

# PLANET STORIES



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THE UNIVERSE OF FUTURE CENTURIES

20c

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# Golden Amazons of Venus, by John Murray Reynolds

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THE GOLDEN AMAZONS OF VENUS

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

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[Sidenote: Dakta death, horrible beyond the weirdest fever-dreams of Earth-men, faced Space Ship Commander Gerry Norton. The laconic interplanetary explorer knew too much. He stood in the dynamic path of Lansa, Lord of the Scaly Ones, the crafty monster bent on conquering the fair City of Larr and all the rich, shadowless lands of the glorious Amazons of Venus.]

The space-ship *Viking*--two hundred feet of gleaming metal and polished duralite--lay on the launching platform of New York City's municipal airport. Her many portholes gleamed with light. She was still taking on rocket fuel from a tender, but otherwise all the final stores were aboard. Her helicopters were turning over slowly, one at a time, as they were tested.

In the *Viking's* upper control room Gerry Norton and Steve Brent made a final check of the instrument panels. Both men wore the blue and gold uniform of the Interplanetary Fleet. Fatigue showed on both their faces, on Steve's freckled pan and on Gerry Norton's lean face. Gerry in particular had not slept for thirty-six hours. His responsibility was a heavy one, as commander of this second attempt to reach the planet Venus from Earth. Well--he would have a chance to catch up on sleep during the long days of travel that lay ahead.

The two officers finished their inspection, and strolled out onto the open deck atop the vessel. For a while they leaned on the rail, staring down at the dense crowds that had thronged the airport to see the departure of the *Viking*. In this warm weather the men wore only light shorts and gayly colored shirts. The women wore the long dresses and metal caps and thin gauze veils that were so popular that year.

Around the fringes of the airport stood the ramparts of New York's many tall buildings, with the four hundred story bulk of the Federal Building a giant metal finger against the midnight sky.

"When are we going to pull out, Chief?" Steve Brent asked.

"As soon as the ship from Mars gets in and Olga Stark can come aboard."

"Funny thing--I've never been able to like that gal!" Steve said. Gerry smiled faintly.

"That puts you in the minority, from all reports. However--that's aside from the point. She's the most capable Space-pilot in the whole fleet, and we need her. What's she like personally?"

"Tall, dark, and beautiful--with a nasty tongue and the temper of a fiend," Steve said. He yawned, and changed the subject. "Y'know--I've just been wondering what really did happen to the *Stardust*!"

Gerry shrugged without replying. That was a question that was bound to be in the minds of all members of this expedition, whether or not they put it in words. Travel between Earth and Mars had been commonplace for more than a generation now, but there had not yet been any communication with Venus--that cloud-veiled planet whose orbit lay nearer the sun than that of earth. Two years ago the exploring ship *Stardust* had started for Venus. She had simply vanished into the cold of outer space--and never been heard from again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gerry Norton thought the *Viking* would get through. Science had made some advances in these past two years. His ship would carry

better rocket fuel than had the *Stardust*, and more efficient gravity plates. The new duralite hull had the strength to withstand a terrific impact. They would probably get through. If not--well--he had been taking chances all his life. You didn't go into the Interplanetary Service at all if you were afraid of danger.

"There comes the ship from Mars now!" Steve Brent said, suddenly pointing upward.

A streak of fire like a shooting star had appeared in the sky far above. It was the rocket blast of the incoming space liner. Yellow flames played about her bow as she turned on the reverse rockets to reduce the terrific speed. The roar of the discharge came down through the air like a faint rumble of distant surf. Then the rockets ceased, and the ship began to drop down as the helicopters were unfolded to take the weight and lower her easily through the atmosphere.

"It won't be long now!" Steve said in his low, deep, quiet voice.

"Aye, not long!" boomed a deep voice behind them, "but I'm thinking it will be a long day before we return to this braw planet of ours!"

Angus McTavish, chief engineer of the *Viking*, was a giant of a man with a voice that could be heard above the roar of rocket motors when he chose to raise it. He had a pair of very bright blue eyes--and a luxuriant red beard. There were probably no more than a dozen full sets of whiskers worn in the earth in this day and age, and McTavish laid claim to the most imposing.

"Fuel all aboard, Chief," he said, "The tender's cast off and we're ready to ride whenever you give the word."

"Just as soon as these people come aboard."

"Tell me, Mac," Steve Brent interposed, "Now that we're all about to jump off into the unknown--just why *do* you sport that crop of whiskers?"

"So I won't have to button my collar, ye feckless loon!" the big engineer replied instantly.

"The Scots are a queer race."

"Aye, lad--the salt o' the earth. We remain constant in a changing world. All the rest of you have forgotten race and breed and tradition, till ye've become as alike as peas in the same pod all over the Earth. We of Scotland take pride in being the exception."

"And in talking like some wild and kilted highlander of the twentieth century! You're out of date, Angus!"

"If you two are going to argue about that all the way to Venus," Gerry said grimly, "I'll toss you both out and let you drift around in space forever."

"Speaking of the Twentieth Century," Steve said, "one of the ancient folk who lived in that long ago and primitive time would be surprised if they could see the New York of today. Why, they made more fuss about one of their funny old winged air-ships flying the Atlantic than we do about a voyage to Mars or the Moon."

The ship from Mars settled gently down on the concrete landing platform, and her helicopters ceased to turn. From a hundred nozzles along the edge of the platform came hissing streams of water, playing upon the hull that had been heated by its swift passage through the outer layers of the Earth's atmosphere. Then, as the hull cooled, the streams of water died away and the doors opened. The



passengers began to emerge.

A platoon of police, their steel helmets gleaming in the glow of the lights, cleared a path through the crowd for a small group that hurried across to the waiting *Viking*. A few minutes later three newcomers came aboard. All wore the blue and gold uniform of the Interplanetary Fleet. The two men were Martians, thin and sharp featured, with the reddish skin of their race. The other was an Earth woman. Olga Stark stood nearly as tall as Gerry Norton's own six feet. She had a pale skin, and a mass of dark hair that was coiled low on her neck.

"Pilot-Lieutenant Stark and Flight-Ensigns Tanda and Portok reporting aboard, sir," she said quietly.

"You'll find the officers' quarters aft on B-deck. I'm calling a conference in the chart room as soon as we get clear of the stratosphere."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gerry Norton stood on the little platform at the top of the control room, under a curved dome of transparent duralite that gave him a clear view along the whole length of the *Viking's* super-structure. The last member of the expedition was aboard, the airport attendants had all stepped back. The time of departure had come at last!

"Close all ports!" he snapped.

"Close ports it is, sir," droned Chester Sand, the Safety Officer. Warning bells rang throughout the ship. Tiny green lights came winking into view on one of the many indicator panels.

"All ports closed, sir!" the Safety Officer sang out a minute later. For a moment Gerry bent over the rail of the platform and himself glanced

down at the solid bank of green lights on the board.

"Start helicopters!" he ordered.

There was a low humming. The ship began to vibrate gently. From his place in the dome, Gerry could see the *Viking's* dozen big helicopters begin to spin. Faster and faster they moved as Angus McTavish gave his engines full power. Then the ship rose straight up into the air.

"Here we go, boys--Venus or bust!" Steve Brent muttered under his breath, and a low chuckle swept across the control room.

The lighted surface of the airport fell swiftly away beneath them. The myriad lights of New York were spread out like a jeweled carpet in the night, dwindling and seeming to slide together as the drive of the *Viking's* powerful motors carried her steadily upward. At the three thousand-foot level they passed a traffic balloon with its circle of blue lights, and the signal blinker spelled out a hasty "Good Luck!"

\* \* \* \* \*

At the thirty thousand-foot level they passed an inbound Oriental & Western liner, bringing the night mail from China. She hung motionless on her helicopters to let the *Viking* pass, her siren giving a salute of three long blasts while her passengers crowded the decks to cheer the space-ship. After another ten thousand feet they were above ordinary traffic lanes. The glass windows of the control room were beginning to show a film of condensing moisture, and Steve Brent brought the heavy duralite panes up into place.

"Stand by rocket motors!" Gerry commanded. "Stand by to fold helicopters. Ready? *Contact!*"

There was a muffled roar. The *Viking's* nose tilted sharply upward. Momentarily the space-ship trembled like a living thing. Then she shot ahead, while the helicopters dropped down into recesses within the hull and duralite covers slid into place over them. Gerry climbed down from the dome into the main control room. Momentarily he glanced at the huge brass and steel speed indicators.

"Twelve hundred miles an hour," he said. "Fast enough for this density of atmosphere. Hold her there. Summon heads of departments and all deck officers to the chart room."

The call was quickly answered.

The assembled officers stood leaning against the walls, or perched on the chart-lockers. Now that the trip had actually begun, uniform coats were unbuttoned and caps laid aside. Angus McTavish had a battered brier pipe clenched in his teeth. The stem was so short that the swirling smoke seemed to filter upward through his whiskers.

"Better be careful, Mac," said Portok the Martian. "Maybe the air filters won't be able to handle that smoke of yours."

"Never mind the air filters, sonny!" grunted the big Scot with imperturbable good humor. "They'll handle the smoke of good 'baccy better than the fumes of that filthy *gricqua* weed you smoke on Mars."

A radio loud-speaker had been left on, and they heard the voice of an announcer on some European station:

"We now bring you a brief sports résumé. In Canton, China, the Shantung Dragons played a double header with the Budapest Magyars. The score of the first game was...."

"Wonder if they ever heard of baseball on Venus!" Steve Brent chuckled.

"Maybe they'll learn as fast as we of Mars," said Portok. "I seem to remember that in the last Interplanetary Championship Series we...."

"Skip it!" Steve growled. "I lost a week's salary on that series."

McTavish and Portok grinned.

Gerry Norton watched them with a smile on his lean, dark face. They were a good crowd! The *Viking* was going on the most dangerous journey mankind had ever attempted, a journey from which no one had ever before returned alive, but he could not have asked for a better group of subordinates. They were people of his own choosing, and all but two were old shipmates. Though he had never sailed with Chester Sand, the Safety Officer had been highly recommended. Neither had he ever sailed with Olga Stark before, but he knew her by reputation as an excellent navigator and when she applied to go he felt he should accept her.

\* \* \* \* \*

For half an hour Gerry held them together, while he set the watches and checked assignments and outlined other routine details. Then the meeting ended, and only Steve Brent remained with him. They walked forward into the darkened control room, where the only light was the dim glow from the indicator boards. The Quartermaster on watch stood motionless beside the steering levers.

Gerry noticed that he had a tendency to rise a couple of inches off the floor with each step. The pull of Earth was already lessening! He threw the switch that controlled the attraction-gear, and heard a faint hiss of shifting gravity plates beneath their feet. The feeling and

impression of normal weight returned.

For a moment Gerry and Steve stood looking out one of the big duralite windows of the control room. At this level the legions of stars gleamed with an unreal brilliance in the dead black of the heavens. The Earth was a vast globe behind them, glowing for a quarter of its surface with the familiar outlines of the continents still visible. With the lessening pull, the *Viking* had increased speed to five thousand, but she seemed to be standing still in comparison with the vastness of space.

"Funny thing, Chief," Steve Brent said meditatively, "Olga Stark and Chester Sand are not supposed to have met before they came aboard this ship--but I saw them whispering together in that dark corner off Corridor 6 as I came forward."

"Maybe she's just a fast worker," Gerry said. For a moment the incident irritated him, but then he shrugged and forgot it. On a purely scientific and exploratory expedition of this kind, there was no possible motive for any underhand work.

\* \* \* \* \*

The days passed in slow progression. The *Viking* had attained her maximum speed of fifty thousand miles an hour as the ceaseless drive of her great rocket motors forced her ahead, a speed possible in the void of outer space where there was no air to create friction. For all her great speed by Earthly standards, she was but crawling slowly across the vastness of Interplanetary space.

Life on board had settled down to a smooth routine. Now and then alarm bells would suddenly ring a warning of the approach of a small planetesimal or some other vagrant wanderer of outer space, and the ship would change course to avoid a collision. Otherwise there was

little excitement. Astern, the familiar Earth had dwindled to a shining disc--like the button on an airman's uniform. Ahead, the cloud-veiled planet of Venus drew steadily nearer.

Passing along one of B-deck corridors one day, Gerry met Olga Stark coming out of the recreation rooms. She was off duty at the moment, and instead of her uniform she wore a long gown of green silk. Her dark hair was surmounted by a polished metal cap, and a thin gauze veil hung to her chin. Gerry stopped her with a gesture.

"Very decorative, Lieutenant," he said with a twitch of his lips, "but this is supposed to be a scientific expedition. I must ask that you wear your uniform outside of your cabin."

"I am off duty!" she retorted, her dark eyes suddenly angry and sullen.

"It's true that you're not on watch at this moment, but everybody is on duty twenty-four hours a day till this expedition is over. Resume your uniform."

"And if I refuse?" she asked.

"You'll go into double irons. When I'm commanding a ship, I do just that!"

For a moment their glances met, the woman's hot and angry, the man's cold and unyielding. Then, without another word, she swept away to her cabin. Gerry Norton sighed, and went on his way. He had never become entirely reconciled to the presence of women in the Interplanetary Fleet. They made good officers most of the time, but occasionally they had fits of feminine temperament.

\* \* \* \* \*

At last there came the day when the yellowish, cloud-veiled mass of Venus filled half the sky ahead. Watches were doubled up. Rocket motors were cut down as the attraction of the planet pulled them onward. Then the forward rocket-tubes began to let go for the braking effect, and the flame of the discharges filled the control room with a flickering yellow light.

As they entered the outer atmosphere layers of Venus, the effect of air on the sun's rays gave them natural sunlight and blue skies again for the first time in over six weeks. Something about the effect of yellow sunlight slanting in the portholes raised the spirits of all of them, and men were whistling as they went about their work. Gerry brought the ship to a halt a few thousand feet above the endless, tumbled mass of clouds that eternally covered all of Venus. They were now near enough to be fully caught in the rotation of the planet's stratosphere, so that they had normal night and day instead of the eternal midnight that had gripped them for weeks.

Early the next morning, with all hands on duty, the *Viking's* helicopters began to drop her down into the cloud-mass. The cottony billows swept up to meet them--and then they were submerged in a dense and yellowish fog. Moisture gathered thickly on the windows of the control room.

"This reminds me of a good London fog!" said Angus McTavish, who had come up from his engine rooms for a few minutes. "I wonder if they have any good pubs down there!"

The soupy, saffron-colored fog enshrouded the *Viking* as she dropped lower and lower. Gerry Norton checked the altitude personally, watching the slowly moving hand of the indicator. Twice he held her motionless while he sent echo-soundings down to make sure they were not too close to land. Then they went a little lower--and

suddenly came clear of the cloud mass. They were sinking slowly downward through a peculiarly murky, golden light that was the normal day-time condition on the planet of Venus. They had arrived!

Below them stretched the rippling waters of a vast and greenish sea. It was broken by scattered islands, bare bits of rock that were dotted with a blue moss and were utterly bare of life except for a few swooping sea-birds. On a distant shore were lofty mountains whose peaks were capped with snow. In one or two places a narrow shaft of sunlight struck down through a brief gap in the canopy of eternal clouds, but otherwise there was only that subdued and peculiarly golden light. Nothing moved but those few oddly shaped birds.

"Lord--but it's lonely!" Gerry muttered.

There was no sign of human existence, no trace of the towers and buildings of mankind. Not even any sign of life at all, except for those sea-birds. It was like a scene from the long-ago youth of the world, when the only life was that of the teeming shallows or the muddy shores of warm seas. The place was desolate, and forlorn, and inexpressibly lonely.

They had opened some of the ports for a breath of fresh air after long weeks of the flat and second-hand product of the air filters, with its faint odor of oil and disinfectant. The breeze that came in the open ports was warm and moist and faintly salty.

"Rocket motors--minimum power!" Gerry commanded quietly.

"There's no use landing on one of those bare islets. We'll see what lies beyond the mountains."

The subdued blast of only two rocket tubes began to drive the *Viking* forward at a slow speed of about 300 M.P.H., while long fins were thrust out at the sides to carry the weight and free the helicopters. All



hands were crowded at the windows and ports. After a moment Olga Stark turned to Gerry.

"Our magnetic compasses are working again, Captain," she said quietly. "I suggest going across the mountains and then turning southwest."

"Why there--rather than in any other direction?" Gerry asked quietly. The girl shrugged.

"Just a hunch. Of course, it's all guesswork."

The *Viking* had to go up to a level of 18,000 feet above this lonely Venusian sea before she was above the peaks of the mountains. Then Gerry turned her inland. Just before they left the shoreline they passed some sort of a flying *thing* that swooped down to prey on the sea-birds. It had a reptilian body, and a spread of leathery wings about twelve feet across.

"Will you look at that!" Steve Brent muttered.

"I'd hate to meet that on a dark night!" Gerry said grimly. Along the shoreline as they flashed inland he could see monstrous, crawling things that moved sluggishly along the beaches or in the shallows. It began to seem that life on Venus was on a different level than that of the Outer Planets.

The *Viking* drove steadily westward across the mountains. From the lower control room windows Gerry could see only drifted snow and naked boulders, and the gauntly lonely peaks. The air was thin and cold. The canopy of yellow clouds was only a little way above them. Then, across the mountains at last, they dropped down toward a broad table-land covered with patches of forest and alternate stretches of open grass-land.

"Cut rockets!" Gerry snapped. "Prepare to land!"

A few minutes later the *Viking* settled gently down in a broad clearing, where the coarse grass was knee high. For the first time in over six weeks the sound and vibration of the motors ceased. The expedition had landed on Venus!

\* \* \* \* \*

The landing party filed out a door that opened in the lower part of the hull. The moist air was a little warmer than that of Earth, and it had an unfamiliar smell of growing things, but its density seemed about the same. Since the size of Venus was similar to that of their own planets, neither Earth-man nor Martian had much trouble in walking as soon as they became accustomed to a slightly lesser gravity. Gerry found he could leap eight feet in the air without any trouble.

Gerry split the landing party into four groups, sending them spreading out like the spokes of a fan.

"Don't go more than three miles from the ship without further orders. Study the countryside thoroughly, and then report back on board."

All the landing party wore light armour of steel coated with duralite, and carried ray-tubes at their belts. Every third man had a heavier ray-gun with its cylindrical magazine, not unlike the old-fashioned machine gun. Their polished armor took on a golden tinge as they tramped away across the grass-land, while behind them the *Viking* lay motionless in the grass like a great torpedo of steel and blue.

Gerry took personal command of the southernmost exploring party, leading them into a broad belt of forest. It was very still beneath the giant trees, where strange yellow flowers hung from the branches and

their path wound between clusters of ten-foot ferns. Huge toad-stools of purple and green rose higher than their heads, and once they saw a giant ant some three feet long who scuttled off through the underbrush with the speed of a galloping horse.

Gradually Gerry became separated from the rest of his party, bearing more to the southward as he caught a glimpse of more open country through the trees. Then, on the edge of a small clearing, he abruptly halted as half a dozen men appeared on the far side.

That is, Gerry thought of them as men for lack of a better term. They were like nothing he had ever seen on either Earth or Mars or any of the planetoids between. Lean bodies were covered with glistening gray scales. Though the hands seemed human, the feet were clawed and webbed. Short, flat tails hung behind them. The faces were scaleless, low-browed and green-eyed, with a jutting mouth and nose that came together in a sort of snout. They had pointed ears that stood sharply erect. Their general appearance was a little more on the animal side than the human, but they had swords slung at their belts and carried short-barreled rifles.

In the center of the group was a woman. She was naked except for a scarlet loin-cloth and golden breast-plates. This was no semi-reptilian creature, but a woman straight and clean-limbed and beautiful, with long blonde hair that hung nearly to her waist. She had blue eyes, and her skin was about as white as Gerry's own, though it had a faintly tawny tinge so that she appeared all golden. At the moment her hands were tightly tied behind her back and a cloth gag distended her lips, while one of the Scaly Men led her along by a rope about her neck.

Gerry stepped out into the clearing with his ray-tubes swinging free in his hand. His wide shoulders were thrown slightly forward, his whole muscular body was tensed and ready beneath his armor. As always

when he went into a fight, his lean, and normally somber face was smiling.

\* \* \* \* \*

The captive girl saw him first, and her eyes widened in utter surprise. Then the half dozen reptilian men caught sight of the lone Earth-man standing there in his gleaming armor, and their snout-like mouths sagged open. Gerry walked quietly forward.

He was half across the clearing before the Venusians recovered from their surprise. Then one of the patrol flung his short rifle to his shoulder. There was a hiss of escaping gas, and a split-second later an explosive bullet struck him in the chest with a flash and a loud report. It would have instantly killed an unprotected man, but it did no more than slightly dent Gerry's armor.

The Earth-man half crouched, his eyes narrowing and his jaw jutting suddenly forward. He had meant to try and parley, but diplomacy had no place with creatures who shot first and challenged afterward. His ray-tube swung up to the level. There was a sharp crackling sound, and for a second a murky red light played around the open end. The nearest Venusian crumpled and went down. He twitched for a second, and then lay still. The gray scales had turned dead black in the area where the death-ray had struck him.

At least the Scaly Men had courage! The remaining five came forward with a shrill and almost canine yelping, advancing at a bent-legged run. Their rifles hissed as the compressed gases were released, the explosive bullets crackled all around Gerry. Twice more his ray-tube let go its deadly blast--and then his weapon was empty. He cursed himself through clenched teeth for having strayed away from the patrol while armed only with a light tube with simply three charges. Two more of the reptile men lay twitching in the tall grass,

but the other three were almost up to him. After that one volley they had drawn their swords, which probably meant that their compressed-gas rifles were cumbersome things to reload.

And then Gerry Norton suddenly remembered the greater strength of his Earthly muscles. As the foremost Venusian lunged for him with long blade swinging, Gerry bounded high into the air. He went clean over the head of his antagonist, coming down squarely on top of the next behind. They both went sprawling, but Gerry recovered first. Gripping the fallen Venusian by the ankles, the Earth-man swung him around his head like a flail and hurled him squarely at the other two. The three of them went down in a tangled heap.

By the time the reptile men again scrambled to their feet, Gerry had snatched up the sword of one of the men he had killed with the ray-tube. Now he had something to fight with! The long sword whistled as he jerked it free from its scabbard. For an instant he tested the blade in both hands. It was forged of some bluish metal that seemed as strong and flexible as well-tempered steel. Then, still smiling his thin-lipped smile though his eyes were as cold as the wintry seas, Gerry Norton waited the onrush of the three Venusians.

There were a few seconds of clashing steel. The reptile men were good swordsmen, but they were no match for the speed and strength of the Man from Earth. Two of them were stretched on the ground with cloven skulls, and then the last survivor turned and ran. Gerry could have caught him easily, for the webbed feet of the Venusian did not make for great speed, but he was content to let him go.

When the scaly tail of the fleeing creature had vanished in the underbrush, Gerry thrust his sword upright in the ground--where it would be handy if he needed it again in a hurry--and freed the golden-haired girl from her bonds.

"I wonder where *you* fit into this picture, Bright Eyes!" he muttered, knowing she would not understand.

There was certainly nothing of the shrinking violet about this girl! When her hands were free she faced Gerry without any sign of either fear or even much gratitude, standing erect with her hands on her hips and her eyes nearly on a level with his own.

"*Jaro quimtar*--who are you?" she asked in Martian.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gerry stared at her in startled surprise. The girl had unquestionably spoken in Martian. It was a very old and antique form of the language that she used, a dialect that had not been heard on Mars itself for countless generations, but it was possible for Gerry to understand it. The last thing he had expected to find on this planet of Venus was anyone who spoke one of the tongues common on the Outer Planets!

"I'm Gerry Norton," he said.

"Geree!" the girl repeated. "You talk funny."

"Same to you, sister," Gerry grinned. "And just who are you, anyway?"

"I am Closana, of course, the daughter of Rupin-Sang!" the girl said haughtily. "Don't you see the Golden Arrow?"

She touched a small golden arrow that hung from a light chain about her neck. It seemed to be some kind of an insignia of rank. Her deep blue eyes were looking at him thoughtfully.

"You wear queer clothes, Geree," she said at last. "Where do you

come from?"

"From Earth."

She frowned.

"Where is that? Is it one of the lands beyond the Great Sea?"

"Much farther away than that. It's another planet, far off in outer space."

"You lie," she said. "Such a thing is not possible."

"Okay, sister," Gerry snapped, "we won't argue about that right now. Who were your unpleasant friends here? What do we do next?"

Closana walked across to take the sword of one of the slain Reptilians. She tested its balance, seemed satisfied, and then belted the scabbard about her own waist. She handled the long blade with the experienced ease of a warrior, and for the first time Gerry noticed the play of corded muscles beneath the smooth and tawny skin of her arms and shoulders. Closana, daughter of Rupin-Sang, was feminine enough but there was nothing of the clinging vine about her! She threw her long hair back over her shoulders and faced Gerry with the sword in her hand.

"You should have killed the last of the Scaly Ones," she said, "instead of letting him get away. Now he will bring the whole raiding party down on us."

"Who are they, those things you call the Scaly Ones?"

"Their region lies beyond the frontier of our land of Savissa," the girl explained. "We are near the boundaries now. There is constant warfare between ourselves and the Scaly Ones. Now and then their

raiding parties break through our ring of barrier forts, and it was a group of five hundred such raiders that captured me this morning. That one who escaped will bring the rest back with him."

"Then I guess we'll need help!" Gerry said grimly.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a two-way, short-wave radio set built into his helmet. He reached up to adjust the switch, then flashed the alarm signal. A few seconds later he heard the answering voice of Portok the Martian, who was in command of the nearest of the *Viking's* exploring parties.

"Jumping ray-blasts, Chief, we were wondering what had happened to you!"

"Guide on my transmitter and get here as soon as you can!" Gerry snapped. "Hurry!"

A few minutes later they saw a glint of armor through the trees, and then the half dozen members of the exploring party emerged into the clearing. Their eyes were wide with surprise as they saw Closana standing beside Gerry.

"Who's your yellow-haired friend, Chief?" Portok asked with a broad grin. He had spoken in Martian, the two tongues being practically interchangeable with the men of the Interplanetary Fleet. Closana's eyes flashed fire.

"Speak of me with more respect, little Red-face!" she snapped. Portok's jaw sagged open, but before he could say anything further the underbrush on the far side of the clearing suddenly vomited a yelling horde of the Scaly Ones.



They came in close-packed masses, yelping shrilly. Their scaly skins and the blades of their swords gleamed in the subdued yellow light. Evidently bent on capture of the small group of strangers, they were not using their gas-guns.

"Keep together! Fall back toward the ship!" Gerry roared, drawing the sword he had captured earlier in the day.

There was a sharp crackle of ray-blasts as the Earth-men fell back before the charging horde of the Scaly Ones. The short hand-tubes were soon exhausted, but the heavy ray-guns carried by two of the men fired steadily. Murky light continually played about their stubby muzzles. Dozens of the Scaly Ones dropped, twitching, in the tall grass before the deadly blast of the rays, but the shouting hordes came on unchecked. And then a bugle sounded somewhere off on the flank!

"Now, you scaly devils!" Closana screamed, facing about and waving the sword high above her head, "The frontier guards have arrived!"

Long lines of warriors charged out through the bushes to take the reptile men on the flank. The front line of skirmishers carried heavy bows and had quivers of arrows slung on their backs, the ranks behind were armed with shields and spears. Rank by rank and company by company they came, nearly a thousand strong, the ringing clamor of brazen trumpets urging them onward. Gerry Norton stared at them blankly, scarcely able to believe what he saw. All the warriors were women!

They were tall and clean-limbed, with long golden hair that streamed behind them as they ran. Like Closana, they wore bright-colored loin cloths and had round gold plates fastened across their breasts. The might of the Golden Amazons of Venus swept forward like a giant wave, with a spray of tossing spear points above it. Then the

trumpets sounded again, and the arrow storm began.

The front ranks loosed their long shafts swiftly, and the air became full of the twang of bow-strings and hiss of speeding arrows. A shouting officer of the Scaly Ones went down with a pair of shafts feathered in his chest. His men were dropping all about him as the gold-tipped arrows struck home.

\* \* \* \* \*

The reptile men were using their gas-guns now. The sharp hiss of the discharges rose above the twang of the bow-strings, the snap of the exploding bullets was like a crackle of old-fashioned musketry. The projectiles ripped holes in the front ranks of the Amazons, but they still came bounding forward. Then the sharp reports of the exploding bullets died away, for the gas-guns were cumbersome things to re-charge and there was no time. The two lines met with a clash of steel

Gerry Norton had thrown his armoured Earth-men and Martians as a guard around Closana when she ran toward the center of the Amazon line. On two occasions small parties of the Scaly Ones cut their way through the guarding spears to reach them, and each time the blast of the heavy ray-guns mowed them down. The clatter of meeting blades was like the noise of a thousand smithies, the shrill yelping of the reptile men was drowned out by the triumphant blast of the Amazon trumpets. The Scaly Ones were giving back all along the line, under pressure of superior numbers and the greater agility of the lithe Amazons.

Gerry fought with the long, blue-bladed sword in his hand and the shield of a fallen Amazon on his left arm. With the greater strength of his earthly muscles, he raged through the fighting while his heavy blade wrought deadly execution. And then it was over! The Scaly Ones broke up into scores of fleeing groups and fresh companies of

Amazons bounded in pursuit with their long bows twanging. Closana leaned on her dripping blade and held out her hand.

"It was a good fight, Geree. I think I will take you for my husband."

"I think," Gerry said, "We'll just leave that idea for discussion some other time."

\* \* \* \* \*

The fleeing survivors of the Scaly Ones had gone, with companies of light armed Amazons in hot pursuit. The others were tending the wounded and gathering up the dead, picking up fallen weapons, doing all the routine tasks that are the aftermath of battle. Closana was now surrounded by a body-guard of tall, blonde Amazons whose loin-cloths bore the same design of a golden arrow-head as her own.

"I think," she said to Gerry, "that you should come to see my father Rupin-Sang, who is ruler of this land."

Quite a thinker, decided Gerry.

"We can take you there in the ship if you show us the way," he said shortly.

A horde of Amazons thronged around the big blue-and-silver hull of the *Viking* where she lay in the knee-high grass. As the members of the landing party filed on board and turned their ray-tubes in to the Ordnance Officer to be recharged, the other members of the crew came out to stare at the visitors. Angus McTavish stood on the steps of the ladder with his big fists on his hips.

"Will ye look at all the bonny lassies!" he said, "This may not be such a bad planet after all."

The feminine warriors of Venus saw McTavish then, and a sudden murmur swept over the throng. An instant later a hundred blades flashed in the air in salute, and then all the Amazons dropped down on one knee.

"Now what the devil...?" muttered Steve Brent who had come out of the ship just behind McTavish.

"Just a proper tribute to my outstanding personality, lad!" the big Scot muttered aside. Closana read the surprise in Gerry Norton's eyes.

"There are few men in this land of Savissa," she explained, "And the wearing of a beard is the sign of a noble of the highest rank."

"Wonder how long it will take me to grow a good crop of whiskers!" Steve said.

Closana and a dozen of her body-guard came aboard, looking curiously about them. As the Venusian princess walked into the control room she came face to face with Olga Stark. For a long moment the two women stood looking at each other, their clashing glances hard and intent. The golden Venusian and the dark haired Earthling. Then Closana shrugged and turned away.

"I do not like her," she said calmly. A slow flush spread over Olga Stark's face, and her eyes smoldered, but she did not answer.

With helicopters spinning, the *Viking* rose a thousand feet in the air. Then she moved ahead at minimum cruising speed. Closana stood at one of the control room windows to point the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a strange land that they saw moving past below them, though a

pleasant one. There were rolling uplands, and patches of forest, and occasional villages surrounded by broad tilled fields. Except for the yellowish tinge to the vegetation, and the odd shapes of the trees, it might have been an Earthly countryside. Then Gerry noticed another thing! Though it was broad daylight, as bright as it could become on this planet, there were no shadows at all. The diffusing effect of the eternal cloud barrier kept the light equal on all sides.

"The Land of No Shadow!" he said aloud. For the first time in this busy day he thought of the fact that they were forty million miles from home. If anything happened to the *Viking*, they would spend the rest of their lives here.

They passed some of the barrier forts, square and stone walled buildings reminiscent of medieval castles on Earth. In the misty hills beyond, Closana told Gerry, lay the country of the Scaly Ones.

"What is it like?" he asked. She shrugged, but her eyes were shadowed.

"All I know about it is legend, the sort of tales that old women tell in the evenings. Many of our people have been taken there as prisoners in raids, but none has ever returned alive."

Leaving Steve Brent in command in the control room for the moment, Gerry went aft to his quarters where he had a compact Tri-dimensional-cinema outfit. He was passing along one of the corridors on B-deck when he abruptly halted. A faint humming was coming from behind the closed door of the radio room!

The *Viking's* sending outfit was not strong enough to bridge the vastness of interplanetary space. Such outfits existed, of course, but only a small set had been installed on the space-ship because of the extra weight involved. The radio room had been closed and locked

weeks ago. No one was supposed to have access to it except Steve Brent and Gerry himself. And yet--the unmistakable hum of a generator was coming from behind the closed door!

Gerry cautiously tested the knob of the door. It gave under his hand. As he opened the portal a crack, he clearly heard the sharp murmur of the sending apparatus. Then he swung the door wide on its noiseless and well oiled hinges. A dim light gleamed across the room! A dark figure was crouched tensely over the table that held the sending set. At the moment Gerry could not see who it was.

Two steps Gerry took into the room. Three steps. The rubberoid soles of his shoes made no sound. Then a crushing weight descended on top of his head! In the half second before he lost consciousness, he realized that there had been a second interloper in the radio room. Someone who had been crouching against the wall by the door, and who had slugged him as he passed.

\* \* \* \* \*

When consciousness returned to Gerry Norton, he was lying alone on the floor of the darkened radio room. He sat up, and rubbed his aching head, and swore softly. There was no sign of the interlopers, nor any clue to their identity.

The whole incident puzzled him. His assailants must have been from among the *Viking's* crew. That was surprising enough in itself, but there was also the problem of motive. Why would anybody be sending a secret message when there was no receiving set within millions of miles? The thing just didn't make sense.

Closing the radio room behind him Gerry went back to the control-room and drew Steve Brent aside.

"Look here, Steve! I just found someone sending a secret message out over the radio, and got knocked on the head before I could see who it was."

"You must have been reading some of those funny old Twentieth Century gangster yarns of evil deeds!" Steve grinned.

"I'm serious. That really happened." Gerry snapped. The grin faded from Brent's freckled face.

"Then it must have been Chester Sand," he said promptly.

"Why do you say that?"

Brent shrugged.

"Because he's the only man aboard that I don't know too well to suspect."

"Interesting logic," Gerry grunted, "But we can't lock a man up on such negative grounds. Keep your eyes open. I'm going to try to sweat some information out of someone as soon as we get through this ceremony of visiting the king of this place."

\* \* \* \* \*

Women working in the fields looked up as the *Viking* passed, lifting a hand to shade their eyes as they stared aloft at the soaring spaceship. Other women drove small carts along the white roads that wound through the fields. There did not seem to be any men in this land at all. Then, along the far horizon ahead, there began to lift the domes and towers and minarets of a mighty city. Closana proudly lifted her arm.

"The Golden City of Larr!" she said, "Capitol of our land of Savissa. None but our own people have ever penetrated those walls except as prisoners of war."

The walled city of Larr dominated the plain in all its towered splendor. Its walls of polished yellow stone were more than a hundred feet high. The serrated battlements at the top were faced with plates of thin gold. Domes of blue and scarlet gleamed within the walls. Slender minarets lifted their lattices high in the air. In the center was a massive round tower whose top was shaped like the point of a golden arrow.

"But surely your people never built this place!" he gasped. Closana shook her head.

"The city was not built by my people as they are now. Larr, the Golden City, is very ancient. It was built by the Old Ones--they who lived here long ago, in the dim dawn of time. I have forgotten most of the tale but my father can tell you."

As they passed over the outer walls, Gerry saw some long steel tubes mounted on swivels above the battlements. They were protected by gleaming metal shields. He touched Closana's arm.

"What are those things that look like giant ray-guns?"

"Those are the defences of the walls," the girl answered, "We also have them at the barrier forts. In some way they send out rays of heat that burn and shrivel all things within reach. I do not know much about them, but my father can tell you."

"Looks like he's going to tell me a lot of things," Gerry said. Closana shook back her long hair and looked at him thoughtfully for a moment.



"Yes, Geree. He will also tell you why you had better marry me as I suggested."

"I told you we'd have to let that subject wait till later!" he said grimly. Steve Brent prodded him gently in the ribs.

"Persistent souls, these Golden Amazons!" he said in English.

\* \* \* \* \*

The appearance of the *Viking* in the air over Larr created a mounting excitement among the citizens of the city. Through the open windows of the control room Gerry could hear the brazen clamor of many trumpets, sounding the alarm. Crowds appeared on the roofs. Arrows streaked up at the space-ship, futile shafts that fell short of the mark. As they neared the central tower, gun crews swarmed about two of the ray-tubes. Knowing the resisting power of the *Viking's* duralite hull, Gerry was not greatly worried, but Closana seemed to feel that things had gone far enough.

Hitherto the girl had been quite evidently enjoying the consternation that the *Viking's* arrival had caused among the defenders of the city. Now she leaned far out from the open window and waved reassuringly. As she was recognized, defense preparations ceased and the gun crews began to cover their weapons up again.

The *Viking* settled gently down on the worn stone pavement of a square plaza directly before the central tower. A ring of amazon spearmen instantly formed to keep back the curious crowds, and other companies were drawn up as a guard of honor. They saluted Closana with a shout and a surge of uplifted spears when she and Gerry stepped out the opened starboard door. Then, when Angus McTavish came out with a group of senior officers a few seconds later, all the Amazon warriors dropped instantly down on one knee

while their spear-points rattled on the stones. The big engineer beamed through his beard, and tilted his uniform cap to a more rakish angle.

"I have already stated that these folk are a verra discriminating people!" he said with deep satisfaction. Closana turned to Gerry.

"It would be better to take only a few of your people along when we go into see my father."

Gerry faced about, his glance running quickly over those of his crew who had emerged from the hull and were standing nearby.

"Steve Brent stays here in command," he said quietly, "You come with me, Angus. And Portok. And one other...." He hesitated, then named Olga Stark. Later he was to wonder what evil genius had led him to select her as one of the party. He could not quite remember. Probably it was just a desire to take as varied and representative a group along with him as possible. Closana looked annoyed at his choice, but did not comment.

\* \* \* \* \*

They passed through the ranks of the spear-guard, and up to the octagonal main door of the tower where carved golden leaves slid back into the wall on each side. A blue light glowed around the inner frame of the door, and Closana held up her arm.

"Wait till the blue light fades, for it is Death," she said quietly. Then, as the light died out, they all stepped inside while the golden leaves of the door closed clashing behind them.

They were in a winding corridor whose stone walls were faced with polished stone and hung with ancient tapestries. The place was

lighted by metal discs set flush in the ceiling, discs of a substance that gave forth a soft and golden glow. Even this light, Gerry noticed, was so diffused as to be shadowless. "The Land of No-Shadow!" he muttered under his breath, remembering the phrase that had come to him earlier. Somehow the friendly old Earth seemed very far away at that moment!

In an ante-chamber they met the first man they had seen since they reached Venus, aside from the half-animal raiders of the Scaly Ones. This man was short and slight, with a very high forehead and unusually large eyes. His skin had the same tawny tinge as that of the feminine warriors of his race, but he was more lightly built than they. He wore a loose yellow tunic, and his hair and thin beard were heavily shot with gray. Somehow he looked tired, and old even beyond his years, as though the sands of his race were running very low.

"Rupin-Sang awaits your coming," he said to Gerry. As Portok and the others from the *Viking* came into sight, the Venusian stared at them with strangely startled eyes. He said nothing more, but his glance seemed to hold a strange, terrible haunting fear.

At the end of the corridor they stepped into a small golden car. A door closed behind them. The floor shot rapidly upward. A few seconds later the door of the lift-car swung open again and they stepped out into a round chamber near the top of the great tower.

"Enter to His Highness Rupin-Sang, Lord of Savissa and the Mountain Lands, ruler of field and forest and castle, hereditary Warden of the Great Sea!" the Venusian courtier said sonorously.

The room was circular, with glassless windows set in the walls every few feet. A warm breeze blew in to stir the tiny metal discs that hung around near the tops of the walls in a sort of frieze, setting them swinging till they clashed together with a continuous jingling. A small

fountain murmured in the center of the room. A peculiarly shaped telescope stood by one wall, and there were other scientific instruments of a type unfamiliar to the Earth-men.

\* \* \* \* \*

In a big carved chair in the center sat a very old man, a rolled parchment lying across his knees. What remained of his hair and beard were pure white. His face was lined and sunken. He half raised his arm in a ceremonial gesture of welcome, but then a sudden expression of alarm came over his face. He pointed with one shaking hand.

"Aie--woe to the City of Larr! The hour of the fulfilment of the prophecy is at hand! Woe to Larr, with its walls and towers!"

Closana hurried to her father's side. A moment later the old man had regained his calm. He greeted them with formalized speech of welcome full of old phrases, then added:

"Forgive my agitation when you first entered, *hiziren*, but it brought to mind the doom-filled phrases of what we of Savissa call the Prophecy of Jeddah-Khana."

"What is that?"

"It is a very old prophecy, carved in an ancient runic script on the stone walls of one of the vaults under this tower. Tradition says it was put there by the Old Ones who built this city, and of whose science we are the unworthy heirs." Rupin-Sang bowed and touched his forehead as he mentioned the Old Ones. "The Prophecy states that the day will come when a red-skinned man and a dark-haired woman and a ruddy, bearded giant will come together to the city from afar, and that within a month thereafter the Golden City of Larr will crumble

and return to the dust."

"But surely you don't take such old legends seriously!" Gerry said. The old man smiled.

"My head tells me not to, but superstition is strong in we of Savissa. However--I can take comfort from the fact that the old legend also prophesies a re-birth for Savissa after the great catastrophe. But enough of this talk of portents and legends! I give you welcome to Savissa, and to the city of Larr. Also, I thank you for rescuing my youngest daughter from the Scaly Raiders. Whence come ye?"

Gerry sketched in hasty phrases the outline of present conditions on Earth and Mars, and told of their trip through space to Venus in the *Viking*. Rupin-Sang nodded without showing any particular surprise.

"And so that's the story," Gerry concluded. "We're curious about some of your conditions here. The women warriors, for instance...."

"It was not always so in the land of Savissa," Rupin-Sang said with a faint smile. "In the days of the Old Ones there was a natural balance of the sexes. But, as the slow centuries passed, the birth rate gradually changed. Now one child in five thousand born in Savissa is a male. The few men we do have are needed for certain administrative and scientific work, particularly the supervision of the alta-radium mines in the mountains from which we get the raw material for the alta-ray tubes that are our greatest protection against invasion."

"I saw the tubes on the walls," Gerry said, "but why is it that your mobile forces are armed only with primitive weapons like bows and arrows?"

"Because we cannot possibly mine and produce enough of the alta-

radium to do more than supply the defences of the city and of the barrier forts. The possession of the secret of that ray has kept our borders free from the Scaly Ones except for isolated raids like the one you encountered today, but we cannot arm our troops with the ray."

"And the gas-guns of the Scaly Ones?"

"They are a good weapon--but we have not the materials to manufacture them on this side of the border."

"Sounds like what we used to call a 'balance of power' in the days when Earth was torn by wars," Gerry said with a smile. "But tell me one thing more. I notice that in this land you speak an archaic form of Martian."

"The Tempora-scope can tell you the story better than my words."

Rupin-Sang nodded to his attendant, and a cloth cover was removed from a broad metal disc that was attached to some kind of a machine. He touched a control lever, and the mechanism began to hum. Blinds were dropped down over the windows, so that the room was filled with a murky twilight. The humming sound grew steadily louder. Now the metal disc glowed with a brilliant light. Momentarily its polished surface clouded over, as though obscured by a thin fog, and then the mists drifted aside.

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Before them they saw the Universe as it was in the youth of the world, when roaring volcanoes were still active on the Moon and the rings of Saturn were just drifting out from the girth of that spinning sphere. It was as though they were looking out through a circular window somewhere in the sky. The machine gave a perfect illusion of reality,

not merely tri-dimensional but touching all the senses as well. They could hear the roar of new-made satellites spinning off into the void, and the rush of burning gases. They could smell the scent of molten rock.

Then time passed! The planets began to cool. The mud-flats steamed under a cloudy sun, the mountains shouldered their way upward through the tilted and riven fields. On the edges of inland seas, the hot shallows were filled with slimy things that crawled with their bellies dragging. They could hear the ripple of the waters, and the rustle of warm winds blowing through the flowerless and fern-like forests. Gerry could smell the rank odors of the steaming and primitive jungles. There was a pungent taste on his lips. Once he stretched his hand out toward a trilobite that seemed to be crawling up to his feet--and he felt the coarse surface of the shell before he pulled his hand back again.

The picture changed once more, centering on a ruddy planet that swept toward them while Portok exclaimed at the sight of Mars in the ancient days before the planets were built. Men and women walked its smooth fields, among the flaming scarlet flowers. Music and laughter and the voices of women drifted on the scented winds. But Mars was changing. It was drying up. Life could no longer be the same. Some of the people were beginning to draft the plans for the great canals that were to conserve the planet's failing supply of water, but others took to space-ships and sailed off into the void.

Then, for the first time, they saw the planet Venus as the Martian space-ships dropped down through the veiling clouds. They saw those first pioneers of space land on Venus, and subjugate the natives, and build mighty cities in the plains. But something happened to the birth-rate, and most of the science of the Old Ones was lost when a series of great quakes swept the planet. The

holdings of the descendants of those interplanetary travelers of long ago dwindled to only the city of Larr and the land of Savissa itself.

The humming of the Tempora-scope died away. The big metal disc again became blank. The machine had ceased to function, and the illusion of the reality of the past was gone. They were simply in a shaded tower room with a tired old man who sat on a carved throne.

"And that is the tale of the rise and decline of our people, *hiziren*," he said sadly. "Now the sands of our nation run low. I am half inclined to believe that the old prophecy will come true, and that this is the twilight of Savissa and its people. But--enough of that. Raise the blinds again, Rotosa, so that we may have light while we can. And I ask you visitors from afar to dine with me tonight before you go back to your space-ship."

\* \* \* \* \*

The banquet table was set on the ground floor of the Arrow-Tower, in a room where an open colonnade looked out on a walled garden behind the palace of the rulers of Savissa. A carved wooden table was set with golden plates. Faint music came from some hidden source. In the garden outside, night birds sang softly and there was a constant sound of running water from many fountains.

In addition to Rupin-Sang, there were three of his male attendants and about twenty women. On this ceremonial occasion they supplemented their usual scanty garb with long and graceful robes that gleamed like silk. Thin veils were attached to jeweled circlets. Catching a glimpse of the sullen discontent on Olga Stark's face, Gerry suddenly realized that the Earth woman was jealous of her own appearance.

"Probably hating my guts right now for making her wear her uniform!"



he thought. "Women are queer!"

To Gerry Norton, that meal was a peaceful interlude between the monotonous strain of the long interplanetary voyage and the uncertainty of what lay ahead. Though some of the native dishes tasted strange to his Earthly palate, the food was generally good. Fragrant, heady wines from the hill country bordering Savissa were served in colored glass goblets. A sound of distant singing drifted across the garden.

Gerry was wondering what disaster had overtaken the first expedition that had set out to reach this planet, the space-ship *Stardust* that had left Earth over two years ago under command of Major Walter Lansing. Perhaps it had landed in some less friendly part of the planet and been overwhelmed by the natives before it could get away again. Perhaps it had met some swift disaster in outer space and was now spinning endlessly in the void--a lifeless and man-made planetoid. In any case, he would make a thorough search for some trace of the *Stardust* before he started back to Earth again.

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When the meal was over and they all arose from the table, Gerry noticed that Angus and Olga Stark walked out into the garden together. It struck him as an odd combination, for Olga was the one person on board with whom the genial Scot was not friendly. Then he forgot about it.

A few minutes later Closana took Gerry's arm and led him out into the garden. Colored lanterns hung here and there along the paths, but most of the light came from globes of glowing metal that were concealed near the tops of the trees. The effect was much like Earthly moonlight, except that the moon was golden instead of silver. Angus and Olga should have been a few yards ahead of them, but both had

disappeared. Gerry wondered about it--and then a dim figure rose up in the shadows immediately before him. A cloud of choking gas, hurled squarely in his face from some sort of flask, filled his lungs with the pain of many fiery needles.

Gerry crumpled soundlessly to the ground. He could see and hear what went on, but otherwise he was paralyzed and incapable of sound or movement. For a moment he thought that Closana was behind some form of treachery. Then dark figures swarmed around him, lifting him from the ground, and he saw the dim light gleaming on gray scales. The Scaly Ones had penetrated to the innermost sanctuary of the City of Larr!

Gerry's head fell back as they lifted him, and he could see that Closana was equally helpless in the grip of more of the raiders. A section of grass and bushes was swung back on a hidden trap door, revealing a flight of moss-covered stone steps leading downward. The two prisoners were carried down, and the door dropped hollowly into place above them.

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They were in a narrow and very ancient stone passage. Moss and lichens covered the walls, moisture dripped from the ceiling. On the floor in the midst of another group of the Scaly Ones lay Angus McTavish, evidently also a victim of the paralyzing gas. Olga Stark stood nearby, her long dark hair loose about her shoulders and an expression of savage triumph in her eyes.

"Tie them securely!" she snapped to the officer in command of the Scaly Men. His long-nosed, brutish face creased in a grim smile.

"It shall be done, Mistress!"

Closana was stripped to her loin-cloth. A cloth gag was twisted into her mouth, her arms were tied behind her back. Gerry and Angus were treated in the same way. Control of his muscles was returning swiftly to Gerry Norton now, as the effects of the gas wore off, but he was already secured and helpless.

Grim rage filled Gerry then, but even greater than that emotion was his utter amazement. The thing was completely beyond his understanding. This was no routine raid of the Scaly Ones against the people of Larr, but a definite attempt to capture *him*! Strangest of all was the part played by Olga Stark, who acted as though she was in command of the Scaly Men. It just wasn't possible--but it was happening.

The three prisoners were pulled to their feet. Guards gripped their elbows. At the first bend in the passage a small waterfall came down from above and formed a gurgling stream that ran in a deep gutter at one side. The air was hot, and moist, and heavy with the scent of running water and fungus growths. Other jets of water came down from above to add to the trickle of water until, as the passage widened, a gurgling torrent ran along beside them. Suddenly Gerry realized where they were. This was the sewerage system that carried away the waste of the city's many flowing fountains!

At last they came to the main drain, a vaulted stone passage where a twenty-foot stream of black water flowed along beside the narrow foot-path. Tied up there, looking like a sea-monster in the dim light of the lanterns carried by the Scaly Men, was a metal boat that had only a narrow deck and a round dome above the water. A crude submarine!

The three prisoners were forced aboard. Their gags were removed, now that silence no longer mattered, but their arms remained bound and they were chained by the necks to a steel bar as they sat in a row

at one side of the narrow hull. The raiders cast off, came aboard, and closed the dome behind them. Motors hummed softly, and then the submarine moved sluggishly down the stream.

At the moment the three of them were alone. They could see the scaly skins of some of their captors busied at various tasks in adjoining compartments, but there was no one within hearing. After twisting futilely at his bonds for a moment, Gerry leaned back against the steel bulkhead behind him and looked over at Angus.

"Well--here we are!" he said.

"Aye--so it seems!" The Scot's broad face was grim. "I should have known that black-haired witch had some devilry in mind when she asked me to walk in the garden with her!"

"But where does she fit into the picture? How does she get her control over these scaly devils?"

"How do I know?" snorted McTavish angrily. "Ask me some more riddles! What's more to the point is where they're taking us in this queer craft."

"I can guess that," Closana said quietly. The girl was very pale, but she smiled faintly as she met Gerry's eyes. "This drain empties into the Giri river, and a few miles farther along that river forms the boundary between Savissa and the lands of the Scaly Ones. We have never known they could travel beneath the water this way."

"What will happen after they get us there?"

"Torture and death. Once any of our people are taken across into the land of Giri-Vaaka, they never return alive."

"Nice little trip we're taking, Gerry lad!" McTavish growled. "Too bad you didn't bring your cinema camera along!"

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The submarine moved sluggishly ahead, silent except for the hum of its motors. As Gerry looked around he could see that it was a crudely constructed and makeshift craft. Even so, it was more than he would have expected from men of the apparent mentality of the Scaly Ones.

"This is a funny sort of submarine!" he said to Angus. The big engineer, who had twisted around to peer at the bulkhead directly behind them, growled deep in his throat.

"It's funnier than ye think, lad! Look at this!" McTavish nodded toward one of the sheets of thin steel from which the bulkhead had been built. On the edge there were stamped a few words. The letters were small, and in the dim light Gerry had to narrow his eyes for a moment before he could read them.

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"How in Heaven's name did they get that...?" Gerry's voice trailed off without finishing the sentence. McTavish shrugged.

"Ye don't need more than one guess. The *Stardust* must have been wrecked somewhere near here, and these devils took some of her parts to build this outlandish craft."

At last, long hours later, the submarine came to a stop. As his captors led him up on deck, Gerry saw that the ungainly craft had grounded in the shallows on the shore of a broad river. It was just daylight. A pale yellow light filtered down through the canopy of clouds, and a flight of marsh-fowl was winging by just overhead.

"Where are we?" asked Gerry.

"This is the Giri River," Closana said. "Savissa lies on the far shore. This is the land of the Scaly Ones."

Some of the reptile men hauled the submarine into a cove and began to cover it over with piles of reeds. Some twenty others formed up in a column with the three prisoners in the center. Then the officer in command barked an order and they all moved out along a dirt road that led away from the river. Olga Stark was walking beside the first rank of scaly warriors. She had not looked at the prisoners at all.

They tramped steadily onward through the dust in silence except for the dull slap of the webbed feet of the reptile men and the jingle of their equipment. After a while the officer in command came back to look at the prisoners. He was a grizzled veteran with shaggy ridges above his eyes and the long-healed scars of half a dozen old wounds on his scaly body. McTavish glared at him for a moment.

"Take a good look, sonny boy!" the big Scot growled. "What's your name--if you have one?"

"I should tear out your tongue for speaking in that tone to an officer of Giri-Vaaka," the officer said. His voice had the high pitched and metallic quality typical of his race, and he bared his pointed teeth in a not unfriendly grin, "but the torturers of the Lord Lansa will take care of you soon enough. I am Toll, commander of a *strikka* in the border guards."

"Where are you taking us?"

Toll grinned wickedly.

"To the palace of Lansa, overlord of all Venus."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gerry noticed that this countryside of Giri-Vaaka was very different from the pleasant and cultivated fields of Savissa over which he had passed the day before. The roads were dirt and half over-grown. Not much of the country was under cultivation. Strange purple bushes with thorns a foot long covered much of the land, crowding close on the patches of forest where ten-foot ferns towered high overhead. Sometimes they came upon a grazing herd of the yard-long giant ants, who would go galloping away with their antennæ waving in the air and their hard-shelled leg-joints clicking loudly.

Depression hung on Gerry Norton's chest like a physical weight. It was not alone the fact that every stride carried them deeper into a grim and hostile land--prisoners whose doom was probably already sealed--that set him biting his lower lip till he tasted the salt blood on his tongue. Nor even the fact that Closana shared the same fate because she happened to have been with him at the time of the raid. It was also the utter strangeness of everything. Yesterday, in Savissa, the people and the mode of life had been nearly enough to normal so that he was not deeply conscious of the strange vegetation and the other things in which Venus differed from Earth and Mars.

Now everything seemed different, and alien. The lowering yellow skies of Venus were ominous. The hot winds brought strange smells and seemed to carry a hint of doom. The one thought that gave him any real hope was the fact that Portok the Martian had not been captured with the rest of them. He must have missed them soon after the abduction. There might be a chance that he and Steve Brent would bring the *Viking* to look for them.

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They had begun to pass occasional small farms. These were scanty fields carved out of the creeping masses of purple thorns, usually with a roughly thatched hut in the center. On one such occasion the farmer and his family stood apathetically at the roadside to watch the patrol of Reptile Men go by.

"But they're not scaly!" Gerry exclaimed. Closana shook her head.

"No. They are of the Green Men of Giri. Once they held this land while the Scaly Ones dwelt in the marshes of Vaaka farther west, but the Scaly Ones have now been masters of this place for many generations."

The Green Men, Gerry noticed, looked like ordinary Earthlings except for a slight greenish cast to their skin. Probably, like the Golden Amazons, they were also descended from the Old Ones who had come from Mars so long ago. The ragged and mud-stained farmer gave Toll a perfunctory salute, and then leaned on his hoe to watch the column pass by.

The warriors of Toll swaggered along the road with the insolent assurance of men who know themselves masters of all around them. The farmer's green face was carefully expressionless, but there was a gleam in his eyes that spoke of no great liking for his scaly masters. When his glance lingered on Gerry's for an instant, the Earth-man read a definite sympathy in it.

They camped that night in a clearing beside a small stream. One of the guards shot a giant ant with his gas-gun, then cracked open the horny shell with his sword. They cut long strips of the meat and roasted it over a fire. Though the taste was peculiar the stuff was edible, and the three prisoners managed to swallow it.

"The condemned man ate a hearty meal!" Angus McTavish said with



grim humor, wiping his fingers on the coarse yellow grass beside him.

Olga had gone on with a faster-moving detachment, and only a dozen Scaly Ones remained with Toll to guard the three prisoners. Gerry and Closana sat side by side before the fire, their bare shoulders touching. The ruddy and flickering glow of the firelight touched Angus' giant frame a little farther around the circle, and then the scaly skins and long snouts of the reptile men watching them. Gerry clasped his arms around his knees.

"Y'know Angus, at the moment we're living as our ancestors must have lived long generations ago. No ray-tubes or dura-steel armor. No portable electro-phones. Not even a low-speed rocket car to carry us along. It must have been this way back in the days when they built that little old building that's now used for a museum in New York. The Empire State Building."

"You've got your dates mixed, laddie," McTavish yawned. "The Empire State was built in the twentieth century, and even the people of those queer old days were more advanced than most of what we've seen of life on this planet of Venus."

"I don't suppose those Ancients knew what they were missing."

"Maybe they were better off! At least they only got into trouble on their own Earth instead of wandering off to other planets like a pack of fools as we have!"

Toll and two of his men came toward them, carrying the ropes with which they had earlier been bound.

"Sorry, but I must tie you up for the night," he said. For an instant Gerry thought of making a break. If he could get away he might find

some way of rescuing the others. Then he decided against it. One of the reptile men would be almost sure to bring him down with a gas-gun before he got out of the circle of firelight, in spite of the greater strength of his Earthly muscles. So he shrugged, and allowed the guards to tie him up again. For quite a while he lay awake, hoping to hear the hum of the *Viking's* motors, but at last he fell asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the third day of their journey, the trail led upward, into a range of bleak and rocky hills. A few mean huts were the only signs of human habitation. Then, as they rounded a bend in the trail which at this point clung to the face of a cliff, they saw the answer to a mystery that had puzzled the civilized world for two years.

It was the wreck of the space-ship *Stardust*. She lay at the foot of a cliff across the valley, her steel and duralite hull still gleaming brightly through the thick green creepers that had grown up around it. Even from this distance Gerry could see the hopelessly crumpled rocket-tubes at the stern, and the gaping holes where plates had been ripped away to make the submarine that had brought them out of the city of Larr.

"So that was the end of the *Stardust*!" Gerry muttered. "I wonder what happened to her crew!"

"We'll probably find out soon enough!" McTavish replied grimly. "I'll bet all the gold in Savissa against an empty rocket-oil tin that we're headed for the same fate right now."

"Poor devils—I suppose the Scaly Ones did get them. I never liked Walter Lansing, as you know, but I could have wished him better luck than this!"

At last they crossed the hills and saw a broad valley before them. Dim and snow-capped mountains notched the yellow sky on the far side of the Valley. A river wound through the plain, and on the shore of the saffron waters of a mighty lake they saw the gray walls of a city. Toll, the reptilian captain, pointed across the valley.

"Yonder lies the city of Vaaka-hausen. Soon you will stand before the Lord Lansa, and then," he added with a grim and ghoulish humor, "neither I nor anybody else will be bothered with you any more."

The countryside immediately around the city of the Scaly Ones was better kept and more cultivated than what they had seen of the rest of Giri-Vaaka. There were a number of small villages. Then they passed in through the walls, gray stone ramparts that seemed to be very old and were in poor repair. The muzzles of heavy caliber gas-guns peered over the battlements here and there.

The crowds in the streets stared curiously as Toll led his prisoners toward the center of the city. Tall reptile men swaggered through the crowds with their swords slung on their hips, but the shorter Green Men were in the great majority. Most of them, men and women alike, stared at the captives without any particular sign of emotion. This gray and crowded city of Vaaka-hausen had none of the atmosphere of pleasant friendliness that Gerry had noticed in Larr. It seemed a place of fear and oppression.

\* \* \* \* \*

The palace of the ruler of the Scaly Ones was a squat gray building in the center of the city. An arm of the river swept along beneath one wall, with the muddy waters lapping at the aged gray stones. An iron gate swung aside to let the newcomers into the courtyard. Men who wore black metal breast-plates over their scales took over the prisoners from Toll, leading them down a long flight of stairs into the

dungeons beneath the palace. They waited in a vaulted chamber where the only light was a shaft of yellow radiance that came from a narrow slit high up near the ceiling.

"It won't be long now!" Gerry muttered.

Then a gong sounded somewhere nearby. It was a very resonant and deep-throated gong, and instantly the rock-walled chamber became filled with a green light. It had no visible source, seeming to come from the walls or from the very air itself. Again the gong rolled.

"The Lord Lansa comes!" barked the captain of the guards, "the overlord of Venus is at hand. Down on your knees, captives and slaves."

Closana went to her knees, though otherwise holding herself proudly erect with her hands tied behind her back. In the greenish light her long blonde hair looked like molten gold. Angus McTavish muttered savagely in his beard and stayed on his feet. Instantly one of the reptile guards drew his sword and held the blade horizontally behind the Scot's knees.

"Kneel—or I cut the tendons!" he snapped.

"Come down, you stiff-necked idiot!" Gerry growled. With a muttered oath Angus dropped to his knees, and the guard stepped back into line.

Then the door opened, and three men came slowly into the room. Two were gray-scaled guards who carried their gas-guns cocked and ready. The third was a tall man in a loose green robe. His head was hooded, so that nothing of his face could be seen at all, his hands were tucked in the sleeves of his robe. There was something deadly and almost grotesque about that silent figure. Gerry knew that

at last he was in the presence of Lansa, Lord of the Scaly Ones and ruler of Giri-Vaaka, self-styled Overlord of all Venus!

\* \* \* \* \*

The seconds passed in silence. The guards were frozen motionless at attention. At last Lansa spoke, his voice coming hollowly from the shadows of his hood.

"Take them to the cells. Their doom shall be decided when the Serpent Gods have spoken. I have ordered it!"

The tyrant of Venus gestured sharply, and the guards closed in about the prisoners. For a fleeting instant Gerry had a glimpse of a thin green hand, a hand where the finger was missing at the second joint. Then Lansa went out and the door closed behind him. The deeply resonant gong sounded again, and the pulsating green light instantly vanished so that there was again no light except for the thin trickle of yellow radiance that came in the single high window. The prisoners were pulled to their feet.

There was no chance to speak to Angus or Closana again. Gerry's guards led him down a narrow corridor, past the steel doors of cells. It was very dim and silent. From some of the cells he heard a faint rattle of chains, from others a low groaning. Otherwise there was no sound but their own footfalls. At last the guards opened the door of a cell, pushed Gerry inside, and cut the ropes that bound his arms. As they slammed the heavy steel door behind them he heard the rasp of bolts. Then the slapping tread of the guards' webbed feet died away and he was left alone.

Dim as the light in the corridor had been, that in the cell was so much less that Gerry had to wait half a minute before he could see at all. Then he made out the outlines of a small, bare cell with a bunk made

of a light and flexible metal at one side. There was nothing else in the place. Gerry rubbed his wrists a moment to restore circulation, then sat down on the edge of the bunk and dropped his head in his hands.

He seemed to be about at the end of his trail. Well--that was fate. He did not mind so much for himself and Angus. You knew you were taking risks when you signed up for interplanetary travel in the first place! But he was sorry that Closana had been dragged into it.

Gerry had now lost all hope of rescue by the *Viking*. He did not doubt that her duralite hull could withstand the explosive bullets of even the heaviest caliber gas-guns, nor that her three-inch ray-tubes could blast a way into these underground dungeons in a few minutes. If only Steve Brent knew where to come! That was the rub. There was now no way for Brent to learn where the prisoners were being held, and he could not search all the land of Giri-Vaaka.

Something small and furtive was moving about on the floor a few feet away. Gerry scuffed his feet on the stones, and the creature scampered quickly away. Probably a rat! It seemed that he was going to have pleasant company during his stay in this place.

Restless and gloomy, Gerry stood up again. He started to walk up and down the few feet that the length of his cell allowed him. Then he froze motionless! A faint tapping was sounding from somewhere to his left. Someone was knocking lightly on the wall of the adjoining cell. Then a voice spoke softly in Martian.

"You there! You in the next cell! Can you hear me?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Gerry knelt down on the damp floor and put his head close to the base of the wall. Now he could hear the man more clearly, could even

hear his heavy breathing. Gerry's groping fingers found a place between two of the stones where the mortar had been picked away to leave a small air space.

"Yes, I hear you!" he called softly. He heard a dry chuckle.

"Good! I have been waiting a long time for them to put someone in the next cell. Some of the stones are loose. I will come in."

There was a soft rattle of falling mortar, and a scrape of sliding stones. Gerry saw the head and shoulders of a man thrust through the opening, and then the man crawled laboriously into the cell.

"Who are you?" he whispered. "Your accent is not like that of the Green Men of Giri. Wait, I have a light here."

A small flashlight clicked on. Its beam pointed up into Gerry's face. Then the man gasped.

"Good Lord!" he whispered. "It ... it's Gerry Norton!"

Then the man swung the light so that it swung on himself. Gerry saw a tall, gaunt man in the tattered remains of a blue and silver uniform. It was Major Walter Lansing, once of the Interplanetary Fleet, who had commanded the ill-fated *Stardust* when she set out on her voyage into space!

"Norton!" he gasped in a hoarse whisper. "Man, I never expected to see anyone from Earth again!"

"We thought you were dead."

"I might as well be!" Lansing said grimly. "But tell me how you come to be here."

As they squatted there in the darkened cell, Gerry whispered the story of the *Viking's* expedition and of his own capture. Lansing told him how the *Stardust* had been wrecked on the rim of the mountains when landing, and how the Scaly Ones had captured all the crew.

"They have kept me alive because the signs pointed that way when they cast the omens before the Serpent Gods," Lansing said, "but all the rest of the crew were used as bait for hunting the giant Dakta. They died. You and your companions will probably meet the same fate."

"Pleasant prospect!" Gerry said grimly. Lansing gripped his arm.

"There's a chance, Norton! Listen! I've been able to get these scaly devils to bring me a good many things from the wreck. I couldn't get a ray-tube, they were too wise for that, but I did get a portable radio by telling them it was my tribal god. I have it in my cell. We'll go over and you can phone your ship to come after us." He eyed Gerry eagerly.

"Let's go!"

They both crawled through the gap in the wall. It was like Gerry's own, but it was piled with an assortment of junk from the wrecked spaceship. In one corner stood a compact two-way radio telephone set with its tubes still intact.

"Think you can tell them how to come?" Lansing whispered.

"I'm not sure. They marched us along the roads, and the route was winding, and...."

"I'll draw you a map!" Lansing interrupted. "You hold the light."

While Gerry held the flash, the other man spread out a piece of



crumpled paper on the floor and began to draw on it with the stub of a graphite stylus. He talked as he wrote, in a shrilly, excited whisper. Gerry had never liked the man in the old days, considering him excitable and undependable, and it was evident that the long captivity had not improved Walter Lansing's self-control. That did not matter. The main thing was to get out of this place. And then Gerry saw something that stiffened every muscle and made the short hair prickle all down the back of his neck. The ring finger of Lansing's left hand was missing at the second joint!

\* \* \* \* \*

The suspicion that had come to Gerry Norton seemed impossible. Walter Lansing ... the Lord Lansa. It couldn't be. And yet—he was sure he had seen that same mutilated hand thrust out from the sleeve of a green robe an hour before! Lansing was still talking as he bent over the improvised map.

"Here's the line of the Giri River. Tell them to cross by the bald gray hill, then bear west-six-north, using Venusian magnetic bearings. After that...."

He suddenly stopped and looked up, catching Gerry's grim glance fixed on his left hand. Hastily he jerked it aside into the shadows. He must have read in Gerry's eyes that his move had been too late, for his own gaunt face hardened.

"*You rat!*" Gerry hissed between his teeth. His right hand shot out, clutching for the other man's throat, but Lansing twisted aside and jerked a dark object from his pocket. An instant later a stinging cloud of the paralysis gas took Gerry in the face, and he fell limply to the floor.

Lansing straightened up and tossed aside the flask that had held the

gas. There was a savage gleam in his narrow eyes.

"All right, Norton," he said, "we'll do it the other way. Ho--guards!"

A gong sounded in the corridor, the pulsating green light immediately flooded the cell. Scaly-skinned guards swarmed in and saluted. Lansing ripped off the torn uniform, revealing a tight-fitting green garment beneath it, and one of the guards helped him on with the cowed robe he had worn before. He glanced down at Gerry for a moment.

"Bring him and the others up to me when he recovers the use of his muscles," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Gerry Norton recovered from the effects of the gas he had been securely bound again. Two guards led him to the end of a corridor and up a flight of stairs to the level above. This was also part of the prison zone of the castle, but built in an entirely different manner. Walls and floor were of a polished green metal. Super-charged electronic locks fastened each door, holding death for anyone who attempted to tamper with them. Metal globes gave a steady light. Mirrors above each cell door gave the guards who lounged in the corridors a complete view of the inside of every cell.

This, Gerry realized, was actually the prison used by the lords of Giri-Vaaka. He had been placed in the old and abandoned dungeons beneath as part of the scheme to lure him into calling the *Viking* to her doom. Glancing in the door-mirrors of the cells as he went by, Gerry saw that most of the occupants were men and women of the Green Race of Giri, with a fair number of Golden Amazons and a few reptile men who had been guilty of some crime or infraction of discipline.

Then he saw Closana! The girl was tightly spread-eagled against one of the polished metal walls of her cell, her outstretched wrists and ankles held by steel cuffs. Gerry's jaw jutted stubbornly forward, and for a moment he twisted helplessly against the cords that held his arms behind him.

The guards halted before a door deep in the interior of the palace, where a pair of scaly warriors stood on guard with gas-guns cocked and ready. The opening itself was not closed by any door, but by what looked like a tightly stretched curtain of some transparent green material. On closer inspection he saw that it glowed with a steady pulsation, while occasional specks of green fire ran through it. When one of the guards moved incautiously back so that the tip of his scabbard touched the green glow filling the door, there was a crackling hiss. The tip of the scabbard simply vanished. It was as though it had been cleanly cut off by a very sharp knife.

A challenge came from within, and one of Gerry's guards shouted a reply. The green glow suddenly vanished from the doorway. Whatever elemental force it was that blocked the passage had been withdrawn, and they walked freely in through the opening.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wide room before them was walled with slabs of polished black marble. The figures of writhing snakes and rearing reptiles were inlaid into the black walls with some iridescent green stone. Their eyes were inlaid jewels. Thin trails of pungent smoke drifted upward from their nostrils. A low and throbbing music, full of the thunder of muted drums, came from unseen source. At regular intervals around the walls stood tall golden standards with glowing globes atop them.

This was the throne room of Lansa, Lord of Giri-Vaaka, who had

once been an officer in the flying forces of Earth. The man himself sat on a black marble throne with a dozen of the higher officers of his scaly warriors grouped around him. These Inner Guards wore breastplates and helmets of a bright green metal, and their pointed ears protruded upward through twin openings in the sides of the helmets.

Lansa's swarthy face was gloatingly triumphant. It had always been Gerry Norton's private opinion that Walter Lansing was slightly mad. Brilliant in many ways, but definitely unstable. At last he appeared to have slipped over that shadowy border that divides the rational from the insane.

"It is unfortunate that my little scheme to have you summon your space-ship here did not work," Lansa said in English. "But we will find some other way of persuading you to do it."

"You think you're quite the little tin god, don't you?" Gerry sneered.

"*I am* a god--to these people," Lansa replied quietly. "Though the *Stardust* was damaged too badly to return to earth, little of her equipment was harmed except for the rocket tubes themselves. Within six months after landing I had made myself master of these primitive but obedient people. The submarine that brought you from the city of Larr shows what can be done with them. In the meantime I had communicated with friends on Earth by means of a secret radio frequency, and waited for the sending of the next space-ship...."

He broke off as a door behind the throne opened and a woman came into the room. It was Olga Stark, now wearing a long gown of shimmering green. Metal strands of the same color were braided into her dark hair, which was crowned by a circlet bearing the design of a rearing serpent. All the officers and courtiers lifted their arms in salute. The woman walked over and stood beside Lansa's throne, looking down at Gerry with a cold and impersonal scorn. It had not

taken Olga Stark very long to fit herself into the role of the queen of Gira-Vaaka!

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A number of things were clear to Gerry Norton now! It had been Olga Stark with whom Lansing had secretly communicated after he made himself master of the Scaly Ones, and that explained her insistent requests to join the expedition. Again, it had been Olga who had been surreptitiously using the radio to talk to Lansing that day when Gerry had stepped into the radio room on hearing the hum of the generator. They had been arranging the details of his abduction. Only—who was Olga's confederate who had knocked him over the head when he had walked in on them that time? There was still some traitor on board the *Viking*.

"I have now developed the resources of this country to the point where the final campaign is ready," Lansa boasted, "all these reptile men needed was a man of sufficient brains and initiative to lead them. We are making ray-tubes, modeled on those aboard the *Stardust*, and will soon be able to blast down the guardian forts of Savissa and to conquer those few other portions of this planet that still stand against me. Then I will return to the Earth in your *Viking*, taking with me enough gold to buy a vast fleet of ships. There is more gold available here on Venus than all your banks on Earth have ever imagined! I could make myself ruler of Earth with all that gold, but I will choose another method. I will bring back the space-ships, and load them up with my scaly warriors—and then sail to conquer the Outer Planets and whatever else may lie beyond the Solar System!"

Gerry Norton stared at Lansa in a grim silence. The man was undoubtedly mad. Stark, raving mad! No one but a maniac would cherish such a wild dream of Universal conquest. He had that

dangerous combination of natural cleverness and distorted values that has often distinguished leaders who have taken nations into the shadowy valleys of ruin. For a moment Lansa hesitated, his narrow eyes blazing and one arm flung up in a dramatic gesture. Then some of the fire went out of him, and he returned to more prosaic and immediate things.

"But all that lies in the future. At the moment I must ask you to radio-phone the *Viking* to come to this city and land in the plain just below the walls."

"I'll see you in hell first!" Gerry snapped. Lansa shrugged.

"I expected you to indulge in some such heroics! Your type always does. I have not forgotten your attacks on my reputation back on Earth some years ago, Norton, nor your charges that I was unfit to command the *Stardust*. It will give me considerable pleasure to watch what is about to happen to you. Ho--guards! Bring him down to the torture chamber."

\* \* \* \* \*

The place of torture was a circular and low vaulted chamber. Gerry was led across to one of the walls, and his bound hands fastened behind him to a metal ring. The place was lit by a dim green light that had no visible source, though in one spot there was a ruddy glow where irons were heating in a brazier of burning charcoal. A bench was placed for Lansa and Olga to sit on, and four of their guards stood beside them.

The torturers themselves had been selected from among the Green Men of Giri, instead of the scaly skinned warrior race of Vaaka. They were squat and heavy men, those torturers, evidently of the most brutal and debased type that Lansa had been able to find. One in

particular, whose wide green face was made hideous by an old scar that had put out one of his eyes, licked his thick lips in ghoulish anticipation as his fingers prodded the flesh about Gerry's ribs and felt the Earth-man's muscles.

"Bring in the other two," Lansa commanded.

All about the room were the tools of the torturer's art. Some were familiar things that have been used since men first began to mistreat his fellow creatures--leaded whips and stretching-racks and cradles lined with pointed spikes. Others were strange looking and probably even more horrible mechanisms of coils and wires and electrodes. Gerry licked his lips. The place had the hushed stillness of a chamber that has been thoroughly sound-proofed. Probably no screams of agonized victims ever penetrated beyond those smooth walls of polished green metal.

They brought Angus McTavish in first. He looked like some shaggy red giant, wearing only a loin-cloth with his hair and beard all awry. Then came Closana. Her crossed wrists were tied together before her by a cord that was held by one of the guards, and she was very pale.

Lansa nodded quickly.

"Let them begin," said Lansa tonelessly.

"A suggestion, sir!" Olga leaned forward on the bench. The glance of her brooding eyes was fixed on the young Amazon princess. "Let them work on the girl first. It will probably succeed more quickly. I think the man Norton has fallen in love with that empty headed young savage, and you know how men are."

"You are right. Let it be done that way."

Closana was spread-eagled in mid-air, her upstretched arms fastened to ropes that led to the ceiling and her ankles lashed to metal rings in the floor below. She could move nothing but her head as Olga Stark walked up to stand before her.

"This will repay for the condescension with which I was treated in Savissa!" the Earth-woman said venomously. Closana looked at her in silence for a moment, and then suddenly spat squarely in the other woman's face.

"*Atta girl!*" roared Angus with all the power of his big lungs. Olga struck the helpless girl twice in the mouth with her clenched fist, then returned to her seat.

"Begin!" she commanded.

One of the torturers tossed Closana's long hair forward on either side of her neck, to leave her back entirely bare for the lash. The girl's eyes were closed again, and there was a thin trickle of blood at one corner of her mouth. The torturer shook out the lash, whirled it once through the air and then brought it smashing across the middle of Closana's back.

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The girl's whole body writhed convulsively for a moment. There was an instant red welt where the whip had struck. A low moan escaped between her clenched teeth. Then Gerry Norton leaned forward where he stood bound against the wall.

"You win, Lansing!" he said hoarsely, "stop it! Make them leave her alone and I'll do as you say."

"I thought you would," the renegade officer said softly. There seemed



to be a definite disappointment in his cruel eyes. "I will have the radio set brought here and you can call the ship right now."

"Have them lower the girl down."

"She stays where she is until you have finished."

The portable radio-phone from the wrecked *Stardust* was brought in and set up on a stand immediately in front of Gerry. Olga set up the sigmoid antenna on its duralite frame, and twisted the dials to the space-ship's wave length. Then she took the transmitter.

"Calling Steve Brent on the *Viking*! Calling Steve Brent on the *Viking*! Please come in!" she repeated over and over.

At last the answering signal lit up, and Steve's familiar voice came from the receiver.

"This is Steve Brent. Who is calling?"

Olga held the transmitter before Gerry's mouth. Lansa nodded to one of the torturers, who drew a white hot iron from one of the braziers and held it a little way from Closana's face.

"One false word and that iron goes into the girl's eyes," the Lord of Giri-Vaaka warned in a low hiss. "After that, all of you will live in agony for weeks before we have finished. Tell him to land near the city and bring all but a single watch-man to the east gate where they will be well received."

"Hello Steve. This is Gerry Norton!" Gerry said. Brent's voice shook with excitement.

"Jumping ray-blasts, chief, we all thought you were done for! Where

did you go? What happened? Where are you now?"

"I'm being well entertained in the city of Vaaka-Havson. These Scaly Men are very pleasant and friendly when you get to know them. Cross the Giri River by a bald hill...."

Gerry finished the directions for the coming of the *Viking* and the landing of its crew as ordered by Lansa. As the radio was turned off, the Lord of the Scaly Ones stood up with his thin lipped smile.

"Good! Our plans progress. Now you three will go back to a cell. And, since you are no longer of any value to us, you will be used when we hunt the giant Dakta on the shore tomorrow."

\* \* \* \* \*

The three prisoners were placed in the same cell, all spread-eagled against the wall with their outstretched arms held by metal cuffs. Angus McTavish's face was sour and glowering as he turned to Gerry.

"That was an ill thing that ye did, Gerry Norton," he growled.

"I could not see them whip her any more."

"The three of us will probably meet as bad a fate soon anyway, from what that thin faced devil said at the end, and, meanwhile, ye've lured our comrades to destruction."

"It couldn't be helped," Gerry said, and closed his eyes. He had taken what was probably the longest chance of his career, and he was not in a mood to talk about it. Particularly when every faintest syllable uttered in one of these metal cells could be heard by the guards in the corridor outside!

There was little rest for any of them, chained in that awkward position and with the cell always filled with that pitiless green light. Gerry dozed fitfully from time to time. Closana seemed to have fallen asleep, drooping forward in her bonds with her head hanging low, but her long hair covered her face and it was hard to tell. Angus made no attempt to sleep at all, and for most of the intervening time he was muttering many tongued curses into his beard.

At last they were freed from their chains. They were given water in metal cups, and a bowl of some kind of stew to eat. For perhaps an hour they rested and eased their stiffened muscles. Then more guards came and bound their hands behind them and took them away.

It was again broad daylight when they were taken out into the streets of the city, the peculiarly yellow daylight that filtered through the cloudy canopy overhead. The three prisoners were surrounded by a heavy guard of reptile men who marched them across the city and out through a gate in the far wall. Here a broad plain swept down to the waters of a saffron colored lake, a sheet of water so vast that its far shore was no more than a dun line along the horizon. A sort of grandstand had been erected along one side of the plain.

"I think I begin to understand the point of this little game!" McTavish muttered, squinting as he peered ahead, "and I don't fancy the idea at all."

"I don't get what you mean?"

McTavish snorted.

"Did ye never see a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap?"

Then Gerry himself began to understand. On a broad platform before

the grandstand stood a line of men armed with gas-guns. Some were gray scaled officers of the fighting forces, and others were dandified Green Men of the decadent minority that had fawned upon and mingled with their conquerors. In the flat and marshy expanse of the plain before them there had been driven a number of short but heavy stakes like tent pegs, each with a metal ring set in the top. There were long rows of them. Gray scaled guards were busy fettering prisoners to the pegs, making them fast by tying to the metal ring the other end of the long cord with which their hands were tied behind them. The hunters and the audience were ready, the bait was being prepared.

Closana was a few feet away from Gerry, fastened to the next stake. She stood erect, her shoulders drawn back by the strain of her bonds and her long hair blowing in the wind.

"This is the end, Geree," she said, "if not today, then tomorrow or the next day. This was the tale told in Larr of what happens to the prisoners of the Scaly Ones, but I never believed it till now."

\* \* \* \* \*

There were sixty or eighty prisoners fastened in the field to serve as bait for the giant dakta. About half were Golden Amazons captured in various raids. The remainder were men and women of the Green People of Giri, prisoners condemned to death by the grim and ruthless tribunals of the Scaly Ones. Now a dozen attendants carrying leather buckets ran up and down the lines of the captives, splashing each victim with a dipper full of a purple colored and very pungent oil.

"Now what's the game?" Gerry muttered. Angus bent his head to sniff at the heavy liquid trickling down his hairy chest.

"It smells like a harlot's dream!" he muttered sourly, "probably

intended to make us more attractive to whatever kind of creature it is that's coming after us!"

The attendants had hurried away with their buckets of oil, and now the crowds in the grandstand and on the plain settled down to wait. They were in holiday mood, laughing and talking in their shrill voices.

Then a black dot appeared high up in the sky. A murmur of anticipation ran over the crowd. The dakta came plummeting earthward as its super-keen senses saw and smelled the attractive bait waiting below. The thing, as it came near, was like some figment from a nightmare. It had a reptilian body between a twenty-foot spread of leathery wings, and a long beak with a double row of pointed teeth. One of the things that Gerry had seen flying over that lonely sea when he first brought the *Viking* down through the canopy of clouds that covered the planet of Venus!

"So *that* is a dakta!" Angus muttered, "bonny little creature!"

The winged lizard checked its flight momentarily some ten feet off the ground, directly above one of the captive Amazons. Then he dove down. The girl screamed and twisted away to the length of her tether, and the toothed beak just missed her. The first of the hunters fired as the dakta whirled and lashed out again, but the bullet exploded off to one side.

Gripping the writhing Amazon with his beak and his clawed feet, the dakta flapped his great wings and soared upward again. Two more of the hunters fired together. One of the explosive bullets missed entirely, the other blew one of the girl's legs to pieces but did not harm the monster that held her.

Then Lansa tossed aside his green robe and stood up. Gerry saw that he held a ray-tube, either one from the *Stardust* or one of the new

ones he now claimed to be able to make in Giri-Vaaka. The tube slanted upward. Murky light played around its muzzle. The dakta gave a shrill and almost human scream. Then it dropped its mangled victim and fell twitching to the ground. Its leathery skin was turned black where the ray-blast had struck it. Along the edge of the field, the close packed crowds broke into wild cheering and Lansa acknowledged it with a condescending gesture of one upraised arm.

The hunt went on. Sometimes the dakta came singly, sometimes in pairs. The hunters had the range better now, and dropped them consistently. On several occasions the flying lizards were brought down before they had time to seize a victim at all, but most of the time one of the prisoners was killed or mortally wounded before the dakta was slain. A Green Man tethered to the stake next beyond Closana had been ripped about the throat by the raking teeth of a dakta's bill, and was breathing with a sort of gurgling moan as he bled to death. So far, that was the nearest that one of the flying lizards had come to Gerry or his two companions.

And then Gerry saw the thing for which he had been watching. There was a streak of fire along the eastern horizon. The blast of speeding rocket tubes! A cigar shaped hull of gleaming blue and silver came streaking across the saffron sky with a trail of smoke behind it. *The Viking* had come!

\* \* \* \* \*

A swelling uproar came from the crowds which began to mill about in confusion. Lansa had risen to his feet and was peering upward with one hand raised to shade his eyes. Yellow flames played about the *Viking's* bow as the reverse rockets checked her momentum. A pair of swooping dakta veered away from her, then dropped down toward the bait tethered below. One of them was headed straight for Angus

McTavish.

Instantly one of the forward ray-guns on the space-ship glowed into life, and the winged lizard crumpled in mid-flight. Gerry knew then that someone on board had been looking down through the powerful viewing glasses, and had recognized him and Angus. He shouted hoarsely, knowing he would not be heard but unable to keep silent.

Drums were throbbing a swift alarm, and the milling crowds were in wild confusion. Companies of the scaly warriors were firing by volley, but the explosive bullets only flashed harmlessly against the *Viking's* duralite hull. Some of the heavier gas-guns set on the battlements above hissed into life then, but even the larger caliber explosives could make no impression on tempered duralite. With her ray-guns flashing and ripping black swathes in the scaly ranks below, with her helicopters spinning to take the strain as the blast of the rockets died away, the *Viking* settled rapidly groundward.

"By Lord, Steve came a-fightin'!" McTavish roared.

"Of course, you old goat!" Gerry shouted back, "did you really think I'd call the ship into a trap? You're as bad as that maniac who calls himself Lansa. I knew that if I spoke *too* strongly of what nice fellows these scaly devils are, Steve would have the sense to know that I was under pressure and in a trap."

And then came swift disaster! Over the edge of the nearest black and battlemented wall of Lansa's palace thrust the muzzle of a large caliber ray-gun. Steve Brent saw it, too, and tried to lift the nose of his ship to bring his own guns to bear on this new menace, but he was too late. The muzzle of the ray-gun on the battlements glowed dully, the blast of the supode-rays struck the row of spinning helicopters on top of the *Viking's* hull. The blades of the big propellers went spinning into space, their shafts bent and crumpled like straws in a gale.

Robbed of their support, essential when lacking rocket power of at least 300 miles per hour, the space-ship plunged downward like a falling star. She struck the waters of the lake with a mighty splash. Spray dashed as high as the walls of Lansa's castle, and when it was gone the space-ship had vanished.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gerry Norton stood motionless. He was staring at the muddy and foam flecked waters of the lake, and at the spreading ripples that still beat on the shore as the effect of that mighty splash subsided. At the moment he felt old and tired and defeated, his brain numbed. The *Viking* was gone! Freckled Steve Brent, and the cheerful Portok, and all the rest of them were gone. Buried deep in the muddy bottom of a Venusian lake.

The second expedition from Earth to this cloud-veiled and ill-fated planet had also ended in disaster. In the future the *Viking* would be classed with the *Stardust*—simply another luckless space-ship that sailed away into the void and vanished. The men of her crew and what they tried to accomplish would be forgotten, their names would only remain on some yellowing record buried in the maze of government files. So deep was Gerry Norton's bitter brooding that he scarcely heard the words Angus McTavish was shouting in his ear.

"Come on, Gerry lad! Let's get away while there's all this confusion."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ever since they had been brought to this field beside the lake, Angus had been working at his bonds. He was a very strong man anyway, and the swell of his earthly muscles was far greater than the strength of any of the races that the Scaly Ones were accustomed to making prisoners. While the attention of all the guards was absorbed in the



appearance and subsequent wreck of the *Viking*, Angus had managed to snap his own bonds and was now unhurriedly freeing Gerry's wrists.

Gerry ran to Closana and untied her hands, while Angus freed the nearest other prisoner who was a stocky and broad shouldered Green Man with a heavily lined face. As soon as his hands were free, the latter wheeled to face them.

"My thanks, *hiziren!*" he panted, "now go while you can. You are more easily spotted in a crowd than I. Hurry! I will free as many of these others as possible. Get into the city, and try to reach the place men call 'The Square of the Dragon.' Say that Sarnak sent you. Hurry!"

Even though he was carrying Closana in his arms, Gerry's Earthly muscles allowed him to run in mighty six-foot bounds. Angus went leaping along before him. So great was the confusion that they were half way across the plain to the city before anyone noticed them at all. Then a shouting officer of the Scaly Ones threw himself in front of them with his drawn sword in his hand.

The big engineer roared like an angry bull, and leaped clean over the man. Before the scaly warrior could turn the Scot had him from behind. An instant later Angus had the sword and was racing ahead, while the Venusian lay sprawled in the mud with his neck broken and his long head twisted grotesquely awry.

The half dozen guards posted in the arch of the gate stared indecisively at the white skinned trio racing toward them. Angus had a sword in each hand by this time, and he leaped at the guards with a shout. The fugitive broke through the line of swordsmen by sheer momentum and dashed into the city. There was no pursuit. The first of the panic stricken throng rushing back for the shelter of the city reached the gate a moment later, and the guards were swamped by

a jostling mob of mingled Scaly Ones and Green Men.

Gerry and his two companions darted into the nearest of the many narrow alleys that twisted about this part of the city. They dodged from one dingy thoroughfare to the next. When they met a woman of the Green People, Gerry unceremoniously tore off her robe and shielding veil and flung them to Closana to hide her own tawny skin and golden hair. Later, when he and Angus had also disguised themselves in the rough garments worn by the poorer folk of this city of Vaaka-hausen, they were able to walk quietly down the streets without fear of detection unless they met a patrol at close range.

At last they came to a dingy plaza that was surrounded by ramshackle buildings of great age. It had probably once been a prosperous and fashionable part of the city, centuries ago, before the Scaly Ones overran the land of Giri. Now grass grew up between the paving stones, and the roofs of the dingy buildings sagged close to the breaking point, and piles of festering rubbish lay along the gutters. The place was a slum of the sort that had not existed on the more enlightened planets of Earth and Mars for many generations. A canal flowed along one side of the square, and in the center of the plaza stood the eroded and ancient black marble statue of a rearing dragon.

"This must be the place!" Angus muttered from the shadows of the hood that he had drawn up over his head.

\* \* \* \* \*

As they hesitated, a few people peered furtively out at them from the broken windows and sagging doors of the houses around the square. Then a man came toward them. He was bent and crippled, a beggar wearing filthy rags. His matted hair hung down over his eyes, and his whole body seemed covered with the caked filth of one who had

never thought of washing. As the man came forward with a sort of limping shuffle, Gerry instinctively laid his hand on the hilt of the sword he carried concealed under his cloak, while Closana drew the concealing veil more closely over her face.

"Alms, *hiziren!* A little charity of your generosity!" the beggar whined as he came closer.

"What place is this?" Gerry asked, trying to give his voice the soft tone and lisping accent characteristic of the Green Men.

The beggar limped a little closer and peered up into the shadows of Gerry's hood. What he saw seemed to satisfy him.

"Take your hand from your sword hilt, friend!" he said in a low voice quite unlike his previous whine, "what place do you seek?"

"The Place of the Dragon."

"This is it. Who sent you?"

"Sarnak sent us."

"It is good." The beggar pointed down a flight of worn stone steps that led to the canal whose surface was some eight or ten feet below the level of the plaza. "Go down there, below the bridge, and tap on the stone that bears a rusted iron ring. You will find friends. Go quickly, while there are no strangers to observe you."

"Do you trust that man?" Angus whispered in English as they turned away. Gerry shrugged.

"We've got to. It's our only chance, We're too easy to recognize, in spite of these clothes, to stay free in this city for long."

The black waters of the canal flowed sluggishly along between slimy stone walls. Refuse drifted on the surface. The water itself had a foul and penetrating odor. Gerry walked down the steps, and then along the walk that stretched beside the water at one edge of the canal until he was under an arch that served as a bridge to support the street above. The arch was wide enough so that they were now completely hidden from the view of anyone in the plaza above.

On one of the stones of the arch, at about the height of his shoulder, Gerry saw a rusted iron ring. He tapped on that stone with the hilt of his sword. He heard a faint click, and though there was no visible change in the surface of the pitted stone wall before him he heard a whispered question:

*"Who knocks?"*

"Friends," Gerry replied.

"Who sent you?"

"Sarnak sent us."

There was a low, metallic jingle. A section of the wall about the height of a man and some three feet wide swung quietly inward. As soon as the three of them had stepped through the opening into a small room that was built in the interior of the arch, the door swung shut behind them.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were half a dozen men in this low roofed and stone walled chamber. All were of the Green People, dressed as ragged beggars but with the bearing and appearance of warriors. Drawn steel gleamed in their hands. Their faces were heavy with suspicion. One

of the men had gone to stand with his back against the closed door behind them.

"Who are you, that come using the name of Sarnak?" snapped the leader.

Suspicion became blended with puzzled surprise as Gerry and Angus threw back their hoods and the outlaws saw their white skins. Hastily Gerry told the tale of the dakta hunt and of their subsequent escape.

"So Sarnak got away!" the leader of the Green Men exulted. "Ho! That is the best news that we of the Dragon's Teeth have heard in many weeks! All right, Slag, take these strangers through to the inner places."

One of the Green Men beckoned to Gerry to follow him down a narrow flight of steps at the back of the room. It ended in a circular pool of water like a large well, the steps going on down below the surface. Their guide opened a cupboard built into the wall and took out four glass helmets. The helmets were attached to leather pads that fitted tightly about the shoulders and chest, with straps to hold them in place. A cylindrical metal tank was attached to the back of each helmet, with a tube that led to a valve at the side. The guide also took out some heavily leaded sandals.

"Put on these helmets and then open the valves," he explained, "then follow me down the steps. Be careful not to fall in the darkness. After we get around the first bend in the corridor below there will be light."

Gerry put the globular glass helmet over his head, opening the valve as soon as he had adjusted the straps. The air in the helmet immediately took on a faintly chemical odor, but it was pleasant and in no way oppressive. As soon as all of them were ready, the man

called Slag beckoned and then started down the steps.

Warm black water rose to Gerry's knees, then to his waist. As it came up to his shoulders he saw the top of Slag's helmet disappear below the surface ahead of him. For a moment the smooth surface of the water was level with Gerry's eyes as it rose around his own helmet. Then he stepped down into a darkness as black and impenetrable as though he were immersed in ink.

Gerry guided himself with his left hand on the slime covered stones of the wall beside him. He reached back with his other hand to steady Closana who was just behind. All together he counted thirty steps, feeling carefully with his feet each time, before the floor leveled off. The wall curved around to the right. Gerry followed it, rounded a bend, and was no longer in darkness.

They stood in a straight passage that was lined with blocks of polished stone. Metal plates, set in the ceiling at regular intervals, glowed with a greenish-yellow light that was nearly as bright as the cloudy Venusian daylight. The place was completely filled with water.

It was an eerie sensation! Slag was standing a few feet ahead, grinning at them through the glass of his helmet, but now he turned and walked slowly down the corridor. Gerry followed him, bent well forward as he walked, forcing himself ahead against the resistance of the water. All their movements were sluggish and slow, but the heavily leaded sandals held them down and gave their feet purchase.

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Small fishes swam past them along the passage, their round eyes peering in through the helmet glasses as they passed. Clumps of colored sea-weed grew out from the walls and ceiling, their long streamers waving gently in the slow currents set up by the passage of

the men. In spite of the brightness of the light from the ceiling plates, the effect of the water made it difficult to see far down the passage ahead. The outlines of Slag were clear enough as he plodded along directly ahead of Gerry, but everything beyond him was a little blurred and uncertain. It was like living in a mirage.

At last they came to a point where the passage branched. Here they passed a sentry who wore a glass helmet and a tight fitting green rubber uniform. On his chest was the insignia of a rampant black dragon. He was armed with a very thin, almost needle-like sword whose point was razor keen. Gerry realized the reason for that peculiarly designed weapon when the sentry swung his sword upward to salute their guide. The blade was so thin that it offered little resistance to the water, and its power of being quickly wielded made it a far more effective weapon under water than a heavier sword would have been.

They passed more branching passages, and more rubber-clad sentries who stared at them curiously as they went by. There was a whole network of corridors in this underwater world! At last Slag opened a metal door at the end of the particular passage he had followed, and they all crowded into a small room. Slag closed the door and dogged it, then tapped on a glass panel across the room.

A silvery flood of air bubbles came pouring out the end of a pipe that protruded through the wall. At the same time Gerry heard the thud of heavy pumps starting to suck water through gratings at the base of the wall. The water level dropped rapidly. When it was down to their waists, Slag took off his helmet and slipped the leaded sandals from his feet. He motioned to the others to do the same.

"We are about to enter the hidden realm of Luralla, the home of the Dragon's Teeth!" he said. "If you can prove your right to be here you will be welcome. Otherwise you will go back into one of these

waterlocks--without any helmets on."

He grinned cheerfully.

\* \* \* \* \*

The water dropped below the level of the door sills. The pumps sucked noisily on the last few foaming inches for a moment, and then they ceased. The inner door was opened by a sentry whose tight fitting green uniform with its black dragon was made of dry cloth instead of dripping rubber. He wore a plumed metal helmet, and carried a heavy sword instead of one of the thin water blades.

"Come in, Slag," he said, "who are these strangers?"

They were in a sort of guardroom, a square chamber where glass water helmets stood in long rows on metal shelves and many weapons hung in racks on the walls. The control levers of the pumps were just to the left of the door. There were half a dozen uniformed men standing about the room, one of them bearing the silver insignia of an officer on his chest. When Slag had given a hasty account of the coming of Gerry and the others, the officer nodded toward an inner door.

"Prince Samak has just returned. You will find him in the great hall. Take these strangers there."

The sound of music and laughter, and the confused babel of many voices, came to Gerry's ears as soon as the far door was opened. They entered a vast hall. It was low ceiled, as were all the water-locked chambers of this strange place, but it was broad and spacious. Heavy stone columns carved like giant sea-horses supported the roof. Patterns of sea-weed and star fish and other denizens of the deep were inter-mingled with rearing dragons in the



painted designs along the walls. The room was filled with wide tables flanked by long benches.

The men and women who sat at the tables, or stood gossiping in noisy groups in corners of the hall, were nearly all of the Green People of Giri, but there were a few escaped Golden Amazons who came flocking eagerly around Closana. In outward appearance these green skinned men and women were similar to the folk who lived in the city overhead with their scaly masters, but there was a subtle difference. These people had none of the cowed and subjugated air of the citizens who lived above ground. There was a different look in their eyes, a more confident note in their voices, a firmer set to their shoulders. These folk had the air of free men and warriors, not slaves.

A stocky and merry eyed man caught sight of them and came striding across the hall. It was Sarnak, the man who had been tethered next to them in the field of the dakta hunt.

"Welcome to the halls of Luralla!" he boomed, "we are glad to have you come to the hidden realm of the Dragon's Teeth. *Hiziren* and comrades, these are the outlanders from afar who freed me this afternoon so that I and a dozen more of our people escaped death at the hands of the Scaly Ones!"

"Thrice hail!" roared the crowd, while a hundred blades flashed in the golden light. Angus McTavish wrung the water out of his dripping beard.

"These look like men of spirit," he rumbled cheerfully, "I think I'm going to enjoy myself again."

\* \* \* \* \*

A little later, wearing dry clothes, the three of them sat down with Sarnak and his officers at a table in the corner of the hall. Young girls brought them dishes of fried sea-urchins, and broiled steaks of the grappa fish, and other savory dishes.

"We who call ourselves the Dragon's Teeth are outlaws descended from outlaws," Sarnak explained. "Our ancestors were men and women who never acknowledged the rule of the Scaly Ones when they overran this once pleasant land of Giri. I was born in this hidden place, as was my father before me and his father before him. We live here in the water-locked Halls of Luralla, and harass the tyrants in what ways we can, and try to keep alive the traditions and glory of the old days when the Dragon Kings ruled in this city and the Scaly Ones were still lurking in their Vaaka marshes to the westward."

"Does Lansa know of this place?"

"He knows that the Dragon's Teeth exist, as all rulers of the Scaly Ones have known it, but the location of our hiding place has never been betrayed."

"Then," roared Angus, pounding his big fist on the table till the dishes rattled, "why don't you revolt? I'll go with you myself to strike a blow against those reptile skinned devils up above!"

"Count me in, too!" Gerry said quietly.

Angus' voice had boomed out through the big hall. It was answered by a lilting shout as men sprang to their feet. Hundreds of sword blades flashed clear of their scabbards. Only Sarnak himself remained seated, slowly shaking his head. There was a twisted smile on his broad and heavily lined face. His eyes held bitterness.

"It would only be pointless suicide, *hiziren!*" he said grimly. "We

number only about a thousand all together, we hunted men of the Dragon's Teeth, against the countless thousands of Lansa's scaly hordes. It would be different if our countrymen up above could be inspired to a mass uprising, but the time is not yet. Too long have they lived under the rule of the tyrants. They are cowed. They have lost their spirit, and some of the younger ones have even become fawning satellites of the conquerors! If there comes a day when the forces of the Scaly Ones are engaged in some major war along the frontier, as in this suggested assault upon the barrier forts of Savissa that Lansa is said to be planning, then we may be able to do something. For the present we must continue to lie hidden and bide our time."

Gerry Norton was uncertain about his own course. Now that the *Viking* and her crew had been lost, with all hope of a return to Earth cut off, he felt hopelessly adrift. Sarnak urged his visitors to stay in Luralla. The place was a remarkable engineering feat, completely under water and with its air constantly re-conditioned and preserved, but Gerry felt restless and cramped there. Though the outlaws carried on a constant guerilla warfare with the Scaly Ones, it was all on a small scale. Gerry felt that he would rather return to Savissa, where at least the people were free and the Amazon warriors kept ceaseless watch on their frontiers. Closana, of course, was very anxious to return home.

"Suits me, too," Angus rumbled, "in that country they at least show a proper respect for a man of my attainments."

"Meaning your whiskers?" Gerry asked.

"Look out, Angus," Closana warned with a smile, idly running her slender fingers along the keen edge of her dagger. "Some Savissan princess will choose you for her husband as I have chosen Geree here."

"I told you we wouldn't talk about that for the present...." Gerry began. Closana's hand moved swiftly as a striking dakta. The keen blade bit through the cloth of Gerry's sleeve and pinned it to the table top.

"You'll never get away from me, Geree," the girl said quietly. Angus McTavish burst out in a great roar of laughter.

"Might as well admit you're licked now, lad! These Venusian women seem to be verra strong minded lassies!"

\* \* \* \* \*

They started two days later. There was, of course, neither night nor day in the sub-aqueous halls of Luralla but the outlaws ran their lives on a normal schedule. Sarnak supplied Gerry and the others with rubber uniforms and complete equipment including the thin bladed water-swords in the long feathery scabbards.

"I will have you guided out to one of our exits that is a quarter mile off shore from the place where the dakta hunt was held," Sarnak offered.

"I thought that water was a lake," Gerry said. Sarnak shook his head.

"No. It is an estuary, an arm of the Great Sea. The chemical tanks on your water helmets will keep the air pure for several days travel, and the sentries at the last outpost will give you trained saddle-dolphins so that you will make better time toward the coastal regions of Savissa."

Sarnak went with them to the guardroom at the edge of the water filled passages, and personally checked over their equipment.

"These are our new type of helmet with the audiphones that let the

wearers talk to each other under water," he said, touching the tiny microphones set into the curved glass. "Well--you had better start. May the Dragon Gods be with you!"

They strapped on their helmets and adjusted the valves. A uniformed guide stepped into the water-lock with them. Sarnak shook hands, saluted, and then stepped back through the door which closed behind him. The guide lifted his hand in a signal, and a second later a torrent of water rushed out of the gratings to foam about their feet. They were ready to leave Luralla!

Again they went through the maze of water-filled passages, passing occasional sentries. After a while the character of the corridor changed. It was wider, and was arched instead of square, and there was a carpet of soft natural sand beneath their feet instead of a stone floor.

"We come to the last outpost of Luralla, *hiziren!*" the guide said.

They stepped out of the end of the passage and found themselves in the open sea, many fathoms down. A broad and slightly sloping floor of smooth sand studded with lumps of coral and clusters of sea-weed stretched before them. Some were giant ferns stretching twelve and fifteen feet high, others were low and sponge-like growths. A school of tiny red fishes shot swiftly past them. Larger fish sailed majestically by overhead. The top of the water was a gleaming golden ceiling far above them, the greenish yellow light lessening in intensity as it came down to the depths.

The end of the passage was surrounded by a barrier of piled coral. Outlaw swordsmen stood on guard, also armed with a sort of compressed air cross-bow that shot a heavy metal needle with great force. From a corral at one side an orderly brought three saddle-dolphins.

The big fish were equipped with rubber saddles strapped around the body, and short stirrups. They were guided by a bridle similar to that used on Earthly horses. As Gerry swung up to the saddle his dolphin bucked once or twice with quick flips of his tail, then steadied down as he felt the tight pressure of his master's knees. When the other two were mounted, the officer commanding the outpost lifted his arm in salute.

"The Dragon Gods be with you!" he said. At a distance of fifteen or twenty feet the sound of his voice was slightly muted, but the words were perfectly clear in the ear-pieces of Gerry's helmet. He lifted his own rubber gloved hand to his globular helmet and returned the salute.

\* \* \* \* \*

They rode off at an easy pace, the dolphins rising above the tops of the tallest vegetation. Gerry found that it was easy to sit the saddle as long as he bent a little forward to overcome the resistance of the water against his chest. They were about thirty or forty feet down. On Earth such a depth would have been uncomfortable, but the lighter gravity of Venus made it easily bearable.

Gerry glanced back. Closana was riding a few feet behind him, slender and erect, controlling her restless dolphin as easily as though she had been accustomed to such steeds all her life. Angus was grinning broadly through his globular glass helmet as he sat astride a particularly big dolphin and swung his light bladed water-sword from side to side.

"If any of our friends back on Earth could see us now in some sort of an astral spectroscope," the big Scot cried, "they'd think themselves crazy. Maybe this is only a nightmare at that! Do you think we'll wake

up soon and find ourselves safe back on board the *Viking*?"

"I'm afraid not," Gerry answered. He wondered in what part of this vast sea the twisted hulk of the *Viking* was now lying.

All day they rode, roughly following the shoreline to the northward. Whenever it got so deep that nothing was visible below but a vast green shadow Gerry headed inland until the tops of the sea gardens again came into view. Sarnak had told them that by the middle of the next day it should be safe for them to come above water and check their maps and put fresh chemical cartridges in the cylinders of their helmets. The Scaly Ones patrolled their coast line in shallow open boats, but they did not go beyond their own borders.

Once Gerry checked his dolphin and then headed downward as he caught sight of something big and dark lying on the sand. The others followed him. It was the broken and rusting hulk of a space-ship, a vessel of a strange type with a name in an unknown tongue still visible on the shattered stern. The wreck must have been there for a very long time, for the sand was heaped high about it and sea-weeds grew up through the open hatches.

"Leaping ray-blasts!" McTavish said softly. "Yon craft never came from either Earth or Mars."

"Probably from some far distant planet in outer space that we've never heard of," Gerry said. "Some adventurous wanderer of the interstellar regions who came to grief in this lonely spot."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was desolate and forlorn, the sight of that wrecked vessel from so long ago. It made Gerry think of his own lost command. There were clean picked white bones of strange shape lying about on the sand.

Gerry saluted, a tribute to those strange and forgotten wanderers of space, and then urged his dolphin to a higher level again.

When the dimming light showed that it was dusk above the water they rode in to the four-fathom shallows and halted in a smooth patch of yellow sand. Gerry unsaddled the dolphins and tethered them to lumps of coral where they browsed contentedly on the short vegetation. Then the three exiles sat down in a circle on the sand. McTavish stretched his long legs, bouncing a few feet off the ground as he did so and then floating slowly down again.

"I'll never forget this journey if I live to be older than the whole Solar System itself!" he said. "Also--I'm hungry."

"There's nothing we can do about that until noon tomorrow," Gerry grunted. "Maybe the fasting will make you lose some of that surplus bulk of yours. But I'll admit I could do with some of that special coffee Portok used to brew in the ward room on the *Viking* in the evenings."

"I'd give a lot for a drink of plain water," Closana said wistfully. "Acres of water around us and nothing to drink!"

When the last of the light was gone they lit a small lamp that Sarnak had given them. It illumined a circle some twenty feet across, a little patch of light in the midst of the utter blackness of the depths of the sea. They sat there talking for a while, then Gerry stretched out on the sand with one arm hooked around a lump of coral to hold himself in place. He was thankful that the waters of Venus were always warm. It would scarcely have been possible to sleep at the bottom of one of Earth's oceans in this manner, even with the equipment with which Sarnak had supplied them.

For a while Gerry drowsed. The audiphones of his helmet picked up all the faint sounds of this watery world. A muffled splash as Angus



McTavish stirred restlessly ... the steady movement as their drowsing but apparently sleepless dolphins fed on the fields of sea-weed ... an occasional steady churning as some larger denizen of the deep swam past above them. Then he slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was well past midnight by the illuminated dial of the waterproof chronometer that Sarnak had given Gerry when he awoke. Angus was shaking his shoulder. The light had been put out hours before, and there was no illumination at all except for an occasional flash of green phosphorescence where some fish sped by.

"Either I'm an over-grown sponge," the big engineer muttered, "or there's a light shining through the water off to the west."

Gerry yawned and sat up, instinctively starting to rub his eyes before his hands bumped against the hard glass surface of his curving helmet. Some of the bits of coral around them glowed with an eerie green radiance, and a tall frond of sea-weed had tiny specks of light on the tips of its constantly waving leaves. Then, far off to the left, Gerry caught a faint glow.

It was hard to tell what kind of a light it was, so great was the refraction of the water, but there was something there. It was little more than a lessening of the deep gloom that otherwise surrounded them on all sides. Gerry got to his feet and picked up his rubber saddle which he had been using as a pillow under his helmet.

"We'd better investigate," he said. "Wake Closana."

They saddled their dolphins and rode out at an easy pace, holding the big fish down with a tight rein. As they rode the glow ahead of them became more definite. It seemed to come from a long row of

twenty or more lights. Then they were near enough to see each other in the reflected glow.

"It's some kind of a ship," Gerry said. "Those lights are her port holes!"

"It's more than that!" snapped Angus. "It's the *Viking*! I know the lines of her stern anywhere, even in this sunken and God forsaken spot!"

The space-ship lay quietly in the soft mud of this part of the ocean bottom. All her port holes of transparent duralite were glowing with the reflected light from inside. The twisted wrecks of her helicopters were still visible on top of the hull, but otherwise she did not appear to be damaged.

Gerry was in the middle as the three of them rode their dolphins up close to one of the big windows of the control room. The ship had evidently survived the fall into the water, for they could see dim figures moving about inside.

"I told you that duralite hull could stand a little thing like a fall into the ocean!" McTavish exulted.

As they crowded their finny steeds close to the glass of the control room window, Portok the Martian came to peer out. His red-skinned face went pale as he saw them, and even through the ship's hull their audiphones picked up his agonized cry.

"Steve! Tanda! I just saw the ghosts of Norton and McTavish looking in the window!"

Steve Brent came into the control room. He looked haggard and unshaven, and he was stained with oily grease.

"What are you raving about, Portok?" he snapped.

"It's no raving, Steve!" the little Martian chattered, "I tell you I saw the three of them. The Chief, and Angus, and the Amazon girl--all riding on some kind of big fish and peering in that window!"

"You're going crazy!" Steve Brent snapped, but he walked to the window. His own eyes widened as he saw the strangely clad trio sitting their mounts outside. Gerry waved violently to him.

"Let us in, you idiot!" he shouted, forgetting that the *Viking* did not carry any audiphones that could pick up his words. He heard Steve's unsteady voice.

"Maybe we're both crazy, Portok, but I think they're really out there. Open the outer door to the starboard space-lock."

\* \* \* \* \*

A small door swung open on the starboard side of the *Viking's* blue and silver hull. That small compartment had really been designed for dropping objects into the void of outer space, or for testing the quality of the atmosphere on any stray planetoids the *Viking* might have visited on her journey across the vastness of interplanetary space, but it would do for a water-lock in this instance.

Gerry and the others dismounted from their dolphins and let the reins hang. Angus gave his mount a slap on the flank. With a flip of its tail the big fish wheeled and swam off, and after a second the others followed it. Gerry led the way into the space-lock and closed the door behind him. It only took a few seconds for the blast of the *Viking's* powerful compressed air tanks to blow out the water. Then, as Gerry unstrapped his helmet and lifted the big glass globe off his head, Steve Brent opened the inner door and stepped into the space-lock.

"I don't know if I'm crazy or dreaming or what, Chief," he said, "but I'm damn glad to see you back."

"You're sane enough," Gerry snapped, "it's a long story, so skip it for the moment. I thought *you* were done for!"

"Not the *Viking*!" Larry affectionately slapped the laminated duralite shell of the space-ship. "She can stand more than being dropped in the drink from a few hundred feet up. Our problem is how to get going again. We've been able to crawl along the bottom by using minimum power of one rocket tube and scaring hell out of all the fish, but that's the best we've been able to do. Now that Angus is back he can take over. What do you think about the helicopters?"

"I could forge new ones in a week out of that blue metal they have in Giri-Vaaka," McTavish muttered. "But God knows how we'll ever get hold of a supply. Anyway, I think I can reverse enough of the gravity plates to give this craft reserve buoyancy so she'll navigate on the surface instead of hugging the bottom."

"I never thought of that!" Steve said admiringly. Angus grunted, and began to strip off his green rubber uniform.

"It takes a Scotsman to show the rest of the Universe how to get out of a tough spot!"

\* \* \* \* \*

It was afternoon on the following day when the *Viking's* long hull finally broke the surface. She lay in the water like a half submerged cigar, the yellowish ripples lapping on the curved blue duralite of her super-structure. The twisted remains of the shattered helicopters were ugly stumps along the space-ship's sleek back. A single rocket tube

flamed and smoked astern, its blast driving the vessel through the water at a good pace while her wake smoked and bubbled.

Gerry Norton opened the duralite dome of the upper control room and stepped out on the wet deck with a few of the others. They were well out on the great sea, with the green hills of the Giri-Savissa border a low smear along the horizon to starboard. This was the same lonely sea they had seen when they first dropped down through the clouds to Venus.

The vast and greenish-yellow waters were broken by scattered islands, bare bits of rock that were dotted with blue moss. Sea birds swooped about them. Lofty mountains on a distant shore were capped with snow. In one or two places a narrow shaft of sunlight struck down through a brief gap in the canopy of eternal clouds, but otherwise there was only that subdued and peculiarly golden light in which there moved only a few oddly shaped birds.

So much had happened since they first saw that lonely sea! It seemed as though much more than a week had elapsed. Savissa and its Golden Amazons ... the arrow tipped tower of Rupin-Sang ... the Scaly hordes of Vaaka and the dread palace of the insane Lansa who had once been an Earthly officer ... the secret and water-locked halls of Luralla where The outlaws of Giri dwelt—many scenes went through Gerry Norton's mind. He seemed to have aged ten years since the day he brought the *Viking* down through the cloud screen. Well—the immediate problem was to get some suitable metal to repair the smashed helicopters. The *Viking* might possibly get up into the air with the power of her rockets alone if they beached her on a sloping shore with her nose upward, but she could never come down safely without helicopters.

"I'll hold her on this course a while," Gerry said. "In the morning we

can strike over and try to pick up the frontiers of Savissa."

It was just at dusk that they saw white towers against the sky. They rose out of the sea as Gerry turned the *Viking's* blunt nose toward them--the mighty battlements of a vast city. Closana, who was standing on deck beside him at the time, rested her hands on the rail and stared in utter amazement.

"But it isn't possible, Geree!" she gasped, "there isn't any civilization out there on the islands of the Great Sea!"

"Could it be a mirage?" he suggested. "A reflection of some Savissan city on the mainland?"

"No." The girl shook her head. "There are no cities of that sort in any of these lands. Geree--there is something strange here. I do not like it. There *cannot* be any city ahead of us there!"

"But there it is!" Gerry said grimly. "We can't all be seeing things. We'll go closer and get a better look."

It was sunset, the unspectacular Venusian sunset which was simply a swift lessening of the golden glow from the cloud veiled sky above. Lights were gleaming from most of the tall buildings of the towering city as the *Viking* drove toward it through a quiet sea. Sea birds swooped low about the ship's wake. The watchers on deck could see the low shore line of the island on which the city was built. Then they heard distant bells, pleasant bells that seemed to be chiming a farewell to the day and a welcome to the night. And then a red light flashed on top of the tallest building and in an instant the entire city vanished.

\* \* \* \* \*

One minute the strange city had been clearly visible before them, its graceful towers agleam with lights as they notched the sky. The next instant the whole place was gone. There was nothing in sight at all but a low shoreline. It was as though a thick veil of concealing mist had been suddenly drawn across between the ship and the city. Only--the air was clear and without a trace of mist. Gerry walked across to the open dome of the upper control room.

"Cut rockets!" he snapped. "Get some kind of an anchor overboard. We'll just stay right here off shore until morning. There's something queer going on."

Gerry and Steve Brent leaned on the rail together, peering through the darkness toward the island. Nothing was visible in the faint phosphor-glow that marked the Venusian night, but they could just hear a distant singing as of many voices lifted in chorus.

"What do you think happened to the city so suddenly?" Steve asked. Gerry shrugged.

"I suppose some mist hid it."

"There wasn't any mist," Steve said flatly, "anyway--we could see the low hills on shore just as clearly after the city disappeared as before. Anyway...."

"Listen!" Gerry interrupted.

Now they could again hear the sound of bells coming across the water. Half the time the sound was swept away by the night breeze, half the time they could just hear it. The bells were of many blended tones and notes, an immense carillon. They were singing some outland melody that was full of the surge of ocean breezes and the cries of the sea birds. It rose, and swelled, and died away again.

"The city's there, all right," Gerry said slowly. "Though I can't imagine why we don't see any lights with the sound of the bells that close. But we'll see in the morning."

"I tell you there is no city," Closana said, her voice troubled. "We have often sailed ships into these waters from the Savissan coast, and we know that none of these Outer Isles are inhabited. What you have heard must be the ghosts of the Old Ones, ancient phantoms speeding through the skies. There is a legend that the bells of their phantom ships can sometimes be heard off the coast at night."

"Ghosts or no ghosts, we're going ashore there in the morning!" Gerry said stubbornly.

\* \* \* \* \*

All night the *Viking* rode to a crude anchor that Angus had improvised from some spare parts on board. The space-ship's designers had never expected her to lie in water. Most of the crew were on deck as soon as it grew light enough to see. Ahead of them, less than half a mile away, stretched a sandy shore backed by a line of low hills. The island had a wealth of the yellow vegetation typical of the mainland of Venus, so that it had a more friendly appearance than the other specks of land which dotted the Great Sea and were only bare rock, but there was no sign of life. Certainly there was no trace of any city! There was not even an indication of human habitation at all. As the dawn-mists cleared away they could see that another range of hills stretched along the horizon some miles behind. Their greenish-yellow slopes were clear and sharp against the cloudy sky beyond, and they were located well in the rear of where the city had appeared to be in that hasty glimpse the night before.

"Ready the landing party!" Gerry commanded. "Full armor and



equipment!"

They gently beached the space-ship on the sloping expanse of sand, running her nose a little way up above the water level while the light surf lapped her dripping sides. Some giant crabs scurried away across the beach in startled surprise.

"Want to go ashore, Angus?" Gerry asked as McTavish's red bearded face came up through an escape hatch. The big engineer shook his head.

"I'll just stay aboard here and brood over my broken helicopters, thanks. My last trip ashore took care of all my wanderlust for the present."

Gerry took half the vessel's crew with him, leaving the other half on guard. Closana went with the landing party. With their armor gleaming in the golden light, ray-guns and other weapons ready, they tramped up across the loose sand of the beach. Beyond the shore line was firmer ground, a field of some low plants that grew in orderly yellow rows.

"I'll swallow my ray-tube if this isn't a field cultivated by man! Nature was never that orderly," Steve Brent muttered. Gerry shrugged.

"Lord knows! If we ever get those helicopters fixed, I'm all for a quick return to Earth. This planet is certainly no peaceful garden of Eden, and I've had pretty near all I want of it. Savissa was the only place I really liked. I wonder what's happening there now!"

"We'll know if anything very exciting turns up," Steve said. "When we started out on our search after you disappeared that night, I left Tanda behind with a portable radio to keep us posted. Sort of figured it was our base on Venus, and anyway there was always the chance

you might wander back there."

"Great planetoids--I just thought of something! As soon as we get back to the ship, remind me to radio Tanda to tell Rupin-Sang that the Scaly Ones had learned to use the old sewers, and that he must either block them off or place a heavy guard there."

For a mile they walked inland, across those odd fields. The orderly rows of plants stretched off to the horizon on both sides. And then they came to a kind of level plain. The ground before them was strange looking, so strange that Gerry called a halt while he stared down the slight slope at it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Most of the plain was of bare rock, rock that was absolutely smooth and level without any sign of weathering at all. Along the outer edge it was pitted at regular intervals by what looked like shallow wells a foot in diameter. Beyond that zone were many excavations of many sizes and shapes, all cut down into the solid rock with the sides perfectly straight and smooth. Gerry took off his helmet and scratched his head.

"Now what do you make of that?"

"I know what it looks like to me," Steve said. "It looks just like the foundations of a city--without the city. Those round pits are the anchorages of the outer wall. Those square holes are the basements of tall buildings. Only--somebody has lifted the whole city away."

"You're crazy!" Gerry growled. Steve shrugged.

"Maybe we all are! Anyway, I'm going to take a look into one of those holes."

Steve walked quickly forward toward the nearest of the round pits. Suddenly, just as he reached the very edge of the zone of bare rock, there was a dull clash of steel. Something had seemed to pick Steve up bodily and hurl him backward. He landed flat on his back on the ground, his helmet bouncing off and rolling a few feet away.

"It hit me," he shouted.

"What did?"

"I don't know." Steve sat up and rubbed his head. "Y' know, Chief, it really felt more as though I'd just walked squarely into a solid stone wall."

"It has just occurred to me," Gerry said slowly, "that maybe that's exactly what you *did* do!"

Gerry walked forward cautiously, a foot at a time, one hand stretched out before him. When he reached a spot on line with the place where Steve had been stopped, his hand encountered something cool and firm and smooth. It was like the surface of a highly polished stone wall. Or a sheet of heavy and invisible glass. He ran both his hands over it. The thing was continuous and solid. There was nothing visible to the eye, and he could see far ahead of him across the strangely surfaced rocky plain, but there was an impenetrable barrier blocking the path.

Stepping back a few feet, Gerry picked up a pebble and tossed it upward. The stone bounced sharply back as soon as it came in line with the invisible barrier. He threw the pebble higher and the same thing happened. There was something mysterious and disquieting about the way the stone would soar up into the clear air--and then sharply bounce back from a point in space where nothing at all was visible.

"Magic!" Closana said nervously. Even the Earth-men of the landing party had drawn together in a compact group, ray-tubes ready and eyes alert.

Gerry moved back a few feet farther, then hurled the stone forward and upward as high as he could. This time the pebble did not bounce back. It simply vanished in thin air. And then, from somewhere off in the emptiness of space above them, there came the sound of a deep and mocking laughter!

\* \* \* \* \*

As though that first laugh had somehow eased the necessity for a carefully enforced silence, there came a whole burst of unseen and eerie merriment. There was a murmur of many voices. Then it died away again. There was still nothing visible, and the silence was once more unbroken.

"For Lord's sake, let's get out of here!" Portok gasped. "This place is ghost ridden!"

"There are no ghosts here, little red-faced man!" boomed a voice.

The sound had seemed to come from somewhere overhead. From the empty void above, where there was nothing at all until the cloud canopy was reached many thousands of feet up. One of the *Viking's* crew bared his teeth in a sudden panic and lifted his ray-gun to fire blindly upward. Before he could pull the trigger there was a blinding blue flash and a crash like summer thunder. Captive lightning! The ray-gun flew from the man's hands and landed a few feet away, its wooden stock badly charred and its barrel a glowing mass of fused metal.

"Let your weapons rest, for they are useless here!" commanded that same booming voice from above. "Whence came ye, strangers in odd clothing who have traveled in a ship like a blue whale? What do ye seek here in the Outer Isles?"

Gerry stepped forward, a few feet ahead of the group. He shouted that they were a scientific exploring party who had come from Earth in a space-ship. There was a brief period of silence, as though men consulted in whispers. Then the voice called him again.

"You there--the leader! The Council of Elders will talk with you. Go fifty paces to your right, to where there are two white stones, and then come forward between them. Do not be afraid. You will not be harmed."

"Are you going to take the chance, Chief?" Steve whispered. Gerry nodded.

"I'll have to."

About fifty yards to his right Gerry saw two white stones. They were set some twelve or fifteen feet apart, on the very edge of the invisible barrier. Gerry walked over, turned left, and then walked squarely in between the stones. He held one arm protectingly in front of him, but this time his hand did not encounter any barrier. Instead--he found himself standing under the arch-way of a gate with a mighty city spread before him!

\* \* \* \* \*

The city had simply appeared in a flash, with its mighty towers soaring up to the sky, as soon as he stepped over the outer line of the arch. Whatever it was that held the place invisible from outside, it had ceased to function for him as soon as he came within the limits

of the outer surface of the walls. Glancing back, he saw that his companions were still staring blankly at the spot he had just quitted. They were evidently unable to see either him or any part of the city.

"It's all right, Steve!" he shouted. "Just hold everybody there till I come back."

Doors of heavily carved glass slid noiselessly out of recesses within the wall to close the gate through which Gerry had just entered. The arch in which he stood was inside the thickness of the wall, faced with white marble, inlaid with designs in gold. Ahead, he could see a broad avenue that ran from the gateway down through the center of the city. It was tree lined and pleasant, thronged with people. Flowers grew in little plots in front of the gold and white houses. Small furry animals, dogs, were evidently kept as pets. They drowsed on the doorsteps or scampered about the neat gardens.

Half a dozen men were standing around Gerry, within the arch of the gate. They were slight in stature though wiry, with heads a little larger than normal and exceptionally high foreheads. Their skin bore a tawny tinge, similar to that of the Amazons of Savissa. Two of them, who immediately took up posts just inside the glass portals of the gate, wore a semi-military uniform that included a gilded helmet. The others wore white cotton tunics and high leather shoes. It suddenly struck Gerry that this was the first place on Venus that he had visited where the majority of the citizens did not go heavily armed at all times. Perhaps it was a good omen.

One of the men stepped forward, a bearded and gray-haired man who bore a gold-tipped staff.

"I am Gool, chairman of the Council of Elders of Moorn," he said in the deep voice that Gerry had heard outside. "The Council has decided to see you at once. You are the first outsider who has been

permitted to enter the city of Moorn--White Queen of the Outer Isles--in countless generations. It would not have been permitted even now if you had been a man of this planet. Come with me."

\* \* \* \* \*

They went up a flight of steps and climbed into a metal car that hung from an overhead rail supported by columns along the street. Gool touched a button, and the car shot ahead at high speed along the overhead mono-rail. The old man, who had settled comfortably back on one of the upholstered seats, was faintly smiling as he watched Gerry's face.

"You are puzzled, stranger?" he asked at last.

"Yes. There seemed to be nothing on the plain but a lot of holes bored in the rock, and now...."

"And now you find yourself in the city of Moorn," Gool said. "A knowledge of dimensional control is one of the reasons why we of this city have lived in peace and safety for so many centuries while the rest of the planet is torn by constant wars."

"Dimensional control?" Gerry said slowly. Gool nodded.

"Yes. It is hard to put it into language that will be clear to one who has no knowledge of our science. Perhaps I can explain it by saying that the human eye is a three-dimensional organism, and therefore capable of perceiving only things that fall into that same category. There are a great many things in the universe, some of the greatest importance, that the ordinary man's senses are incapable of perceiving. We have learned how to cast a protective screen of fourth-dimension rays about our city, and the effect is that it becomes completely invisible to the human eye. Do I make myself clear?"

"Not entirely," Gerry grinned. "But I do know that your screen works! But, since your science is so far ahead of the other people of Venus, why don't you rule the entire planet?"

"The other races are all barbarians," Gool said with a sort of disdainful gravity. "We prefer to live here in our peaceful isolation and not bother with them. That is an essential part of our philosophy."

The speeding mono-rail car mounted higher as it neared the center of the city. The track seemed to end on the blank wall halfway up the tallest of the buildings, but as the car came near a circular doorway suddenly opened just in time to let it through. They halted in a circular chamber where heavy springs caught and allayed the last of the car's momentum, and a pair of gold-helmeted guards saluted Gool as they helped him to alight.

"The Council is ready and waiting, my Lord," said one. Gool nodded over his shoulder to Gerry.

"Follow me," he commanded.

The Council of Elders of Moorn sat at a U-shaped table in a high-ceilinged room whose walls were hung with heavy and very ancient tapestries. The dozen members of the council were all old men, gray-beards who seemed dwarfed by the high-backed chairs in which they sat. They listened with grave attention to Gerry's account of what he had seen of conditions on Venus, but their austere faces showed no sign of animation when he again suggested that they should intervene in the planet's affairs.

"We are not interested," Gool said listlessly.

Suddenly the short-wave alarm in Gerry's helmet buzzed loudly. He pressed the receiving switch.



"Listen, Chief!" Steve Brent's voice was tense and excited as it came from the ear-phones, "I just got a message from Tanda back in Larr. There's hell to pay back there! The Scaly Ones have in some way managed to storm one of the barrier forts, and now they're pouring over the borders of Savissa in great hordes. They're armed with supode rays, too!"

Gerry switched off the radio, and leaned forward with his hands on the carved table.

"Now is the time for you to act!" he snapped. "Lansa is a mad-man. He plans to overrun all Venus. If you come to the aid of the Amazons at this time, it will...."

"Our isolation of centuries is not to be broken," Gool interrupted. Watching the emotionless faces of the Council of Elders, he felt as though he were wading through mud. He was getting nowhere! The inertia of these gray-beards was a leaden and tangible thing.

"But if Lansa wins he may come after you!" he urged. "Your walls are invisible, but they're there. I could feel them with my hands. Now that Lansa has the equipment to project the supode ray, he may bring them down and...."

"We take no part in what goes on outside our walls," Gool repeated firmly. "We will give you the metal to repair your own ship. If you and some of your men wish to return quickly to the mainland in the meantime, we will send you across in our flying cars. That is the most that we can do."

\* \* \* \* \*

Half a dozen flying cars rested on a broad platform on top of one of

the walls of the city of Moorn. Many bells were tolling the noonday chimes as Gerry Norton led his armored men from the *Viking* aboard the compact little flying machines. There was room for six men in each car, the pilot and five passengers. Only Angus and the necessary assistants had remained behind to repair the space-ship with the materials supplied by the men of Moorn. Gerry leaned from his car to shake hands with Gool, who was leaning on his gold-tipped staff.

"Thanks for this much help," Gerry said. "Next time we meet I'll tell you...."

"We shall not meet again, my friend," Gool said with a half smile. The words seemed definitely ominous to Gerry, but before he could say anything more the old man had bowed ceremonially and then stepped back off the landing platform.

The flying cars of Moorn were shallow bowls of some gleaming blue metal, oval in shape and with three comfortably upholstered seats. They had no visible means of propulsion. Curved windshields of heavy glass protected the passengers from the air-blast of swift motion. Gerry got in beside the pilot of the leading car, who was a slight and taciturn Moornian with the big head and high forehead of his race. A complicated control board was fixed in place before him. Closana and Portok were in the seat next behind, while two more members of the *Viking's* crew occupied the rear seat.

"Ready?" the pilot asked. Gerry nodded.

The pilot touched a switch on the control board before him, and three globular dials glowed with an iridescent light. The space-car rose easily from the landing platform, moving upward and outward at a steep angle. There was neither noise nor vibration. The city vanished as soon as they passed outside the zone of dimensional-control on

its outer walls. Looking back and down, Gerry saw only the pitted rock of the foundations far below. A cart was moving toward the beach with some bars of metal for the *Viking*.

Then the next flying car came into sight as it sped out beyond the walls. Its nose came into sight first, then the middle section, finally the whole car. One after another, the rest of the flotilla took off till they were flying in a V-shaped formation like a flock of wild geese.

"What kind of power makes these cars go?" Gerry asked.

"Iso-electronic rays," the pilot replied shortly, not taking his eyes from the indicator board.

"And can they be made invisible like the city?"

"Yes. The dimensional-control lever is here." The pilot pointed at many of the controls, then again lapsed into silence.

It was evident that Gerry was not going to be able to have any extended conversation with the driver of the car. That might be due to instructions the man had received from his superiors, or simply to his own nature. Probably a combination of both! These men of Moorn were a cold and self-centered race. Probably they were an isolated off-shoot of the original Old Ones who had first settled this planet, a group who had managed to retain the scientific knowledge of their ancestors but had lost the vigor and fire that are found in active and vital nations.

\* \* \* \* \*

Below them lay the greenish yellow expanse of the Great Sea. Though these electronic flying cars of Moorn traveled with a noiseless smoothness that was the last word in flying comfort, their speed was

much less than that of the *Viking* at even minimum rocket power. The pilots were holding the flotilla down to a level of only a few hundred feet. The sight of the vast expanse of rippling waters sliding past so close below them was a strange experience to Gerry Norton, who had spent his life in space-ships that always traveled at the upper levels where everything below looks like a gigantic patch-work quilt.

Scattered islands shouldered their way upward through the sea ahead, and then sailed past below. So utterly smooth and noiseless was the movement of the electronic flying cars that they seemed to be standing motionless, while a strong wind blew against their glass shields and the surface of the planet unrolled beneath them. It was well into the afternoon before the familiar mountain ranges bordering Savissa came into view ahead.

Closana was leaning forward on her seat, her eyes eager and youthful in the shadows of the steel helmet with which she had been fitted out from the *Viking's* stores. Then, as the coast line became clearer with every passing mile, she suddenly pointed ahead and down to two black dots on the surface of the sea. The pilot took one glance at them, and then his hand moved to the dimensional control lever.

When they first entered the flying cars, Gerry had noticed that each one bore a very realistic appearing metal bird at the end of a sort of flag-staff that protruded upward at the bow. At the time he had thought it was simply a form of decoration. Now he realized that the metal bird fulfilled a much more useful purpose. It was outside the zone of invisibility, and gave all the pilots something to indicate the locations of the other cars and avoid collisions. When he glanced back, all he could see was a flock of birds following them in a wide V. The flotilla was keeping formation.

As they soared closer to shore, the two black dots gradually took shape as a pair of good-sized surface craft. A black-hulled raider, manned by a crew of the Scaly Ones, was hotly engaged with a wooden Savissan patrol boat. Companies of Amazons crouched behind the high bulwarks of their warship, loosing their arrows in stinging flights. Explosive bullets crackled around them as the Scaly Ones replied with their gas-guns. The boat was equipped with a big charging-tank, for reloading the gas-guns, equipment too heavy to be carried by land raiders but possible here. The tide of battle was definitely setting against the Amazons. The bodies of many of the golden-haired feminine warriors lay sprawled in the scuppers or scattered on the riven decks.

Closana's fists were clenched as she peered down at the battle on the seas below. The decks of the Savissan craft were beginning to smolder, and her arrow fire was weakening. Closana threw Gerry an agonized glance, and he turned to the pilot beside him.

"Is there any way we can strike at that raider below?" he asked. The Moornian pilot smiled faintly, and then handed Gerry a long metal rod that was equipped with gun-sights and had a sort of rubber stock. A wire trailed away from it and was attached to the car's power plant beneath the control board. It looked like an odd form of rifle, but the metal rod was solid instead of hollow.

"Aim--then press the button!" the taciturn Moornian said.

Gerry brought the strange-looking weapon to his shoulder and sighted through a line of rings set in the top. He centered the cross-hairs amidships on the black-hulled Reptilian craft, then gently pressed the switch button set in the stock.

There was a blinding flash of lightning. An instant later came the crashing roar of thunder. Momentarily the flying car rocked under the buffeting of the disturbed air masses, then it steadied down again. On the sea below, the battle had come to an abrupt end. That single blow was enough.

The lightning bolt struck the sea raider amidships, with a blinding flash. The metal hull glowed red hot. Water steamed about it. The dark shapes of Scaly warriors went spinning off into the sea. Then the tank of gas amidships exploded, sending a sheet of blue flame high into the air.

The Savissan war-craft rocked violently on the waves created by the lightning bolt and the explosion. The surviving Amazons clung frantically to bullwarks and rigging to avoid being washed overboard by the sheet of foam-flecked water that spread over the decks. Then as their craft steadied down again, they looked up into the sky. All they could see was a flock of small birds speeding rapidly inland. They lifted their weapons to the sky in salute, a tribute to whatever dark Gods had sped the deadly bolt that wrecked the enemy craft.

Gerry gingerly handed the deadly lightning caster back to the pilot.

"That's an effective weapon," he said. "If these flying cars can only stay with us for a few hours after we arrive at the city of Larr, we can probably break up the attack of the Scaly Ones and...."

"We return to Moorn immediately, as soon as we have landed you in Larr," the pilot said with cold finality. "Those are the orders of the Council of Elders."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dusk caught them just as they passed over the Savissan coast line.

They saw the gleaming lights of various scattered towns and hamlets below them. An hour later the lights of Larr itself came into view. At first they were only a glow along the horizon. Then, as the flotilla of flying cars swept nearer, the lights of the city began to take on definite form and shape. Closana was again leaning eagerly forward.

"The lights look strange!" she said, "so many of them are unsteady and flickering!"

Gerry Norton peered ahead through the night. His own eyes were narrowed and thoughtful.

"Those flickering lights you see are ray-guns," he said at last. "The city is already under siege."

Before attempting a landing as they came to the Golden City of Larr, the flotilla of flying cars swept in a wide circle over the city and its surrounding suburbs. Great fires burned in braziers along the walls. Other fires had been kindled by the besiegers. Dozens of cottages outside the circuit of the city walls were also aflame, blazing furiously. The whole place was suffused with a ruddy and uneven light, and the observers in the flying cars had a clear view of the scene below.

Behind the battlements and bastions atop the city's walls crouched the Golden Amazons of the garrison, loosing their storms of arrows at the swarming besiegers below them. Other tawny-skinned crews worked the alta-ray tubes that belched blasts of blue flame at regular intervals. Wherever the blue beams struck, the ground was blackened while the twisted and charred shapes of Scaly Ones writhed in brief agony. The myriad brazen trumpets of Larr sounded hasty rallying calls, or else tossed staccato signals from one part of the defences to another.

The hordes of Lansa had invested the city on three sides, the marsh-

land on the far border of the city protecting that side from direct assault. Groups of Scaly Ones took shelter behind tree trunks and mounds of earth and any other possible cover, firing their gas-guns up at the battlements in an effort to lessen the arrow fire. Others crept forward behind movable metal shields. Heavy-caliber gas-guns inched slowly forward behind wooden mantlets that bristled with arrows, and hurled their larger explosive bullets up at the walls. Wherever they struck there was a puff of yellow dust and a scarred place on the stones. Reptilian trumpets beat with a staccato thunder as Lansa kept in touch with his various divisions. Not all the advantage was with the besiegers, however. Even as Gerry watched, a blue heat-ray struck full on one of the big gas-guns and blew it up with a shattering crash.

In all but one particular the battle was a large-scale edition of the type of assault that the Scaly Ones had often tried against various barrier forts in the past. The difference was that they now possessed the supode ray, which Lansa had been able to prepare for his forces. Long beams of the familiar murky, reddish light were continually playing upon the walls of Larr.

The effect of the supode rays seemed to be less serious than Gerry would have expected. Perhaps Lansa's ray-guns were lacking in power because inefficiently made. Perhaps the yellow stones that formed the walls of Larr contained some radioactive substance that partially neutralized the rays. The walls were crumbling into powder in dozens of small spots as the searching beams of the rays found a weak point or flaw in the stone, but there was none of the wholesale collapse that Lansa had probably hoped to achieve.

The whole scene below was like a macabre nightmare. The fires flashed and crackled, and the explosive bullets of the Scaly Ones twinkled like fire-flies through the drifting smoke. Red light glinted on



the points of flying arrows. Savissan trumpets blared defiance to the thunder of reptilian drums. Most dramatic of all, silent but terribly deadly, was the duel of the ray-casters as the red beams of the attackers and the blue rays of the defenders darted back and forth through the night like the rapiers of fencing giants.

\* \* \* \* \*

The flotilla of flying cars darted down to the plaza in front of the Tower of the Arrow. The pilots kept them invisible until they had landed, lest the nervous crew of a defending ray-machine blast them before their identity was known. As soon as the dimensional-control was switched off there were cries of alarm, and a few hasty arrows glanced harmlessly off the Earthmen's armor. Then Closana shouted reassuringly and they were recognized.

A little later Gerry and a few of his officers stood with Rupin-Sang on one of the balconies of the Great Tower. The aged king of Savissa wore full armor though in the shadows of his gilded helmet his face looked old and gray and tired. Beside them, a squad of the Golden Amazons worked a long-range ray-tube that was firing at the rear areas of the Reptilian position. The muscles of the feminine warriors rippled beneath their tawny skins as they swung the heavy controls of the big ray-machine.

"They came against one of our barrier forts from the rear, in great numbers," Rupin-Sang said wearily. "I cannot imagine how they had managed to get so many men in behind our lines...."

"Probably brought them under water in that submarine they used when they took me captive," Gerry said. "Brought them through in relays. I should have sent you warning to block the river channel against that craft, but I never thought Lansa would strike so quickly."

"At least we had enough warning to prepare for the defense of the city after they broke through the frontier," Rupin-Sang said. "We called in all the surrounding troops. We sent the very young and the very old, the ill and the crippled back to comparative safety in the hills by way of secret trails through the swamps. If the walls will stand against the new rays the Scaly Ones are using, we should be able to hold out for a long time."

"The armor of my men is proof against either rays or explosive bullets," Gerry told him, "and our ray-guns are superior to those that Lansa has been able to make. We'll use my men as shock troops to beat back any particularly pressing attack. Between us, we can hang on until Lansa gets tired of the siege."

"I hope you're right," Rupin-Sang said gloomily, "but I recall the old prophecy. It is in my mind that the end of the Golden City of Larr is at hand, and that the sands of my nation run very low. However--we will fight to the end."

"No bunch of half-lizards led by a white renegade is going to lick me!" Gerry rasped.

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later Gerry Norton was less confident. Haggard and unshaven, he stalked into an inner room and tossed his helmet clattering on the table. His armor was badly dented by the impact of many explosive bullets, and one forearm was burned where a supode ray had momentarily pierced between the chinks of the armor.

"All right, Steve," Gerry said wearily, "it's your watch. Go up on the walls and take over."

"Anything new?" Steve Brent asked, sitting up on the cot where he

had been sleeping and running both hands through his tousled crop of sandy hair. His freckled face was as lined and drawn as Gerry's own.

"Another of the bastions on the west wall came down under the rays, but we're holding the breach all right with archers and a portable ray-caster. Hurry and get up there, like a good fellow! I left Portok in charge, and he's dead on his feet."

"I am not so damn much alive myself!" Steve muttered, but he put on his helmet and went clanking off up the corridor.

Gerry sat down heavily on a bench, at the moment too tired even to take off his armor. The city of Larr still held out—but that was all that could be said. The Scaly Ones still pressed the assault day and night without ceasing. The once mighty walls of yellow stone were crumbling under the constant attack of the walls while the defense of the steadily widening breaches put an added strain on the dwindling numbers of the garrison.

If only the *Viking* would come! Her duralite hull would withstand either rays or explosives, and her own powerful ray-tubes should be able to blast the attacking artillery out of existence and thereby raise the siege. But he could not raise the space-ship on the radio! That was the thing that worried Gerry most of all. Tanda had been trying at hourly intervals for days, but he could not get any answer from McTavish.

At last Gerry stretched out on the cot that Steve had quitted, and almost instantly went to sleep. It seemed only a moment later that he awoke to find Portok the Martian shaking him by the shoulder. Gerry laboriously raised himself up on one elbow shaking his head to clear his brain. So strong were the bonds of sleep that several seconds passed before his brain grasped the meaning of the words that

Portok was shouting in his ear.

"Chief! Can't you hear me? The whole western wall has come down, carrying all the ray-tubes with it. The Scaly Ones are in the city!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Gerry seized his helmet and weapons from the table where he had thrown them, and dashed out of the room. From one of the balconies of the Arrow Tower he could see the swift disaster that had come upon the City of Larr. The ceaseless, unrelenting play of Lansa's supode ray machines had finally weakened the city's western wall until the whole rampart had collapsed.

The once towering wall was now only a long mound of rubble. The companies of Scaly Ones nearest the wall had been buried in the debris when it fell, but fresh hordes were pouring forward with a shrill yelping. The Amazon archers defending the wall from above had been mainly crushed in the wreckage. Reserve regiments were hurrying into place at the double, bow strings twanging and long golden hair streaming out behind them but there was one loss that could not be replaced. All the alta-ray machines on that wall were shattered and broken.

The despairing courage of Larr's feminine defenders was not enough to hold that mile-long pile of rubbish whose sloping sides could be easily climbed by the swarming hordes from Giri-Vaaka. The Amazons were falling back all along the line. The retreat was a slow and stubborn one, but it was steady. Such of the alta-ray machines as could be brought to bear upon the shattered wall from other portions of the fortifications swept the advancing Scaly Ones with blue blasts that tore gaping holes in their ranks, but there were not enough of them. The firelight gleamed on the armor of a few of the *Viking's* men who were fighting with the rear-guard, their ray-guns stabbing

viciously into the Reptilian ranks as they fell back. The drums of the Scaly Ones took on a deep-mouthed bellow of triumph, and the brazen trumpets of Larr were the voice of a forlorn and fading hope.

Rupin-Sang appeared on the balcony beside Gerry, leaning his gnarled old hands on the rail. He was smiling, as though final disaster had at least brought a relief from strain.

"This is the end of the City of Larr," he said. "The ancient prophecy of Jeddah-Khana comes true after all. Save yourself and your men while you can, my friend."

"Can't we all escape through the swamps and put up a better fight in the hills?" Gerry asked. Rupin-Sang shook his head.

"No, my friend. The last survivors will do that when all is over, but we will defend Larr to the end--street by street and house by house--as is the tradition of Savissa. We are the last descendants of the Old Ones. We may die, but we will do it with honor."

The swift advance of Lansa's men bit deeply into the city, halfway from the shattered wall to the central plaza surrounding the Great Tower, before it was checked at a line of hasty barricades. There was bitter house-to-house fighting all across the city. Gerry knew that the stand at the barricades could not be sustained for very long. The advance of the Scaly Ones had at the moment outdistanced their supode ray casters and their heavy caliber gas-guns. For the present the Amazon arrows held them checked. The advance was sure to resume as soon as Lansa's heavy weapons could be brought up again.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a hopeless fight--and yet Gerry could not bring himself to leave.

Partly it was his affection for the grief-stricken but indomitable Closana that held him there. Partly it was the sheer courage of the Amazon's gallant fight against such heavy odds that kept him in the battle line. By some standards the affair was none of his business but he could not quit now. However--he had not the right to hold his men in the stricken city if they wished to leave. As he located the various members of the *Viking's* crew in the disorganized Amazon ranks, he gave each one permission to escape from the city through the eastern marshes. Portok's reaction was typical.

"Run from these snake-skinned devils?" the little Martian panted hoarsely, his ruddy face gaunt and his eyes sunken deep in their sockets. "Not while I can still stand. I'm staying with the rear guard--as long as there is one!"

New fires had been started by the victory-drunk Reptilians, fires within the walls. The lurid glow of burning houses made the night hideous. Fully a third of the city was in flames by now, and only the easterly wind kept the flames from driving the defenders away from those portions of the city that they still held.

By noon the next day the tale was nearly all told. The Savissans now held less than a third of their city, a V-shaped sector with the Arrow Tower at its apex. The murky beams of supode rays were now continually playing against the walls of the Great Tower itself, and small cascades of pulverized rock kept sliding off the face of the stone work as the weaker parts began to decompose under the steady impact of the rays. And still the fight went on!

Gerry had forgotten what it was like to lie down and rest. He was leaning in an angle of the wall, actually asleep on his feet, when Chester Sand from the *Viking* hurried across to him.

"Rupin-Sang wants to see you down in the garden right away, Chief!"

Sand panted. "You and Steve Brent both."

"All right. Get Steve," Gerry growled. He sighed, and tightened his belt, and went wearily down the steps to the lower floor of the tower.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pleasant walled garden behind the tower was a very different place from the stop Gerry had seen when he first came to Savissa. The explosive bullets of the Scaly Ones had ripped up many of the trees, and shattered the marble statues. A heap of debris fallen from above lay along the base of the tower wall, while more was constantly trickling down as the murky beams of the supode rays criss-crossed overhead. The bodies of dead Amazons were scattered here and there on the trampled grass. Dense clouds of acrid smoke from the burning city swirled down over the garden wall.

Closana was waiting in the garden, her armor dim and battered. Her left arm was heavily bandaged, but she still carried a naked sword in her right hand.

"I was told that you wanted me," she said. Gerry shook his head.

"No, it was your father who sent for *me*." Just then Steve and Chester Sand came across the garden. A faint suspicion began to stir in Gerry's mind.

"Where is Rupin-Sang?" he demanded.

Sand hesitated, and cleared his throat. His eyes were shifty. Then Gerry heard a slight sound behind him. He spun around--and looked squarely into the muzzle of a ray-tube held by Lansa himself!

They had been neatly trapped! Lansa and a dozen of his men had

come up through the sewers and slain the Amazon guards posted there.

"Drop your weapons!" Lansa snapped. Gerry shrugged and obeyed, and the others followed his example. There was a triumphant smile on the renegade's saturnine face. "I am glad you were not killed in the fighting, Norton," he said, "because you and Brent and the girl will make very valuable hostages for me when your space-ship eventually returns."

Gerry turned and stared at Chester Sand. The *Viking's* Safety Officer was pale, but he met the other man's glance with a sort of weak defiance. Gerry's lip curled.

"So *you* are the rat who slugged me that time I caught Olga in the radio room!" he said. "I should have known it. I seem to have left several loose ends I should have watched, but I'll fix you for this some day and...."

"You won't be fixing anybody any more, Norton," Lansa said grimly. "After I've used you to get possession of the *Viking* you'll die in the torture chambers at Vaaka-hausen. Thanks to my good friend Sands, I also know the location of the invisible city. That, too, I will attend to. But all in good time. Guards! Bind and gag the prisoners...."

He never finished the sentence. There was a sharp hiss, and a thud. A narrow steel point stood a hand's breadth out beyond his throat. A wondering expression came into his eyes. Then his knees buckled, and he went down on the trampled grass. Across the garden, still holding the air-gun from which he had shot the long steel slug, stood Sarnak of Luralla!

\* \* \* \* \*



The Scaly Ones went for their weapons, but a vengeful throng of the outlaw brood of the Dragon came pouring up from below on the heels of their leaders. There was no thought of quarter between these hereditary foes. There was a short, sharp fight--and then the last of Lansa's raiding party died in the shadow of the wall. Sarnak came striding forward, his hand outstretched and a cheerful smile on his broad face.

"It seems that I came in very good time, my friends!" he said.

"Perfect," Gerry grinned. "But what does your coming mean?"

"It means that the hour of deliverance is at hand. When Lansa brought his full force eastward against Savissa, it gave us the opportunity we have been needing for generations. We of the Dragon's Teeth rose against the scanty garrisons he left behind, and put them to the sword. The mass of the people joined us then, when the chances of victory looked so strong that hope overcame the despair born of generations of oppression. Now the Green Folk of Giri have thrown off the yoke of the invader at last, and thousands of them are marching this way to take the army of the Scaly Ones in the rear."

"But how did you come to arrive in the garden at this particular moment?" Gerry asked.

"The forces of Giri have forded the river and are marching overland, but I came ahead with a hundred picked cavalry mounted on swift saddle-dolphins. We saw a crude type of underwater craft moving in this direction, and followed it at a distance. You know the rest. After bringing down the sentries that Lansa had posted below, we left our dolphins and our water helmets down at the main drain and crept up through the passages to this place."

"When do you think the rest of the Green Folk will come?" Closana

asked.

"Within a few more hours, Princess. They will not be in time to save your city, but they will be in time to protect the survivors."

"If there are any of us left by then!" the girl said bitterly. Gerry suddenly pointed upward.

"Look there! The worst is over now!" he shouted. The *Viking* was streaking across the sky in a burst of yellow rocket flame.

The big space-ship dropped down over the beleaguered city, her powerful ray-tubes flashing. Other murky beams stabbed up to meet her, but her duralite hull was impervious to the rays and Angus kept her high enough so that the helicopters were protected by the curve of the hull. One after another the ray casters and heavy gas-guns of the Scaly Ones went out of action. When the ship's beams had silenced the artillery and commenced to rip black holes in the ranks of the Reptilian warriors themselves, they suddenly broke and fled.

\* \* \* \* \*

The war drums of the Scaly Ones were silent at last, while the trumpets of Savissa raised a long-drawn paeon of vengeance. Out of the ruined and flaming city fled the Reptilian men, while troops of swift-footed Amazons hung on their flanks and rear with twanging bows. Back across the plains toward the border they fled--and ran squarely into the grim thousands of the Green People who tore them apart with the savagery of an oppressed race just finding their souls again. The few that survived, out of the powerful army that Lansa the mad Earth-man had brought eastward to attack Savissa, were a handful who fled back across the land of Giri and vanished into the desolate Vaaka marshes from which their people had first emerged generations before.

The Golden City was hopelessly afire, past saving, and the survivors gathered on a level field outside the northern wall. Gerry and Sarnak and Rupin-Sang were standing together as the *Viking* dropped down to land on the edge of the field. McTavish stepped out, red bearded and jovial but showing the effects of sleepless nights himself.

"Sorry we couldn't get here sooner," he said, "but we've been working night and day to make proper repairs with that queer metal the people of Moorn gave us. We got your radio messages, but couldn't reply because the ship's sending set is broken and I figured the helicopters were more important repairs."

In a few brief words Gerry told McTavish of the fight in the garden. The big Scot beamed his pleasure. "An' did they get that slinking she-devil of an Olga along with the rest of the carrion?" he asked.

Gerry shook his head. "No, she wasn't there. At least, we didn't see her. It wasn't likely though that she would come. She probably remained back in Vaaka-hausen."

McTavish frowned his disappointment. "Ah, weel," he shrugged, "ye canna' have ever'thing."

"Don't worry, McTavish," Sarnak grinned, "we'll probably have her in a few hours. A force of Savissans and Green Men have already left to clean up Vaaka-hausen."

Gerry grinned. "Good. There's one thing I would like to suggest. I loathed Lansing as much as any of you, but he is a white man, and I dislike thinking that he may be hauled off and tossed into a common grave with the rest of the Scaly Ones. Let's go to the garden, and see that his body has at least a half-way decent interment."

The rest of the party agreed to this, and they made their way back to the garden. They went down the steps leading to it, then all stopped in surprise. The bodies of the slain Scaly Men and Lansa were gone!

McTavish rubbed his eyes unbelievably. "What kind of devilment is this?" he whispered. Sarnak shook his head slowly. "I don't understand. Unless the retreating forces found them, and carried them along with them. They were all dead, of that I'm sure."

"Lansing, too?" inquired McTavish suspiciously.

Gerry laughed. "Lansing never walked away from here, unless as a ghost. I saw him go down. And men with an arrow transfixing their throats don't do much walking."

But the big Scot didn't seem entirely convinced, and as they walked away, he was still shaking his great, shaggy head in doubt.

With the strain of the siege over at last, many of the garrison had simply dropped to the ground and gone to sleep where they fell. Gerry was watching the flames sweep over the last of the city. For a long time the Arrow Tower remained standing above the sea of fire, but then it began to tip. Faster and faster it fell, till it came down in a shower of sparks. Closana dropped her head in her hands, but old Rupin-Sang touched his daughter on the shoulder.

"Save your grief girl," he said. "It is true that the Golden City of our fathers no longer exists, but there was a second part to the prophesy. That, after the great disaster, the people of Savissa would have a re-birth. A message that just came through from those of our people who are hidden in the hills tells me that--of ten children who have been born since we sent all the non-combatants out of the city--seven have been boys! The curse has been lifted from our race."

Two days later, even before the ashes of Larr were cool, working parties of Amazons began to clear away the ruins to prepare for the building of a new city. Sarnak of Luralla had already returned across the river Giri to supervise the rebuilding of his own land. Angus McTavish came up to where Rupin-Sang and Gerry stood in front of the king's tent.

"Tests all complete, Chief," he said. "That material we got in Moorn is all right."

"I don't suppose there's any way of thanking them for it."

The big Scot shook his head slowly, tugging at his beard. "The city isn't there any more."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that it's gone. We heard the bells a few hours after you left, and then we never heard them again. You can walk clean across the plain where the city stood. Sand from the beach is drifting into the holes that held the wall foundations, and grass is already beginning over the rest of the place.... It's gone, that's all."

"They were queer folk, the people of Moorn," Gerry said moodily. "I suppose they were afraid they might get dragged into the affairs of the planet in spite of themselves, and simply moved the whole city off to some distant and unknown planet."

"But how could they do that?" McTavish said. Gerry shrugged.

"Ask me another! How could they make the place invisible? We know they did that, we don't know how much further their science went.

Anyway--I'm going to be glad to get back to Earth for a while. I guess we're ready to start."

He turned to look at Closana for a moment. The girl had laid aside her battered armor for her customary bright loin cloth and golden breast plates. She shook back her long golden hair and faced him with a smile.

"Want to come back to Earth with me, Closana?" he asked.

"Either that--or the ship goes back without its captain," she said quietly. Gerry laughed.

"Darling, I feel sorry for any Earth-woman who ever concludes you're some shy little stranger she can patronize. Well--the trails of interplanetary space are long and we'd better get going. All aboard!"

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