existed between the two men—the mental communion of laughter and a dream.

Arnsen was looking up into the darkening sky, a queer tensy in his posture. He turned abruptly, came to a table near me, and sat down. From his pocket he took a small box. It snapped open. His gaze probed into the unknown thing that was hidden by his cupped hands.

I picked up my drink and went to Arnsen's table. All I could see was the back of his sleek, massive head. Then he looked up—

If ever I saw hell in a man's face, I saw it in Arnsen's then. There was a dreadful longing, and an equally horrible hopelessness, the expression one might see on the face of a damned soul looking up from the pit at the shining gates forever beyond his reach.

And Arnsen's face had been—ravaged.

The searing mark of some experience lay there, branded into his furrowed cheeks, his tightened lips, into his eyes where a sickness dwelt. No—this was not Steve Arnsen, the boy I had known at Midwestern. Youth had left him, and hope as well.

"Vail!" he said, smiling crookedly. "Good Lord, of all people! Sit down and have a drink. What are you doing here?"

I sought for words as I dropped into a chair. Arnsen watched me for a mo-

ment, and then shrugged. "You might as well say it. I've changed. Yeah—I know that."

"What happened?" There was no need to fence.

His gaze went beyond me, to the dark sky above the landing field. "What happened? Why don't you ask where Doug is? We always stuck together, didn't we? Surprising to see me alone—"

HE LIT a cigarette and crushed it out with an impatient gesture. "You know, Vail, I've been hoping I'd run into you. This thing that's been boiling inside of me—I haven't been able to tell a soul. No one would have believed me. You may. The three of us kicked around together a lot, in the old days."

"In trouble?" I asked. "Can I help?"

"You can listen," he said. "I came back to Earth thinking I might be able to forget. It hasn't worked. I'm waiting for the airliner to take me to Kansas Spaceport. I'm going to Callisto—Mars—somewhere. Earth isn't the right place any more. But I'm glad we ran into each other, Vail. I want to talk. I want you to answer a question that's been driving me almost insane."

I signalled the waiter and got more drinks. Arnsen was silent till we were alone once more. Then he opened his cupped hands and showed me a small shagreen box. It clicked open. Nestling in blue velvet was a crystal, not large, but lovelier than any gem I had ever seen before.

Light drifted from it like the flow of slow water. The dim shining pulsed and waned. In the heart of the jewel was—

I tore my eyes away, staring at Arnsen. "What is it? Where did you get the thing? Not on Earth!"

He was watching the jewel, sick hopelessness on his face. "No—not on Earth. It came from a little asteroid out there—"

somewhere." He waved vaguely toward the sky. "It isn't charted. I took no reckonings. So I can never go back. Not that I want to, now. Poor Doug!"

"He's dead, isn't he?" I asked.

Arnsen looked at me strangely as he closed the box and slipped it back into his pocket. "Dead? I wonder. Wait till you know the story, Vail. About Doug's lucky charm, and the dreams, and the Crystal Circe. . . ."

The slow horror of remembrance crept across his face. Out there, in space, something had happened. I thought: It must have been frightful to leave such traces on Arnsen.

He read my thought. "Frightful? Perhaps. It was quite lovely, too. You remember the old days, when I thought of nothing but raising hell. . . ."

After a long pause, I said, "Who was—the Crystal Circe?"

"I never knew her name. She told me, but my brain couldn't understand it. She wasn't human, of course. I called her Circe, after the enchantress who changed her lovers to swine." Again he looked at the darkening sky. "Well—it began more than two years ago, in Maine. Doug and I were on a fishing trip when we ran into the meteorite. Little fishing we got done then! You know how Doug was—like a kid reading a fairy tale for the first time. And that meteorite—"

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Star-Gem

**I**T LAY in the crater it had dug for itself, a rounded arc visible about the brown earth. Already sumac and vines were mending the broken soil. Warm fall sunlight slanted down through the trees as Douglas O'Brien and Steve Arnsen plodded toward the distant gurgling of the stream, thoughts intent on catching the limit. No fingering tendrils

of menace thrust out to warn them.

"Mind your step," Arnsen said, seeing the pit. He detoured around it and turned, realizing that O'Brien had not followed. "Come on, Doug. It's getting late."

O'Brien's tanned young face was intent as he peered down into the hollow. "Wait a bit," he said absently. "This looks—say! I'll bet there's a meteor down there!"

"So there's a meteor. We're not fishing for meteors, professor. They're mostly iron, anyway. Gold, now, would be a different matter."

O'Brien dropped lightly into the hole, scraping at the dirt with his fingers. "Wonder how long it's been here? You run along, Steve. I'll catch up with you."

Arnsen sighed. O'Brien, with his vast enthusiasm for everything under the sun, was off again. There would be no stopping him now till he had satisfied his curiosity about the meteorite. Well, Arnsen had a new fly he was anxious to use, and it would soon be too late for good fishing. With a grunt he turned and pushed on toward the stream.

The fly proved excellent. In a surprisingly short time Arnsen had bagged the limit. There was no sign of O'Brien, and hunger made itself evident. Arnsen retraced his steps.

The younger man was sitting cross-legged beside the crater, holding something in his cupped hands and staring down at it. A swift glance showed Arnsen that the meteorite had been uncovered, and, apparently, cracked in two, each piece the size of a football. He stepped closer, to see what O'Brien held.

It was a gray crystal, egg-sized, filled with cloudy, frozen mists. It had been cut into a diamond-shaped, multifaced gem.

"Where'd you get that?" Arnsen asked.

O'Brien jumped, turning up a startled face. "Oh—hello, Steve. It was in the meteorite. Damnedest thing I ever saw.

I saw the meteorite had a line of fission all around it, so I smacked the thing with a rock. It fell apart, and this was in the middle. Impossible, isn't it?"

"Let's see." Arnsen reached for the jewel. O'Brien showed an odd reluctance in giving it up, but finally dropped it into the other's outstretched hand.

The gem was cold, and yet not unpleasantly so. A tingling raced up Arnsen's arm to his shoulder. He felt an abrupt, tiny shock.

O'Brien snatched the jewel. Arnsen stared at him.

"I'm not going to eat it. What—"

The boy grinned. "It's my luck piece, Steve. My lucky charm. I'm going to have it pierced."

"Better take it to a jeweler first," Arnsen suggested. "It may be valuable."

"No—I'll keep it." He slipped the gem into his pocket. "Any luck?"

"The limit, and I'm starving. Let's get back to camp."

**O**VER their meal of fried trout, O'Brien fingered the find, staring into the cloudy depths of the gem as though he expected to find something there. Arnsen could sense a strange air of withdrawal about him. That night O'Brien fell asleep holding the jewel in his hand.

His sleep was troubled. O'Brien watched the boy, the vaguest hint of worry in his blue eyes. Once Doug lifted his hand and let it fall reluctantly. And once a flash of light seemed to lance out from the gem, brief and vivid as lightning. Imagination, perhaps. . . .

The moon sank. O'Brien stirred and sat up. Arnsen felt the other's eyes upon him. He said softly, "Doug?"

"Yes. I wondered if you were awake."

"Anything wrong?"

"There's a girl. . . ." O'Brien said, and fell silent. After what seemed a long time, he went on: "Remember you said

once that I'd never find a girl perfect enough to love?"

"I remember."

"You were wrong. She's like Deirdre of the Tuatha Dé, like Freya, like Ran of the northern seas. She has red hair, red as dying suns are red, and she's a goddess like Deirdre, too. The Song of Solomon was made for her. 'Thou art all fair, my love; there is no spot in thee. . . . I sleep, but my heart waketh; it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh.' Steve," he said, and his voice broke sharply. "It wasn't a dream. I know it wasn't. She exists, somewhere." He stirred; Arnsen guessed that he was peering at the gray jewel.

There was nothing to say. The frosty brilliance of the stars gleamed through the laced branches above. A curious breath of the unearthly seemed to drop down from the vast abyss of the sky, chilling Arnsen's heart.

In that moment he knew that his friend was ensorcelled.

Superstition—foolishness! He shook the thought away. But all the blood of his Northern ancestors rose up in him, the Vikings who had believed in Queen Ran of Ocean, in trolls and warlocks and the water-maidens who guard sunken gold.

"You're dreaming," he said stubbornly, more loudly than he thought. "It's time we got back to the city. We've been here long enough."

To his surprise, O'Brien agreed. "I think so. I've an idea I want to work on." And the boy shut up like a clam, relaxing almost instantly into peaceful slumber.

But Arnsen did not sleep for a long time. The stars seemed too close and, somehow, menacing. From the black void, eyes watched—not human eyes, for all their loveliness. They were pools of darkest night, and stars glimmered within them.

He wished that O'Brien had not found the meteorite.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Lure of the Crystal

THERE was a change in the boy after that. The dream in his eyes did not fade, but he worked now with an intensity of purpose that had never existed before. Previously, the two had held routine jobs in a huge commercial organization. Without warning O'Brien quit. Arnsen followed suit, feeling the necessity for staying close to the younger man. Yet in the days to come, he amounted to little more than excess baggage.

O'Brien had plans. He borrowed money, scraped together enough to equip a small laboratory, and there he worked long hours. Arnsen helped when he could, though that was not often. He seldom knew exactly what the boy was trying to accomplish.

Once O'Brien said a queer thing. They were in the laboratory, awaiting the result of an experiment, and Arnsen was pacing back and forth nervously.

"I wish I knew what was up, Doug," he said almost with anger. "We've been at this for months now. What do you expect, anyway? You've had no more than an ordinary training in physics."

"The jewel helps," O'Brien said. He took the gem from its suede bag and stared into the cloudy depths. "I catch—thoughts from it."

Arnsen stopped short, staring. His face changed.

"You kidding?" he demanded.

O'Brien flushed. "Okay, try it," he said, thrusting the stone at Arnsen, who took it rather reluctantly. "Shut your eyes and let your mind go blank. That does it, sometimes."

"I—all right." Arnsen squeezed his eyes closed and thought of nothing. Instantly a sick, horrible feeling swept through him—a terrible yearning such as

he had never known before. So might the Assassins feel, deprived of the magic drug that took them to Paradise. An Assassin exiled, cast into outer darkness.

A face swam into view, lovely and strange beyond imagination. Only a glimpse he had, blotted out by rainbow, coruscating lights that darted and flashed like elfin fireflies. Then darkness, once more, and the frightful longing—for what?

He let go of the gem; O'Brien caught it as it fell. The boy smiled wryly.

"I wondered if you'd get it, too. Did you see her?"

"I saw nothing," Arnsen snarled, whirling toward the door. "I felt nothing!"

"Yet you're afraid. Why? I don't fear her, or the stone."

"The more fool you," Arnsen cast over his shoulder as he went out. He felt sick and weak, as though unnamable vistas had opened before him. There was no explanation for what he had felt—no sane explanation, at least.

AND yet there might be, he thought, as he paced about the yard, smoking an endless chain of cigarettes. Telepathy, thought-transference—he had simply caught what was in O'Brien's mind. But it was horrible to know that Doug was feeling that soul-sick craving for the goddess-girl who could not exist.

O'Brien came out of the laboratory, eyes aglow. "It's done," he said, trying to repress his triumph. "We've got the alloy at last. That last treatment did the trick."

Arnsen felt vague apprehension. He tried to congratulate O'Brien, but his tone rang false to his own ears. The boy smiled understandingly.

"It's been good of you to string along, Steve. The thing will pay off now. Only—I'll need a lot of money."

"You'll have a lot. Plenty of companies will be bidding for the process."

O'Brien said, "I want enough to buy a spaceship."



Arnsen whistled. "That's a lot. Even for a small boat." His eyes narrowed. "Why do you want it?"

"I'm going to find Deirdre," the other said simply. "She's out there, somewhere." He tilted his head back. "And I'll find her."

"Space is pretty big."

"I've a guide." O'Brien took out the gray gem. "It wants to go to her, too. It wants to go back. It isn't really alive here on Earth, you know. And I'm not just dreaming, Steve. How do you suppose I managed to make this alloy—the perfect plastic, tougher than beryllium steel, lighter than aluminum, a conductor or non-conductor of electricity depending on the mix . . . You know I couldn't have done it alone."

"You did it."

O'Brien touched the jewel. "I found out how to do it. There's life in here, Steve. Not earthly life, but intelligent. I could understand a little, not much. Enough to work out the alloy. I had to do that first, so I could get money enough to buy a spaceship."

"You don't know how to pilot in space."

"We'll hire a pilot."

"We?"

He grinned. "I'm going to prove my point. You don't believe in Deirdre. But you'll see her, Steve. The jewel will guide us. It wants to go home—so we'll take it there."

Arnsen scowled and turned away, his big shoulders tense with unreasoning anger. He found himself hating the imaginary being O'Brien had created. Deirdre! His fists clenched.

She did not exist. The major planets and satellites had been explored; the inhabited ones held nothing remotely human. Martians were huge-headed, spindle-legged horrors; Venusians were scaled amphibians, living in a state of feudalism and constant warfare. The other planets

. . . the avian, hollow-boned Callistans were closest to humanity, but by no stretch of the imagination could they be called beautiful. And Deirdre was beautiful. Imaginary or not, she was lovely as a goddess.

*Damn her!*

But that did no good. O'Brien was not to be turned from his purpose. With relentless, swift intensity he patented the alloy process, sold it to the highest bidder, and purchased a light space cruiser. He found a pilot, a leather-skinned, tough, tobacco-chewing man named Tex Hastings, who could be depended on to do what he was told and keep his mouth shut.

O'BRIEN chafed with impatience till the cruiser jetted off from the spaceport. The closer he came to achieving his goal, the more nervous he grew. The jewel he kept clenched in one hand most of the time. Arnsen noticed that a dim brilliance was beginning to glow within it as the ship plunged farther out toward the void.

Hastings cast quizzical glances at O'Brien, but did what he was told. He confided in Arnsen.

"We haven't even bothered with charts. It's screwy, but I'm not kicking. Only this isn't piloting. Your friend just points at a star-sector and says, 'Go there.' Funny." He scratched his leathery cheek, faded eyes intent on Arnsen's face.

The big man nodded. "I know. But it isn't up to me, Hastings. I'm supercargo."

"Yeah. Well, if you—want any help—you can count on me. I've seen space-madness before."

Arnsen snorted. "Space-madness!"

Hastings' eyes were steady. "I may be wrong, sure. But anything can happen out here. We're not on Earth, Mr. Arnsen. Earth laws don't apply. Neither does logic. We're on the edge of the unknown."

"I never thought you were superstitious."

"I'm not. Only I've been around, and seen a lot. That crystal Mr. O'Brien lugs around with him—I never saw anything like that before." He waited, but Arnsen didn't speak. "All right, then. I've known things to drift in from Outside. Funny things, damn funny. The Solar System's like a Sargasso. It catches flotsam from other systems, even other universes, for all I know. One rule I've learned—when you can't guess the answer, it's a good idea to stay clear."

Arnsen grunted moodily, staring out a port at the glaring brilliance of the stars.

"Ever heard any stories about jewels like that one?"

Hastings shook his closely-cropped head. "No. But I saw a wreck once, *Sunside of Pluto*—a ship that hadn't been designed in this System. It was deserted; God knows how long it had been out there. Or where it came from. Inside, it wasn't designed for human beings at all. It came from Outside, of course, and Outside is a big place. That jewel, now—" He bit the end off a quid of tobacco.

"What about it?"

"It's an Outside sort of thing. And your friend isn't acting normal. It may add up to trouble. It may not. My point is that I'm going to keep my eyes open, and you'd be wise to do the same thing."

Arnsen went back to the galley and fried eggs, angry with himself for listening to Hastings' hints. He was more than ever uncomfortable. Back on Earth, it had been easier to disbelieve in any unknown powers that the gray jewel might possess; here, it was different. Space was the hinterland, the waste that bordered the cryptic Outside. The forward step in science that threw open the gates of interplanetary travel had, in a way, taken man back in time to a day when he cowered in a cave, fearing the

powers of the dark that lurked in the unknown jungle. Space travel had broken barriers. It opened a door that, perhaps, should have remained forever closed.

On the shores of space strange flotsam was cast. Arnsen's gaze probed out through the port; to the red globe of Mars, the blinding brilliance of the Milky Way, the enigmatic shadow of the Coal Sack. Out there anything might lie. Life grown from a matrix neither Earthly nor even three-dimensional. Charles Fort had hinted at it; scientists had hazarded wild guesses. The cosmic womb of space, from which blasphemous abortions might be cast.

So they went on, day after day, skirting Mars and plunging on into the thick of the asteroid belt. It was uncharted country now, a Sargasso of remnants from an exploded planet that had existed here eons ago. Sounds rang loudly in the narrow confines of the space ship. Nervousness gripped all three of the men. But O'Brien found comfort in the gray crystal. His eyes held a glowing light of triumph.

"We are coming closer, Steve," he said. "Deirdre isn't far away now."

"Damn Deirdre," Arnsen said—but not aloud.

The ship went on, following the blind course O'Brien pointed. Hastings shook his head in grim silence, and trained his passengers in the use of the space-suits. Few of the asteroids had atmosphere, and it became increasingly evident that the destination was an asteroid. . . .

## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Singing Crystals*

THEY found it at last, a jagged, slowly revolving ball that looked incredibly desolate, slag from some solar furnace. The telescope showed no life. The ball had hardened as it whirled,

and the molten rock had frozen instantly, in frigid space, into spiky, giant crags and stalagmites. No atmosphere, no water, no sign of life in any form.

The crystal O'Brien held had changed. A pale light streamed from it. O'Brien's face was tensely eager.

"This is it. Set the ship down, Hastings."

The pilot made a grimace, but bent toward the controls. It was a ticklish task at best, for he had to match the ship's speed to the speed of the asteroid's revolution and circle in, describing a narrowing spiral. Rocket ships are not built for maneuverability. They blast their way to ground and up again through sheer roaring power.

She settled bumpily on the iron-hard surface of the asteroid, and Arnsen looked through the thick visiglass at desolation that struck a chill to his heart. Life had never existed here. It was a world damned in the making, a tiny planetoid forever condemned to unbearable night and silence. It was one with the darkness. The sun glare, in the absence of atmosphere, made sharp contrasts between light and jet shadow. The fingers of rock reached up hungrily, as though searching for warmth. There was nothing menacing about the picture. It was horrible in its lifelessness; that was all.

It was not intended for life. Arnsen felt himself an intruder.

O'Brien met his glance. The boy was smiling, rather wryly.

"I know," he said. "It doesn't look very promising, does it? But this is the place."

"Maybe—a million years ago," Arnsen said skeptically. "There's nothing here now."

Silently O'Brien put the crystal in the giant's hand.

From it a pulse of triumph burst out! Exultation! The psychic wave shook Arnsen with its intensity, wiped doubt

from his face. Invisibly and intangibly, the jewel shouted its delight!

The glow within it waxed brighter.

Hastings said abruptly, "Time to eat. Metabolism's higher in space. We can't afford to miss a meal."

"I'm going out," O'Brien said.

But Arnsen seconded the pilot. "We're here now. You can afford to wait an hour or so. And I'm hungry."

They opened thermocans in the galley and gulped the hot food standing. The ship had suddenly become a prison. Even Hastings was touched with the thirst to know what awaited them outside.

"We circled the asteroid," he said at last, his voice argumentative. "There's nothing here, Mr. O'Brien. We saw that."

But O'Brien was hurrying back to the control cabin.

The suits were cumbersome, even in the slight gravity. Hastings tested the oxygen tanks strapped on the backs, and checked the equipment with stringent care. A leak would be fatal on this airless world.

SO THEY went out through the airlock, and Arnsen, for one, felt his middle tightening with the expectation of the unknown. His breathing sounded loud and harsh within the helmet. The tri-polarized faceplates of the helmets were proof against sunglare, but they could not minimize the horrible desolation of the scene.

A world untouched—more lifeless, more terrible, than frigid Jotunheim, where the Frost Giants dwelt. Arnsen's heavily-leaded boots thumped solidly on the slag. There was no dust here, no sign of erosion, for there was no air.

In O'Brien's hand the crystal flamed with milky pallor. The boy's face was thin and haggard with desire. Arnsen, watching, felt hot fury against the incubus that had worked its dark spell on the other.

He could do nothing—only follow and

wait. His hand crept to the weighted blackjack in his belt.

He saw the hope slowly fade from O'Brien's eyes. Against his will he said, "We're only on the surface, Doug. Underground—"

"That's right. Maybe there's an entrance, somewhere. But I don't know. We may be a thousand years too late, Steve." His gaze clung to the crystal.

It pulsed triumphantly. Pale flame lanced joyously from it. Alive it was; Arnsen had no doubt of that now. Alive, and exulting to be home once more.

Years too late? There was not the slightest trace of any artifact on this airless planetoid. The bleakness of outer space itself cast a veil over the nameless world. The three men plodded on.

In the end, they went back to the ship.

The quick night of the tiny world had fallen. The flaming corona of the sun had vanished; stars leaped into hard, jeweled brilliance against utter blackness. The sky blazed with cold fires.

Lifeless, alien, strange. It was the edge of the unknown.

They slept at last; metabolism was high, and they needed to restore their tissues.

Hours later Arnsen came to half wakefulness. In his bunk he rose on one elbow, wondering what had roused him. His mind felt dulled. He could scarcely tell whether or not he was dreaming.

Across the ship a man's head and shoulders were silhouetted against a port, grotesquely large and distorted. Beyond, the stars blazed.

They moved. They swirled in a witch-dance of goblin lanterns, dancing, whirling, spiraling. Blue, yellow, amethyst and milky pearl, streaks of light golden as the eye of a lioness—and nameless colors, not earthly, made a patterned arabesque as they danced their elfin saraband there in the airless dark.

The dark swallowed Arnsen. Slumber took him. . . .

**S**LOWLY, exhaustedly, he came back to consciousness. His head ached; his tongue was thick. For a moment he lay quietly, trying to remember.

Dream? Arnsen cursed, threw his blankets aside, and sprang from the bunk.

O'Brien was gone. Tex Hastings was gone. Two spacesuits had vanished from their racks.

Arnsen's face twisted into a savage mask. He knew, now, what had been so wrong about his vision of the night. The man he had glimpsed at the port had been *outside* the ship. Doug?

Or Hastings. It did not matter. Both men were gone. He was alone, on the mystery world.

Arnsen set his jaw, gulped caffeine tablets to clear his head, and wrenched a space-suit from its hooks. He donned it, realizing that sunlight once more was pouring down from the distant sun.

Soon he was ready. He went out of the ship, climbed atop it, and stared around. Nothing. The bleak, light-and-shadow pattern of the asteroid stretched to the sharply curving horizon all around. There was nothing else.

Nor were there tracks in the iron-hard slag. He would have to search at random, by pure guesswork. In the low gravity his leap to the ground scarcely jarred him. He gripped the billy at his left and moved forward, toward a high pinnacle in the distance.

He found nothing.

Worst of all, perhaps, was the horrible loneliness that oppressed him. He was too close to Outside now. He was the only living thing in a place never meant for human life. The ghastly bleakness of the asteroid sank like knife-blades into his mind, searing it coldly. There was no relief when he looked up. The distant sun, with its corona, was infinitely far away. The rest of the sky held stars, remote, not twinkling as on Earth, but shining with a cold intensity, a pale fury relentless and eternal. In the light the heat seared him through his armor; in the shadows he shivered with cold.

He went on, sick with hate, seeking the unknown thing that had taken Doug.

The boy was a poet, a dreamer, a fool, easy victim for the terror that haunted the asteroid.

Exhausted, he turned back. His air

supply was running low, and there was no sign of either Doug or Hastings. He headed for the ship. . . .

It was further than he had thought. He sighted it at last, beneath a towering stalagmite that thrust up into the harsh sunlight, and his steps quickened. Why hadn't he thought to bring extra cylinders of oxygen?

The lock stuck under his gloved, awkward fingers; he wrenched at it savagely. At last the great valve swung open. He went through the airlock, opened his visiplat, and took great breaths of the fresher air. Oxygen cylinders were racked near by; he swung several into position on his back and clamped them into place. He gulped more caffeine tablets.

Some instinct made him turn and look back through the port. Over the uneven ground a space-suited figure was staggering, a quarter of a mile distant. . . .

Arnsen's heart jumped. In one swift motion he clamped shut his visiplat and leaped for the airlock. It seemed an eternity before he was outside, leaping, racing, straining toward the man who had fallen helpless, a motionless shadow amid the glare. Doug? Hastings?

**I**T WAS O'Brien, his young face gray with exhaustion and flushed with oxygen-thirst. For a moment Arnsen thought the boy was dead. He thrust one arm under O'Brien's back, lifting him; with the other hand he fumbled at an auxiliary air-hose, thrusting it into the valve in O'Brien's chin-plate as he ripped away the useless hose. Oxygen flowed into the boy's suit.

His nostrils distended as he drank in the precious air. Arnsen watched, teeth bared in a mirthless grin. Good! Color came back to O'Brien's cheeks—a healthy flush under the deep tan. His eyes opened, looked into Arnsen's.

"Couldn't find her," he whispered, his voice hollow through the audiophone.

"Deirdre—I couldn't find her, Steve."

Arnsen said, "What happened, Doug?"

O'Brien took a deep breath and shook his head. "I woke up—something warned me. This." He unclasped his gloved hand and showed the milky crystal. "It knew—she—was close. I felt it. I woke up, went to a port, and saw the—the lights. Hastings was out there. She'd called him, I guess. He was running after the lights. . . . I had sense enough to put on my suit. Then I followed. But Hastings was too fast for me. I followed till I lost him. Miles—hours. Then I saw my oxygen was low. I tried to get back to the ship—"

He tried to smile. "Why did she call Hastings, Steve? Why not me?"

Arnsen felt cold. "We're getting off this asteroid. Right away."

"Leaving Hastings?"

"We—I'll look for him myself. There's life here, malignant life. Plenty dangerous."

"Not evil. No. Beyond evil, beyond good. I'm not going, Steve."

"You're going if I have to hog-tie you."

O'Brien's gloved hand tightened on the milky crystal. "Deirdre!" he said.

And, in the emptiness above them, a glow brightened.

There was no other warning. Arnsen tilted back his head to see—the incredible.

*Deirdre*, he thought. Then, unbidden, another name leaped into his mind.

*Circe!*

Circe of Colchis, goddess of Aea—Circe, Daughter of the Day, who changed men to swine! Circe—more than human!

For this was no human figure that hovered above them. It seemed to be a girl, unclad, reclining in nothingness, her floating hair tinted like the rays of a dying sun. Her body swept in lines of pure beauty, long-limbed and gracious. Her eyes were veiled; long lashes hid them.

There was tenderness in her face, and

aloofness, and alienage. There was beauty there—not entirely human beauty.

Rainbow crystals garmented her.

Some large, some small, multi-faceted gems danced and shimmered against the blackness of the sky and the whiteness of Circe's body. Moon-yellow, amber-gold, blue as the sea off Capri, green as the pine-clad hills of Earth—angry scarlet and lambent dragon-green!

With some distantly sane corner of his mind, Arnsen realized that it was impossible for any living being to exist without protection on the frigid, airless surface of the asteroid. Then he knew that both air and warmth surrounded the girl.

The crystals protected her. He knew that, somehow.

O'Brien twisted in his arms. He saw the girl, tried to spring free. Arnsen gripped him.

The boy swung a jolting blow that jarred the giant's helmet. His mailed glove smashed against the metal plate. Dazed and giddy, Arnsen fell back, clawing at O'Brien. His fingers slipped along the other's arm; he felt something drop into his hand, and clutched it.

Then O'Brien was free. He wrenched an oxygen-tank from Arnsen's shoulders, whirled, and took a step toward the girl. She was further away now. . . .

Arnsen staggered up. His head was throbbing furiously. Too late he realized that, in the scuffle, his air-valve had fouled. He fumbled at it with clumsy fingers—and fell.

His helmet thudded solidly against hard slag. Blackness took him. . . .

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Circe the Immortal*

IT WAS dark when he woke. Oxygen was once more pouring into his suit; he had managed to open the valve before falling. Far above, the dis-

tant, corona-crowned sun flamed against the starry backdrop. The ship lay beneath its crag.

But of O'Brien there was no trace whatever.

After that, something akin to madness came to Arnsen. Again the utter loneliness of space crushed down on him, with suffocating terror. Doug was gone, like Hastings. Where?

He searched, then, and in the days thereafter. He grew haggard and gaunt, drugging himself with stimulants so he could drive himself beyond his limit. Hour after hour he searched the tiny world, squinting against sun-glare, peering into black shadow, shouting O'Brien's name, cursing bitter, searing oaths that sounded futile to his ears. Time dragged on into an eternity. He had been here forever. He could not remember a time when he had not been plodding across the asteroid, watching for a glimpse of a space-suited figure, of dancing jewels of fire, of a slim white body. . . .

Who was she? *What* was she? Not human—no. And the crystals, what were they?

He returned to the ship one day, shoulders slumping, and passed the spot where he had seen the girl. Something on the ground caught his eye. A pearly, skinning gem.

He remembered his scuffle with O'Brien, and the thing that had dropped into his glove.

The jewel, of course. It had lain here, unnoticed, for many revolutions of the asteroid.

He picked it up, staring into the milky depths. A pulse tingled up his arm, fingering into his mind. A pulse of longing—

The girl had appeared when O'Brien summoned her.

Perhaps it would work again. There was no other hope.

But he could not call her Deirdre. He

gripped the hard crystal. His thought probed out, forceful and summoning.

*"Circe!"*

Nothing. The eternal silence, the cold blaze of the stars. . . .

*"Circe!"*

The gem in his hand leaped with eagerness. In emptiness above him a rainbow glitter of coruscating light flamed. The crystals—and, within them, the girl!

She had not changed. Lovely and alien, she lay among her dancing, shining gems, and her lashes still veiled the cryptic depth of her eyes. Arnsen stumbled forward.

"Where's O'Brien?" His voice cracked, harsh and inhuman. "Damn you! Where is he?"

She did not look at him. Her body seemed to recede. The jewels swirled into swift motion about her.

Arnsen lurched on. His mind felt on fire. He whipped out his elastic billy and plunged toward the girl.

She was not there. She had drifted back amid the rainbow crystals.

Arnsen could not overtake her. It was like following a will-o'-the-wisp, a torch of St. Elmo's fire. But he did not take his eyes from the girl. More than once he fell. She was leading him away from the ship, he knew. That did not matter. Not if she also led him to Doug.

What had she done with the boy? He hated her, hated her relentless inhumanity, her incredible beauty. Teeth bared, red-rimmed eyes glaring, Arnsen plunged on in a nightmare race across the face of the silent asteroid.

Hours later, it seemed, she vanished in black shadow under a thrusting pinnacle of slag. Arnsen followed, reeling with fatigue, expecting to cannon into a rock wall. But the darkness remained intangible. The ground sloped down beneath his leaded boots. Suddenly light shone through a cleft at his side.

Pale, warm, liquid light, it drifted up from a slanting corridor in the rock. Far

down the passage Arnsen could see the cloud of dancing flames that marked the girl's crystal attendants. He stumbled on.

Down he went, and down, till at last the passage turned again in the distance. He rounded the bend—and stopped, blinded and dazed.

AS HIS vision adjusted itself, Arnsen made out a pillar of fire that rose from floor to ceiling of the cavern before him. Yet it was not fire. It was something beyond human knowledge. Pure energy, perhaps, wrenched from the locked heart of the atom itself, silently thundering and pouring up like a geyser. The pillar shook. It wavered and rocked, coldly white, intensely brilliant, like a living thing blazing with a power inconceivable.

Walls and floor and roof of the cavern were crusted with jewels. The rainbow crystals clung quivering, thousands of them, some tiny, others huge. They watched.

They were alive.

The girl stood near Arnsen. A score of the jewels pressed against her lovingly. They caressed her. The veiled eyes did not meet Arnsen's. But she lifted her arm.

There was a movement in Arnsen's gloved hand. The milky gem stirred; a pulse of eagerness beat out from it.

It leaped free—raced toward Circe.

She caught it, flung it at the shaking tower of flame.

Into the pillar's blazing heart the crystal darted.

The fires sank—rose again. Spewed forth the jewel.

No longer milky—no longer dulled. It blazed with fantastic brilliance! Vital energy streamed from it; it whirled and danced joyously with sheer delight. It was like a sleeper suddenly awakened.

It spun toward Circe, pulsed madly with the intoxication of life.

The girl rose, featherlight, without gravity, drifting across the cavern to a passage-mouth that gaped in the wall. The jewels clustered around it swayed toward her. Some broke free, rushing in her train.

She vanished into the portal.

The spell that held Arnsen broke. He flung himself after her, too late. Already she was gone. But along the corridor jewels floated, bright, shining, alive.

And suddenly strong arms were around Arnsen. The face of O'Brien was before him. O'Brien, no longer wearing his space-suit, haggard, and yet aflame with a vital something that glowed in his dark eyes. O'Brien—laughing.

"Steve!" His voice shook. "So you followed me. I'm glad. Come in here—it's all right."

The energy went out of Arnsen, leaving him weak and exhausted. He cast one glance up the empty corridor and followed O'Brien through a cave-opening into a little room cut out of solid rock. He felt the other's fingers loosening his helmet, removing the bulky space-suit. Some remnant of caution returned.

"The oxygen—"

"There's air here. It's a place of wonders, Steve!"

There was air. Cool, sweet, and refreshing, it crept into Arnsen's lungs. He looked around. The little cavern was empty, save for dozens of the rainbow crystals clinging to the walls.

They watched alertly.

O'Brien pressed him back, made a quick gesture. A jewel floated forward, hovering over Arnsen's face. He felt water trickling between his lips, and, too exhausted for wonder, swallowed gratefully.

"You need sleep," O'Brien said. "But it's all right, Steve. It's all right, I tell you. You'll hear all about it when you wake up. Time enough then. You'll see Deirdre."



Arnsen tried to struggle up. "I won't—"

O'Brien signalled again. Another gem drifted close. From it a gray breath of cloud floated, perfume-sweet, soporific. It crept into Arnsen's nostrils. . . .

And he slept.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Jewel-Folk

THE room was unchanged when he woke once more. O'Brien sat cross-legged, looking into space. His face had altered, had acquired a new peace and maturity.

He heard Arnsen's slight movement and turned.

"Awake? How do you feel?"

"All right. Well enough to hear explanations," Arnsen said with a flash of temper. "I've been nearly crazy—looking for you all over this damned asteroid. I still think I'm crazy after all this."

O'Brien chuckled. "I can imagine. I felt pretty upset for a while, till the crystals explained."

"The crystals *what?*"

"They're alive, Steve. The ultimate product of evolution, perhaps. Crystalline life. Perfect machines. They can do almost anything. You saw how one created drinkable water, and—well, look here." He beckoned.

A jewel floated close. From it a jet of flame shot, red and brilliant. O'Brien waved his hand; the gem drifted back to its place.

"They can convert energy into matter, you see. It's logical, when you forget about hide-bound science. All matter's made up of energy. It's simply locked in certain patterns—certain matrixes. But inside the atom—the framework of matter—you've got nothing but energy. These crystals build patterns out of basic energy."

Arnsen shook his head. "I don't see it."

O'Brien's voice grew deeper, stronger. "Long ago—very long ago, and in another galaxy, light-years away, there was a civilization far beyond ours. Deirdre is a child of that race. It was—mighty. It passed through our culture-level and went far beyond. Till machines were no longer needed. Instead, the race made the crystals—super-machines, super-robots, with incredible powers locked in them. They supplied all the needs of Deirdre's race."

"Well?"

"This asteroid doesn't belong to our family of planets. It's from that other system, in the neighboring galaxy. It drifted here by accident, I think. I don't quite know the facts of it. It came under the gravitational pull of a comet, or a wandering planet, and was yanked out into space. Eventually it settled into this orbit. Deirdre didn't care. Her mind isn't like ours. The crystals supplied all her needs—made air, gave her food and water. Everything she desired."

Arnsen said, "How long has this been going on?"

"Forever, perhaps," O'Brien said quietly. "I think Deirdre's immortal. At least she is a goddess. Do you remember the crystal I found in that meteorite?"

"Yeah. I remember."

"It came from here. It was one of Deirdre's servants. Somehow it was lost—wandered away. Cosmic dust collected on it as it moved in an orbit around the sun—for thousands of years, perhaps. Iron atoms. At last it was a meteorite, with the crystal at its heart. So it fell on Earth, and I found it, and it wanted to go home, back to Deirdre. It told me that. I felt its thoughts. It drew me here, Steve—"

Arnsen shivered. "It's unbelievable. And that girl isn't human."

"Have you looked into her eyes?"

"No—"

"She isn't human. She is a goddess."

A new thought came to Arnsen. "Where's Tex Hastings? Here?"

"I haven't seen him," O'Brien said. "I don't know where he is."

"Uh-huh. What have you been doing?"

"She brought me here. The crystals took care of me. And Deirdre—" He stood up. "She's summoning me. Wait, Steve—I'll be back."

Arnsen put out a detaining hand; it was useless. O'Brien stepped through the portal and was gone. A dozen crystals swept after him.

ARNSEN followed, refusing to admit that he, too, wanted another glimpse of the girl. Down the passage he went in O'Brien's trail, till the boy vanished from sight. Arnsen increased his pace. He halted on the threshold of the cavern where the pillar of flame swept up to the roof.

He had thought it thundered. It did not—it rushed up in utter silence, shaking and swaying with the surcharged intensity of its power. The walls were crusted with the dancing, watching crystals. Now Arnsen saw that some were dull gray, motionless and dead. These were sprinkled among the others, and there were thousands of them.

O'Brien paced forward—and suddenly Circe was standing with her back to Arnsen, the gems clustering about her caressingly. She lifted her arms, and O'Brien turned.

A great hunger leaped into his face. The girl did not move, and O'Brien came into the circle of her arms.

So swift was her movement that Arnsen did not realize it till too late. The slender arms slid free; Circe stepped back a pace—and thrust O'Brien toward the tower of flame!

He stumbled, off balance, and the crystals leaped from Circe's body. They were no longer a garment. They pressed

against O'Brien, forcing him away, thrusting, pushing. Arnsen cried out and sprang forward—

O'Brien reeled, was engulfed by the flame-pillar. The pouring torrent swallowed him.

Simultaneously from the farther wall a gray, dead jewel detached itself and shot toward the tower of fire. Into the blazing heart it fled and vanished.

The pillar sank down. It pulsed—thundered up again, silently streaming like a torrent toward the roof. And out of its depths the jewel came transformed.

Sentiment, blazing, shining with a myriad hues, it swirled toward Circe. Scintillant with delight, it hovered about her caressingly.

It was alive!

Arnsen cried out, flung himself forward. Circe turned to face him. Still her eyes were hidden; her face was aloofly lovely and inhuman.

The crystal swept toward Arnsen, cupping itself into his outthrust hand. From it a wave of mad delight rushed into his brain.

It was Doug—*it was Doug!* Frozen with sick horror, Arnsen halted, while thoughts poured from the sentient crystal into his mind.

"The—the gray jewel—" His tongue fumbled thickly with the words. He looked up to where the dull gems clung among the shining ones.

"Machines, Steve." The thought lanced into him from the living thing he held. "Robots, not energized. Only one thing can energize them—life-force, vital energy. The flame-pillar does that, through atomic transmutation. It's not earthly science—it was created in another galaxy. There, Deirdre's race had slave people to energize the crystals!"

"Doug—she's killed you—"

"I'm not dead. I'm alive, Steve, more alive than I ever have been. All the crystals—Martians, Venusians, beings

from other systems and galaxies that landed on this asteroid. Deirdre took them for her own. As she took Hastings. As she has taken me. We serve her now—"

The jewel tore free from Arnsen's grip. It fled back to Circe, brushing her lips, caressing her hair. The other gems, scores of them, danced about the girl like elfin lovers.

**A**RNSEN stood there, sick and nauseated. He understood now. The intricate crystal machines were too complicated to work unless life-force energized them. Circe, who took the minds of living beings and prisoned them in silicate robot-forms.

They felt no resentment. They were content to serve.

"Damn you!" Arnsen mouthed, and took a step forward. His fists balled. His fingers ached to curl about the girl's slender neck and snap it with sharp, vicious pressure.

Her lashes swept up. Her eyes looked into his.

They were black as space, with stars prisoned in their depths. They were not human eyes.

Now Arnsen knew why O'Brien had asked if he had looked into Deirdre's eyes. They were her secret and her power. Her human form was not enough to enchant and enslave the beings of a hundred worlds. It was the soul-shaking alienage that looked out of Circe's eyes.

Through those dark windows Arnsen saw the Outside. He saw the gulf between the stars, and no longer did he fear it. For Circe was a goddess.

She was above and beyond humanity. A great void opened between her and the man, the void of countless evolutionary cycles, and a million light-years of space. But across that gulf something reached and met and clung, and Arnsen's senses drowned in a soul-shaking longing for Circe.

It was her power. She could control emotion, as she could control the crystals, and the power of her mind reached into Arnsen and wrung sanity and self from it. Only in outer semblance was she even slightly human. Beside her Arnsen was an animal, and like an animal he could be controlled.

She blazed like a flame before him. He forgot O'Brien, forgot Hastings and Earth and his purpose. Her power clutched him and left him helpless.

The grip upon his mind relaxed. Circe, confident of her triumph, let her eyelids droop.

And Arnsen's mind came back in a long, slow cycle from the gulfs between the stars, drifted leisurely back into the crystalline cavern and the presence of the goddess—and woke.

Not wholly. He would never be whole again. But he felt the crowding vibrations of the countless prisoners in crystal who had gone the way his own feet were walking now, bewildered, drunken and drowning in emotions without name, sacrificing identity without knowing what they sacrificed. Flung into eternity at the whim of a careless goddess to whom all life-forms were one. . . .

She was turning half away as realization came back to Arnsen. She had lifted one round white arm to let the crystals cascade along it. She did not even see him lurch forward.

What he did was without thought. The emotions she had called up in him drowned all thought. He only knew that he must do what he did—he could not yet think why.

The breath hissed between his lips as he stumbled forward and thrust Circe into the flame. . . .

**F**ROM the roof a gray jewel dropped. The tower of fire paused in its rhythm—beat out strongly again. From it a crystal leaped. It hung motion-

less in the air, and Arnsen seized it with shaking fingers. He felt great, racking sobs shake him. His fingers caressed the jewel, pressed it to his lips.

"Circe!" he whispered, eyes blind with tears. "Circe—"

### *Epilogue*

**A**RNSEN had not spoken for a long time. Through the window I could see the Cairo stratoship being wheeled into place. Beyond, the lights of New York glowed yellow.

"And so you came back," I said.

He nodded. "And so I came back. I put on my spacesuit and went back to the ship. The crystals didn't try to stop me. They seemed to be waiting. I don't know for what. I blasted off and headed Sunward. I knew enough to do that. After a while I began to send out S. O. S. signals, and a patrol boat picked me up. That was all."

"Doug—"

"Still there, I suppose. With all the others. Vail, why did I do it? Was I right?" He didn't wait for an answer, but cupped the little shagreen box in his hand. He didn't open it.

"No," he went on, "you can't answer me; nobody can. Circe took the soul out of my body, and I'm empty now. There's no peace for me on Earth, or in the spaceways. And out there, somewhere, on that asteroid, the crystals are waiting—waiting for Circe to come back—"

"But she will never come back. She will stay with me till I die, and then she'll be buried with me in space. In the meantime—Circe doesn't like it here on Earth. So I'm going out again. Sometime, perhaps, I'll take her back Outside, to the unknown place from which she came. I don't know—"

An audio announced the plane for Kansas. Arnsen stood up, gave me a smile from his ravaged face, and without a word went out.

I never saw him again.

I think that beyond Pluto, beyond the farthest limits of the system, a little cruiser may be fleeing into the void, controls set, racing, perhaps, for the darkness of the Coal Sack. In the ship is a man and a jewel. He will die, but I do not think that even in death his hand will relax its grip on that jewel.

And the ship will go on, into the blackness which has no name.