



Jason, Son of Jason

J. U. Giesy

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Author: J U Giesy

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Chapter I

It was midnight when the night superintendent called and told me No. 27 had died. I rose. The thing was no surprise. I had known it was going to happen. No. 27 had told me so himself. Nonetheless, I went to his room. Routine in the mental hospital had nothing to do with that strange secret held in common between myself and the man--that strange state of affairs which had enabled him to predict his own death so accurately.

And yet as I mounted the stairs to the room where his body now lay as a worn-out husk I had none of the feeling which so customarily assails the average mortal in such an hour. To me it was not as though he had died. The body was a husk indeed--an emaciated, worn-out thing which, because of our mutual secret, I knew had been kept alive by the sheer force of the spiritual tenant, now removed.

I stood looking down upon it, with very much the same sensations one might have in viewing the tool once plied by the hand of a friend. It was nothing more than that really. Jason Croft had used it while he had need of its manipulation, and when his need was accomplished he had simply laid it down.

Croft was a physician, even as am I. He was a scientific man. In addition he was a student of the occult--the science of the mind, the spirit, and its control of the physical forces of life.

He was an Earth-born man. The home in which I first met him contained the greatest private collection of works on the subject I have ever seen. In dying he left them to me--I have them all about me.

Many men have mastered the astral control on the Earthly plane. Croft had carried it to an ultimate degree. He shook off the envelope

of the Earth atmosphere, led thereto, as he frankly confessed in our conversations, by the attraction of a feminine spirit, though he did not know it at the time, and recognized it only when he first viewed Naia--Princess of Tamarizia--on Palos, planet of a distant star.

I had dabbled in the occult to some extent myself. Hence when he spoke of the doctrine of twin souls he had no further need to explain. He alleged that since a child the Dog Star had called him subtly through the years in a way he could not explain. Once having come into her presence, however, he knew that Naia had called across the void to him.

To an accomplishment of his marrying her, Croft declared that he had done a weirdly wonderful thing. Discovering a Palosian dying of a mental rather than a physical ailment, he had waited until death occurred, then appropriated the still physically viable body to himself.

Over that body he obtained absolute control, exactly as he had gained the same ability with his own. For a time thereafter he led a sort of dual existence, sometimes on Palos, sometimes on Earth, until he had fully shaped his plans. Then, and then only, did he voluntarily forsake the mundane life to enter that other and fuller existence he felt that Naia of Aphur could make complete.

I questioned him closely. I took up first the question of time required in passing from Earth to Palos. He smiled and replied that outside the mental atmosphere a man time ceased to exist; that it was man's measure of a portion of eternity, and nothing more, and that he could not use what was non-existent, hence reached Palos as quickly in the astral condition as I could span the gulf between that member of the Dog Star's Pack and Earth in thought. All other points I raised he met. Even so it was a good deal of a shock to find my new patient speaking to me with Croft's evident understanding, looking at me out of what seemed oddly like Croft's eyes.

This night, earlier in the evening, he had bidden me goodbye--told me he was going back to Naia, the woman he had dared so much to win, his mate who ere long was to bear him, Jason Croft of Earth, a child. And now--well, now as before, it would seem he had kept his word. Jason Croft was dead *again*.

I gave what directions were needed for the disposal of No. 27's body, returned to my bed, and stretched myself out.

Both the narratives to which I had listened--first from the man I knew to be Jason Croft really, secondly from the pitiable wreck he had employed on his return, that worn-out husk which had just died--had produced on me a somewhat odd effect. So clearly had he portrayed the events and emotions which had swayed him in his almost undreamed courtship of the Aphurian princess that I had come to accept the characters he mentioned as actually existent persons, acquaintances almost, just as, in spite of all established precedent, I still regarded Croft himself as alive.

Naia of Aphur--when he told me she was about to become a mother, I had cried out, on impulse, that I wished as a medical man I might attend her--would be glad to see the light in her eyes when they first beheld his, Jason's, child.

And Croft had replied, "Man, I could love you for that," and he flashed me an understanding smile.

So now that he was gone back to her--I lay on my bed unsleeping, and let all he had told me unroll in a sort of mental panorama, dealing wholly with the Palosian world.

Tamarizia! It was into this empire Croft blundered blindly when he went to Palos first--a series of principalities surrounding the shore of

a vast inland sea, with the exception of a central state--the seat of the imperial capital, embracing the island of Hiranur located in the sea itself, and Nodhur to the west and south. From the Central Sea a narrow strait led into an outer ocean to the west.

This was known as the gateway. To the north was Cathur, a rugged, mountainous state, the seat of national learning, in its university at the capital city of Scira, and east of Cathur was Mazhur, known as the lost state at the time of Croft's first arrival, because it had been wrested from the empire some fifty years before, in a war with Zollaria, a hostile nation to the north.

Croft, after gaining physical life on Palos, succeeded in winning it back, and in gaining thereby the consent of Naia's father, Prince Lakkon, and her uncle, Jadgor, King of Aphur, to their marriage. It was at this point his narrative had ended first.

East of Mazhur, still hugging the sea and extending into the hinterland of the continent was Bithur, and Milidhur joined Bithur to the south. West of Milidhur, completing the circle, was Aphur--the name meaning literally "the land to the west" or "toward the sun." Aphur was the southern pillar of the gateway, ending at the western strait. Nodhur lay south of Aphur, gaining access to the sea by the navigable river Na, on whose yellow flood moved a steady stream of commerce driven by sail and oar until Croft revolutionized transportation by producing alcohol-driven motors. And--if I were to believe his second account--since then he had actually electrified the nation, harnessing mountain streams to generate the force.

Except for the waterways, traffic prior to Croft's innovations was by conveyances drawn by the gnuppa--a creature half deer, half horse, in appearance--or by means of caravans of the enormous beast called sarapelca, resembling some huge Silurian lizard, twice the size of an elephant, with a pointed tail, scale armored back, camel-

like neck, and the head of a marine serpent tentacle-fringed about the mouth.

They were driven by reins affixed to these fleshy appendages, and streamlined across the Palosian deserts, bearing huge merchandise cargos upon their massive backs.

Indeed, it was a wonderful world into which Croft had projected himself, Babylonian in seeming, as he had described it to me at first.

North of Tamarizia was Zollaria, inhabited by a far more warlike race. Its despotic government had long cast a covetous eye of the Central Sea, through which, and the rivers emptying into its expanse, most of the profitable trade lanes were reached. Tamarizia, controlling the western gateway, had remained master even after the fall of Mazhur, collecting toll from the Zollarian craft on her river despite the foothold gained on her northern coast.

East of Tamarizia, beyond Bithur and Milidhur, lay Mazzeria, peopled by a race little over the aborigine in their social life. Tatar-like, the Mazzerians shaved their heads of all save a single tuft of hair, with a most remarkable effect, since the race was blue of complexion and the prevailing color of their hair was red.

Mazzeria, at the time of Croft's incursion into the planet's affairs, was the acknowledged ally of Zollaria, although at peace with Tamarizia. In earlier times, however, numbers of them had been taken captive in border wars and brought to both nations as slaves. These, in so far as Tamarizia was concerned, had later been freed and given citizenship of a degree constituting in their ranks the lowest or serving caste.

Each state was governed by a king, by hereditary succession, in conjunction with a national assembly consisting of a delegate elected

by each ten thousand or deckerton of civil population. The occupant of the imperial throne was elected for a period of ten years by vote of the several states.

One Croft's advent, Scythys--a dotard--had been king of Cathur, with his son Kyphallos, the crown prince, a profligate of the worst type sunk under the charms of Kalamita, a Zollarian adventuress of great beauty, with whom he had plotted the surrender of Cathur to her nation in return for the Tamarizian throne with Kalamita by his side.

Jadgor of Aphur, scenting the danger, had sought to bind the northern prince to Tamarizian fealty through a marriage with Naia, his sister's child. To win Naia and overthrow Zollaria's scheme had been Jason's task. The introduction of both the motor and firearms enabled him to overthrow the flower of Zollaria's hosts on a couple of bloody fields. Victory gained and Zollaria forced to cede Mazhur after fifty years of occupation, Croft prevailed upon the nation to accept a democratic form of government, it being at the end of Emperor Tamhys's term. This was accomplished without too much difficulty.

As to the Tamarizians themselves, they were a white and well-formed race. Their women held equal place with men. They believed in the spirit and a future life. They had made no small progress in the sciences and arts. They worked metal, gold being as common as iron on Palos.

They tempered copper also and used it in innumerable ways. They wove fabrics of great beauty, one being a blend of vegetable fiber and spun gold. They cut and polished jewels. They had a system of judiciaries and courts and a medical and surgical knowledge of sorts.

They were a fairly moral and naturally modest people. Their clothing was worn for protection and ornamentation, rather than for any other purpose. It was donned and doffed as the occasion required, without

comment being aroused. In women it consisted, rich and poor, of a single garment falling to the knee or just below it, cinched about the body and caught over one shoulder by a jeweled or metal boss, leaving the other shoulder, arm, and upper chest exposed. To this was added sandals of leather, metal, or wood, held to the foot by a toe-and-instep band and laces running well up the calves.

Men of wealth, and soldiers generally, wore metal casings, jointed to the sandal to permit of motion and extending upward to the knees. Men of caste wore also a soft shirt or chemise beneath a metal cuirass or embroidered tunic. Save on formal occasions the serving classes wore a narrow cinch about the loins.

Agriculture was highly developed, and they had advanced far in architecture, painting and sculpture. They lavished much time and expense in beautifying their homes. They had well-constructed caravan roads. As Croft had pointed out, he found them an intelligent race waiting, ready to be trained to a wider craft.

And among them, in Naia of Aphur, he believed he had found his twin soul. He had won her according to his belief and returned to Earth, for the last time, ere he should return and make her his bride. He had told me about it, and he had cast off his Earthly body, severing the last tie that held him from his life in Palos. He had died.

He had gone back and found his plans disarranged through the actions of Zud, the High Priest of Zitru, the capital of Hiranur, where he had left Naia waiting his return in the Temple of Ga, the Eternal Mother--the Eternal Woman, in the Zitran pyramid. Zud, moved by Croft's works and by a story told him by Abbu, a priest who knew Jason's story, had proclaimed him Mouthpiece of Zitu, thereby raising an insurmountable barrier, as it seemed, between him and Naia, since celibacy was one of the tenets of the Tamarizian priests. And yet Croft had won to her, overcoming all obstacles, even winning

a second war, with all Mazzeria egged on, her armies officered by Zollarians in disguise this time, ere he gained the goal of his desire.

These things had been told me inside the last few weeks by No. 27--the man who had been committed to the institution for a dissociation of personality, at which he quietly laughed after he had obtained my ear; because he wished to gain contact with me, who knew his former story, and win my aid toward the fulfillment of his mission.

Only he wasn't dead, and I knew it as I lay there with the names of men and women of the Palosian world buzzing in my head. He had gone back to them, now that his work was ended--to Naia, his golden-haired, purple-eyed mate--to Lakkon, her father; to Jadgor, her uncle, and Robur his son, governor now of Aphur in the palace where his father, president of the Tamarizian republic, had been king; to Robur, who, like a second Jonathan, had ever been Croft's loyal assistant and friend, and Gaya his sweet and matronly wife; to Magur, High Priest of Himyra, the ruling red city of Aphur, by whom Croft and Naia were betrothed to Zud himself, to whom he had taught the truth of astral control. And I found myself portraying them as Croft had described them, predicating their thoughts and feelings, as I might have done those of any man or woman I knew on Earth.

Actually I was projecting my intellect, if not my consciousness, to Palos. The thought came to me. In spirit, if not in perception, I was there for the moment with my friend. Croft, if I was any judge, had gone back to Naia--and there was I lying, picturing the scene, where she waited for his coming in their home high in the western mountains of Aphur, given to them by Lakkon, a wedding gift, after the war with Mazzeria was won.

His body would be lying there, covered with soft fabrics, waiting for its tenant on a couch of wine-red wood such as the Tamarizians used--

or perhaps of molded copper. And Naia--the woman who had given him her life, would be watching, watching for the first stir of his returning.

Only--I smiled--Croft had told me he could gain Palos as quickly in the consciousness as I could project myself there in my mind--so, by now, that stirring of her strong man's limbs, beneath the eyes of the fair watcher, had occurred, and once more those two were together.

I smiled again.

I slept after a time, as one will, drifting from continued thought upon one subject into slumber. And I woke with the thought of Croft's weird homecoming still in mind. It stayed with me more or less, too, in the succeeding days.

Naia of Aphur! I knew her home. I could imagine her moving about it, young, vibrant, happy, alone or with Croft by her side. I could fancy her bathing in the sun-warmed waters of the private bath in the garden--the gleam of her form against the clear yellow stone of which it was constructed--until she seemed the little silver fish Croft had called her, disporting in a bowl of gold, behind the white, screening, vine-clad walls. Or I could dream of her walking about the grounds, with the giant Canor--the huge, doglike creature who was at once her pet, her companion, and guard. Then, one night something over a month after No. 27 had died and been laid away, I dreamed. I went to bed that night and fell asleep. How long I slept I do not know. But a voice disturbed by slumbers after a time.

"Murray--Murray." I heard it, dimly at first, but insistent. It kept repeating itself over and over. "Murray--in the name of Zitu--and Azil--"

I stiffened my attention. Zitu was God in the Tamarizian language, as I

knew, and Azil was the Angel of Life--as Ga was the Virgin Mother. Ga and Azil--the mother and the life-bringer--they were the ones to whom the Tamarizian women most frequently prayed.

"Murray--I need your advice--your counsel. Naia needs you. It's life and death, Murray. You told me you would gladly render her assistance as a physician. Murray--will you come?"

My spirit staggered. It was most amazing, for now I knew that the speaker was Jason Croft.

"Murray!"

I think the lips of my sleeping material being must have moved at last. Be that as it may, I know I answered, "Yes."

"Then--fix your mind on our home in the western mountains, visualize it, Murray, as I have described it to you. Will your conscious presence within it. I shall be waiting for you. Call up the scene and demand that our will be granted. Think of nothing else."

Save for the directions for reaching to him, the thing was as real as a telephone message, and the assurance that the husband of your patient would be waiting your arrival at his house. Consciously, then, I sought to follow Croft's directions.

I fastened my thought on his Aphurian home. I strove to exclude everything else from my mind. I brought up the picture of it as a thing at the end of a distant vista, down which I must pass to attain it, and--all at once that picture moved!

I say it moved, because that is how it at first appeared. For an instant my comprehension faltered, and then I knew. I knew I had gained my purpose--that I was astrally out of my body, even though I had not

known the instant when I had left it; that I was speeding with incredible rapidity toward the scene into which I had wished to be projected; that darkness was all about me, like an impenetrable wall; that I was like one in an infinite, an interminable tunnel, with the lighted picture I had conjured up at the end.

Then that too faded, dissolved, lost its comprehensive quality, and gave place to more finite detail, and--I was in a room. But it was not strange. I knew it--recognized it instantly, thanks to Croft's previous words.

Its walls were hung with purple hangings shot through with threads of gold. There was a shallow pool of water in its center edged round with white and golden tiles. Beside it on a pedestal of wine-red wood there stood a figure--the form of a man straining upward as if for flight, with outstretched arms and uplifted wings, translucent--formed of a substance not unlike alabaster--the shape of Azil.

That too I recognized in a flash, and I seemed to catch my breath. At last I was on Palos! This was Azil, the Angel of Life, before me--poised by the mirror pool in the chamber of Naia of Aphur--ablaze now with the light of many incandescent bulbs in copper sconces against the walls. All this I saw, and became conscious that, as well as light, the chamber was now full of life.

Naia of Aphur! She lay before me on a copper-moulded couch--and I turned my eyes upon her, her body beneath coverings of silklike fabric.

A woman, of whom two were in attendance, wearing the blue garment embroidered with a scarlet heart above the left breast--the badge of the nursing craft, as Jason had told me--spoke to Naia in soothing accents the words of which I could not understand.

"Murray!"

Whirling, I beheld Jason Croft. Rather, I seemed to see two Jason Crofts, instead of one. One sat in a chair of the same wine-red wood of which the pedestal supporting Azil was formed, in the posture of a man in more than mortal slumber. One floated toward me, ghostlike--a shimmering, shifting, vaporlike semblance of the other as to physical shape.

And it was this second Croft that seemed to speak. It came over me instantly that Jason had purposely assumed the astral condition to welcome me on my arrival here.

I had been too much occupied with my surroundings until then to give thought to my own possible appearance. But as I put out a hand in answer to his single word of greeting, I found it no more than a thin, diaphanous cloud. I was even as he was--a nebulous something. The features of his astral presence were actually haggard, marked by a suffering plainly mental, yet akin in its way to the lines that contorted Naia of Aphur's face in her present mortal woe.

"Croft, in God's name what is the trouble?" I asked as once more a low sound of smothered anguish came from the couch behind me. He gave me at once an exact and scientific understanding of her condition. "Can she see me? Does she know I am here? Can I speak with her?" I asked.

"She will sense your presence at least," Croft said. "I will revivify my body and draw the chair in which it is sitting close beside the couch. You will sit there, Murray, and I shall tell her you are present, watching, nerving me to my task, before I set to work. She knows I called you, Murray, and now you must help us both. Your brain must use my hands to save her. Come--what do you advise me to do, Murray?"

I told him as soon as he had brought his almost panting response to an end. His exposition of the problem we faced had made it dreadfully plain.

He heard me out and then nodded with set lips. The form beside me vanished. The body in the chair flung up its head and rose. It pushed the chair it had occupied quite to the side of the copper couch, and bent to speak to the woman who lay upon it.

I followed. I sank into the seat provided. Croft straightened. Naia turned her head directly toward me. I looked for the first time into her violet-purple eyes.

Her lips moved. Distinctly I heard her speak. "Dr. Murray--good friend of my beloved, who tells me of your presence in response to his appeal for your assistance to us--I bid you welcome to our home. Thrice welcome are you, upon whose coming depends, as he tells me also, our future happiness together, as well as the life of our child."

She addressed me most surprisingly in English, until I bethought me that Croft had doubtless taught her the tongue, exactly as he had taught her so much else; to fly the first airplane in Palos, the control of the astral body itself.

"I am more than happy to be here, Princess Naia, and to bid you be of good cheer, remembering that even now Azil stands close by the gateway of life, in charge of a newborn soul."

"Azil," she whispered. "But--that new soul is so long in passing, my friend."

I turned to Croft.

"Come," I hurled my thought force toward him. "Let us spare her more bodily anguish than must be endured. Let us make an end."

Of what followed I shall say no word. Suffice it to state that Jason Croft labored, grim of lips and pallid of feature. And then suddenly the man turned to me a face transfigured past anything I had ever pictured.

"Murray--we win--win, man--thanks to you and--God!"

I turned back. Croft spoke to one of the attendants. She crossed to a curtained doorway and lifted the purple drapings. There stole into the room a girl of Mazzeria--a graceful creature, for all the odd blue color of her skin. Twin braids of ruddy hair fell from her head to her waist. Her figure held all the untrammelled litheness of a panther as she advanced. Across her outstretched arms she bore a pure white cloth.

Upon it, the child of Jason Croft and Naia of Aphur was placed.

She wrapped the fabric about it, cradling it against her breast. She turned to Naia, smiling, sinking down beside her on her supple rounded thighs.

Croft addressed me.

"Maia," he said softly. "I've described her to you before if you remember, Murray. She asked that you might be permitted to attend the--the little one."

His voice broke. His face was weary, overstrained, worn. I understood. The graceful girl was Naia's personal attendant--the Mazzerian woman, who had aided her mistress in saving Croft's life at a time when he was taken captive during the Mazzerian war. I nodded my comprehension. He bent again as though by irresistible

attraction above the couch where the blue girl still was kneeling, and Naia seemed waiting his undivided attention.

Through the half-drawn curtains of a window, light stole into the room. It shamed the incandescents in the sconces. A finger of golden glory touched the tips of the upflung wings of Azil. With a start, I realized that the night of anguish was ended--that new life had come into the house of Jason with--the dawn.

Chapter II

I went toward the curtains and stood looking out between them, removing so far as I could even my invisible presence from the tableau behind me.

The attendants were moving about. I heard the soft pad of their gnuppa-hide sandaled feet, the softened tones of their voices.

"Murray." Jason was speaking to me. I sensed his touch on my arm. Again he was in astral form. "Come, while the women perform their task."

My glance shot beyond him to where his physical body was seemingly lost in a lethargy of exhaustion, once more in the red-wood chair. I turned from it and followed Croft through the curtained doorway of the chamber, onto the balcony, along which one approached the room.

He had described it minutely to me, but even so I marveled at it as we stood together, sensing its proportions, its brilliant yet not offensive blendings of yellow and white and red. And then I think I must have started very much as Croft himself had done the first time he beheld such a sight, as I became conscious of a man, blue as the blue girl of Mazzeria in the room behind me, wearing upon his shaven poll a single flaming tuft of red. He was a stalwart man, and he bore a skin equipped with a sprinkling-nozzle upon his back while he sprayed the beds of growing vegetation--accompanied in his occupation by a slow-stalking beast remarkably like a hound.

Croft noted the direction of my glance and manner. "Mitlos--our majordomo, and Hupor," he said and smiled. "Zitu man, when I told you about them, the last thing I dreamed was that some day you

should see them.'

"And now?"

"And now"--he laughed in a tone of exultation--"you see not only them, but me, husband of Tamarizia's most beautiful woman, and thanks to you--the father of her child."

"Nonsense. I did nothing--what can a ghost accomplish?"

He turned fully toward me. "I came here even as you are, Murray, and"--he waved a hand in a comprehensive gesture--"I have accomplished this, and other things beside--yet not so much that this morning--the most wonderful of all my span of existence, I have neither words nor deeds in which the assistance your presence within the last few hours gave me, may be repaid."

"Let us not speak of payment," I said. "As it happens, Croft, my presence here was no more than the granting of an expressed wish. I've got to be getting back, Croft, or someone's likely to think that Dr. Murray is dead."

"I know you know how I feel, old fellow. Now fix your mind on your body--and try to open its eyes."

I was ready. I put out a hand and laid it on his shoulder. He did the same. We looked into one another's faces.

"Some time--you'll come again," Croft told me. "And--now that we've established the astral power, I'll come to you, Murray--and when I speak you will answer. Can you see where the thing may lead to?"

"Yes," I said. "It's big, Croft--big. But if I don't get out of here now it may lead a very important part of me to the grave. Make my adieus to

Naia. Now--do what you can to help me, for I'm going to try a pretty broad jump, as such things are considered."

I closed my eyes.

A sound like splintering wood assailed my ears. A blended sound of voices beat upon them. "Murray--Murray--doctor!"

There was no doubt about it. A very human voice was calling to me--a hand laid hold upon my shoulder--only it wasn't the hand Jason Croft had laid upon it in farewell. The thing bit into the flesh. It seemed trying to shake me.

With an effort I lifted my lids and stared up into the face of a hospital orderly, strained and anxious. I was back on Earth. There wasn't any doubt about it. I was on Earth, in my room in the mental hospital and in bed.

"Yes," I said; "yes."

The man's breath actually hissed as he let it out. He stammered. "You'll excuse us, doctor, but you didn't show up and you didn't answer when we rapped--and--well--we broke in the door at last. It seemed best."

His use of the pronoun arrested my attention. I made another effort and sat up. The orderly had fallen back from my bedside as he spoke, and beyond him I saw a nurse--a woman--not blue-robed like those I had seen in Naia or Aphur's apartments, but crisply gowned in white--and back of her the door of my own chamber, sagging open with a broken lock.

"It's all right, Hansen," I made answer. "I must have been pretty sound asleep. What time is it?"

"Ten-thirty," said the nurse, consulting a watch on her wrist. "You're sure you feel all right, doctor?"

"Perfectly," I nodded. "If you'll withdraw, I'll get up."

She left the room and Hansen followed. I rose and began to dress. Outside a brilliant sunlight was visible through my windows. It showed me familiar objects. The Palosian landscape had faded. It had been after ten when Jason had come to me, to, as it were, speed a parting guest, and now it was half after ten, and I was back on Earth. Well, he had told me the gulf could be bridged by the spirit in a flash.

A month passed and a little more, approximately such a span of time as they called a Zitran on Palos, where the year was a trifle longer than ours, though divided in similar fashion into twelve periods. I had about settled back into acceptance of a completely corporeal routine, and then...

"Murray--Murray," a voice whispered to me in my slumber.

It roused me. I sat up.

"Murray--get out of that cloud, and let's talk."

Suddenly I was intensely awake, and I saw--the nebulous form of Jason, seated against the metal rail at the foot of my bed.

"That's better. How would you like to take another trip to Palos?"

He smiled as he said it, and I answered in similar fashion. "If I can make the round trip a little quicker I wouldn't mind it. What's wrong up there now?"

"Nothing's wrong up there. Everything's all right."

His expression quickened. "But what happened?"

I told him, and he nodded. "Well, this will be different as you'll get back before morning. Murray, both Naia and I want very much that you should be present in so far as you can, two nights from now, at the christening of our son.

"Of course," he said, "you'll see without being seen, but--after it's over--Naia wants to meet you astrally at least. Will you come?"

Naia wanted to meet me. After the thing was over and the others were gone, we three would meet as Croft and I were meeting now and establish a personal relation.

"Will I?" I exclaimed. "Well, rather."

I locked myself in my room and stretched myself out on my bed the second night.

I lay there and fixed my mind on the home of Lakkon in Himyra--the great red city of Aphur, where Croft had said the ceremony would occur. I pictured it even as I had pictured Jason's home in the mountains, its splendid court paved with the purest of rock-crystal--and--I was there.

Light, color. They were all around me. The flawless crystal of the floor caught the radiance from the lights above them in a million facets, broke it into a myriad flashing pinpoints of refraction until the whole, vast court seemed paved with a shimmering iridescent carpet. White was the balcony about it, and the pillars on which it was supported, and the gleaming bits of sculpture between. And the shrubs, the banks and hedges of vegetation, in the unpaved beds of the court were green, save that they were blooming, loaded down with colorful flowers everywhere.

Tables a-glitter with gold and glass stretched down the central portion of the sparkling pavement in the form of three sides of a rectangle, with a purple-draped dais at the closed end. Guests thronged the vast apartment, seated on chairs of wine-red wood or reclining on couches interspersed among the beds of flowering vegetation. Nodding plumes of every hue and shade graced the heads of the women. Of every grade of richness were their jewel-embroidered robes.

Men and women, they were like birds of brilliant plumage, and as the lights struck down upon them, save for the gleam of the bared arms and shoulders of the women, the glint of their fair limbs through the intricate slashings of their leg casings and sandals of softest leathers, the rose tint of their knees, they blazed. A babble of voices--the rhythm of music from concealed harps, was in the room. I indulged in a single comprehensive glance and looked about for my hosts.

But I did not find them anywhere among their guests. A trumpet blared with a softened tongue. I became aware of a page in purple garments, standing with the instrument at his lips, on the topmost tread of one of the flight of yellow stairs.

The thrum of the hidden harps quickened. The assembled company rose. They stood and faced the stairway where, now, something in the nature of a ceremonial procession showed.

Naia and Croft came first, Naia in white from the tips of her slender sandals to the feathers that nodded from a fillet of shimmering diamondlike jewels in the masses of her golden hair. Croft led her downward. He was in all his formal harness, golden cuirass, on the breast of which glowed the cross ansata and the wings of Azil in azure stones--golden greaves and sandals gem-incrusted, golden

helmet supporting azure plumes.

And after them came Maia, the blue girl of Mazzeria, bearing on a purple cushion, the child.

Lakkon followed, walking side by side with a man, stalwart, grizzled, strong-faced, clad in a cuirass of silver, rarest of all Tamarizian metals, wearing the circle and cross of Zitra, the capital city of the nation, done in more of the diamondlike stones upon his armor.

Jadgor, I thought.

Behind them, azure-clad--the cross ansata on his breast, a flame of vivid scarlet gems--stalked a man, white-haired and most benign of appearance in company with a second, more stalwart, also in azure robes. They carried staves tipped with the looped cross and were followed by a boy supporting a tray of silver, on which were two silver flasks and a tiny, blazing lamp.

A man with a cuirass, on which showed a rayed sun, and wearing plumes of scarlet, and a woman, scarlet-robed, with the same ruddy feathers above her soft brown hair brought up the rear.

Zud and Magur, and a temple boy, Robur and Gaya, his wife--high priest of Zitra and his deputy of Himyra, governor of Aphur and his consort, I named them to myself.

While the company kept silent and the harps filled all the air with a sort of triumphant paeon, the little procession advanced. It reached the foot of the stairs and crossed to the dais, mounted its steps. It formed itself in a shimmering semicircle, Croft and Naia--and Maia kneeling before them in the center--the others on either side, and before them the boy of the temple and the two priests.

Him I named Zud, because of his bearing and his mane of snowy hair, raised his stave. The music died. Silence came down for a moment, and then the voice of Magur rose:

"Hail Zitu, giver of life, and Ga, through whom life is given, and Azil, bringer of life, we are met together that a name may be given unto this new soul, thou hast seen fit to assign to the flesh.

"Greetings to you, Naia, daughter of Ga, and to you, Jason, Hupor, named Mouthpiece of Zitu among men through whose union Zitu and Ga have expressed their will that life shall remain eternal, renewing its fire from generation unto generation, in the name of love. Is it your will that a name be given this, thy child?"

"Aye, priest of Zitu." Naia and Jason inclined their heads.

"And how call you it between yourselves?"

"Jason, Son of Jason," came Croft's voice.

"Then present him unto Zud, high priest of Zitu, that he may receive Zitu's blessing at his hands," Magur said.

The girl of Mazzeria raised the cushion on her arms with the child upon it. The temple boy advanced his silver tray, and knelt. Zud uncorked the silver flasks.

"Jason, Son of Jason, in the name of Zitu, the father, and Ga, the mother, and Azil, the son, I baptize thee with wine and with water and light," he began. Moistening his fingers from one of the two flasks, he went on, "With wine I baptize thee, which like the blood, invigorates the body, and strengthens the heart and makes quick the brain." Bending, he touched the child on the forehead, poured water from the other flask into his palm and continued, "I baptize you with water

which nourisheth all life, purifies all with which it comes in contact, makes all things clean."

He paused and sprinkled the glowing little body before him, took up the light and a tiny bit of silver I had not noted before and threw into the little face a golden reflected beam. "With light I baptize thee Jason, Son of Jason, since by the will of Zitu it is the light of the spirit which fills the chambers of the brain. May that light be with thee ever and forever, nor be absent from thee again."

Of course I didn't understand it. It was only afterward when Croft had translated it to me that its inward meaning was plain. And then he took the cushion from the kneeling girl of Mazzeria, lifted it, turning to face the brilliant assemblage.

"Jason, Son of Jason," he cried, holding the infant toward them.

"Hail, Jason, Son of Jason," the guests responded like a well-drilled chorus, and the thing was done.

Followed a feast, similar I fancied in every detail to those Croft had told me he had witnessed at first and been privileged to attend.

The guests departed, last of them, according to Tamarizian custom, Jadgor, president of the Republic, the guest of honor, and with him Gaya and her husband Robur, governor of Aphur and Jadgor's son. Naia took the child into her arms from the hands of its Mazzerian attendant. She and Jason moved toward the stairs. I knew that the hour I had waited for had come.

I followed up the stairway and along the balcony and to a room--hung here in golden tissues, furnished with wine-red woods and twin couches of molded copper--with the mirror pool in its center and once more the figure of Azil close beside it as in Jason's home.

Naia placed the child on a tiny couch and covered its sleeping form with a bit of silken fabric. She turned to Jason, her blue eyes shining. He drew her into his arms and held her, smiling.

"There is yet one guest, beloved," he said in English.

"Aye," she responded softly; "but—one who understands the heart both of the wife, and the mother of Jason's son."

"And awaits a welcome from her," said Jason. "Come, beloved." He led her to one of the copper couches and sat down with an arm about her white-sheathed form.

From it there crept a lovely thing—an exact replica of it. And that shape stretched out its slender hands. It swayed toward me, with Croft's astral presence close behind it.

"At last," said Naia of Aphur, "I may welcome you, Dr. Murray, as mine and Jason's friend."

"At last, I may converse with Naia of Aphur, and thrill with the glory of her—a thing I have long desired," I replied, and took her shadowy hand and raised it to my none less shadowy lips.

She smiled, and glanced at Jason. "Beloved, are all the men of Earth so courtly? It was even so if you remember that you met me first in the flesh."

Croft chuckled. "Life is much the same on Earth or Palos," he made answer. "Well, Murray, what do you think of Palosian life?"

"Babylonian," I said. "You were right in the simile beyond question. I was thinking tonight when I watched it that it was almost a pity in one way you should be changing it all with your innovations."

"In a way I've thought as much myself. I get your meaning. But I'm going to try and preserve it at least in part."

"Babylonian?" Naia asked.

Jason and I explained.

"Oh, but--things must change, must they not, Dr. Murray?--and the common people will be so much happier for the knowledge Jason brings to Palos. And even I--think where I and my child would be now save for the knowledge possessed by a man of Earth. It is to you and Jason that we owe our lives. Think you not that I carry your name to Ga and Azil in my prayers--that I have wished to meet you in order to express my thanks myself?"

Her words gave me a feeling of something like exaltation, even while in a way they embarrassed. "I too," I faltered, "am very glad of the meeting, to be able to assure you that it was my happiness to serve you, and to wish you and Jason the happiness of each other, and your son a long and useful life."

She glanced toward the tiny couch and back again, smiling. "Life," she said softly. "It is so wonderful to hold him--to realize that his life is but the blending of Jason's and mine. Sometimes I even think that I understand in a measure what Ga must feel as she guards the eternal fire."

Conversation became general for something like an hour, and then Jason prompted. "Beloved, shall we accompany Murray somewhat--show him Himyra in passing when he returns?"

"Aye, as you like," she assented. "And he must come to us again."

Croft nodded. "Yes, Murray is going to have his hand in Tamarizian

affairs from now on, and the boy there will know more than any man ever born on Palos in the end. Well, Murray, want to see Himyra?"

"I've always wanted to see it since you told me about it first."

"Then come along." He led the way with Naia through one of the open windows of the chamber.

The city lay beneath us. I saw the double row of lights that fringed the flood of the Na, the mighty pyramid of Zitu, upreared against the skyline, black now instead of red, save where the lights threw ruddy splashes upon it, banded with white at the apex with the pure white Temple of Zitu upon its truncated top--the long line of the houses of the nobles of the old regime, fronting a wide street at the top of the river embankment in an amazing vista, set down each in its private grounds among night-darkened shrubs and trees, the wide-flung palace of the governor of Aphur, once the palace of Jadgor, Aphur's king. The thing swam a shimmering vision before me under the light of the Palosian moons. I strained my eyes and saw the mighty sweep of Himyra's shadowy walls.

It moved me oddly. Already I knew so much of the city's history as involved in Croft's romance. I turned my eyes.

"Himyra," I said. "I shall not forget it--nor Naia of Aphur, nor Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, nor Jason, Jason's son. Zitu guard you, my friends. I must be going."

"Zitu guard thee," Naia answered.

And suddenly I was back in my own room, remembering her parting smile.

These things have I narrated in order to show how there was built up

between Croft and Naia of Aphur, his mate, and myself, a subtly intimate relation that must, as I hope, make what followed plain.

Life went on pretty much with me after that for some further eight months, however, before the events I intend to relate occurred. Now and then during the interval Jason Croft came to me in the astral presence, and on several occasions I succeeded by my own endeavors in visiting him and Naia in their home.

Between them they taught me somewhat of the Tamarizian tongue, Croft explaining that as all life was the same in reality, and the thought back of the word similar in intent even though the word itself might vary in sound, all languages were really one in thought and purpose. With that as a key, I soon discovered that the spoken words of those about me were not difficult for one in the astral condition to understand--that the vibrations of their thought affected the astral shell in a manner that made their meaning plain.

So at least in those months I acquired a fair understanding of their speech, and I came more and more to regard their home in the western mountains of Aphur, across the desert from Himyra, on Palos, with the same intimacy of feeling I might have experienced for the home of two friends on Earth. My conversations with Jason came more and more to resemble consultations on modern affairs. He asked me constantly concerning this and that fresh progress in mundane matters. He discussed with me his plans for improving material and social conditions on Palos.

And then--one night he called me to him as he had called me the night of Jason's birth--and I found him in the selfsame chamber, with the purple draperies half torn down and trampled--the fair form of Azil drowned in the mirror pool, beside which the dead body of Mitlos the Mazzerian majordomo lay sprawled.

Chapter III

Violence, conflict. The marks of the thing were on every side. I gazed into Jason's face, even in its astral semblance haggard. "Croft, what in Zitu's name has happened?"

He jerked out an arm in an all-embracing gesture. "Gone, Murray," he told me with a vibration of agony in his answer; "both of them--both Naia and the--child."

"Gone? Gone--where?"

"Into the western mountains, toward the outer ocean. She came to me tonight in the Zitran pyramid--astrally, of course. You know I told you I was going to Zitra to see Jadgor in a matter concerning the government railroad control..."

I nodded.

"She found me there tonight. She had been afraid to leave the body before, lest something happen to little Jason. It was last night this thing occurred--and my body's still in Zitra." I sensed the tenseness of his emotion. "I'm so utterly impotent to help her, and wrest her from them."

"From whom?"

He appeared to grip himself as he answered. "Forgive me, Murray. The Zollarians, of course. It was an armed band of those Sons of Zitemku that attacked here in my absence."

"Zollarians?" I said. "She told you?"

"Yes." He nodded. "They--they must have been planning it, Murray--they must have been using spies."

"Unless," I rejoined, "it was merely a wandering band of marauders."

"Wandering band? Murray, talk sense. They knew enough to seize Naia of Aphur--the fairest woman of her nation, of its best blood--the wife of the Mouthpiece of Zitu, who has twice defeated their schemes and their armies--and her child."

I nodded. "Then what do you intend?"

"I intend to follow her--learn what is behind this damnable action first."

"Astrally?"

"Of course. It's the only way I can follow with the cursed hulk of me in Zud's pile of rock in Zitru. And I want you to go with me tonight. Before Naia left me she said they stopped for an hour's rest, but that before daylight faded they had seen the outer ocean from a hill, and a ship. I think that ship is waiting for her, Murray."

"Then let's get on it," I suggested.

In a flash we were outside. And as on that night after the christening of Jason, Son of Jason, when Croft and Naia showed me Himyra, we floated upward. Only now there were no lights to fasten the attention, no mighty piles of architecture, no wide embracing walls. There were just the tumbled masses of the mountains, their sides cut and gashed by night-filled ravines and tortuous canyons, and the silvery radiance of the Palosian moons, and the stars.

"Look, Murray--they've reached the shore-line, and--they're building a flare."

I turned my gaze into the west, where low down on what might or might not be the horizon, but was certainly not the heavens, there winked a point of light, too ruddy, too unsteady, to be a star.

We swept toward it. For the first time I saw the Zollarian manhood in the light of the leaping fire they had built upon a beach. Tawny-haired they were, for the most part, stalwart, with muscular arms and heavy limbs, as they stood straining their vision across the water toward the moonlighted shape of a galley.

So much I saw--then Croft led me to where Naia and the blue girl of Mazzeria were seated, a little way apart.

Maia was speaking softly as we reached them. "My mistress, you are quite assured then that the Hupor Jason understands?"

"Aye." Naia bent her cheek to rest it against the head of the infant. "Be of good courage, Maia, and fear not."

"I fear not for myself, but for you and that one against your breast," the blue girl answered. "Had it been my part to do so, I had done as Mitlos and died in your defense."

"I know." Naia stretched out a hand and touched the girl upon the shoulder.

"I came gladly," the blue girl said quickly, "yet do I not understand these sleeps in which you lie as dead, and I remember once when Mitlos and I worked above you thinking Zilla had taken your spirit, before you were the Hupor Jason's bride--and it was even so with the Hupor himself in the camp of the Mazzerian army, when we went to save him..."

"Peace, girl," Naia interrupted, and paused and caught her breath

sharply, as Jason bent the force of his presence on her.

She smiled, handed the child to Maia, and reclined her body on the warm sand of the beach. Then she let the fair astral tenant of her body steal forth!

"Beloved," said Jason Croft, and drew her close. "Beloved, we have heard your words, I and our friend of Earth."

Naia turned her head toward me from the shelter of his arms. "Once more, you come to our aid, good friend. Did Jason, my lord, call you to him?"

"Aye, Princess of Aphur."

She spoke again to Jason. "You have followed me, beloved; what else lies in your mind?"

"Naught for the present," Croft told her. "It is plain that they intend taking you upon yonder ship, and we shall follow you aboard it."

"I shall not fear," said Naia of Aphur. "Have I not given myself wholly into your keeping?"

"By Bel—they are awake out there at last." The sound of a rough voice drifted to my ears.

Croft turned his head at the same instant, toward the group of Zollarian raiders and the ship beyond them, between which and the beach a boat now appeared.

"Aye," growled another speaker. "And time enough. Look to the women and the slave."

"The time is at hand, beloved." I heard Jason speaking. "Return, soul

of my soul, to your beautiful mansion--and think not I shall not be near."

For a moment he clasped her closer and sank his lips to hers uplifted, and then--she was gone and her body stirred, sat up as two of the Zollarians approached and ordered her to rise.

"What did he mean by 'the slave'?" I questioned Jason.

"Wait," he said as another group of Naia's captors led a blue man into the light of the fire. "Bathos--one of my house servants," he went on. "Now, for what purpose in Zitu's name have they brought him along?"

I could offer no suggestion, and I didn't try. The boat had reached the beach by the time the women and the blue man had been brought to the edge of the water, and now they were thrust in. Part of the Zollarians crowded aboard, and the boat shoved off, leaving the rest of the band to await its return.

Croft and I followed, as propelled by the straining muscles of well-nigh naked rowers, it moved across the waves. With a sense of the bizarreness, the weirdness, of it all, I found myself perching upon a gunwale, while Croft actually took his place at Naia's side.

It was an odd sensation to realize myself a part of that strange archaic scene, wherein a beautiful woman had been abducted, and her captors, bronzed men dressed more in fashion of the soldiery of forgotten empires than anything else, drove their boat across a moonlight-silvered tide. I found myself wondering how they would have acted could they have seen us seated there among them. But they did not, and the steady sweep of the oars brought us presently close the side of the galley, up which the Zollarians swarmed on down-flung ladders to reach the deck.

Naia and Maia followed, climbing a ladder with surprising ease. Last of all to leave the boat, before it returned to the beach, came Bathos, whom, being blue, the Zollarians had termed a slave, as were all of his race born of captive parents, in the nation to the north.

I glanced about me, recognizing the craft as similar in the main details at least to those Jason had found in common use on the Tamarizian rivers and the Central Sea when he had reached Palos first. There was a high deck forward, a lower deck in the waist, where the oarsmen sat on benches, close to a series of ports in the skin of the vessel, through which were thrust the butts of the heavy oars. Aft again was a second higher deck, covered by an awning beneath which were placed padded divans and several quaintly shaped and ornamented chairs. Indeed, the vessel was nothing less than regal, as I perceived. Green was the awning and the sail on the gilded mast running up between the banks of rowers' benches.

Gilded too were the railings of the twin stairs that led up to the after-deck on either side, from the lower level of the waist. And the sheathing of the decks seemed to be made of closely fitted strips of the wine-red wood, customarily used for the fashioning of couches and divans and chairs.

Plainly, then, we had come aboard the craft of someone of more than ordinary station, I thought, and gave my attention to a man standing on guard beside a door in the facing of the space between the level of the after-deck and the waist.

Huge he was and florid, muscled like an ox, his mighty thorax banded with metal, fitting him so closely that the bellies of the shoulder muscles bulged above their upper edge. Head, shoulders, and arms were naked, as were his legs save for a short cloth skirt below his armor, falling halfway down his thighs, and the metal casings on his

heavy calves. He leaned on the haft of a spear and watched, straightening to attention only when the captain in charge of the raiding party advanced with his captives toward him. But only for a moment. Then as the captain paused, without speaking, he shifted his spear, put out a hand, and opened the door.

It gave into a passage, with curtained doorways on either hand and a lighted apartment at the farther end, toward which Naia, her maid, and Bathos, with the Zollarians who led them, passed.

They reached it, and then, in so far as sensation went at least, I gasped. The room was ablaze with lights that struck back on every hand from woodwork carved and tooled in most magnificent fashion, hung with woven fabrics of green shot through with threads of gold. But if the apartment was amazing in its appearance, its occupant was in no way overcast.

Tawny she was as a lioness, of hair and eyes, as she lay there on that splendid couch, draped with the mottled hide of some tawny beast; lithe as a tigress she appeared in all her supple, wonderfully rounded length, save for a jeweled girdle supporting a drapery of almost transparent tissue. And as she lifted her fine torso, raising herself to a sitting position before the captain, who sank with uplifted hand to a knee before her, one sensed there were tiny bells on the jeweled bands about her tapering ankles that tinkled as she moved.

Suspicion, swift as a lance-thrust, came upon me as I saw her, even before the captain spoke. "Hail to thee, Kalamita, Priestess of Adita, goddess of beauty; thy servant returns from that mission on which it was thy pleasure to send him, bringing with him those thou named."

Kalamita! Kalamita, the Zollarian, magnet of the flesh, by whose shameless charms and yet more shameless favors Kyphallos, Prince of Cathur, had been seduced.

Kalamita smiled. "'Tis well, Ptoth. Arise. You have proven faithful, and you shall have your reward. Found you any obstacle worth naming on your mission?"

"Nay, Sister of Bandhor," said Ptoth rising. "None but the house slaves lay there to oppose us--one we brought with us, since so it was ordered--the rest were slain."

I glanced at Croft, and he nodded.

"'Tis well," said Kalamita again. "Found you any trace of this Mouthpiece of Zitu?"

"Nay," the captain answered, smiling, "but we left him ample trace of us."

Kalamita's whole expression darkened. Her amber eyes flashed. "Aye--and may Adita forsake my beauty and blast it if I give him not another. Let this woman wait, and bring me his slave."

Ptoth turned to Bathos, seized him by an arm, and flung him at the feet of the woman on the couch.

Kalamita put out a pink-nailed foot and touched him. "Come, get up, how are you called?"

"Bathos," the servant faltered.

"Listen, then, Bathos," Kalamita continued. "Canst find the way over which my captain led you, and return?"

"Aye, if I be granted the chance."

"It will be granted, provided you will bear a message."

"Aye, I will bear it."

"Then give ear. It is for your lord. Return to his dwelling and from there to Himyra; seek out one in authority, and bid him send word to the Hupor Jason that the woman he has taken to wife and her child are in Kalamita's hands. Say further that they shall be taken to a place I know of and held until I have received word from him, and that I shall wait his coming in a hunting house, one of my possessions, in the mountains north of Cathur's border, half a sun's journey, where, when he comes to listen to my requirements, he will be led by men who will lie in watch. Repeat now my own words to me, Tamarizian canor, and make no mistake in the telling. I desire that this Hupor Jason fails not to understand."

Bathos complied. Kalamita nodded and turned to Ptoth. "He has his lesson. Take him and see him put ashore. That done, see that we turn north at once, and say to Gor that I deny my presence to any, as you pass him. Take also the blue girl with you. I would deal with the other alone. You may leave her the child."

Ptoth threw up an arm in flat-handed salute and bowed, motioned Bathos to precede him, and caught Maia by an arm. I glanced at Jason, and found his expression one of intense attention. He seemed to feel my gaze, however, and shook his head slightly, as though to say this was no time for anything more than observation.

I turned back to the two women, now confronting one another. Ptoth and his charges had vanished. They were alone. For a moment each seemed appraising the other; then Kalamita rose.

It was like Aphrodite rising, the tissue of the draperies dependent from the gem-incrusted girdle clasping her rounded body seeming no more than a white foam, a shimmering streaking of froth, more than

half revealing what it concealed. She went a lithe pace forward and paused.

"So, at last I see Tamarizia's most beautiful woman, and find her rather pale of feature, rather wide-eyed, possessed of a not unattractive figure, but scarcely so favored of Adita as I have been led to believe."

"Favored rather by Ga, *the true woman*, Kalamita," Naia returned, glancing down at the child in her arms. "You do well to call Adita, goddess of unclean love."

For the moment the Zollarian made no answer. Once more her yellow eyes flashed. Scarcely, I thought, had she looked for the cold taunt from Naia's lips, aimed at her own unsavory reputation.

"By Bel, you dare such speech to me! Think you I have it in mind to treat you as my prisoner or a guest?"

"As prisoner, I pray Zitu. Other treatment from Kalamita were disgrace."

"By Bel!" Kalamita mouthed again, her face distorted with passion, and flung herself back on her couch. "You have a bold tongue at least. How think you your Mouthpiece of Zitu will accept your being prisoner to Kalamita?"

"Jason, my lord, will answer that question to Zollaria and Kalamita in person."

"Bel grant it." All at once Kalamita laughed. "If so I shall have something to say to that self-exalted spirit--that panderer to priests, who scorned the open offer of my favor for yours."

Once more I glanced at Croft, and found his face contorted at the woman's reference to the time he was captive during the Mazzerian war. And, too, I found myself thinking that here was the old situation of a woman scorned.

Then Naia of Aphur was speaking. "Jason, my lord, like to the wild gnuppa of the mountains, prefers that the fountain at which his thirst is slaked be clean--and like it once it is captured, when led to a foul spring, he refused."

"Thou fool." Kalamita sprang up. "Think you not I shall make you repent these words--or that, save this Mouthpiece give heed to my demands and those of my nation, he shall return to your arms, or see your offspring again?"

"Nay," Naia said, as Kalamita came to a panting pause before her, "these things lie with the gods. Tell me, Zollarian, stand I prisoner to all your nation, or to Kalamita alone?"

I felt a quiver shake me. Naia of Aphur had herself in hand. She knew Croft and I were present, that we could see and hear and understand. And she asked a question, fully aware that our presence was something Kalamita could not know.

Nor did she. Something like gloating leaped into her tawny eyes as she turned again to her couch and sat down.

"So," she said, smiling coldly, "we begin to stand on common ground. You stand prisoner to all Zollaria, wife of Jason, you and Jason, Son of Jason. There be two forms of warfare, Aphur, that of wits as well as that of arms. Wherefore, in your capture and that of your child, I serve both the interests of my country and my own. It was so Bandhor, my brother, and I planned."

Naia nodded. Her tone became one of musing. "Bandhor and Kalamita, his sister, on whose beauty he mounted to his position as general of all Zollaria's armies, rather than by any ability of his own, and the court of Zollaria at Berla, have planned before."

"Aye," said Kalamita quickly, "we planned, and had won, save for the undreamed weapons this Mouthpiece of yours brought against us--weapons against which no army might stand. Yet before he reclaims Naia of Aphur and her suckling--the secrets of those weapons shall be known. The Zollarian and the Tamarizian armies shall stand on equal footing again. Your Mouthpiece and your nation shall go down through Naia of Aphur--and what then of Jason's son?"

Once more I caught my breath. Once more Naia of Aphur went pale. I saw the astral form beside me clench its shadowy hands, sensed something of Jason's emotion, and then Naia of Aphur made answer.

"Yet not so surely on equal terms, Zollaria, since he who made the weapons of which you desire the secret may have others still in mind. 'Tis a poor plan to purchase or barter with unlaidd eggs."

But Kalamita stretched her rosy arms and limbs with a tinkle of little bells, and remained upon the couch. A glint of something like amusement waked in her narrow eyes.

"Your position is worth considering, Aphur," she said slowly. "It may even be put in the agreement that he shall refrain from attempting what you suggest--or that, should he attempt it, the act be an excuse for war."

"In which, were the excuse used against her, Zollaria would perchance again be foiled?"

"And Naia of Aphur, and Jason, Son of Jason, be emptied of the

spirit."

"Nay--that is with Zitu," Naia made answer. "Ere this my lord has saved me from the embrace of Zilla. I trust him wholly." And all at once she smiled.

Kalamita frowned. "By Bel, at least you have spirit."

"Which will not break before you, Priestess of Adita." Naia began a slow rocking of the infant Jason in her arms.

The act seemed to drive Kalamita to fury. Once more she lifted herself to a half-sitting posture. "Go--hide yourself in one of the rooms yonder--get out of my sight."

Then, as Naia moved toward the mouth of the passage and the curtained doors of its rooms, she relaxed. A quiver shook her. "Now, Bel and Adita befriend me, and give me my will of this woman. Adita, judge between us and blast her beauty. Her son to thee, Bel, if Tamarizia refuses our demands as a sacrifice. I swear it."

"Come." I sensed Croft's emotion-clogged direction.

We made our way outside. The ship was in motion, the benches filled with straining rowers. Kalamita's galley was straining north, bearing Naia of Aphur and Jason, Son of Jason, helpless captives aboard her.

"Where now?" I asked.

"Zitra." Croft seized my arm in his grasp. Then the creeping galley, the moonlighted flood of the outer ocean, were behind us, the tumbled region of Aphur's hills were beneath us. They too fell away and gave place to the shimmer of the Central Sea. An island

appeared in its center--the walls of a mighty city. White they were as milk in the moonlight--white as the foam of the sea. And the city was white when we reached it, all white and purple shadows, with the mighty pyramid of Zitu lifting the pure white temple on its loft top above the walls.

"Zitra," said Croft again. "I've got to get back in the flesh."

And even as he spoke, I sensed that we were in a room somewhere within the pyramid itself. Bare was its floor of tessellated paving, bare were its walls save for here and there a light in a metal sconce. Bare, too, it seemed of furnishings, save for a chest of metal, a stool and a couch, on which the body of Jason found a place.

The astral Jason seated himself beside it, and fastened me with his eyes. "You heard, Murray. You see what they intend." And then his expression altered. "Saw you ever a more glorious woman than Naia, wife of Jason? Well, I've got to get to work. I've got to save her."

"Just how?"

"I don't know," he admitted rather slowly. "Beyond the first step, that is. I'll explain things to Jadgor and Lakkon, of course, and I'll have a wireless sent to Robur at Himyra. After that--well--you heard the instructions given Bathos. There's no denying Kalamita has won the first trick. I think I'll fall in so far with her proposal and meet her face to face."

"And thereby lose the second trick and the game altogether. Do you really think if you went up there to meet that tawny she devil, the Mouthpiece of Zitu--Tamarizia's big man--would be given chance to return?"

For a moment after I finished Croft said nothing, and then, "By Zitu--

Murray, you're right! I must have been blind! I'll--I'll have to send another than myself. We've got to keep a few cards in our hand. But--consider my position."

"I do," I said. "I understand it perfectly, old man. I don't expect a man to keep cool in a game where the stakes are his wife and son."

He shook his head. "It isn't that only, Murray. I dare not sacrifice Tamarizia, either--and I won't fail Naia. Think, man--think--there must be a way to serve both ends."

"Perhaps what Naia herself suggested," I made tentative answer.

Pride flashed momentarily in his eyes and died. "The invention of another--a superior weapon," he said. "Zitu--the thought fired me when she named it. Hah! She knew we were present--and she led the conversation to inform us in advance of what was proposed. It was like her, Murray, but--man, how can I risk it? You heard that fiend of Adita's oath after Naia left her--to Bel with Jason's son."

"I know," I said slowly.

"But do you know its meaning?"

"No," I admitted.

"Murray, they practise the hellish rites of ancient Phoenicia in the northern nation. The child would be burned."

Burned--Jason, Son of Jason--a living sacrifice! The rites of the Phoenicians! The thought staggered me, revolted, as it lifted to mind the picture of Moloch--the brazen god into whose insensate arms children and babes and maidens were cast--and I recalled that, as well as Moloch, that savage divinity had been known as Bel. Bel--

Moloch--flame. On impulse I named the thing to Croft.

"Zitu--God," he said, and then, "Man--it may be the answer, if there is nothing else. Now, I've got to let Zud and Jadgor and Lakkon know what has happened. And I've got to get a message off to Robur. He's Naia's cousin, as I've told you, and I love him like a brother. Will you go with me on my missions, or will you return to your body, as I must to mine?"

"If you don't mind," I decided, "I'd like to know all that happens, and I'll linger around until dawn."

He nodded. "I'll be glad to feel you with me, and as soon as I reach Himyra I'll manage to visit you again. Look into the thing you suggested, won't you?"

"Go on. Get about your business," I told him. "I'll have the information for you the next time we meet, if I can find a certain man."

The body beside which he had been sitting raised itself on the couch and swung its feet around. It rose. "You've got to find him, man," Jason's physical voice told me without making the least break in the conversation, as he began to dress. "You know, Murray, I can perceive you dimly even so, and I can get your thought waves, of course--just as Naia was able to do the same thing the night of Jason's birth--so if you have any more suggestions to offer in what occurs inside the next few hours, make them of course. I'm not exactly myself. My spirit is still hot within me, where presently I think now it is going to grow deadly cold."

He jerked the fastenings of his leg casings into position and clasped the belt of a short sword about him. "Now, I'm going before Zud first."

He turned to a door that slid back before his touch into a recess in

the massive wall. I followed him into a corridor, constructed top and floor and sides of huge blocks and slabs of stone, lighted at intervals by a lamp whose rays served to no more than partly dispel the night-shrouding gloom. Age--age--the age of the pyramids of Egypt. And then he paused before another door, lifted his sword, and rapped with its hilt for admittance.

"Who calls on Zud?" a voice came muffled through the door.

"Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, man of Zitu."

The door slid back. Zud stood before us, blinking aged eyes. "Mouthpiece of Zitu, what does this visit betide?"

"Work of Zitemku and his agents," Croft said hoarsely, stepping inside the high priest's apartments and pausing while Zud closed the door.

"Thou knowest of my sleeps, O man of Zitu--and what occurs at times when my body lies sleeping, and how my spirit gains knowledge beyond the power of most men in the gaining--for I have explained to thee, and shown thee somewhat, O Zud, so that by thyself something of the same power was attained," he went on, and gave Zud a brief account of what had happened.

"Zitu," stammered the high priest, advancing a step to lay a withered hand on Jason's shoulder--"may he befriend thee, and guard the woman I know thou lovest. In what way may I aid thee, Jason?"

"In no way, save that I desired your acquaintance with the knowledge. I go now to Jadgor, and Lakkon, her father," Croft replied. "Grant us thy prayers, Zud, and those of the Gayana, since once she lay among them waiting to be my bride." He turned to the door, crashing it back with a wholly unneeded force, and strode off, clanking down the

passage, leaving old Zud staring after out of troubled, aged eyes.

Chapter IV

At another door he stopped, wrenching it open and laying hands upon a cord that hung within it. He jerked upon it, released it, and stood waiting with hands clenched as though in impatience, until there rose slowly into sight a platform, upon which he stepped. The platform sank slowly, carrying him downward inside a rock-faced shaft, which ended in a dimly lighted chamber, where blue men strained about a capstan and windlass by means of which the primitive lift was controlled.

"Hai! The Mouthpiece of Zitu requires a motur and one to drive it," Croft addressed the man in charge.

The fellow saluted and turned away. I saw there were several moturs parked against one of the chamber walls. And too, I recalled that Croft had found a similar arrangement in the pyramid of Himyra when first he called on Magur, save that then the room had been used to house the carriages and gnuppas of the priests.

Croft strode toward one of the waiting cars, and a man appeared. As Jason climbed to a seat he took his place at the wheel and the engine roared. Blue men set open a heavy door and stood aside. Through it the car darted out of the base of the pyramid to reach the street beyond it.

"To the palace of Jadgor, and hasten!" Jason cried.

And thus it was that I saw Jadgor and Lakkon in the flesh, and found them as Croft had described them to me. Both were quick to resort to arms, both reluctant to use trickery; but as Jason spoke, and their indignation gave way to reason, they agreed that Croft's plan was best for both Tamarizia and Naia.

Jadgor wrote the order to the captain of a galley, which would place the craft under Jason's orders. Lakkon apologized for his first angry words when he accused Jason of weakness in not making war at once; Croft knew his father-in-law well, and accepted the apology gracefully.

Outside the room he made his way, outside the palace of Jadgor, once more to sit in the motur, and in it toward the city walls and the foot of a mounting flight of stairs.

A sentry stood with sword and spear before them. Croft addressed him. He saluted and permitted him to pass. Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, climbed up in the silvery moonlight, his shadow a purple blot beside him, to reach the top at last. And there strangely in all that archaic scene he paused before the door of the hut, above which towered the spidery outline of a wireless mast. For an instant he turned his eyes outward over the expanse of the Central Sea, and then he passed inside.

A man seated at a table, with a key of the wireless before him, started to his feet.

"A message to Robur, Governor of Aphur in Himyra, and quickly," Croft said.

The operator regained his seat and produced his headdress, clamping it against his ears. Croft gave the message. There came a hissing crash of the spark. Strange, I found myself thinking as I watched—an anachronism surely that this youth of Palos, clad in plain tunic and sandals and leg casings of leather, above which showed the sinewy flesh of his lower thighs and knees, should be sitting here on top of the ramparts of a walled city, hurling forth across the ocean beyond him the potential Hertzian waves. And yet it was no more

strange than that I should know it.

And then the thing was done. The crashing of the spark was silenced. Croft tossed a coin on the table and passed outside down the stairs. And when next the motor paused he gave the driver another coin and dismissed him. He stood before a galley, moored close to the semicircular quays of Zitra's inner harbor, stretching like a pool of liquid silver beyond him to the mighty sea doors that closed the entrance to it in the overarching walls.

But though I thrilled to the massive grandeur of the picture, Croft heeded it little. To him it was an old scene.

"Hai! Captain of the watch, aboard the galley!" he hailed sharply and stood waiting until a head appeared above the rail of the waist and a voice replied:

"Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, with the mandate of Jadgor from the palace of Jadgor. I would come toward you." Croft made answer.

The head disappeared. For possibly two minutes nothing happened, and then a gangway was shoved out to reach the quay.

Croft strode alone it, presented Jadgor's tablet to a suddenly wide awake captain, and was led to an apartment under the after-deck, richly furnished in red woods and hangings of scarlet, the personal color of Jadgor's house.

Life woke on board the galley. There was a tramping of feet, a sound of voices bawling orders, suddenly the sibilant hiss of water past the hull. The galley heeled slightly on the long arc of a circle, straightened back to an even keel. Through the windows let into the stern I became conscious of a graying of the eastern heavens, and then a shadow fell upon us. It came to me that the monster sea doors were opened

to permit our passing.

Croft sank down upon a couch of burnished copper and sighed. He turned his glance about the apartment. "Are you still here, Murray?" he questioned.

"Aye."

"Better be going," he said. "But give me the benefit of your thoughts in the next few days. If you've waited until now, you've had recent proof of how hard it is for the father to hold his personal interests of lesser importance than matters of state."

"Nonsense, man," I returned. "We'll beat them. Once you're in Himyra, you and Robur will get your heads together, and I'm going to work collecting all the information I can obtain on the device I suggested earlier tonight."

"Do so." He nodded and stretched himself out on the couch. "I'll use it if we can think of nothing else. You and Rob--Murray, I thank Zitu for you both. I know I have your sympathy and understanding, and--I'll find the same things once I am in Himyra. I'll see you inside the next few days, of course."

Chapter V



From now on this narrative must become, until the end, an account of Croft's efforts toward the rescue of Naia and Jason, rather than of things experienced by myself. For now I was become little more than his lieutenant on Earth—a collector of knowledge to whom, when he came in the astral presence to gain it, he told how that knowledge was to be employed.

In the body he went to Himyra first. But astrally he willed himself back that morning after I had left him, aboard Kalamita's gilded craft, where he told Naia what he had accomplished, mentioning at the end the possible means of rescue I had suggested.

"Zitu!" Naia faltered. "It were strange indeed, were it not, if the answer to this riddle be found by our friend of Earth?"

"Aye, strange," said Jason, "yet not more so than that, despite their knowledge, I stand here now before you."

"Yet he is wise," she replied, clinging closer to him, "in that he saw quickly the true meaning of the meeting between you and herself this Zollarian woman saw fit to propose."

Croft smiled in rueful fashion. "Jadgor, too, was against it. It would seem that all perceived the motive of it, save only Jason alone."

"Ah, but Jason, my beloved, was overwrought."

"Aye," he confessed; "and now it appears to him that it was on that Kalamita counted to lead him into a trap."

"And will count," said Naia, "not knowing the strange power you have taught me, by which we meet."

Croft nodded. "And through which their every move may be watched. To my mind, beloved--this meeting on which she is bent at present must be brought about."

"But not by Jason!"

"Nay," Croft reassured her, "not by Jason, but another, in a fashion, once I am in Himyra, Robur and I shall devise."

"Hold, then." Naia paused to consider before she went on quickly. "Perchance against a woman, a woman's wits may aid you. Told she not Bathos to say this meeting would be north of Cathur--and sought she not once ere this, when before you fought to make me thine, beloved, to work harm to Tamarizia through Cathur's prince, so that the succession was lost to Koryphu, his brother, and in the elections for governor, even though he sought to gain the station, he was ignored? Think you not that in Koryphu, Scythys' younger son, you may find one with hate in his heart for this woman and an agent to your hand?"

"Aye, by Zitu!"

And so to Scira, capital city of Cathur, he willed himself. Long familiarity with Scira made it easy for him to reach the residence, which, after the overthrow of his family, had become the home of Cathur's lesser prince. And there he found Koryphu, always unlike Kyphallos, his brother, more or less of a student, already busy with

the tablets and scrolls that as yet in Tamarizia took the place of books. Satisfied that his man would be easy to located when needed, he returned to the galley at once.

Thereafter followed a weird four days and nights, during the lighted portion of which Croft occupied himself as best he might, while the galley plowed across the Central Sea toward the mouth of the Na, up which lay Himyra. And when the daylight faded he stretched himself on the couch in his apartment and joined Naia in the spirit, going with her north to a Zollarian seaport, and from it in gnuppa-drawn conveyances wherein the passengers reclined on deeply padded cushions, toward Berla, discovering thereby that no matter what Kalamita may have said to Bathos regarding the place of Naia's holding, she was to be taken to the seat of the Zollarian government first.

Himyra. Croft stepped upon its quays, where lapped the yellow Na, with a feeling of relief. Himyra--home. It was so he regarded that red city more than any other place on Palos outside his own house.

"Jason!"

He whirled, to behold Robur coming toward him from a motur.

"Rob!" He turned in his direction.

They met, and Robur clasped him to his breast.

"My brother in all but birth," he said with emotion. "Would Zitu he had not sent this thing upon you. Gaya sends her greeting."

"Like thee, Rob," Croft said, his heart warmed by such a meeting. "In Himyra, and thy presence, I breathe easier than for days. Bathos, my servant, has arrived?"

"The sun before this," Robur returned as they got into his waiting motur. "Himyra, Aphur, and Robur stand ready to aid you in all things toward the rescue of our cousin. Jason need but say the word."

"Presently," said Croft, "when I sit in the presence of Gaya and Robur, my true friends."

Robur reached the top of the embankment and increased the motur's speed. In through the wide doors of the palace, with their doglike guardians of stone, and their weblike wings, to the red court where blue men sprinkled water upon the ruddy pavement, he drove. Past sentries armed with spears and short swords, who sprang to swift attention at sight of Aphur's governor, and the Mouthpiece of Zitu--the wonder worker of their nation, descending from one of his own creations--he led Croft into a private wing of the palace, and through it to the inner court, where Gaya waited on a couch beneath a striped awning, close to the sun-kissed waters of the bathing pool.

Croft's heart swelled as he once more entered the well-known lounging place. For a moment his eyes dimmed as he bent above Gaya's hand, in silent salutation.

"Jason, my friend," she said softly, "take thought that the ways of Zitu are past understanding, and that from this further ordeal now laid upon you may come a double peace."

"Hai!" exclaimed Robur quickly. "Give heed to her, Jason. At times she seems given prophetic vision. Perchance this double peace is for thee and Tamarizia also."

"Zitu grant it," said Croft, deeply affected by Gaya's greeting. "It is of that we must speak after I have made certain things plain."

Robur nodded. Gaya returned to the couch. The two men drew other

seats beside her, and Croft narrated his story. He rapidly outlined a plan for sending a Tamarizian party into the mountains north of Cathur, and at the last he mentioned Koryphu's name.

"Hai!" Robur's face lighted. "Now, by Zitu, Jason, you have found the proper man. True is he in his heart, as I believe, and a sufferer from his brother's treason. He should welcome this task."

"Naia brought the man to my mind," said Jason.

"Aye"--Gaya smiled--"the step savors of a woman. Kalamita will gain small satisfaction when she meets him face to face. It is a proper choice."

"He lies at Scira?" Robur questioned.

Croft nodded. "Aye--I have visited him in spirit inside the last five days--and found him busy with tablets and scrolls, more student than man of affairs."

"Then," Robur declared with quick decision, "we go to Scira and lay the matter before him without delay."

"Nay"--Croft shook his head--"first shall I be present in Berla in my own fashion when Naia arrives. Meanwhile, Robur, you and I arrange other details for the mission to this meeting, and prepare to reopen the shops."

For a moment Robur regarded him out of narrowed eyes, and then he nodded. "Has the Mouthpiece of Zitu some new device for the making, he will find me ready to work with him upon it as in the past."

"Nay, I know not, nor will till after this meeting with the Zollarian woman. And after that it may be I shall revisit Earth."

"Earth!" Robur exclaimed. "When last you attempted such a matter, the thing was an affair of Zitran. Think you..."

"Hold, Rob," Jason interrupted. "Within the last cycle--I have visited and conversed with a man of Earth in the spirit rather than the flesh."

Gaya caught her breath sharply. "Jason," she faltered, "as man I know you, yet are there times when to me you seem more like to a spirit in man's form even as on a time Zud of Zitran said."

Croft turned to her. "Man is a spirit, Gaya, my friend and wife of my all but brother," he said slowly. "Yet now my spirit is heavy, in that I am a man bereft. Wherefore, ere this thing be finished, I shall work in body and spirit to regain what I have lost. Rob, have you stores in plenty of metals, rubber, and cloth?"

"Aye, in plenty--and if not, since Koryphu's mission will take the best part of a Zitran to arrange and carry out, it were possible to put double shifts at the forges and send the weavers to their looms."

"Then do so," Jason accepted, filing his chest with a heavy inhalation, "for it is in my mind that ere Naia and Jason, Son of Jason, shall see Aphur again strange things shall be seen in the skies."

Chapter VI

Freedom of action, co-operation, a friendly understanding, marked the following days for Croft. That night he visited Naia while his body lay in a room in Robur's part of the palace, covered with a silken tissue, worked over by Gaya's own maids, whom she sent to rub into its stalwart muscles, soft, nourishing, perfumed ointments, such as the Tamarizian nobles used.

Invisible, his presence known only to Naia, he saw the triumphal display of the captives, the procession through the streets of Berla, at the end of their voyage. But he also found a little satisfaction at Kalamita's frustration when she found that the emperor, Helmor, had his own use for the captives. They would be held as hostages under the emperor's protection. Croft's momentary satisfaction vanished, however, when Helmor agreed to turn the child over to Kalamita, for sacrifice to Bel, if Tamarizia either refused to yield to Zollaria's demands or made war upon Zollaria.

Croft writhed in his spirit, at the meaning of Helmor's words--the picture of Jason, Son of Jason, torn from the breast against which now he rested all unknowing, and fed into Bel's foul body filled with flame. He knew in the main what Zollaria would ask--knew in his soul that her demands must be refused for Tamarizia's good. There remained then naught for him save to support Naia insofar as he could in the spirit, and devise some means of freeing her from her present position, other than any true consideration of what Zollaria might propose.

And now it appeared to him that the best he could do was to bring about delay in whatever negotiations might grow out of the situation--to see them dragged out without a definite decision--to gain time,

wherein he might think and scheme. Or if there were no other way, seek to perfect some such device with which to strike a counterblow against Kalamita's nation as that I had proposed.

Such thoughts held him, therefore, as he went to a room deep amid the foundations of the palace into which Naia and her maid and child were thrust.

A little of straw was upon the floor. It was dimly lighted by a single-oil lamp in a scone against one wall. There was a copper couch with a none-too-clean sleeping pad upon it, and nothing more. With a quick rebellion of the spirit, Croft found himself thinking that it was not so Helmor, when a prisoner of Tamarizia, had been housed.

He waited until Maia had induced her to stretch herself upon the couch, and taking the child in her arms had crouched beside her on the straw, rocking it gently and crooning to it a quaint Tamarizian song. And then as Naia's lips moved and he caught her whisper, "Beloved," he answered: "I am here."

She sighed, and her body relaxed as its astral tenant stole forth.

"You heard all, beloved?" she questioned as they sat together.

"Aye," Croft told her.

"Now Zitu help us!" Naia of Aphur cried. "For if my spirit be not broken, yet it is shaken within me, Jason, because of that little life Maia now holds in her arms."

"Nay--fear not." Jason drew her to him and told her his plan to gain delay while perfecting his other plans. "Azil gave not the spirit of our son to us, beloved, to be set free in Bel's unclean arms."

"Zitu grant it." Naia glanced about the barren chamber. "Forgive me my weakness, Jason. If delay seems best to you, I shall endure it, so you come to me frequently to tell me of all your progress."

"Aye." Croft's soul rebelled at the thought of her durance in such quarters, though there seemed nothing else for it. "Here we may meet in safety since Helmor himself denies all access to you. And I shall visit Earth, beloved, ere I come to thee again."

These things Croft told me on the night he kept his promise to visit me again. From Berla he went to Himyra first, speaking with Gaya and Robur, directing the latter to mobilize the workmen who had labored on the airplanes before the Mazzerian war. Croft also visited the motur shops and gave command for the immediate inception of work on engines of a somewhat more powerful design than any used on Palos heretofore.

Furthermore, Croft requested that he see what airplanes were already constructed, thoroughly overhauls, as part of the preparation for Koryphu's mission into the mountains north of Cathur. And that part of his intentions he explained.

"They follow a course of deception already, Rob, and two may play at the game. Much must be done ere we attempt a rescue, and toward the doing we must needs gain time. Wherefore since to the minds of Helmor and Kalamita it is unknown that I am forewarned and their intent to hold Naia in Berla, rather than it the place of which by Bathos she sent me word, it appears best to me that we make it seem we are deceived. These planes shall mount the air from Cathur, therefore, and fly above the mountains in advance of Koryphu's party, as though seeking for some place of concealment, wherein her captives may lie hid. Thus we shall help Kalamita play her part to her mind at least, and perchance throw at least some dust in Zollaria's eyes."

Robur nodded. "I sense your plan, Jason," he agreed. "Yet I have taken thought that a plane may fall, and that it is the secret of the moturs which Zollaria wishes in part to gain."

Croft smiled rather grimly. "Aye, Rob. The point were well taken, nor has it escaped my mind. To such an end each flier must be provided with a device by which his motur may under such conditions be destroyed, and with orders to burn his machine, escaping thereafter by the aid of the other planes on duty with him, or in any way he can."

Once more Robur nodded.

"Aye," said he, "you think of all things. And this other device toward the forming of which you are preparing?"

"Nay," Jason replied. "It depends upon my visit to Earth, after which I hope to give you plans and figures."

"Zitu grant you be successful," said the Governor of Aphur. "You will seek this knowledge when?"

"Tonight," Jason told him; "after which Scira must be visited and the consent of Koryphu to head the party to this meeting with Kalamita gained. She will lose small time in hastening to it, hoping to add another prisoner to her number, despite the fact that Helmor has altered her plans."

"Aye, and were swift moturs or an airplane to descend upon her lodge after Koryphu has reached it, it might be that Tamarizia would have a prisoner to exchange with Zollaria without a longer waiting."

"That, too, have I thought of, Aphur, yet though we match craft with craft and violence with violence, if the need arises, let none say that

Zitu's Mouthpiece counseled the violation of an embassy's seeming or used it as a mask to another purpose than that to which it sets forth."

"But--if this Zollarian plans to trick you into her hands by such a meeting?"

"Nay, she will fail," said Jason. "Yet think not, meaning to seize me if so it falls out according to her wishes, she will come to that place so poorly guarded that an attempt to make her captive would result in aught save a clash of arms. Wherefore let her fail of her aim and return to Berla the next time with empty hands. How stands Zollaria then, save to deal direct with Zitra, which shall quibble with her--neither accepting nor refusing, appointing a place perhaps for a more representative meeting, while you and I, Rob, labor over our designs?"

"I have talked with Zitra by means of the message tower you have placed in Himyra and upon Zitra's walls," Robur replied. "Jadgor, my father, stands ready to aid you in whatsoever way he can, and the spirit of Lakkon writhes with thoughts of his daughter. May I say to them those things with which you have made me acquainted?"

"Aye," Croft assented. "Say also that Naia sends a greeting to her father, and that at present she lies safe from harm. Come, let us return to the palace since things are now arranged."

And that night it was Croft made his promised visit to me. I was ready for him. I had not delayed in instituting my efforts at gaining the knowledge the use of which I had suggested, and I had found the man I wanted--one who had served his country well in the chemical arm of the service, and was therefore qualified to give me the information of which I stood in need. My greatest difficulty had been in convincing him that I desired the knowledge for no improper use, but in the end I

sumounted the task. And that night after Jason had roused me to his presence I recited the formula to him.

"Zitu! Murray, the thing can be accomplished! Palos holds all that will be required."

"Good," I said. "Then you can make it?"

His thought waves beat back at me in a very passion of conviction. "Yes, and we'll carry it to them in something like blimps."

"Blimps--dirigibles, you mean?"

"Yes," he said. "That's what I've been considering making, though I haven't told Rob about it yet. They'll be far more stable for the purpose than planes."

"Why, yes," I agreed. "Croft, it's a rather peculiar thing, but before the armistice was signed in Europe each side was planning to blot out the major cities of the opposing nations beneath a fiery rain."

For that was the thing I had proposed to Jason, and the secret for the production of the unquenchable liquid fire which could be stored and carried, and sprayed in a rain of death upon those against whom it was used, was the thing I had gained from Captain Gaylor, formerly connected with the department of gas and flame.

It was as though already the doom of Helmor's plans and Kalamita's vengeance was sealed. "Croft," I questioned, "you know the general nature of these blimps?"

"Aye." He nodded. "But if you have any suggestions, Murray..."

"Well," I said, "Captain Gaylor gave me the general plan in describing how the stuff you're going to demonstrate to Helmor was

to be carried--as well as a description of the fire bombs they meant to carry aboard their planes. You know just before the armistice, Jason, there was talk of a new deadlier gas. In reality it wasn't gas at all, but this stuff of which I've told you. The gas talk was just a mask."

"Go on--tell me, Murray," he prompted tensely. "Give me all you can to begin with, though if I get stuck I'll be back again, of course."

"Of course," I said, and told him all I knew myself.

"Murray," he exclaimed when I had finished, "Naia of Aphur, and Jason, Son of Jason, will owe you their salvation."

"The thing seems plausible to me, Croft."

"Plausible," he repeated. "It shall be accomplished. Now, Koryphu may start upon his mission, while every shop and forget in Himyra roars."

"By the way, how does the populace cotton to this fresh Zollarian move?"

"They don't know it yet, old fellow." He gave me a glance. "You know, Murray, Tamarizia, even yet, isn't Earth. There's only the wireless between Himyra and Zitra, and a telegraph across the gateway to Scira in Cathur--but in view of what's going to happen in Himyra almost at once--the preparations, I mean--I think I'll tell them, and suggest that in Zitra the masses be informed by Zud--that Zollaria has struck at the Mouthpiece of Zitu in order to coerce the nation. It won't do any harm to have the sympathy of the populace behind us in this."

"Nor in Scira," I said. "Cathur hasn't forgotten how nearly she was enslaved, I imagine--or that her fate would have been the same as Mazhur's for fifty years, if it had not been for the Mouthpiece of Zitu's

intervention in hers and Tamarizia's behalf. And see here, Croft--if you've a telegraph up there, why don't you send Koryphu a message instead of going after him yourself? You've enough to tend to in the matter of the blimps without traipsing about."

He smiled for the first time. "It might do here, but not on Palos Murray. They're great for delegations, personal representation--the old ways. You can't change them all at once. But--it won't do any harm to announce by coming or its reason, or that the Mouthpiece of Zitu comes in person to the house of Koryphu. That in itself might even serve in preparing the mind of Cathur's prince for the proposition I shall make him once I arrive. According to Palosian standards, Murray, even though it sounds bald for me to say so, such an occasion should be an important event in Koryphu's life."

Chapter VII

Croft went not to Himyra, however, as I fancied, but to Zitra, after he left me, and the sleeping apartment of Zud, taking his stand close to where the high priest lay wrapped in slumber on a copper couch.

"Zud! Zud! Man of Zitu!" he let the call of his spirit steal forth. Once in a past time he had taught the high priest something of the astral body, finding it necessary to his purpose then to convince him of the truth. And he had told him that when he should call him in the future he would answer.

"My lord," he muttered. "Aye--my lord."

"Spirit of Zud--come forth!"

Zud of Zitra's body relaxed. His spirit obeyed. Mistlike it hovered above his physical form.

"My lord," it faltered again.

"Peace," said Croft. "Ye have answered me, Zud, in such wise. Give ear and obey me in the flesh, when dawn comes again to the world. I, Mouthpiece, say unto thee this:

"Word of the abduction of Naia, wife of Jason, and of Jason, Son of Jason, shall be noised abroad. Be it said that Zollaria, envious of Tamarizia's progress, has seized them and borne them into her country, holding them ransom to her demands against this nation, under penalty of death to Jason's son.

"Let it be understood. Let Zud himself sponsor the announcement, first going to Jadgor's palace and saying to Jadgor that Jason, the

Mouthpiece of Zitu, gives the word.

"Say also to Jadgor that Jason requires him to send, from the tower on Zitra's walls, word to Mutlos, Governor of Cathur, requesting him to see that word is spread to Scira--also that Jason himself shall come to Scira to hold speech with Koryphu on the matter--and that he notify Scythys' younger son. Let this be done by command of Jadgor. The message being received from him in Himyra will be forwarded to Scira at once."

"Aye, Mouthpiece of Zitu," Zud made answer. "Once ere this have ye appeared in such guise before me, and I obeyed thee. Even so shall I obey you now. These things shall be done."

"Yet counsel the people to remain calm in the announcement," Jason said. "Zitu's Mouthpiece desires no more than their sympathy in this."

"But the woman--my lord has word of her and the infant?" the high priest questioned.

"Aye," Croft told him. "As Zud knows, I may meet with her in the spirit even as with Zud himself."

"Aye"--Zud inclined his astral head--"that Zud no longer doubts, since within his knowledge it is proved."

"Say also to Jadgor that Jason goes to Himyra to labor in the flesh with Robur, son of Jadgor," Croft continued. "Now return to thy body and finish thy slumbers, man of Zitu. Yet, waking, see that in all things my counsel is obeyed."

"Aye, Zud obeys on waking," the high priest promised.

"In Zitu's name," said Croft, and with that he left.

Dawn was breaking over Berla when he reached it in the astral and told Naia of the visit with me and his talk with Zud. Throughout the next day, Jason and Robur passed from one palace to another, calling the captains, whom Croft himself had trained, explaining, and issuing orders.

Late in the afternoon, bulletins struck off Jason's presses appeared posted on the corners—flaunting the news of Zollaria's latest move before the people's eyes. It had one effect that he had not counted on; time after time, in his progress from one place to another, his motur was halted by crowds and Croft found he had to make speeches. The delay was irritating, however gratifying the sympathy and support of his people.

Thus it was not until evening that he reached the hangars, and told his select corps that both moturs and planes must be destroyed if a forced landing was made on Zollarian soil. Robur would direct them in the use of grenades. The pilots were distressed at the thought of destroying their planes, but firm in their determination that Zollaria should not learn their secret. Croft's spirits were high as he and Robur entered their motur to return home.

"Tonight, Rob, I give you many plans and dimensions," he said. "That done, I board Jadgor's galley for Scira. Till I return, the work lies in your hands."

Chapter VIII

All Scira was *en fete*, or seemed so, though there was a strange sullenness about her crowds, despite the flags, the banners that decked the houses and lined the streets, and flew above her blue walls.

The Mouthpiece of Zitu was coming from Aphur on a mission, and the city was adorned to greet him by the orders of Mutlos, Governor of Cathur, himself. The throngs which waited his coming, to welcome him, and escort him to the house of Koryphu, where the sun-rayed banner of Aphur hung beside that of Cathur in the almost breathless air, wore their brightest garments. But his mission forbade holiday spirits in the minds of the crowd.

What was the purpose of the man to whom all Tamarizia looked as little less than a demigod in his knowledge, in visiting Koryphu, who had pored over tablets and scrolls in a semiseclusion ever since the disgrace Kyphallos, son of Scythys, now happily dead, had brought upon Cathur's royal house?

Be that as it may, Mutlos prepared his residence for the occasion and on the day of the expected arrival of Jason Croft donned his bravest apparel and waited to welcome his quest.

Yet it was mid-afternoon before Jadgor's galley, bearing the standard of Zitra--the circle and cross--appeared and bore down on Scira's walls.

The giant sea doors swung open, admitting her to the harbor, and closed again when she had passed. Breaking forth Cathur's flag, she advanced across the inner harbor and swung to a mooring. A band of trumpeters ruffled forth from the quay, where Mutlos waited. The

gangway was thrust forth, and the Mouthpiece of Zitu, walking alone and unattended, appeared.

"Hail, Mouthpiece of Zitu!" the assembled populace roared.

Mutlos advanced. The two men struck hands on shoulders, and joined their palms in a moment's claps. Side by side they entered Mutlos's motur. The trumpeters fell in before them, breaking a pathway through the crowds.

So came Jason to Scira once more, somber of mien, yet steady-eyed.

"My sympathy as a man I give thee, Advisor of Tamarizia," Mutlos said as the car began to move. "My assistance and that of Cathur I pledge you an' it be needed. This thing passes all endurance. Say but the word and Cathur will gather her swords."

"Nay," Jason replied slowly. "Thy sympathy, Cathur, warms the heart of the man. But the time of rescue has not arrived. Armed interference at present were ill-advised, since Zollaria fears it, and should it be attempted, thinks to offer my son to Bel a sacrifice."

"Zitu!" Mutlos gasped. "What then, O Mouthpiece? Where lies a chance of rescue? Zollaria makes demands of ransom?"

"Aye--or will. Even now one approached a rendezvous in the mountains north of Cathur to meet with an agent of ours. It is because of that I am here."

"To arrange a mission to this meeting?" Mutlos said with ready understanding.

"Aye. Zollaria sends Kalamita of ill-fame to Cathur as her agent.

Tamarizia, with the knowledge of Cathur and his own consent if it is forthcoming, sends Scythys' son."

"Now, by Zitu!" Admiration waked in Mutlos's eyes. "'Tis well thought of--to face that tawny enchantress, this creature of Adita, by one in whose heart must burn hot with hate against her. Guardsmen I place at your disposal and his. My place lies open to you, and you will honor it with your presence--or plan you to lodge in Koryphu's house?"

"With Koryphu this night at least," said Jason. "Yet with Mutlos things must be discussed here the mission fares forth. Hence at the palace in the night succeeding the sun after this. I accept the offer of guardsmen gladly. A score will be enough."

"They will be forthcoming," Mutlos promised, and spoke to his driver. "To Koryphu's house."

Up to the door of the lesser palace stalked Jason alone, once he had descended from the motur.

But Koryphu had marked his coming, and the door slid open before him.

"Hail to this, Tamarizia, in the person of Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu," Koryphu exclaimed and drew back a pace before him, that he might enter under the eyes of the watching crowd.

"My lord," he said once the portal was closed, shutting them in together after Mutlos had risen in his motur and bowed and he had returned the salutation.

"Greetings to you, Koryphu, son of Scythys," Croft responded. "Behold in me not so much anything as a man bereft and sorely troubled by his loss--one who comes to you thus in a time of trouble

to ask you to lend him aid."

Koryphu's eyes widened swiftly. "But, by Zitu--in what can one of fallen fortunes aid you, Mouthpiece of Zitu?"

"It is of that we must speak together, Prince of Cathur."

"Come then," Koryphu turned and led the way across a court done in blue and crystal, surrounded by a balcony of blue and white, to the room in which more than any other Koryphu spent his life.

"Be seated, lord," he invited, indicating a red wood chair and taking his place in another drawn close to a table of copper, littered with numerous scrolls. "Loss is not unknown to Scythys's son, nor the feeling of it. Speak--Koryphu lends his ear to thy voice."

Jason explained--going at some length into past events--proffering Koryphu the leadership of the first embassy at last.

"I--Koryphu!" The Cathurian noble stammered, his breathing a trifled quickened. "Zitu's Mouthpiece chooses me for such an errand as this?"

"Aye." Croft inclined his head, watching the man before him. "Koryphu the Tamarizian."

"Tamarizian!" Koryphu repeated. "But why Koryphu--why the son of a discredited house? Why not another, whose loyalty none could question?"

"Because, who heads this mission will meet Kalamita of Zollaria in the north."

"Kalamita!" Koryphu stiffened. "That--foul sepulchre of dead loves and unholy emotions--that stench in the nostrils of true men, and blot

on the name of women. Say you she comes herself to this meeting?"

"Aye," said Jason Croft. "Wherefore, there appears no better agent in all Tamarizia to meet her when she comes to trap me also as she hopes, seeing she had bidden me to this conference in person, than one who loves her not nor is apt to fall captive to her shameless graces--than Koryphu Tamarizian first, and son of Cathur, and loyal in his heart to both, as I believe."

"Thou believest?" Koryphu questioned with an eagerness almost pathetic.

"Aye. Else were I not sitting in his house."

For a moment silence came down, save for Koryphu's audible breathing. For a moment his eyes flamed with a sudden light, and then he turned them away since, in the code of Tamarizian manhood, there was little room for tears. Then he rose.

"Zitu!" he broke forth hoarsely and lifted his arms. "Father of life--hast then given ear in such fashion to my prayers? Is the time of penance ended? If so, I thank thee, Zitu."

He sank down again, dropping his head upon his folded arms on the table.

For a time Croft watched him, elation and sympathy blended in his regard. "Nay, Koryphu," he said presently as the Cathurian kept his face hidden while his shoulders heaved. "None questioned thy loyalty really. Half thy worry was of your own conceiving. Few spake illy of thee. Men deemed rather you had taken for comfort to your tablets and scrolls. By Jadgor and Robur of Aphur, my choice of thee is approved."

"Hai! Jadgor--Robur! Say you so?" Koryphu lifted his head. "Perchance thou art right," He went on more calmly. "Perchance I have brooded overmuch. Yet comes this now as the realization of dreams born in nights of brooding, hopes formed in sorrow, and well-nigh dead."

"You accept, then?" Croft questioned.

"Accept. Aye, by Zitu--and I shall serve you loyally. What do I when I face this beauteous slayer of men's souls--shall I watch for opportunity and strike her dead? If so the life of Koryphu were a small price..."

"*Hilka!*" Croft interrupted. "Hold now, Cathur--Koryphu does naught save listen to her words. Think you the death of their agent would help us--or render my dear ones more safe--or that the dead body of Koryphu would bring to Tamarizia more swiftly the demands Zollaria will make through her toward those negotiations that shall follow? Nay, small danger lies in this mission so that rather than inflamed with rage when he stands before her, Koryphu appears but one come to return with her words."

"Aye." Koryphu caught his breath quickly. "Yet owe her I a debt of overlong standing."

Croft nodded. "I deny it not. Let Koryphu's vengeance begin when she sees me not of Tamarizia's party--and finds herself outplayed."

"Thinks she the Mouthpiece of Zitu a fool to walk into her trap?"

"She thinks me a husband and father, less well informed of her true purpose than perchance I am," Croft replied. "It were well she be not undeceived. Wherefore I send airplanes north before you--to fly above the mountains as though seeking a place of concealment, that

she may not know I am aware Naia of Aphur lies in Berla."

Koryphu narrowed his eyes in appreciation. "The thought were well conceived. I do naught then save meet this Zollarian and give ear to her terms of ransom?"

"Naught else, save say that those terms will be brought to my ears and the ears of the nation."

"'Tis well," the Cathurian now accepted. "That shall I do, and naught to endanger to success of the undertaking, because of my personal affairs. When do I depart upon my mission?"

"Presently," Jason told him. "Mutlos will furnish you a score of guardsmen. You will go north after the airplanes have arrived."

"Two alighted before Mutlos's palace this morning," Koryphu announced. "They declared to the crowds they came by your orders, yet said nothing further. Are there others?"

"Six in all," said Jason, smiling, well pleased that his fliers had lost no time. "Doubtless the others will arrive."

The next day he spent with Mutlos, arranging for Koryphu's departure and explaining his purpose in the airplanes, the last of which arrived. The evening passed in meeting many of the Cathurian officials, bidden by Mutlos to the occasion and a feast at which Koryphu and Pala were among the more prominent guests. No secret had been made of his mission. In fact, word of it had been given out.

For the time being Koryphu found himself again a person of importance—one in whom Tamarizia herself had given evidence of faith. Watching him under circumstances more or less trying to a man of inferior metal, Croft found himself pleased by his demeanor.

Well pleased then, he gave orders that the planes depart in the morning, and that later Koryphu and his escort should leave for the north. Taking tables, he wrote rapidly a message to Kalamita, setting forth the fact that the bearer was a representative in person, and gave it to Koryphu after pressing his signet into the waxen surface with instructions to place it in her hands.

Stretching himself on the couch in the sumptuous chamber in Mutlos's palace, to which he had been led, he freed his consciousness from his body and went in search of the woman herself, to find her in the midst of a wayside camp of Zollarian soldiery, asleep on the pads of her gnuppa-drawn conveyance, beside which the giant Gor of the galley mounted watch.

Koryphu went north with the dawn, and Kalamita was hastening to meet him. Satisfied, he left her in slumbrous ignorance of his presence and visited Naia, telling her of the progress he was making, and how Robur was stoking the furnaces of Himyra toward the creation of yet another marvel, in the eyes of the population, until they flared red above the walls of the city in the night.

In the morning he sent Robur a message announcing his departure, said farewell to Mutlos and was driven to the quays and Jadgor's galley. Going aboard he gave the order for sailing. The sea doors were opened. He passed through them, and turned the prow of the craft at his disposal swiftly into the south.

Chapter IX

Koryphu of Cathur, under the banner of Tamarizia--with seven red and white stripes and a blue field with seven stars--a thing designed by Croft himself after the republic was established, fared north in a gnuppa-drawn conveyance with his escort of Cathurian guards.

Kalamita and Zollaria came down from the north in a similar fashion, but with a vastly heavier escort--strong enough as Croft had suggested to Robur to avoid any chance of surprise. Croft sailed south, but watched their progress each night, when he let his consciousness steal forth. The airplanes sailed north and found themselves a landing place as best they might, to which, after each day spent above the mountains north of Cathur's border, they returned.

Three days brought Jason to Himyra. Jadgor's galley was swift, indeed. Each day he spent in the shops, sometimes with Robur, sometimes without him; a part of each night he spent in the laboratory he had fitted up in Robur's own part of the palace, experimenting in the blending of reagents, the making of the liquid fire. And his labors ended, each night Croft stretched himself out on his couch, closed his physical eyes and maintained observation of events taking place in the north.

Three days after his return to Himyra, Kalamita arrived at her hunting lodge. Rather the thing was a small palace, built of native stone from the mountains and massive beams of wood--its central court fur-lined, its walls and floors covered with trophies of the chase--skins of the woolly tabur, which ran wild as well as in domesticated herds.

Swiftly then Jason willed himself into the hunting lodge where sat

Kalamita, dressed or undressed as one might prefer to express it, for the occasion, in a huge chair draped with the black and tan hide of some savage creature, Gor, her giant attendant, by her side.

"Thou understandest, Gor, that when this one comes before me, I shall demand that we speak together alone. And I have given word to the guardsmen that his men shall be surrounded and at a word from me, after my purpose is accomplished, all save one be put to the sword. After a time as we speak together I shall simulate anger at some word of his, to the speaking of which I shall lead him by taunting speech, and then fling myself upon him and bind him. This is clear?"

"Aye, mistress, when has Gor failed thee--or to do thy bidding?"

"None fail me save once," said Kalamita. "Enough."

Outside, a trumpet blew a ruffling blast. There followed a pause, and then Cathur, tricked out in his bravest armor, with the twin mountain peaks of Cathur on it done in blue stones, appeared in the doorway of the lodge between two Zollarian captains, and paused.

"Cathur for Tamarizia seeks audience with Kalamita," the senior captain announced.

For a moment the face of the woman twitched; then she replied, gripping the arm of her chair till her knuckles whitened, "Let Cathur approach."

The captains fell back and disappeared. Koryphu advanced. A single pace before her he halted.

"These tablets bring I from Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu to Tamarizia, to Kalamita," he said, and placed Croft's message in her hand.

She held them for a single instant, ere she hurled them to the floor. Her lips twitched, hardened, her tawny eyes glared.

But outwardly she strove for calm. "How are you called, man of Cathur, who come to listen to my demands and carry them to this strong man, who exerts not himself to come before me?"

"Koryphu, brother of Kyphallos, woman of Zollaria," Koryphu replied.

Kalamita recoiled. Her body shrank back as from a blow, and then she stiffened.

"Koryphu! Now, in Bel's name, what trickery is this that sends before me the weakling student brother, at whom Kyphallos laughed?"

"No trickery, Zollaria, lies in it, but rather purpose," Koryphu returned, "in that Jason chose for his messenger one who had sufficient knowledge of thee to assure his remaining unmoved by your charms, no matter how shamelessly employed—one who would hearken to your demands as regarding Naia of Aphur and Jason, Son of Jason, yet give no ear to other words."

Mentally Croft applauded even while physically Kalamita, the magnet, gasped.

"The Mouthpiece of Zitu were a shrewd man," she said after a moment, "yet might he have felt doubly assured in thy choice, had he considered thy presence. Kalamita wastes not her wiles on aught less than a man. Did he send also to guard thee, the things that fly over the mountains the past two days?"

"Nay," said Koryphu as one who considered his answer. "They but seek a place of hiding, since Kalamita said her whose terms of ransom I come to bear to him, would lie hidden in the mountains until

such terms were arranged."

Kalamita smiled. "As he wills," she said more lightly. "I might forbid it, but it disturbs me not. He will not find the place, and endangers the terms himself, since a part of my demands were gained already if one of his devices falls. Even now my guardsmen lie in wait for such a happening in the hills."

Koryphu appeared unmoved by the information. "Let your guards beware, since if one of them falls it will be destroyed. Does Kalamita desire the secret of them for Zollaria or herself?"

And again Croft applauded his choice of the man who was unveiling the true state of affairs behind the present meeting, and yet leaving Zollaria's agent at least in part deceived.

"Where it not the same, Kalamita being Zollarian, man of Cathur?"

"Aye, perhaps," Koryphu assented. "If perchance the interests be the same. It would seem then that as well as Kalamita's price to Jason, I return to Tamarizia with Zollaria's demands."

"And thy shoulders can support so vast a burden, Cathur--these terms I warn you are not light."

"I await them," Koryphu replied.

"Then hear Kalamita's price for the pale-face one and her suckling. Mazhur must be returned--the gateway must be opened without let or hindrance. There must be no tax exacted over Zollarian traffic on the Central Sea. There must be surrendered with men to explain them the secrets of your moturs and your air machines, and of all other devices born of the Mouthpiece of Zitu's brain--the fire weapons, the balls that burst when thrown amidst an enemy's forces. Name these

things as the price of ransom to your Mouthpiece when you return."

"These seem heavy terms, indeed." Koryphu threw out his hands in a helpless gesture. "Were it not wiser for Zollaria to ask less with a chance of obtaining somewhat than to overshoot the mark by asking everything?"

"Nay." Kalamita leaned back well pleased as it seemed by the man's quite natural confusion on being given a message that spelled little less than his country's ruin.

"Nay, by Bel, Cathur—one there was a time when thy brother's plans and mine went down in confusion when Tamarizia demanded and Zollaria yielded. Now Zollaria speaks, and should Tamarizia not accept, or make any move to resist her demands by force of arms, Naia of Aphur goes to the mines with the blue men who labor in them and her puny offspring into Bel's mighty arms a paltry sacrifice. So much herself the woman understands—wherefore she sends this ring to Jason to plead as her own voice that he hearken to Kalamita's words."

Stripping a signet from her finger, she extended it upon her palm.

Koryphu's features were strained as he took the ring. "These things I shall carry to Jason's ears. Does Kalamita await his answer?"

"Nay—let Jason arrange the next meeting," said Kalamita. "I go to a place he knows not of, despite his man-made birds and their spying. Yet will a messenger on the highway north from Mazhur be met, and his message accepted. So I shall arrange." She broke off sharply as a commotion arose outside the lodge, then turned to Gor. "Go learn the cause of this disturbance."

Gor stalked to the door, and paused.

"Mistress, they come," he declared, and drew back as a group of Zollarian guardsmen in charge of a captain entered, a man in leathern jacket and helmet held captive in their midst.

With a start Croft recognized one of his own fliers. Disaster--already one of the planes had fallen, he thought, and heard the captain confirm his fears.

The man saluted with upflung arm. "Behold, Princess, one whom we bring before you--a Tamarizian dog--who fell with the device he rode like an arrow-pierced bird from the skies."

Kalamita's smile was coldly gloating as she regarded the captive. "Well, Tamarizian, found you the hiding place you flew in search of?"

"Nay." The youth stiffened. "'Tis not always easy, Zollarian, to discover the hiding places of Zitemku's agents. Nor have we searched overlong."

Kalamita's features hardened. She gave her attention to the captain. "What of the machine?"

"The machine, Princes, was by this one destroyed ere we could prevent it. It lies burst and ruined by flames."

"So?" Rage lighted the woman's tawny eyes--once more she was baffled in a purpose. "For that he dies."

Under his grime and sweat, inside the circle of his helmet, the aviator's face went pale, but he maintained his poise of body even as Koryphu spoke quickly--"Princess of Zollaria, unsay those words."

"Peace, brother of Kyphallos." Kalamita turned like a tigress on him. "Who are you to interfere? Stand back and watch how Zollaria deals

with Tamarizian spies. Gor, take thy spear."

Gor's lips curled back as he advanced slightly, lifted his heavy weapon and poised it.

And suddenly the aviator threw up his hand toward the other man of his nation. "Hail, Cathur, Aphur salutes thee," his voice came strongly. "Long life to Tamarizia. Say to Zitu's Mouthpiece that Robur..."

"Slay!" Kalamita screamed.

Gor's spear plunged home.

"Carry off that carrion." The woman's arm rose, pointing at the body.

The captain growled an order. The guardsmen lifted the limp form in its suit of leather and bore it out on their spears.

Kalamita swung her whole form lithely about to where Koryphu was standing. "Say to Zitu's Mouthpiece that so we treat his spies."

"Aye," he made answer gruffly. "Small doubt but I shall narrate to Zitu's Mouthpiece many things."

For a moment the eyes of man and woman met and plunged glances lance-like one into the other, ere there rose again an outward commotion, a burst of thunderous sound, which gave way in an instant to groans and cries.

Koryphu stiffened. Kalamita started to her feet, as the outcry continued. Some of the flush of anger faded from her features, and then Koryphu, turning, ran across the floor toward the doorway and outside it.

"The standard--the standard of Tamarizia, let it be unfurled," he roared.

Out of the sky came down a drumming from where an airplane sailed. On the ground lay some half dozen Zollarian guards--the same who had carried out the aviator's body--some of them without motion, some of them that groaned and moved. The vengeance of the flier's fellow had been swift and deadly. But the flag of Tamarizia broke out over Koryphu's party, the Tamarizian in the plane circling to drop another grenade, altered his course, zoomed up above the nearest ridge of hills and disappeared.

Croft quivered in spirit as he watched him. He could scarcely censor his hot-headed action in dropping the bomb on the murderers of his comrades and yet now--blood had been shed on both sides, and Gor was approaching Koryphu where he stood.

"Go!" he commanded with a gesture of dismissal. "My mistress grants you safety since you are of no value save as you carry her message. Take thy men and get thee on thy mission."

"Aye--be you my messenger to carry her my parting greeting," Koryphu returned, and stalked to his carriage, about which, under the banner of Tamarizia, his Cathurians had already formed.

Croft opened the eyes of his physical body in Robur's palace and lay staring into the night. He lay pondering the matter until dawn, and then rose. He sought Robur and told him of all he had seen.

"Send a message into Cathur, Rob, recalling the airplanes," he directed. "Zitu forbid that I waste further the lives of such men. They have served their purpose in a measure. Bid them return."

"And what of the further course of the matter?" Robur inquired.

"Kalamita returns to Berla, in my estimation," said Croft. "She must make report. Yet thus far have we dealt with Kalamita only. Thus far the matter has lain between herself and me alone. It was to me Bathos was sent with his message. Wherefore, so quickly as Koryphu returns, we shall ask Zittra to send one through Mazhur, calling upon Zollaria to confirm or deny Kalamita's acts in a representative parley."

Robur nodded. "By Zitu, I sense your intention. In such a way you safeguard our cousin and gain time for our own endeavors."

"Aye," said Jason, "time in which our work must be pressed with speed."

Chapter X



By day the forges of Himyra roared, and at night they blazed. Men toiled and sweated. Croft planned, designed, and urged for haste, instructing, advising, passing upon each part of the engines of swift deliverance he had ordered made by day, by night watching in his own peculiar fashion the progress of Koryphu back to Cathur, and that of Kalamita north.

Two days after the meeting in the mountains he sent Jadgor's galley to Scira, to await Koryphu's coming and returning to Himyra with the Cathurian aboard, deeming it best to take the man with him to Zittra to appear before Jadgor in person, that his own statements might be confirmed by Koryphu's words. Himself he determined to be present astrally in Berla, when Kalamita appeared before Helmor to make her report.

That her return empty handed was a bitter thing in her heart he was well aware. Watching her, Croft sensed that once more her brain was busy with its schemes.

Bandhor met her at the palace and escorted her into a small and sumptuously furnished room. Helmor of Zollaria sat there, his face contorted into an expression of displeasure. As Bandhor and his sister entered, he half rose, and Kalamita sank swiftly to her knees.

"Hail, Helmor, emperor and lord," she faltered.

"Rise," said the Zollarian monarch. "Thy coming was expected. Bandhor informed me as you bade him, yet seemed unminded to further use his tongue. So, then, you appear before me alone?"

"Aye, Helmor." Kalamita lifted herself on shapely limbs and stood with downcast eyes. Suddenly she had adopted a meekness wholly out of keeping with her usual demeanor. "Helmor foresaw the outcome of my effort in his wisdom. All things fell out as he advised."

"The Mouthpiece came not to the meeting?"

"Nay. Perchance he lacked the courage on which I counted." Kalamita threw up her head. Her tawny eyes flashed for a single instant.

Helmor resumed his seat. His brows knit in a frown.

"I await thy story, sister of Bandhor," he said after a time.

Kalamita explained. Helmor's frown deepened as she proceeded with her story. Once and once only his expression denoted satisfaction, and that when the woman spoke of the airplanes flying above the mountains.

"It would seem then that he knows not the woman lies in Berla," he said, nodding. "It was so I planned. In so much is he deceived. Go on—finish the story."

"Nay," Kalamita resumed. "There is no more save that I stated the requirements of her ransom as it was agreed upon between us, and gave Koryphu her signet which I had taken from her finger, bidding him say to the Mouthpiece that she bade him yield, and that one of the flying devices falling, and the Tamarizian within it, being captured, though not before he had destroyed it, was slain by my orders before

Koryphu's eyes."

"Slain?" repeated Helmor sharply. "Now, by Bel, were it wise to slay him, or didst let thy judgment be consumed by rage?"

"Perchance," Kalamita admitted, still adhering to her role of meekness. "Yet if so, the act was avenged and quickly, in that one of his fellows flew above my lodged and dropped a fire-ball, which, bursting, slew two in the number of my guard--and would have repeated the attack upon us, save that Koryphu himself bade the flag of Tamarizia be unfurled above his party, whereat the flier altered his course and disappeared.

"Helmor of Zollaria--blood has been shed by Tamarizia in this matter. Did not Helmor vow that such an act by the southern nation should give Bel the child of the Mouthpiece, a living sacrifice?"

"Aye, so Helmor promised," he returned slowly. "Yet meant he not the act of a man enraged by the death of his fellow--a minor instance--a matter of no consequence along the border. Sister of Bandhor, you appear over quick to destroy what were a safeguard as well as a price of advantage in Helmor's eyes."

Once more Kalamita lowered her face.

"There were no advantage to Helmor or the nation," she said slowly, "save by favor of the gods. If Kalamita err, be it upon her own head, yet thus far the matter had not gone overly to our liking--and were Bel's favor purchased..."

"Enough!" All at once Helmor roared. "Question not Bel's favor. Has he not placed these two wholly in our power? Is the way not paved for parley and negotiation? Think you the man who waits on the road out of Mazhur will fail to receive an answer to our demands?"

"Nay," said Kalamita, "there will be an answer. Yet now is it in my heart to warn Helmor against permitting that these parleys--these discussions of our demands--be entered into over long."

"What mean you? Were time not needful when a matter of so great importance is to be arranged?"

"Aye--none may deny it." Kalamita granted the point without hesitation. "And I know not wherein lies the peril save that these be a crafty people, depending more upon their wits than on their strength, and that this Aphurian woman boasted to men aboard my galley that the one who devised these things, the secret of which we are demanding, might well devise a greater. Wherefore let Helmor be warned against protracting his parley to great length."

"A greater device?" he questioned. "Now, by Bel, what were it? Has he not brought his fire weapons, his fire chariots across the Earth, his fire ships to swarm upon the water, his flying devices into the skies? Where else shall he turn for a new field to conquer? Earth, water, air--their mastery is his--and will remain his only unless Zollaria wrests it from him.

"These airplanes, as he calls them, are our greatest menace--and now they fly above the mountains, seeking her who lies safe inside Berla's walls. Nay, sister of Bandhor, thy work is finished--leave what remains to be accomplished in Helmor's hands, nor heed the words of a woman. Perchance she meant to raise up a fear thought to affright thee."

Kalamita stiffened.

"Kalamita is not easily affrighted," she made answer. "And being woman, may sense the meaning of a woman's words. Yet has

Helmor spoken. May Kalamita retire now that her mission is ended, less happily than she wished, yet ended none the less?"

"Aye." Helmor inclined his head. "Ere the sun sinks I shall send to your palace a chariot filled with silver. Bandhor, remain. I would speak with you briefly."

"Bel strengthen Helmor's mind." To Croft it seemed almost as though a hidden meaning lurked in the woman's words as she sank again to her knees, rose and passed from the room.

He followed. Let Bandhor and Helmor talk, plan, plot, devise. There lurked not the danger he feared, but rather in the brain of the woman now making her way toward the carriage across the palace court. Hence it was with no surprise as she entered her carriage that he heard her direct Gor to the Temple of Bel, before she reclined upon the cushions and drew a gasping breath.

And he followed close behind her as she reclined upon the cushions and drew to the pyramidal temple itself.

It was built of some dark-hued stone, in color nearly black, set down in the exact center of a mighty open space. Pillared it was on four sides, about a mighty central court, like a great rectangular funnel, the sides of which were corrugated with steps, leading down once more to the outer level of the mighty base. These steps could furnish a multitude with seats, as he saw at a glance. And in the center of the remaining level--huge--massive--smoke-and-fire darkened--horrible in its grinning visage, its pot-bellied furnace back of extended arms, the idol of Bel found place.

At the head of the inner steps on the side from which she had entered, Kalamita paused. So vast was the structure that standing so alone in her supple beauty, her figure became a pigmy thing, was

suddenly dwarfed. Her arms rose above her head. She bent once, twice, thrice from the hips in salutation to the monstrous thing before her, turned and made her way among the pillars of the surrounding colonnade toward the end opposite that the idol faced.

It was built in, unlike the other three sides, and here Jason fancied as he followed, would be the quarters of the temple attendants and the priests.

Upon a door of silver, set in the ebon surface of the wall, Kalamita hammered with peremptory fist, and waited, until the portal was swung ajar by a heavy-muscle individual clad in no more than a leathern apron tied about his waist.

"Go," she directed, stepping past him. "Say to Ptah that the Princess of Adita desires speech with him at once."

"Aye, beautiful one."

The man saluted and hastened off along a passage, to return and beckon her after him mutely until he paused before a second silver door.

He struck upon it. A voice rumbled from beyond it. The man set it open and Kalamita passed it into the presence of Bel's priest.

Huge he was, powerful, heavy muscled, thick of neck and nose and lip, with a knotted, shaven poll, gross, in seeming an unwieldy human beast, as dissimilar to the lithe beauty as day to night. Yet she spread her rosy, gem-banded arms and sank down with lowered eyes.

"Hail to Ptah, priest of the Mighty One," she spoke in salutation.

"Rise, Princess of Adita," said Ptah, his small eyes nearly lost behind

the heavy lids lighting at sight of her kneeling figure. "What seeks the Lamp of Pleasure in the house of Ptah?"

"Counsel, O Wise One," Kalamita answered, rising, and went swiftly on to explain concerning her vow to Bel in regard to Naia of Aphur's child.

"So?" Ptah pursed his heavy lips at the end. "Helmor is headstrong nor listens as closely as his fathers to the voices of the gods. In this case hardly could even I defy him, Priestess of Joy."

"Not Bel's priest? Am I in this then to stand forsworn? And think you what may depend upon it. Does Bel take a promise lightly--and were his favor purchased..." Once more she paused.

Ptah frowned. Once more he pursed his lips, and then rising, he took up a metal hammer and struck with it upon a gong which Croft now perceived to be let into the substance of the door.

Casting the hammer aside he waited until the man with the leathern apron appeared. "Go," he commanded then; "fetch me a suckling tabur and the knife of augury from the hall of sacrifice where it is stored."

Returning to his seat he waited, his eyes never shifting from the shape of the woman before him until the man reappeared bearing the little creature he had named, and a massive knife of copper with a weighted blade.

Rising, he received both and held them until the attendant had disappeared.

"Oh, Bel--thou Strong One--show us thy pleasure in the matter before the nation and in the case of Naia of Aphur's suckling. Speak to us

through the life of this creature I, Ptah, am about to sacrifice to thee," his heavy voice rumbled.

Seizing the tabur by the hind legs, he poised the copper blade, and with one muscular sweep of his mighty arm, struck off his head, and laid the carcass down.

"Let me, O Ptah!" cried Kalamita, seizing the reeking knife from the hands of the priest and kneeling to slit open the quivering belly of the tabur, so that the entrails were exposed. Plunging her pink-nailed hands into the quivering mass, she wrenched them forth and spread them writhing on the bloodstained floor.

Ptah bent over them, marking the fall of them closely. The woman still knelt before him, watching his every change of expression out of questioning eyes, holding forth toward him, palm upward, her crimson-dripping hands. Ptah said nothing, and after a time he straightened and lifted his hands toward the ceiling, "Bel, I, Ptah, thy servant, hear thee," he intoned hoarsely.

"An augury--an augury!" Kalamita panted. "What says the Strong One?"

Ptah lowered his back-tilted head. "Naught but the child may prevail to save Zollaria in this matter. It lies with Helmor. Him must you persuade to give ear to Bel's decision."

"Or"--she bent toward him, laying her blood-dabbled hands against his mighty torso--"were the child brought into the temple--"

"Hah!" Ptah's eyes fired. "Bel himself has spoken to thee also, Priestess of Adita. Were the child within this temple none, not even Helmor, would have the power to regain him, and were Helmor to know a third defeat, one more pious might mount the throne."

For a moment there was silence, and then Kalamita said slowly, "And he listens not to Bel's message, perchance the Strong One will show me a way to gain our ends."

Ptah nodded. "Perchance, Priestess."

A glance of understanding passed between them, and Kalamita moved toward the door.

Chapter XI

Kalamita and Ptah. Croft knew not wholly what they plotted, what plans might lie in their brains. Yet whatever they might intend, certain it was that the death of Jason, Son of Jason, was included in the plan. And that night as he labored in the laboratory he called Robur and Gaya to him and explained to their ready ears those things he had heard and seen.

At the end Gaya's soft eyes were wide with sympathetic sorrow, and Robur's square lower jaw was clamped hard. As Croft paused he broke into exclamation:

"Now, by Zitu, Ptah was right. Naught but the child of Jason can save his unclean nation indeed--and should harm come on him Zitemku will have a foul pit full of Zollarian souls."

"Aye, if he be harmed. But it were an empty revenge after all, my friend, and one which might not bring him again to my house."

Robur nodded. "What then does Jason propose? Many suns must pass ere we are ready to attempt the rescue, and meanwhile Kalamita plans."

"To warn Helmor of her planning."

"Warn him? In what fashion may Helmor be warned in time--even were he minded to give ear to any word out of Tamarizia? Jason, you speak in riddles."

Croft nodded. "Nay--Helmor would pay little heed to Tamarizian words, but were he to dream..."

"Dream..." All at once Gaya caught her breath. Her glance met Croft's in a subtle understanding. "Jason, thou meanest--thou canst induce a dream in his brain?"

"Aye." For the second time Croft nodded, well pleased at her intuitive understanding. "Why not? Gaya knows how in the spirit I called Naia of Aphur's spirit to me, before our marriage, and that nightly now we speak so together concerning our love and this present thing; also that I speak so to Zud of Zitra when the need arises, having taught him to answer the call of my spirit. Wherefore, may I not visit Helmor in the spiritual presence and by the same force inspire a vision of his and Zollaria's danger in his mind?"

"By Zitu!" Robur mumbled again.

But Gaya sat brooding the thought for a moment longer, presently lifting her head to murmur, "Three times. Let the dream be repeated once and yet again, Jason, until it takes possession of him wholly, nor is absent from his thoughts at any time."

Croft started slightly. He had only considered the one inspired dream of warning, but now, he realized swiftly the value of Gaya's words--the weight attached to the repetition of a dream. Her suggestion demanded acceptance. "Aye, Gaya," he assented. "Ga speaks through you to the benefit of child and mother. The dream shall be repeated three times, on as many nights--until Helmor is convinced of an agency behind it, even though the nature of that agency he fails to suspect."

Robur rose. His manner was restless. Suddenly he whirled around.

"You can do this thing?" he questioned. "Is naught forbidden to you, my friend? You can enter the mind of another and order the shape of the pictures in his brain?"

Jason eyed him for a moment before he answered. "Naught is forbidden to the seeker after knowledge, Rob, so he see not from evil purpose or for merely selfish gain. All life is a rhythm—even as the sound of the harp given off from a vibrating string. And if I alter the rhythm of Helmor's mind to the preserving of the life of my child, the honor of his mother, the estate of himself, and the lives of his people, were the action vain?"

"Nay, it were a work of justice and mercy," exclaimed Gaya before Robur found words in which to respond.

Croft lifted a tiny vial and held it toward both man and woman. "Behold!" he cried sharply. "Fix your eyes upon it."

Arrested by his sudden words and manner, they complied, and in an instant for them the room faded, gave place to another scene. A straw-covered dungeon appeared—a dungeon with every detail of which Croft was familiar in his spirit—a woman, a blue girl of Mazzer—a child. Briefly Robur of Aphur and Gaya his wife beheld that picture and knew it for the room beneath Helmor's palace—and then the whole thing faded and once more they were gazing at a tiny vial in the Mouthpiece of Zitu's hands.

It was no more than an example of mass hypnotism as practiced for ages by the Hindu fakirs, a trick learned by Croft while still as a man of Earth he had lived and studied in India for several years, but to the two Tamarizians it was altogether strange.

"Zitu! Zitu!" Robur gasped, while his wife sat staring no longer at the vial but into Jason's eyes.

"Think you that you have been to Berla?" he questioned, smiling slightly. "Nay, my good friends, the thing was but a changing of the

rhythm of your minds into sympathy with mine; but a picture never absent from my thought, which I excited in your brains. Think you now that I may make Helmor behold a vision?"

"Aye." Robur's tone was thick. "Aye, Jason, thou man unlike any other."

"Aye, Helmor shall dream," Gaya echoed his assurance. She smiled, and her smile was strange.

Yet no more strange than the hour passed by Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, before he stretched his body on its couch of copper in the formulation of a dream--the careful marshaling of the various thought forms he meant of deliberate purpose to instill into Helmor's brain.

Only when their sequence was wholly to his satisfaction did he relax his body, his physical mind, will his astral form swiftly to Helmor's palace and into Helmor's room.

A vast apartment it was, draped in saffron hangings, lighted by small lamps to a dusky twilight, in which blue maids, slaves of the palace kept up a ceaseless waving of noiseless fans above the silver couch on which the emperor slept.

Unseen, unnoted any more than the trailing smoke of one of the low-burning lamps, he drifted to Helmor's luxurious bed and began hurling his thought force upon him, seeking thereby to awaken a sympathetic vibration inside his heavy head.

Over and over he drew the mental pictures he had formed, concentrating all his power on them--Helmor defeated in every purpose--Kalamita and Ptah as co-plotters--Helmor about to be dethroned--the child sacrificed to Bel--and Tamarizia resorting for vengeance to the sword--the Zollarian armies once more beaten into

a bleeding rabble--fleeing--leaving their own defenseless monarch to face the future alone--Kalamita haughty and sneering--her mask of meekness cast aside--showing at last as the one by whom these things had been brought to pass.

And suddenly the lips of Zollaria's monarch moved. He muttered in his slumber, "Lost--all is lost--defeat--dishonor." For a moment while the slave girls eyed one another without stilling the sweep of their fans there was silence, and then Helmor groaned.

He stirred, he knotted the fingers of a heavy hand. "Thou--thou treacherous one," he muttered. "Through thee Helmor stands undone."

Croft thrilled. The thing was succeeding. In his mind Kalamita answered. "Aye, Helmor, through me, these things have transpired to my ends. Defeat have I brought upon you. Tamarizia would have held back the sword, had you possessed the child to place safely in her hands."

And then suddenly, as though to point the moral, appeared Naia, clasping the form of the infant the tawny siren had announced as slain, lifting it toward Helmor in suppliant fashion, even as in the flesh she held it to him once. And she spoke sinking upon her knees. "Take him and give him back to his father, O Helmor, and all will be well with thee again." And Helmor, seizing the infant, lifted it toward the skies and--Kalamita screamed, covering her face, and turned to stagger out of his presence, while a multitude of voices sounded, crying, "Hail to Helmor, saviour of his nation! Hail to Helmor the Wise!"

Whereat Helmor surged suddenly up in his bed, and sat blinking in the half dusk of his chamber, from one to another of his attendant slaves.

So for a moment he sat, and then, throwing off his coverings, he rose.

"Go," he directed in a voice that quivered with the emotion of his vision. "Rouse Gazar and say to him that I have dreamed, and require his presence."

And on the instant one of the slave girls dropped her fans and ran lithely from the room, leaving Helmor to sink back to a sitting posture on the couch, his heavy hands clasping his naked knees, his expression a thing of brooding, introspection, excited by his dream.

So he remained until a man entered the apartment and advanced toward him shuffling across the rug-littered tiles of the floor.

Old he was, bent, with no more than a fringe of ragged silver about an otherwise bald poll. Reaching the emperor's couch, he paused and bowed before him, in little more than an accentuation of his already stooping posture.

"Helmor of Zollaria calls," he quavered, "and Gazar, servant of Helmor, appears. Speak to me the things thou hast seen in a vision, O Helmor, that I may make plain their meaning to your ears."

Helmor dismissed the remaining slave girls and complied. Oddly enough Croft had an opportunity to test the success of his endeavor at first hand, as Helmor recited each detail of his dream, and Gazar listened, nodding his head less in silent accentuation of the several points than because of some form of palsy that continually shook him, watching his patron with dark and observant eyes.

He spoke only when Helmor had paused. "Thou didst lift the infant in thy arms, and Kalamita fled from before thee, shrieking?"

"Aye." Helmor inclined his head.

"In which is the meaning plain," said Gazar. "Let Helmor watch closely this woman, sister to him who captains all Zollaria's army--and let him guard closely the child of the Tamarizian Mouthpiece lest harm come upon it through her, who hating the father because of a personal slight put upon her in the past, thirsts now for an act of revenge."

Helmor nodded. "Gazar's words seem words of wisdom," he rejoined, narrowing his eyes, and recalling, as Croft fancied, Kalamita's scarcely veiled displeasure at his placing Naia and Jason under guard in the palace, her more recent suggestion concerning the sacrifice of the child. "How says he? Were this dream a vision?"

"Perchance," replied Gazar slowly. "It beareth the seeming of it. Were it to be repeated, Helmor should deem it such beyond all doubt."

"Aye and I will," said the Zollarian monarch. "If it comes again, I shall safeguard the child, placing a double watch upon it, and also upon this woman, whose beauty is too great to fail to sway men's minds."

Gazar appeared to consider.

"'Twere well to do so," he agreed at length. "The past sun it came to my ears that since her return she has visited the house of Ptah."

"Ptah?" Helmor stiffened. "Now, by Bel himself, he appeared in my dream--those together."

"Aye," the soothsayer made answer. Gazar did not miss the point. It was as but the naming of something already known.

As in his sleep Helmor contracted the fingers of a hand. His lips set. His expression became one of determination.

"Now, by Bel," he declared, "shall I indeed have this insolent beauty watched. Go. I shall ponder these things deeply. More lies within this vision than the fancies of a sleep-dulled brain."

Croft quitted the chamber as Gazar turned to leave it. He was determined that the succeeding night would see the dream repeated, with far less effort since now the pictures of its sequence were printed on the surfaces of Helmor's mind, and the man would go to his couch, considering the likelihood of his dreaming again. A vast elation, a reborn confidence thrilled Croft as he sought another room in the palace where Naia of Aphur lay on the soiled padding of a battered couch, cradling Jason, Son of Jason, in her arms.

He told her of his progress, how he should take Koryphu to Zitra, how there he should let him tell his story before Jadgor, how a message would be sent north through Mazhur, bearing Tamarizia's demands for a meeting between representatives of both nations, whereat Zollaria's demands and Tamarizia's attitude toward them might be discussed.

And then he left her and fled swiftly back to Himyra and the form on the copper couch.

Chapter XII

Three days after Helmor of Zollaria dreamed of the loss of a throne, and his ultimate salvation through the safety of a child, Jadgor's galley arrived at Himyra with Koryphu of Cathur aboard. During the interval Helmor dreamed again twice.

Koryphu's coming announced in advance from Scira was a somewhat stately affair, but seemingly failed to give the one-time prince much pleasure. His mien was solemn and he left the galley and met Robur and Jason on the quays before an observant crowd assembled for the occasion.

Bowing perforce to the welcoming people of Himyra, he took his seat in Robur's motur and maintained the poise of a noble until the palace was reached and he and his two companions were closeted alone. Then he let his feelings loose in a flood of resentful speech, describing all that had transpired at his meeting with Kalamita, and at the end of his narration laying in Jason's palm the purple signet ring.

"Whether this comes from Naia of Aphur of her own choice, or was forcibly taken from her I know not, O Mouthpiece of Zitu, but since it was given to me with the command to say she sent it to you with her plea for an early acceptance of the terms of ransom, I fulfill my mission and place it in your hands."

Croft turned the trinket gently. It affected him strangely--and he had little doubt of the thoughts unexpressed in Koryphu's mind.

"Think you, man of Cathur, that Naia, daughter of Jadgor's sister, cousin to Robur of Aphur, wife of Jason, sent this to him by the hand of Kalamita, through any choice save force? In Zitu's name, let me have your answer and promptly--son of Scythys' house."

Koryphu's face grew pale. "Nay, Jason--I meant nought save to make plain the thought that Kalamita had added this to her efforts to persuade you. May Zilla strike me if I sought to question her who is Jason's wife."

Croft nodded. "Then let the matter remain between ourselves. Koryphu of Cathur, so soon as you are refreshed, we go to Zitra, to hold speech with Jadgor in person concerning these things."

"Let not Koryphu delay you," Koryphu said quickly. "Refreshment were not needful in a pressing matter or one involving the safety of Jason's wife and son."

"Accept Jason's gratitude then instead," he made answer. "So quickly as the galley shall fill her tanks with fuel for the motur, we shall go aboard."

Zitra rose white before them the morning of the fourth day, ringed by its shimmering walls, fairylike as a mirage on first appearance. Tamarizia's flag was broken out above the galley and it darted into the inner harbor through the massive silver-faced sea doors.

The quays were banked with life. Jadgor, Lakkon, and members of the national assembly showed in metal harness of gem-encrusted garments; Zud, the high priest, stood beside them, backed by a group of harpists, a band of the Gayana, the vestals of the pyramid, mark of Croft's semireligious position in the nation.

White-clad they were, their hair loosened save for a binding silver fillet, their lower limbs cased in white leather nearly to their rosy knees. And back of them was the crowd, close pressed, necks craning restrained by members of the Zitran guard, who were patrolling the quays or massed about the moturs, the carriages of the

assemblymen, the officials of state, in a glittering phalanx at the end of the street of approach.

Croft saw it all with a swelling heart as the galley touched the quay and a gangplank was run out. The trumpets of the guardsmen blared and the harpists lifted their instruments into position, their voices mounted in a chant of welcome and blended with the clamor of the crowd.

At the foot of the gangplank, Jadgor and Zud and Lakkon waited. Jadgor and he struck palms.

"Hail, Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu," said Naia's uncle, and turned to Croft's companion. "And to Koryphu of Cathur greeting. It has come to my ear that Scythys' son has served right loyally Zitu's Mouthpiece and in him all the people of Tamarizia as well. Wherefore is he welcome to Zitra and Jadgor's palace as an honored guest."

The face of the Cathurian twitched. "Now, by Zitu, O Jadgor," he replied in a tone of quick emotion, "your words make the heart of Koryphu beat once more as the heart of a man."

Zud spoke to Jason. "Thou must speak to them, lord." His glance turned to the close-packed throng of faces. "For many days their thoughts have been upon you. They await the Mouthpiece of Zitu's words at this time."

"Aye." Croft nodded. "Here?"

"Nay," said Zud, "the matter is arranged."

Again Croft inclined his head and turned to lay his hand on Lakkon's shoulder. "Father of Naia," he said, "this coming marks a step toward the goal to which both thee and Jason turn their hearts. Yet this sun

shall make all plain."

Then turning again to Zud, he followed toward the high priest's car, in which the prelate indicated that he was to ride.

Jadgor and Lakkon entered their motur. The phalanx of guardsmen swung about. The trumpeters took the van. The harpists fell in before Zud and Jason. The Gayana--their arms filled with brilliant flowers--ranged themselves on either side, and lifted their voices in song. The procession moved off along the level floor of Zitra's pavements, through the welcoming throng, to pause after a time in the midst of a broad, open space.

Croft recognized it with leaping pulses as the square in which he had been proclaimed as Zitu's Mouthpiece--saw that once more it held an elevated stage.

Upon it he mounted with Zud and Jadgor and Lakkon, the men of the assembly--the harpists--the Gayana--over a carpet of the flowers they cast before his feet. His eyes swept over the faces of the concourse. His heart swelled oddly at the sight. This was Tamarizia--her people. This was Zitra--her citizens.

He lifted his hand. The throbbing of the harps--the liquid voices of the Gayana died. Croft spoke. To those lifted faces he told the story of all that had happened, the reason for his coming again to Zitra. To them he gave the substance of Zollaria's demands. A sound ran through them--deep, low-pitched--an unmistakable thing of amazement and resentment. It was as if the multitude groaned.

He waited until it was past and gave them his word--the word of the Mouthpiece of Zitu, that Tamarizia would never yield an acceptance. He bade them to be of good courage, waiting until the steps he was intent on taking could produce results--and them--should his plans

fail--should harm befall Naia of Aphur or Jason, Son of Jason--he promised them to call on them to follow him into action--to lead them once more against Zollaria with the sword.

And now the people cheered. Croft lifted his arms, high-flung before them. "Zollaria shall receive Tamarizia's answer ere long."

Again the roar of voices beat back like the pulse of a human surf upon his ears.

He dropped his arms and turned.

"Come," he said to Jadgor. Together they left the platform and entered the president's car, with Koryphu and Lakkon.

"This night the assembly meets to hear Jason's pleasure," Jadgor said as he took his place at Croft's side. "Robur bade me smooth the path of your mission in a message. Wherefore I have summoned their number to a special session, since he said also that I best could aid you by arranging for your return to Himyra with speed."

"Aye," Croft replied, his heart warming toward Robur. "Speed in all things, O Jadgor. So shall we solve this riddle. Speed in our work of preparation--in the execution of our plans--speed so great that we shall strike in terror upon the sight of Helmor and all Berla, and ere they expect our coming, wake to the threat of our presence over Berla's walls."

"Hai!" Jadgor's eyes flashed at the answer. "Robur said naught save that once more the forges of Himyra roar to the making of yet another marvel."

Croft nodded. "Which presently I shall make plain."

And he kept the promise, once the four men were closeted in a small room of the palace, its sliding door covered by a scarlet curtain, its windows partly veiled by crimson tissues, its floors half concealed by gorgeous rugs.

First he called on Koryphu for his story of the meeting with Kalamita and after the Cathurian had spoken, he explained all he intended doing and all that thus far he had done.

At the end Koryphu was standing rigid, wide of eye and flared of nostril, with back-thrown head. Lakkon was watching, leaning against the end of a table, and Jadgor had thrown a hand across his body and was gripping the hilt of his heavy-bladed sword.

"Now, by Zitu," he exclaimed, his tone a trifle hoarsened. "Fire? Hah! Let them call on Bel if they still desire it. Tamarizia shall bring them fire from the skies themselves--clean fire--unlike that their filthy priesthood builds in their stinking god."

"Aye," said Croft. "The fire of Zitu's justice, O Jadgor--that shall destroy the guilty wholly should the innocent come to harm."

Jadgor opened his lips, paused and relaxed the tightened muscles of his throat by a swallowing movement. "By Zitu--this mission you shall ask tonight is therefore no more than a means of gaining time?"

"Aye. Zollaria expects it. Let it be sent to occupy her mind."

The lips of the Tamarizian president twitched. "Oh, aye--it departs for Mazhur beyond any doubting. We shall demand the naming of an embassy to confer with men of our choosing."

Abruptly Lakkon asked a tense-voiced question--"Thou art assured she lies even now within Berla's walls?"

"Aye," Croft told him, looking him steadily in the eyes. "And the father of Naia of Aphur knows well how Jason knows."

Jadgor nodded. "Enough," he said, rising, "we have gained an ample understanding and Cathur has been overlong aboard the galley. It were fitting now that he refresh himself."

Summoning an attendant he gave orders that Koryphu be conducted to a room.

Lakkon rose also, remaining until the Cathurian had quitted the apartment, then turned to Croft.

"Thou hast seen her, Jason, my son?" he faltered--"thou hast seen her and the child--hast spoken with her in the spirit?"

Croft smiled as he made answer--"Aye, since last I saw thee, Lakkon, many times."

"She lies in Berla, indeed?"

"Aye--beneath Helmor's palace."

"How fares she? Sent she no message by thee?"

"Aye, the love and respect of a daughter." Croft explained the situation from first to last, even describing the manner in which Helmor had been warned.

When next he paused Jadgor's eyes were narrowed to rigid slits, and Lakkon's features were pale and drawn.

"Zitu," he said in husky fashion, "I doubt not thy power, my son. Think you the man will give heed to such a warning sufficiently long?"

"Aye--Tamarizia's messenger reaches him with a demand for parley," Croft declared from the depths of his inmost feeling. "Think you I had taken time to journey thus to Zitra, save that to my mind the step were one wholly needful to the full success of my plans?"

Jadgor spoke. "Nay, Jason is right. This step is that of a statesman. Let Zollaria lie unsuspecting, while his devices are in the making. Tonight the matter of the messenger and his message will be arranged."

Chapter XIII

Jadgor's faith in the action of the assembly proved justified, in fact. Croft went before the representatives of the Tamarizian states that very same night.

With Koryphu to precede him, telling of the meeting in the mountains, he waited until the Cathurian had lashed the minds of the men who heard him to a pitch of sullen fury, then rose slowly to his feet.

"These demands bid for no consideration," he began and paused, laying his hand on the hilt of his sword.

An outburst of swift acclaim greeted the words and was followed by silence as he explained the object of his presence in Zitra--emphasized the need of a messenger being sent north, and asked for their sanctioning word.

Now and then he was interrupted by a question, but for the most part he spoke without interruption.

"Grant me this, O representatives of Tamarizia--give me time to prepare Tamarizia's answer to this coward's threat of a treacherous nation, which, daring not again the shock of arms, seeks yet to win back her lost prestige behind the tender bodies of a woman and her child. Grant me the power to meet craft with craft, nor think that the signet given to Koryphu was stripped from the hand of Naia of Aphur save by force, in the treacherous hope that it might seem to support a spurious plea from her that Tamarizia yield."

For a moment no one spoke after he had finished and stood waiting for their answer, and then the man from Bithur rose.

"Nay," he cried, "not that Naia, daughter of Jadgor's sister, daughter of Lakkon--not that Naia, who was wed to Zitu's Mouthpiece within Atla of Bithur when the blue hordes of Mazzer captained by the brother of this same Kalamita, and other men of his nation, lapped like the waves of an unclean sea against Atla's walls. Not of such metal is her spirit. Tamarizians, send this messenger north from Mazhur; let him demand that Zollaria support or deny her woman agent's words."

"Aye--aye," came other voices.

Jadgor rose, his silver cuirass blazing. "Add to the message answer to Kalamita's foul threat, that if aught befalls Jason, Son of Jason--aye, or Naia, mother of Jason--ere parley is held on the matter, Tamarizia waits but the knowledge to unsheathe the sword."

"Aye--aye," again a storm of voices answered his suggestion.

"A vote--a vote!" someone began shouting.

"Let Tamarizia's message be strong."

In the end, once the turmoil exited by the Bithurian and Jadgor had in a measure subsided, a formal vote was taken, and Croft himself was empowered to draft the message entrusting it to one of the regular government couriers--men so employed for years and of trained endurance. Well satisfied, he went back to the palace, worked half the night in formulating it to his liking, interviewed the man who was to bear it and watched his galley sail out of Zitra and turn north at dawn.

And now Himyra and his work behind its red walls called him. He lost small time in answering its call. Once more his galley slipped forth from the massive sea doors. Zitra sank into the Central Sea--or seemed to, slipping little by little beneath the sparkling waters with its

shimmering milk-white walls.

Speed. He had used the word to Jadgor. And now he called upon the captain of the galley for it--speed to Himyra. And he promised himself speed on the task before him once he reached Aphur's ruddy city--such speed as never before, not even in the heat of his preparation against the Zollarian war, had he employed.

For three days he chafed against the surge and plunge of the galley, the slither of each passing wave, until after dawn on the morn of the fourth, the mouth of the Na was reached. Eight days had been consumed on the journey--eight days, and how much longer until he finished his work?

He had forbidden word of his coming preceding him to Robur's city. He wanted no trumpery of public welcomes, no ceremonials, however slight, to delay his purpose now. Almost before the galley had tied fast to the quays he left it, and threw himself into his task.

He gave himself wholly to it. He appeared unexpectedly that afternoon in the shops, the forges, learning that Robur had not been idle, with a mounting satisfaction, finally meeting Aphur's governor face to face on one of his stops.

"Zitu!" cried Robur. "I knew not of your returning. Is it your spirit come to mark my progress, Jason, my friend, or do I behold you in the flesh?"

"Both," Croft answered. "Spirit and flesh united on the work before us, Rob, at last."

"All is arranged?" Robur's eyes flashed with anticipation.

"Aye." Jason inclined his head. "There should be naught to distract

from our labors from now until the end."

"The end--*hai*--the end," said Robur. "Together we shall bring it quickly, my friend."

Little by little each day the work advanced. The liquid fire was an accomplished fact. Trusted men--the best educated in their line in Himyra--were engaged now upon its production, its preparation for the final venture, as they filled it into the containing flasks.

The shapes of six blimps were slowly forming--huge, unwieldy-seeming bags constructed out of Croft's varnished cloth. Little by little the means of putting the plan of rescue into execution was taking concrete form at last.

Miles of rope and cordage were flowing out of the shops--were being woven into the harness by which the cars should be swung beneath the gigantic envelopes. Vast quantities of chemicals were being collected toward the production of unlimited cubic feet of hydrogen gas.

Through all the seeming chaos Jason moved, ordering, directing, with a fresh certainty of precision now, as something like a definite result to all the days and nights of labor showed.

With him went Robur, aiding and abetting in all ways toward the successful issue of the task. Gaya listened each night to a report of the progress made.

During the war with Mazzer, Croft had perfected a dry-cell battery to solve the ignition troubles of the armored moturs. Now with the liquid fire in the process of manufacture, he turned himself to the problem of constructing an electric flashlight, by which signals between the blimps could be exchanged.

Days passed. A Zitran had elapsed since his return from Zitra. At its end word came by wireless that Zollaria's answer had been received--that Helmor consented to the naming of a Zollarian delegate to discuss the terms of ransom--that a Tamarizian party would be formed and sent north to meet them, with instructions to protract the negotiations, turn the parleys between the Zollarians and themselves into a useless war of words.

Croft read the message and wirelessly back his ratification of it. He was very well pleased indeed. Let the matter be delayed yet another Zitran as it might without exciting undue suspicion, since it would take well-nigh half that time for the two delegations to be arranged and get together, and he felt he would be practically prepared.

Even now six monster bags were nearing completion in the huge sheds built by swarming workmen for their housing. The cars were ready for attaching, the moturs to be installed. That ceaseless driving of a double shift had crowded the work of two Zitrans into one so far as results were concerned. Satisfied with the word from Zitra, Croft flung himself into the last stages of his task with redoubled vigor. The envelopes were inflated and floated clear of the ground.

Workmen swarmed about them on spidery trestles and stages, harnessing each monster inside its network of securely knotted cordage, binding fast with each intricate twist and turning as it seemed to the man who ceaselessly watched them, so part of his desperate hope.

Motur-trucks brought from the ships of their fabrication the cages to be hung beneath each tensely floating shape. Men sweating at their labor, made them fast. The new moturs Croft had designed at first were assembled, delivered, and mounted. Propellers were set in place. Day by day the first dirigibles of Palos grew nearer to

completion.

Robur was inseparable during those days from Croft. He viewed the monster devices with unbounded enthusiasm and amaze, vowing them the marvel of their age, repeating over and over again his own conception of the consternation they must cause in Zollarian minds when, without warning, they appeared and hung above Berla's walls. Gaya drove down at his solicitation on one occasion and gazed at the hugely bulking shapes out of widening brown eyes.

Word came again from Zitra that the Tamarizian delegation had gone north.

"Let them go," Croft cried to Robur. "Ere long shall Jason follow."

Came a day when the last rivet was driven home, the last nut screwed into place, when Croft distributed largess to the workmen and a vast roar of human voices filled all the places where his latest creation had been given birth. Croft stood with Robur and viewed them--the mighty engines for the deliverance of his hostages to fate. His heart leaped.

"With the sun," he said, turning to his companion, "let Himyra see them. We make a test."

"I and thou," Robur returned, flashing his even teeth.

Croft nodded. His hand crept out and closed on the other man's. "Aye, Rob, if you wish."

Robur's muscles gripped down upon his fingers. "And not only to the testing, friend of Aphur, but even to Berla itself."

"Berla." Croft loosened his hand to lay it on Robur's shoulder, looked

into the son of Jadgor's eager face. "It is not in my heart, Rob, to refuse you anything in this."

Dawn came and Himyra gasped--gasped and stood with heads back-tilted, staring upward at a might oblong bag that swung in majestic fashion high above the walls. It hung there like a monstrous bubble, glinting as the rays of Sirius struck upon it--drifting slowly as it seemed before the winds of morning. And yet--even as they watched it, turning and moving against the wind in steady fashion--silently--without seeming reason, too high above the red, red city of Aphur for the ears of her people to sense how its moturs roared.

An hour before--under direction of Croft and Robur--it had been dragged slowly forth from its concealing shed. With filled tanks its engines waited the awakening touch of the engineers--men selected for this first attempt at dirigible navigation from the aviation personnel by Croft himself. A huge flask of the liquid fire, equipped with its spraying device, was attached to the carrier designed to hold it. When this was done Croft and Robur stepped aboard.

A hundred workmen--men who had labored to construct it--held the ropes that still controlled it, ready to release it at a word.

"Let go!" That word came in the Mouthpiece of Zitu's voice.

Two hundred hands relaxed their hold upon the ropes. The blimp soared toward the skies.

Himyra fell away beneath it, became a red gem on the yellow sand of the desert, the breast of Aphur, pierced by the thread of the Na like a sparkling, supporting chain. To the north and east the waters of the Central Sea showed as burnished silver under the first rays of the sun.

Robur made no comment, said no word. He stood tight-lipped, gripping the rail of the platform on which they rode with tensely muscled hands. Croft ordered the engines started--and even so there was no feeling that the mighty fabric moved. Rather it seemed stationary, the only solid thing in all existence, while Palos and all it held dropped away from beneath it, until Himyra's palaces and shops and houses became things no larger than the toys of children, her people, pigmies moving antlike on her streets.

Croft pointed beyond the walls.

"The desert," he said and watched while the blimp answered to the manipulation of her engines--her rudder and vanes. "It is in my mind to try first the liquid fire upon its scanty vegetation, where it can do small harm."

And after that he waited until they flew above a comparatively level tract of country, covered by a low-growing shrub that thrived on scanty moisture, before he stationed himself at the spraying device and opened the valve of the flask.

Far below, the scrub blossomed suddenly into tiny points of color like swiftly opening flowers--that grew, expanded, ran together in patches and lines of quivering light, until the whole mass of vegetation vanished, blotted out beneath a leaping sea of flame. A moment before it had lain there unchanged, as it and the desert had lain practically unchanged for years, and now it was a seething, smoking, blazing thing, sinking down in a red destruction unloosed upon it from the skies.

Croft closed the tank. "Back to Himyra," he cried and turned a set face to Robur, to find his features pale and rigid.

"It is finished, Rob," he said, speaking in a voice that quivered

tensely. "As soon as the fliers are trained we go north."

Chapter XIV

That day he entered his motur once the blimp had landed, drove to the airplane hangars, and called for volunteers to man the other five ships.

Returning with the men selected he personally tested each blimp, rising, maneuvering and returning before a constantly growing crowd, which in the end required the use of a detachment of the Himyran guard for its restraining.

Himyra was seething with an exciting augmented with the ascent of each mighty glistening bag. A jostling throng pressed like an impenetrable wall about the sheds, as each new monster was towed out by its straining attendants, was manned by its waiting crew, and rose. They watched and pointed, gesticulated, and cheered.

"Hail to the Mouthpiece of Zitu!" they roared whenever Croft appeared.

That night, eagerness possessed him when he sought his chamber and laid himself down--an eagerness that had possessed him through the length of the day--an eagerness to visit Naia and tell her that the thing was done.

He closed his eyes and released the bond of his spirit. North and north he fled to Berla, and to Helmor's palace and the room beneath it--to stand gazing with eager eyes on Naia of Aphur's form.

Pale as death she sat there, waiting, waiting, as she had waited so long, and she was speaking. "Jason--Jason." Over and over she was repeating the word to his son.

"Ja-son--" the baby lips repeated with a screaming effort. And Naia of Aphur smiled and gathered him into her arms.

Jason--with a full heart Croft understood that she was teaching the child the name of his father--that this word was one of the first his tongue had known.

"Beloved--O my beloved!" he sent their meeting call to her.

She stiffened, threw up her head, and turned to Maia.

"Come, take the child, thou faithful one," she directed--waited until the blue girl had complied and stretched her form on the couch, ere she answered his summons, releasing her astral body to steal into Croft's waiting arms.

For a moment he simply held her, and then he told her. "Beloved--the time approaches. The thing is done."

"Done?" she faltered.

"Aye, finished wholly," Jason said, and felt her quiver--sensed the fires of her astral being quicken--found the form he held suddenly glowing.

"Now Zitu be praised." In all her slender length she pressed suddenly closer to him. "Draws then so near the day?"

"Aye, by Zitu," he declared.

"I know not the meaning of it," Naia said, "but Maia lies daily on the straw within the door of our chamber--and she had heard mutterings now and then among the guard. Thy mention of Bandhor recalls it. Kalamita's brother has come among them within the last few suns, if one may credit their speech among themselves."

"Bandhor? To what purpose?"

"Nay, I know not. Maia but heard mention of his presence--some word concerning Helmor's signet."

"His signet? Hai!" Croft found himself suddenly shaken. "Now may Zitemku seize that woman, and Adita turn her favor from her!"

"Thou meanest--Kalamita?" And now Naia clung against him, not in womanly yearning, but with the quick fear of a mother. "Jason..."

"Aye," he said tensely, "have you forgotten how she forced thy own ring from thee--or the foul thing she planned, save Helmor had overruled her? Now Zitu be thanked you have spoken of this in time since, in my own way, those things she plans may be learned, and Helmor warned. Farewell, thou mate of Jason. He goes to learn what they plan."

Once more, then, it behooved him to bring himself into contact with the woman Kalamita. He willed himself toward her, passed swiftly to Bandhor's palace and failed to find any sign; paused, baffled for a time before he recalled the scene he had witnessed between her and Ptah, Bel's priest, in the latter's quarters in the temple. Then, where better if she were plotting against Helmor, he asked himself, than in that ebon-walled room.

Swiftly he sought it, and there he found her--and not only her, but Bandhor, Ptah, and another, a heretofore unknown man.

The four were seated around Ptah's table, where flaring oil lamps partly dispelled the gloom, pricking out the intent masks of the several faces, causing iridescent flashes of light from the jeweled bands that circled Kalamita's arms, and broidered her garment's

hem.

"It is to thee, Panthor," she declared, eyeing the third masculine member of the party. "It is for thee to say whether thy cousin shall hold Zollaria's throne. Twice have his plans to humble Tamarizia failed, his efforts proved vain. Think not but the people say Helmor has no more Bel's favor--wherefore Zollaria is no longer strong. So then--a quick stroke and the thing is done."

"Aye--a quick stroke." Panthor nodded. He was heavy-set, not unlike Helmor, his cousin, in a way, with full lips of a sensual turn and closely cut hair, the stubble of which was blond. "But--regarding this child. I question not the sincerity of Kalamita, yet were it slain--even to gain Bel's favor, which none more than I admit is needful, would not Tamarizia, according to her own words, descend upon us with superior weapons and bring defeat to our armies again?"

"By Bel, has then Panthor so little faith in his favor?" Ptah exclaimed.

"Peace." Kalamita's red lips curled. "Your question is a man's question, Panthor, and the question not of a man's heart, but his brain. Think you Tamarizia means all she says--or speaks to gain her ends? This Mouthpiece is a man--and Naia of Aphur is a woman--and though a child be slain, still is she a woman and the mate of Jason, and he has twice defeated Helmor's plans to gain. Think you the child's death would change the heart of Tamarizia's strong man, or that he would carry his threat far--were she kept safe from harm to be surrendered once more to his arms?"

"Nay, by Bel!" roared Bander, striking the table. "My sister has struck the mark in her words--with Bel's favor purchased--her oath redeemed and the woman still on our possession, Tamarizia may well balk a resort to arms. It remains then to get the child in our hands."

"My hands," said Ptah.

Bandhor nodded. "Aye, into thy hands, Priest of the Strong One--and there is a way in which it may be done. Let Helmor's signet be presented to the captain of the guard now placed upon him, and our ends are gained."

Kalamita leaned half across the table toward Panthor.

"Thou knowest the device on Helmor's ring?"

"Aye," said Panthor slowly.

"And thou knowest some worker of stones?"

"Aye, Priestess of Adita."

"Then let Panthor see Helmor's sign cut on a stone," Kalamita rose. "And let him place it in Bandhor's hand when it is done. Ptah, build you the fires--let them be ready for the torch at the appointed time. Kalamita's oath to the Strong One shall be redeemed. How long, Panthor, before thy part shall be done?"

"Ten suns, perchance twelve," said Panthor, he and Bandhor also rising.

"See to it." Kalamita turned to leave the room. Ptah moved his heavy body to set the door open before her, and Bandhor joined her. They passed out and were gone.

Ptah turned back. "Hail emperor, favorite of Bel," he said, bending his heavy neck to incline his head to Panthor.

Panthor's expression changed. He drew himself up to his fullest

height. Already he seemed to sense the weight of authority upon him as he answered. "By Bel--O Ptah--thou and I together once Helmor sits no more upon the throne."

Chapter XV



Ten days, at most twelve, before Helmor's spurious sign should be cut on a lying stone. And then one would bear it down to that dungeon where Naia waited a promised rescue, and with it as authority, demand the child. And after that. Croft sickened as he left Ptah's chamber--sickened and the thought of what might have happened save for Maia's listening ear as she lay on the straw inside the door of the dungeon--Naia's mention of the words the blue girl had overheard to him.

But--suddenly he stiffened. In ten days a great deal might be done. Helmor might be warned as he had said to Naia--or--the rescue might actually be performed.

In the end he made his way back to the palace and into Helmor's chamber. The man would be asleep, he fancied, but once he had gained his apartments he met with a surprise. Far from sleep, Zollaria's emperor sat in consultation with Gazar, the soothsayer he had summoned to him the night of his first dream of danger, and a man Croft had once defeated on a bloody field, and learned later to know by sight at the end of the first Zollarian war as Helmon, Helmor's son.

Helmor's face was dark with ill-suppressed rage.

"Thou sayest that Panthor, my cousin, entered the house of Bel, upon

their heels. What makest thou of it, Gazar? Speak thou who for years have been to me eyes and ears."

So that was it. Soothsayer Gazar might be, but he evidently combined the work of espionage with his other vocation, as it now appeared.

Croft gave him full attention as he began speaking slowly.

"Helmor knows the claim his cousin makes for his house in Zollarian affairs. Were Bandhor to support him it were ill indeed. And Bandhor is the brother of Kalamita--whose power would appear to have made drunk her spirit as her beauty had made drunk the hearts of men. Also there is the matter of the Tamarizian's child."

"Bandor, Kalamita, Panthor--'tis a pretty trio, my father," Helmor said. "The woman grants her favor lightly where her interest is involved--and Panthor is a man and ambitious--even as Ptah is a man, though a priest. Also has she a debt of hate to be repaid against this Mouthpiece of Zitu--whom I love not myself. Lies anything definite against them, O Gazar?"

"Nay"--the old man shook his head--"naught as yet save what one may suspect..."

"Then"--Helmor leaned toward him to speak in lowered tones--"what would Gazar advise?"

"Look to the woman and the child. To me it is known that Bandhor has been among his guard. Let it be changed from sun to sun, O Helmor, neither captained by or including the same men twice. So it appears to me he shall be safe for the present, unless some unforeseen happening transpire. Let Panthor be watched closely by trusted men--watch for a meeting between any two or all of the four

we have mentioned, tonight, again."

"It is well." Helmor leaned back in his seat. "See to it, Helmon, that the guard be changed. Distribute also a largess to the palace guard--announce additional pay to the soldiery in Berla of twenty mina, for the Zitran, and afterward as much. Gazar--have me these others watched. By Bel, our cousin may find it requires more to cast Helmor from his throne than the schemes of a woman and a priest."

"Zitu." Croft breathed the word in his spirit. Helmor of Zollaria was far from asleep, indeed. More than that, now that he was awake he was well served. Panthor would seek an engraver of stones inside the next day or two, at latest, and Panthor would be watched. Helmor had more than one pair of eyes.

Croft's confidence returned. After all, Kalamita and Ptah were not the only ones in Berla who played the game of statecraft, it would seem; he returned again to Naia, and told her what had occurred--watched her astral fires pale and quicken, as side by side they bent over the child.

"By Ga and Azil," he swore, "we shall not lose him. I go now to return in the flesh to Berla, by Zitu's aid inside Panthor's limit of days."

"Zitu go with you and return again with you, Beloved."

Back, back to Himyra, sped the spirit of Jason Croft. It crept in the form on the couch of molded copper and opened its eyes. It urged it up atingle with the knowledge it brought and all it involved. It sent it seeking an attendant to bid the guardsman find the apartment of Robur and rouse him from his slumbers and summon him to the Mouthpiece of Zitu's chamber at once.

And when Aphur's governor appeared with sleep driven swiftly from

him, Croft told him all he had seen and heard.

"Wherefore," he made an ending, "we go north from Himyra in three suns."

"Three?" Robur stared. "But, by Zitu, Jason, think you their crews may learn so quickly to control them?"

Croft nodded. "They are eager. In the morn I explain to them that there comes a need of haste. On the fourth day we go north with such as are able to follow. The rest may remain. Also, we take six of the airplanes with us."

"Aye," Robur said--"yet can they fly not to such a distance. Short of Berla must they descend for fuel."

"At Scira, at Niera," Croft told him, giving the routing of the planes as well as an answer. "Send in my name a message to Scira--that with morn a swift galley depart for Niera, bidding Mazhur send a quantity of the fuel north along the highway to within a day's march of the northern border of the state. In these things, Rob, lies my reason for calling you to me. Much must be arranged ere we start."

"Aye." A look of steely purpose crept into Robur's eyes. "As ever, Jason, my friend, you are ready. The message shall be sent without delay." He rose.

"We will take with us the man who sends it, also," said Croft. "Let it be understood. Once we are over Berla it will be needful that there be one who shall understand the signals of the flashlights I have made, since according to my plans I shall land a plane in the square before Helmor's palace."

Robur's eyes widened suddenly. "*Thou* wilt land a plane before his

palace!"

"Aye," Croft answered, smiling slightly. "Who else? Think you I shall trust the final mission to another? Wherefore I shall require a man on one of the blimps to read any such message as I may give."

The glances of the two men continued to hold for a breathless moment, and then Robur said with feeling, "By Zitu--thou art a brave man, Jason, yet I sense not your plan in this. They will but fall upon thee..."

"Nay." Croft shook his head. "Nay, Rob--and you think so, you sense not my plan indeed. Ere I make a landing before the palace of Helmor, a part--a small part of Berla--but one adjoining the space about the palace, shall be ablaze. In the light of that conflagration shall Jason of Tamarizia descend--and call upon Helmor for the surrender of the ones he holds to ransom, under penalty of seeing the remainder of Berla destroyed. Think you he will long falter, or seek to injure my person? Nay, he will make the better choice."

"Aye," Robur said a trifle gruffly because of his blended emotions, "now I understand thee, Jason. But it would take Zitu's Mouthpiece to undertake it in such fashion. And what does Robur of Aphur to aid the success of the venture?"

Once more Croft smiled. He laid a hand on his companion's shoulder. "He watches from the sky for any message I shall flash with the signal-lamp I shall carry--which, being interpreted to him by the man of the message tower, he shall see translated instantly into deeds. So shall he safeguard Jason's life--perhaps."

"Perhaps, aye," said Robur. "So be it. I shall send the message as Zitu's Mouthpiece directs. As for the rest, I like it not."

Turning, he stalked from the room with a gloomy face.

To himself, Croft admitted perforce that his plan was in the nature of a somewhat desperate chance. Yet he believed that he had read the Zollarian spirit aright—felt assured that he was predicating Helmor's actions correctly.

Returning with the assurance that he had despatched a messenger with his orders, Robur found him no whit less firm in his resolution, and they discussed all details attendant on the departure of the blimps through the further course of the night.

Morning ushered in three days of well-nigh ceaseless toil, of practice with the giant aircraft by day—of an overhauling of them, a correcting of minor faults by night, of consultations with the fliers in which every step of the expedition was explained to them by Croft—of a grooming and testing of the six planes that were to accompany the monster dirigibles north.

Mutlos of Cathur sent back word the first day that the galley for Niera had put forth. That same night Croft and Robur visited the wireless tower, and Croft demonstrated his signaling flash.

The man, trained to receiving and sending, read the code with little trouble, transcribing more than one message correctly and then flashing them back to Croft. Then seating himself again at his key, he sent word to Zitra that the expedition was about to set forth.

There followed two more straining days wherein Croft gave it out that only four blimps would be taken, and those manned by the crews that showed the greatest aptitude in their work. Four, he had decided, would be enough for the venture, and at dawn on the morning of the fourth day they rose like monstrous glistening bubbles above Himyra's walls, and pointed their blunt noses north.

Three days to Niera, to reach which the swiftest galley took five. So he had planned it. And at Niera he would descend. Long before he had taken the necessary steps for that--sending what apparatus he would require to the capital of Mazhur--that it might be ready for any need.

The night before had seen the airplanes depart for Scira on the first leg of their flight. From there they would go to Niera, and there the entire expedition would once more meet.

Three days, he thought, as he watched Himyra drop away beneath him with the gaping, cheering crowds that had gathered to see the blimps depart. Three days and four were seven. A day at Niera, to overhaul any weakness that might have developed in the flight across the Central Sea, a half day to the northern borders of Mazhur, the last jump, before the final hop off for the planes. And from there to Berla--four hundred miles or a trifle over. He allowed eight hours for that.

Higher and higher soared the blimps. A strong wind raged about them, bucking the roaring kick of the propellers. Higher yet, he gave command. Higher and still higher, seeking a favorable current, higher and higher, until it was found--then north--north--where once more as always the lodestone of Naia of Aphur's being drew him--north and north. He was going north at last!

The thought fired him. There was no sense of motion. Even as in the astral body, it was as though he himself stood silent and all beneath him moved. Overhead the monster gas-bag glinted like a thing of silver under the Sirian ray. Below him lay the no longer yellow ribbon of the Na, framed in the green band of the irrigated lands.

To the north the Central Sea showed sparkling in the morning sunshine. And beyond the Central Sea was Mazhur--and beyond

Mazhur--Naia. Naia and Jason, Son of Jason--captive in a hostile land. A wonderful, a mighty, a vast exaltation of the spirit seized him. He was going to her, borne swiftly out across the Central Sea on a favoring wind, as though Zitu himself had filled the lungs of his Omnipotent purpose, and were wafting him on his mission of salvation with a strong, beneficent blast.

Purposely he had placed the wireless operator aboard the blimp under command of Rob. That night they exchanged signals--flashing message and answer between them, as the tireless engines roared. The moons of Palos rose and turned the Central Sea to indigo and silver--glinted on the monster racing-bags. Far down, their shadows raced across the tossing waves beneath them, like the shadows of weird clouds.

Far off--a blot on the glinting waters--a galley showed. Croft found himself wondering just what emotions the sight of the four huge aircraft might cause aboard. At least he was sure the moons of Palos--those moons by whose light he had first held Naia of Aphur in his arms and kissed her--had never before beheld a similar sight. For a long time after he had ceased signaling to Robur's blimp he sat brooding, staring off across the moon-burnished surface of the waters which showed on every side.

And then, wrapping himself in a robe, since the night was chill at that elevation, he laid himself down and after a time, to all appearances, he slept.

In reality, he came to Earth as he had come the night on which he had decided on the step upon which he had now set forth. He came and roused me and told me all that had occurred on Palos during the intervening months since we had spoken together last.

And the thing fired me, woke in me an intense desire, so that as he

paused I cried, "Croft, let me be present--let me see the end of the thing, at least."

He smiled. "Man," he said, "I knew you'd say that, and the thing will be at night, three, four, five--six nights after this. Listen for my call then, Murray, and after that--you'll have to shift for yourself."

I nodded. "Just the same, I'll stick pretty close to you," I declared.

"You can do it in the shape you'll be in," he retorted, smiling. "On the last hop off from just south of Helmor's country, I'll be aboard a plane. Rob knows his work, and he'll captain the blimps. They'll slip over Berla after dark and light up the buildings fronting the palace square. There is a bit of country outside the city that I'll make just about dusk, and land. From there when I see the light of the fire, I'll simply zoom up over the walls and alight in front of Helmor's doors--or that's the way I've got it planned. So you see it's lucky you're going to be capable of speedy motion, Murray, if you expect to go along."

"But see here," I objected, "won't it be pretty risky coming down outside the city, like that?"

He shook his head. "You haven't quite learned Palos yet, Murray. I'll hit a tract of uninhabited country, of course. If I were a Zollarian, I could pull the same stunt in the desert outside Himyra's walls. Now, do you understand?"

I said I did, and he left me. And that is the way in which I came to witness the ending of the duel between Zollaria and Tamarizia, but more particularly between Kalamita and Jason, the Mouthpiece of Zitu, I shall endeavor to describe.

Of what intervened during the next five days I know of course only by hearsay. Briefly, Croft made Niera on time, and came down. The

airplanes--five of them, that is--arrived. The other had come to grief and been compelled to remain behind. He did not wait for it, but pressed on. The final stopping-place was reached.

Croft, to Robur's horror, made use of a parachute with which he had equipped each ship, and dropped safely to the ground. Robur sailed into the north, and Croft, waiting until the planes had filled their fuel tanks for the final stage of the journey, rose to follow just after the noontide hour of prayer.

The hour of prayer. Eight hours he had allowed himself to cover the last four hundred miles. If nothing went wrong he could come in sight of Berla about dusk--and he would keep the blimps in sight, of course. One hour, two, three passed with the steady drone of the motor in his ears--four, five, six. Another, and the blimps paused and began a majestic circling.

Berla was in sight from their greater elevation, and twilight was falling. Across it he winked his signal--and was answered by a responsive flash. The plane fled on, swerving to one side to find the spot where it should lie waiting. Like a great bat swooping, it sank and went skimming across the darkening landscape, seeking a place to alight. In the end it grounded far out beyond the now shadowy outlines of Berla's walls.

Croft leaned back in his seat. Briefly he spoke to his pilot and seemed to rest, sagging inside his supporting straps. But, as aboard the blimp that first night, his spirit sought the chamber beneath Helmor's palace--found Naia and Jason on the couch together watching the blue girl of Mazzeria, who was busy weaving patterns out of straws. Naia of Aphur--and Jason, Son of Jason--on this night of all nights--safe!

Croft opened his eyes and lifted his body more stiffly in its seat. "Zitu-

-I thank thee," he whispered, raising his face to the now night-darkened heavens, and then--he sent the call for which I was listening on Earth.

Chapter XVI

Berla of Zollaria. It lay there, huge, dark, slumbrous, safe; secure as the night pall wrapped it in all, seeming, undisturbed by any alarm of danger--unapproached by any force of foes. For what could harm Helmor's city, behind its darkly outlined walls? Four hundred miles of mountain, plain, and desert lay between it and the Tamarizian border--and as yet, save for the sending of a delegation to parley, Tamarizia had not moved. Dark, silent, it lay, save for where on either side of one of its many gates, the fire urns flared.

And yet on the darkened terrain beyond them crouched the squat, wide-winged shape of the Tamarizian plane, with its two men, watching, watching. And somewhere--high above it rode the blimps, of which there was no sign.

Then suddenly--without sound, so high they rode--from out of the blue-black void of the heavens--there showed a winking light. Ruddy it was as a falling star--as it glowed briefly and vanished like a fading spark. And yet, seeing it, one knew that under cover of the darkness, before the moons of Palos wheeling up like racers of the night revealed them, the blimps were stealing in.

Once more the ruddy pin-point winked, twice, thrice, and vanished, and as it faded for the last time it was answered by Croft himself from the plane. Briefly his torch glowed and was extinguished and the spot in the heavens did not appear again. Only Jason spoke to the flier. "Be ready, Avron."

And the man replied, "Aye, lord," climbed into the pit of the fuselage, and began strapping himself in place.

Croft followed suit. The two men sat staring out toward the walls of

Berla, where the fire urns still made flickering flares against the gates.

And that was all. Save for their breathing, the whisper of the night wind round them, there was no sound. Silent as death itself was the blimps' approach, and as unsuspected, until presently an arc of silver appeared above the eastern horizon, and up shot the first of the twin Palosian moons.

Its upflung rays fell on a wondrous sight. They struck against the giant dirigibles, turning them into slowly drifting things of silver--huge, unbelievable, weird as the moonlight struck upon them, like monstrous dream shapes--unthinkable bubbles wafted forward on some unsensed breeze. So they must have burst upon the startled sight of Berla's people, first, soaring high above the city, circling as though in search of some definite spot, before they paused, appeared to hover for an instant, and began settling down.

"Zitu!" Avron whispered tensely under his breath.

"Aye," said Zitu's Mouthpiece as though in answer. "Watch ye now, Avron--watch."

Down, down sank those mighty glistening shapes from the Palosian skies--down, down until at length without seeming cause they checked their descent, and hung gently swaying, until a strange red brilliance leaped up high over Berla's walls.

"Go now--in Zitu's name," Croft spoke to his pilot.

The motur roared--the huge plane quivered, seemed to shake off the lethargy of its waiting, trundled forward, gained headway, tilted, and rose.

Up, up in a reaching slant, Avron drove it toward the growing radiance before it. And then, like a kite striking home upon its prey, it swept above Berla's ramparts and plunged down beneath the moon and flame-illuminated gas-bags, toward the leaping fires.

They leaped, they blazed, those fires spreading in a ruddy band of destruction before Helmor's palace. They smoked. The wind of night caught that smoke and swept it off across the city in twisting, writhing streamers and billows, like the tatters of a trailing shroud. For an instant it half veiled the racing plane, and Avron coughed. Then the machine burst through it and swam above the square already beginning to fill with a running, shouting, wildly gesticulating mob, beyond which on the steps of the palace itself showed a body of the palace guard.

The fire struck off ruddy flashes from their massed cuirasses and helmets, pricked out the livid color of their saffron plumes. A captain lifted a sword and pointed toward the hovering gas-bags with a glinting blade. The roof of a house crashed down roaring in a fiery dissolution, casting up a myriad of sparks against the smoke pall of the major conflagration, from which a sickly, unsteady light was filling all the square, casting flickering shadows over the jostling mass of the panic-stricken crowd.

Above that scene the airplane swam with a chattering motor. The milling masses heard it and lifted their faces toward it in a fresh alarm. It turned. It circled back.

"Down," Croft spoke to Avron. "Land me before the guard."

Avron nodded, worked with his controls briefly. The plane tilted, circled again at a lower level--and suddenly with deadened engine volplaned with the steady-winged swoop of a hawk toward the wide expanse of pavement, to trundle forward and pause.

Before it the guard shifted uneasily, watched its slowing advance with widened eyes and paling faces, a slight backward movement of their ranks.

Not so the captain, however.

"By Bel--he has given one of them into our hands and least. Upon them!" he roared, and drew his sword to lead them in an overpowering charge.

"Hold!" Croft rose in his place and faced the quick, forward surge of the guardsmen. "Naught has Bel given thee, captain. Wherefore spare thy praises. By design are we come among thee--for speech with Helmor. Put up thy sword."

The firelight glinted on him as he left the plane and sprang lightly to the ground. It shone on his burnished harness, it struck upon his azure plumes. It pricked out the design of the cross ansata and the widespread wings of Azil on his cuirass. And suddenly the captain lowered the point of his weapon in a startled recognition.

"Thou?" he stammered.

"Aye," said Jason gruffly. "I, Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu--to hold speech with Helmor, as thou hast already heard. I, Jason of Tamarizia--the one man who may save Berla from destruction--by whose order what remains once that fire has burned itself to embers--may be spared. Go say as much to Helmor, and say also that I wait a meeting with him--here."

Followed a tense moment, in which quite plainly the Zollarian debated his course, turning his glance from Croft to the slowly swinging menace of the moonlighted blimps above him--those

glinting shapes so remote, so detached in their cold, almost frost-rimmed seeming--and yet as the man before him said the cause of the ravening flames in whose light that man appeared.

And as though sensing his thought, Tamarizia's Mouthpiece spoke again:

"Think not that save by my order any part of Berla will be spared--neither thou, nor Helmor, nor any of her people. That ye behold done here may be done elsewhere, Zollarian captain."

"By Bel..." The captain sheathed his sword. Seemingly the situation was too much for him to handle unaided. "Restrain the people," he directed a lieutenant. "Hold him securely and in safety until I have seen this carried to Helmor's ears."

The lieutenant saluted. Turning, the captain ran flashing up the stairs. His subordinates growled a command. The guardsmen advanced, split, moved off right and left, formed a cordon about the plane and Jason, facing outward toward the crowds in the square with leveled spears.

Time passed. Jason of Tamarizia stood motionless with folded arms. The people of Berla pressed up to the very spear points, shrieking and mouthing. The conflagration roared.

And then the palace doors opened. Helmor and Helmon appeared. Slowly and without any sign of undue haste they descended the steps until nearly at the foot they paused.

The Zollarian monarch and Tamarizia's strong man stared into one another's eyes, and Helmor caught a body-filling breath.

"So," he said, "*it is* thou. Word I had of thy presence, yet hardly it

seemed thou hadst dared."

Not a line of Jason's set expression altered as he replied, "Wherein Helmor had right. Naught have I dared indeed. If Helmor doubts it, let him use his eyes. Let him gaze on yonder fire, and lift his vision to the skies. There may he behold the cause in those engines with which I have come upon him, by which Berla shall ere morning lie in ashes, save I and I only give the word that it be spared. Wherefore I dare naught in standing thus before him to offer him the safety of himself and people. What would it profit Helmor to bid his guardsmen seize me, and thereby lose his one remaining chance of safety? Has he any means with which he may combat them--any cover beneath which he shall lie safe from a rain of unquenchable fire?"

Helmor hesitated in his answer--hesitated even as those who know that they are lost. And indeed he must have known it in that instant as he lifted his eyes to the heavens and beheld there the unbelievable creations brought against him too remote for any resistance within his power to reach them, yet near enough to bring swift death upon himself and his people, as witnessed by the blazing wall of the city, at the foot of the palace square. And in that bitter moment of realization Helmor of Zollaria's spirit must have writhed.

Now was humiliation come upon him--upon him who had sought to bring it upon others in his time. Staggered by the appalling swiftness of it, he found no words with which to meet the situation. And as he lowered his glance and forced it back to that of the man before him, Croft spoke again.

"Nor Berla alone, O Helmor. These things be not of my seeking, nor of Tamarizia's design. Yet if I return not scatheless from this meeting, not only Berla but all Zollaria as well shall burn. If I return not safely that begun this night shall certainly continue, and Tamarizia shall hurl her total strength against a treacherous nation which seeks by unlawful

methods to further her ends. And in that day Zollaria as a nation shall go down in a red ruin, from which she shall not rise.

"We sought not war, O Helmor, nor aught save only peace. Twice have you loosed your strength against us--and twice has it proved vain. Yet again you planned our undoing--and this third time you struck not as a man against men, but against the innocent, the weak and helpless--seeking through them to win what had been failed of through force of arms. Helmor of Zollaria struck not at the heart of a man as he hoped to Zollaria's and his own profit. But now must he face strength again.

"Yet even so we come not in war against thee or thy nation, save in so far as it be needful to prove resistance vain. War we make not against the defenseless, the weak, nor wish to--and we hold it a thing for sorrow, were the helpless, the innocent, to perish for Helmor's or another's sin. Wherefore we come before thee and offer thee peace, O Helmor--a peace which Helmor needs but say the word to win."

"Thy price? Name the ransom of Berla, Mouthpiece of Zitu." Suddenly Helmor appeared to find his tongue. His voice rose hoarsely. "By Bel, I would not see my people burn."

"Helmor knowest," Croft said slowly, "I but require of thee my own. Let Naia of Aphur and the blue girl, her attendant, and Jason, Son of Jason, be brought forth and placed unharmed aboard the machine Helmor sees before him."

"And afterward?" Croft's utterly controlled demeanor, the mildness of his demands, seemed in a way to disturb Zollaria's monarch, appeared to excite the suspicion of some hidden trap in his mind.

"Nay, nothing," the Mouthpiece of Zitu returned. "Have I not said that I come not in vengeance upon thee? Hark ye, Helmor, I am not driven

by any such intent as that of the woman who having led thee into this position now plans to cast thee from a throne. Yet, if ye yield not, by Zitu, whose Mouthpiece men name me--thy throne itself and all it stands for shall be destroyed."

Helmor started, Croft's intimate knowledge of a plot against the tenure of his power seemed to shake him well nigh as deeply as all else. He stood silent, once more lost to all seeming in a gloomy consideration, into which broke the rising voices of the crowd. For they too had heard from their places outside the ring of threatening spears in the hands of the guardsmen, and now they cried to him, "O Helmor--yield to him--grant him his demands nor seek to resist him, O Helmor. Let not Berla be destroyed!"

Those cries beat into his ears a very surge of plaint and entreaty. And hearing it Helmor threw up his head and turned to Croft.

"This is the sum of your requirement, Mouthpiece of Zitu, which being granted, shall lead to nothing else?"

"Aye, by Zitu, on the word of Jason," Croft assented quickly, making the words both agreement to Helmor's query and an oath.

"O Helmor..." Once more the plea of a panic-stricken people.

For a moment Zollaria's ruler gazed out across their terror-whitened faces. And then he yielded, lifting a hand and upflung arm to calm them. "Peace. Helmor bows to thy wishes in this matter. Go, Helmon, son of Helmor, thyself bring forth the women and the child."

"O Helmor. Hail Helmor! All praise to Helmor by whom we are preserved!" In swift transition from plaint to plaudits once more came the voice of the crowd. "Helmor the Wise One--the guardian of his people! O Helmor! Aye, aye, Helmor--given them to him!"

They surged forward, lifting their hands in acclaiming gestures as Helmor turned and began to mount the steps.

He had won, won! For an instant as the Zollarian prince climbed upward, Croft found himself unnerved. He had won the desperate venture.

And then he stiffened. Helmor emerged from the palace, and with him, Naia of Aphur, and Maia walking beside her, and about them some half dozen members of the guard.

And now no longer was Croft the Mouthpiece of Zitu, but as he watched the approaching party begin the descent of the stairs, noting the slender lines of Naia's figure, the deathlike pallor of her, straining his eyes for a first glimpse of the child. A moment--a single moment his leaping heart told him, and they would be reunited--one moment only remained of the dreary waiting. Naia of Aphur was coming toward him--nay, flying toward him.

For, suddenly, without any warning, she was free of Maia's supporting figure, clear of the guardsmen, past Helmor and speeding swiftly in the firelight down the steps.

Croft opened wide his arms.

And then she was against him, lifting to his bended face eyes so filled with maddening horror that they struck fresh terror to his spirit, beating upon the cross the wings of Azil of his cuirass with tight-clenched, desperate hands, panting rather than speaking, into his startled ears the cry of a mother's frenzy.

"Gone, Jason--gone. They have taken him from me. In the name of Zitu, hasten to Bel's temple and save him. They have gone to sacrifice our son!"

"God!" he cried, not knowing in the shock of the moment that he spoke in English, and releasing the grip of his arms about her body, he seized her by the arms. His fingers bit into the white, white flesh upon them. "But--he was safe with thee when darkness fell, beloved."

"Aye, aye!" she nodded in desperate affirmation. "Scarce had Gor gone when Helmon came to release us..."

"Gor!" Croft bent straining eyes upon her.

"Aye--Gor--creature of Kalamita. He it was who tore him from me, after he had slain the captain of the guard--saying it was done by Helmor's order. O Ga and Azil, canst not understand? To the Temple of Bel and save him or else let Berla be destroyed."

"Aye, if he dies, by Zitu." Croft swept her close pressed against his side, and turned to Helmor.

"Thou hearest, Zollaria. What answer have ye to words of Gor?"

And in that moment, Helmor more than any time in Croft's knowledge of him proved his right to reign. One quick pace he came toward the Mouthpiece of Zitu, and the half fainting woman he supported, and paused with hand on sword and flashing eyes.

"Nay, by Bel," he answered strongly. "Not by word of Helmor was this thing come to pass, but by the trickery of another, because of a plot against me, of which it would seem from his own words, Jason knows. Helmon, my son"--he turned briefly to the crown prince standing pallid and shaken before this fresh turn of events--"what know you of this foul matter?"

And Helmon answered quickly, "Naia of Aphur speaks truth. Gor slew

the captain who denied him entrance to the chamber, and cowed the guardsmen with his mighty strength--saying he took the child by thy orders, O my father; wherein as thou knoweth he lied."

"Aye." Helmor's features darkened. "Yet sought to take advantage of the present instance to accomplish the interests of his sweetheart. By Bel, I swear it. Let Tamarizia say if he believes."

Deep in his troubled soul Croft knew that he did. The thing was well in keeping with the methods Kalamita would almost certainly have employed. She might well have sent Gor on his mission, trusting to the excitement to gain him access to the palace, to Helmor's former words to overcome any refusal of his demands on the part of the guard. Such things passed swiftly through his brain as the crowd again took up its clamor--"To the temple, O Helmor--to the temple. Death to Gor who has undone us! Seek and slay him!"

Jason Croft inclined his azure-crested helm. "Aye, Helmor," he accepted. "Jason believes. This were the work of Kalamita, not another. Wherefore..."

"To the temple!" Naia of Aphur screamed. "In Zitu's name, waste no more words about it!"

"To the temple--to the temple!" The words became a beating surf of sound on the lips of the people. "To the temple quickly, O Helmor!"

Helmor acted. "Ho, guardsmen, attend me! To the Temple of Bel!" he roared.

Chapter XVII

To the Temple of Bel! To that ebon-dark structure, where in its mighty enclosure crouched the figure of the unclean god.

"To Avron--up and remain with him," he cried to Naia.

"Nay, Jason--nay, my beloved," she denied him, gasping. "With thee. Keep me in this at thy side."

"Come, then." He tightened the arm about her yielding waist and crushed her to him. There was scanty time to argue. Already the guard were forming--massing a wall of their bodies about them. And there was a thing that demanded his attention. Swiftly he drew his signal lamp and pointed it to the skies.

"To the Temple of Bel! Descend above it!" He sent a message with a hand that, despite his stern control, was not wholly steady. "To the Temple of Bel," he repeated, and lowered his eyes to find Helmor's eyes upon him.

"I signed the airships to follow us to the temple," he voiced in explanation, lest the man misunderstand him. Helmor seemed to understand, though he made no answer, speaking instead to Helmon. "Remain and guard the machine. Let no one approach it."

"To the temple!" Once more the voice of the crowd--a seething mass now of jostling, pressing bodies--of white faces and lifted arms in the flickering light of the firelight.

Helmor answered the rising ululation. "Aye, to the temple. Forward, guard!"

Croft lifted Naia of Aphur, holding her terror-shaken figure before him, cradling it in his arms against his metal breast. Side by side he went forward with Helmor as the guard advanced across the square, breaking a pathway through the mass of the people with their spears. Slowly at first, and then with a quickened rhythm beat their feet. Their moving mass gathered momentum as their captain lifted his voice and called a rising cadence. The light of the blazing buildings shone sharply upon the spearheads--shimmered and flashed on their glinting harness as they charged toward the shadowy mouth of a street.

To the temple--the temple! The thud and clank of their feet, striking in a measured rhythm, seemed to beat the words into Jason's ears. To the temple--the temple! Naia of Aphur was praying. As he raced inside the cordon of other racing bodies, Croft caught the whisper of her pale lips beneath his own set, straining face.

"Ga--Azil--Ga, eternal mother--Azil--angel of life--have mercy--spread thy wings in shelter above him..."

They reached the street and plunged among its shadows, pounding with a dull reverberation of many feet along it. To the temple--the temple. The walls of its banking structures gave back the echo of that ceaseless rhythm. He glanced at Helmor. Set of lip and narrow-eyed, his features distorted by the rage that burned within him, the realization of this latest menace come upon him, the haste that had made him cast aside all dignity of station, and sent him thus on foot in a last endeavor to offset it, the Zollarian ran with a steady, unfaltering stride.

"Zitu--father of all life..."

Croft tensed his muscles, pressing the yielding form of Naia closer to his pounding heart. Save for her whispers, the clank and thud of the

charging body of men, their heavy breathing, there was no sound in all the night. Behind them Berla was burning, with a lessening glare. Here only the moonlight cut in silver bands and purple shadows as they raced. He glanced up toward the azure heavens. His sweat-misted eyes beheld a drifting shape--huge, too regular of outline for a cloud--the glistening, glinting envelope of a blimp.

"They follow us, beloved--Robur follows." He spoke in muffled tones to Naia--and found her purple eyes lifted darkly to his face.

Out of one street and into another raced the straining Zollarian guard, and along it, and into another, and through that into a second monstrous square.

The Temple of Bel! Croft knew it--recognized it, felt his spirit once more falter as he sensed its dark mass lightened by some interior radiance that shone redly between the mighty pillars, picking out each massive column in an inky blackness--the light of Bel's lighted fire!

Croft sensed its meaning--that Ptah had done his part and ignited the sacrificial flame in the body of the monstrous god--lifted his eyes from the fire-whirling streamers above the temple facade, lifted his soul in a prayer that Robur would also see it, mark it a beacon to guide his searching, and ran on toward the serried flight of steps before him, reached them and began to climb.

Up, up, he made his way with Helmor and the now panting guard. Up, up--the last step at last. And there, among the pillars supporting the mighty colonnade, Helmor's party paused. Before and below them, the vast pit with its rows of surrounding steps, whereon a multitude might find seats--the idol in its center showed. Men--such as Croft had seen on the occasion of Kalamita's visit to the Priest of Bel, were working about the god. Smoke and flame curled from its flaring

nostrils as they fed its inward fires--and its hands, extended flatly, palm up, before its ugly belly shone redly--they glowed. Heated to a dull incandescent, they waited the sacrifice.

So much Croft saw in a single glance, and found his spirit lighten, even as Naia struggled to her feet and gazed upon the scene before her--cried out and covered her eyes.

"Forward." He spoke to Helmor. "Bid the guard surround the idol--seize the men who attend it and hold them, while we make search for the child."

For there was time--time yet to accomplish all his purpose. Bel's glowing hands were waiting, but not yet had the sacrifice been placed within them.

And Helmor seemed to comprehend both his intent and the situation fully. He addressed the captain of the sweating guardsmen. "Take a portion of your men--surround the image. Let none approach it." Then as the officer, saluting, turned to fulfill his orders, he drew back, with face gone livid, and faltered. "Stay! Nay, now, by Bel I dare not. The sacrifice approaches. Behold!"

Lifting a shaking arm, he pointed. Croft followed the direction of his hand and starting eyes. He turned his baffled glance to the other end of the mighty enclosure, where at the head of the farther tier of steps a processional appeared.

Ptah! He saw him, naked in all his wonderful animal strength save for a scarlet leathern apron about his bulging loins and a headdress of ebon plumes, and the glint of metal sandals and casings of metal on his feet and monstrous calves. And behind him a body of lesser priests.

So much only he saw at first, and then, as Ptah and his satellites descended the upper tier of steps, Kalamita, in the veiled beauty of her physical form, appeared. Kalamita! Woman of flesh and fleshly beauty--Priestess of Adita. Her perfect body shone in the light of the sacrificial fires, an iridescent thing of tinted silk and jewels, and behind her Bandhor and Panthor.

They descended a single step--and behind them came Gor in his banded cuirass of copper, on which the light struck dully, bearing the sacrifice.

Jason, Son of Jason--he lay upon an ebon-colored cushion.

"Ga--and Azil," cried Naia of Aphur in an anguish of recognition.

Croft whirled on Helmor. "Forward. There remains yet time to save him!"

"Nay, Mouthpiece of Zitu, I dare not." At the end, Helmor balked the issue. Lifelong superstition proved stronger than all other considerations. "Helmor nor any man may seek to keep from Bel what is consecrated to him."

"Ga..." The prayer of a mother to the Mother Eternal.

The thing was a matter of a few moments. Then Croft cast his glance upward.

A monstrous, glistening oblong hung there, slowly turning. He lowered his gaze and swept it across the floor of the mighty pit, and from that to Ptah and those behind them. And then his voice lashed back at Zollaria's monarch. "Does Helmor fear then the fire of Bel--more than Tamarizia's fires?"

And Helmor answered. "Helmor, Tamarizian, performs not a sacrilege against his god. In his hands be it."

"Then let Helmor behold!" Croft took the only chance remaining. Swiftly he darted down some half dozen tiers of steps and lifted his huge signaling-torch to the skies. *"Set fire to the pit of the temple."*

Once, twice, he flashed that message, even though after the first swift sending, the blimp began sinking down. And then as it hovered lower and lower, bulking ever more hugely, he turned and climbed back with limbs that shook beneath him, to Naia's side.

For that was the thought born of his desperate need as Helmor weakened in his purpose--to flood the level space between Ptah and the idol with a mass of impassable flame--to check him, hold him from the presence of his god with fire, since he might not do it with men.

Lower and lower sank the airship. Like a mighty cover settling down above the open enclosure, it seemed. And as Croft slipped an arm about the swaying form of Naia of Aphur, it paused.

Paused, too, Ptah and his fellow priests. They had caught sight of Croft on the steps beyond the idol--marked the upflung posture of his arm. Their eyes had leaped above it and fallen on the glistening shape descending, as it seemed, upon their heads. Perhaps consternation seized them--perhaps they waited merely to grasp its presence. But at all events they paused with lifted faces.

And as they stood--the floor of the pit about the idol, beyond it farther and farther, burst into widening lines of flame. Swiftly those lines stretched out, spreading, spreading across the sunken level, as the monstrous shape above it poured down its fiery rain. In it the image of Bel glowed yet more hotly, became a thing of a myriad licking,

darting, fiery tongues. The men who had stoked the fires within it vanished, writhing, caught beyond any hope of rescue in the open.

And whether consternation had first seized the minds of Ptah and his party, it seized them now. They turned to draw back before the deadly menace of the sea of fire before them. Too late--its ever widening circle swung its arc against them. Ptah--Priest of Bel, shrieked once in mortal anguish, and went down.

On the steps of Bel's Temple--on their way to Bel's idol--he and his fellows sank in a horrid dissolution, with a grotesquely terrible twitching of tortured bodies, a tossing of arms and limbs. They fell and, driven by their own contortions, dropped one by one from step to step among the lapping flames.

Above them stood Kalamita--Priestess of Adita--stood as one wholly bereft of motion, until suddenly she shrieked in a voice that rang from end to end of the temple, turned to flee, and shrieked again, and fell forward, beating at her body--and Gor, casting aside the child on its ebon cushion, leaped down and caught her writhing figure in his arms.

"Enough--enough!" Croft flashed the signal upward, and started running off between the pillars to reach the further tier of steps from whence still rang the screams of Kalamita. And as he ran he drew his sword, and went on clutching it in a tightly gripping hand.

"After him! Seize Bandhor, Panthor, and the woman. Hold them! Preserve the child!" Helmor roused from the fear that had held him impotent in the presence of Zollaria's now discredited god.

The guard leaped to obey the order. Croft heard the pound of their feet behind him and ran on.

A hundred feet, two, three. The fires below him having naught to feed them, were burning themselves out. He reached the tier of steps down which Ptah and his fellows had gone to their death. Bandhor and Panthor stood there, and Gor--his mistress's screams now sunk to moanings--her once lovely body marked by angry scars where the spattering liquid fire had sprayed from the lower steps and struck her, yet held a white, jeweled shape against his mighty breast.

Toward them, still with his naked sword in his hand, he made his way. Behind him came Helmor's guard. And yet--as he advanced, oddly enough Croft gave little attention to them. His eyes seemed centered beyond all other purpose, on the shape of the ebon cushion Gor had cast from him ere he leaped to Kalamita's aid--that cushion beside which, wholly unheeded, lay the form of Jason, Son of Jason--his child.

Then, as he stooped to raise him in the hands that trembled, the guard flung themselves on the two men.

"Back," Bandhor suddenly thundered. "Back, men of Zollaria! It is thy commander speaking."

And Helmor, bursting through the faltering soldiery, answered, "Nay, not so, Bandhor, thou traitor, any longer--not thou or Panthor, but Helmor rules still in Berla. Seize him--and lead him to the palace, there to stand trial with Panthor for his treason."

Again the guard surged forward, closing about Bandhor and Helmor's cousin, and Croft found a slender form hurled swiftly against him, white hands clinging to him--the purple eyes of Naia of Aphur, lighted with the wild, sweet fires of fulfilled yearning, lifted to him across the body of the child.

His heart too surcharged for words, he smiled upon her and laid

Jason, Son of Jason, in her arms.

With the sound of a caught-in sob, a gesture hungry in its passion, she gathered him to her, bent her face above him, rocking him gently with a swaying of her slender figure as one groping baby hand crept up and dug itself into the soft substance of her gown. Turning with him to the girl of Mazzeria, whom Croft now sensed for the first time as having followed from the palace--dogging faithfully her mistress's footsteps to the last.

Ga, the Mother--the Virgin--the Madonna, bending in tender brooding above the infant--pressing it in loving rapture against the greater bulk of the form that had given it birth.

From that sight Croft turned away his misted eyes to find those of Kalamita fixed on him in a stare of well-nigh insane hatred.

She had struggled free from Gor, and, despite the pain of her burns, which in their blindly, upflung course, had spared not the once beautiful mask of her face, was standing there before him. And, as their glances met, her tightly held lips parted.

"Thou--thou," she mouthed; "thou Mouthpiece of Zitu--thou man of ice and fire--thou wrecker of the plans of Kalamita--thou man like not to any man before thee--by all the fiends of the foul pit of the underworld I curse thee--may they torture thy spirit--and that of her whom I have kept for Zitrans from thee, and bring sickness and loathsome disease on the child. May its flesh rot and its bones grow hollow like blasted reeds--may Adita cause thy mate to shrivel quickly--may she cease to please thee, and yet cling to thee--denying thee the pleasure she herself no longer gives. May Bel visit his wrath upon thee for the sacrilege thou hast shown him. I, Kalamita..."

"Peace." The captain of the guard laid hold upon her. "Thy pleasure

with this woman, O Helmor?"

And Helmor eyeing her, answered, "Nay--nothing. That she who has turned the minds of men with her beauty should stand thus now before them, were punishment indeed. Release her--let her go her ways."

"Thy fault--thou Mouthpiece. The curse of Kalamita on thee!" Once more she wheeled on Jason.

"Nay--curse no more," he told her. "Once thou didst challenge Adita to blast thy fairness if thou did not accomplish thy ends against me. And now it is in my mind that fickle goddess has taken thee at thy word."

"Aye, peace!" said Helmor. "Get thee to thy palace, woman."

For a moment Kalamita drew herself up before him, and then, flinging clenched hands above her tawny head in an impotent gesture, she turned to Gor standing stolidly waiting, and leaning her weight against him, went with him into the night.

Chapter XVIII

And that is all, as Croft would say, I suppose--since when he described Naia's winning to me at the time of the Mazzerian War he brought his narrative to a close with their marriage, until I demanded that the end of the war itself be told.

So now one may fancy that to him the real ending of the matter would have been in that moment when he stood there with Helmor, and Naia, standing with Jason, Son of Jason, held fast against her breast, and Maia, the girl of Mazzeria, at her side, and knew that Helmor had no longer any thought save to see him depart with them in safety, that he and his city might also know themselves safe.

But to my mind there is more to the story--not so much of an individual nature, as applying to the future of the Palosian life.

For, to the ears of my spirit, which had witnessed all the crowded events, came Helmor's voice addressing Jason:

"How now, Mouthpiece of Zitu--what else?"

And Jason answered, "Naught, O Helmor, save that we return to the machine before the palace, and depart in peace, unless by Helmor's wish."

"What mean you by Helmor's wish?" There was no sign of understanding in the Zollarian monarch's intonation or the now somber lines of his face, as the last rays of the fire in the vast pit of Bel's Temple struck upon it.

Again Croft answered slowly, "Naia of Aphur, wife of Jason, and Jason, Son of Jason, were seized for a purpose--which Helmor

knows--and the end is--this."

For a moment he paused and swept an arm about the mighty interior of the temple--embracing all--the still-smoking figure of the idol--the bodies of Ptah and his fellow priests, now lying charred and blackened below him on the serried steps.

And then as Helmor made no response or comment on that scene of sudden death and desolation, he resumed. "Yet have I said that I came not in vengeance against thee, nor in war, nor for any reason save only to regain my own. Wherefore, I say again to Helmor, now, that the purpose he had in mind may be served equally in a different fashion--and that he say the word he may gain in peace what he might not obtain by either treachery or war--and I say to him also that this night's work has preserved not only Naia of Aphur and Jason, Son of Jason, to me, but to Helmor also, his throne."

And now Helmor spoke, nodding quickly. "Aye--Helmor does not overlook it. Speak, Mouthpiece of Zitu--how may these things you hint at be done?"

Having fully caught his attention, Croft went on, "Let Zollaria and Tamarizia make a pact of peace between them, pledging themselves without reservation to sheathe the sword from this hour, nor draw it one against the other again. Let Helmor subscribe to this, and Helmon, Helmor's son. Let him proclaim the establishment of schools, the education of his people. Let him seek for his nation strength through the growth of knowledge, rather than the strength of arms..."

Once more he paused, and again Helmor nodded.

His face lighted swiftly as he caught Croft's meaning. "Aye, by Bel," he said. "It is thy knowledge, Mouthpiece of Zitu, that has made

Tamarizia strong."

"And not Tamarizia only, but Zollaria also," said Jason, "if Helmor sets his seal to such a bond."

"By Bel," Helmor exclaimed, as all the suggestion embraced burst suddenly upon him. "Come then to the palace. Let us speak of this more fully. Delay thy departure as guests of Helmor and his people till morn."

"Aye." Croft assented without hesitation, his stern face strangely exalted by the thought that out of this night of warring purpose and emotion, peace between age-old foemen might be born.

Back, then, they made their way through the streets along which they had rushed so short a time ago in so vastly different a fashion to regain the square before the palace--where only the light of the fire urns now served to show Avron, still sitting at his station in the pit of his machine.

And there Croft, lifting his signaling-flash, sent a final message to the mighty shapes still circling over the city. "Remain until the morning. Watch for the plane at dawn."

Robur's answering flash winked promptly back at him redly, and bidding Helmon join them, they entered the palace, through which Jason had flitted in the astral presence so many times.

Yet different now indeed was the situation, as Helmor summoned slave girls to attend on Naia, provide for her every comfort. He left her with Croft for the moment and Croft drew her into his arms.

For a long, long moment he held her, sensing her nearness--her dearness--the truth that now again, not only in spirit but in body, was

she his own.

"Beloved!" he whispered, and crushed her to him.

"Beloved!" she whispered, and threw back her golden head to lift her purple eyes to him.

So for a long moment, and then she spoke again. "And thou canst accomplish thy purpose, beloved--were it not well worth suffering, indeed? Thinkest thou Helmor is taken with the notion?"

"Aye," said Jason.

"Zitu grant it."

Naia nestled against him. "Go then and arrange it. I shall pray for thy success upon my knees."

After that, Croft left her, and rejoined Helmor and his son. To that same apartment in which Jason had inspired his dream of warning against Kalamita, the Zollarian monarch led them, and there they took up the matter of a treaty between their nations, at the point where they had laid it down.

Thereafter, while the hours passed, Helmor's expression altered; his eyes grew darkly flashing; the deeply graven lines in his somber visage relaxed as Croft expounded the advantages to be gained in a friendly intercourse between his own and Helmor's people, suggested with what must have seemed to the two Zollarians closeted with him, an inspired mental vision. He proposed the terms of the international coalition--teachers from Tamarizia to instruct the Zollarian workmen--the establishment of telegraphic communication--a readjustment of trade relations--the extension north of Croft's interrupted scheme for a system of electrically operated railroads--

the opening of shops and schools.

Until at last Helmor, rising in no small excitement, sent Helmon to summon a scribe, and demanded the immediate drawing-up of a provisional bond, which Jason should take with him in the morning for ratification at Zitra. He began a restless pacing to and fro as the scribe set to work upon it, holding his heavy hands clasped together behind his back as he paced and turned.

It was a strange night for Helmor of Zollaria, as he must have thought, wherein Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu--the man who had thrice baffled his purpose, sat with him in his own apartment, and rather than crushing him wholly, now, in his final defeat--placed the objects of his seeking in his hands--a strange night, indeed, whereon he owed not only his own throne to his singular foeman--but the promise of a greater future than ever to his nation--greater than he had dreamed in all his scheming.

And then--the scribe had finished his labors. Helmor strode to the table, removed his signet from his finger and affixed its seal to the agreement. Through the windows of the apartment a faint gray light was stealing--the harbinger of dawn.

He replaced his signet, extended his hand to Jason. Across the promise of a newer dawn for their people Helmor of Zollaria and the Mouthpiece of Zitu struck palms.

And in the light of that double dawn, the fullness of that double peace, Jason and Naia of Aphur, Maia, the girl of Mazzeria, and Jason, Son of Jason, went down to the waiting machine.

Croft helped the women aboard and passed up the child. Cased in his suit and helmet of leather, Avron took his place in the machine. Then ere he followed, Jason turned to look into Helmor's face.

"Hail Helmor--and farewell. And thou, Helmon, son of Helmor," he said.

"Hail, Mouthpiece of Zitu--and Naia of Aphur--and farewell," they replied.

Up, up shot the plane, leaving Helmor and Helmon and the soldiery to mark its swift ascent. Up, up it mounted over Berla, until the sunlight caught it also, turning its wheeling vanes like the greater shapes above them to gold. Up, up--the city fell away beneath it as it swung in an ever widening circle, beneath the mighty ships that all night had waited for its rising. Naia of Aphur lifted her voice.

Clear, strong, true, and perfect as a golden bell, it mounted in a paeon of thanksgiving.

"Hail, Zitu--father of all life--and thanks from a grateful heart. Hail, Azil-giver of life--who poured life into the mold of life--from which I was born. Thanks be to thee for the life that is mine--this life--I hold from thee--to be mine own. Blessings--my blessings upon thee, Ga--that I am a woman--my thanks for the tears with which, womanlike, I have washed your feet--not knowing that so I washed out also sorrow--preparing thereby my heart as a flask for the mellow wine of life from which now joy is drunk."

So sang Naia of Aphur, and I recognized the song as one of which Croft had told me--as one she had sung on another occasion when she bore him back from the camp of the Mazzerian army under Bandhor--as a chant--a prayer, used by Tamarizian women for one who had lain at the very door of death, and returned.

Here, then, I think is the logical end of the story--with the great plane driven south by Avron, and behind him, Maia, the girl of Mazzeria,

and Jason, Mouthpiece of Zitu, and Naia of Aphur singing--with Jason, Son of Jason, held safe in her cradling arms.

THE END