



# The Flame-Worms of Yokku

by Hal K. Wells

**W**ITHIN the central lounge-room of the *Falcon*—space-yacht from earth bound for the cylogen mines of Uranus—three men faced each other in a tense tableau of smoldering menace.

The *Falcon* belonged to the two earthmen in the little group—Eric Larsen and Bart Wheeler. They were interplanetary adventurers, whose close friendship had been sealed by perils mutually shared on every habitable world in the solar system. Both were magnificent physical specimens.

Larsen, blond as his distant Viking forebears, had the lithe strength of a tiger in

his tall body. Wheeler's dark head barely reached Larsen's shoulder, but his stocky body had the spreading shoulders and massive chest of one of earth's ancient wrestlers.

The third member of the trio was Dalo Yok, Martian navigator of the *Falcon*. In any physical combat either Larsen or Wheeler could have broken Dalo Yok's thin body in half. Yet for the moment they stood helplessly at bay before the menace of the acid-gun in the blue-skinned Martian's hand. Its spurting jet of acid-mist would crumble flesh and bone into steaming liquid, like butter melting before the thrust of a white-hot poker.

Larsen's eyes were fixed upon Dalo Yok's face, trying to fathom the reason for this utterly unexpected attack. During the twelve months that the Martian had been their navigator he had always been loyal, quiet, and as coldly efficient as an automaton. Those were the very qualities that made Martians in such great demand as space-navigators. Combat and the other more adventurous phases of exploration were left to the warmer-blooded races of Earth and Venus.

On the present trip Dalo Yok had remained quietly in his quarters in the navigating-room forward until barely two minutes ago, when he had come charging suddenly back into the lounge, confronting Larsen and Wheeler with his acid-gun and gibbering away in guttural Martian like a madman. In that excited flow of words the bewildered earth-men had been able only to make out repeated references to "Yokku, lost dead sun of Ran Yok."

Larsen's gaze studied Dalo Yok's face only briefly before he found that which he was seeking. The reason for the Martian's sudden outburst was clearly written in the slight greenish tinge of his yellow eyes and the peculiar oily sheen of his blue-skinned face. Those physical signs mean only one thing. Dalo Yok had been chewing *luhna* weed, the forbidden narcotic plant of Mars, which for the time being drives its devotees thoroughly and hopelessly insane.

Dalo Yok snarled as he met Larsen's steady gaze. He abruptly shifted his tirade from Martian to English.

"Earth-men, no longer are you masters of the *Falcon*," he boasted. "From now on I shall dictate our course, and it will be a course that but one other man in all history has ever dared travel. We go to seek the lost dead sun of Ran Yok—that fire-ringed world of mystery to which he gave the name of Yokku. I have the charts which everyone believed were lost with Ran Yok's death.

"Do you remember how your scientists of earth laughed down Ran Yok's claims after he came hurtling in, dying and alone, from his great voyage into outer space? They said that his story was the mere fantasy of a dying madman, and the rest of the solar system believed them. Ran Yok's memory became a laughingstock. It is left to me, son of Ran Yok, to vindicate the vanished honor of the House of Yok.

"The chance for that vindication is now at my hand. The *Falcon* shall follow Ran Yok's historic trail, on beyond Uranus, beyond Neptune, and on for two billion miles more through the black void of outer space, until we find again the lost dead sun of Yokku."

The Martian drew a small silken flag from his belt-pouch and shook its folds free for the earth-men to see the intricate monogram of ancient Martian script embroidered in gold against a black background.

"The banner of the mighty House of Yok!" he shouted exultantly. "We shall plant it upon the loftiest peak of Yokku. There it shall proclaim to the entire Universe that Ran Yok was neither liar nor madman, but the greatest space explorer of all worlds and all time!

"But enough of this!" Dalo Yok checked his harangue abruptly. "I am wasting valuable time." He gestured imperiously with the barrel of his weapon toward the closed metal door behind them. "In the cage-room, Earth-men. There you can remain safely out of my way until we land on Yokku. Hurry—I have work to do."

A glance of swift relief passed between Larsen and Wheeler. This was a better break than they had dared hope for. The cage-room—a bare steel cell used occasionally for transporting live animal specimens from other planets—had a new feature of which Dalo Yok knew nothing.

The heavy door of the cage-room locked automatically and until recently could only be opened from the outside. But while the ship was in repair dock on earth a month ago the accidental closing of the door had made a prisoner of Wheeler for nearly twenty-four hours before he was finally found. He and Larsen had promptly done away with any future danger of that kind, by installing auxiliary mechanism that allowed the lock to be opened from the inside by anyone who knew the combination.

Trying to keep from seeming too suspiciously acquiescent, Larsen and Wheeler retreated backward to the cage-room, followed by Dalo Yok with alertly leveled gun. A moment later they were inside the cell and the door clicked shut and locked after them.

Wheeler promptly reached a hand toward the new mechanism to unlock the door, but Larsen quickly stopped him.

“Not too fast, Bart,” he whispered. “Wait till we’re sure Dalo Yok has left the lounge. He’ll have to return to the navigating-room to start the bow-generators for the propulsion rays, if he’s going to swing us around Uranus. When we feel the vibration of the generators starting, we can sneak out and stalk him. Till then, let’s get away from this door. He might take a peek in through the observation-panel and get suspicious.”

Wheeler shrugged his shoulders in reluctant assent to the wisdom of Larsen’s plan, and followed him over to the opposite wall. They sprawled as comfortably as they could on the bare metal floor, silently waiting for the vibration of the generators.

Larsen’s thoughts were busy with memories conjured up by Dalo Yok’s mention of Yokku and Ran Yok. Five years ago—back in the Summer of 2149—both of those names had figured sensationally in the news of the day.

Ran Yok, an obscure Martian astronomer, had advanced the theory that out

in space, far beyond the known limits of the solar system, there was a dwarf companion to the sun—not merely another planet, but a small dark sun warmed by the smoldering remnants of its own original fires, and possibly with portions of its surface-crust habitable by living beings.

It was plausible enough as a theory. A number of men had advanced it before Ran Yok. The great majority of stars have stellar companions, and there was no particular reason why the sun should be a freak hermit. It was admitted that a small solar companion, even though self-luminous to a considerable degree, could exist far out in space and never be discovered telescopically.

But Ran Yok went farther than mere theory. He claimed to have charted the dwarf companion’s actual position, two billion miles beyond Neptune’s orbit. He offered a maze of figures to support his assertion, but after a cursory glimpse at them the leading scientists of both earth and Mars dismissed Ran Yok’s claims as being too vaguely theoretical to even merit consideration.

Ran Yok then tried to induce space explorers to voyage out into the uncharted void in search of the dead sun, but he failed utterly. Space travel within the bounds of the solar system itself was scarcely a century old. To leave the familiar realm of the known planets and go hurtling out two billion miles into the black void of interstellar space in search of a tiny dim world whose very existence had yet to be proved—that was a proposition before which even the hardest of space explorers frankly quailed.

Finally in sheer desperation Ran Yok secured a spaceship himself and with three companions set out. Six months later his ship came roaring in out of the Martian sky and crashed to the ground completely out of control. Opening the wreck, investigators found Ran Yok’s three companions gone and Ran Yok himself a raving madman who

screamed incessantly of “Worms—flame-worms—giant flame-worms of Yokku!”

He was so badly injured that he died while they were removing him from the wreckage. It was believed at that time that his charts and calculations had perished with him. The ship’s log was nearly destroyed in the crash, but one of the few entries remaining legible seemed to indicate that Ran Yok had actually found the sun’s dwarf companion—a strange habitable little world lighted and heated by a ring of fire encircling it—and had given it the name of Yokku.

For a brief time Ran Yok became a popular hero in the sensational press. Then his story gradually crumbled before the cold logic of Earth’s scientists, who pointed out that Ran Yok was a totally inexperienced space explorer, and that there was not a shred of actual proof that his entire story of Yokku was not a mere figment of a madman’s disordered brain.

In the reaction that followed, Ran Yok’s story was completely discredited. The most commonly accepted belief regarding his tragic voyage finally came to be that he had really landed upon some remote part of the solar system—possibly one of the three unexplored moons of Jupiter. Losing his three companions in some tragedy there, his brain had given way under the shock and he had headed back home, a pathetic madman with a “Yokku” obsession.

Wheeler broke in upon Larsen’s thoughts. “Too bad we didn’t know Dalo was old Ran Yok’s son. There must be a taint of lunacy in the whole family.”

“We had no reason to guess it,” Larsen answered. “Yok is a common enough family name on Mars. I wonder how long he’s been brooding over his father’s wrongs and trying to plan a way to seize the *Falcon*? Probably ever since he’s been with us, but never quite got nerve enough up to really start things. Then this trip he indulged in a private little

*luhna jag*, and finally got himself hopped up to the point where he had enough courage to try his hare-brained—”

Larsen broke off abruptly as the metal floor suddenly began the vibration that told of the generators being started. Dalo Yok was safely back in the navigating-room.

The two men quickly rose to their feet and started for the door. They had barely taken the first step when they detected the telltale odor of burnt cinnamon. Their startled glance up at the ventilator high in the forward wall showed a pale amber mist streaming down into the air of the little room. Lethygen—the instantaneous and perfect anaesthetic!

With faces blanched in consternation, they flung themselves forward in a last desperate lunge for the door. But midway in their rush their muscles collapsed under them and they crashed helplessly to the floor.

The lethygen apparatus in the ventilator was for use when animals in the cage-room became too violent. Under the influence of the amber mist a victim could be kept in a state of suspended animation for weeks at a time. The release switch for the lethygen was in the navigating-room. Dalo Yok had apparently turned it on to rid himself of any further bother with his prisoners during the trip.

Larsen’s last conscious thought was one of sheer horror at the situation in which he and Wheeler were now placed—helpless prisoners lying there in a stupor of living-death, while the space-ship hurtled on toward the unknown void of outer space, with only the mad whims of a drug-crazed Martian to direct its flight. Then every thought faded from Larsen’s brain in the final oblivion of the lethygen.

HE struggled slowly, back to consciousness with a vague impression that something was wrong in his surroundings. He opened his eyes and saw that the floor was sloping at an angle

that had slid both himself and Wheeler down against one wall. The Falcon had obviously landed somewhere, and the landing had been so badly botched that the ship now rested nearly over on one side.

Wheeler was already awake. The two men clambered stiffly to their feet. A moment's manipulation of the door's mechanism released the lock. They crept cautiously out and advanced through the deserted lounge toward the navigating-room. Their first glance inside showed them that caution was no longer necessary. Dalo Yok had left the *Falcon*. Both the inner and outer doors of the air-lock were still slightly ajar where the Martian had gone out.

Wheeler entered the air-lock to look outside for Dalo Yok. Larsen made a hurried, anxious examination of the intricate control panels and mechanisms in the navigating-room, to see how badly damaged they had been in the Falcon's landing. It had been the jar of the landing that had put the cage-room lethygen apparatus out of commission, for the switch was still in the "on" position. A few other minor connections in the navigating-room were broken, but Larsen found no serious injury anywhere.

Then suddenly he discovered something that brought a smothered gasp of dismay to his lips. The anode-bar in the central control panel was gone. The six-inch piece of intricately fashioned marabite metal had been clumsily disconnected from its terminals and removed bodily. Without that anode-bar it was impossible to even start the ship's propulsion ray generators.

Larsen silently heaped maledictions upon the absent Martian's head, as he realized what had happened. With drug-inspired cunning, Dalo Yok had made sure that no one would move the ship in his absence. Wherever the Martian now was, the anode-bar was with him.

Wheeler stepped back in through the

air-lock with an expression of frank amazement upon his deeply tanned face.

"Looks like that Martian idiot did just what he threatened to do about taking us to Yokku!" he announced grimly. "There's the ring of fire in the sky that old Ran Yok wrote about in his log, and from what I can see of the stars we're somewhere out about two billion miles beyond Neptune. We must have been in that lethygen sleep for weeks."

"Did you see anything of Dalo Yok?" Larsen demanded anxiously.

"Sure. I looked out just as he was passing out of sight through a gap in the cliffs. He's so full of luhna now he could hardly walk. Why so anxious about him? There's no particular hurry in going after him."

"Oh, yes, there is!" Larsen answered grimly. He pointed to where the anode-bar was missing. "We've no reserve bar to replace that one, and no possible chance of getting one, if we're out beyond reach of solar system supply-depots. We've got to catch Dalo Yok before something happens to both him and the bar. Otherwise we may be marooned here for the rest of our lives."

As he spoke Larsen was already handing down full equipment for their belt-harnesses from the racks in the room. He passed up the acid-guns because their range was too short for effective outdoor work, but included nitrolite pistols, selithium tubes, hand-axes, plenty of reserve ammunition, and even a tin each of concentrated food capsules.

"No telling what we'll run into out there," he commented, "so we'd better go well prepared. Remember what happened to Yokku's first visitors. Three of them were never heard from again, and the fourth returned to Mars a raving madman."

"What about one of us staying here on guard in case Dalo Yok circles back to the ship?" Wheeler asked.

"No use doing that," Larsen decided. "Finding that lunatic will be a two-man job,

I'm afraid. He can't move the ship if he does circle back here. Any fool can dismantle that anode-bar, but it requires an expert to set it properly in place again. Dalo Yok couldn't get it adjusted right in less than a week, even if his wits weren't hopelessly muddled with *luhna*. Come on, let's go."

Stepping out through the air-lock, they swung the heavy outer port shut and locked it behind them, to keep any possible invaders out of the ship during their absence. Larsen caught his breath as he saw for the first time the starkly brilliant beauty of the scene around them. Like Saturn, Yokku was surrounded by a giant ring, but Yokku's ring was one of pulsing fire. Squarely overhead the great sun-arch swept from horizon to horizon in a rainbow ribbon of shimmering flame, with alternate stripes of livid blue, emerald green, and golden yellow.

The *Falcon* had landed near the edge of a vast level area of sparkling white sand that was dotted here and there by clumps of gray feathery vegetation. Some two hundred yards away a range of high cliffs rose, jagged and sheer from the plain, in titanic masses of crystalline stone, whose naked surfaces gleamed like giant sapphires under the varicolored rays of the sun-arch overhead. Nearly opposite the *Falcon's* position the towering ramparts were briefly broken in a narrow pass that gashed straight back into the range.

Wheeler pointed to where the hundred-foot walls towered on either side of the narrow portal. "Dalo Yok went through there," he said. "He hasn't over ten minutes' start on us at the most. With any luck at all, we ought to catch him."

They started out across the fine white sand of the plain. Not a frond of the feathery vegetation stirred in the still, dry air, and there was not the faintest trace of a cloud in the arch-lit sky overhead. Even the air seemed devoid of the tiny dust particles that give planetary skies of the solar system their azure

hue. Yokku's sky, save in the direct vicinity of the sun-arch, was a dark gray-black in which the stars shone clearly visible.

Larsen glanced swiftly at the stars and saw that Wheeler's first report had been correct. There was no doubt that they were on Ran Yok's lost sun. That glowing yellow star down near the horizon was their own sun, now so far distant that it did not show as a disc to the naked eye. Small wonder that Yokku had never been discovered telescopically. Its gravity indicated that it was very little larger than earth itself. It was doubtful if the telescopes of Earth or Mars could discern that tiny radiant speck so far out in space even if they were trained directly on its position.

With every step the men took toward the cliffs, they were impressed anew with the utter strangeness of the flora and fauna around them. The seemingly fragile stems and feathery fronds of the gray vegetation proved upon contact to have the unyielding hardness of hammered metal. There was the same striking metallic suggestion everywhere in the life that teemed in the thickets.

Crab-like crustaceans with armored backs that sparkled as though encrusted with flakes of mica, clambered with spidery legs about through the branches. Through the tops of the thickets weirdly beautiful flying things drifted in graceful flight, looking like golden nuggets set in the center of gossamer webs of spun silver.

Scores of small lizard-like quadrupeds scampered over the sand under the gray bushes, with chunky bodies whose rough surfaces glittered dully like living nuggets of copper. The manner in which the brutes fed was spectacular proof of how utterly different Yokku's life forces were from those of planets in the solar system.

Set in the center of the bulging foreheads on the lizard-thing's hideous heads was a triangular group of three slender rod-like antennae. When a certain frond of the

gray vegetation was selected to be devoured, strange pencil-beams of pale light shot from the tips of the antennae, one ray blue, another yellow, and the third green. As the rays came to a focus on the bit of vegetation a swift and startling reaction occurred. The vegetation glowed in fiery incandescence for a brief second, then vanished in a small dense cloud of swirling oily black vapor shot through with leaping tongues of scarlet flame.

Abruptly the rays from the antennae ceased, and the black vapor swiftly thickened and coalesced into a shapeless blob of viscid ebony. A long slender tongue, three-pronged at the tip in grotesque parody of a hand, darted forth from the lizard-things mouth and snatched the molten black lump with it as it returned and the bony jaws again snapped shut.

The sight recalled to the minds of the men with new force the words Ran Yok had screamed in his last delirium. With the existence of Yokku itself already proved to be actual fact, there was no reason to doubt that Ran Yok had also spoken truth when he had screamed his horror of the mysterious monsters he had called "Flame-worms—giant flame-worms of Yokku."

Wheeler and Larsen searched their surroundings with redoubled vigilance as they neared the crystalline blue cliffs, but they saw nothing more formidable than new droves of the small lizard-creatures that fled in blind panic as they approached. Then they entered the pass and for the moment forgot all thought of Ran Yok's flame-worms as they concentrated their full attention on the problem immediately at hand. Somewhere on the other side of that narrow pass through the cliffs was wandering a hopelessly crazed Martian, carrying with him in his blind flight a tiny bit of metal that represented their only chance of ever leaving this sinisterly beautiful world of metal lizards and crystal mountains.

The gap was a thirty-foot-wide strip of

white sand, that cut straight back for nearly two hundred feet before opening into another valley. Near the center of the pass its narrowness was accentuated by a great overhanging area that bulged out from one of the side walls until it more than half closed the space overhead. Wheeler and Larsen passed the overhanging area, and another sixty feet brought them to the other end of the pass. Before them was a circular shaped level valley, approximately a quarter of a mile in diameter, and almost completely walled in by the jagged mountains that rose in glittering splendor on every side.

Their first glance showed them that if Dalo Yok were still within the valley he was safely trapped. The only exit from the place was through the pass itself. On every other side mighty cliffs of sapphire crystal arose sheer and naked for hundreds of feet.

They searched the valley floor without seeing any trace of the Martian among the many masses of vari-colored crystalline boulders that littered the white sand. Then as they emerged from the shelter of the pass and started forward, Dalo Yak made his presence known with startling suddenness.

They were barely clear of the walls of the pass, when there came the crashing explosion of a nitrolite bullet against the cliff so near them that they were flung to the ground half dazed by the concussion. Scrambling madly to their feet, they succeeded in gaining the shelter of a rock heap just as another bullet burst close behind them.

From their shelter they soon located Dalo Yok's position among the jagged litter of a high heap of rocks near the valley's center.

"It shouldn't be hard to drive him out of there," Larsen commented confidently. "You stalk him from this side. I'll take the other. Whatever you do, be careful not to make a direct hit on him. If that anode-bar ever caught the full blast of a nitrolite bullet it would be wrecked beyond possible repair.

We'll just have to keep trimming the corners around him till we get a shot close enough to stun him. Let's go."

A swift fusillade of nitrolite against Dalo Yok's position drove the Martian to cover, where he lay long enough for Wheeler and Larsen to dart from their own shelter and begin stalking their quarry. Skilled veterans that they were in a score of similar battles upon foreign planets, they set about their task with a methodical efficiency, against which the *luhna*-crazed Martian had little chance.

Wheeler worked along the left wall of the cliffs, Larsen along the right. Dodging from cover to cover, coordinating their attack perfectly to help each other's progress, they swiftly flanked the Martian and drove him from one rock heap to another, inexorably driving him near and nearer the barrier cliffs at the valley's rear. Dalo Yok's answering shots were wild, inaccurate efforts that did no damage other than occasionally to shower one of his attackers with flying sand and rock fragments.

As Dalo Yok retreated the available cover rapidly thinned, until the only rock-masses breaking the level white expanse of the valley floor were occasional isolated boulders scattered here and there like gargantuan jewels. The time inevitably came when Dalo Yok was momentarily caught in the open as he dashed from the shelter of one boulder to another.

It was the chance for which Wheeler and Larsen had been waiting. Their bullets exploded in the sand within a yard of the fleeing Martian. Dalo Yok was flung bodily from his feet by the terrific concussion. He sprawled in a limp heap on the sand, completely stunned.

Wheeler and Larsen started toward the unconscious figure. Wheeler was much the closer of the two. He had nearly reached the Martian while Larsen was still fifty yards away. Then, as Wheeler passed close beside a

huge green boulder that rose from the sand near Dalo Yok, disaster struck with bewildering swiftness.

Before Larsen's startled eyes the great, green boulder for one flashing moment came to life! Its jade front gaped open, releasing blood-red tentacles that lashed out and enveloped Wheeler before he could move. The crimson tissues instantly snapped back inside the cavity with their prisoner, and the crystal front of the boulder again clicked shut like the closing jaws of a steel trap. The entire incident occurred with a lightning speed that stunned Larsen.

A moment of mad racing over the sand brought him to where the great block of opaque green crystal towered as stonily motionless as it had been before Wheeler was engulfed. Roughly oblong in shape and towering upward nearly eight feet, the thing looked somewhat like a great, jade coffin standing on end. Long ribbons of what seemed to be dried vegetation festooned its sides, adding to its appearance of having stood there lifeless and motionless far centuries.

Yet Larsen knew that within that stony shell there was hideous life—life that was probably even now smothering the hopelessly trapped body of Bart Wheeler. The line where the lips had closed was faintly visible in the front wall of the stone. Stepping between the dangling brown ribbons that trailed over the sand at the boulder's base, Larsen snatched the heavy little hand-axe from his belt and savagely attacked the closed lips.

For all the effect his blows had, he might as well have been assailing the metal shell of the *Falcon* itself. The green boulder did not even quiver. Larsen stepped back, baffled for the moment.

Realizing that seconds might mean the difference between life and death for Wheeler, Larsen drove his racing brain in an agony of effort to find a way to pierce the crystal-armored walls. He dared not use nitrolite. Any

explosion violent enough to wreck that stony colossus was almost certain to be fatal to Wheeler as well.

Larsen stepped despairingly forward to make a last attempt at prying open the closed jaws. As he did so he trod upon one of the trailing brown ribbons. The green wall instantly split open for its full height, as if two doors were operated by a hidden spring. Larsen's instinctive leap backward saved him by inches from the tentacles of red flesh that lashed out from the boulder's interior.

The red tissues snapped back within the thing and again the stone jaws clicked shut, but not before Larsen had caught a brief ghastly glimpse of an inner cavity of pulsing red membranes, among which Wheeler's stocky body still struggled feebly.

Swift realization flashed through Larsen's racing brain. He knew now how to make the powerful jaws snap open. Those apparently innocent, brown ribbons were, in reality, cleverly disguised sense-organs for the thing. When an unwary victim trod upon one of the ribbons, the jaws automatically snapped open and the lashing red membranes swept the captive inside, to be digested at the thing's leisure.

Larsen's lips set in a grim straight line as he snatched a selithium tube from his belt. There was one morsel that the thing would not relish. He pressed the switch in the handle. The tube's six-inch selithium tip—used by explorers for both light and warmth—glowed in white-hot incandescence.

Larsen warily trod again upon one of the brown ribbons. The jaws snapped open in instant response. In the fleeting second they remained open Larsen flung the flaming tube between the curtains of membrane deep into the body cavity.

The jaws clicked shut again. For a brief second, as the thing remained stonily motionless, Larsen thought his ruse had failed. Then the crystal came to sudden and frenzied

life. Its festooning ribbons writhed like tortured snakes, while the whole vast bulk shuddered and rocked crazily on its base.

For a moment the evidences of agony continued. Then abruptly the jaws gaped open and remained open while the tortured membranes of the inner cavity retched in a mighty effort to expel the object that was causing excruciating pain. Wheeler's body was ejected with a violence that hurled it ten feet away.

With Wheeler safely clear, Larsen sent a swift burst of nitrolite bullets into the gaping body cavity. When the explosions ceased, nothing remained of the thing but a shattered heap of green crystal fragments and torn scarlet membranes of quivering flesh.

Wheeler, his clothes smeared with the body juices of the creature's maw, was climbing dazedly to his feet as Larsen turned toward him.

"Thanks, Eric," he said weakly, scowling in disgust as he wiped the slime from his face. "About one more minute in that hellish thing and I'd have gone raving crazy. I'm all right now—just messed up a little is all. You'd better take care of that Martian, though. He seems to be coming to."

Heeding Wheeler's warning, Larsen promptly stepped over to where Dalo Yok was groggily rising to his feet. The Martian made no effort to resist as Larsen stripped his belt-gear from him, merely staring at Larsen with lusterless eyes that told of a brain that was hopelessly dazed, now that his first murderous frenzy had passed. Larsen drew a breath of deep relief as he found the anode-bar cached in the Martian's belt-pouch.

"Find it?" Wheeler queried. "Good. Now let's beat it back to the *Falcon*. I've had about all I want of Yokku for all time!"

"I've no craving to linger here any longer," Larsen assented. "Now that we've recovered the anode-bar we might as well—" He broke off abruptly as a startling outcry

came from beyond the cliffs. There was an indescribable metallic quality in that grating roar, as of great sheets of rusty iron rasping together. The sound lasted for nearly ten seconds, then died away into silence.

Larsen's eyes met Wheeler's, the same thought in both their minds. That metallic roar came from the spot where they had left the *Falcon!*

Without a word, they started grimly for the pass, dragging the still dazed Martian along between them. When they at last emerged from the other side of the narrow gap, they stopped short in horrified consternation at the sight which confronted them.

The *Falcon*, resting there upon the sand two hundred yards away, was enmeshed in the coils of two great serpent forms, whose colossal size seemed to dwarf even the graceful cylindroid of the space-yacht. Each of those great serpentine figures was a full sixty feet in length, with bodies nearly six feet in diameter. The lustrous, metallic, bronze-colored scales, that armored their undulating coils, glittered with a savage and sinister beauty under the tri-colored rays of the sun-arch overhead.

They possessed the same peculiar flame-creating equipment that had been noted in the small lizard-like quadrupeds, the three short rigid rod-antennae set in the foreheads of their great ugly heads. One of the giant worms was already focusing the pale rays of green, blue, and yellow upon one of the *Falcon's* closed ports. Where the rays met a swirling cloud of greasy, black vapor began to form.

Staring at the metallic colossi with blanched faces, Wheeler and Larsen realized that they were at last facing the monstrous things of which Ran Yok had babbled in dying delirium. Here were the "flame-worms of Yokku" in all their appalling power and terrible beauty!

The sight of the great serpents seemed

to strike a sudden responsive spark in Dalo Yok's drug-colored brain. Before they realized what he was doing he wrenched himself free from their grip and started racing headlong across the plain toward the *Falcon*, shouting an incoherent gibberish of guttural Martian as he ran.

Larsen drew his nitrolite pistol. "Come on, Bart," he said grimly. "We've no chance to head that flying lunatic off, but we've got to fight our way into the *Falcon* some way before those things fuse the ports with their flame-antennae and bar us completely out."

They started warily toward the ship. Dalo Yak had already covered half the distance. The great metallic worms had seen the oncoming Martian and were deserting the *Falcon* for the moment to investigate.

The progress of their colossal bodies was a miracle of effortless speed, as they writhed forward toward Dalo Yok. Gray vegetation and everything else in their path was crushed ruthlessly beneath them. Drove of the small lizard-quadrupeds fled in blind panic before the monsters' advance.

Dalo York showed no fear even when the on-coming titans were squarely upon him. He stopped and, with fists lifted in pathetically futile defiance, awaited their coming. One of the great worms trained its triple antennae upon the Martian.

Wheeler and Larsen swung their pistols into line to make a last desperate effort to save Dalo Yok, but a new drove of the panic-stricken lizard-things came hurtling against their legs just as they were pressing the triggers. Their shots flew wide. They staggered for a moment, then recovered their balance as the lizards flashed on past them in their mad flight, but the brief delay had meant death for the Martian.

Where his body had stood, before those lethal rays had focussed upon it, there was now a pillar of swirling oily black vapor, shot through with angry flashes of leaping red

flame. Then the rays vanished, and the vapor almost instantly coalesced into a shapeless lump of molten black. The giant worm sent a long ribbon-like yellow tongue flickering out to enclose the black mass with its three-pronged tip and whisk it back into the gaping mouth.

In a revulsion of horror at Dalo Yok's hideous death, Wheeler and Larsen flung nitrolite against the monster's armored bodies until the explosions merged into a single rippling crash. The rod-antennae retracted into the massive skulls until they were little more than pointed bulges, and the deep-set eyes were filmed over with protective plates of transparent crystal, but the giant worm-figures held their ground with stony immobility, even in the face of that crashing bombardment. When Larsen and Wheeler at last ceased their fire they saw to their despair that the bursting nitrolite had had no apparent effect whatever upon the monsters. There was not even a break in the lustrous bronze of their scales.

The instant the nitrolite barrage ceased the worms began gliding warily toward the men. Larsen and Wheeler started slowly giving ground, backing toward the pass. Then the silent pistols seemed to reassure the worms. They began closing in with increasing speed.

Knowing that any attempt at flight would be made futile by the incredible speed of the worms, the men again stood their ground and once more stopped their pursuers for the moment with a crashing fire of nitrolite. This time they concentrated their aim upon the hideous heads, searching every inch of the massive skulls to find a vulnerable spot. They failed utterly. As far as nitrolite was concerned, the giant worms were absolutely invulnerable.

Again they ceased their fire, and again they had to retreat as the worms once more resumed their resistless advance. This time, as their silent pistols threatened a new outburst of

speed from the pursuing worms, Wheeler and Larsen tried different tactics.

Instead of standing their ground and bringing the worms to a complete halt with a concentrated burst of nitrolite, they contented themselves with a slow steady fire against the great heads in an effort to merely slow their pursuers down enough to keep them at a safe distance. Their plan worked for the moment.

The bursting nitrolite, though powerless to wreak any real injury upon the metallic titans, seemed to both annoy and puzzle them. They slowed their advance down to a steady, cautious progress that kept them some fifty feet behind their retreating quarry. There was a leisurely, almost contemptuous, quality in that slow, inexorable advance, as though, in the knowledge of their own resistless power, the monsters were content to bide their time for the moment, until the annoying explosive stings of their puny victims should be exhausted.

Larsen and Wheeler fought doggedly on to hold the worms at bay as long as possible, but they knew that the final result was inevitable. Their ammunition could not last forever. The pass through the cliffs was nearly at their backs now. To go on through it meant being trapped in the cliff-walled valley beyond. Yet escape to either side of the pass entrance was nearly as futile. They were bound to be overwhelmed in the end, anyway.

Better to make a last fighting stand and get it over with. The pass itself was probably as good a place as any. They were at least guarded from any flank attack there. Larsen started to suggest the idea to Wheeler, then abruptly stopped, as thought of the pass brought a sudden inspiration flashing through his brain. There was a possible weapon that might vanquish even the colossal power of the great worms.

"Load your pistol to full capacity, Bart," Larsen snapped tensely. "Then give me all your reserve ammunition. I'm dropping

back into the pass to lay a trap for those brutes. Keep them at bay as long as your ammunition lasts. Then break and run for it back through the pass. I'll be waiting to cover your retreat."

The worms briefly threatened to surge forward as Larsen darted back into the pass, but Wheeler quickly increased his fire to a smashing fusillade that again brought them nearly to a halt. Larsen raced on back to where the wall bulged out in that titanic overhang. Beginning about twenty feet above the floor of the pass, the overhanging area extended for nearly seventy feet along the wall.

Larsen took the first likely spot he found, a shallow cavity in the wall just under the center of the overhang. Dumping all the reserve nitrolite from its safety containers, he made a compact pile of the deadly pellets in the niche. There was enough nitrolite in that small pile of blue-black capsules to annihilate a city. It required only one smashing blow to set the whole thing off.

He hastily packed rock fragments around the explosive to divert as much of its force as possible against the cliff face, leaving a yard-wide hole through which to send the bullet that was to explode the pile.

Just as Larsen finished his hurried job, Wheeler's ammunition was exhausted. Larsen heard Wheeler's fire abruptly cease as Wheeler came racing toward the pass. Larsen dashed twenty yards beyond the mine spot to get as far as possible from the terrific blast of the nitrolite. Then he dropped to one knee to steady his aim as he trained his pistol upon the niche.

Wheeler, his face contorted with effort as he forced every last ounce of speed from his stocky body, was barely beyond reach of the racing worms behind him as he entered the pass. The pursuing titans abruptly slowed down as they saw Larsen waiting ahead of them with leveled pistol. For a moment they came to a full halt, watching Larsen's

motionless figure with shielded eyes, apparently expecting the tormenting hail of nitrolite to start against their faces again.

Wheeler raced on past the overhanging area to safety, and flung himself flat on the ground beyond Larsen in response to Larsen's tersely worded command. The worms' hesitancy vanished as Larsen's pistol remained silent. They started cautiously forward again, their great glittering bodies seeming to nearly fill the pass as they advanced side by side.

Larsen's eyes glowed in satisfaction. The situation was ideal for his plan. With the worms advancing abreast as they now were, he had an excellent chance of getting both of them.

He held his fire for a long tense moment. Then, when both the great ugly heads were squarely under the overhanging cliff wall, he sent a single bullet hurtling accurately into the niche where the nitrolite lay.

There came the sharp report of his bullet exploding, almost instantly blotted out in a terrific blast of fire and crashing chaos that seemed to rock the very universe. Larsen's senses reeled for a brief second in the cataclysmic fury of that blast. Then something crashed against his forehead, bringing swift and complete oblivion.

He struggled back to consciousness to find Wheeler working over him. "A rock fragment bounced off your skull," Wheeler explained briefly. "Why didn't you get farther away before setting off that blast, you idiot?"

"I got as far away as I could and still be able to get a shot inside the niche," Larsen answered. "Did it work?"

"Did it work?" Wheeler retorted. "Boy, you brought a whole mountain down on those brutes! Get up and take a look."

Larsen staggered dizzily to his feet and saw that Wheeler's statement had been no exaggeration. For a distance of nearly thirty

yards the pass was chocked with a chaotic mass of great jagged blocks of blue crystalline rock. Crushed and broken beneath those countless tons of rock and crystal were the bodies of the two giant worms. The only remaining traces of their great metallic figures were a few torn shreds of bronze-scaled flesh among the rock rubble at the edge of the mass.

“We’d better climb on out of this place before the noise of that battle attracts some of the brutes’ little playmates,” Wheeler suggested.

Climbing over the ragged pile of fallen rocks was a precarious task, made doubly so by several remaining masses high up on the shattered cliff wall that threatened to fall at

any minute, but they made it without mishap. Leaving the pass they quickly crossed the plain to the *Falcon*. They opened the entrance port, then stopped and turned for a last look back at the pass.

As they looked they saw one of the precariously balanced masses high on the shattered cliff tremble for a moment, then go crashing down. The great block struck against the crystalline boulders in the pass with a clear ringing impact that the acoustics of the narrow gap magnified until it was oddly like the single chiming note of a giant crystal bell struck in requiem over the shattered bodies of the mighty flame-worms of Yokku.

THE END