120 Pages

Pandora

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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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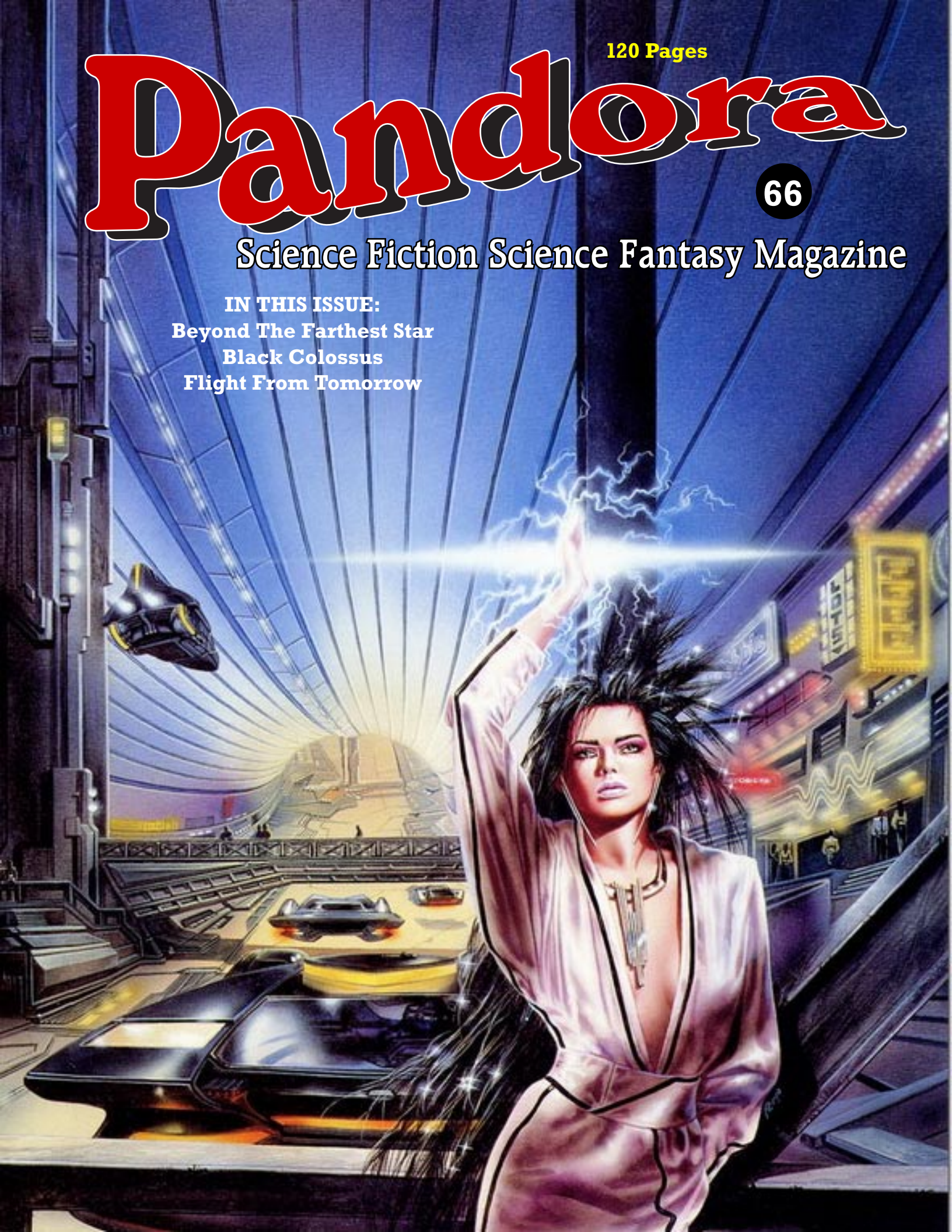

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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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BEYOND THE FARTHEST STAR

Part I: ADVENTURE ON POLODA

FOREWORD

We had attended a party at Diamond Head; and after dinner, comfortable on hikiee and easy-chairs on the lanai, we fell to talking about the legends and superstitions of the ancient Hawaiians. There were a number of old-timers there, several with a mixture of Hawaiian and American blood, and we were the only malihinis-happy to be there, and happy to listen.

Most Hawaiian legends are rather childish, though often amusing; but many of their superstitions are grim and sinister-and they are not confined to ancient Hawaiians, either. You couldn't get a modern kane or wahine with a drop of Hawaiian blood in his veins to touch the bones or relics still often found in hidden burial caves in the mountains. They seem to feel the same way about kahunas, and that it is just as easy to be polite to a kahuna as not-and much safer.

I am not superstitious, and I don't believe in ghosts; so what I heard that evening didn't have any other effect on me than to entertain me. It couldn't have been connected in any way with what happened later that night, for I scarcely gave it a thought after we left the home of our friends; and I really don't know why I have mentioned it at all, except that it has to do with strange happenings; and what happened later that night certainly falls into that category.

We had come home quite early; and I was in bed by eleven o'clock; but I

couldn't sleep, and so I got up about midnight, thinking I would work a little on the outline of a new story I had in mind.

I sat in front of my typewriter just staring at the keyboard, trying to recall a vagrant idea that I had thought pretty clever at the time, but which now eluded me. I stared so long and so steadily that the keys commenced to blur and run together.

A nice white sheet of paper peeped shyly out from the underneath side of the platen, a virgin sheet of paper as yet undefiled by the hand of man. My hands were clasped over that portion of my anatomy where I once had a waistline; they were several inches from the keyboard when the thing happened-the keys commenced to depress themselves with bewildering rapidity, and one neat line of type after another appeared upon that virgin paper, still undefiled by the hand of man; but who was defiling it? Or what?

I blinked my eyes and shook my head, convinced that I had fallen asleep at the typewriter; but I hadn't-somebody, or something, was typing a message there, and typing it faster than any human hands ever typed. I am passing it on just as I first saw it, but I can't guarantee that it will come to you just as it was typed that night, for it must pass through the hands of editors; and an editor would edit the word of God.

Chapter One

I WAS SHOT DOWN behind the German lines in September, 1989. Three Messerschmitts had attacked me, but I spun two of them to earth, whirling funeral pyres, before I took the last long dive.

My name is-well, never mind; my family still retains many of the Puritanical characteristics of our revered ancestors, and it is so publicity-shy that it would consider a death-notice as verging on the vulgar. My family thinks that I am dead; so let it go at that-perhaps I am. I imagine the Germans buried me, anyway.

The transition, or whatever it was, must have been instantaneous; for my head was still whirling from the spin when I opened my eyes in what appeared to be a garden. There were trees and shrubs and flowers and expanses of well-kept lawn; but what astonished me first was that there didn't seem to be any end to the garden-it just extended indefinitely all the way to the horizon, or at least as far as I could see; and there were no buildings nor any people.

At least, I didn't see any people at first; and I was mighty glad of that, because I didn't have any clothes on. I thought I must be dead-I knew I must, after what I had been through. When a machine-gun bullet lodges in your heart, you remain conscious for about fifteen seconds-long enough to realize that you have already gone into your last spin; but you know you are dead, unless a miracle has happened to save you. I thought possibly such a miracle might have intervened to preserve me for posterity.

I looked around for the Germans and for my plane, but they weren't

there; then, for the first time, I noticed the trees and shrubs and flowers in more detail, and I realized that I had never seen anything like them. They were not astoundingly different from those with which I had been familiar, but they were of species I had never seen or noticed. It then occurred to me that I had fallen into a German botanical garden.

It also occurred to me that it might be a good plan to find out if I was badly injured. I tried to stand, and I succeeded; and I was just congratulating myself on having escaped so miraculously, when I heard a feminine scream.

I wheeled about, to face a girl looking at me in open-eyed astonishment, with just a tinge of terror. The moment I turned, she did likewise and fled. So did I; I fled to the concealment of a clump of bushes.

And then I commenced to wonder. I had never seen a girl exactly like her before, nor one garbed as was she. If it hadn't been broad daylight, I would have thought she might be going to a fancy dress ball. Her body had been sheathed in what appeared to be gold sequins; and she looked as though she had either been poured into her costume, or it had been pasted on her bare skin. It was undeniably a good fit. From the yoke to a pair of red boots that flapped about her ankles and halfway to her knees, she had been clothed in sequins.

Her skin was the whitest I had ever seen on any human being, while her hair was an indescribable copper colour. I hadn't had a really good look at her features; and I really couldn't say that she was beautiful; but just the glimpse that I had had assured me that she was no Gorgon.

After I had concealed myself in the shrubbery, I looked to see what had become of the girl; but she was nowhere to be seen. What had become of her? Where had she gone? She had simply disappeared.

All about this vast garden were mounds of earth upon which trees and shrubbery grew. They were not very high, perhaps six feet; and the trees and shrubbery planted around them so blended into the growth upon them that they were scarcely noticeable; but directly in front of me, I noticed an opening in one of them; and as I was looking at it, five men came out of it, like rabbits out of a warren.

They were all dressed alike-in red sequins with black boots; and on their heads were large metal helmets beneath which I could see locks of yellow hair. Their skin was very white, too, like the girl's. They wore swords and were carrying enormous pistols, not quite as large as Tommy guns, but formidable-looking, nonetheless.

They seemed to be looking for someone. I had a vague suspicion that they were looking for me... Well, it wasn't such a vague suspicion after all.

After having seen the beautiful garden and the girl, I might have thought that, having been killed, I was in heaven; but after seeing these men garbed in red, and recalling some of the

things I had done in my past life, I decided that I had probably gone to the other place.

I was pretty well concealed; but I could watch everything they did; and when, pistols in hand, they commenced a systematic search of the shrubbery, I knew that they were looking for me, and that they would find me; so I stepped out into the open.

At sight of me, they surrounded me, and one of them commenced to fire words at me in a language that might have been a Japanese broadcast combined with a symphony concert.

"Am I dead?" I asked.

They looked at one another; and then they spoke to me again; but I couldn't understand a syllable, much less a word, of what they said. Finally one of them came up and took me by the arm; and the others surrounded us, and they started to lead me away. Then it was that I saw the most amazing thing I have ever seen in my life: Out of that vast garden rose buildings! They came up swiftly all around us-buildings of all sizes and shapes, but all trim and streamlined, and extremely beautiful in their simplicity; and on top of them they carried the trees and the shrubbery beneath which they had been concealed.

"Where am I?" I demanded. "Can't any of you speak English, or French, or German, or Spanish, or Italian?"

They looked at me blankly, and spoke to one another in that language that did not sound like a language at all. They took me into one of the buildings that had risen out of the garden. It was full of people, both men and women; and they were all dressed in skintight clothing. "Out of that vast garden rose buildings." They looked at me in amazement and amusement and disgust; and some of the women tittered and covered their eyes with their hands; at last one of my escort found a robe and covered me, and I felt very much better. You have no idea what it does to one's ego to find oneself in the nude among a multitude of people; and as I realized my predicament, I commenced to laugh. My captors looked at me in astonishment; they didn't know that I had suddenly realized that I was the victim of a bad dream: I had not flown over Germany; I had not been shot down; I had never been in a garden with a strange girl... I was just dreaming.

"Run along," I said. "You are just a bad dream. Beat it!" And then I said "Boo!" at them, thinking that that would wake me up; but it didn't. It only made a couple of them seize me by either arm and hustle me along to a room where there was an elderly man seated at a desk. He wore a skintight suit of black spangles, with white boots.

My captors spoke to the man at length. He looked at me and shook his head; then he said something to them; and they took me into an adjoining room where there was a cage, and they put me in the cage and chained me to one of the bars.

Chapter Two

I WILL NOT BORE YOU with what happened during the ensuing six

weeks; suffice it to say that I learned a lot from Harkas Yen, the elderly man into whose keeping I had been placed. I learned, for instance, that he was a psychiatrist, and that I had been placed in his hands for observation. When the girl who had screamed had reported me, and the police had come and arrested me, they had all thought that I was a lunatic.

Harkas Yen taught me the language; and I learned it quickly, because I have always been something of a linguist. As a child, I travelled much in Europe, going to schools in France, Italy and Germany, while my father was the military attach at those legations; and so I imagine I developed an aptitude for languages.

He questioned me most carefully when he discovered that the language I spoke was wholly unknown in his world, and eventually he came to believe the strange story I told him of my transition from my own world to his.

I do not believe in transmigration, reincarnation or metempsychosis, and neither did Harkas Yen; but we found it very difficult to adjust our beliefs to the obvious facts of my case. I had been on Earth, a planet of which Harkas Yen had not the slightest knowledge; and now I was on Poloda, a planet of which I had never heard. I spoke a language that no man on Poloda had ever heard, and I could not understand one word of the five principal languages of Poloda.

After a few weeks Harkas Yen took me out of the cage and put me up in his own home. He obtained for me a brown sequin suit and a pair of brown boots; and I had the run of his house; but I was not permitted to leave it, either while it was sunk below ground or while it was raised to the surface.

That house went up and down at least once a day, and sometimes oftener. I could tell when it was going down by the screaming of sirens, and I could tell why it was down by the detonation of bursting bombs that shook everything in the place.

I asked Harkas Yen what it was all about, although I could pretty well guess by what I had left in the making on Earth; but all he said was: "The Kapars."

After I had learned the language so that I could speak and understand it, Harkas Yen announced that I was to be tried.

"For what?" I asked.

"Well, Tangor," he replied, "I guess it is to discover whether you are a spy, a lunatic, or a dangerous character who should be destroyed for the good of Unis."

Tangor was the name he had given me. It means from nothing, and he said that it quite satisfactorily described my origin; because from my own testimony I came from a planet which did not exist. Unis is the name of the country to which I had been so miraculously transported. It was not heaven and it was certainly not hell, except when the Kapars came over with their bombs.

At my trial there were three judges and an audience; the only witnesses were the girl who had discovered me,

the five policemen who had arrested me, Harkas Yen, his son Harkas Don, his daughter Harkas Yamoda, and his wife. At least I thought that those were all the witnesses, but I was mistaken. There were seven more, old gentlemen with sparse grey hairs on their chins-you've got to be an old man on Poloda before you can raise a beard, and even then it is nothing to brag about.

The judges were fine-looking men in grey sequin suits and grey boots; they were very dignified. Like all the judges in Unis, they are appointed by the government for life, on the recommendation of what corresponds to a bar association in America. They can be impeached, but otherwise they hold office until they are seventy years old, when they can be reappointed if they are again recommended by the association of lawyers.

The session opened with a simple little ritual; everyone rose when the judges entered the courtroom; and after they had taken their places, every one, including the judges said, "For the honour and glory of Unis," in unison; then, I was conducted to the prisoner's dock-I guess you would call it-and one of the judges asked me my name.

"I am called Tangor," I replied.

"From what country do you come?"

"From the United States of America."

"Where is that?"

"On the planet Earth."

"Where is that?"

"Now you have me stumped," I said. "If I were on Mercury, Venus, Mars, or any other of the planets of our solar system, I could tell you; but not knowing where Poloda is, I can only say that I do not know."

"Why did you appear naked in the limits of Orvis?" demanded one of the judges. Orvis is the name of the city into which I had been ruthlessly catapulted without clothes. "Is it possible that the inhabitants of this place you call America do not wear clothing?"

"They wear clothing, Most Honourable Judge," I replied (Harkas Yen had coached me in the etiquette of the courtroom and the proper way to address the judges); "but it varies with the mood of the wearer, the temperature, styles, and personal idiosyncrasies. I have seen ancient males wandering around a place called Palm Springs with nothing but a pair of shorts to hide their hairy obesity; I have seen beautiful women clothed up to the curve of the breast in the evening, who had covered only about one per centum of their bodies at the beach in the afternoon; but, Most Honourable Judge, I have never seen any female costume more revealing than those worn by the beautiful girls of Orvis. To answer your first question: I appeared in Orvis naked, because I had no clothes when I arrived here."

"You are excused for a moment," said the judge who had questioned me; then he turned to the seven old men, and asked them to take the stand. After they had been sworn and he had asked their names, the chief judge asked them if they could locate any such world as the Earth.

"We have questioned Harkas Yen, who has questioned the defendant," replied the oldest-of the seven, "and we have come to this conclusion." After which followed half an hour of astronomical data. "This person," he finished, "apparently came from a solar system that is beyond the range of our most powerful telescopes, and is probably about twenty-two thousand light-years beyond Canapa."

That was staggering; but what was more staggering was when Harkas Yen convinced me that Canapa was identical with the Globular Cluster, N. G. C. 7006, which is two hundred and twenty thousand light-years distant from the Earth and not just a measly twenty-two thousand; and then, to cap the climax, he explained that Poloda is two hundred and thirty thousand light-years from Canapa, which would locate me something like four hundred and fifty thousand light-years from Earth. As light travels 186,000 miles per second, I will let you figure how far Poloda is from Earth; but I may say that if a telescope on Poloda were powerful enough to see what was transpiring on Earth, they would see what was transpiring there four hundred and fifty thousand years ago.

After they had quizzed the seven astronomers, and learned nothing, one of the judges called Balzo Maro to the stand; and the girl I had seen that first day in the garden arose from her seat and came forward to the witness-stand.

After they had gone through the preliminaries, they questioned her about me. "He wore no clothes?" asked one of the judges.

"None," said Balzo Maro.

"Did he attempt to-ah—annoy you in any way?"

"No," said Balzo Maro.

"You know, don't you," asked one of the judges, "that for wilfully annoying a woman, an alien can be sentenced to destruction?"

"Yes," said Balzo Maro; "but he did not annoy me. I watched him because I thought he might be a dangerous character, perhaps a Kapar spy; but I am convinced that he is what he claims to be."

I could have hugged Balzo Maro.

Now the judges said to me. "If you are convicted, you may be destroyed or imprisoned for the duration; but as the war has now gone into its one hundred and first year, such a sentence would be equivalent to death. We wish to be fair, and really there is nothing more against you than that you are an alien who spoke no tongue known upon Poloda."

"Then release me and let me serve Unis against her enemies," I made answer.

Chapter Three

THE JUDGES DISCUSSED my proposition in whispers for about ten minutes; then they put me on probation until the Janhai could decide the matter, and after that they turned me back to the custody of Harkas Yen, who told me later that a great honour had been done, as the Janhai rules Unis; it was like putting my case in the hands of the President of the United States or the King of England.

The Janhai is a commission com-

posed of seven men who are elected to serve until they are seventy years old, when they may be reelected; the word is a compound of jan (seven) and hai (elect). Elections are held only when it is necessary to fill a vacancy on the Janhai, which appoints all judges and what corresponds to our governors of States, who in turn appoint all other State or provincial officials and the mayors of cities, the mayors appointing municipal officers. There are no ward-heelers in Unis.

Each member of the Janhai heads a department, of which there are seven: War; Foreign, which includes State; Commerce; Interior; Education; Treasury and Justice. These seven men elect one of their own number every six years as Elianhai, or High Commissioner. He is, in effect, the ruler of Unis but he cannot serve two consecutive terms. These men, like all the appointees of the Janhai, the provincial governors, and the mayors, must submit to a very thorough intelligence test, which determines the candidate's native intelligence as well as his fund of acquired knowledge; and more weight is given the former than the latter.

I could not but compare this system with our own, under which it is not necessary for a Presidential candidate to be able either to read or write; even a congenital idiot could run for the Presidency of the United States of America, and serve if he were elected.

There were two cases following mine, and Harkas Yen wanted to stay and hear them. The first was a murder case; and the defendant had chosen to be tried before one judge, rather than a jury of five men.

"He is either innocent, or the killing was justifiable," remarked Harkas Yen. "When they are guilty, they usually ask for a jury trial." In a fit of passion, the man had killed another who had broken up his home. In fifteen minutes he was tried and acquitted.

The next case was that of the mayor of a small city who was accused of accepting a bribe. That case lasted about two hours and was tried before a jury of five men. In America, it would possibly have lasted two months. The judge made the attorneys stick to facts and the evidence. The jury was out not more than fifteen minutes, when it brought in a verdict of guilty. The judge sentenced the man to be shot on the morning of the fifth day. This gave him time to appeal the case to a court of five judges; they work fast in Unis.

Harkas Yen told me that the court of appeal would examine the transcript of the evidence and would probably confirm the finding of the lower court, unless the attorney for the defendant made an affidavit that he could bring in new evidence to clear his client. It he made such an affidavit, and the new evidence failed to altar the verdict, the attorney would forfeit his fee to the State and be compelled to pay all court costs for the second trial.

Attorneys' fees, like doctors', are fixed by law in Unis; and they are fair-a rich man pays a little more than a poor man, but they can't take his shirt. If a defendant is very poor, the State em-

ploys and pays any attorney the defendant may select; and the same plan is in effect for the services of doctors, surgeons and hospitalization.

After the second trial I went home with Harkas Yen and his son and daughter. While we were walking to the elevators, we heard the wail of sirens, and felt thee building dropping down its shaft. It was precisely the same sensation I had when coming down in an elevator from the 102nd story of the Empire State Building.

This Justice Building, in which the trials had been held, is twenty stories high; and it dropped down to the bottom of its shaft in about twenty seconds. Pretty soon we heard the booming of antiaircraft guns and the terrific detonation of bombs.

"How long has this been going on?" I asked.

"All my life, and long before," replied Harkas Yen.

"This war is now in its one hundred and first year," said Harkas Don, his son. "We don't know anything else," he added with a grin.

"It started about the time your grandfather was born," said Harkas Yen. "As a boy and young man, your great-grandfather lived in a happier world. Then men lived and worked upon the surface of the planet; cities were built above-ground; but within ten years after the Kapars launched their campaign to conquer and rule the world, every city in Unis and every city in Kapar and many cities on others of the five continents were reduced to rubble.

"It was then that we started building these underground cities that can be raised or lowered by the power we derive from Omos." (The Sun of Poloda.) "The Kapars have subjugated practically all the rest of Poloda; but we were, and still are, the richest nation in the world. What they have done to us, we have done to them; but they are much worse off than we. Their people live in underground warrens protected by steel and concrete; they subsist upon the foods raised by subjugated peoples who are no better than slaves, and work no better for hated masters; or they eat synthetic foods, as they wear synthetic clothing. They themselves produce nothing but the material of war. So heavily do we bomb their land that nothing can live upon its surface; but they keep on, for they know nothing but war. Periodically we offer them an honourable peace, but they will have nothing but the total destruction of Unis."

Chapter Four

HARKAS YEN INVITED ME to remain in his home until some disposition of my case was made. His place is reached by an underground motorway a hundred feet beneath the surface. Throughout the city many buildings were still lower, those more than a hundred feet high having entrances at this hundred-foot level as well as at ground level when they were raised. The smaller buildings were raised and lowered in shafts like our elevator shafts. Above them are thick slabs of armor plate which support the earth and top soil in which grow the trees, shrubbery, and grass which hide

them when they are lowered. When these smaller buildings are raised they come in contact with their protecting slabs and carry them on up with them.

After we left the centre of the city I noticed many buildings built permanently at the hundred-foot level; and when I asked Harkas Yen about this, he explained that when this underground city had first been planned it was with the expectation that the war would soon be over and that the city could return to normal life at the surface; that when all hope of the war's end was abandoned, permanent underground construction was commenced.

"You can imagine," he continued, "the staggering expense involved in building these underground cities. The Janhai of Unis ordered them commenced eighty years ago and they are nowhere near completed yet. Hundreds of thousands of the citizens of Unis live in inadequate shelters, or just in caves or in holes dug in the ground. It is because of this terrific expense that, among other things, we wear these clothes we do. They are made of an indestructible plastic which resembles metal. No person, not even a member of the Janhai, may possess more than three suits, two for ordinary wear and one suit of working-clothes, for all productivity must go into the construction of our cities and the prosecution of the war. Our efforts cannot be wasted in making clothes to meet every change in style and every silly vanity, as was true a hundred years ago. About the only things we have conserved from the old days, which are not absolutely essential to the winning of the war or the construction of our cities, are cultural. We would not permit art, music, and literature to die."

"It must be a hard life," I suggested, "especially for the women. Do you have no entertainment nor recreation?"

"Oh, yes," he replied, "but they are simple; we do not devote much time to them. Our forebears who lived a hundred years ago would think it a very dull life, for they devoted most of their time to the pursuit of pleasure, which was one of the reasons that the Kapars prosecuted the war so successfully at first, and why almost every nation on Poloda, with the exception of Unis, was either subjugated or exterminated by the Kapars."

The motorcars of Unis are all identical, each one seating four people comfortably, or six uncomfortably. This standardization has effected a tremendous saving in labor and materials. Power is conducted to their motors by what we would call "radio" from central stations where the sun's energy is stored. As this source of power is inexhaustible, it has not been necessary to curtail the use of motors because of war needs. This same power is also used for operating the enormous pumps which are necessary for draining this underground world, the mechanism for raising the buildings, and the numerous air-conditioning plants which are necessary.

I was simply appalled by contemplation of the cost of the excavating and constructing of a world beneath the surface of the ground, and when I men-

tioned this to Harkas Yen he said: "There never has been enough wealth in the world to accomplish what we have accomplished, other than the potential wealth which is inherent in the people themselves. By the brains of our scientists and our leaders, by the unity of our people, and by the sweat of our brows we have done what we have done."

Harkas Yen's son and daughter, Don and Yamoda, accompanied us from the Hall of Justice to their home. Yamoda wore the gold sequins and red boots that all unmarried women wear, while Don was in the blue of the fighting forces. He and I have hit it off well together, both being flyers; and neither of us ever tire of hearing stories of the other's world. He has promised to try to get me into the flying service; and Harkas Yen thinks that it may be possible, as there is a constant demand for flyers to replace casualties, of which there are sometimes as many as five hundred thousand in a month.

These figures staggered me when' Harkas Don first mentioned them, and I asked him how it was the nation had not long since been exterminated.

"Well, you see," he said, "they don't average as high as that. I think the statistics show that we lose on an average of about a hundred thousand men a month. There are sixteen million adult women in Unis and something like ten million babies are born every year. Probably a little better than half of these are boys. At least five million of them grow to maturity, for we are a very healthy race. So, you see, we can afford to lose a million men a year."

"I shouldn't think the mothers would like that very well," I said.

"Nobody does," he replied, "but it is war; and war is our way of life."

"In my country," I said, "we have what are known as pacifists, and they have a song which is called, 'I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier.'"

Harkas Don laughed and then said what might be translated into English as: "If our women had a song, it would be, 'I didn't raise my son to be a slacker.'"

Harkas Yen's wife greeted me most cordially when I returned. She has been very lovely to me and calls me her other boy. She is a sad-faced woman of about sixty, who was married at seventeen and has had twenty children, six girls and fourteen boys. Thirteen of the boys have been killed in the war. Most of the older women of Unis, and the older men, too, have sad faces; but they never complain nor do they ever weep. Harkas Yen's wife told me that their tears were exhausted two generations ago.

I didn't get into the flying service, I got into the Labor Corps-and it was labor spelled with all capitals, not just a capital L! I had wondered how they repaired the damage done by the continual bombing of the Kapars and I found out the first day I was inducted into the Corps. Immediately following the departure of the Kapar bombers we scurried out of holes in the ground like worker ants. There were literally thousands of us, and we were accompanied by trucks, motorized shovels, and scrapers, and an ingenious tool for lifting a tree out of the ground with the

earth all nicely balled around the roots.

First, we filled the bomb craters, gathering up such plants and trees as might be saved. The trucks brought sod, trees, and plants that had been raised underground; and within a few hours all signs of the raid had been obliterated.

It seemed to me like a waste of energy; but one of my fellow workers explained to me that it had two important purposes-one was to maintain the morale of the Unisans, and the other was to lower the morale of the enemy.

We worked nine days and had one day off, the first day of their ten-day week. When we were not working on the surface we were working below-ground; and as I was an unskilled laborer, I did enough work in my first month in the Labor Corps to last an ordinary man a lifetime. On my third day of rest, which came at the end of my first month in the Labor Corps, Harkas Don, who was also off duty on that day, suggested that we go to the mountains. He and Yamoda got together a party of twelve. Three of the men were from the Labor Corps, the other three were in the fighting service. One of the girls was the daughter of the Elianhai, whose office is practically that of the President. Two of the others were daughters of members of the Labor Corps. There was the daughter of a university president, the daughter of an army officer, and Yamoda. The sorrow and suffering of perpetual war has developed a national unity which has wiped out all class distinction.

Orvis stands on a plateau entirely surrounded by mountains, the nearest of which are about a hundred miles from the city; and it was to these mountains that we took an underground train. Here rise the highest peaks in the range that surrounds Orvis; and as the mountains at the east end of the plateau are low and a wide pass breaks the range at the west end, the Kapars usually come and go either from the east or west; so it is considered reasonably safe to take an outing on the surface at this location. I tell you it was good to get out in the sun again without having to work like a donkey! The country there was beautiful; there were mountain streams and there was a little lake beside which we planned to picnic in a grove of trees. They had selected the grove because the trees would hide us from any chance enemy flyers who might pass overhead. For all of the lives of four generations they have had to think of this until it is second nature for them to seek shelter when in the open.

Someone suggested that we swim before we eat. "I'd like nothing better," I said, "but I didn't bring any swimming things."

"What do you mean?" asked Yamoda.

"Why, I mean clothes to swim in-a swimming-suit."

That made them all laugh. "You have your swimming suit on," said Harkas Don, "you were born in it."

I had lost most of my tan after living underground for a couple of months; but I was still very dark compared with these white-skinned people who have

lived like moles for almost four generations, and my head of black hair contrasted strangely with the copper hair of the girls and the blond hair of the men.

The water was cold and refreshing and we came out with enormous appetites. After we had eaten we lay around on the grass and they sang the songs that they liked.

Time passed rapidly and we were all startled when one of the men stood up and announced that we had better leave for home. He had scarcely finished speaking when we heard the report of a pistol shot and saw him pitch forward upon his face, dead.

The three soldiers with us were the only ones who bore arms. They ordered us to lie flat on our faces, and then they crept forward in the direction from which the sound of the pistol-shot had come. They disappeared in the underbrush and shortly afterward we heard a fusillade of shots. This was more than I could stand, lying there like a scared rabbit while Harkas Don and his companions were out there fighting; so I crawled after them.

I came up to them on the edge of a little depression in which were perhaps a dozen men behind an outcropping of rock which gave them excellent protection. Harkas Don and his companions were concealed from the enemy by shrubbery, but not protected by it. Every time an enemy showed any part of his body one of the three would fire. Finally the man behind the extreme right end of the barrier exposed himself for too long; and we were so close that I could see the hole the bullet made in his forehead before he fell back behind the barrier. Beyond the point where he fell thick trees and underbrush concealed the continuation of the outcropping, if there was more, and this gave me an idea which I immediately set to work to put into execution.

I slipped backward a few yards into the underbrush and then crawled cautiously to the right. Taking advantage of this excellent cover, I circled around until I was opposite the left flank of the enemy; then I wormed myself forward on my belly inch by inch until through a tiny opening in the underbrush I saw the body of the dead man and, beyond it, his companions behind their rocky barrier. They were all dressed in drab, grey uniforms that looked like coveralls, and they wore grey metal helmets that covered their entire heads and the backs of their necks, leaving only their faces exposed. They had crossed shoulder belts and a waist-belt filled with cartridges in clips of about fifteen. Their complexions were sallow and unwholesome; and though I knew that they must be young men, they looked old; and the faces of all of them seemed set in sullen scowls. They were the first Kapars that I had seen, but I recognized them instantly from descriptions that Harkas Don and others had given me.

The pistol of the dead man (it was really a small machine-gun) lay at his side, and there was almost a full clip of cartridges in it. I could see them plainly from where I lay. I pushed forward another inch or two and then one of the

Kapars turned and looked in my direction. At first I thought that he had discovered me, but I presently saw that he was looking at his dead comrade. Then he turned and spoke to his companions in a language I could not understand; it sounded to me something like the noise that pigs make when they eat. One of them nodded to him, evidently in assent, and he turned and started to walk toward the dead man. That looked like the end of my little scheme, and I was just about to take a desperate chance and make a lunge for the pistol when the Kapar foolishly permitted his head to show above the top of the barrier, and down he went with a bullet in his head. The other Kapars looked at him and jabbered angrily to one another; and while they were jabbering I took the chance, extended my arm through the underbrush, grasped the pistol and dragged it slowly toward me.

The Kapars were still arguing, or scolding, or whatever they were doing, when I took

careful aim at the nearest of them and commenced firing. Four of the ten went down before the others realized from what direction the attack was coming. Two of them started firing at the underbrush where I was hidden, but I brought them down, and then the other four broke and ran. In doing so they were exposed to the fire of Harkas Don and his companions, as well as of mine, and we got every one of them.

I had crawled out from the underbrush in order to my friends would get me before they recognized me; so I called Harkas Don by name and presently he answered.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Tangor," I replied. "I'm coming out; don't shoot."

They came over to me then, and we went in search of the Kapar ship, which we knew must be near by. We found it in a little natural clearing, half a mile back from the place where we had shot them. It was unguarded; so we were sure that we had got them all.

"We are ahead twelve pistols, a lot of ammunition, and one ship," I said.

"We will take the pistols and ammunition back," said Harkas Don, "but no one can fly this ship back to Orvis without being killed."

He found a heavy tool in the ship and demolished the motor.

Our little outing was over; and we went home, carrying our one dead with us.

Chapter Five

THE NEXT DAY, while I was loading garbage on a train that was going to the incinerator, a boy in yellow sequins came and spoke to the man in charge of us, who turned and called to me. "You are ordered to report to the office of the Commissioner for War," he said; "this messenger will take you."

"Hadn't I better change my clothes?" I asked. "I imagine that I don't smell very good."

The boss laughed. "The Commissioner for War has smelled garbage before," he said, "and he doesn't like to be kept waiting." So I went along with the yellow-clad messenger to the big building called the House of the Janhai,

which houses the government of Unis.

I was conducted to the office of one of the Commissioner's assistants.

He looked up as we entered. "What do you want?" he demanded.

"This is the man for whom you sent me," replied the messenger.

"Oh, yes, your name is Tangor. I might have known by that black hair. So you're the man who says that he comes from another world, some 548,000 light-years from Poloda."

I said that I was. Poloda is four hundred and fifty thousand light-years from Earth by our reckoning, but it is 547,500 Polodian light-years, as there are only three hundred days in a Polodian year; but what's one hundred thousand light-years among friends, anyway?

"Your exploit of yesterday with the Kapars has been reported to me," said the officer, "as was also the fact that you were a flyer in your own world, and that you wish to fly for Unis."

"That is right, sir," I said.

"In view of the cleverness and courage which you displayed yesterday, I am going to permit you to train for the flying force-if you think you would prefer that to shovelling garbage," he added with a smile.

"I have no complaint to make about shovelling garbage, or anything else that I am required to do in Unis, sir," replied. "I came here an uninvited guest, and I have been treated extremely well. I would not complain of any service that might be required of me."

"I am glad to hear you say that," he said. Then he handed me an order for a uniform, and gave me directions as to where and to whom to report after I had obtained it.

The officer to whom I reported sent me first to a factory manufacturing pursuit-plane motors, where I remained a week; that is, nine working days. There are ten assembly lines in this plant and a completed motor comes off of each of them every hour for ten hours a day. As there are twenty-seven working days in the Polodan month, this plant was turning out twenty-seven hundred motors a month.

The science of aerodynamics, whether on Earth or on Poloda, is governed by certain fixed natural laws; so that Polodan aircraft do not differ materially in appearance from those with which I was familiar on Earth, but their construction is radically different from ours because of their development of a light, practically indestructible, rigid plastic of enormous strength. Huge machines stamp out fuselage and wings from this plastic. The parts are then rigidly joined together and the seams hermetically sealed. The fuselage has a double wall with an air space between, and the wings are hollow.

On completion of the plane the air is withdrawn from the space between the walls of the fuselage and from the interior of the wings, the resulting vacuum giving the ship considerable lifting power, which greatly increases the load that it can carry. They are not lighter than air, but when not heavily loaded they can be manoeuvred and landed very slowly.

There are forty of these plants, ten devoted to the manufacture of heavy bombers, ten to light bombers, ten to combat planes, and ten to pursuit planes, which are also used for reconnaissance. The enormous output of these factories, over a hundred thousand planes a month, is necessary to replace lost and worn-out planes, as well as to increase the fighting force, which is the aim of the Unisan government.

As I had in the engine factory, I remained in this factory nine days as an observer, and then I was sent back to the engine factory and put to work for two weeks; then followed two weeks in the fuselage and assembly plants, after which I had three weeks of flying instruction, which on several occasions was interrupted by Kapar raids, resulting in dogfights in which my instructor and I took part.

During this period of instruction I was studying the four of the five principal languages of Poloda with which I was not familiar, giving special attention to the language of the Kapars. I also spent much time studying the geography of Poloda.

All during this period I had no recreation whatsoever, often studying all night until far into the morning; so when I was finally awarded the insignia of a flyer, I was glad to have a day off. As I was now living in barracks, I had seen nothing of the Harkases; and so, on this, my first free day, I made a beeline for their house.

Balzo Maro, the girl who had been first to discover me on my arrival on Poloda, was there, with Yamoda and Don. They all seemed genuinely glad to see me and congratulated me on my induction into the flying service.

"You look very different from the first time I saw you," said Balzo Maro, with a smile; and I certainly did, for I was wearing the blue sequins, the blue boots, and the blue helmet of the fighting service.

"I have learned a number of things since I came to Poloda," I told her, "and after having enjoyed a swimming party with a number of young men and women, I cannot understand why you were so shocked at my appearance that day."

Balzo Maro laughed. "There is quite a difference between swimming and running around the city of Orvis that way," she said, "but really it was not that which shocked me. It was your brown skin and your black hair. I didn't know what sort of wild creature you might be."

"Well, you know when I saw you running around in that fancy-dress costume in the middle of the day, I thought there might be something wrong with you."

"There is nothing fancy about this," she said. "All the girls wear the same thing. Don't you like it-don't you think it's pretty?"

"Very," I said. "But don't you tire of always wearing the same thing? Don't you sometimes long for a new costume."

Balzo Maro shook her head. "It is war," she said: the universal answer to

almost everything on Poloda.

"We may do our hair as we please," said Harkas Yamoda, "and that is something."

"I suppose you have hairdressers who are constantly inventing new styles," I said.

Yamoda laughed. "Nearly a hundred years ago," she said, "the hairdressers, the cosmeticians, and the beauticians went into the field to work for Unis. What we do, we do ourselves."

"You all work, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes," said Balzo Maro, "we work that we may release men for men's work in the fighting service and the Labor Corps."

I could not but wonder what American women would do if the Nazis succeeded in bringing total war to their world. I think that they would arise to the emergency just as courageously as have the women of Unis, but it might be a little galling to them at first to wear the same indestructible costume from the time they got their growth until they were married; a costume that, like Balzo Maro's, as she told me, might be as much as fifty years old, and which had been sold and resold time and time again as each wearer had no further use for it. And then, when they were married, to wear a similar, destructible silver costume for the rest of their lives, or until their husbands were killed in battle, when they would change to purple. Doubtless, Irene, Hattie Carnegie, Valentina, and Adrian, would all commit suicide, along with Max Factor, Perc Westmore, and Elizabeth Arden. It was rather a strain on my imagination to visualize Elizabeth Arden hoeing potatoes.

"You have been here several months now," said Harkas Don; "how do you like our world by this time?"

"I don't have to tell you that I like the people who live in it," I replied. "Your courage and morale are magnificent. I like your form of government, too. It is simple and efficient, and seems to have developed a unified people without criminals or traitors."

Harkas Don shook his head. "You are wrong there," he said. "We have criminals and we have traitors, but unquestionably far fewer than in the world of a hundred years ago, when there was a great deal of political corruption, which always goes hand in hand with crimes of other kinds. There are many Kapar sympathizers among us, and some full-blooded Kapars who have been sent here to direct espionage and sabotage. They are constantly dropping down by night with parachutes. We get most of them, but not all. You see, they are a mixed race and there are many with white skins and blond hair who might easily pass for Unisans."

"And there are some with black hair, too," said Harkas Yamoda, as she looked at me meaningly, but softened it with a smile.

"It's strange I was not taken for a Kapar, then, and destroyed," I said.

"It was your dark skin that saved you," said Harkas Don, "and the fact that you unquestionably understood no language on Poloda. You see, they made

some tests, of which you were not aware because you did not understand any of the languages. Had you, you could not have helped but show some reaction."

Later, while we were eating the noonday meal, I remarked that for complete war between nations possessing possibly millions of fighting ships, the attacks of the Kapars since I had been in Unis had not seemed very severe.

"We have lulls like this occasionally," said Harkas Don. "It is as though both sides became simultaneously tired of war, but one never can tell when it will break out again in all its fury."

He scarcely had ceased speaking when there came a single, high-pitched shrieking note from the loudspeakers that are installed the length and breadth of the underground city. Harkas Don rose. "There it is now," he said. "The general alarm. You will see war now, Tangor, my friend. Come."

We hurried to the car, and the girls came with us to bring the car back after they had delivered us to our stations.

Hundreds of ramps lead to the surface from the underground airdromes of Orvis, and from their camouflaged openings at the surface planes zoom out and up at the rate of twenty a minute, one every three seconds, like winged termites emerging from a wooden beam.

I was flying a ship in a squadron of pursuit planes. It was armed with four guns. One I fired through the propeller shaft, there were two in an after cockpit, which could be swung in any direction, and a fourth which fired down through the bottom of the fuselage.

As I zoomed out into the open the sky was already black with our ships. The squadrons were forming quickly and streaking away toward the southwest, to meet the Kapars who would be coming in from that direction. And presently I saw them, like a black mass of gnats miles away.

Chapter Six

OF COURSE, at the time that I had been killed in our little war down on Earth, there had not been a great deal of aerial activity; I mean, no great mass flights. I know there was talk that either side might send over hundreds of ships in a single flight, and hundreds of ships seemed a lot of ships; but this day, as I followed my squadron commander into battle, there were more than ten thousand ships visible in the sky; and this was only the first wave. We were climbing steadily at terrific speed in an effort to get above the Kapars, and they were doing the same. We made contact about twelve miles above the ground, and the battle soon after developed into a multitude of individual dogfights, though both sides tried to keep some semblance of formation.

The atmosphere of Poloda rises about one hundred miles above the planet, and one can fly up to an altitude of about fifteen miles without needing an oxygen tank.

In a few minutes I became separated from my squadron and found myself engaged with three light Kapar combat planes. Ships were falling all around us, like dead leaves in an autumn storm;

and so crowded was the sky with fighting ships that much of my attention had to be concentrated upon avoiding collisions; but I succeeded in maneuvering into a commanding position and had the satisfaction of seeing one of the Kapars roll over and plummet toward the ground. The other two were now at a disadvantage, as I was still above them and they turned tail and started for home. My ship was very much faster than one of theirs, and I soon overhauled the laggard and shot him down, too.

I could not but recall my last engagement, when I shot down two of three Messerschmitts before being shot down myself; and I wondered if this were to be a repetition of that adventure-was I to die a second time?

I chased the remaining Kapar out over the enormous bay that indents the west coast of Unis. It is called the Bay of Hagar. It is really a gulf for it is fully twelve hundred miles long. An enormous island at its mouth has been built up with the earth excavated from the underground workings of Unis, pumped there through a pipe that you could drive an automobile through. It was between the coast and this island that I got on the tail of this last Kapar. One gunner was hanging dead over the edge of the cockpit, but the other was working his gun. Above the barking of my own gun I could hear his bullets screaming past me; and why I wasn't hit I shall never know, unless it was that that Kapar was Poloda's worst marksman.

Evidently I wasn't much better, but finally I saw him slump down into the cockpit; and then beyond his ship I saw another wave of Kapar flyers coming, and I felt that it was a good time to get away from there. The Kapar pilot that I had been pursuing must have seen the new wave at the same time that I did, for he turned immediately after I had turned and pursued me. And now my engine began to give trouble; it must have been hit by the last spurt from the dead gunner's piece. The Kapar was overhauling me, and he was getting in range, but there was no answering fire from the gunners in my after cockpit. I glanced back to find that they were both dead.

Now I was in a fix, absolutely defenseless against the ship pulling up behind me. I figured I might pull a fast one on him; so I banked steeply and dived beneath him; then I banked again and came up under his tail with my gun bearing on his belly. I was firing bullets into him when he dived to escape me, but he never came out of that dive.

To the west the sky was black with Kapar ships. In a minute they would be upon me; it was at that moment that my engine gave up the ghost. Ten or eleven miles below me was the coast of Unis. A thousand miles to the northeast was Orvis. I might have glided 175 or 180 miles toward the city, but the Kapars would long since have been over me and some of their ships would have been detached to come down and put an end to me. As they might already have sighted me, I put the ship into a spin in the hope of misleading them into thinking I had been shot down. I spun down for a short distance and then went into a straight dive, and I can tell you that

spinning and diving for ten or eleven miles is an experience.

I brought the ship down between the coast and a range of mountains, and no Kapar followed me. As I climbed out of the pilot's cockpit, Bantor Han, the third gunner, emerged from the ship.

"Nice work," he said, "we got all three of them."

"We had a bit of luck," I said, "and now we've got a long walk to Orvis."

"We'll never see Orvis again," said the gunner.

"What do you mean?" I demanded.

"This coast has been right in the path of Kapar flights for a hundred years. Where we are standing was once one of the largest cities of Unis, a great seaport. Can you find a stick or stone of it now? And for two or three hundred miles inland it is the same; nothing but bomb craters."

"But are there no cities in this part of Unis?" I asked.

"There are some farther south. The nearest is about a thousand miles from here, and on the other side of this range of mountains. There are cities far to the north, and cities east of Orvis; but it has never been practical to build even underground cities directly in the path of the Kapar flights, while there are other sections less affected."

"Well," I said, "I am not going to give up so easily. I will at least try to get to Orvis or some other city. Suppose we try for the one on the other side of these mountains. At least we won't be in the path of the Kapars every time they come over."

Bantor Han shook his head again. "Those mountains are full of wild beasts," he said. "There was a very large collection of wild animals in the city of Hagar when the war broke out over a hundred years ago. Many of them were killed in the first bombing of the city; but all their barriers were broken down, and the survivors escaped. For a hundred years they have ranged these mountains and they have multiplied. The inhabitants of Polan, this city you wish to try to reach, scarcely dare stick their heads above-ground because of them. No," he continued, "we have no complaint to make. You and I will die here, and that will mean that we have lost four men and one pursuit plane to their three light combat ships and, possibly, twenty men. It is a mighty good day's work, Tangor, and you should be proud."

"That is what I call patriotism and loyalty," I said; "but I can be just as patriotic and loyal alive as dead, and I don't intend even to think of giving up yet. If we are going to die anyway, I can see no advantage in sitting here and starving to death."

Bantor Han shrugged. "That suits me," he said. "I thought I was as good as dead when you tackled those three combat planes, and the chances are that I should have been killed in my next engagement. I have been too lucky; so, if you prefer to go and look for death instead of waiting for it to come to you, I'll trot along with you."

So Bantor Han and I took the weapons and ammunition of our dead comrades and entered the Mountains of

Loras.

I was amazed by the beauty of these mountains after we entered them. We were about eight or nine hundred miles north of the Equator and the climate was similar to the south temperate zone of Earth in summertime. Everything was green and beautiful, with a profusion of the strange trees and plants and flowers which are so like those of Earth, and yet so unlike. I had been cooped up for so long in the underground city of Orvis that I felt like a boy lust released from a schoolroom for a long vacation. But Bantor Han was uneasy. "Of course, I was born here in Unis," he said, "but being on the surface like this is to me like being in a strange world, for I have spent practically all of my life either underground or high up in the air."

"Don't you think that this is beautiful?" I asked him.

"Yes," he said, "I suppose it is, but it is a little bewildering; there is so much of it. There is a feeling of rest, and quiet, and security down there in underground Orvis; and I am always glad to get back to it after a flight."

I suppose that was the result of living underground for generations, and that Bantor Han had developed a complex the exact opposite of claustrophobia. Possibly it has a name, but if it has I never heard it. There were streams in the mountains, and little lakes where we saw fish playing, and the first animal that we saw appeared to be some sort of an antelope. It was armed with long, sharp horns, and looked something like an addax. It was standing with its forefeet in shallow water at the edge of a lake, drinking, when we came upon it; and as it was upwind from us it did not catch our scent. When I saw it I drew Bantor Han into the concealment of some bushes.

"There is food," I whispered, and Bantor Han nodded.

I took careful aim and brought the animal down with a single bullet through the heart. We were busy carving a few steaks from it when our attention was attracted by a most unpleasant growl. We looked up simultaneously.

"That's what I meant," said Bantor Han. "The mountains are full of creatures like that."

Like most of the animals that I have seen on Poloda, it did not differ greatly from those on Earth; that is, they all have four legs, and two eyes, and usually a tail. Some are covered with hair, some with wool, some with fur, and some are hairless. The Polodian horse has three-toed feet, and a little horn in the centre of his forehead. The cattle have no horns, nor are their hoofs cloven, and in fighting they bite and kick like an earthly horse. They are not horses and cows at all, but I call them by earthly names because of the purposes for which they are used. The horses are the saddle animals and beasts of burden, and occasionally are used for food. The cattle are definitely beef animals, and the cows give milk. The creature that was creeping toward us with menacing growls was built like a lion and striped like a zebra, and it was about the size of an African lion. I drew my pistol from its

holster, but Bantor Han laid a hand upon my arm.

"Don't shoot it," he said, "you may make it angry. If we go away and leave this meat to it, it probably will not attack us."

"If you think I am going to leave our supper to that thing, you are very much mistaken," I said. I was amazed at Bantor Han! I knew that he was no coward. He had an excellent record in the fighting service and was covered with decorations. But everything here on the ground was so new and strange to him. Put him twelve miles up in the air, or a hundred feet underground, and he wouldn't have backed down for man or beast.

I shook his hand off and took careful aim just as the creature charged, with a charge for all the world like an African lion. I let him have it straight in the heart-a stream of four or five bullets, and they almost tore him apart, for they were explosive bullets.

Civilized, cultured, as these Unisans are, they use both dumdum and exploding projectiles in their small arms. When I commented on the fact to one of them, he replied: "This is the complete war that the Kapars asked for."

"Well," exclaimed Bantor Han, "you did it, didn't you?" He seemed surprised that I had killed the beast.

We cooked and ate the antelope steaks, and left the rest where it lay, for we had no means of carrying any of it with us. We felt much refreshed, and I think that Bantor Han felt a little safer now that he had found that we were not going to be eaten up by the first carnivorous animal that we met.

It took us two days to cross through this mountain range. Fortunately for us, we had tackled it near its extreme northern end, where it was quite narrow and the mountains were little more than large hills. We had plenty to eat, and were only attacked twice more by dangerous animals, once by a huge creature that resembled a hyena, and again by the beast that I have named "the lion of Poloda." The two nights were the worst, because of the increased danger of prowling carnivora. The first we spent in a cave, and took turns standing watch, and the second night we slept in the open; but luck was with us and nothing attacked us.

As we came down out of a canyon on the east side of the mountains we saw that which brought us to a sudden stop-a Kapar plane not half a mile from us, on the edge of a little ravine that was a continuation of the canyon we were in. There were two men beside the plane, and they seemed to be digging in the ground.

"Two more Kapars for our bag, Bantor Han," I said.

"If we get them and destroy their plane, we can certainly afford to die," he said.

"You're always wanting to die," I said reproachfully. "I intend to live." He would have been surprised had he known I was already dead, and buried somewhere 548,-000 light-years away! "And furthermore, Bantor Han," I added, "we are not going to destroy that plane; not if it will fly."

We dropped into the ravine and made our way down toward the Kapars. We were entirely concealed from above, and if we made any noise it was drowned out by the noise of the little brook running over its rocky bed.

When I thought we had gone far enough, I told Bantor Han to wait and then I clambered up the side of the ravine to reconnoitre. Sure enough, I had hit the nail right on the head. There were the two Kapars digging away, scarcely a hundred feet from me. I crouched down and beckoned Bantor Han to come up.

There is no chivalry in complete war, I can assure you. Those two Kapars didn't have a chance. They were both dead before they knew there was an enemy within a thousand miles. Then we went to see what they had been at, and found a box beside the hole which they had been excavating. It was a metal box with a waterproof top, and when we opened it we found that it contained two complete blue uniforms of the Unis Fighting Corps, together with helmets, boots, ammunition belts, daggers, and guns. There were also directions in the Kapar language for entering the city of Orvis and starting numerous fires on a certain night about a month later. Even the location of the buildings that might most easily be fired, and from which the fires would spread most rapidly, was given.

We put the box aboard the ship and climbed in.

"We'll never make it," said Bantor Han. "We're bound to be shot down."

"You're certainly determined to die, aren't you?" I said, as I started the engine and taxied for the takeoff.

Chapter Seven

I KNEW THAT THE SOUND-DETECTORS were already giving warning of the approach of a ship, and of a Kapar ship, too; for our ships are equipped with a secret device which permits the detectors to recognize them. The signal that it gives can be changed at will, and is changed every day, so that it really amounts to a countersign. Watchers must be on the alert for even a single ship, but I was positive that they would be looking up in the air; so I hugged the ground, flying at an elevation of little more than twenty feet.

Before we reached the mountains which surround Orvis, I saw a squadron of pursuit planes come over the summit.

"They are looking for us," I said to Bantor Han, who was in the after cockpit, "and I'm going right up where they can see us."

"You'll come down in a hurry," said Bantor Han.

"Now, listen," I said; "as soon as we get where you can distinguish the gunners and pilots and see that their uniforms are blue, you stand up and wave something, for if you can see the colour of their uniforms, they can see the colour of yours; and I don't believe they will shoot us down then."

"That's where you're mistaken," said Bantor Han; "lots of Kapars have tried to enter Orvis in uniforms taken from our dead pilots."

"Don't forget to stand up and wave,"

I said.

We were getting close now, and it was a tense moment. I could plainly see the blue uniforms of the gunners and the pilots; and they could certainly see Bantor Han's and mine, and with Bantor Han waving to them they must realize that here was something unusual.

Presently the Squadron Commander ordered his ships to take position above us; and then he commenced to circle us, coming closer and closer. He came so close at last that our wings almost touched.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Bantor Han and Tangor," I replied, "in a captured Kapar ship."

I heard one of his gunners say: "Yes, that's Bantor Han. I know him well."

"Land just south of the city," said the Squadron Commander. "We'll escort you down; otherwise you'll be shot down.."

I signalled that I understood, and he said, "Follow me."

So we dropped down toward Orvis near the apex of a V-formation, and I can tell you I was mighty glad to pile out of that ship with a whole skin.

I told the Squadron Commander about what we had seen the two Kapars doing, and turned the box over to him. Then I went and reported to my own Squadron Commander.

"I never expected to see you again," he said. "What luck did you have?"

"Twenty-two Kapars and four ships," I replied.

He looked at me a bit skeptically. "All by yourself?"

"There were three in my crew," I said. "I lost two of them, and my ship."

"The balance is still very much in your favor," he said. "Who else survived?"

"Bantor Han," I replied.

"A good man," he said. "Where is he?"

"Waiting outside, sir."

He summoned Bantor Han. "I understand you had very good luck," he said.

"Yes sir," said Bantor Han; "four ships and twenty-two men, though we lost two men and our ship."

"I shall recommend decorations for both of you," he said, and dismissed us. "You may take a day off," he said, "you have earned it; and you, too, Bantor Han."

I lost no time in setting off to the Harkases. Harkas Yamoda was in the garden, sitting staring at the ground and looking very sad; but when I spoke her name she leaped to her feet and came running toward me, laughing almost hysterically. She seized me by both arms.

"Oh, Tangor," she cried, "you did not come back, and we were sure that you had been shot down. The last that anyone saw of you, you were fighting three Kapar combat planes alone."

"Harkas Don," I asked, "-he came back?"

"Yes; now we shall all be so thankful and so happy-until next time."

I had dinner with Yamoda and her father and mother, and after dinner

Harkas Don came. He was as surprised and delighted as the others to see me.

"I didn't think you had a chance," he said. "When a man is gone three days, he is reported dead. You were very fortunate."

"How did the battle go, Harkas Don?" I asked.

"We thrashed them as usual," he said. "We have better ships, better pilots, better gunners, better guns, and I think that now we have more ships. I don't know why they keep on coming over. They sent over two waves of five thousand ships each this time, and we shot down at least five thousand of them. We lost a thousand ships and two thousand men. The others parachuted to safety."

"I don't see why they keep it up," I said. "I shouldn't think they'd be able to get men to fight when they know they are just going to their death for no good reason."

"They are afraid of their masters," replied Harkas Don, "and they have been regimented for so many years that they have no initiative and no individuality. Another reason is that they wish to eat. The leaders live like princes of old; the army officers live exceptionally well; and the soldiers get plenty to eat, such as it is. If they were not fighting men, they would be laborers, which, in Kapara, is the equivalent of being a slave. They get barely enough food to subsist upon and they work from sixteen to eighteen hours a day; yet their lot is infinitely better than that of the subjugated peoples, many of whom have been reduced to cannibalism."

"Let's talk of something pleasant," said Yamoda.

"I think I see something pleasant to talk about, coming," I said, nodding toward the entrance to the garden where we were sitting. It was Balzo Maro.

She came in with a brilliant smile, which I could see was forced. Harkas Don met her and took both her hands and pressed them, and Yamoda kissed her. I had never seen such demonstrations of affection before, for though those three people loved one another, and each knew it, they made no show of that love in front of others.

They evidently saw that I was puzzled, and Balzo Maro said, "My youngest brother died gloriously in the battle;" and after a pause she said: "It is war." I am not terribly emotional, but a lump came in my throat and tears to my eyes. These brave people! How they have suffered because of the greed for power, the vanity, and the hate of a man who died almost a hundred years ago!

They did not speak of Balzo Maro's loss again; they never would speak of it again. It is war.

"So you have tomorrow free," said Harkas Don. "Perhaps you are fortunate."

"Why?" I asked.

"Tomorrow we raid Kapara with twenty thousand ships," he said. "It is a reprisal raid."

"And then they will send over forty thousand ships in reprisal," said Harkas Yamoda; "and so it goes on forever."

"I shall not have a free day tomor-

row," I said.

"Why, what do you mean?" asked Yamoda.

"I am going out with my squadron," I said. "I don't see why the commander didn't tell me."

"Because you have earned a day to yourself," said Harkas Don.

"Nevertheless, I am going," I said.

Chapter Eight

WE TOOK OFF THE NEXT MORNING just before dawn, thousands of planes of all descriptions. We were to fly at an altitude of twelve miles, and as we gained it, four of Omos' eleven planets were visible in the heavens, the nearest less than six hundred thousand miles away. It was a gorgeous sight indeed. Around Omos, the sun of this system, revolve eleven planets, each approximately the size of our Earth. They are spaced almost exactly equidistant from one another; the path of their orbits being a million miles from the centre of the sun, which is much smaller than the sun of our own solar system. An atmospheric belt seventy-two hundred miles in diameter revolves with the planets in the same orbit, thus connecting the planets by an air lane which offers the suggestion of possible interplanetary travel; this Harkas Yen told me might have been achieved long since had it not been for the war.

Ever since I came to Poloda my imagination has been intrigued by thoughts of the possibilities inherent in a visit to these other planets, where conditions almost identical with those on Poloda must exist. On these other planets there may be, and probably are, animal and plant life not dissimilar from our own, but which there is little likelihood that we shall ever see while complete war is maintained upon Poloda.

I had a long flight ahead of me, and speculating on interplanetary travel helped to pass the time away. Kapara lies on the continent of Epris, and Ergos, the capital of Kapara, is some eleven thousand miles from Orvis; and as our slowest planes have a speed of five hundred miles an hour, we were due over Ergos a couple of hours before dawn of the following day. As all three of my gunners are relief pilots, we relieved each other every four hours. Bantor Han was not with me on this flight, and I had three men with whom I had not previously flown. However, like all of the men of the fighting forces of Unis, they were efficient and dependable.

After crossing the coastline of Unis we flew three thousand and five hundred miles over the great Karagan Ocean, which extends for eighty-five hundred miles from the northern continent of Karis to the southernmost tip of Unis, where the continents of Epris and Unis almost meet.

At an altitude of twelve miles there is not much to see but atmosphere. Occasional cloud banks floated beneath us, and between them we could see the blue ocean, scintillating in the sunlight, looking almost as smooth as a millpond; but the scintillation told us that high seas were running.

About noon we sighted the shore of Epris; and shortly after, a wave of Kapar

planes came to meet us. There were not more than a thousand of them in this wave; and we drove them back, destroying about half of them, before a second and much larger wave attacked us. The fighting was furious, but most of our bombers got through. Our squadron was escorting one of the heavy bombers, and we were constantly engaged in fighting off enemy attack planes. My plane was engaged in three dogfights within half an hour, and I was fortunate to come through with the loss of only one man, one of the gunners in the after cockpit. After each fight I had to open her up wide and overtake the bomber and her convoy.

The cruising speed of these pursuit ships is around five hundred miles an hour, but they have a top speed of almost six hundred miles. The bombers cruise at about five hundred, with a top speed around five hundred and fifty.

Of the two thousand light and heavy bombers that started out with the fleet on this raid, about eighteen hundred got through to Ergos; and there, believe me, the real fighting commenced. Thousands upon thousands of Kapar planes soared into the air, and our fleet was augmented by the arrival of the survivors of the dogfights.

As the bombers unloaded their heavy bombs we could first see the flames of the explosions and then, after what seemed a long while, the sound of the detonation would come to us from twelve miles below. Ships were falling all about us, ours and the Kapars. Bullets screamed about us, and it was during this phase of the engagement that I lost my remaining after cockpit gunner.

Suddenly the Kapar fleet disappeared, and then the antiaircraft guns opened up on us. Like the antiaircraft guns of Unis, they fire a thousand-pound shell twelve or fifteen reties up into the air, and the burst scatters fragments of steel for five hundred yards in all directions. Other shells contain wire nets and small parachutes, which support the nets in the air to entangle and foul propellers.

After unloading our bombs, some seven or eight thousand tons of them, upon an area of two hundred square miles over and around Ergos, we started for home, circling to the east and then to the north, which would bring us in over the southernmost tip of Unis. I had two dead men in the after cockpit; and I hadn't been able to raise the gunner in the belly of the ship for some time.

As we circled over the eastern tip of Epris, my motor failed entirely, and there was nothing for me to do but come down. Another hour and I would have been within gliding distance of the tip of Unis, or one of the three islands which are an extension of this tip, at the southern end of the Karagan Ocean.

The crews of many ships saw me gliding down for a landing, but no ship followed to succor me. It is one of the rules of the service that other ships and men must not be jeopardized to assist a pilot who is forced down in enemy country. The poor devil is just written off as a loss. I knew from my study of Polodan geography that I was beyond the southeastern boundary of Kapara, and over

the country formerly known as Punos, one of the first to be subjugated by the Kapars over a hundred years before.

What the country was like I could only guess from rumors that are current in Unis, and which suggest that its people have been reduced to the status of wild beasts by years of persecution and starvation.

As I approached the ground I saw a mountainous country beneath me and two rivers which joined to form a very large river that emptied into a bay on the southern shoreline; but I found no people, no cities, and no indication of cultivated fields. Except along the river courses, where vegetation was discernible, the land appeared to be a vast wilderness. The whole terrain below me appeared pitted with ancient shell-craters, attesting the terrific bombardment to which it had been subjected in a bygone day.

I had about given up all hope of finding a level place on which to make a landing, when I discovered one in the mouth of a broad canyon, at the southern foot of a range of mountains.

As I was about to set the ship down I saw figures moving a short distance up the canyon. At first I could not make out what they were, for they dodged behind trees in an evident effort to conceal themselves from me; but when the ship came to rest they came out, a dozen men armed with spears and bows and arrows. They wore loincloths made of the skin of some animal, and they carried long knives in their belts. Their hair was matted and their bodies were filthy and terribly emaciated.

They crept toward me, taking advantage of whatever cover the terrain afforded; and as they came they fitted arrows to their bows.

Chapter Nine

THE ATTITUDE OF THE reception committee was not encouraging. It seemed to indicate that I was not a welcome guest. I knew that if I let them get within bow range, a flight of arrows was almost certain to get me; so the thing to do was keep them out of bow range. I stood up in the cockpit and levelled my pistol at them, and they immediately disappeared behind rocks and trees.

I wished very much to examine my engine and determine if it were possible for me to repair it, but I realized that as long as these men of Punos were around that would be impossible. I might go after them; but they had the advantage of cover and of knowing the terrain; and while I might get some of them, I could not get them all; and those that I did not get would come back, and they could certainly hang around until after dark and then rush me.

It looked as though I were in a pretty bad way, but I finally decided to get down and go after them and have it out. Just then one of them stuck his head up above a rock and called to me. He spoke in one of the five languages of Unis that I had learned.

"Are you a Unisan?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"Then do not shoot," he said. "We will not harm you."

"If that is true," I said, "go away."

"We want to talk to you," he said. "We want to know how the war is going and when it will end."

"One of you may come down," I said, "but not more."

"I will come," he said, "but you need not fear us."

He came down toward me then, an old man with wrinkled skin and a huge abdomen, which his skinny legs seemed scarcely able to support. His grey hair was matted with twigs and dirt, and he had the few grey hairs about his chin which can note old age on Poloda.

"I knew you were from Unis when I saw your blue uniform," he said. "In olden times the people of Unis and the people of Punos were good friends. That has been handed down from father to son for many generations. When the Kapars first attacked us, the men of Unis gave us aid; but they, too, were unprepared; and before they had the strength to help us we were entirely subjugated, and all of Punos was overrun with Kapars. They flew their ships from our coastlines, and they set up great guns there; but after a while the men of Unis built great fleets and drove them out. Then, however, it was too late for our people."

"How do you live?" I asked.

"It is hard," he said. "The Kapars still come over occasionally, and if they find a cultivated field they bomb and destroy it. They fly low and shoot any people they see, which makes it difficult to raise crops in open country; so we have been driven into the mountains, where we live on fish and roots and whatever else we can find."

"Many years ago," he continued, "the Kapars kept an army stationed here, and before they were through they killed every living thing that they could find-animals, birds, men, women, and children. Only a few hundred Punosans hid themselves in the inaccessible fastnesses of this mountain range, and in the years that have passed we have killed off all the remaining game for food faster than it could propagate."

"You have no meat at all?" I asked.

"Only when a Kapar is forced down near us," he replied. "We hoped that you were a Kapar, but because you are a Unisan you are safe."

"But now that you are so helpless, why is it that the Kapars will not permit you to raise crops for food?"

"Because our ancestors resisted them when they invaded our country and that aroused the hatred upon which Kapars live. Because of this hatred they tried to exterminate us. Now they fear to let us get a start again, and if we were left alone there would be many of us in another hundred years; and once again we would constitute a menace to Kapara."

Harkas Yen had told me about Punos and I had also read something about the country in the history of Poloda. It had been inhabited by a virile and intelligent race of considerable culture. Its ships sailed the four great oceans of Poloda, carrying on commerce with the people of all the five continents. The central portion was a garden spot, supporting countless farms, where grazed

countless herds of livestock; and along its coastline were its manufacturing cities and its fisheries. I looked at the poor old devil standing before me: this was what the warped, neurotic mind of one man could do to a happy and prosperous nation!

"Won't your ship fly?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "I want to examine the motor and find out."

"You'd better let us push it into the canyon for you," he said. "It can be better hidden there from any Kapars who may fly over."

There was something about the poor old fellow that gave me confidence in him, and as the suggestion was a wise one, I accepted it. So he called his companions and they came down out of the canyon—eleven, dirty, scrawny, hopeless-looking creatures of all ages. They tried to smile at me, but I guess the smiling muscles of their ancestors had commenced to atrophy generations before.

They helped me push the ship into the canyon, where, beneath a large tree, it was pretty well hidden from above. I had forgotten the dead men aboard the ship; but one of the Punosans, climbing up on the wing, discovered the two in the after cockpit; and I knew that there must be another one in the belly of the ship. I shuddered as I thought what was passing through the creature's mind.

"There are dead men in the ship," he said to his fellows; and the old man, who was the leader, climbed up on the wing and looked; then he turned to me.

"Shall we bury your friends for you?" he asked, and a weight of fear and sorrow was lifted from my shoulders.

They helped me remove the cartridge belts and uniforms from the bodies of my friends and then they scooped out shallow graves with their knives and their hands, and laid the three bodies in them and covered them again.

When these sad and simple rites were ended, I started taking my engine down, the twelve Punosans hanging around and watching everything I did. They asked many questions about the progress of the war, but I could not encourage them to think that it would soon be over, or ever.

I found the damage that had been done to my engine, and I knew that I could make the necessary repairs, for we carried tools and spare parts; but it was getting late and I could not complete the repairs until the following day.

The old man realized this and asked me if I would come to their village and spend the night there.

I could have slept in the ship, but purely out of curiosity I decided to accept his invitation.

Before we started for his village he touched me timidly on the arm. "May we have the guns and ammunition of your dead friends?" he asked. "If we had them, we might kill some more Kapars."

"Do you know how to use them?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "we have found them on the bodies of Kapars who crashed here, and those whom we killed, but we have used up all the ammunition."

I followed them up the canyon and then along a narrow, precipitous trail

that led to a tiny mesa on the shoulder of a towering peak. A waterfall tumbled from the cliff above into a little lake at its foot, and from there a mountain stream wandered across the mesa to leap over the edge of another cliff a mile away. Trees grew along one side of the stream and up to the foot of the cliff, and among these trees the village was hidden from the eyes of roving pilots.

Hide! Hide! Hide! A world in hiding! It seemed difficult to imagine that anyone had ever walked freely in the sunlight on the surface of Poloda without being ready to dodge beneath a tree, or into a hole in the ground; and I wondered if my world would ever come to that. It didn't seem possible; but for thousands of years, up until a hundred years ago, no inhabitant of Poloda would have thought it possible here.

In the village were a hundred people, forty women, fifty men, and ten children, poor, scrawny little things, with spindly arms and legs and enormous bellies, the result of stuffing, themselves with grasses and twigs and leaves to assuage the pangs of hunger. When the villagers saw my escort coming in with me they ran forward hungrily, but when they recognized my blue uniform they stopped.

"He is our friend and guest," said the chief. "He has killed many Kapars, and he has given us guns and ammunition to kill more." And he showed them the weapons and the ammunition belts.

They crowded around me then and, like the twelve men, asked innumerable questions. They dwelt much upon the food we had in Unis, and were surprised to know that we had plenty to eat, for they thought that the Kapars must have devastated Unis as they had Punos.

The little children came timidly and felt of me. To them I was a man from another world. To me they were the indictment of a hideous regime.

The hunting party whose activities I had interrupted had brought in a couple of small rodents and a little bird. The women built a fire and put a large pot on it, in which there was a little water. Then they took the feathers off the bird and skinned the rodents, and threw them in without cleaning them. To this they added herbs and roots and handfuls of grass.

"The skins will make a little soup for the children for breakfast," an old woman explained to me as she laid them carefully aside.

They stirred the horrible mess with a piece of a small branch of a tree, and when it boiled the children clustered around to sniff the steam as it arose; and the adults formed a circle and stared at the pot hungrily.

I had never seen starving people before, and I prayed to God that I might never see any again unless I had the means wherewith to fill their bellies; and as I watched them I did not wonder that they ate Kapars, and I marvelled at the kindliness and strength of will that kept them from eating me. When those mothers looked at me I could imagine that they were thinking of me in terms of steaks and chops which they must forego although their children were

starving.

In a community in which there were forty adult women there were only ten children, but I wondered how there could be any, infant mortality must certainly be high among a starving people. I could imagine that I was looking at the remnant of a race that would soon be extinct, and I thought that there must be something wrong with all the religions in the universe that such a thing could happen to these people while the Kapars lived and bred.

When they thought the mess in the pot was sufficiently cooked, little cups of clay, crudely burnt, were passed out, and the chief carefully measured out the contents of the pot with a large wooden ladle. When he came to me, I shook my head; and he looked offended.

"Is our fare too mean for you?" he asked.

"It is not that," I said. "I am well fed, and tomorrow I shall eat again. Here are starving men, and starving women, and, above all, starving children."

"Forgive me," he said. "You are a very kind man. The children shall have your share." Then he dipped out other cupful and divided it among the ten children, scarcely a mouthful apiece; but they were so grateful that once again the tears came to my eyes. I must be getting to be a regular softy; but before I came to Poloda I had never seen such sadness, such courage, such fortitude, or such suffering, as I have upon this poor war-torn planet.

Chapter Ten

NEXT MORNING THE WHOLE VILLAGE accompanied me down the cation to see me take off for Orvis. Three men went far in advance and when he got down into the cation one of them came running back to meet us. I could see that he was very much excited, and he was motioning to us to be silent.

"There is a Kapar at your ship," he said, in a whisper.

"Let me go ahead," I said to the chief. "There will probably be shooting."

"We should have brought the guns," he said. "Why did I not think of that?" And he sent three men scurrying back to get them.

I walked down the canyon until I came to the other two men who had gone ahead. They were hiding behind bushes and they motioned me to take cover, but I had no time for that; and instead I ran forward, and when I came in sight of the ship a man was just climbing up onto the wing. He was a Kapar all right, and I started firing as I ran toward him. I missed him, and he wheeled about and held both hands above his head in sign of surrender.

I kept him covered as I walked toward him, but as I got nearer I saw that he was unarmed.

"What are you doing there, Kapar?" I demanded.

He came toward me, his hands still above his head. "For the honour and glory of Unis," he said. "I am no Kapar." He removed his grey helmet, revealing a head of blond hair. But I had been told that there were some blond Kapars, and I was not to be taken in by any ruse.

"You'll have to do better than that," I said. "If you are a Unisan, you can prove it more convincingly than by showing a head of blond hair. Who are you, and from what city do you come?"

"I am Balzo Jan," he said, "and I come from the city of Orvis."

Now Balzo Jan was the brother that Balzo Maro had said was shot down in battle. This might be he, but I was still unconvinced.

"How did you get here?" I demanded.

"I was shot down in battle about two hundred miles from here," he said. "We made a good landing and some Kapars who saw that we were evidently not killed came down to finish us off. There were four of them and three of us. We got all four of them, but not before my two companions were killed. Knowing that I was somewhere in Epris, and therefore in Kapar-dominated country, I took the uniform of one of the Kapars as a disguise."

"Why didn't you take his gun and ammunition, too?"

"Because we had all exhausted all our ammunition," he replied, "and guns without ammunition are only an extra burden to carry. I had killed the last Kapar with my last bullet."

"You may be all right," I said, "but I don't know. Can you tell me the name of some of your sister's friends?"

"Certainly," he said. "Her best friends are Harkas Yamoda and Harkas Don, daughter and son of Harkas Yen."

"I guess you're all right," I said. "There are a couple of blue uniforms in the after cockpit. Get into one of them at once, and then we'll go to work on the motor."

"Look," he cried, pointing beyond me, "some men are coming. They are going to attack us."

I turned to see my friendly hosts creeping toward us with shafts fitted to their bows.

"It is all right," I shouted to them, "this is a friend."

"If he is a friend of yours, then you must be a Kapar," replied the chief.

"He is no Kapar," I insisted; and then I turned and shouted to Balzo Jan to get into a blue uniform at once.

"Perhaps you have deceived us," shouted the chief. "How do we know that you are not a Kapar, after all?"

"Our children are hungry," screamed a woman farther back up the canyon. "Our children are hungry, we are hungry, and here are two Kapars."

It was commencing to look very serious. The men were creeping closer; they would soon be within bow range. I had put my pistol back into its holster after I had been convinced that Balzo Jan was no impostor, and I did not draw it as I walked forward to meet the chief.

"We are friends," I said. "You see, I am not afraid of you. Would I have given you the three guns and the ammunition had I been a Kapar? Would I have let that man back there live if I had not known that he was a Unisan?"

The chief shook his head. "That is right," he said. "You would not have given us the guns and ammunition had you been a Kapar. But how do you know

this man is not a Kapar?" he added suspiciously.

"Because he is the brother of a friend of mine," I explained. "He was shot down behind the Kapar lines and he took the uniform from a Kapar he had killed to use as a disguise, because he knew that he was in Kapar country."

About this time Balzo Jan crawled out of the after cockpit dressed in the blue suit, boots, and helmet of a Unisan fighting man.

"Does he look like a Kapar?" I asked.

"No," the chief said. "You must forgive us. My people hate the Kapars, and they are hungry."

With Balzo Jan's help I had the engine repaired and we were ready to take off a little after noon; and when we rose into the air the starving villagers stood sad-eyed and mute, watching us fly away toward a land of plenty.

As we rose above the mountains that lay between us and the coast I saw three ships far to our left. They were flying in a southwesterly direction towards Kapara.

"I think they are Kapars," said Balzo Jan, who was far more familiar with the lines of Polodian ships than I, having spent most of his lifetime looking at them.

Even as we watched, the three ships turned in our direction. Whatever they were, they had sighted us and were coming for us.

If they were Unisans, we had nothing to fear; nor for that matter did we have anything to fear if they were Kapars, for my ship could out fly them by a hundred miles an hour. Had they been as fast as ours, they could have cut us off, for they were in the right position to do so. We had been making about four hundred miles an hour and now I opened the throttle wide, for I did not purpose taking any chances, as I felt that we wouldn't have a chance against three Kapars, with three or four guns apiece, while we only had two. I opened the throttle, but nothing happened. The engine didn't accelerate at all. I told Balzo Jan.

"We shall have to fight, then," he said, "and I wanted to get home and get a decent meal. I have had practically nothing to eat for three days."

I knew how Balzo Jan felt, for I had had nothing to eat myself for some time, and anyway I had had enough fighting for a while.

"They are Kapars all right," said Balzo Jan presently.

There was no doubt about that now; the black of their wings and fuselages was quite apparent, and we were just about going to meet them over the island off the southern tip of Unis. We were going to meet right over the last and largest of the three islands, which is called the Island of Despair, where are sent those confirmed criminals who are not to be destroyed, and those Unisans whose loyalty is suspected, but who cannot be convicted of treason.

I had been fiddling with the engine controls, trying to step up the speed a little, when the first burst of fire whistled about us. The leading ship was coming

head-on toward us, firing only from her forward gun, when Balzo Jan sent a stream of explosive projectiles into her. I saw her propeller disappear then, and she started to glide toward the Island of Despair.

"That's the end of them," shouted Balzo Han.

Quite suddenly and unexpectedly my motor took hold again, and we immediately drew away from the other two ships, which Balzo Jan was spraying with gunfire.

We must have been hit fifty times, but the plastic of our fuselage and wings could withstand machine-gun fire, which could injure us only by a lucky hit of propeller or instrument-board. It is the heavier guns of combat planes and bombers that these fast, lightly armed pursuit planes have to fear.

"I hate to run from Kapars," I shouted back to Balzo Jan. "Shall we stay and have it out with them?"

"We have no right to throw away a ship and two men," he said, "in a hopeless fight."

Well, that was that. Balzo Jan knew the rules of the game better than I; so I opened the throttle wide and soon left the remaining Kapars far behind, and shortly after, they turned and resumed their flight toward Kapara.

There are two pilot seats and controls in the front cockpit, as well as the additional controls in the after cockpit. However, two men are seldom seated in the front cockpit, except for training purposes, as there is only one gun there and the Unisan military chiefs don't believe in wasting man power. However, the seat was there, and I asked Balzo Jan to come up and sit with me.

"If you see any more Kapars," I said, "you can go back to your gun."

"Do you know," he said, after he had crawled up into the forward cockpit and seated himself beside me, "that we have been so busy since you first discovered me climbing into your ship that I haven't had a chance to ask you who you are. I know a lot of men in the fighting service, but I don't recall ever having seen you before."

"My name is Tangor," I said.

"Oh," he said, "you're the man that my sister discovered without any clothes on after a raid several months ago."

"The same," I said, "and she is mourning you for dead. I saw her at the Harkases the night before we took off for this last raid."

"My sister would not mourn," he said proudly.

"Well, she was mourning inwardly," I replied, "and sometimes that's worse for a woman than letting herself go. I should think a good cry now and then would be a relief to the women of Poloda."

"I guess they used to cry," he said, "but they don't any more. If they cried every time they felt like crying, they'd be crying all the time; and they can't do that, you know, for there is work to do. It is war."

Chapter Eleven

IT IS WAR! That was the answer to everything. It governed their every ac-

tivity, their every thought. From birth to death they knew nothing but war. Their every activity was directed at the one purpose of making their country more fit for war.

"I should think you would hate war," I said to Balzo Jan.

He looked at me in surprise. "Why?" he demanded. "What would we do with ourselves if there were no war?"

"But the women," I said. "What of them?"

"Yes," he replied, "it is hard on them. The men only have to die once, but the women have to suffer always. Yes; it is too bad, but I can't imagine what we would do without war."

"You could come out in the sunshine, for one thing," I said, "and you could rebuild your cities, and devote some of your time to cultural pursuits and to pleasure. You could trade with other countries, and you could travel to them; and wherever you went you would find friends."

Balzo Jan looked at me skeptically. "Is that true in your world?" he asked.

"Well, not when I was last there," I had to admit, "but then, several of the countries were at war."

"You see," he said, "war is the natural state of man, no matter what world he lives in."

We were over the southern tip of Unis now. The majestic peaks of the Mountains of Loras were at our left, and at our right the great river which rises in the mountains south of Orvis emptied into the sea, fifteen hundred miles from its source. It is a mighty river, comparable, I should say, to the Amazon. The country below us was beautiful in the extreme, showing few effects of the war, for they have many buried cities here whose Labor Corps immediately erase all signs of the devastating effects of Kapar raids as soon as the enemy has departed.

Green fields stretched below us in every direction, attesting the fact that agriculture on the surface still held its own against the Kapars on this part of the continent; but I knew at what a price they raised their crops with low flying Kapar planes strafing them with persistent regularity, and bombers blasting great craters in their fields.

But from high above this looked like heaven to me, and I wondered if it were indeed for me the locale of that afterlife which so many millions of the people of my world hope and pray for. It seemed to me entirely possible that my transition to another world was not unique, for in all the vast universe there must be billions of planets, so far removed from the ken of Earth men that their existence can never be known to them.

I mentioned to Balzo Jan what was passing in my mind and he said, "Our people who lived before the war had a religion, which taught that those who died moved to Uvala, one of the planets of our solar system which lies upon the other side of Omos. But now we have no time for religion; we have time only for war."

"You don't believe in a life hereafter, then?" I asked. "Well, I didn't either, once, but I do now."

"Is it really true that you come from another world?" he asked. "Is it true that you died there and came to life again on Poloda?"

"I only know that I was shot down by an enemy plane behind the enemy lines," I replied. "A machine-gun bullet struck me in the heart, and during the fifteen seconds that consciousness remained I remember losing control of my ship and going into a spin. A man with a bullet in his heart, spinning toward the ground from an altitude of ten thousand feet, must have died."

"I should think so," said Balzo Jan, "but how did you get here?"

I shrugged. "I don't know any more about it than you do," I replied. "Sometimes I think it is all a dream from which I must awake."

He shook his head. "Maybe you are dreaming," he said, "but I am not. I am here, and I know that you are here with me. You may be a dead man, but you seem very much alive to me. How did it seem to die?"

"Not bad at all," I replied. "I only had fifteen seconds to think about it, but I know that I died happy because I had shot down two of the three enemy planes that had attacked me."

"Life is peculiar," he said. "Because you were shot down in a war on a world countless millions of miles away from Poloda, I am now alive and safe. I can't help but be glad, my friend, that you were shot down."

It was a quiet day over Unis; we reached the mountains south of Orvis without sighting a single enemy plane, and after crossing the mountains I dropped to within about a hundred feet of the ground. I like to fly low when I can; it breaks the monotony of long flights, and we ordinarily fly at such tremendous altitudes here that we see very little of the terrain.

As we dropped down I saw something golden glinting in the sunshine below us. "What do you suppose that is down there. I said to Balzo Jan, banking so that he could see it.

"I don't know," he said, "but it looks amazingly like a woman lying there; but what a woman would be lying out in the open for, so far from the city, I can't imagine."

"I am going down to see," I said.

I spiralled down and as we circled over the figure I saw that it was indeed a woman, lying upon her face-an unmarried woman, I knew, for her suit was of golden sequins. She lay very still, as though she were asleep.

I put the plane down and taxied up close to her. "You stay at the controls, Balzo Jan," I said, for one must always think of Kapars and be ready to run, or fight, or hide.

I dropped to the ground and walked over to the still form. The girl's helmet had fallen off, and her mass of copper red hair spread over and hid that part of her face which was turned up. I knelt beside her and turned her over, and as I saw her face my heart leaped to my throat-it was Harkas Yamoda, little Harkas Yamoda, crushed and broken.

There was blood on her lips, and I thought she was dead; but I didn't want

to believe it, I wouldn't believe it; and so I placed my ear against her breast and listened-and faintly I heard the beating of her heart. I lifted the little form in my arms, then, and carried it to the ship.

"It is Harkas Yamoda," I said to Balzo Jan, as I passed her up to him; "she is still alive. Put her in the after cockpit." Then I Sprang to the wing of the ship and told Balzo Jan to take the controls and bring the ship in.

I got in with Harkas Yamoda and held her in my arms as gently as I could, while the ship bumped over the rough ground during the takeoff. I wiped the blood from her lips; that was all I could do, that and pray. I had not prayed before since I was a little boy at my mother's knee. I remember wondering, if there were a God, if He could hear me, so very far away, for I had always thought of God as being somewhere up in our own heaven.

It was only a matter of fifteen or twenty minutes before Balzo Jan set the ship down outside of Orvis and taxied down the ramp to our underground airdrome.

There are always fleets of ambulances at every airdrome, for there are always wounded men in many of the ships that come in. Also, close by is an emergency hospital; and to this I drove with Harkas Yamoda, after telling Balzo Jan to notify her father.

The surgeons worked over her while I paced the floor outside. They worked very quickly and she had only just been carried to her room when Harkas Yen, and Don, and Yamoda's mother came. The four of us stood around that silent, unconscious little form lying so quietly on her cot.

"Have you any idea how it happened?" I asked Harkas Yen.

He nodded. "Yes," he said, "she was on an outing with some of her friends when they were attacked by Kapars. The men put up a good fight and several of them were killed. The girls ran, but a Kapar overtook Yamoda and carried her away."

"She must have jumped from the plane," said Don.

"Planes!" said Yamoda's mother bitterly. "Planes! The curse of the world. History tells us that when they were first perfected and men first flew in the air over Poloda, there was great rejoicing, and the men who perfected them were heaped with honors. They were to bring the peoples of the world closer together. They were to break down international barriers of fear and suspicion. They were to revolutionize society by bringing all people together, to make a better and happier world in which to live. Through them civilization was to be advanced hundreds of years; and what have they done? They have blasted civilization from nine-tenths of Poloda and stopped its advance in the other tenth. They have destroyed a hundred thousand cities and millions of people, and they have driven those who have survived underground, to live the lives of burrowing rodents. Planes! The curse of all times. I hate them. They have taken thirteen of my sons, and now they have

taken my daughter."

"It is war," said Harkas Yen, with bowed head.

"This is not war," cried the sad-faced woman, pointing at the still form upon the cot.

"No," I said, "this is not war-it is rapine and murder."

"What else can you expect of the Kapar's?" demanded Harkas Don. "But for this they shall pay.

"For this they shall pay," I, too, swore.

Then the surgeons came in and we looked at them questioningly. The senior surgeon put his hand on the shoulder of Yamoda's mother and smiled. "She will live," he said.

"She was not badly injured."

Yes; planes used in war are a curse to humankind, but thanks to a plane Balzo Maro's brother had been returned to her, and little Yamoda would live.

Listen! The sirens are sounding the general alarm.

Part II: TANGOR RETURNS

Foreword

Naturally, my imagination has been constantly intrigued by speculation as to the fate of Tangor, since his unseen, perhaps ghostly, fingers typed the story of his advent upon Poloda, that mysterious planet some 450,000 light years from Earth; typed them upon my own machine one midnight while I sat amazed, incredulous, and fascinated, with my hands folded in my lap.

His story told of his death behind the German lines in September, 1959, when he was shot down in a battle with three Messerschmitts, and of how he had found himself, alive, uninjured, and as naked as the day he was born, in another world.

I hung upon every line that he wrote; his description of the underground city of Orvis with its great buildings that were lowered deep beneath the surface of the ground when the Kapar bombers flew over by thousands to drop their lethal bombs in the great war that has already lasted more than a hundred years.

I followed his adventures after he became a flier in the air corps of Unis, the Polodan country of his adoption. I grieved with him at the bedside of little Harkas Yamoda; and there were tears of relief in my eyes, as there must have been in his, when the surgeons announced that she would live.

And then the last line that he typed: "Listen! The sirens are sounding the general alarm."

That was all. But I have sat before my typewriter at midnight many a night since that last line was typed by unseen hands. I have wondered if Tangor ever came back from the battle to which that general alarm called him, or if he died a second death and, perhaps, a final one.

I had about given up my midnight vigils as useless, when one night recently, shortly before midnight, I was awakened by a hand upon my shoulder. It was a moonlight night. The objects in the room were faintly visible, yet I could see no one. I switched on the reading

light at the head of my bed. Other than myself there was no one in the room, or at least no one I could see; and then I heard and saw the space bar of my typewriter moving up and down with something that seemed like a note of urgency.

As I started to get out of bed, I saw a sheet of typewriter paper rise from my desk as though endowed with life and place itself in the typewriter. By the time I reached my desk and sat down before the machine, those ghostly fingers had already started to type the story which you are about to read.

Tangor had returned!

Chapter One

THAT GENERAL ALARM certainly called us to a real battle. The Kapars sent over ten thousand planes, and we met them over the Bay of Hagar with fully twenty thousand. Perhaps a thousand of them got through our lines to drop their bombs over Orvis, those that our pursuit planes did not overtake and shoot down; but we drove the others out over the Karagan Ocean, into which ships plunged by the thousands.

At last they turned and fled for home, but we pursued them all the way to Ergos, flying low over the very city, strafing them as they taxied for their ramps; then we turned back, perhaps ten thousand ships out of the twenty thousand that had flown out to meet the Kapars. We had lost ten thousand ships and perhaps fifty thousand men, but we had practically annihilated the Kapar fleet and had saved Unis from a terrific bombing; and on the way back, we met a few straggling Kapars returning, shooting down every last one of them.

Once more all three of my gunners were killed, while I came through without a scratch. Either I have a charmed life or else, having died once, I cannot' die again.

I saw practically nothing of Harkas Yamoda while she was convalescing, as the doctors had ordered that she have perfect rest; but a flier has to have relaxation, and he has to have girl friends- he sees altogether too much of men while he is on duty, as about half of those he does see are firing rifles or machine guns or cannons at him. It is a nerve-racking business, and the majority of us are always on edge most of the time when we are on the ground. It is a strange thing; but that restlessness and nervousness seem to leave me when I am in the air; and of course when you are in battle, you haven't time to think of such things.

There was a girl working in the office of the Commissioner for War, whom I had seen and talked to many times. She was always exceedingly pleasant to me and as she seemed a nice sort, intelligent and witty, I finally asked her to have dinner with me.

We had a mightily pleasant evening together, and after that I saw a great deal of her when I was off duty. She liked to get me to talk about my own world, way off there so far beyond Canapa.

Once, after we had been going together for some time, Morga Sagra said she couldn't understand why it was I was so loyal to Unis when I hadn't been born there and had no relations, even, on the

planet.

"Suppose you had come down in Kapara," she asked, "instead of in Unis?"

I shrugged. "I don't like to think of it," I said; "I am sure that I never could have fought for and been loyal to the Kapars."

"What do you know about them," she asked, "except what we Unisans have told you? and naturally, we are biased. As a matter of fact, I don't think they are a bad sort at all, and their form of government is based upon a much more enduring concept than ours."

"Just what do you mean?" I asked.

"It is based on war," said Morga Sagra, "and war is the natural state of the human race. War is their way of life. They are not always thinking of peace as are we."

"You wouldn't like peace?" I asked.

"No!" she exclaimed, "I should hate it. Think of having to associate with men who never fought. It would be disgusting. If I were a man, I would join the Kapars, for they are going to win the war eventually."

"That is a very dangerous thing to say, Morga Sagra," I told her.

"I'm not afraid to tell you," she said; "you are no Unisan, you owe no more allegiance to Unis than you do to Kapara. Listen, Tangor; don't be stupid. You are an alien here; you have made a good record as a fighter, but what can it get you?-nothing. You will always be an alien, who can do no more than fight for Unis-and probably get killed in the long run."

"Well, and what do you want me to do, stop fighting?"

"No," she said, leaning close to me and whispering; "I want you to go to Kapara and take me with you. You and I could go far there with the Unisan military secrets we could take with us."

I was immeasurably shocked, but I did not let her see it. The little fool was a traitor, and if she had thought that I was greatly shocked by what she had said, she would be afraid that I might turn her in to the authorities. If she would turn against Unis for no reason whatsoever other than a perverted admiration for the Kapars, she certainly wouldn't hesitate to' turn against me if she had reason to fear me. She was right, I am an alien here. Any lie that she could make up might be believed.

"You take me by surprise, Morga Sagra," I said; "I had never thought of such a thing. I don't believe that it could be done; the Kapars would never accept me."

After that she evidently thought that I could be won over easily, for she told me that she had long been in touch with Kapar sympathizers in Orvis and knew two Kapar secret agents well.

"I have discussed this matter with them," she said, "and they have promised me that you and I will be treated like kings of old if we can get to Ergos. That's the capital of Kapara," she added.

"Yes, I know," I told her; "I have been there."

"You have!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, to drop bombs on it. It would be amusing to go there now to live, and

have my old comrades in arms dropping bombs on me."

"Then you'll go?" she asked.

"Let me think it over, Morga Sagra," I said; "this is not something that a man can do without thought."

So we left it that way, and the next day I went to the Commissioner for War and told him the whole story, and I didn't have even a single qualm of conscience for betraying Morga Sagra; she was a traitor and she tried to make a traitor of me. While I am on Poloda, Unis will be as dear to me as my own United States of America. I wear the uniform of her fighting force; I have been well treated; my friends are here; they trust me, as do my superiors and my fellow fighters. I could never betray them.

The Commissioner for War is a crusty old fellow, and he almost blew up like one of his own bombs when he learned that a Kapar agent was employed in his department.

"She'll be shot tomorrow!" he exploded, and then he thought a moment and calmed down. "Maybe it would be better to let her live," he said; "maybe we can use her. Come with me."

He took me to the Eljanhai's office and there he had me repeat what I had told him. "It is too bad," said the Eljanhai; "I knew her father well; he was a brave officer. He was killed in battle when she was a little baby. I hate to think of ordering his daughter destroyed, but I suppose there is no other way."

"I have another way," said the Commissioner for War. "I suggest that if Tangor will accept the mission, we let him accede to Morga Sagra's proposition. As you know, the Kapars are supposed to have perfected a power amplifier which will permit them to fly to great distances from Poloda, possibly to other planets. I have heard you say that you wished that we could get the drawings of this new amplifier." He turned to me. "It would be a very dangerous mission, Tangor, and one in which you might not possibly be able to succeed, but there would be a chance, if you were there. What do you say to it?"

"I am in the service of Unis," I said; "whatever you wish me to do, I will do to the best of my ability."

"Excellent," said the Eljanhai, "but do you realize that the chances are about a thousand to one that you will be unsuccessful and that you will never get out of Kapara alive."

"I realize that, sir," I said, "but I take similar chances almost ever day of my life."

"Then it is settled," he said, "let us know when you are ready to go, and every arrangement will be made to facilitate your departure; and, by the way, when you get to Kapara, see if you can get any information as to the fate of one of our most valuable secret agents from whom we have not heard for two years; he is an officer named Handon Gar," and then he described the man very minutely to me, as I could not, of course, inquire about him, and furthermore, he had unquestionably changed his name after he reached Kapara.

The two then gave me certain military information to report to the Kapars,

information they were perfectly willing to trade for a chance to get the secret of the amplifier.

I wondered just why they were so anxious to obtain the secret of this power amplifier and so I made bold to ask.

"To be perfectly frank," said the Eljanhai, "Unis is tired of war; and we wish to send an expedition to one of the nearer planets, either Tonos or Antos, to see what conditions are there; and if they are better, eventually to transport all Unisans to one of these planets."

What an amazing and stupendous project, it was staggering even to contemplate-an heroic migration unparalleled in history.

"But if you get the secret," warned the Eljanhai, "you must destroy all copies of the plans you do not bring away with you, and destroy also all those who could reproduce them, so that the Kapars cannot follow. Our sole desire is to find some world free from war, and no world would be free from war if there were Kapars there."

I saw Morga Sagra again that evening. "Well," she asked, "have you made up your mind?"

"Yes," I replied. "I have come to the conclusion that you were right; I owe these people nothing, and if the Kapars are going to win this war, I might as well be on the winning side."

"You are quite right," she said; "you will never regret it. I have made all the necessary arrangements for our entry into Kapara, but the problem of getting out of Unis is for you to solve."

"I will take care of everything," I told her, "and in the meantime I think that we should not be seen together too much. Hold yourself in readiness to leave at any moment; I may call for you tomorrow or the next day."

We parted then and I went out to the Harkases' to bid them good-bye. Yamoda was stronger and had been moved out into the garden, where she lay on a couch in the artificial sunlight which illuminates this underground city. She seemed so genuinely happy to see me that I hated to tell her that I was going away for an indefinite period. We had become such excellent friends that it saddened us both to realize that we might not see one another again for a considerable time, and her lip trembled when I told her that I had come to say good-bye. She seemed to sense that this was more than an ordinary parting to which the women of Unis are so accustomed.

"How long will you be gone?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I replied.

"Then I suppose that you can't tell me where you are going, either."

"No, I can't," I replied; "about all I can tell you is that it is a secret mission."

She nodded and placed her hand on mine. "You will be careful of yourself, won't you, Tangor?" she asked.

"Yes, Yamoda, I will be careful; and I will try to get back as quickly as possible, for I shall miss you very much."

"You have been doing very well without me lately," she said, with a mischievous twinkle in her eye; "is she such

very good company?"

"She is better than nobody," I replied, "and I get terribly lonesome when I can't come out here."

"I don't believe I know her," she said; "she does not go with the same people I do."

I thought I noticed just a trace of contemptuousness in that speech, something quite unlike Yamoda. "I have never met any of her friends," I said. Just then Yamoda's mother came into the garden, and we talked of other things. They insisted on my staying to dinner.

When I left, later in the evening, it was very hard for me to say good-bye to them all, for the Harkases are my best friends in Unis, and Don and Yamoda are just like brother and sister to me; in fact their mother calls me her other son.

Chapter Two

EARLY THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I called on the Commissioner for War, and told him that I planned on leaving that day. I explained in detail the procedure I wished to follow to get Morga Sagra out of Orvis, and he told me that everything would be arranged in accordance with my plans. He then gave me a sheaf of military documents which I was to turn over to the Kapars as proof of my good faith and of my potential value to them.

"You will need something to meet expenses while you are there," he said, and he handed me a heavy leather pouch. "As there is no longer any monetary medium of international exchange," he continued, "you will have to do the best you can with the contents of this pouch, which contains gold and precious stones. I shall immediately instruct your squadron commander that you have been ordered to make a reconnaissance flight alone and that the mission is a secret one, he is to see that no one is in the hangar between the third and fourth hours after noon, as it is my wish that no one sees you depart. During that time, you can smuggle in your coconspirator; and now good-bye, my boy, and good luck. The chances are that I shall never see you again, but I shall remember you as one who died gloriously for the honour and glory of Unis."

That sounded altogether too much like an obituary, and I went away thinking of the little white cross somewhere in the Rhine valley. If what I had been told about the Kapars were true, I would have no little white cross there, as my body would be shipped off to serve as food for some of their subjugated peoples working in slavery for them.

I called on Sagra at the third hour after noon. "Everything is arranged," I told her, "and we shall be on our way within the hour."

She had not smiled as she usually did when we met, and I noticed a certain constraint in her manner. Finally the cause of it came out, as she blurted, "What were you doing in conference with the Commissioner for War this morning?"

"How did you think I was going to get out of Orvis?" I demanded. "I had to work on the old chap a long time to get him to order me to make a recon-

naissance flight alone."

"I'm sorry," she said, "but this is dangerous business; and when one's life is constantly at stake, suspicion becomes almost an obsession.

"I can well understand that," I said; "but if our mission is to be successful, we must trust one another fully."

"I shan't doubt you again," she said, "but right now my nerves are on edge. I am really terrified, for I don't see how you are going to get me out of the city; and if you are caught trying it, we'll both be shot."

"Don't worry," I said; "just do as I tell you."

We went out to my car then, and I had her get in the rear compartment, and when I was sure that no one was looking, I told her to lie down on the floor; then I threw an old robe over her.

I drove directly to the hangar, which I found entirely deserted. I drove as close to my ship as I could and then had Sagra crawl into the gunner's compartment in the belly of the fuselage. A moment later I had taxied up the ramp and taken off.

"Which way?" I asked Sagra, over the communicating system.

"Northwest," she replied. "When can I get out of here? I don't like it down here."

"In just a moment," I replied.

By mutual agreement, Sagra had kept all of the plans covering our flight to Kapara and our entry into that country to herself. My job had been to simply get the military secrets and get us out of Orvis.

A small hatchway in the ceiling of the compartment in which Sagra was led to the rear gunner's cockpit, and when I told her to come up with me, she came through this hatchway and climbed over into the forward cockpit.

"Now," I said, "you can tell me why we are flying northwest if we are going to Kapara, which lies southwest of Unis."

"It's a long way around, I know," she said, "but it's the only way in which we can eventually enter Kapara in a Kapar plane. In this plane and with that uniform of yours, we'd not get far in Kapara; so we are flying to Gorvas first."

Gorvas is a city on the continent of Karis, the farthest removed from the continent of Epris on which Kapara is situated. It is a poor barren continent, and the one least affected by the war, for it possesses nothing that the Kapars want.

After an uneventful flight, we landed at Gorvas. No fighting planes had come up to meet us, and no antiaircraft shells had burst around us, as we had circled above Gorvas before landing; for the people of Karis know they have nothing to fear from Unis, and we received a friendly greeting from some officers at the airport.

Morga Sagra had obtained forged credentials for us, and she had told me that my name hereafter would be Korvan Don, while she would keep her own name which was favorably known to her connections in Ergos, the capital of Kapara.

After leaving the airport, Sagra told the driver of the public conveyance we

had hired, to drive to a certain house, the address of which had been given her by a Kapar agent in Orvis.

Gorvas is a poor city, but at least it is not underground, although, as I was told, every building has its bombproof cellar. Occasionally we saw bomb craters, indicating that the Kapars came even here to this far away, barren country, either because the Kerisans were known to be friendly with Unis or just to satisfy their inordinate lust for destruction.

Our driver took us to a poor part of town and stopped before a mean little one-story stone house where we dismissed him. We stood there until he had driven away; then Sagra led the way along the street to the third house, after which she crossed the street to the house directly opposite. It was all quite mysterious, but it showed the care with which everything had been arranged to avoid leaving a well-marked trail.

Approaching the door of this house, which was a little more pretentious than the one before which we had first stopped, Sagra knocked three times in rapid succession, and then twice more at intervals; and after a moment the door was opened by a hard-faced,

scowling man.

"What do you want?" he demanded gruffly.

"I am Morga Sagra," replied my companion, "and this is Korvan Don."

"Come in," said the man; "I've been expecting you. Let me see your credentials."

Sagra handed him a perfectly blank piece of paper. I was standing near the man, and when he opened it up, I saw that there was nothing on it.

"Sit down," said the man, and then he went to a desk; and, seating himself there, took what appeared to be a pocket flashlight from one of the drawers and shone its light upon the paper.

The light must have made writing on the paper visible for I could see him passing it back and forth and that his eyes followed it. Presently he got up and handed the paper back to Sagra.

"You will remain here," he said, "while I go and complete arrangements." Then he left us.

"Do you know that fellow's name?" I asked Sagra.

"Yes," she said.

"What is it? Why didn't you introduce me?"

"His name is none of your business," said Sagra. "You must learn not to ask questions, Korvan Don; however, just to satisfy your curiosity, I don't mind telling you that his name is Gompth."

"What a beautiful name," I said, "but as far as I am concerned you needn't have told me what it was. His name doesn't interest me any more than his face."

"Don't say things like that," snapped Sagra. "He is a very important person, and it is not wise to make unpleasant remarks about important persons. Now be sure not to let him know that you know his name, for that is not the name that he goes by here."

I was getting my introduction to the fear and suspicion which hangs like a

pall over everything Kaparan. I had said that I did not care whether I knew this man's name or not, for how could I know that one day I should be very glad that I did know it.

In about an hour, Gompth returned. He had brought with him civilian clothing such as is worn by the inhabitants of Karis, and after we had changed into it, he drove us out into the country, where he turned an old Karisan plane over to us.

It was not until Sagra and I were in the plane that he gave us our final instructions, and handed us credentials. He directed us to fly to a city called Pud, on the continent of Auris, and report to a man with the poetic name of Frink.

"What will become of my plane?" I asked him.

"What difference does it make to you?" he demanded.

"It makes a great deal of difference to me," I snapped, for I was getting fed up with all this rudeness and secrecy. "I expect that, unquestionably, I shall be sent on missions to Unis; and if I am, I shall need my plane and my uniform."

He eyed me suspiciously before he replied. "How could you ever return to Unis without being destroyed as a traitor?" he asked.

"Because I used my head before I left Orvis," I replied; "I arranged to be sent out on reconnaissance flight, and I can think of a hundred excuses to explain even a long absence."

"If you ever need your plane or your uniform," he said, "they will be here when you return."

I breathed more freely when we rose into the clear air and left Mr. Gompth behind. His was a most depressing personality. His conversation gave the impression that he was snapping at you like an ill-natured dog, and not once while we were with him had he smiled. I wondered if all the Kapars were like that.

In Pud we found Frink by the same devious means that we had arrived at the house of Gompth, only here there was a slight difference; we were allowed to call Frink by name, because Frink was not his name.

We stayed overnight in Pud; and in the morning, Frink gave us Kapar clothes, and later furnished us with a Kapar plane, a very excellent plane too; and for that I was glad, as I had not been very happy crossing the Voldan Ocean from Karis to Auris in the ancient crate that Gompth had furnished us. Before us lay a flight of some two thousand miles across the Mandan Ocean from Auris to Kapara.

The crossing was monotonous and uneventful, but after we got over Kapara, and were winging toward Ergos, we sighted a squadron of Unisan planes that were doubtless on reconnaissance. I tuned away in an effort to avoid them, but they took after us.

The ship I was piloting was a very swift scouting plane lightly armed. There was a bow gun which I could operate and one gun in an after cockpit, which Morga Sagra could not have operated even had I wished her to. I had no intention of firing on an Unisan plane

under any circumstances, and so I turned and ran.

They chased me out across the Mandan Ocean for nearly a thousand miles before they gave up and turned back. I followed, keeping just within sight of them, until they bore to the south with the evident intention of passing around the southern end of the continent of Epris; then I opened the throttle wide and streaked for Ergos.

When we ran down a ramp into the city, we were immediately surrounded by men in green uniforms; and an officer gruffly demanded our credentials. I told him that our instructions were to hand them to Gurrul and then he bundled us into a car, and we were driven off, surrounded by green-clad members of the Zabo, the secret police of Kapara.

Ergos is a large city, sprawling around deep underground. We passed first through a considerable district in which there were indications of the direst poverty.

The buildings were principally flimsy shelters and sometimes only holes in the ground, into which people scurried when they saw the green uniforms of the Zabo. But presently we came to more substantial buildings, which were all identical except in the matter of size. There was not the slightest indication of ornamentation on any of them. The ride was most uninteresting, just one monotonous mile after another until we approached the centre of the city where the buildings suddenly became rococo in their ornateness.

The car stopped before one of the more hideous these buildings, a multicolored atrocity, the facade of which was covered with carved figures and designs.

We were hustled out of the car and into the building, and a moment later we were ushered into the office of Gurrul, Chief of the Zabo, the most feared man in all Kapara.

Chapter Three

GURRUL WAS A GROSS MAN with a cruel mouth and close-set eyes. He scrutinized us in silence for a full minute, as though he were trying to read our inmost thoughts. He was really fixing in his mind every detail of our appearance, and he would know us again whenever or wherever he saw us and only the cleverest of disguises could deceive him. It is said of him that Gurrul knows a million people thus, but that seems to me like an exaggeration.

He took our credentials and examined them carefully; then he asked for the military secrets I had brought from Orvis, and when I turned them over to him he glanced through them hurriedly, giving no indication of any great interest in them.

"You flew for the enemy?" he demanded of me.

"Yes," I replied.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I knew no other country than Unis," I explained.

"Why did you turn against the country of your birth?" he asked.

"Unis is not the country of my birth."

"Where were you born?"

"On another planet in another solar system millions of miles from here."

He scowled at me fiercely and pounded his desk until everything on it danced. "You dare stand there and tell me such a lie, you fool!" he cried; "you, a filthy Unisan, dare insult my intelligence thus. Possibly you have never heard of Gurrul, you idiot. If you had, you would have cut your own throat before you came to him with such a story."

"Most high," said Morga Sagra timidly, "I believe that he speaks the truth-everyone in Orvis believes him."

He wheeled on her angrily. "Who told you to speak?" he snapped.

"Forgive me, most high," she said. She was trembling all over, and I was afraid that her knees were going to give away beneath her.

Gurrul turned to one of his lieutenants. "Have them searched and then lock them up," he ordered, and that was the end of our reception in Kapar, where they were going to receive us with open arms and load us with honors.

My gold and jewels were taken from me, and Morga Sagra and I were locked up in a cell in the basement of the Zabo headquarters. Our cell was nothing but an iron cage, and I could see corridor after corridor of them closely packed together, and all of them appeared to have occupants, sometimes six or eight people jammed into a cage scarcely large enough for two.

Most of our fellow prisoners whom I could see sat dejectedly on the stone floor of their cages, their heads bowed upon their chests; but there were others who gibbered and screamed, those whom torture and confinement had driven mad. When the screaming annoyed a guard too much, he would come down to the cage and turn a hose upon the screaming inmate. From the first hour that we were there, for a solid hour, one of the poor creatures screamed incessantly. One guard after another turned the hose on him, but still he screamed. Finally the head keeper came in, an officer covered with gold braid, medals, and brass buttons. He walked up to the maniac's cage and deliberately shot him through the heart. He did it as casually as one might swat a fly, and then he walked away without a backward glance.

"You must be very happy," I said to Morga Sagra.

"What do you mean?" she whispered.

"You are in your beloved Kapara at last, surrounded by your dear friends."

"Hush," she cautioned, "someone will hear you."

"Why should I hush?" I asked. "Don't you want them to know how fond you are of them?"

"I am fond of them," she said; "this is all a terrible mistake, but it is your fault—you never should have told that story to Gurrul."

"You wouldn't want me to lie to the most high, would you?"

"You must not use that tone of voice when you speak of anyone here," she whispered; "the first thing you know, you'll get us both beheaded."

We were kept in that vile hole for a

week, and almost every waking hour we expected to be taken out and destroyed. Morga Sagra was virtually a nervous wreck when, at last, they did come for us.

Sagra was so weak from fright that the guards had to support her as we were lead along a corridor. Finally one of them said to her, "You have nothing to fear; you are going to be released."

At that Sagra collapsed completely and sat down on the stone floor. The guards laughed and picked her up and practically carried her the rest of the way. They were still carrying her when I was hustled off down another corridor.

They took me from the building through a rear doorway and put me into what looked like a big green moving van. It was so filled with humanity that they had to push me in and then slammed the doors on me quickly before I fell out. There was an iron barred window in front, and a guard with a rifle in his hand sat facing it.

As soon as the doors were closed and locked, the truck started off, the human load swaying to and fro, trampling on each others toes and cursing beneath its breath. That was a ride to be long remembered for its discomforts.

The heat from the men's bodies became absolutely oppressive, and the air so foul that one could scarcely breathe.

The vehicle moved at a high rate of speed. How long we were in it, I do not know; but I should imagine about two hours, because it seemed like ten; but at last it stopped and turned around and was backed up to stop again. Then the doors were opened, and we were ordered out.

I saw before me a very large enclosure, surrounded by a high wire fence. There were open sheds along two sides. There were several hundred men in the enclosure, and they were all dressed alike in black clothes with big white numbers across the front and back. I didn't have to be told that I was in a prison camp.

There was sort of an office by the gate where we were taken from the truck, and here our names were entered in a book and we were given prison uniforms and numbers. Then we were ordered into the enclosure with the other prisoners. They were a filthy, emaciated lot with the most hopeless expressions I have ever seen on human faces. When I had been taken from my cell, I had felt that I was going to be beheaded, but I could conceive that this was infinitely worse.

I had asked the officer who had checked us in why I was being imprisoned and for how long, but he had just told me to shut up and speak only when I was spoken to.

This was a work camp, and when I say work that doesn't half describe it. We were usually employed on the hardest kind of manual labor for sixteen hours a day. There was one day of rest in every ten; it had been upon one of the rest days that I had arrived. There were both men and women in the camp, and they came from nearly every country of Poloda. We were treated just like animals, the prison clothes they gave us

had to last a year; and we only had the one suit in which we worked and slept. Most of the men, and women too, were in nothing but rags. The food that was given us was indescribable. It was thrown into troughs twice a day just as food is given to hogs. Men and women both were insulted, beaten, kicked, often killed. We were not allowed to use names even among ourselves-just our numbers.

Day and night, guards patrolled just outside the wire fence; and if they saw prisoners talking, they yelled at them to stop and sometimes they came inside and beat them. Nevertheless we did talk, for it was hard to stop us after dark; and finally I made a few friends.

There was one who said that he came from Orvis, with whom I became quite friendly, although I knew it was dangerous, as the Kapars planted many spies in these camps. Finally, however, I came to the conclusion that this Tunzo Bor was all right, and so I asked him if he knew a man named Handon Gar.

Immediately he was all suspicion. "No," he said, "I don't know anyone by that name. Why do you ask?"

"I have a message for him," I replied.

"From whom?" he asked.

"From a friend in Orvis."

"Well, I don't know any Handon Gar," he insisted, "and if he is here you may rest assured he is not known by that name."

"I suppose not," I said, "but I certainly wish that I could find him, as I should like to deliver my message."

I was sure that he was lying and that he did know Handon Gar and that it was quite possible that the man might be in this very camp, but I saw that it was useless to pursue the question further as it would only make Tunzo Bor all the more suspicious of me.

We were worked very hard and were underfed. It seemed to me that the Kapars were very stupid; they need labor, yet they treat the men in labor camps so badly that the mortality rate is much higher than necessary. I noticed that the Kapars are always pressed for food, but they are extremely shortsighted to beat men to death for nothing or overwork them so they drop in their tracks, when these same men might be producing more food for them.

The lot of the free workers is a little better, but not much; they are serfs, but they are not locked up in prison camps. However, they are overworked and treated cruelly, although many of them are native Kapars as well as peoples of conquered countries. The soldiers fare much better than the workers, and the members of the Zabo live well, for everyone is afraid of them; even the army officers and those highly placed politically live little better, though they live off the fat of the land, if there is any fat in Kapara.

After a week of hard labor and poor food, I was given an easy job, working in the garden of the officer in charge of the camp. An armed guard always accompanied me and remained with me while I worked. He did not abuse me, nor did any of the guards in the prison compound. I was even given good food

occasionally from the officer's kitchen. I could not understand it, but I was afraid to ask any questions, but finally the guard himself volunteered some information.

"Who are you, anyway?" he demanded.

"I am No. 267M9436," I replied.

"No," he said; "I mean what is your name?"

"I thought we weren't supposed to use any names," I reminded him.

"If I tell you to, you can," he said.

"Well, my name is Korvan Don," I replied.

"Where are you from?"

"Orvis."

He shook his head. "I can't understand it," he said.

"Understand what?" I asked.

"Why orders have been given that you shall be treated so much better than the other prisoners," he explained; "and they come straight from Gurrul, too."

"I'm sure I don't know," I replied, but I had an idea that it might be because Gurrul was still investigating me and might be coming to the conclusion that I could be of value to the Kapars. I knew perfectly well that I wasn't being treated this way because of any humanitarian reasons.

Chapter Four

WHEN THE SKY IS NOT OVERCAST, the Polodan nights are gorgeous in the extreme. There is a constant procession of planets passing across the heavens, following each other in stately procession throughout the night; and thus clear nights are quite well lighted, especially by the nearer planets.

It was on such a clear night, about three weeks after I had been brought to the prison camp, that a fellow prisoner came close to me and whispered, "I am Handon Gar."

I scrutinized him very closely to see if I could recognize him from the description given me by the Commissioner for War.

This man was terribly emaciated and looked like an old man, but gradually I recognized him. He must have been subjected to the cruellest of treatment during the two years that he had been here.

"Yes," I said presently, "I recognize you."

"How can you recognize me?" he demanded, instantly suspicious; "I do not know you, and you never knew me. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I recognized you from the description given me by the Commissioner for War," I explained. "I know that you are Handon Gar, and that I can trust you. My name is Tangor; I am know here as Korvan Don. I was sent here on a mission by the Eljanhai and the Commissioner for War," I continued in a low whisper, "and was instructed to ascertain what your fate had been."

He smiled sourly. "And now you are in the same boat as I; I'm afraid they'll never learn what became of either of us."

"Is Tunzo Bor all right?" I asked.

"Yes, but he suspected you. However, I did too, but I couldn't see how I

could be any worse off if I told you my name. I do not recall ever having heard yours. Where did you live in Unis, and what did you do?"

"I lived in Orvis and was a pilot in the fighting service."

"It is strange that I never met you," he said, and I could see that he was becoming suspicious again.

"It is not so strange," I said; "I am sure that I know only a very few of the thousands of pilots in the service; one could not know them all. Do you know Harkas Don?"

"Yes, indeed, very well," he replied

"He is my best friend," I said.

He was silent for some time, and then he said, "How are Don's brothers?"

"He hasn't any," I replied; "they have all been killed in the war."

"And his sisters?" he asked.

"He only has one sister," I replied; "Yamoda. I saw her the night before I left. She had had an accident, but she is all right now."

"Well," he said, "if you know these people so intimately, you must be all right. You know we have to be careful here."

"Yes, I understand," I replied.

Again he was silent for a few moments, and then he leaned closer to me and whispered, "We are going to make a break in a few days; Tunzo Bor and I and a couple of others. We have it all planned. Do you want to come along?"

"I can't," I replied; "I haven't fulfilled my mission yet."

"You can't fulfil it while you're in a work camp," he said, "and you'll never get out. You might just as well make a break with us. If we get back to Orvis, I'll explain to the Eljanhai that I advised you to escape while there was a chance."

"No, thanks," I replied, "I shall get out of here."

"You seem very sure," he said, and I noticed that he looked at me peculiarly, and I had a feeling that he already regretted telling me what he had. I was about to try to reassure him, when a guard ordered us to stop talking.

A couple of days later, which was a rest day, a guard called to me to come over to the wire fence, and there I found Morga Sagra awaiting me. It was quite unusual for prisoners to be allowed to have visitors, and I could see that it aroused a great deal of interest and comment in the compound.

"I have been working hard for your release," she told me in a whisper, "but Gurrul is still unconvinced. If you have heard of anything suspicious here-anything the Zabo would like to know of you will report it, it will prove that you are all right, and it will be much easier to get you out."

"I have heard nothing," I said; "we are not allowed to do much talking, and anyway, everyone here is suspicious of everyone else."

"Well, keep your ears open, though I think that I'll soon have you out anyway. The thing that has Gurrul guessing is your appearance; you know, you don't look much like a native of any Polodan country; and so he is commencing to

think that your story of your origin may be true."

"How are you getting along?" I asked her.

"All right," she said. "I have a nice apartment, and they are treating me all right, but I am always being watched; however, it is a grand place to live; these are real people; they live for war-a great race, a noble race.

"And a very hospitable people," I said.

Her eyes narrowed. "Be careful, Korvan Don," she said. "You can go too far even with me. Remember that I am a Kapar now."

I laughed. "You always insist on putting the wrong interpretation on things I say, Sagra."

"I hope so," she snapped.

Shortly after she left, Handon Gar approached me. "You'll get out all right, you damn cur," he whispered under his breath. "I know that woman, I always thought that she was a traitor. I suppose that you told her all about the plan Tunzo Bor and I have to escape."

Once again a guard interrupted and made us stop talking before I could explain. But could I explain? I was sorry flat he believed as he did; but there was nothing that I could do about it, for I could not tell even him all the details of my mission.

And then, the very next day, his suspicions must have been definitely confirmed, as a messenger came from Gurrul with an order for my immediate release; and to make it appear all the worse, Morga Sagra accompanied the messenger and threw her arms around me.

I was taken by underground railway to Ergos and immediately to Gurrul's office in the headquarter's building of the Zabo. He talked to me for about half an hour, asking me many questions concerning the other world and solar system from which I said I came.

"You certainly are no Polodan," he said, "there never was a human being like you, but I don't see how you could have been transported from another solar system."

"Neither do I," I admitted, "but there are many things in the universe that none of us understand."

"Well, Morga Sagra has vouched for you, and I am taking her word for it," he said; then he told me that quarters had been reserved for me, and that he would send a man with me to show me where they were located. "I think I can use you later on," he said; "so hold yourself in readiness. Do not leave your quarters without leaving word where you are going and never leave the city without my permission;" then he called into the room the man who was to show me to my quarters and dismissed me.

I knew that he was still suspicious of me, but that was not at all surprising as the secret police are always suspicious of everybody and everything. However, when I whispered to him some of the military secrets I had been ordered by the Eljanhai to give him orally, his attitude changed a little; and he was almost amiable as he bid me goodbye.

When I reached my new quarters,

the door was opened by a rather nice looking chap in the livery of a servant.

"This is your master, Korvan Don," said the green-uniformed Zabo agent who accompanied me.

The man bowed. "My name is Lotar Canl, sir," he said; "I hope that I shall be able to satisfy you."

Morga Sagra's apartment was in the same building as mine; and almost immediately we commenced to be invited out and entertained, but I had the feeling that we were being constantly watched. Well, so is everyone in Kapara. The entire nation lives in an atmosphere of intrigue and suspicion. The army fears the Zabo, the Zabo hates the army; everyone fears the five top men of the regime, each of whom fears the others. The head of the nation is called the Pom Da, literally the Great I. The present Pom Da has ruled for ten years. I suppose he had a name once, but it is never used; he is just the Great I, a cruel and cunning monster who has ordered many of his best friends and closest relatives destroyed.

Morga Sagra is a most sagacious girl; she was cut out by nature for intrigue, treason, and espionage. She thinks far ahead and lays her plans accordingly.

Everywhere that she went, she told people that I was from another world. She did this not so much to attract attention to me, but to help convince the Kapars that I had no ties in Unis and no reason to be loyal to that country. She wanted them to understand that I would be no traitor to Kapara, and eventually her plan bore fruit-the Great I sent for me.

Lotar Canl, my man, was evidently greatly impressed when he gave me the message. "You can go very far in Kapara, sir," he said, "if the Pom Da becomes interested in you; I am very proud to serve you, sir."

I already knew that I might go far if the Pom Da noticed me, but in what direction I was not certain-the paths of glory sometimes lead but to the grave.

Chapter Five

WHEN I REACHED THE ORNATE BUILDING which houses the head of Kapara, I was first carefully searched for concealed weapons and then escorted by two heavily armed guards to a room presided over by a grim, elaborately uniformed and decorated official. Here I waited for about half an hour, my two guards sticking close to me; then the door at the far end of the room opened, and another officer appeared and called my name.

The guards arose with me and escorted me to the door of an enormous chamber, at the far end of which a man sat behind a huge desk. The guards were dismissed at the doorway and told to wait, and two officers took their places and escorted me the length of the room into the presence of the Pom Da.

He is not a large man, and I think that he appears even smaller than he is because of his very evident nervousness, fear, and suspicion.

He just sat and eyed me for what must have been a full minute before he spoke. His expression was venomous,

seeming to reflect the deepest hatred; but I was to learn later that this expression was not reserved for anyone in particular; it was almost habitual with him, and this is understandable because his whole ideology is based on hate.

"So you are Korvan Don, the traitor?" he shot at me.

"I am no traitor," I said.

One of the officers seized me roughly by the arm. "When you address the Pom Da," he shouted angrily, "always refer to him as the Highest Most High."

"You are betraying Unis," said the Pom Da, ignoring the interruption.

"Unis is not my country-Highest Most High."

"You claim to be from another world-from another solar system. Is that right?"

"Yes, Highest Most High," I replied.

"One Highest Most High in a conversation is sufficient," snapped the officer on my other side. I was learning Kaparan high etiquette the hard way.

The Pom Da questioned me for some time about the Earth and our solar system and how I could know how far away it was from Poloda. I explained everything to him to the best of my ability, but I doubt very much that he understood a great deal of what I said; the Kapars are not highly intelligent, their first Pom Da having killed off a majority of the intelligent people of his time and his successor destroying the remainder, leaving only scum to breed.

"What were you in that strange world from which you say you came?" he asked.

"I was a flyer in the fighting forces of my country and also something of an inventor, having been at work on a ship in which I purposed travelling to another planet of our

solar system."

"How far from your Earth would this planet be?" he asked.

"About 48,000,000 miles," I replied.

"That is a long way," he said. "Do you think that you could have done it?"

"I had high hopes; in fact, I was almost on the verge of perfecting my ship when I was called away to war."

"Tonas is less than six hundred thousand miles from Poloda," he mused. I could see that he had something on his mind, and I guessed what it was, or at least I hoped. He talked to me for over a half an hour and then he dismissed me, but before I left I asked him if he would order my gold and jewels returned to me.

He turned to an officer standing at one end of his desk and instructed him to see that all of my belongings were returned to me; then the two officers and I backed out of the room. I had stood all during the interview, but that was not at all surprising as there was only one chair in the room and that was occupied by the Pom Da.

The green Zabo car took me back to my quarters, and the men who accompanied me were most obsequious; and when Lotar Canl opened the door and saw them bowing to me and calling me Most High, he beamed all over.

Morga Sagra came in from her

apartment presently; and she was delighted with the honour that had been done me, and she didn't let any grass grow under her feet before she let it be known that I had been received by the Pom Da in an interview that lasted over a half an hour.

Now we commenced to be invited into the homes of the highest; and when my gold and jewels were returned, as they were the day after my interview with the Pom Da, Sagra and I were able to splurge a little bit; so that we had a gay time in the capital of Kapara, where only the very highest have a gay time, or even enough to eat.

Among our acquaintances was a woman named Gimmel Gora, with whom Morga Sagra had associated while I was in the prison camp; and she and her man, Grunge, were with us a great deal. They were not married, but then no one in Kapara is married; such silly, sentimental things as marriages were done away with nearly a hundred years ago. I did not like either Gimmel Gora or Grunge; in fact, I did not like any of the Kapars I had met so far, with the possible exception of my man, Lotar Canl; and, of course, I even suspected him of being an agent of the Zabo.

The Kapars are arrogant, supercilious, stupid, and rude; and Grunge was no exception. I did not know what he did for a living; and, of course, I never asked, as I never showed the slightest curiosity about anything. If a stranger asks too many questions in Kapara, he is quite likely to find his head rolling around on the floor-they don't waste ammunition in Kapara.

We were making a lot of acquaintances, but I was not any place with my mission. I was no nearer learning about the amplifier than I had been in Orvis. I kept talking about the ship I had been inventing in my own world, hoping in that way to get a hint from someone that would lead me on the right trail; but after two months in Ergos, I hadn't been able to get the slightest lead; it was just as though no such thing as a new powerful amplifier existed, and I commenced to wonder if the Commissioner for War had been misinformed.

One day a green car stopped before the building in which my apartment was located. Lotar Canl, who had been at a front window saw it, and when a summons came at our door, he looked at me apprehensively. "I hope that you have not been indiscreet," he said as he went to open the door.

I, too, hoped that I hadn't, for these grim, green-uniformed men do not call on one for the purpose of playing rummy or hopscotch.

"Korvan Don?" asked one of the men, looking at me.

I nodded, "Yes."

"Come with us."

That was all-just like that: "Come with us."; just, "Come with us."

I came, and they whisked me away to that horrible building with the carved facade, where I was ushered into Gurrul's office.

He gave me that venomous stare of his for about a half a minute before he spoke. "Do you know what happens to People who have knowledge of crimes

against the state and do not report them to the authorities?" he demanded.

"I think I can guess," I replied.

"Well, four men have escaped from the prison camp in which you were confined."

"I do not see how that concerns me," I said.

He had a large file of papers on the desk before him, and he thumbed through them. "Here," he said, "I find that on several dates you were found talking to Handon Gar and Tunzo Bor-in whispers!"

"That is the only way one may talk there," I replied.

He thumbed through the papers again. "It seems that you were extremely familiar with Tunzo Bor from the time you entered camp; you were evidently very familiar with both of these men, although I find no record that you were particularly familiar with the other two who escaped. Now," he shouted, "what were you whispering about?"

"I was questioning them," I said.

"Why?" he demanded.

"I question whomever I can for such information as I may get. You see, I was in the Zabo in my own country; so it is natural for me to acquire all the information I can from the enemy."

"Did you get any information?"

"I think I was about to when Morga Sagra came to see me; after that they wouldn't talk to me."

"Before Handon Gar escaped he told several prisoners that you were a spy from Unis."

As he growled this out, Gurrul looked as though he would like to chop my head off himself.

I laughed. "I told him that myself," I said. "He evidently wanted to get even with me for almost fooling him."

Gurrul nodded. "An intelligent agent would have done that very thing," he said. "I am glad that you have been able to clear yourself, as this is the first bad report I have had concerning you." then he dismissed me.

As I walked slowly toward my apartment, just about a half a mile from the Zabo headquarters, I reviewed in my mind my interview with Gurrul; and I came to realize that he had exonerated me altogether too willingly. It was not like him. I had a feeling that he was still suspicious of me, and that he had done this to throw me off my guard that I might be more easily trapped if I were indeed disloyal. This conviction was definitely heightened before I reached my apartment. I had occasion to stop in two shops on the way; and, on each occasion, when I left the shop I saw the same man loitering nearby; I was being shadowed, and in a very crude and amateurish way at that. I thought that if the Zabo were no more efficient in other respects, I would have little to fear from them; but I did not let this belief lessen my caution.

Before I reached my apartment, I met Grunge, who was walking with a man I did not know, and whom he introduced as Horthal Wend. Horthal was a middle-aged man with a very kindly face, which certainly differentiated him from most of the other Kapars I had met.

They invited me into a drinking place and because I believed Grunge to be connected in some way with the Zabo, I accepted. Grunge had no visible means of support, yet he was always well supplied with money; and, for that reason, I suspected him of being either a member or a tool of the secret police. I felt that if I associated with men of this stamp and was always careful of what I said and did, only good reports of me could reach Gurrul. I also made it a point to try to never be alone with anyone-and never to whisper; there is nothing that makes a member of the Zabo more suspicious than a whisper.

Grunge and Horthal Wend ordered wine. Grunge had to show a wine card in order to obtain it; and this strengthened my belief that he was connected with the Zabo, for only those who stand well with the government are issued wine cards.

When I ordered a nonalcoholic drink, Grunge urged me to take wine; but I refused, as I never drink anything of the sort when I have an important duty to fulfil.

Grunge seemed quite put out to think that I would not drink wine with him, and that convinced me that he had hoped that wine would loosen my tongue-a very mouldy trick of secret police. I found Horthal Wend as kindly in manner as in appearance, and I took quite a liking to him. Before I left him, he had extracted a promise from me that I would come and see him and his woman and bring Morga Sagra with me.

Little did I dream then what the death of this kindly man would mean to me.

Chapter Six

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Sagra and I had dinner with Grunge and Gimmel Gora, and during the course of the evening I mentioned Horthal Wend and remarked that I had found him most intelligent and friendly.

"I guess that he is intelligent enough," said Grunge, "but I find him a little too pleasant; that, to me, is an indication of sentimentality and softness, neither of which have any place in Kapar manhood. However, he stands very well with the Pom Da, and is, therefore, a safe man to know and cultivate, for our beloved Pom Da is never wrong in his estimate of men-in fact, he is never wrong in anything."

I could not help but think that if sentiment and intelligence had no place in Kapar manhood, Grunge was an ideal Kapar.

Grunge's use of the word beloved might seem to belie my statement that he was without sentiment, but it was really only the fawning expression of a sycophant and connoted more of fear than love.

I was constantly mentally comparing Kapars with the Unisans. Here in Kapara all is suspicion and fear-fear of unseen malign for forces that are all powerful; fear of your next door neighbor; fear of your servants; fear of your best friend, and suspicious of all.

All during the evening, Sagra had seemed distrait. Grunge, on the other hand was quite talkative and almost af-

fable. He directed most of his conversation and elephantine wit at Sagra and was correspondingly disagreeable and sarcastic when he spoke to Gimmel Gora.

He was meticulously polite to me, which was unusual; as Grunge was seldom if ever polite to anyone of whom he was not afraid. "We have much to be thankful for in the wonderful friendship that has developed between us," he said to me; "It seems as though I had known you always, Korvan Don. It is not often in this life that two men meet who may mutually trust each other on short acquaintance."

"You are quite right," I said, "but I think one learns to know almost instinctively who may be trusted and who may not. I wondered what he was driving at, and I did not have to wait long to discover.

"You have been in Kapara for some time, now," he continued, "and I suppose that some of your experiences could not have been entirely pleasant; for instance the prison camp and the prison beneath the Zabo headquarters."

"Well, of course, freedom is always to be preferred to confinement," I replied; "but I have sense enough to realize that every precaution must be taken in a nation at war, and I admire the Kapars for their efficiency in this respect. While I did not enjoy being confined, I have no complaint to make, I was well-treated." If one may instinctively recognize a trustworthy friend, one may also instinctively recognize an unscrupulous enemy; and this I felt Grunge to be, for I was confident that he was attempting to cajole me into making some criticism that would incriminate me in the eyes of the Zabo.

He looked a little crestfallen, but he said, "I am glad to hear you say that. Just between friends, tell me in confidence what you thought of Gurrul."

"A highly intelligent man, well fitted for the post he occupies," I replied. "Although he must have to contend with all types of criminals, scoundrels, and traitors, he appears to me to be fair and just, without being soft or sentimental." I was learning to talk like a Kapar and to lie like one too.

As Sagra and I walked home that night, I asked her what had been troubling her, for she had not seemed herself at all.

"I am worried and frightened," she replied; "Grunge has been making advances to me, and Gimmel Gora knows it. I am afraid of both of them, for I believe that both are agents of the Zabo."

"Neither one of us has anything to fear," I said. "Aren't we both good Kapars?"

"I sometimes wonder if you are," she said.

"At first I may have been a little critical," I said, "but that was before I understood the strength and beauty of their system. Now I am as good a Kapar as there is." From this speech it might be assumed that I was suspicious of Morga Sagra, and the assumption would be wholly correct. I was suspicious of Morga Sagra, of Grunge, of Gimmel Gora, of Lotar Canl, my man—in fact, of

everybody. In this respect, at least, I had become a good Kapar.

When I got home that night, I found that my quarters had been thoroughly ransacked. The contents of every drawer was scattered about on the floor; my rugs had been torn up, and my mattress cut open.

While I was viewing the havoc, Lotar Canl came home. He looked around the place, and then, with the faintest of smiles on his lips he said, "Burglars. I hope that they got nothing of value, sir."

Most of my gold and jewels are deposited in a safe place; but in addition to that which I carry on my person, I had left a handful of gold in one of the drawers in my desk, and this I found scattered on the floor-all of it.

"Well," I said, "they overlooked this gold, and there was nothing else in the apartment anybody would wish."

"They must have been frightened away before they could gather this up," said Lotar Canl.

The little game that he and I were playing was almost laughable for neither of us dared suggest the truth-that the apartment had been searched by the police.

"I am glad," he said, "that you had nothing of value here other than this gold."

When I met Sagra the next day, I said nothing about the matter to her, for I had learned that no matter how often one's home is "burglarized" or even if his grandmother is taken at midnight and beheaded, he does not mention the occurrence to anyone; but Sagra was less reticent. She told me that she was being constantly watched; that her room had been searched three times, and that she was terrified. "I have a secret enemy," she said, "who is leaving no stone unturned to get me destroyed."

"Have you any idea who it is?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, "I think I know."

"Gimmel Gora?"

She nodded, and then she whispered, "And you must be careful of Grunge. He thinks that you are my man, and he would like to get rid of you."

There had never been any suggestion of any sentimental relationship between Morga Sagra and me. She had used me in order to get to Kapara; and because we had been two strangers in a strange land, we had been constantly thrown together since. I know that she enjoyed my company, and I still found her witty and entertaining when she was not entirely preoccupied with the terror which now obsessed her. If ever a just retribution were being meted to a person, this was the instance. I was confident that Morga Sagra would have given her soul to have been back in Unis; and to her terror was added hopelessness, for she knew that she could never return.

That evening we went to call on Horthal Wend and his woman, Haka Gera. She was a heavy minded, rather stupid woman, but evidently a good housekeeper and probably a good manager, which I judged Horthal Wend needed, for he was evidently easygoing and careless.

We talked about art, literature, music, the weather, and the wonders of Kapar ideology-about the only safe subject for discussion in Kapara; and even then we had to be careful. If one should by mistake express appreciation of some work of art or musical composition by a person in bad odor with the heads of the state or with the Zabo, that was treason.

During the evening, their fourteen year old son, Horthal Gyl, joined us. He was a precocious child, and I do not like precocious children. He was a loud-mouthed little egotist who knew it all, and he kept projecting himself into the conversation until he practically monopolized it.

Horthal Wend was evidently very proud of him and very fond of him; but once when he made a gesture as though to caress the lad, the boy struck his hand away.

"None of that!" he growled at his father; "such maudlin sentimentality is not for Kapar men. I am ashamed of you."

"Now, now," said his mother gently; "it is not wrong for your father to love you."

"I do not wish him to love me," snapped the boy. "I only wish that he should admire me and be proud of me because I am hard. I do not want him or anyone to be as ashamed of me as I am of him because of his sentimentality and softness."

Horthal Wend tried to smile as he shook his head. "You see, he is a good Kapar," he said; and, I thought, a little sadly.

"I see," I said.

The boy shot me a quick suspicious look. Evidently I had not kept my innermost feelings out of those two words.

We left shortly after this and as we walked home, I was conscious of a feeling of great depression. I think it was caused by the attitude of that son to his father. "Horthal Gyl will grow up to be a fine example of the Kapar gentlemen," I said.

"I would rather not discuss him," replied Sagra.

Chapter Seven

I WENT TO BED immediately after reaching my apartment. Lotar Canl had asked for the entire night off; so when I was awakened shortly after midnight by a summons at my door, I had to answer it myself. As I opened it, two green-clad Zabo troopers stepped in with drawn pistols.

"Dress and come with us," said one of them.

"There must be some mistake," I said; "I am Korvan Don, you can't want me."

"Shut up and get dressed," said the one who had first spoken, "or we'll take you along in your nightclothes."

While I was dressing, I racked my brains trying to think what I had done to deserve arrest. Of course I knew it would be useless to ask these men. Even if they knew, which they probably did not, they wouldn't tell me. Naturally I thought of Grunge, because of what Morga Sagra had told me, but the man could not possibly have had anything to report against me; although, of course,

he could have fabricated some story.

I was taken directly to Gurrul's office; and although it was well after midnight, he was still there. He gave me one of his most terrible looks and then screamed at me, "So you slipped at last, you filthy spy. I have always suspected you, and I am always right."

"I don't know what you are talking about," I said. "You can have absolutely no charge against me; because I have spoken no treasonable words since I came to Kapara. I defy anyone to prove that I am not as good a Kapar as you.

"Oh," he barked, "so you haven't said anything treasonable? Well, you idiot, you have written it;" and he took a small red book from a drawer in his desk and held it up in front of me and shook it in my face. "Your diary, you fool." He turned the leaves and scanned the pages for a moment and then he read, "'Gurrul is a fat idiot'; so I am a fat idiot, am I?" He turned a few more pages, and read again. "'The Zabo is made up of moronic murderers; and when our revolution succeeds, I shall have them all beheaded. I shall behead Gurrul myself.' What do you say to that?"

"I say that I never saw that book before and that I never wrote any of the things which you have read."

He turned over some more pages and read again, "The Pom Da is an egotistical maniac and will be one of the first to be destroyed when J and I rule Kapara. Who is J?" he bellowed at me.

"I haven't the slightest idea," I told him.

"Well, there are ways of making you find out," he said, and getting up and coming around the end of his desk, he knocked me down before I had the slightest idea what his intentions were.

I leaped to my feet with the intention of handing him what he had handed me, but several troopers seized me. "Secure his hands," ordered Gurrul, and they put them behind my back and snapped handcuffs about my wrists.

"You'd better tell me who J is," said Gurrul, "or you'll get a great deal worse than what I just gave you. Who is this accomplice of yours? It will go easier with you if you tell me."

"I do not know who J is," I said.

"Take him into the question box," ordered Gurrul, and they took me into an adjoining room which I instantly saw was fitted up as a torture chamber. They let me look around the room for a moment at the various instruments of torture, and then Gurrul started demanding again that I tell him who J was. He kept striking me repeatedly, and when I fell he kicked me.

When I still insisted that I didn't know, one of them burned me with a hot iron.

"Your right eye goes next," said Gurrul; "who is J?"

They worked on me for about an hour, and I was pretty nearly dead when they finally gave up.

"Well," said Gurrul, "I can't spend all the rest of the night with this stubborn fool; take him downstairs and behead him-unless in the meantime he tells you who J is."

Well, this was the end of my mission. I had learned absolutely nothing, and now I was to be beheaded. As a spy I was evidently a total failure. A couple of them jerked me roughly to my feet; for I could not rise by myself, and just then the door opened and Lotar Canl entered the room. When I saw him, my suspicions were confirmed, as I had always thought that he was probably a Zabo agent; and now I thought that it was probably he who had turned this forged diary over to them, probably in the hope of winning preferment by discovering this plot against the nation.

He took in the scene in a quick glance and then he turned to Gurrul. "Why is this man here?"

"He is a traitor who was conspiring against Kapara," replied Gurrul. "We found the evidence of his guilt in this diary in his desk."

"I thought as much," said Lotar Canl, "when I came home earlier than I expected tonight and found that the book had been removed from his desk."

"You knew about this book," demanded Gurrul.

"Of course," replied Lotar Canl. "I saw it planted there. Korvan Don knew nothing about it. I have watched this man most carefully since he has been here. He is as good a Kapar as any of us."

Gurrul looked a little sheepish, that is if a wolf can look sheepish. "Who put the book in his desk?" he asked.

"The man who actually placed it there was an innocent tool," replied Lotar Canl. "I have him under arrest. He is in the next room under guard. I wish that you would question him yourself."

The man was brought in, and Gurrul showed him the diary and asked him if he had placed it in my desk.

The poor fellow was trembling so that he could scarcely speak, but finally he managed to say, "Yes, Most High."

"Why did you do it?" demanded Gurrul.

"The night before last, a man came into my room shortly after midnight. He flashed a tiny light on a Zabo badge he wore, but he was careful not to shine it on his face. He told me that I had been selected to place this book in Korvan Don's desk. He said that it was a command from you, Most High."

Gurrul called Lotal Canl to the far end of the room, and they whispered together for several minutes; then Gurrul came back. "You may go," he said to the man, "but understand that nobody ever came to your room in the middle of the night and asked you to put anything in anybody's desk; you were not brought here tonight; you did not see me nor anyone else who is in this room. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Most High," replied the man.

"Take him away and see that he is returned to his home," Gurrul directed the two agents who had brought the fellow in; then he turned again to me. "Mistakes are bound to occur occasionally," he said. "It is regrettable, but it is so. Have you any idea who might have had that book placed in your desk?"

I thought that it was Grunge, but I said, "I haven't any idea; as far as I know

I haven't an enemy in Kapara. There is no reason why anyone should wish to get me into trouble." I suspected that Grunge was a Zabo agent, and I knew that if he were I would probably get myself into trouble by accusing him. Gurrul turned to one of his officers. "Have this man taken to a hospital," he said, "and see that he receives the best of treatment;" and then he turned to me. "You are never to mention this unfortunate occurrence to anyone. While returning home, you were knocked down and run over. Do you understand?"

I told him that I did; and then they sent for a stretcher, and I was carried out and taken to a hospital.

The next day, Sagra came to see me. She said that she had found a note under her door telling her that I had been in an accident and what hospital I was in.

"Yes," I said, "I was hit by an automobile."

She looked frightened. "Do you think that you will be hit again?" she asked.

"I hope not by the same automobile," I said.

"I am terribly frightened," she said; "I am afraid that it will be my turn next."

"Keep out of the way of automobiles," I advised her.

"Gimmel Gora won't speak to me any more, and Grunge won't leave me alone. He told me not to be afraid, as he is a Zabo agent."

"Just as I thought," I said, "and a hit and run driver too."

"I wish I were back in Orvis," she said.

"Be careful what you say, Sagra," I advised.

She looked at me with wide, frightened eyes. "You, too?" she asked.

"No, not I," I assured her; "but the walls may have ears."

"I wish you could tell me what happened," she said.

I shook my head. "I have told you-I was hit by an automobile and run over."

"I suppose you are right," she said; "and I also suppose that I have talked altogether too much; but I am nearly crazy, and if I didn't have someone to tell my fears too, I think I should go crazy."

Treason is a terrible thing, and its punishment must be terrible.

Chapter Eight

I WAS IN THE HOSPITAL for about two weeks; but at last I was discharged and allowed to go home, although I had to remain in bed there most of the time. I found a new man there to take Lotar Canl's place. He had brought a note from Lotar Canl saying that he knew that I would need someone as soon as I returned from the hospital and that he could highly recommend this man, whose name was Danul.

Lotar Canl came to see me himself the day after I was returned from the hospital. While we were talking, he wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to me. It read, "Danul is not connected with the Zabo, but he is a good Kapar;" then, after I had read it, he took the paper from me and burned it up; but he was very careful to see that

Danul was not around to observe what he did.

It is terrible to live under this constant strain of fear and suspicion, and it shows in the faces of most of these people. Lotar Canl was peculiarly free from it, and I always enjoyed talking with him; however, we were both careful never to touch on any forbidden subjects.

While I was in Ergos, there was scarcely a day passed that I did not hear the detonation of Unisan bombs; and I could visualize my comrades in arms flying high over this buried city. The only reports that I ever heard of these activities always related Kapar victories; or the great number of enemy planes shot down, and the very small losses suffered by the Kapars, or they would tell of the terrific bombing of Orvis or of other Unisan cities. According to these official reports, Kapara was just on the verge of winning the war.

Harkas Yamoda was much in my mind at this time, and thoughts of her and my other friends in Orvis rather depressed me, because I felt that I couldn't return until I had fulfilled my mission, and I seemed to be as far as ever from that. No matter how often I brought up the subject of my invention, no one ever indicated that he had heard of such a thing. It was very disheartening, as the first step to acquiring any information about the new amplifier was to learn who was working on it; and of course I didn't dare suggest in the slightest way that I had knowledge that any such thing was being considered in Kapara.

Sagra came to see me every day and spent a great deal of time with me, and one day Grunge came. "I was very sorry to hear of your accident," he said; "and I intended to come and see you sooner, but I have been very busy. There are many careless drivers in Ergos; one cannot be too careful."

"Oh, well," I said, "perhaps it was my fault; I was probably careless in crossing the street."

"One cannot be too careful," he said again.

"I have found that out," I replied; "even a friend might run over one."

He gave me a quick look. He did not stay very long, and it was evident that he was nervous and ill at ease while he was there. I was glad when he left, for the more I saw of the man the less I liked him.

Horthal Wend and his woman and son came on another day while Sagra was there. Horthal Wend said that he had only just heard of my accident and was greatly distressed to think that he had not known of it before and come to see me earlier. He did not question me as to the cause of it, but Horthal Gyl did.

"I was hit by an automobile, knocked down and run over," I told him. He gave a knowing look and started to say something, but his father interrupted him. "Gyl has just made his mother and me very proud," he said; "he stood at the head of his class for the year," and he looked adoringly at the boy.

"What are you studying?" I asked, in order to be polite and not that I gave

a continental hang what he was studying.

"What do you suppose a Kapar man studies?" he demanded impudently. "War."

"How interesting," I commented.

"But that is not all I study," he continued. "However, what else I study is the business only of my instructor and myself."

"And you expect to be a fighter when you grow up, I suppose," I said, for I saw that it pleased Horthal Wend that I should be taking an interest in his son.

"When I grow up, I'm going to be a Zabo agent," said the boy; "I am always practicing."

"How do you practice for that?" I asked.

"Don't show too much curiosity about the Zabo," he warned; "it is not healthful."

I laughed at him and told him that I was only politely interested in the subject.

"I have warned you," he said.

"Don't be impolite, son," Horthal Wend admonished him.

"If I were you," he retorted, "I wouldn't interfere with the Zabo; and you should be more careful with whom you associate," and he cast a dark look at Sagra. "The Zabo sees all; knows all." I should have liked to have choked the impossible little brat. Sagra looked uncomfortable and Horthal Wend fidgeted.

Finally he said, "Oh, stop talking about the Zabo, son; it's bad enough to have it without talking about it all the time."

The boy shot him a dirty look. "You are speaking treason," he said to his father.

"Now, Gyl," said his mother, "I wouldn't say things like that."

I could see that Horthal Wend was getting more and more nervous, and presently he got up and they took their leave.

"Somebody ought to give that brat rat poison," I said to Sagra.

She nodded. "He is dangerous," she whispered. "He hangs around Grunge's home a great deal and is very friendly with both Grunge and Gimmel Gora. I think it is through Gimmel Gora that he has come to suspect me; did you see how he looked at me when he told his father that he should be more careful with whom he associated?"

"Yes," I said, "I noticed; but I wouldn't worry about him, he is only a little boy practicing at being a detective."

"Nevertheless, he is a very dangerous little boy," she said. "A great deal of the information that the Zabo receives comes from children."

A couple of days later I went out for my first walk; and as Horthal Wend lived only a short distance from my apartment, I went over to call on him.

Haka Gera, his woman, opened the door for me. She was in tears, and the boy was sitting, sullen and scowling, in the corner. I sensed that something terrible had happened, but I was afraid to

ask. At last, between sobs, Haka Gera said, "You came to see Wend?"

"Yes," I replied; "is he at home?"

She shook her head and then burst into a violent spasm of sobbing. The boy sat there and glowered at her. Finally she gained control of herself and whispered, "They came last night and took him away." She looked over at the boy, and there was fear in her eyes-fear and horror and reproach.

I did my best to comfort her; but it was hopeless, and finally I took my departure. As far as I know, Horthal Wend was never seen nor heard of again.

I am not a drinking man; but as I walked back toward my apartment, I was so depressed and almost nauseated by the whole affair that I went into a drinking place and ordered a glass of wine. There were only two other customers in the place as I seated myself at a little table. They had the hard, cruel faces of Kapar fighting men or police. I could see that they were scrutinizing me closely and whispering to one another. Finally they got up and came over and stopped in front of me.

"Your credentials," barked one of them.

My wine permit was lying on the table in front of me, and I pushed it over toward him. It bore my name and address and a brief description. He picked it up and looked at it and then threw it down on the table angrily. "I said your credentials," he snapped.

"Let me see yours," I said; "I have the right to know upon what authority you question a law-abiding citizen." I was right in my demand, although possibly a little foolish in insisting upon my rights. The fellow grumbled and showed me a Zabo badge, and then I handed him my credentials.

He looked them over carefully and then handed them back. "So you're the fellow who was run over by an automobile a few weeks ago," he said; "well, if I were you, I'd be more respectful to Zabo officers, or you may be run over again;" and then they turned and stamped out of the place. It was such things as this that made life in Ergos what it was.

When I got home, Danul told me that two Zabo agents had been there and searched my apartment. I don't know why he told me; because he really had no business to, unless he had been given orders to do so for the purpose of trapping me into some treasonable expression, for it is treason to express any disapproval of an act of the Zabo; I could have been drawn and quartered for what I was thinking of them though.

Now I commenced to be suspicious of Danul, and I wondered if Lotar Canl had lied to me or if this man was an agent without Lotar Canl having any knowledge of the fact. Insofar as suspicion was concerned, I was becoming a true Kapar; I suspected everybody. I think the only man whom I had ever met here that I had perfect confidence in was Horthal Wend, and they had come at night and taken him away.

Chapter Nine

MOREA SAGRA CAME IN SHORTLY after I returned; and I sent Danul out on

an errand, so that I might tell her about Horthal Wend.

"That horrible child!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Tangor!" she cried, "can't we get out of here?"

"Don't ever speak that name again," I said. "Do you want to get me into trouble?"

"I'm sorry; it just came out. Couldn't we get away somehow?"

"And be shot as soon as we return to Orvis?" I said. "You got yourself into this," I reminded her, "and now you've got to grin and bear it and so have I; although I really enjoy it here," I lied. "I wouldn't go back to Orvis under any circumstances."

She looked at me questioningly. "I'm sorry," she said. "You won't hold it against me, will you? Oh, Korvan Don, you won't tell anybody that I said that?"

"Of course not," I assured her.

"I can't help it," she said, "I can't help it. I am almost a nervous wreck. I have a premonition that something terrible is going to happen," and just then there came a pounding on the door, and I thought that Morga Sagra was going to faint.

"Pull yourself together and buck up," I said, as I crossed to the door. As I opened it, I was confronted by two high officers of the Kapar fighting force.

"You are Korvan Don?" inquired one of them.

"I am," I replied.

"You will come with us," he said.

Well, at least they were not agents of the Zabo; but what they wanted of me I couldn't imagine; and, of course, I did not ask. Since I have been here in Ergos, I have schooled myself to such an extent that I even hesitate to ask the time of day. We were driven at high speed, through crowded streets, to the building in which is the office of the Pom Da, and, after but a moment's wait in an anteroom, I was ushered into the presence of the Great I.

The Pom Da came to the point immediately. "When you were here before," he said, "you told me that before you left that other world from which you say you came, you were working on a ship which you believed would have a radius of something like 48,000,000 miles. One of our foremost inventors has been working along similar lines, and had almost perfected a power amplifier which would make it possible for a ship to fly from Poloda to other planets of our solar system; but unfortunately he recently suffered an accident and died.

"Naturally this important work was carried on with the utmost secrecy. He had no assistants; nobody but he could complete the experimental amplifier upon which he was working. It must be completed."

"I have had excellent reports of your integrity and loyalty since you have been here. I have sent for you because I believe you are the man best fitted to carry on from where our late inventor left off. It is, naturally, a very important piece of work, the details of which must be guarded carefully lest they fall into the hands of our enemy, who treacherously maintains agents among us. I have convinced myself that you are to be

trusted, and I am never wrong in my estimate of men. You will therefore proceed to the laboratory and workshop where the amplifier was being built and complete it."

"Is it a command, Highest Most High?" I asked.

"It is," he replied.

"Then I shall do my best," I said, "but it is a responsibility I should not have chosen voluntarily, and I cannot have but wished that you might have found someone better fitted than I for so important a commission." I wished to give him the impression that I was reluctant to work upon the amplifier, for fear that I might otherwise reveal my elation. After weeks of failure and disappointment, and without the faintest ray of hope of ever succeeding in my mission, the solution of my problem was now being dumped into my lap by the highest Kapar in the land.

The Great I, who was such a marvellous judge of men, gave me a few general instructions and then ordered that I be taken at once to the laboratory, and I backed out of his presence with the two officers who had brought me. I thought that I understood now, why I had been watched so closely, and why my apartment had been ransacked so frequently.

As I drove through the streets of Ergos, I was happy for the first time since I had left Orvis; and I was rather pleased with myself too, for I felt confident that my oft-repeated references to the imaginary ship that I had been supposed to have been working on, on Earth had finally born fruit. Of course, I had never been working on any such ship as I described; but I had done considerable experimental work on airplane motors, and I hoped that this would help me in my present undertaking.

I was driven to a neighborhood with which I was very familiar and was taken to a laboratory behind a home in which I had been entertained-the home of Horthal Wend.

I spent a full week studying the plans and examining the small model and the experimental amplifier that was almost completed. Horthal Wend had kept voluminous notes, and from these I discovered that he had eliminated all the bugs but one. As I worked, I was occasionally aware of being watched; and a couple of times I caught a fleeting glimpse of a face at the window. But whether the Pom Da was having me watched or someone was awaiting an opportunity to steal the plans, I did not know.

The trouble with Horthal Wend's amplifier was that it diffused instead of concentrating the energy derived from the sun, so that, while I was confident that it would propel a ship to either of the nearer planets, the speed would diminish progressively as the distance from the central power station on Poloda increased, with the result that the time consumed in covering the 600,000 miles between the two planets would be so great as to render the invention useless from any practical standpoint.

On the day that I eliminated the last bug and felt sure that I had an amplifier

capable of powering the ship to almost any distance from Poloda, I caught a glimpse of that face at the window again, and decided to try to find out who it was who was so inquisitive about my work.

Pretending that I had noticed nothing, I busied myself about the room, keeping my back toward the window as much as possible, until I finally reached the door that was near the window; then I threw the door open and stepped out. There was Horthal Gyl, very red in the face and looking very foolish.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded; "practicing again, or trying to pry into government secrets?"

Horthal Gyl got hold of himself in a hurry; the brat had the brazen effrontery of a skunk on a narrow trail. "What I am doing here is none of your business," he said impudently. "There may be those who trust you, but I don't."

"Whether you trust me or not, is of no interest to me," I said, "but if I ever catch you here again, I am going to give you all of the beatings in one that your father should have given you." He gave me one of his foul looks and turned and walked away.

The next day I asked for an interview with the Pom Da, who granted it immediately. The officers who came for me and those whom I encountered on my way to the office of the Great I were most obsequious; I was getting places in Kapara in a big way. Any man who spent a full week studying the plans and examining the small model and could ask for an audience with the Pom Da and get it immediately was a man to know.

"How is the work progressing?" he asked me as I stopped before his desk.

"Excellently," I replied. "I am sure that I can perfect the amplifier if you will place a plane at my disposal for experimental purposes."

"Certainly," he said. "What type of plane do you wish?"

"The fastest scout plane you have," I replied.

"Why do you want a fast plane," he demanded, instantly suspicious.

"Because it is the type of plane that will have to be used for the first experimental flight to another planet," I replied.

He nodded and beckoned to one of his aides. "Have a fast scout plane placed at Korvan Don's disposal," he ordered, "and issue instructions that he is to be permitted to fly at any time at his discretion." I was so elated that I could have hugged even the Pom Da; and then he added, "but give orders that a flying officer must always accompany him." My bubble was burst.

I made several experimental flights; and I always took along all the plans, drawings, and the model. I took them quite openly, and I kept referring to Horthal Wend's notes, to the drawings, and to the model during the flight, giving the impression that I had to have them all with me in order to check the performance of the amplifier on the ship, as well as to prevent theft of them while I was away from the laboratory.

The same officer never accompanied me twice, a fact which eventually had considerable bearing upon the per-

formance of my mission. If these fellows could have known what was in my mind all the time they were sitting in the ship beside me, they would have been surprised; I was trying to think of some way in which I could kill them, for only by getting rid of them could I escape from Kapara.

The amplifier was an unqualified success; I was positive that it would fly the ship to any part of the solar system, but I didn't tell anybody so. I still insisted that a few experimental changes would have to be made, and so the time dragged on while I awaited an opportunity to kill the officer who accompanied me. The fact that they had never given me any weapons made this difficult.

I had not dared to ask for weapons; one does not go at anything of that kind directly, but I had tried to suggest that I should be armed by telling the Pom Da that I had seen someone looking in my laboratory window on several occasions. All that got me was a heavy guard of Zabo agents around the laboratory building.

Since I had been working on the amplifier, I had seen practically nothing of Morga Sagra, as I had slept in the laboratory and had only returned to my apartment occasionally for a change of clothing. After I commenced to fly, I occasionally went directly to my apartment from the hangar, taking the plans and the model with me; but I never went out on those nights as I did not dare leave the things in my apartment unguarded.

Danul cooked and served my meals, and Morga Sagra ate with me occasionally. She told me that she had seen Horthal Gyl with Gimmel Gora on several occasions recently, and that Grunge had left his woman and was living in another part of the city. Morga Sagra hadn't seen him for some time now, and she was commencing to feel much safer.

Things seemed to be going along beautifully about this time and then the blow fell-Morga Sagra was arrested.

Chapter Ten

INSOFAR AS I WAS CONCERNED, the worst feature of Morga Sagra's arrest was that when they came for her, they found her in my apartment. Of course I didn't have any idea what the charge against her might be; but, if she were suspected of anything, those who associated closely with her, would be under suspicion too.

She was taken away at what would be about seven o'clock in the evening Earth time, and about ten, Lotar Canl came. He was dressed in the uniform of an officer of the flying force. It was the first time that I had ever seen him in anything but civilian clothes; and I was a little, surprised, but I asked no questions.

He came and sat down close to me. "Are you alone?" he asked in a whisper.

"Yes," I said; "I let Danul go out after dinner."

"I have some very bad news for you," he said. "I have just come from the question box in Zabo headquarters. They had Morga Sagra there. That little devil, Horthal Gyl, was there too; it was

he who had accused her of being a Unisan spy. A very close friend of mine, in the Zabo, told me that he had also accused you, and he had reported that I was very intimate with you and with Morga Sagra also. They tortured her to make her confess that she was a Unisan spy and that you were also."

"She never admitted that she was anything but a good Kapar, but in order to save herself from further torture, she told them that you were, just before she died."

"So what?" I asked.

"You have access to a ship whenever you want one. You must escape and that immediately for they will be here for you before midnight."

"But I can't take a ship out unless an officer accompanies me," I said.

"I know that," he replied; "that is the reason for this uniform. I am going with you."

I was instantly suspicious that this might be a trap, for, if I acted on his suggestion and tried to escape, I would be admitting my guilt. I knew that Lotar Canl was an agent of the Zabo, but I had liked him and I had always felt that I could trust him. He saw that I was hesitating.

"You can trust me," he said. "I am not a Kapar."

I looked at him in surprise. "Not a Kapar?" I demanded, "what are you then?"

"The same thing you are, Tangor," he replied, "a Unisan secret agent. I have been here for over ten years, but now that I am under suspicion, my usefulness is at an end. I was advised of your coming and told to look after you. I also knew that Morga Sagra was a traitor. She got what she deserved, but it was a horrible thing to see."

The fact that he knew my name and that he knew that I was an agent and Morga Sagra a traitor convinced me that he had spoken the truth.

"I'll be with you in just a moment," I said; then I got all the plans, drawings, and notes covering the amplifier and burned them, and while they were burning, I smashed the model so that not a single part of it was recognizable.

"Why did you do that?" demanded Lotar Canls.

"I don't want these things to fall into Kapar hands if we are caught," I said; "and I could reproduce that amplifier with my eyes shut; furthermore, there is a perfectly good one on the ship we will fly away."

It was a good thing that I had insisted upon having a fast scout plane, for while we were taxiing up the ramp to take off, an officer shouted at me to return; and then the alarm sounded, rising above the rapid fire of a machine gun, as bullets whistled about us.

Ships shot from half a dozen ramps in pursuit, but they never overtook us.

We flew first to Pud and got a change of clothing and the old Karisan plane from Frink, and then on to Gorvas where my knowledge of Gompth's name came in handy. Lotar Canl showed him his Zabo credentials, and we got a change of clothing and my ship. I had taken the amplifier off the Kapar plane at Pud, and

when we reached Orvis, I took it immediately to the Elianhai, who congratulated me on having so successfully fulfilled a difficult mission.

Just as soon as I could get away from the Eljanhai and the Commissioner for War, I made a beeline for the Harkases. The prospect of seeing them again made me even happier than had the successful fulfillment of my mission. Don and Yamoda were in the garden when I entered, and when Yamoda saw me, she jumped up and ran into the house. Don confronted me with a face.

I had been so filled with happiness at the prospect of seeing them, the shock of this greeting stunned me and kept me speechless for a moment, and then my pride prevented me from asking for an explanation. I turned on my heel and left. Blue and despondent, I went back to my old quarters. What had happened? What had I done to deserve such treatment from my best friends. I couldn't understand it, but I had been so terribly hurt that I would not go and ask for an explanation.

I took up my old duties in the flying corps immediately. Never in my life had I flown so recklessly. I invited death on every possible occasion, but I seemed to bear a charmed life; and then, one day, the Eljanhai sent for me.

"Would you like to give the amplifier a serious test?" he asked.

"I certainly would," I replied.

"What do you think would be the best plan?" he asked.

"I will fly to Tonos," I replied.

He did some figuring on a pad of paper and then said, "That will take between thirty-five and forty days. It will be very dangerous. Do you realize the risk?"

"Yes, sir."

"I shall ask for volunteers to go with you," he said.

"I prefer to go alone, sir; there is no use in risking more than one life. I have no ties here. It would not mean anything to anyone in a personal way, if I never return."

"I thought that you had some very close friends here," he said.

"So did I, but I was mistaken. I'd really prefer to go alone."

"When do you wish to start?" he asked.

"As soon as I can provision my ship; I shall need a great quantity of food and water; much more than enough for a round trip. There's no telling what conditions are like on Tonos. I may not be able to obtain any food or even water there as far as anyone knows."

"Requisition all that you require," he said, "and come and see me again before you take off."

By the following night, I had everything that I needed carefully stowed in my ship, which was equipped with a robot pilot, as were all the great radius ships in Poloda. I could set the robot and sleep all the way to Tonos if I wished; that is, if I could sleep that long.

I was so intrigued with the prospect of this adventure that I was almost happy while I was actively employed, but when I returned to my quarters that last night, possibly and probably my last night on

Poloda, my depression returned. I could think of nothing but the reception that Yamoda and Don had given me. My best friends! I tell you, try as I would, I couldn't keep the tears from coming to my eyes as I thought about it.

I was just about ready to peel off my uniform and turn in when there was a knock at my door. "Come in!" I said.

The door opened, and an officer entered. At first I did not recognize him, he had changed so since I had last seen him. It was Handon Gar.

"So you did escape," I said "I am glad."

He stood for a moment in silence looking at me. "I don't know what to say," he said. "I did you a terrible wrong, and only today did I learn the truth."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I thought that you were a traitor, and so reported when I returned to Orvis. When you came back and they didn't arrest you, I was dumbfounded; but I figured that they were giving you more rope with which to hang yourself."

"Then it was you who told Harkas Yamoda?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "and that was the worst wrong I committed, for I hurt her and Don as much as I did you; but I have been to them and told them the truth. I have just come from them, and they want you to come to their home tonight.

"How did you learn the truth?" I asked.

"The Commissioner for War told me today. He was surprised to know that you had not told anyone."

"I had not received permission; I was still nominally a secret agent."

When I got to the Harkases, none of us could speak for several moments; but finally Don and Yamoda controlled their emotions sufficiently to ask my forgiveness, Yamoda with tears running down her cheeks.

We talked for some time, as they wanted to know all about my experiences in Kapara, and then Don and Handon Gar went into the house, leaving Yamoda and me alone.

We sat in silence for several moments, and then Yamoda said, "Morga Sagra; was she very beautiful?"

"To be perfectly truthful, I couldn't say," I replied. "I suppose she was good-looking enough, but my mind was usually filled with so many other things that I didn't give much thought to Morga Sagra except as a fellow conspirator. I knew she was a traitor, and no traitor could look beautiful to me. Then too I carried with me the memory of someone far more beautiful."

She gave me a quick half-glance, a little questioning look, as though to ask whom that might be; but I didn't have a chance to tell her, for just then Handon Gar and Don came back into the garden and interrupted our conversation.

"What's this I hear of the expedition you're setting out on tomorrow?" demanded Don.

"What expedition?" asked Yamoda.

"He's going to try to fly to Tonos."

"You're joking," said Yamoda.

"Am I, Tangor?" demanded Don.

I shook my head. "He's not joking."

Then I told them of the amplifier I had perfected and that the Eljanhai had given me permission to make the flight.

"Not alone, Tangor!" cried Yamoda.

"Yes, alone," I replied.

"Oh, please, if you must go, have somebody with you," she begged; "but must you go?"

"My ship is outfitted, and I leave tomorrow morning," I replied.

Handon Gar begged to go with me. He said that he had permission from the Commissioner for War, if I wished to take him along. Don said he'd like to go, but couldn't as he had another assignment.

"I don't see any reason for risking more than one life," I said, but Yamoda begged me to take Handon Gar along, and he pleaded so eloquently that at last I consented.

That night as I left, I kissed little Yamoda goodbye. It was the first time that we had ever kissed. Until then, she had seemed like a beloved sister to me; now somehow, she seemed different.

Tomorrow Handon Gar and I take off for Tonos, over 570,000 miles away.

Editor's note: I wonder if Tangor ever reached that little planet winging its way around a strange sun, 450,000 light years away. I wonder if I shall ever know.

BLACK COLOSSUS

'The Night of Power, when Fate stalked through the corridors of the world like a colossus just risen from an age-old throne of granite.'

—Hoffman Price:

The Girl From Samarkand

Only the age-old silence brooded over the mysterious ruins of Kuthchemes, but Fear was there; Fear quivered in the mind of Shevatas, the thief, driving his breath quick and sharp against his clenched teeth.

He stood, the one atom of life amidst the colossal monuments of desolation and decay. Not even a vulture hung like a black dot in the vast blue vault of the sky that the sun glazed with its heat. On

every hand rose the grim relics of another, forgotten age: huge broken pillars, thrusting up their jagged pinnacles into the sky; long wavering lines of crumbling walls; fallen cyclopean blocks of stone; shattered images, whose horrific features the corroding winds and dust storms had half erased. From horizon to horizon no sign of life: only the sheer breathtaking sweep of the naked desert, bisected by the wandering line of a long-dry river course; in the midst of that vastness the glimmering fangs of the ruins, the columns standing up like broken masts of sunken ships—all dominated by the towering ivory dome before which Shevatas stood trembling.

The base of this dome was a gigantic pedestal of marble rising from what had once been a terraced eminence on the banks of the ancient river. Broad steps led up to a great bronze door in the dome, which rested on its base like the half of some titanic egg. The dome itself was of pure ivory, which shone as if unknown hands kept it polished. Likewise shone the spired gold cap of the pinnacle, and the inscription which sprawled about the curve of the dome in golden hieroglyphics yards long. No man on earth could read those characters, but Shevatas shuddered at the dim conjectures they raised. For he came of a very old race, whose myths ran back to shapes undreamed of by contemporary tribes.

Shevatas was wiry and lithe, as became a master-thief of Zamora. His small round head was shaven, his only garment a loincloth of scarlet silk. Like all his race, he was very dark, his narrow vulture-like face set off by his keen black eyes. His long, slender and tapering fingers were quick and nervous as the wings of a moth. From a gold-scaled girdle hung a short, narrow, jewel-hilted sword in a sheath of ornamented leather. Shevatas handled the weapon with apparently exaggerated care. He even seemed to flinch away from the contact of the sheath with his naked thigh. Nor was his care without reason.

This was Shevatas, a thief among thieves, whose name was spoken with awe in the dives of the Maul and the dim shadowy recesses beneath the temples of Bel, and who lived in songs and myths for a thousand years. Yet fear ate at the heart of Shevatas as he stood before the ivory dome of Kuthchemes. Any fool could see there was something unnatural about the structure; the winds and suns of three thousand years had lashed it, yet its gold and ivory rose bright and glistening as the day it was reared by nameless hands on the bank of the nameless river.

This unnaturalness was in keeping with the general aura of these devil-haunted ruins. This desert was the mysterious expanse lying southeast of the lands of Shem. A few days' ride on camelback to the southwest, as Shevatas knew, would bring the traveller within sight of the great river Styx at the point where it turned at right angles with its former course, and flowed westward to empty at last into the distant sea. At the point of its bend began the land of Stygia, the dark-bosomed mistress of the south, whose domains, watered by

the great river, rose sheer out of the surrounding desert.

Eastward, Shevatas knew, the desert shaded into steppes stretching to the Hyrkanian kingdom of Turan, rising in barbaric splendor on the shores of the great inland sea. A week's ride northward the desert ran into a tangle of barren hills, beyond which lay the fertile uplands of Koth, the southernmost realm of the Hyborian races. Westward the desert merged into the meadowlands of Shem, which stretched away to the ocean.

All this Shevatas knew without being particularly conscious of the knowledge, as a man knows the streets of his town. He was a far traveller and had looted the treasures of many kingdoms. But now he hesitated and shuddered before the highest adventure and the mightiest treasure of all.

In that ivory dome lay the bones of Thugra Khotan, the dark sorcerer who had reigned in Kuthchemes three thousand years ago, when the kingdoms of Stygia stretched far northward of the great river, over the meadows of Shem, and into the uplands. Then the great drift of the Hyborians swept southward from the cradle-land of their race near the northern pole. It was a titanic drift, extending over centuries and ages. But in the reign of Thugra Khotan, the last magician of Kuthchemes, gray-eyed, tawny-haired barbarians in wolfskins and scale-mail had ridden from the north into the rich uplands to carve out the kingdom of Koth with their iron swords. They had stormed over Kuthchemes like a tidal wave, washing the marble towers in blood, and the northern Stygian kingdom had gone down in fire and ruin.

But while they were shattering the streets of his city and cutting down his archers like ripe corn, Thugra Khotan had swallowed a strange terrible poison, and his masked priests had locked him into the tomb he himself had prepared. His devotees died about that tomb in a crimson holocaust, but the barbarians could not burst the door, nor ever mar the structure by maul or fire. So they rode away, leaving the great city in ruins, and in his ivory-domed sepulcher great Thugra Khotan slept unmolested, while the lizards of desolation gnawed at the crumbling pillars, and the very river that watered his land in old times sank into the sands and ran dry.

Many a thief sought to gain the treasure which fables said lay heaped about the moldering bones inside the dome. And many a thief died at the door of the tomb, and many another was harried by monstrous dreams to die at last with the froth of madness on his lips.

So Shevatas shuddered as he faced the tomb, nor was his shudder altogether occasioned by the legend of the serpent said to guard the sorcerer's bones. Over all myths of Thugra Khotan hung horror and death like a pall. From where the thief stood he could see the ruins of the great hall wherein chained captives had knelt by the hundreds during festivals to have their heads hacked off by the priest-king in honor of Set, the Serpent-god of Stygia. Somewhere near by had been the pit, dark and awful, wherein screaming victims were fed to

a nameless amorphic monstrosity which came up out of a deeper, more hellish cavern. Legend made Thugra Khotan more than human; his worship yet lingered in a mongrel degraded cult, whose votaries stamped his likeness on coins to pay the way of their dead over the great river of darkness of which the Styx was but the material shadow. Shevatas had seen this likeness, on coins stolen from under the tongues of the dead, and its image was etched indelibly in his brain.

But he put aside his fears and mounted to the bronze door, whose smooth surface offered no bolt or catch. Not for naught had he gained access into darksome cults, had harkened to the grisly whispers of the votaries of Skelos under midnight trees, and read the forbidden ironbound books of Vathelos the Blind.

Kneeling before the portal, he searched the sill with nimble fingers; their sensitive tips found projections too small for the eye to detect, or for less-skilled fingers to discover. These he pressed carefully and according to a peculiar system, muttering a long-forgotten incantation as he did so. As he pressed the last projection, he sprang up with frantic haste and struck the exact center of the door a quick sharp blow with his open hand.

There was no rasp of spring or hinge, but the door retreated inward, and the breath hissed explosively from Shevatas's clenched teeth. A short narrow corridor was disclosed. Down this the door had slid, and was now in place at the other end. The floor, ceiling and sides of the tunnellike aperture were of ivory, and now from an opening on one side came a silent writhing horror that reared up and glared on the intruder with awful luminous eyes; a serpent twenty feet long, with shimmering, iridescent scales.

The thief did not waste time in conjecturing what night-black pits lying below the dome had given sustenance to the monster. Gingerly he drew the sword, and from it dripped a greenish liquid exactly like that which slavered from the scimitar-fangs of the reptile. The blade was steeped in the poison of the snake's own kind, and the obtaining of that venom from the fiend-haunted swamps of Zingara would have made a saga in itself.

Shevatas advanced warily on the balls of his feet, knees bent slightly, ready to spring either way like a flash of light. And he needed all his coordinate speed when the snake arched its neck and struck, shooting out its full length like a stroke of lightning. For all his quickness of nerve and eye, Shevatas had died then but for chance. His well-laid plans of leaping aside and striking down on the outstretched neck were put at naught by the blinding speed of the reptile's attack. The thief had but time to extend the sword in front of him, involuntarily closing his eyes and crying out. Then the sword was wrenched from his hand and the corridor was filled with a horrible thrashing and lashing.

Opening his eyes, amazed to find himself still alive, Shevatas saw the monster heaving and twisting its slimy form

in fantastic contortions, the sword transfixing its giant jaws. Sheer chance had hurled it full against the point he had held out blindly. A few moments later the serpent sank into shining, scarcely quivering coils, as the poison on the blade struck home.

Gingerly stepping over it, the thief thrust against the door, which this time slid aside, revealing the interior of the dome. Shevatas cried out; instead of utter darkness he had come into a crimson light that throbbed and pulsed almost beyond the endurance of mortal eyes. It came from a gigantic red jewel high up in the vaulted arch of the dome. Shevatas gaped, inured though he was to the sight of riches. The treasure was there, heaped in staggering profusion—piles of diamonds, sapphires, rubies, turquoises, opals, emeralds; zikkurats of jade, jet and lapis lazuli; pyramids of gold wedges; teocallis of silver ingots; jewelhilted swords in cloth-of-gold sheaths; golden helmets with colored horsehair crests, or black and scarlet plumes; silver scaled corselets; gem-crusted harness worn by warrior-kings three thousand years in their tombs; goblets carven of single jewels; skulls plated with gold, with moonstones for eyes; necklaces of human teeth set with jewels. The ivory floor was covered inches deep with gold dust that sparkled and shimmered under the crimson glow with a million scintillant lights. The thief stood in a wonderland of magic and splendor, treading stars under his sandalled feet.

But his eyes were focussed on the dais of crystal which rose in the midst of the shimmering array, directly under the red jewel, and on which should be lying the moldering bones, turning to dust with the crawling of the centuries. And as Shevatas looked, the blood drained from his dark features; his marrow turned to ice, and the skin of his back crawled and wrinkled with horror, while his lips worked soundlessly. But suddenly he found his voice in one awful scream that rang hideously under the arching dome. Then again the silence of the ages lay among the ruins of mysterious Kuthchemes.

Rumors drifted up through the meadowlands, into the cities of the Hyborians. The word ran along the caravans, the long camel trains plodding through the sands, herded by lean, hawk-eyed men in white kaftans. It was passed on by the hook-nosed herdsmen of the grasslands, from the dwellers in tents to the dwellers in the squat stone cities where kings with curled blue-black beards worshipped round-bellied gods with curious rites. The word passed up through the fringe of hills where gaunt tribesmen took toll of the caravans. The rumors came into the fertile uplands where stately cities rose above blue lakes and rivers: the rumors marched along the broad white roads thronged with ox-wains, with lowing herds, with rich merchants, knights in steel, archers and priests.

They were rumors from the desert that lies east of Stygia, far south of the Kothian hills. A new prophet had risen among the nomads. Men spoke of tribal war, of a gathering of vultures in the southeast, and a terrible leader who led

his swiftly increasing hordes to victory. The Stygians, ever a menace to the northern nations, were apparently not connected with this movement; for they were massing armies on their eastern borders and their priests were making magic to fight that of the desert sorcerer, whom men called Natohk, the Veiled One; for his features were always masked.

But the tide swept northwestward, and the blue-bearded kings died before the altars of their potbellied gods, and their squat-walled cities were drenched in blood. Men said that the uplands of the Hyborians were the goal of Natohk and his chanting votaries.

Raids from the desert were not uncommon, but this latest movement seemed to promise more than a raid. Rumor said Natohk had welded thirty nomadic tribes and fifteen cities into his following, and that a rebellious Stygian prince had joined him. This latter lent the affair an aspect of real war.

Characteristically, most of the Hyborian nations were prone to ignore the growing menace. But in Khoraja, carved out of Shemite lands by the swords of Kothic adventurers, heed was given. Lying southeast of Koth, it would bear the brunt of the invasion. And its young king was captive to the treacherous king of Ophir, who hesitated between restoring him for a huge ransom, or handing him over to his enemy, the penurious king of Koth, who offered no gold, but an advantageous treaty. Meanwhile, the rule of the struggling kingdom was in the white hands of young princess Yasmela, the king's sister.

Minstrels sang her beauty throughout the western world, and the pride of a kingly dynasty was hers. But on that night her pride was dropped from her like a cloak. In her chamber whose ceiling was a lapis lazuli dome, whose marble floor was littered with rare furs, and whose walls were lavish with golden friezework, ten girls, daughters of nobles, their slender limbs weighted with gem-crusted armlets and anklets, slumbered on velvet couches about the royal bed with its golden dais and silken canopy. But princess Yasmela lolled not on that silken bed. She lay naked on her supple belly upon the bare marble like the most abased suppliant, her dark hair streaming over her white shoulders, her slender fingers intertwined. She lay and writhed in pure horror that froze the blood in her lithe limbs and dilated her beautiful eyes, that pricked the roots of her dark hair and made gooseflesh rise along her supple spine.

Above her, in the darkest corner of the marble chamber, lurked a vast shapeless shadow. It was no living thing of form or flesh and blood. It was a clot of darkness, a blur in the sight, a monstrous night-born incubus that might have been deemed a figment of a sleep-drugged brain, but for the points of blazing yellow fire that glimmered like two eyes from the blackness.

Moreover, a voice issued from it—a low subtle inhuman sibilance that was more like the soft abominable hissing of a serpent than anything else, and that apparently could not emanate from anything with human lips. Its sound as well as its import filled Yasmela with a shud-

dering horror so intolerable that she writhed and twisted her slender body as if beneath a lash, as though to rid her mind of its insinuating vileness by physical contortion.

"You are marked for mine, princess," came the gloating whisper. "Before I wakened from the long sleep I had marked you, and yearned for you, but I was held fast by the ancient spell by which I escaped mine enemies. I am the soul of Natohk, the Veiled One! Look well upon me, princess! Soon you shall behold me in my bodily guise, and shall love me!"

The ghostly hissing dwindled off in lustful titterings, and Yasmela moaned and beat the marble tiles with her small fists in her ecstasy of terror.

"I sleep in the palace chamber of Akbatana," the sibilances continued. "There my body lies in its frame of bones and flesh. But it is but an empty shell from which the spirit has flown for a brief space. Could you gaze from that palace casement you would realize the futility of resistance. The desert is a rose garden beneath the moon, where blossom the fires of a hundred thousand warriors. As an avalanche sweeps onward, gathering bulk and momentum, I will sweep into the lands of mine ancient enemies. Their kings shall furnish me skulls for goblets, their women and children shall be slaves of my slaves' slaves. I have grown strong in the long years of dreaming . . .

"But thou shalt be my queen, oh princess! I will teach thee the ancient forgotten ways of pleasure. We—" Before the stream of cosmic obscenity which poured from the shadowy colossus, Yasmela cringed and writhed as if from a whip that flayed her dainty bare flesh.

"Remember!" whispered the horror. "The days will not be many before I come to claim mine own!"

Yasmela, pressing her face against the tiles and stopping her pink ears with her dainty fingers, yet seemed to hear a strange sweeping noise, like the beat of bat wings. Then, looking fearfully up, she saw only the moon that shone through the window with a beam that rested like a silver sword across the spot where the phantom had lurked. Trembling in every limb, she rose and staggered to a satin couch, where she threw herself down, weeping hysterically. The girls slept on, but one, who roused, yawned, stretched her slender figure and blinked about. Instantly she was on her knees beside the couch, her arms about Yasmela's supple waist.

"Was it—was it—?" Her dark eyes were wide with fright. Yasmela caught her in a convulsive grasp.

"Oh, Vateesa. It came again! I saw It—heard It speak! It spoke Its name—Natohk! It is Natohk! It is not a nightmare—it towered over me while the girls slept like drugged ones. What oh, what shall I do?"

Vateesa twisted a golden bracelet about her rounded arm in meditation.

"Oh, princess," she said, "it is evident that no mortal power can deal with It, and the charm is useless that the priests of Ishtar gave you. Therefore seek you the forgotten oracle of Mitra."

In spite of her recent fright, Yasmela shuddered. The gods of yesterday become the devils of tomorrow. The Kothians had long since abandoned the worship of Mitra, forgetting the attributes of the universal Hyborian god. Yasmela had a vague idea that, being very ancient, it followed that the deity was very terrible. Ishtar was much to be feared, and all the gods of Koth. Kothian culture and religion had suffered from a subtle admixture of Shemite and Stygian strains. The simple ways of the Hyborians had become modified to a large extent by the sensual, luxurious, yet despotic habits of the East.

"Will Mitra aid me?" Yasmela caught Vateesa's wrist in her eagerness. "We have worshipped Ishtar so long—"

"To be sure he will!" Vateesa was the daughter of an Ophirean priest who had brought his customs with him when he fled from political enemies to Khoraja. "Seek the shrine! I will go with you."

"I will!" Yasmela rose, but objected when Vateesa prepared to dress her. "It is not fitting that I come before the shrine clad in silk. I will go naked, on my knees, as befits a suppliant, lest Mitra deem I lack humility."

"Nonsense!" Vateesa had scant respect for the ways of what she deemed a false cult. "Mitra would have folks stand upright before him— not crawling on their bellies like worms, or spilling blood of animals all over his altars."

Thus objugated, Yasmela allowed the girl to garb her in the light sleeveless silk shirt, over which was slipped a silken tunic, bound at the waist by a wide velvet girdle. Satin slippers were put upon her slender feet, and a few deft touches of Vateesa's pink fingers arranged her dark wavy tresses. Then the princess followed the girl, who drew aside a heavy gilt-worked tapestry and threw the golden bolt of the door it concealed. This let into a narrow winding corridor, and down this the two girls went swiftly, through another door and into a broad hallway. Here stood a guardsman in crested gilt helmet, silvered cuirass and gold-chased greaves, with a long-shafted battleax in his hands.

A motion from Yasmela checked his exclamation and, saluting, he took his stand again beside the doorway, motionless as a brazen image. The girls traversed the hallway, which seemed immense and eery in the light of the cressets along the lofty walls, and went down a stairway where Yasmela shivered at the blots of shadows which hung in the angles of the walls. Three levels down they halted at last in a narrow corridor whose arched ceiling was crusted with jewels, whose floor was set with blocks of crystal, and whose walls were decorated with golden freizework. Down this shining way they stole, holding each other's hands, to a wide portal of gilt.

Vateesa thrust open the door, revealing a shrine long forgotten except by a faithful few, and royal visitors to Khoraja's court, mainly for whose benefit the fane was maintained. Yasmela had never entered it before, though she was born in the palace. Plain and unadorned in comparison to the lavish dis-

play of Ishtar's shrines, there was about it a simplicity of dignity and beauty characteristic of the Mitran religion.

The ceiling was lofty, but it was not domed, and was of plain white marble, as were the walls and floor, the former with a narrow gold frieze running about them. Behind an altar of clear green jade, unstained with sacrifice, stood the pedestal whereon sat the material manifestation of the deity. Yasmela looked in awe at the sweep of the magnificent shoulders, the clear-cut features—the wide straight eyes, the patriarchal beard, the thick curls of the hair, confined by a simple band about the temples. This, though she did not know it, was art in its highest form the free, uncramped artistic expression of a highly esthetic race, unhampered by conventional symbolism.

She fell on her knees and thence prostrate, regardless of Vateesa's admonition, and Vateesa, to be on the safe side, followed her example; for after all, she was only a girl, and it was very awesome in Mitra's shrine. But even so she could not refrain from whispering in Yasmela's ear.

"This is but the emblem of the god. None pretends to know what Mitra looks like. This but represents him in idealized human form, as near perfection as the human mind can conceive. He does not inhabit this cold stone, as your priests tell you Ishtar does. He is everywhere— above us, and about us, and he dreams betimes in the high places among the stars. But here his being focusses. Therefore call upon him."

"What shall I say?" whispered Yasmela in stammering terror.

"Before you can speak, Mitra knows the contents of your mind—" began Vateesa. Then both girls started violently as a voice began in the air above them. The deep, calm, bell-like tones emanated no more from the image than from anywhere else in the chamber. Again Yasmela trembled before a bodiless voice speaking to her, but this time it was not from horror or repulsion.

"Speak not, my daughter, for I know your need," came the intonations like deep musical waves beating rhythmically along a golden beach. "In one manner may you save your kingdom, and saving it, save all the world from the fangs of the serpent which has crawled up out of the darkness of the ages. Go forth upon the streets alone, and place your kingdom in the hands of the first man you meet there."

The unechoing tones ceased, and the girls stared at each other. Then, rising, they stole forth, nor did they speak until they stood once more in Yasmela's chamber. The princess stared out of the gold-barred windows. The moon had set. It was long past midnight. Sounds of revelry had died away in the gardens and on the roofs of the city. Khoraja slumbered beneath the stars, which seemed to be reflected in the cressets that twinkled among the gardens and along the streets and on the flat roofs of houses where folk slept.

"What will you do?" whispered Vateesa, all a-tremble.

"Give me my cloak," answered

Yasmela, setting her teeth.

"But alone, in the streets, at this hour!" expostulated Vateesa.

"Mitra has spoken," replied the princess. "It might have been the voice of the god, or a trick of a priest. No matter. I will go!"

Wrapping a voluminous silken cloak about her lithe figure and donning a velvet cap from which depended a filmy veil, she passed hurriedly through the corridors and approached a bronze door where a dozen spearmen gaped at her as she passed through. This was in a wing of the palace which let directly onto the street; on all other sides it was surrounded by broad gardens, bordered by a high wall. She emerged into the street, lighted by cressets placed at regular intervals.

She hesitated; then, before her resolution could falter, she closed the door behind her. A slight shudder shook her as she glanced up and down the street, which lay silent and bare. This daughter of aristocrats had never before ventured unattended outside her ancestral palace. Then, steeling herself, she went swiftly up the street. Her satin-slippered feet fell lightly on the pave, but their soft sound brought her heart into her throat. She imagined their fall echoing thunderously through the cavernous city, rousing ragged rat-eyed figures in hidden lairs among the sewers. Every shadow seemed to hide a lurking assassin, every blank doorway to mask the slinking hounds of darkness.

Then she started violently. Ahead of her a figure appeared on the eery street. She drew quickly into a clump of shadows, which now seemed like a haven of refuge, her pulse pounding. The approaching figure went not furtively, like a thief, or timidly, like a fearful traveller. He strode down the nighted street as one who has no need or desire to walk softly. An unconscious swagger was in his stride, and his footfalls resounded on the pave. As he passed near a cresset she saw him plainly—a tall man, in the chain-mail hauberk of a mercenary. She braced herself, then darted from the shadow, holding her cloak close about her.

"Sa-ha!" his sword flashed half out of his sheath. It halted when he saw it was only a woman that stood before him, but his quick glance went over her head, seeking the shadows for possible confederates.

He stood facing her, his hand on the long hilt that jutted forward from beneath the scarlet cloak which flowed carelessly from his mailed shoulders. The torchlight glinted dully on the polished blue steel of his greaves and basinet. A more baleful fire glittered bluely in his eyes. At first glance she saw he was no Kothian; when he spoke she knew he was no Hyborian. He was clad like a captain of the mercenaries, and in that desperate command there were men of many lands, barbarians as well as civilized foreigners. There was a wolfishness about this warrior that marked the barbarian. The eyes of no civilized man, however wild or criminal, ever blazed with such a fire. Wine scented his breath, but he neither staggered nor stammered.

"Have they shut you into the street?" he asked in barbarous Kothic, reaching for her. His fingers closed lightly about her rounded wrist, but she felt that he could splinter its bones without effort. "I've but come from the last wine shop open Ishtar's curse on these white-livered reformers who close the grog-houses! 'Let men sleep rather than guzzle,' they say—aye, so they can work and fight better for their masters! Soft gutted eunuchs, I call them. When I served with the mercenaries of Corinthia we swilled and wenched all night and fought all day; aye, blood ran down the channels of our swords. But what of you, my girl? Take off that cursed mask—"

She avoided his clutch with a lithe twist of her body, trying not to appear to repulse him. She realized her danger, alone with a drunken barbarian. If she revealed her identity, he might laugh at her, or take himself off. She was not sure he would not cut her throat. Barbaric men did strange inexplicable things. She fought a rising fear.

"Not here," she laughed. "Come with me—"

"Where?" His wild blood was up, but he was wary as a wolf. "Are you taking me to some den of robbers?"

"No, no, I swear it!" She was hard put to avoid the hand which was again fumbling at her veil.

"Devil bite you, hussy!" he growled disgustedly. "You're as bad as a Hyrkanian woman, with your damnable veil. Here—let me look at your figure, anyway."

Before she could prevent it, he wrenched the cloak from her, and she heard his breath hiss between his teeth. He stood holding the cloak, eyeing her as if the sight of her rich garments had somewhat sobered him. She saw suspicion flicker sullenly in his eyes.

"Who the devil are you?" he muttered. "You're no street waif—unless your leman robbed the king's seraglio for your clothes."

"Never mind." She dared to lay her white hand on his massive ironclad arm. "Come with me off the street."

He hesitated, then shrugged his mighty shoulders. She saw that he half believed her to be some noble lady, who, weary of polite lovers, was taking this means of amusing herself. He allowed her to don the cloak again, and followed her. From the corner of her eye she watched him as they went down the street together. His mail could not conceal his hard lines of tigerish strength. Everything about him was tigerish, elemental, untamed. He was alien as the jungle to her in his difference from the debonair courtiers to whom she was accustomed. She feared him, told herself she loathed his raw brute strength and unashamed barbarism, yet something breathless and perilous inside her leaned toward him; the hidden primitive chord that lurks in every woman's soul was sounded and responded. She had felt his hardened hand on her arm, and something deep in her tingled to the memory of that contact. Many men had knelt before Yasmela. Here was one she felt had never knelt before any one. Her sensations were those of one leading an

unchained tiger; she was frightened, and fascinated by her fright.

She halted at the palace door and thrust lightly against it. Furtively watching her companion, she saw no suspicion in his eyes.

"Palace, eh?" he rumbled. "So you're a maid-in-waiting?"

She found herself wondering, with a strange jealousy, if any of her maids had ever led this war-eagle into her palace. The guards made no sign as she led him between them, but he eyed them as a fierce dog might eye a strange pack. She led him through a curtained doorway into an inner chamber, where he stood, naively scanning the tapestries, until he saw a crystal jar of wine on an ebony table. This he took up with a gratified sigh, tilting it toward his lips. Vateesa ran from an inner room, crying breathlessly, "Oh my princess—"

"Princess!"

The wine jar crashed to the floor. With a motion too quick for sight to follow, the mercenary snatched off Yasmela's veil, glaring. He recoiled with a curse, his sword leaping into his hand with a broad shimmer of blue steel. His eyes blazed like a trapped tiger's. The air was supercharged with tension that was like the pause before the bursting of a storm. Vateesa sank to the floor, speechless with terror, but Yasmela faced the infuriated barbarian without flinching. She realized her very life hung in the balance: maddened with suspicion and unreasoning panic, he was ready to deal death at the slightest provocation. But she experienced a certain breathless exhilaration in the crisis.

"Do not be afraid," she said. "I am Yasmela, but there is no reason to fear me."

"Why did you lead me here?" he snarled, his blazing eyes darting all about the chamber. "What manner of trap is this?"

"There is no trickery," she answered. "I brought you here because you can aid me. I called on the gods—on Mitra—and he bade me go into the streets and ask aid of the first man I met."

This was something he could understand. The barbarians had their oracles. He lowered his sword, though he did not sheathe it.

"Well, if you're Yasmela, you need aid," he grunted. "Your kingdom's in a devil of a mess. But how can I aid you? If you want a throat cut, of course—"

"Sit down," she requested. "Vateesa, bring him wine."

He complied, taking care, she noticed, to sit with his back against a solid wall, where he could watch the whole chamber. He laid his naked sword across his mail-sheathed knees. She glanced at it in fascination. Its dull blue glimmer seemed to reflect tales of bloodshed and rapine; she doubted her ability to lift it, yet she knew that the mercenary could wield it with one hand as lightly as she could wield a riding whip. She noted the breadth and power of his hands; they were not the stubby undeveloped paws of a troglodyte. With a guilty start she found herself imagining those strong fingers locked in her dark hair.

He seemed reassured when she deposited herself on a satin divan opposite him. He lifted off his basinet and laid it on the table, and drew back his coif, letting the mail folds fall upon his massive shoulders. She saw more fully now his unlikeness to the Hyborian races. In his dark, scarred face there was a suggestion of moodiness; and without being marked by depravity, or definitely evil, there was more than a suggestion of the sinister about his features, set off by his smoldering blue eyes. A low broad forehead was topped by a square-cut tousled mane as black as a raven's wing.

"Who are you?" she asked abruptly.

"Conan, a captain of the mercenary spearmen," he answered, emptying the wine cup at a gulp and holding it out for more. "I was born in Cimmeria."

The name meant little to her. She only knew vaguely that it was a wild grim hill-country which lay far to the north, beyond the last outposts of the Hyborian nations, and was peopled by a fierce moody race. She had never before seen one of them.

Resting her chin on her hands, she gazed at him with the deep dark eyes that had enslaved many a heart.

"Conan of Cimmeria," she said, "you said I needed aid. Why?"

"Well," he answered, "any man can see that. Here is the king your brother in an Ophirean prison; here is Koth plotting to enslave you; here is this sorcerer screaming hell-fire and destruction down in Shem—and what's worse, here are your soldiers deserting every day."

She did not at once reply; it was a new experience for a man to speak so forthrightly to her, his words not couched in courtier phrases.

"Why are my soldiers deserting, Conan?" she asked.

"Some are being hired away by Koth," he replied, pulling at the wine jar with relish. "Many think Khoraja is doomed as an independent state. Many are frightened by tales of this dog Natohk."

"Will the mercenaries stand?" she asked anxiously.

"As long as you pay us well," he answered frankly. "Your politics are nothing to us. You can trust Amalric, our general, but the rest of us are only common men who love loot. If you pay the ransom Ophir asks, men say you'll be unable to pay us. In that case we might go over to the king of Koth, though that cursed miser is no friend of mine. Or we might loot this city. In a civil war the plunder is always plentiful."

"Why would you not go over to Natohk?" she inquired.

"What could he pay us?" he snorted. "With fat-bellied brass idols he looted from the Shemite cities? As long as you're fighting Natohk, you may trust us."

"Would your comrades follow you?" she asked abruptly.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," she answered deliberately, "that I am going to make you commander of the armies of Khoraja!"

He stopped short, the goblet at his lips, which curved in a broad grin. His

eyes blazed with a new light.

"Commander? Crom! But what will your perfumed nobles say?"

"They will obey me!" She clasped her hands to summon a slave, who entered, bowing deeply. "Have Count Thespides come to me at once, and the chancellor Taurus, lord Amalric, and the Agha Shupras.

"I place my trust in Mitra," she said, bending her gaze on Conan, who was now devouring the food placed before him by the trembling Vateesa. "You have seen much war?"

"I was born in the midst of a battle," he answered, tearing a chunk of meat from a huge joint with his strong teeth. "The first sound my ears heard was the clang of swords and the yells of the slaying. I have fought in blood feuds, tribal wars, and imperial campaigns."

"But can you lead men and arrange battle lines?"

"Well, I can try," he returned imperturbably. "It's no more than swordplay on a larger scale. You draw his guard, then stab, slash! And either his head is off, or yours."

The slave entered again, announcing the arrival of the men sent for, and Yasmela went into the outer chamber, drawing the velvet curtains behind her. The nobles bent the knee, in evident surprise at her summons at such an hour.

"I have summoned you to tell you of my decision," said Yasmela. "The kingdom is in peril—"

"Right enough, my princess." It was Count Thespides who spoke— a tall man, whose black locks were curled and scented. With one white hand he smoothed his pointed mustache, and with the other he held a velvet chaperon with a scarlet feather fastened by a golden clasp. His pointed shoes were satin, his cote-hardie of gold-broidered velvet. His manner was slightly affected, but the thews under his silks were steely. "It were well to offer Ophir more gold for your royal brother's release."

"I strongly disagree," broke in Taurus the chancellor, an elderly man in an ermine-fringed robe, whose features were lined with the cares of his long service. "We have already offered what will beggar the kingdom to pay. To offer more would further excite Ophir's cupidity. My princess, I say as I have said before: Ophir will not move until we have met this invading horde. If we lose, he will give king Khossus to Koth; if we win, he will doubtless restore his majesty to us on payment of the ransom."

"And in the meantime," broke in Amalric, "the soldiers desert daily, and the mercenaries are restless to know why we dally." He was a Nemedian, a large man with a lion-like yellow mane. "We must move swiftly, if at all—"

"Tomorrow we march southward," she answered. "And there is the man who shall lead you!"

Jerking aside the velvet curtains she dramatically indicated the Cimmerian. It was perhaps not an entirely happy moment for the disclosure. Conan was sprawled in his chair, his feet propped on the ebony table, busily engaged in gnawing a beef bone which he gripped firmly in both hands. He glanced casu-

ally at the astounded nobles, grinned faintly at Amalric, and went on munching with undisguised relish.

"Mitra protect us!" exploded Amalric. "That's Conan the northron, the most turbulent of all my rogues! I'd have hanged him long ago, were he not the best swordsman that ever donned hauberk—"

"Your highness is pleased to jest!" cried Thespides, his aristocratic features darkening. "This man is a savage—a fellow of no culture or breeding! It is an insult to ask gentlemen to serve under him! I—"

"Count Thespides," said Yasmela, "you have my glove under your baldric. Please give it to me, and then go."

"Go?" he cried, starting. "Go where?"

"To Koth or to Hades!" she answered. "If you will not serve me as I wish, you shall not serve me at all."

"You wrong me, princess," he answered, bowing low, deeply hurt. "I would not forsake you. For your sake I will even put my sword at the disposal of this savage."

"And you, my lord Amalric?"

Amalric swore beneath his breath, then grinned. True soldier of fortune, no shift of fortune, however outrageous, surprised him much.

"I'll serve under him. A short life and a merry one, say I—and with Conan the Throat-slitter in command, life is likely to be both merry and short. Mitra! If the dog ever commanded more than a company of cutthroats before, I'll eat him, harness and all!"

"And you, my Agha?" she turned to Shupras.

He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. He was typical of the race evolved along Koth's southern borders—tall and gaunt, with features leaner and more hawklike than his purer-blooded desert kin.

"Ishtar gives, princess." The fatalism of his ancestors spoke for him.

"Wait here," she commanded, and while Thespides fumed and gnawed his velvet cap, Taurus muttered wearily under his breath, and Amalric strode back and forth, tugging at his yellow beard and grinning like a hungry lion, Yasmela disappeared again through the curtains and clapped her hands for her slaves.

At her command they brought harness to replace Conan's chain-mail—gorget, sollerets, cuirass, pauldrons, jambes, cuisses and sallet. When Yasmela again drew the curtains, a Conan in burnished steel stood before his audience. Clad in the plate armor, visor lifted and dark face shadowed by the black plumes that nodded above his helmet, there was a grim impressiveness about him that even Thespides grudgingly noted. A jest died suddenly on Amalric's lips.

"By Mitra," said he slowly, "I never expected to see you cased in coat armor, but you do not put it to shame. By my fingerbones, Conan, I have seen kings who wore their harness less regally than you!"

Conan was silent. A vague shadow crossed his mind like a prophecy. In years to come he was to remember

Amalric's words, when the dream became the reality.

In the early haze of dawn the streets of Khoraja were thronged by crowds of people who watched the hosts riding from the southern gate. The army was on the move at last. There were the knights, gleaming in richly wrought plate-armor, colored plumes waving above their burnished sallets. Their steeds, caparisoned with silk, lacquered leather and gold buckles, caracoled and curvetted as their riders put them through their paces. The early light struck glints from lance points that rose like a forest above the array, their pennons flowing in the breeze. Each knight wore a lady's token, a glove, scarf or rose, bound to his helmet or fastened to his sword-belt. They were the chivalry of Khoraja, five hundred strong, led by Count

Thespides, who, men said, aspired to the hand of Yasmela herself.

They were followed by the light cavalry on rangy steeds. The riders were typical hillmen, lean and hawk-faced; peaked steel caps were on their heads and chain-mail glinted under their flowing kaftans. Their main weapon was the terrible Shemitish bow, which could send a shaft five hundred paces. There were five thousand of these, and Shupras rode at their head, his lean face moody beneath his spired helmet.

Close on their heels marched the Khoraja spearmen, always comparatively few in any Hyborian state, where men thought cavalry the only honorable branch of service. These, like the knights, were of ancient Kothic blood—sons of ruined families, broken men, penniless youths, who could not afford horses and plate-armor, five hundred of them.

The mercenaries brought up the rear, a thousand horsemen, two thousand spearmen. The tall horses of the cavalry seemed hard and savage as their riders; they made no curvets or gambades. There was a grimly businesslike aspect to these professional killers, veterans of bloody campaigns. Clad from head to foot in chain-mail, they wore their visorless headpieces over linked coifs. Their shields were unadorned, their long lances without guidons. At their saddle-bows hung battleaxes or steel maces, and each man wore at his hip a long broadsword. The spearmen were armed in much the same manner, though they bore pikes instead of cavalry lances.

They were men of many races and many crimes. There were tall Hyperboreans, gaunt, big-boned, of slow speech and violent natures; tawny-haired Gundermen from the hills of the northwest; swaggering Corinthian renegades; swarthy Zingarians, with bristling black mustaches and fiery tempers; Aquilonians from the distant west. But all, except the Zingarians, were Hyborians.

Behind all came a camel in rich housings, led by a knight on a great warhorse, and surrounded by a clump of picked fighters from the royal housetroops. Its rider, under the silken canopy of the seat, was a slim, silk-clad figure, at the sight of which the popu-

lace, always mindful of royalty, threw up its leather cap and cheered wildly.

Conan the Cimmerian, restless in his plate-armor, stared at the bedecked camel with no great approval, and spoke to Amalric, who rode beside him, resplendent in chain-mail threaded with gold, golden breastplate and helmet with flowing horsehair crest.

"The princess would go with us. She's supple, but too soft for this work. Anyway, she'll have to get out of these robes."

Amalric twisted his yellow mustache to hide a grin. Evidently Conan supposed Yasmela intended to strap on a sword and take part in the actual fighting, as the barbarian women often fought.

"The women of the Hyborians do not fight like your Cimmerian women, Conan," he said. "Yasmela rides with us to watch the battle. Anyway," he shifted in his saddle and lowered his voice, "between you and me, I have an idea that the princess dares not remain behind. She fears something—"

"An uprising? Maybe we'd better hang a few citizens before we start—"

"No. One of her maids talked—babbled about Something that came into the palace by night and frightened Yasmela half out of her wits. It's some of Natohk's deviltry, I doubt not. Conan, it's more than flesh and blood we fight!"

"Well," grunted the Cimmerian, "it's better to go meet an enemy than to wait for him."

He glanced at the long line of wagons and camp-followers, gathered the reins in his mailed hand, and spoke from habit the phrase of the marching mercenaries, "Hell or plunder, comrades—march!"

Behind the long train the ponderous gates of Khoraja closed. Eager heads lined the battlements. The citizens well knew they were watching life or death go forth. If the host was overthrown, the future of Khoraja would be written in blood. In the hordes swarming up from the savage south, mercy was a quality unknown.

All day the columns marched, through grassy rolling meadowlands, cut by small rivers, the terrain gradually beginning to slope upward. Ahead of them lay a range of low hills, sweeping in an unbroken rampart from east to west. They camped that night on the northern slopes of those hills, and hook-nosed, fiery-eyed men of the hill tribes came in scores to squat about the fires and repeat news that had come up out of the mysterious desert. Through their tales ran the name of Natohk like a crawling serpent. At his bidding the demons of the air brought thunder and wind and fog, the fiends of the underworld shook the earth with awful roaring. He brought fire out of the air and consumed the gates of walled cities, and burnt armored men to bits of charred bone. His warriors covered the desert with their numbers, and he had five thousand Stygian troops in warchariots under the rebel prince Kutamun.

Conan listened unperturbed. War was his trade. Life was a continual battle, or series of battles, since his birth. Death had been a constant companion. It

stalked horrifically at his side; stood at his shoulder beside the gaming-tables; its bony fingers rattled the wine cups. It loomed above him, a hooded and monstrous shadow, when he lay down to sleep. He minded its presence no more than a king minds the presence of his cupbearer. Some day its bony grasp would close; that was all. It was enough that he lived through the present.

However, others were less careless of fear than he. Striding back from the sentry lines, Conan halted as a slender cloaked figure stayed him with an outstretched hand.

"Princess! You should be in your tent."

"I could not sleep." Her dark eyes were haunted in the shadow. "Conan, I am afraid!"

"Are there men in the host you fear?" His hand locked on his hilt.

"No man," she shuddered. "Conan, is there anything you fear?"

He considered, tugging at his chin. "Aye," he admitted at last, "the curse of the gods."

Again she shuddered. "I am cursed. A fiend from the abysses has set his mark upon me. Night after night he lurks in the shadows, whispering awful secrets to me. He will drag me down to be his queen in hell. I dare not sleep—he will come to me in my pavilion as he came in the palace. Conan, you are strong—keep me with you! I am afraid!"

She was no longer a princess, but only a terrified girl. Her pride had fallen from her, leaving her unashamed in her nakedness. In her frantic fear she had come to him who seemed strongest. The ruthless power that had repelled her, drew her now.

For answer he drew off his scarlet cloak and wrapped it about her, roughly, as if tenderness of any kind were impossible to him. His iron hand rested for an instant on her slender shoulder, and she shivered again, but not with fear. Like an electric shock a surge of animal vitality swept over her at his mere touch, as if some of his superabundant strength had been imparted to her.

"Lie here." He indicated a clean-swept space close to a small flickering fire. He saw no incongruity in a princess lying down on the naked ground beside a campfire, wrapped in a warrior's cloak. But she obeyed without question.

He seated himself near her on a boulder, his broadsword across his knees. With the firelight glinting from his blue steel armor, he seemed like an image of steel—dynamic power for the moment quiescent; not resting, but motionless for the instant, awaiting the signal to plunge again into terrific action. The firelight played on his features, making them seem as if carved out of substance shadowy yet hard as steel. They were immobile, but his eyes smoldered with fierce life. He was not merely a wild man; he was part of the wild, one with the untameable elements of life; in his veins ran the blood of the wolf-pack; in his brain lurked the brooding depths of the northern night; his heart throbbed with the fire of blazing forests.

So, half meditating, half dreaming,

Yasmela dropped off to sleep, wrapped in a sense of delicious security. Somehow she knew that no flame-eyed shadow would bend over her in the darkness, with this grim figure from the outlands standing guard above her. Yet once again she wakened, to shudder in cosmic fear, though not because of anything she saw.

It was a low mutter of voices that roused her. Opening her eyes, she saw that the fire was burning low. A feeling of dawn was in the air. She could dimly see that Conan still sat on the boulder; she glimpsed the long blue glimmer of his blade. Close beside him crouched another figure, on which the dying fire cast a faint glow. Yasmela drowsily made out a hooked beak of a nose, a glittering bead of an eye, under a white turban. The man was speaking rapidly in a Shemite dialect she found hard to understand.

"Let Bel wither my arm! I speak truth! By Derketo, Conan, I am a prince of liars, but I do not lie to an old comrade. I swear by the days when we were thieves together in the land of Zamora, before you donned hauberk!

"I saw Natohk; with the others I knelt before him when he made incantations to Set. But I did not thrust my nose in the sand as the rest did. I am a thief of Shumir, and my sight is keener than a weasel's. I squinted up and saw his veil blowing in the wind. It blew aside, and I saw—I saw— Bel aid me, Conan, I say I saw! My blood froze in my veins and my hair stood up. What I had seen burned my soul like a red-hot iron. I could not rest until I had made sure.

"I journeyed to the ruins of Kuthchemes. The door of the ivory dome stood open; in the doorway lay a great serpent, transfixed by a sword. Within the dome lay the body of a man, so shrivelled and distorted I could scarce make it out at first—it was Shevatas, the Zamorian, the only thief in the world I acknowledged as my superior. The treasure was untouched; it lay in shimmering heaps about the corpse. That was all."

"There were no bones—" began Conan.

"There was nothing!" broke in the Shemite passionately. "Nothing! Only the one corpse!"

Silence reigned an instant, and Yasmela shrank with a crawling nameless horror.

"Whence came Natohk?" rose the Shemite's vibrant whisper. "Out of the desert on a night when the world was blind and wild with mad clouds driven in frenzied flight across the shuddering stars, and the howling of the wind was mingled with the shrieking of the spirits of the wastes. Vampires were abroad that night, witches rode naked on the wind, and werewolves howled across the wilderness. On a black camel he came, riding like the wind, and an unholy fire played about him; the cloven tracks of the camel glowed in the darkness. When Natohk dismounted before Set's shrine by the oasis of Aphaka, the beast swept into the night and vanished. And I have talked with tribesmen who swore that it suddenly spread gigantic wings and rushed upwards into the

clouds, leaving a trail of fire behind it. No man has seen that camel since that night, but a black brutish manlike shape shambles to Natohk's tent and gibbers to him in the blackness before dawn. I will tell you, Conan, Natohk is—look, I will show you an image of what I saw that day by Shushan when the wind blew aside his veil!"

Yasmela saw the glint of gold in the Shemite's hand, as the men bent closely over something. She heard Conan grunt; and suddenly blackness rolled over her. For the first time in her life, princess Yasmela had fainted.

Dawn was still a hint of whiteness in the east when the army was again on the march. Tribesmen had raced into camp, their steeds reeling from the long ride, to report the desert horde encamped at the Well of Altaku. So through the hills the soldiers pushed hastily, leaving the wagon trains to follow. Yasmela rode with them; her eyes were haunted. The nameless horror had been taking even more awful shape, since she had recognized the coin in the Shemite's hand the night before—one of those secretly molded by the degraded Zugite cult, bearing the features of a man dead three thousand years.

The way wound between ragged cliffs and gaunt crags towering over narrow valleys. Here and there villages perched, huddles of stone huts, plastered with mud. The tribesmen swarmed out to join their kin, so that before they had traversed the hills, the host had been swelled by some three thousand wild archers.

Abruptly they came out of the hills and caught their breath at the vast expanse that swept away to the south. On the southern side the hills fell away sheerly, marking a distinct geographical division between the Kothian uplands and the southern desert. The hills were the rim of the uplands, stretching in an almost unbroken wall. Here they were bare and desolate, inhabited only by the Zaheemi clan, whose duty it was to guard the caravan road. Beyond the hills the desert stretched bare, dusty, lifeless. Yet beyond its horizon lay the Well of Altaku, and the horde of Natohk.

The army looked down on the Pass of Shamla, through which flowed the wealth of the north and the south, and through which had marched the armies of Koth, Khoraja, Shem, Turan and Stygia. Here the sheer wall of the rampart was broken. Promontories ran out into the desert, forming barren valleys, all but one of which were closed on the northern extremity by rugged cliffs. This one was the Pass. It was much like a great hand extended from the hills; two fingers, parted, formed a fan-shaped valley. The fingers were represented by a broad ridge on either hand, the outer sides sheer, the inner, steep slopes. The vale pitched upward as it narrowed, to come out on a plateau, flanked by gully-torn slopes. A well was there, and a cluster of stone towers, occupied by the Zaheemis.

There Conan halted, swinging off his horse. He had discarded the plate-armor for the more familiar chain-mail. Thespides reined in and demanded, "Why do you halt?"

"We'll await them here," answered Conan.

"IT were more knightly to ride out and meet them," snapped the count.

"They'd smother us with numbers," answered the Cimmerian. "Besides, there's no water out there. We'll camp on the plateau—"

"My knights and I camp in the valley," retorted Thespides angrily. "We are the vanguard, and we, at least, do not fear a ragged desert swarm."

Conan shrugged his shoulders and the angry nobleman rode away. Amalric halted in his bellowing order, to watch the glittering company riding down the slope into the valley.

"The fools! Their canteens will soon be empty, and they'll have to ride back up to the well to water their horses."

"Let them be," replied Conan. "It goes hard for them to take orders from me. Tell the dog-brothers to ease their harness and rest. We've marched hard and fast. Water the horses and let the men munch."

No need to send out scouts. The desert lay bare to the gaze, though just now this view was limited by low-lying clouds which rested in whitish masses on the southern horizon. The monotony was broken only by a jutting tangle of stone ruins, some miles out on the desert, reputedly the remnants of an ancient Stygian temple. Conan dismounted the archers and ranged them along the ridges, with the wild tribesmen. He stationed the mercenaries and the Khoraji spearmen on the plateau about the well. Farther back, in the angle where the hill road debouched on the plateau, was pitched Yasmela's pavilion.

With no enemy in sight, the warriors relaxed. Basinets were doffed, coifs thrown back on mailed shoulders, belts let out. Rude jests flew back and forth as the fighting-men gnawed beef and thrust their muzzles deep into ale-jugs. Along the slopes the hillmen made themselves at ease, nibbling dates and olives. Amalric strode up to where Conan sat bareheaded on a boulder.

"Conan, have you heard what the tribesmen say about Natohk? They say—Mitra, it's too mad even to repeat. What do you think?"

"Seeds rest in the ground for centuries without rotting, sometimes," answered Conan. "But surely Natohk is a man."

"I am not sure," grunted Amalric. "At any rate, you've arranged your lines as well as a seasoned general could have done. It's certain Natohk's devils can't fall on us unawares. Mitra, what a fog!"

"I thought it was clouds at first," answered Conan. "See how it rolls!"

What had seemed clouds was a thick mist moving northward like a great unstable ocean, rapidly hiding the desert from view. Soon it engulfed the Stygian ruins, and still it rolled onward. The army watched in amazement. It was a thing unprecedented—unnatural and inexplicable.

"No use sending out scouts," said Amalric disgustedly. "They couldn't see anything. Its edges are near the outer flanges of the ridges. Soon the whole

Pass and these hills will be masked—"

Conan, who had been watching the rolling mist with growing nervousness, bent suddenly and laid his ear to the earth. He sprang up with frantic haste, swearing.

"Horses and chariots, thousands of them! The ground vibrates to their tread! Ho, there!" His voice thundered out across the valley to electrify the lounging men. "Burganets and pikes, you dogs! Stand to your ranks!"

At that, as the warriors scrambled into their lines, hastily donning headpieces and thrusting arms through shield-straps, the mist rolled away, as something no longer useful. It did not slowly lift and fade like a natural fog; it simply vanished, like a blown-out flame. One moment the whole desert was hidden with the rolling fleecy billows, piled mountainously, stratum above stratum; the next, the sun shone from a cloudless sky on a naked desert—no longer empty, but thronged with the living pageantry of war. A great shout shook the hills.

At first glance the amazed watchers seemed to be looking down upon a glittering sparkling sea of bronze and gold, where steel points twinkled like a myriad stars. With the lifting of the fog the invaders had halted as if frozen, in long serried lines, flaming in the sun.

First was a long line of chariots, drawn by the great fierce horses of Stygia, with plumes on their heads—snorting and rearing as each naked driver leaned back, bracing his powerful legs, his dusky arms knotted with muscles. The fighting-men in the chariots were tall figures, their hawklike faces set off by bronze helmets crested with a crescent supporting a golden ball. Heavy bows were in their hands. No common archers these, but nobles of the South, bred to war and the hunt, who were accustomed to bringing down lions with their arrows.

Behind these came a motley array of wild men on half-wild horses— the warriors of Kush, the first of the great black kingdoms of the grasslands south of Stygia. They were shining ebony, supple and lithe, riding stark naked and without saddle or bridle.

After these rolled a horde that seemed to encompass all the desert. Thousands on thousands of the warlike Sons of Shem: ranks of horsemen in scale-mail corselets and cylindrical helmets—the asshuri of Nippr, Shumir and Eruk and their sister cities; wild white-robed hordes— the nomad clans.

Now the ranks began to mill and eddy. The chariots drew off to one side while the main host came uncertainly onward.

Down in the valley the knights had mounted, and now Count Thespides galloped up the slope to where Conan stood. He did not deign to dismount but spoke abruptly from the saddle.

"The lifting of the mist has confused them! Now is the time to charge! The Kushites have no bows and they mask the whole advance. A charge of my knights will crush them back into the ranks of the Shemites, disrupting their formation. Follow me! We will win this

battle with one stroke!"

Conan shook his head. "Were we fighting a natural foe, I would agree. But this confusion is more feigned than real, as if to draw us into a charge. I fear a trap."

"Then you refuse to move?" cried Thespides, his face dark with passion.

"Be reasonable," expostulated Conan. "We have the advantage of position—"

With a furious oath Thespides wheeled and galloped back down the valley where his knights waited impatiently.

Amalric shook his head. "You should not have let him return, Conan. I—look there!"

Conan sprang up with a curse. Thespides had swept in beside his men. They could hear his impassioned voice faintly, but his gesture toward the approaching horde was significant enough. In another instant five hundred lances dipped and the steel-clad company was thundering down the valley.

A young page came running from Yasmela's pavilion, crying to Conan in a shrill, eager voice. "My lord, the princess asks why you do not follow and support Count Thespides?"

"Because I am not so great a fool as he," grunted Conan, reseating himself on the boulder and beginning to gnaw a huge beef bone.

"You grow sober with authority," quoth Amalric. "Such madness as that was always your particular joy."

"Aye, when I had only my own life to consider," answered Conan. "Now—what in hell—"

The horde had halted. From the extreme wing rushed a chariot, the naked charioteer lashing the steeds like a madman; the other occupant was a tall figure whose robe floated spectrally on the wind. He held in his arms a great vessel of gold and from it poured a thin stream that sparkled in the sunlight. Across the whole front of the desert horde the chariot swept, and behind its thundering wheels was left, like the wake behind a ship, a long thin powdery line that glittered in the sands like the phosphorescent track of a serpent.

"That's Natohk!" swore Amalric. "What hellish seed is he sowing?"

The charging knights had not checked their headlong pace. Another fifty paces and they would crash into the uneven Kushite ranks, which stood motionless, spears lifted. Now the foremost knights had reached the thin line that glittered across the sands. They did not heed that crawling menace. But as the steel-shod hoofs of the horses struck it, it was as when steel strikes flint—but with more terrible result. A terrific explosion rocked the desert, which seemed to split apart along the strewn line with an awful burst of white flame.

In that instant the whole foremost line of the knights was seen enveloped in that flame, horses and steel-clad riders withering in the glare like insects in an open blaze. The next instant the rear ranks were piling up on their charred bodies. Unable to check their headlong velocity, rank after rank crashed into the ruins. With appalling suddenness the

charge had turned into a shambles where armored figures died amid screaming, mangled horses.

Now the illusion of confusion vanished as the horde settled into orderly lines. The wild Kushites rushed into the shambles, spearing the wounded, bursting the helmets of the knights with stones and iron hammers. It was all over so quickly that the watchers on the slopes stood dazed; and again the horde moved forward, splitting to avoid the charred waste of corpses. From the hills went up a cry: "We fight not men but devils!"

On either ridge the hillmen wavered. One rushed toward the plateau, froth dripping from his beard.

"Flee, flee!" he slobbered. "Who can fight Natohk's magic?"

With a snarl Conan bounded from his boulder and smote him with the beef bone; he dropped, blood starting from nose and mouth. Conan drew his sword, his eyes slits of blue bale-fire.

"Back to your posts!" he yelled. "Let another take a backward step and I'll shear off his head! Fight, damn you!"

The rout halted as quickly as it had begun. Conan's fierce personality was like a dash of ice-water in their whirling blaze of terror.

"Take your places," he directed quickly. "And stand to it! Neither man nor devil comes up Shamla Pass this day!"

Where the plateau rim broke to the valley slope the mercenaries braced their belts and gripped their spears. Behind them the lancers sat their steeds, and to one side were stationed the Khoraja spearmen as reserves. To Yasmela, standing white and speechless at the door of her tent, the host seemed a pitiful handful in comparison to the thronging desert horde.

Conan stood among the spearmen. He knew the invaders would not try to drive a chariot charge up the Pass in the teeth of the archers, but he grunted with surprise to see the riders dismounting. These wild men had no supply trains. Canteens and pouches hung at their saddle-peaks. Now they drank the last of their water and threw the canteens away.

"This is the death-grip," he muttered as the lines formed on foot. "I'd rather have had a cavalry charge; wounded horses bolt and ruin formations."

The horde had formed into a huge wedge, of which the tip was the Stygians and the body, the mailed asshuri, flanked by the nomads. In close formation, shields lifted, they rolled onward, while behind them a tall figure in a motionless chariot lifted wide-robed arms in grisly invocation.

As the horde entered the wide valley mouth the hillmen loosed their shafts. In spite of the protective formation, men dropped by dozens. The Stygians had discarded their bows; helmeted heads bent to the blast, dark eyes glaring over the rims of their shields, they came on in an inexorable surge, striding over their fallen comrades. But the Shemites gave back the fire, and the clouds of arrows darkened the skies. Conan gazed over the billowing waves

of spears and wondered what new horror the sorcerer would invoke. Somehow he felt that Natohk, like all his kind, was more terrible in defense than in attack; to take the offensive against him invited disaster.

But surely it was magic that drove the horde on in the teeth of death. Conan caught his breath at the havoc wrought in the onsweeping ranks. The edges of the wedge seemed to be melting away, and already the valley was strewn with dead men. Yet the survivors came on like madmen unaware of death. By the very numbers of their bows, they began to swamp the archers on the cliffs. Clouds of shafts sped upward, driving the hillmen to cover. Panic struck at their hearts at that unwavering advance, and they plied their bows madly, eyes glaring like trapped wolves.

As the horde neared the narrower neck of the Pass, boulders thundered down, crushing men by the scores, but the charge did not waver. Conan's wolves braced themselves for the inevitable concussion. In their close formation and superior armor, they took little hurt from the arrows. It was the impact of the charge Conan feared, when the huge wedge should crash against his thin ranks. And he realized now there was no breaking of that onslaught. He gripped the shoulder of a Zaheemi who stood near.

"Is there any way by which mounted men can get down into the blind valley beyond that western ridge?"

"Aye, a steep, perilous path, secret and eternally guarded. But—"

Conan was dragging him along to where Amalric sat his great warhorse.

"Amalric!" he snapped. "Follow this man! He'll lead you into yon outer valley. Ride down it, circle the end of the ridge, and strike the horde from the rear. Speak not, but go! I know it's madness, but we're doomed anyway; we'll do all the damage we can before we die! Haste!"

Amalric's mustache bristled in a fierce grin, and a few moments later his lancers were following the guide into a tangle of gorges leading off from the plateau. Conan ran back to the pikemen, sword in hand.

He was not too soon. On either ridge Shupras's hillmen, mad with anticipation of defeat, rained down their shafts desperately. Men died like flies in the valley and along the slopes—and with a roar and an irresistible upward surge the Stygians crashed against the mercenaries.

In a hurricane of thundering steel, the lines twisted and swayed. It was warbred noble against professional soldier.

Shields crashed against shields, and between them spears drove in and blood spurted.

Conan saw the mighty form of prince Kutamun across the sea of swords, but the press held him hard, breast to breast with dark shapes that gasped and slashed. Behind the Stygians the asshuri were surging and yelling.

On either hand the nomads climbed the cliffs and came to hand-grips with their mountain kin. All along the crests

of the ridges the combat raged in blind, gasping ferocity. Tooth and nail, frothing mad with fanaticism and ancient feuds, the tribesmen rent and slew and died. Wild hair flying, the naked Kushites ran howling into the fray.

It seemed to Conan that his sweat-blinded eyes looked down into a rising ocean of steel that seethed and eddied, filling the valley from ridge to ridge. The fight was at a bloody deadlock. The hillmen held the ridges, and the mercenaries, gripping their dipping pikes, bracing their feet in the bloody earth, held the Pass. Superior position and armor for a space balanced the advantage of overwhelming numbers. But it could not endure. Wave after wave of glaring faces and flashing spears surged up the slope, the asshuri filling the gaps in the Stygian ranks.

Conan looked to see Amalric's lancers rounding the western ridge, but they did not come, and the pikemen began to reel back under the shocks. And Conan abandoned all hope of victory and of life. Yelling a command to his gasping captains, he broke away and raced across the plateau to the Khoraja reserves, who stood trembling with eagerness. He did not glance toward Yasmela's pavilion. He had forgotten the princess; his one thought was the wild beast instinct to slay before he died.

"This day you become knights!" he laughed fiercely, pointing with his dripping sword toward the hillmen's horses, herded nearby. "Mount and follow me to hell!"

The hill steed reared wildly under the unfamiliar clash of the Kothic armor, and Conan's gusty laugh rose above the din as he led them to where the eastern ridge branched away from the plateau. Five hundred footmen—pauper patricians, younger sons, black sheep—on half-wild Shemite horses, charging an army, down a slope where no cavalry had ever dared charge before!

Past the battle-choked mouth of the Pass they thundered, out onto the corpse-littered ridge. Down the steep slope they rushed, and a score lost their footing and rolled under the hoofs of their comrades. Below them men screamed and threw up their arms—and the thundering charge ripped through them as an avalanche cuts through a forest of saplings. On through the close-packed throngs the Khorajis hurtled, leaving a crushed-down carpet of dead.

And then, as the horde writhed and coiled upon itself, Amalric's lancers, having cut through a cordon of horsemen encountered in the outer valley, swept around the extremity of the western ridge and smote the host in a steel-tipped wedge, splitting it asunder. His attack carried all the dazing demoralization of a surprise on the rear. Thinking themselves flanked by a superior force and frenzied at the fear of being cut off from the desert, swarms of nomads broke and stampeded, working havoc in the ranks of their more steadfast comrades. These staggered and the horsemen rode through them. Up on the ridges the desert fighters wavered, and the hillmen fell on them with renewed fury, driving them down the slopes.

Stunned by surprise, the horde

broke before they had time to see it was but a handful which assailed them. And once broken, not even a magician could weld such a horde again. Across the sea of heads and spears Conan's madmen saw Amalric's riders forging steadily through the rout, to the rise and fall of axes and maces, and a mad joy of victory exalted each man's heart and made his arm steel.

Bracing their feet in the wallowing sea of blood whose crimson waves lapped about their ankles, the pikemen in the Pass mouth drove forward, crushing strongly against the milling ranks before them. The Stygians held, but behind them the press of the asshuri melted; and over the bodies of the nobles of the South who died in their tracks to a man, the mercenaries rolled, to split and crumple the wavering mass behind.

Up on the cliffs old Shupras lay with an arrow through his heart; Amalric was down, swearing like a pirate, a spear through his mailed thigh. Of Conan's mounted infantry, scarce a hundred and fifty remained in the saddle. But the horde was shattered. Nomads and mailed spearmen broke away, fleeing to their camp where their horses were, and the hillmen swarmed down the slopes, stabbing the fugitives in the back, cutting the throats of the wounded.

In the swirling red chaos a terrible apparition suddenly appeared before Conan's rearing steed. It was prince Kutamun, naked but for a loincloth, his harness hacked away, his crested helmet dented, his limbs splashed with blood. With a terrible shout he hurled his broken hilt full into Conan's face, and leaping, seized the stallion's bridle. The Cimmerian reeled in his saddle, half stunned, and with awful strength the dark-skinned giant forced the screaming steed upward and backward, until it lost its footing and crashed into the muck of bloody sand and writhing bodies.

Conan sprang clear as the horse fell, and with a roar Kutamun was on him. In that mad nightmare of battle, the barbarian never exactly knew how he killed his man. He only knew that a stone in the Stygian's hand crashed again and again on his basinet, filling his sight with flashing sparks, as Conan drove his dagger again and again into his foe's body, without apparent effect on the prince's terrible vitality. The world was swimming to Conan's sight, when with a convulsive shudder the frame that strained against his stiffened and then went limp.

Reeling up, blood streaming down his face from under his dented helmet, Conan glared dizzily at the profusion of destruction which spread before him. From crest to crest the dead lay strewn, a red carpet that choked the valley. It was like a red sea, with each wave a straggling line of corpses. They choked the neck of the Pass, they littered the slopes. And down in the desert the slaughter continued, where the survivors of the horde had reached their horses and streamed out across the waste, pursued by the weary victors—and Conan stood appalled as he noted how few of these were left to pursue.

Then an awful scream rent the

clamor. Up the valley a chariot came flying, making nothing of the heaped corpses. No horses drew it, but a great black creature that was like a camel. In the chariot stood Natohk, his robes flying; and gripping the reins and lashing like mad, crouched a black anthropomorphic being that might have been a monster ape.

With a rush of burning wind the chariot swept up the corpse-littered slope, straight toward the pavilion where Yasmela stood alone, deserted by her guards in the frenzy of pursuit. Conan, standing frozen, heard her frenzied scream as Natohk's long arm swept her up into the chariot. Then the grisly steed wheeled and came racing back down the valley, and no man dared speed arrow or spear lest he strike Yasmela, who writhed in Natohk's arms.

With an inhuman cry Conan caught up his fallen sword and leaped into the path of the hurtling horror. But even as his sword went up, the forefeet of the black beast smote him like a thunderbolt and sent him hurtling a score feet away, dazed and bruised. Yasmela's cry came hauntingly to his stunned ears as the chariot roared by.

A yell that had nothing of the human in its timbre rang from his lips as Conan rebounded from the bloody earth and seized the rein of a riderless horse that raced past him, throwing himself into the saddle without bringing the charger to a halt. With mad abandon he raced after the rapidly receding chariot. He struck the levels flying, and passed like a whirlwind through the Shemite camp. Into the desert he fled, passing clumps of his own riders, and hard-spurring desert horsemen.

On flew the chariot, and on raced Conan, though his horse began to reel beneath him. Now the open desert lay all about them, bathed in the lurid desolate splendor of sunset. Before him rose up the ancient ruins, and with a shriek that froze the blood in Conan's veins, the unhuman charioteer cast Natohk and the girl from him. They rolled on the sand, and to Conan's dazed gaze, the chariot and its steed altered awfully. Great wings spread from a black horror that in no way resembled a camel, and it rushed upward into the sky, bearing in its wake a shape of blinding flame, in which a black manlike shape gibbered in ghastly triumph. So quickly it passed, that it was like the rush of a nightmare through a horror-haunted dream.

Natohk sprang up, cast a swift look at his grim pursuer, who had not halted but came riding hard, with sword swinging low and spattering red drops; and the sorcerer caught up the fainting girl and ran with her into the ruins.

Conan leaped from his horse and plunged after them. He came into a room that glowed with unholy radiance, though outside the dusk was falling swiftly. On a black jade altar lay Yasmela, her naked body gleaming like ivory in the weird light. Her garments lay strewn on the floor, as if ripped from her in brutal haste. Natohk faced the Cimmerian—inhumanly tall and lean, clad in shimmering green silk. He tossed back his veil, and Conan looked into the features he had seen depicted on the Zugite coin.

"Aye, blench, dog!" The voice was like the hiss of a giant serpent. "I am Thugra Khotan! Long I lay in my tomb, awaiting the day of awakening and release. The arts which saved me from the barbarians long ago likewise imprisoned me, but I knew one would come in time—and he came, to fulfill his destiny, and to die as no man has died in three thousand years!

"Fool, do you think you have conquered because my people are scattered? Because I have been betrayed and deserted by the demon I enslaved? I am Thugra Khotan, who shall rule the world despite your paltry gods! The desert is filled with my people; the demons of the earth shall do my bidding, as the reptiles of the earth obey me. Lust for a woman weakened my sorcery. Now the woman is mine, and feasting on her soul, I shall be unconquerable! Back, fool! You have not conquered Thugra Khotan!"

He cast his staff and it fell at the feet of Conan, who recoiled with an involuntary cry. For as it fell it altered horribly; its outline melted and writhed, and a hooded cobra reared up hissing before the horrified Cimmerian. With a furious oath Conan struck, and his sword sheared the horrid shape in half. And there at his feet lay only the two pieces of a severed ebon staff. Thugra Khotan laughed awfully, and wheeling, caught up something that crawled loathsomely in the dust of the floor.

In his extended hand something alive writhed and slavered. No tricks of shadows this time. In his naked hand Thugra Khotan gripped a black scorpion, more than a foot in length, the deadliest creature of the desert, the stroke of whose spiked tail was instant death. Thugra Khotan's skull-like countenance split in a mummy-like grin. Conan hesitated; then without warning he threw his sword.

Caught off guard, Thugra Khotan had no time to avoid the cast. The point struck beneath his heart and stood out a foot behind his shoulders. He went down, crushing the poisonous monster in his grasp as he fell.

Conan strode to the altar, lifting Yasmela in his bloodstained arms. She threw her white arms convulsively about his mailed neck, sobbing hysterically, and would not let him go.

"Crom's devils, girl!" he grunted. "Loose me! Fifty thousand men have perished today, and there is work for me to do—"

"No!" she gasped, clinging with convulsive strength, as barbaric for the instant as he in her fear and passion. "I will not let you go! I am yours, by fire and steel and blood! You are mine! Back there, I belong to others—here I am mine—and yours! You shall not go!"

He hesitated, his own brain reeling with the fierce upsurging of his violent passions. The lurid unearthly glow still hovered in the shadowy chamber, lighting ghostlily the dead face of Thugra Khotan, which seemed to grin mirthlessly and cavernously at them. Out on the desert, in the hills among the oceans of dead, men were dying, were howling with wounds and thirst and madness, and kingdoms were staggering. Then

all was swept away by the crimson tide that rode madly in Conan's soul, as he crushed fiercely in his iron arms the slim white body that shimmered like a witch-fire of madness before him.

THE END

FLIGHT FROM TOMORROW

There was no stopping General Zarvas' rebellion

ONE

But yesterday, a whole planet had shouted: Today, they were screaming:

The Palace, where Hradzka, surrounded by his sycophants and guards, had lorded it over a solar system, was now an inferno. Those who had been too closely identified with the dictator's rule to hope for forgiveness were fighting to the last, seeking only a quick death in combat; one by one, their isolated points of resistance were being wiped out. The corridors and chambers of the huge palace were thronged with rebels, loud with their shouts, and with the rasping hiss of heat-beams and the crash of blasters, reeking with the stench of scorched plastic and burned flesh, of hot metal and charred fabric. The living quarters were overrun; the mob smashed down walls and tore up floors in search of secret hiding-places. They found strange things—the spaceship that had been built under one of the domes, in readiness for flight to the still-loyal colonies on Mars or the Asteroid Belt, for instance—but Hradzka himself they could not find.

At last, the search reached the New Tower which reared its head five thousand feet above the palace, the highest thing in the city. They blasted down the huge steel doors, cut the power from the energy-screens. They landed from antigrav-cars on the upper levels. But except for barriers of metal and concrete and energy, they met with no opposition. Finally, they came to the spiral stairway which led up to the great metal sphere which capped the whole structure.

General Zarvas, the Army Commander who had placed himself at the head of the revolt, stood with his foot on the lowest step, his followers behind him. There was Prince Burvanny, the leader of the old nobility, and Ghorzesko Orhm, the merchant, and between them stood Tobbh, the chieftain of the mutinous slaves. There were clerks; laborers; poor but haughty nobles: and wealthy merchants who had long been forced to hide their riches from the dictator's tax-gatherers, and soldiers, and spacemen.

"You'd better let some of us go first sir," General Zarvas' orderly, a blood-stained bandage about his head, his uniform in rags, suggested. "You don't know what might be up there."

The General shook his head. "I'll go first." Zarvas Pol was not the man to send subordinates into danger ahead of himself. "To tell the truth, I'm afraid we won't find anything at all up there."

"You mean...?" Ghorzesko Orhm be-

gan.

"The 'time-machine'," Zarvas Pol replied. "If he's managed to get it finished, the Great Mind only knows where he may be, now. Or when."

He loosened the blaster in his holster and started up the long spiral. His followers spread out, below; sharpshooters took position to cover his ascent. Prince Burvanny and Tobbh the Slave started to follow him. They hesitated as each motioned the other to precede him; then the nobleman followed the general, his blaster drawn, and the brawny slave behind him.

The door at the top was open, and Zarvas Pol stepped through but there was nothing in the great spherical room except a raised dais some fifty feet in diameter, its polished metal top strangely clean and empty. And a crumpled heap of burned cloth and charred flesh that had, not long ago, been a man. An old man with a white beard, and the seven-pointed star of the Learned Brothers on his breast, advanced to meet the armed intruders.

"So he is gone, Kradzy Zago?" Zarvas Pol said, holstering his weapon. "Gone in the 'time-machine', to hide in yesterday or tomorrow. And you let him go?"

The old one nodded. "He had a blaster, and I had none." He indicated the body on the floor. "Zoldy Jarv had no blaster, either, but he tried to stop Hradzka. See, he squandered his life as a fool squanders his money, getting nothing for it. And a man's life is not money, Zarvas Pol."

"I do not blame you, Kradzy Zago," General Zarvas said. "But now you must get to work, and build us another 'time-machine', so that we can hunt him down."

"Does revenge mean so much to you, then?"

The soldier made an impatient gesture. "Revenge is for fools, like that pack of screaming beasts below. I do not kill for revenge; I kill because dead men do no harm."

"Hradzka will do us no more harm," the old scientist replied. "He is a thing of yesterday; of a time long past and half-lost in the mists of legend."

"No matter. As long as he exists, at any point in space-time, Hradzka is still a threat. Revenge means much to Hradzka; he will return for it, when we least expect him."

The old man shook his head. "No, Zarvas Pol, Hradzka will not return."

Hradzka holstered his blaster, threw the switch that sealed the "time-machine", put on the antigrav-unit and started the time-shift unit. He reached out and set the destination-dial for the mid-Fifty-Second Century of the Atomic Era. That would land him in the Ninth Age of Chaos, following the Two-Century War and the collapse of the World Theocracy. A good time for his purpose: the world would be slipping back into barbarism, and yet possess the technologies of former civilizations. A hundred little national states would be trying to regain social stability, competing and warring with one another. Hradzka glanced back over his shoulder at the cases of books, record-spools, tridi-

mensional pictures, and scale-models. These people of the past would welcome him and his science of the future, would make him their leader.

He would start in a small way, by taking over the local feudal or tribal government, would arm his followers with weapons of the future. Then he would impose his rule upon neighboring tribes, or princedoms, or communes, or whatever, and build a strong sovereignty; from that he envisioned a world empire, a Solar System empire.

Then, he would build "time-machines", many "time-machines". He would recruit an army such as the universe had never seen, a swarm of men from every age in the past. At that point, he would return to the Hundredth Century of the Atomic Era, to wreak vengeance upon those who had risen against him. A slow smile grew on Hradzka's thin lips as he thought of the tortures with which he would put Zarvas Pol to death.

He glanced up at the great disc of the indicator and frowned. Already he was back to the year 7500, A.E., and the temporal-displacement had not begun to slow. The disc was turning even more rapidly— 7000, 6000, 5500; he gasped slightly. Then he had passed his destination; he was now in the Fortieth Century, but the indicator was slowing. The hairline crossed the Thirtieth Century, the Twentieth, the Fifteenth, the Tenth. He wondered what had gone wrong, but he had recovered from his fright by this time. When this insane machine stopped, as it must around the First Century of the Atomic Era, he would investigate, make repairs, then shift forward to his target-point. Hradzka was determined upon the Fifty-Second Century; he had made a special study of the history of that period, had learned the language spoken then, and he understood the methods necessary to gain power over the natives of that time.

The indicator-disc came to a stop, in the First Century. He switched on the magnifier and leaned forward to look; he had emerged into normal time in the year 10 of the Atomic Era, a decade after the first uranium-pile had gone into operation, and seven years after the first atomic bombs had been exploded in warfare. The altimeter showed that he was hovering at eight thousand feet above ground-level.

Slowly, he cut out the antigrav, letting the "time machine" down easily. He knew that there had been no danger of materializing inside anything; the New Tower had been built to put it above anything that had occupied that space-point at any moment within history, or legend, or even the geological knowledge of man. What lay below, however, was uncertain. It was night—the visi-screen showed only a star-dusted, moonless-sky, and dark shadows below. He snapped another switch; for a few microseconds a beam of intense light was turned on, automatically photographing the landscape under him. A second later, the developed picture was projected upon another screen; it showed only wooded mountains and a barren, brush-grown valley.

The "time-machine" came to rest with a soft jar and a crashing of broken

bushes that was audible through the sound pickup. Hradzka pulled the main switch; there was a click as the shielding went out and the door opened. A breath of cool night air drew into the hollow sphere.

Then there was a loud inside the mechanism, and a flash of blue-white light which turned to pinkish flame with a nasty crackling. Curls of smoke began to rise from the square black box that housed the "time-shift" mechanism, and from behind the instrument-board. In a moment, everything was glowing-hot: driblets of aluminum and silver were running down from the instruments. Then the whole interior of the "time-machine" was afire; there was barely time for Hradzka to leap through the open door.

The brush outside impeded him, and he used his blaster to clear a path for himself away from the big sphere, which was now glowing faintly on the outside. The heat grew in intensity, and the brush outside was taking fire. It was not until he had gotten two hundred yards from the machine that he stopped, realizing what had happened.

The machine, of course, had been sabotaged. That would have been young Zoldy, whom he had killed, or that old billy-goat, Kradzy Zago; the latter, most likely. He cursed both of them for having marooned him in this savage age, at the very beginning of atomic civilization, with all his printed and recorded knowledge destroyed. Oh, he could still gain mastery over these barbarians; he knew enough to fashion a crude blaster, or a heat-beam gun, or an atomic-electric conversion unit. But without his books and records, he could never build an antigrav unit, and the secret of the "temporal shift" was lost.

For "Time" is not an object, or a medium which can be travelled along. The "Time-Machine" was not a vehicle; it was a mechanical process of displacement within the space-time continuum, and those who constructed it knew that it could not be used with the sort of accuracy that the dials indicated. Hradzka had ordered his scientists to produce a "Time Machine", and they had combined the possible—displacement within the space-time continuum—with the sort of fiction the dictator demanded, for their own well-being. Even had there been no sabotage, his return to his own "time" was nearly of zero probability.

The fire, spreading from the "time-machine", was blowing toward him; he observed the wind-direction and hurried around out of the path of the flames. The light enabled him to pick his way through the brush, and, after crossing a small stream, he found a rutted road and followed it up the mountainside until he came to a place where he could rest concealed until morning.

It was broad daylight when he woke, and there was a strange throbbing sound; Hradzka lay motionless under the brush where he had slept, his blaster ready. In a few minutes, a vehicle came into sight, following the road down the mountainside.

It was a large thing, four-wheeled, with a projection in front which probably housed the engine and a cab for

the operator. The body of the vehicle was simply an open rectangular box. There were two men in the cab, and about twenty or thirty more crowded into the box body. These were dressed in faded and nondescript garments of blue and gray and brown; all were armed with crude weapons—axes, billhooks, long-handled instruments with serrated edges, and what looked like broad-bladed spears. The vehicle itself, which seemed to be propelled by some sort of chemical-explosion engine, was dingy and mud-splattered; the men in it were ragged and unshaven. Hradzka snorted in contempt; they were probably warriors of the local tribe, going to the fire in the belief that it had been started by raiding enemies. When they found the wreckage of the "time-machine", they would no doubt believe that it was the chariot of some god and drag it home to be venerated.

A plan of action was taking shape in his mind. First, he must get clothing of the sort worn by these people, and find a safe hiding-place for his own things. Then, pretending to be a deaf-mute, he would go among them to learn something of their customs and pick up the language. When he had done that, he would move on to another tribe or village, able to tell a credible story for himself. For a while, it would be necessary for him to do menial work, but in the end, he would establish himself among these people. Then he could gather around him a faction of those who were dissatisfied with whatever conditions existed, organize a conspiracy, make arms for his followers, and start his program of power-seizure.

The matter of clothing was attended to shortly after he had crossed the mountain and descended into the valley on the other side. Hearing a clinking sound some distance from the road, as of metal striking stone, Hradzka stole cautiously through the woods until he came within sight of a man who was digging with a mattock, uprooting small bushes of a particular sort, with rough gray bark and three-pointed leaves. When he had dug one up, he would cut off the roots and then slice away the root-bark with a knife, putting it into a sack. Hradzka's lip curled contemptuously; the fellow was gathering the stuff for medicinal use. He had heard of the use of roots and herbs for such purposes by the ancient savages.

The blaster would be no use here; it was too powerful, and would destroy the clothing that the man was wearing. He unfastened a strap from his belt and attached it to a stone to form a hand-loop, then, inched forward behind the lone herb-gatherer. When he was close enough, he straightened and rushed forward, swinging his improvised weapon. The man heard him and turned, too late.

After undressing his victim, Hradzka used the mattock to finish him, and then to dig a grave. The fugitive buried his own clothes with the murdered man, and donned the faded blue shirt, rough shoes, worn trousers and jacket. The blaster he concealed under the jacket, and he kept a few other Hundredth Century gadgets; these he would hide somewhere closer to his center of operations.

He had kept, among other things, a small box of food-concentrate capsules, and in one pocket of the newly acquired jacket he found a package containing food. It was rough and unappetizing fare—slices of cold cooked meat between slices of some cereal substance. He ate these before filling in the grave, and put the paper wrappings in with the dead man. Then, his work finished, he threw the mattock into the brush and set out again, grimacing disgustedly and scratching himself. The clothing he had appropriated was verminous.

Crossing another mountain, he descended into a second valley, and, for a time, lost his way among a tangle of narrow ravines. It was dark by the time he mounted a hill and found himself looking down another valley, in which a few scattered lights gave evidence of human habitations. Not wishing to arouse suspicion by approaching these in the nighttime, he found a place among some young evergreens where he could sleep.

The next morning, having breakfasted on a concentrate capsule, he found a hiding-place for his blaster in a hollow tree. It was in a sufficiently prominent position so that he could easily find it again, and at the same time unlikely to be discovered by some native. Then he went down into the inhabited valley.

He was surprised at the ease with which he established contact with the natives. The first dwelling which he approached, a cluster of farm-buildings at the upper end of the valley, gave him shelter. There was a man, clad in the same sort of rough garments Hradzka had taken from the body of the herb-gatherer, and a woman in a faded and shapeless dress. The man was thin and work-bent; the woman short and heavy. Both were past middle age.

He made inarticulate sounds to attract their attention, then gestured to his mouth and ears to indicate his assumed affliction. He rubbed his stomach to portray hunger. Looking about, he saw an ax sticking in a chopping-block, and a pile of wood near it, probably the fuel used by these people. He took the ax, split up some of the wood, then repeated the hunger-signs. The man and the woman both nodded, laughing; he was shown a pile of tree-limbs, and the man picked up a short billet of wood and used it like a measuring-rule, to indicate that all the wood was to be cut to that length.

Hradzka fell to work, and by midmorning, he had all the wood cut. He had seen a circular stone, mounted on a trestle with a metal axle through it, and judged it to be some sort of a grinding-wheel, since it was fitted with a foot-pedal and a rusty metal can was set above it to spill water onto the grinding-edge. After chopping the wood, he carefully sharpened the ax, handing it to the man for inspection. This seemed to please the man; he clapped Hradzka on the shoulder, making commendatory sounds.

It required considerable time and ingenuity to make himself a more or less permanent member of the household. Hradzka had made a survey of the farmyard, noting the sorts of work that would

normally be performed on the farm, and he pantomimed this work in its simpler operations. He pointed to the east, where the sun would rise, and to the zenith, and to the west. He made signs indicative of eating, and of sleeping, and of rising, and of working. At length, he succeeded in conveying his meaning.

There was considerable argument between the man and the woman, but his proposal was accepted, as he expected that it would. It was easy to see that the work of the farm was hard for this aging couple; now, for a place to sleep and a little food, they were able to acquire a strong and intelligent slave.

In the days that followed, he made himself useful to the farm people; he fed the chickens and the livestock, milked the cow, worked in the fields. He slept in a small room at the top of the house, under the eaves, and ate with the man and woman in the farmhouse kitchen.

It was not long before he picked up a few words which he had heard his employers using, and related them to the things or acts spoken of. And he began to notice that these people, in spite of the crudities of their own life, enjoyed some of the advantages of a fairly complex civilization. Their implements were not hand-craft products, but showed machine workmanship. There were two objects hanging on hooks on the kitchen wall which he was sure were weapons. Both had wooden shoulder-stocks, and wooden fore-pieces; they had long tubes extending to the front, and triggers like blasters. One had double tubes mounted side-by-side, and double triggers; the other had an octagonal tube mounted over a round tube, and a loop extension on the trigger-guard. Then, there was a box on the kitchen wall, with a mouthpiece and a cylindrical tube on a cord. Sometimes a bell would ring out of the box, and the woman would go to this instrument, take down the tube and hold it to her ear, and talk into the mouthpiece. There was another box from which voices would issue, of people conversing, or of orators, or of singing, and sometimes instrumental music. None of these were objects made by savages; these people probably traded with some fairly high civilization. They were not illiterate; he found printed matter, indicating the use of some phonetic alphabet, and paper pamphlets containing printed reproductions of photographs as well as verbal text.

There was also a vehicle on the farm, powered, like the one he had seen on the road, by an engine in which a hydrocarbon liquid-fuel was exploded. He made it his business to examine this minutely, and to study its construction and operation until he was thoroughly familiar with it.

It was not until the third day after his arrival that the chickens began to die. In the morning, Hradzka found three of them dead when he went to feed them, the rest drooping unhealthily; he summoned the man and showed him what he had found. The next morning, they were all dead, and the cow was sick. She gave bloody milk, that evening, and the next morning she lay in her stall and would not get up.

The man and the woman were also beginning to sicken, though both of them tried to continue their work. It was the woman who first noticed that the plants around the farmhouse were withering and turning yellow.

The farmer went to the stable with Hradzka and looked at the cow. Shaking his head, he limped back to the house, and returned carrying one of the weapons from the kitchen—the one with the single trigger and the octagonal tube. As he entered the stable, he jerked down and up on the loop extension of the trigger-guard, then put the weapon to his shoulder and pointed it at the cow. It made a flash, and roared louder even than a hand-blaster, and the cow jerked convulsively and was dead. The man then indicated by signs that Hradzka was to drag the dead cow out of the stable, dig a hole, and bury it. This Hradzka did, carefully examining the wound in the cow's head—the weapon, he decided, was not an energy-weapon, but a simple solid-missile projector.

By evening, neither the man nor the woman were able to eat, and both seemed to be suffering intensely. The man used the communicating-instrument on the wall, probably calling on his friends for help. Hradzka did what he could to make them comfortable, cooked his own meal, washed the dishes as he had seen the woman doing, and tidied up the kitchen.

It was not long before people, men and women whom he had seen on the road or who had stopped at the farmhouse while he had been there, began arriving, some carrying baskets of food; and shortly after Hradzka had eaten, a vehicle like the farmer's, but in better condition and of better quality, arrived and a young man got out of it and entered the house, carrying a leather bag. He was apparently some sort of a scientist; he examined the man and his wife, asked many questions, and administered drugs. He also took samples for blood-tests and urinalysis. This, Hradzka considered, was another of the many contradictions he had encountered among these people—this man behaved like an educated scientist, and seemingly had nothing in common with the peasant herb-gatherer on the mountainside.

The fact was that Hradzka was worried. The strange death of the animals, the blight which had smitten the trees and vegetables around the farm, and the sickness of the farmer and his woman, all mystified him. He did not know of any disease which would affect plants and animals and humans; he wondered if some poisonous gas might not be escaping from the earth near the farmhouse. However, he had not, himself, been affected. He also disliked the way in which the doctor and the neighbors seemed to be talking about him. While he had come to a considerable revision of his original opinion about the culture-level of these people, it was not impossible that they might suspect him of having caused the whole thing by witchcraft; at any moment, they might fall upon him and put him to death. In any case, there was no longer any use in his staying here, and it might be wise if he left at once.

Accordingly, he filled his pockets with food from the pantry and slipped out of the farmhouse; before his absence was discovered he was well on his way down the road.

That night, Hradzka slept under a bridge across a fairly wide stream; the next morning, he followed the road until he came to a town. It was not a large place; there were perhaps four or five hundred houses and other buildings in it. Most of these were dwellings like the farmhouse where he had been staying, but some were much larger, and seemed to be places of business. One of these latter was a concrete structure with wide doors at the front; inside, he could see men working on the internal-combustion vehicles which seemed to be in almost universal use. Hradzka decided to obtain employment here.

It would be best, he decided, to continue his pretense of being a deaf-mute. He did not know whether a world-language were in use at this time or not, and even if not, the pretense of being a foreigner unable to speak the local dialect might be dangerous. So he entered the vehicle-repair shop and accosted a man in a clean shirt who seemed to be issuing instructions to the workers, going into his pantomime of the homeless mute seeking employment.

The master of the repair-shop merely laughed at him, however. Hradzka became more insistent in his manner, making signs to indicate his hunger and willingness to work. The other men in the shop left their tasks and gathered around; there was much laughter and unmistakably ribald and derogatory remarks. Hradzka was beginning to give up hope of getting employment here when one of the workmen approached the master and whispered something to him.

The two of them walked away, conversing in low voices. Hradzka thought he understood the situation; no doubt the workman, thinking to lighten his own labor, was urging that the vagrant be employed, for no other pay than food and lodging. At length, the master assented to his employee's urgings; he returned, showed Hradzka a hose and a bucket and sponges and cloths, and set him to work cleaning the mud from one of the vehicles. Then, after seeing that the work was being done properly, he went away, entering a room at one side of the shop.

About twenty minutes later, another man entered the shop. He was not dressed like any of the other people whom Hradzka had seen; he wore a gray tunic and breeches, polished black boots, and a cap with a visor and a metal insignia on it; on a belt, he carried a holstered weapon like a blaster.

After speaking to one of the workers, who pointed Hradzka out to him, he approached the fugitive and said something. Hradzka made gestures at his mouth and ears and made gargling sounds; the newcomer shrugged and motioned him to come with him, at the same time producing a pair of handcuffs from his belt and jingling them suggestively.

In a few seconds, Hradzka tried to analyze the situation and estimate its

possibilities. The newcomer was a soldier, or, more likely, a policeman, since manacles were a part of his equipment. Evidently, since the evening before, a warning had been made public by means of communicating devices such as he had seen at the farm, advising people that a man of his description, pretending to be a deaf-mute, should be detained and the police notified; it had been for that reason that the workman had persuaded his master to employ Hradzka. No doubt he would be accused of causing the conditions at the farm by sorcery.

Hradzka shrugged and nodded, then went to the water-tap to turn off the hose he had been using. He disconnected it, coiled it and hung it up, and then picked up the water-bucket. Then, without warning, he hurled the water into the policeman's face, sprang forward, swinging the bucket by the bale, and hit the man on the head. Releasing his grip on the bucket, he tore the blaster or whatever it was from the holster.

One of the workers swung a hammer, as though to throw it. Hradzka aimed the weapon at him and pulled the trigger; the thing belched fire and kicked back painfully in his hand, and the man fell. He used it again to drop the policeman, then thrust it into the waistband of his trousers and ran outside. The thing was not a blaster at all, he realized—only a missile-projector like the big weapons at the farm, utilizing the force of some chemical explosive.

The policeman's vehicle was standing outside. It was a small, single-seat, two wheeled affair. Having become familiar with the principles of these hydrocarbon engines from examination of the vehicle of the farm, and accustomed as he was to far more complex mechanisms than this crude affair, Hradzka could see at a glance how to operate it. Springing onto the saddle, he kicked away the folding support and started the engine. Just as he did, the master of the repair-shop ran outside, one of the small hand-weapons in his hand, and fired several shots. They all missed, but Hradzka heard the whining sound of the missiles passing uncomfortably close to him.

It was imperative that he recover the blaster he had hidden in the hollow tree at the head of the valley. By this time, there would be a concerted search under way for him, and he needed a better weapon than the solid-missile projector he had taken from the policeman. He did not know how many shots the thing contained, but if it propelled solid missiles by chemical explosion, there could not have been more than five or six such charges in the cylindrical part of the weapon which he had assumed to be the charge-holder. On the other hand, his blaster, a weapon of much greater power, contained enough energy for five hundred blasts, and with it were eight extra energy-capsules, giving him a total of four thousand five hundred blasts.

Handling the two-wheeled vehicle was no particular problem; although he had never ridden on anything of the sort before, it was child's play compared to controlling a Hundredth Century strato-

rocket, and Hradzka was a skilled rocket-pilot.

Several times he passed vehicles on the road—the passenger vehicles with enclosed cabins, and cargo-vehicles piled high with farm produce. Once he encountered a large number of children, gathered in front of a big red building with a flagstaff in front, from which a queer flag, with horizontal red and white stripes and a white-spotted blue device in the corner, flew. They scattered off the road in terror at his approach; fortunately, he hit none of them, for at the speed at which he was traveling, such a collision would have wrecked his light vehicle.

As he approached the farm where he had spent the past few days, he saw two passenger-vehicles standing by the road. One was a black one, similar to the one in which the physician had come to the farm, and the other was white with black trimmings and bore the same device he had seen on the cap of the policeman. A policeman was sitting in the driver's seat of this vehicle, and another policeman was standing beside it, breathing smoke with one of the white paper cylinders these people used. In the farmyard, two men were going about with a square black box; to this box, a tube was connected by a wire, and they were passing the tube about over the ground.

The policeman who was standing beside the vehicle saw him approach, and blew his whistle, then drew the weapon from his belt. Hradzka, who had been expecting some attempt to halt him, had let go the right-hand steering handle and drawn his own weapon; as the policeman drew, he fired at him. Without observing the effect of the shot, he sped on; before he had rounded the bend above the farm, several shots were fired after him.

A mile beyond, he came to the place where he had hidden the blaster. He stopped the vehicle and jumped off, plunging into the brush and racing toward the hollow tree. Just as he reached it, he heard a vehicle approach and stop, and the door of the police vehicle slam. Hradzka's fingers found the belt of his blaster; he dragged it out and buckled it on, tossing away the missile weapon he had been carrying.

Then, crouching behind the tree, he waited. A few moments later, he caught a movement in the brush toward the road. He brought up the blaster, aimed and squeezed the trigger. There was a faint bluish glow at the muzzle, and a blast of energy tore through the brush, smashing the molecular structure of everything that stood in the way. There was an involuntary shout of alarm from the direction of the road; at least one of the policemen had escaped the blast. Hradzka holstered his weapon and crept away for some distance, keeping under cover, then turned and waited for some sign of the presence of his enemies. For some time nothing happened; he decided to turn hunter against the men who were hunting him. He started back in the direction of the road, making a wide circle, flitting silently from rock to bush and from bush to tree, stopping often to look and listen.

This finally brought him upon one of the policemen, and almost terminated his flight at the same time. He must have grown overconfident and careless; suddenly a weapon roared, and a missile smashed through the brush inches from his face. The shot had come from his left and a little to the rear. Whirling, he blasted four times, in rapid succession, then turned and fled for a few yards, dropping and crawling behind a rock. When he looked back, he could see wisps of smoke rising from the shattered trees and bushes which had absorbed the energy-output of his weapon, and he caught a faint odor of burned flesh. One of his pursuers, at least, would pursue him no longer.

He slipped away, down into the tangle of ravines and hollows in which he had wandered the day before his arrival at the farm. For the time being, he felt safe, and finally confident that he was not being pursued, he stopped to rest. The place where he stopped seemed familiar, and he looked about. In a moment, he recognized the little stream, the pool where he had bathed his feet, the clump of seedling pines under which he had slept. He even found the silver-foil wrapping from the food concentrate capsule.

But there had been a change, since the night when he had slept here. Then the young pines had been green and alive; now they were blighted, and their needles had turned brown. Hradzka stood for a long time, looking at them. It was the same blight that had touched the plants around the farmhouse. And here, among the pine needles on the ground, lay a dead bird.

It took some time for him to admit, to himself, the implications of vegetation, the chickens, the cow, the farmer and his wife, had all sickened and died. He had been in this place, and now, when he had returned, he found that death had followed him here, too.

During the early centuries of the Atomic Era, he knew, there had been great wars, the stories of which had survived even to the Hundredth Century. Among the weapons that had been used, there had been artificial plagues and epidemics, caused by new types of bacteria developed in laboratories, against which the victims had possessed no protection. Those germs and viruses had persisted for centuries, and gradually had lost their power to harm mankind. Suppose, now, that he had brought some of them back with him, to a century before they had been developed. Suppose, that was, that he were a human plague-carrier. He thought of the vermin that had infested the clothing he had taken from the man he had killed on the other side of the mountain; they had not troubled him after the first day.

There was a throbbing mechanical sound somewhere in the air; he looked about, and finally identified its source. A small aircraft had come over the valley from the other side of the mountain and was circling lazily overhead. He froze, shrinking back under a pine-tree; as long as he remained motionless, he would not be seen, and soon the thing would go away. He was beginning to understand why the search for him was being pressed so relentlessly; as long

as he remained alive, he was a menace to everybody in this First Century world.

He got out his supply of food concentrates, saw that he had only three capsules left, and put them away again. For a long time, he sat under the dying tree, chewing on a twig and thinking. There must be some way in which he could overcome, or even utilize, his inherent deadliness to these people. He might find some isolated community, conceal himself near it, invade it at night and infect it, and then, when everybody was dead, move in and take it for himself. But was there any such isolated community? The farmhouse where he had worked had been fairly remote, yet its inhabitants had been in communication with the outside world, and the physician had come immediately in response to their call for help.

The little aircraft had been circling overhead, directly above the place where he lay hidden. For a while, Hradzka was afraid it had spotted him, and was debating the advisability of using his blaster on it. Then it banked, turned and went away. He watched it circle over the valley on the other side of the mountain, and got to his feet.

Almost at once, there was a new sound—a multiple throbbing, at a quick, snarling tempo that hinted at enormous power, growing louder each second. Hradzka stiffened and drew his blaster; as he did, five more aircraft swooped over the crest of the mountain and came rushing down toward him; not aimlessly, but as though they knew exactly where he was. As they approached, the leading edges of their wings sparkled with light, branches began flying from the trees about him, and there was a loud hammering noise.

He aimed a little in front of them and began blasting. A wing flew from one of the aircraft, and it plunged downward. Another came apart in the air; a third burst into flames. The other two zoomed upward quickly. Hradzka swung his blaster after them, blasting again and again. He hit a fourth with a blast of energy, knocking it to pieces, and then the fifth was out of range. He blasted at it twice, but without effect; a hand-blaster was only good for a thousand yards at the most.

Holstering his weapon, he hurried away, following the stream and keeping under cover of trees. The last of the attacking aircraft had gone away, but the little scout-plane was still circling about, well out of blaster-range.

Once or twice, Hradzka was compelled to stay hidden for some time, not knowing the nature of the pilot's ability to detect him. It was during one of these waits that the next phase of the attack developed.

It began, like the last one, with a distant roar that swelled in volume until it seemed to fill the whole world. Then, fifteen or twenty thousand feet out of blaster-range, the new attackers swept into sight.

There must have been fifty of them, huge tapering things with widespread wings, flying in close formation, wave after V-shaped wave. He stood and stared at them, amazed; he had never

imagined that such aircraft existed in the First Century. Then a high-pitched screaming sound cut through the roar of the propellers, and for an instant he saw countless small specks in the sky, falling downward.

The first bomb-salvo landed in the young pines, where he had fought against the first air attack. Great gouts of flame shot upward, and smoke, and flying earth and debris. Hradzka turned and started to run. Another salvo fell in front of him; he veered to the left and plunged on through the undergrowth. Now the bombs were falling all about him, deafening him with their thunder, shaking him with concussion. He dodged, frightened, as the trunk of a tree came crashing down beside him. Then something hit him across the back, knocking him flat. For a moment, he lay stunned, then tried to rise. As he did, a searing light filled his eyes and a wave of intolerable heat swept over him. Then darkness....

"No, Zarvas Pol," Kradzy Zago repeated. "Hradzka will not return; the 'time-machine' was sabotaged."

"So? By you?" the soldier asked.

The scientist nodded. "I knew the purpose for which he intended it. Hradzka was not content with having enslaved a whole Solar System: he hungered to bring tyranny and serfdom to all the past and all the future as well; he wanted to be master not only of the present but of the centuries that were and were to be, as well. I never took part in politics, Zarvas Pol; I had no hand in this revolt. But I could not be party to such a crime as Hradzka contemplated when it lay within my power to prevent it."

"The machine will take him out of our space-time continuum, or back to a time when this planet was a swirling cloud of flaming gas?" Zarvas Pol asked.

Kradzy Zago shook his head. "No, the unit is not powerful enough for that. It will only take him about ten thousand years into the past. But then, when it stops, the machine will destroy itself. It may destroy Hradzka with it or he may escape. But if he does, he will be left stranded ten thousand years ago, when he can do us no harm.

"Actually, it did not operate as he imagined and there is an infinitely small chance that he could have returned to our 'time', in any event. But I wanted to insure against even so small a chance."

"We can't be sure of that," Zarvas Pol objected. "He may know more about the machine than you think; enough more to build another like it. So you must build me a machine and I'll take back a party of volunteers and hunt him down."

"That would not be necessary, and you would only share his fate." Then, apparently changing the subject, Kradzy Zago asked: "Tell me, Zarvas Pol; have you never heard the legends of the Deadly Radiations?"

General Zarvas smiled. "Who has not? Every cadet at the Officers' College dreams of rediscovering them, to use as a weapon, but nobody ever has. We hear these tales of how, in the early days, atomic engines and piles and fission-bombs emitted particles which

were utterly deadly, which would make anything with which they came in contact deadly, which would bring a horrible death to any human being. But these are only myths. All the ancient experiments have been duplicated time and again, and the deadly radiation effect has never been observed. Some say that it is a mere oldwives' terror tale; some say that the deaths were caused by fear of atomic energy, when it was still unfamiliar; others contend that the fundamental nature of atomic energy has altered by the degeneration of the fissionable matter. For my own part, I'm not enough of a scientist to have an opinion."

The old one smiled wanly. "None of these theories are correct. In the beginning of the Atomic Era, the Deadly Radiations existed. They still exist, but they are no longer deadly, because all life on this planet has adapted itself to such radiations, and all living things are now immune to them."

"And Hradzka has returned to a time when such immunity did not exist? But would that not be to his advantage?"

"Remember, General, that man has been using atomic energy for ten thousand years. Our whole world has become drenched with radioactivity. The planet, the seas, the atmosphere, and every living thing, are all radioactive, now. Radioactivity is as natural to us as the air we breathe. Now, you remember hearing of the great wars of the first centuries of the Atomic Era, in which whole nations were wiped out, leaving only hundreds of survivors out of millions. You, no doubt, think that such tales are products of ignorant and barbaric imagination, but I assure you, they are literally true. It was not the blast-effect of a few bombs which created such holocausts, but the radiations released by the bombs. And those who survived to carry on the race were men and women whose systems resisted the radiations, and they transmitted to their progeny that power of resistance. In many cases, their children were mutants—not monsters, although there were many of them, too, which did not survive—but humans who were immune to radioactivity."

"An interesting theory, Kradzy Zago," the soldier commented. "And one which conforms both to what we know of atomic energy and to the ancient legends. Then you would say that those radiations are still deadly—to the non-immune?"

"Exactly. And Hradzka, his body emitting those radiations, has returned to the First Century of the Atomic Era—to a world without immunity."

General Zarvas' smile vanished. "Man!" he cried in horror. "You have loosed a carrier of death among those innocent people of the past!"

Kradzy Zago nodded. "That is true. I estimate that Hradzka will probably cause the death of a hundred or so people, before he is dealt with. But dealt with he will be. Tell me, General; if a man should appear now, out of nowhere, spreading a strange and horrible plague wherever he went, what would you do?"

"Why, I'd hunt him down and kill

him," General Zarvas replied. "Not for anything he did, but for the menace he was. And then, I'd cover his body with a mass of concrete bigger than this palace."

"Precisely." Kradzy Zago smiled. "And the military commanders and political leaders of the First Century were no less ruthless or efficient than you. You know how atomic energy was first used? There was an ancient nation, upon the ruins of whose cities we have built our own, which was famed for its idealistic humanitarianism. Yet that nation, treacherously attacked, created the first atomic bombs in self defense, and used them. It is among the people of that nation that Hradzka has emerged."

"But would they recognize him as the cause of the calamity he brings among them?"

"Of course. He will emerge at the time when atomic energy is first being used. They will have detectors for the Deadly Radiations—detectors we know nothing of, today, for a detection instrument must be free from the thing it is intended to detect, and today everything is radioactive. It will be a day or so before they discover what is happening to them, and not a few will die in that time, I fear; but once they have found out what is killing their people, Hradzka's days—no, his hours—will be numbered."

"A mass of concrete bigger than this place," Tobbh the Slave repeated General Zarvas' words. ""

Prince Burvanny clapped him on the shoulder. "Tobbh, man! You've hit it!"

"You mean...?" Kradzy Zago began.

"Yes. You all know of it. It's stood for nobody knows how many millennia, and nobody's ever decided what it was, to begin with, except that somebody, once, filled a valley with concrete, level from mountaintop to mountaintop. The accepted theory is that it was done for a firing-stand for the first Moon-rocket. But gentlemen, our friend Tobbh's explained it. It is the tomb of Hradzka, and it has been the tomb of Hradzka for ten thousand years before Hradzka was born!"