Chapter One

DANGEROUS MISSION

THE televiewscreen in Alex Jocelyn's apartment sprang to life and a voice came from the reproducer beside it: " Please report to Commander Bryne's office immediately for a personal interview. Top secret and priority."

Alex depressed the secret and priority code button beneath his screen. His reply would go out on scrambled microwaves no enemy agent could tap. International tension was high and no one took chances.

"What brew?" he asked.

"Commander Bryne will detail you. You are to be ready for a mission of grave importance. "

"Very well."

Alex switched off the televiewer. As he went down to street level he wondered what this could mean. Though trained from early boyhood for secret service work. he had never seen Commander " Big " Bryne, Bryne never spoke on televiewscreens and never interviewed the personnel under him if a subordinate could do the job instead.

A jet car swept Alex rapidly through the streets of Chadelio. The shadow of international disquiet hung heavily over the great metropolis. East, smoke from atomic furnaces hazed the sky; here, men worked day and night upon the giant rocket propelled atomic missiles being prepared to shatter enemy cities into smouldering rubble. At night the blue glow of a hundred furnaces was reflected in the sky and the machine shops were never silent. At a cross Alex was forced to halt while twelve sixteen-wheeled lorries rumbled ponderously by. Each carried a single gigantic glittering steel rocket, ready to be sent screaming heavenwards in a destructive parabola which might reduce some city hundreds of miles away to mere broken masonry and tangled steel.

Alex was admitted into Bryne's office by the low-ranking officer who had spoken to him on the screen. Only his long training prevented any sign crossing his face as Alex saluted smartly. He had seen Big Bryne before-- without knowing who he was. It had

been in the water-gardens; Bryne had been with a girl who laughed and chatted with him, her dark curls tossed back. Alex had hesitated, then passed on under the tropical palms and from sight. Until then he had imagined Esther Howard cared for no one else; it was a shock to see her with another man- and to find that man was his superior officer.

From behind his desk Bryne examined him critically. His features were cruel, hard and determined. .

" We daily expect war will be declared, Jocelyn," he stated harshly.

Alex nodded. " It will be a blow-up of planetary dimensions when it begins."

"Exactly. And a quick, decisive blow at the enemy is essential. Our unfriendly neighbour- no names- has as many atomic projectiles as we. If they launch them first we'll be finished like that." Bryne snapped his fingers. " Therefore you are to enter Thundam on secret intelligence work."

"Thundam!" Alex started. "An enemy key city. Can a spy get in there alive?"

"That's for you to find out." Bryne thumbed a push on his desk. To the officer who entered he said: "Detail Jocelyn here as per top secret schedule B793. Send Craig from the 2nd intelligencer department in."'

Alex saw he was dismissed. He saluted and withdrew. An hour later he had been instructed closely in what was required of him and found himself outside the secret-service buildings. Within twelve hours sealed instructions would come from Bryne himself stating the time and method of departure, and the disguise he would adopt. To prevent leakage, these vital details would be known to Bryne only.

Alex alighted from his vehicle and found himself face to face with a tall man with sandy hair who smiled.

"Let's go in where we can talk in private, Alex." he said.

Following his friend Lincoln to his rooms, Alex wondered what could have brought him out from his work in the secret service block. Lincoln closed the door, and his smile had gone.

"So Bryne's sending you into Thundam," he said. He raised a hand for silence. " All right, I know. I've ways of knowing things. That's why I took off time to come here.

Morley was executed in Thundam yesterday. He was one of our best intelligence men, more experienced than you, but he couldn't get away with it. No, Thundam is guarded

ten deep."

"It's my duty to go."

" Duty!" Lincoln used a picturesque expletive. " Suicide, you mean! Bryne's sending you to certain death. It suits his plans."

Alex frowned and memory of Bryne sipping iced wine with Esther in the water-gardens returned. He went to the teleview screen and depressed coded buttons. There was a jabber of unintelligible speech and streaks on the screen. Alex coded for exchange.

"Why can't I get my connection?" he demanded.

" Commander Bryne's orders, sir."

With annoyance Alex switched off. He had wanted to speak with Esther before going to Thundam.

"That proves it," said Lincoln, who had been watching. " Bryne isn't letting you contact her before you leave. He has no use for rivals- he'd rather they were awaiting execution in Thundam.

Alex swore. "I must go. It's my duty! I can't refuse."

In Bryne's office the Commander's second caller of the afternoon had just risen after a long private discussion.

"I understand," he said. Jocelyn is to be sacrificed as a decoy to draw attention away from myself."

"' Exactly!" Bryne nodded encouragingly from behind his desk. "That is my plan, Craig. Regrettable, but wise." He smiled to himself. "You will accompany Jocelyn. It is better that one should live than that both should die. You understand."

Alex spent the remaining hours in preparation. When he had finished his clothing and every object he carried was of the kind manufactured in Thundam. One item- a radio receiver built in a tobacco canister was finally included after deliberation. It was his own, not regulation equipment, and would probably bring about his immediate execution if discovered. From the secret service dispersal wing he was shown into a bare room and told to wait. Alone, he looked round curiously. From here went many intelligence officers- spies-never to return.

A table bore two tied and sealed packages, one with his own name. "Julin Craig". was on the second. Alex started. A man he had never liked. And apparently Craig was to go

with him into Thundam.

With lightning rapidity Alex recalled Lincoln's words. Trained to act quickly as he was, his decision was almost instantaneous. The work was done in seconds. When he turned at the sound of entering footsteps he was just tearing open a package bearing his own name.

Craig was much his own height and age and nodded briefly. He glanced at his sealed papers, turned the packet over to assure the sealing wax was intact, then broke the blue tape between strong fingers. Alex stowed his identification papers away; they told him the name he would use in Thundam, and that he was adopting the identity of a nuclear physicist.

" We go together," Craig said after a glance at his faked papers. " The stratosphere plane is waiting."

They entered the jet craft and whined up into the darkening night sky. Below, Chadelio was a myriad lighted buildings. As they rose, other cities glowed in the distance, each, Alex knew, ready to be plunged into concealing darkness the moment warning came. At an altitude of ten miles the craft flattened bearing them over the sea to Thundam. After a long silent glide the city showed a bare four miles below, Craig jumped first, the suitcase containing the two-way radio apparatus which would maintain contact with headquarters strapped to his back. Alex followed. His chute opened quickly; swinging in the dark and silent sky beneath it, he heard the jet plane turn back for base, Now they were alone. Return to Chadelio was impossible. Worse, an error might mean death.

They landed in fields east of the city The parachutes were hidden in a hollow tree; on foot, they set off towards the lights of the objective.

That much had been easy, Alex thought on the second day as he reviewed what they had done. They had obtained rooms and hidden the transceiver under prised-up floorboards. Thundam itself gave much food for urgent thought. Everywhere gigantic factories turned out atomic projectiles; foundaries glared at the sky and the hammer of the presses turning out machines of war never ceased. From a hilltop he had gazed down on a guarded enclosure stretching farther than the straining eye could see. Here stood row upon row of rocket driven projectiles so enormous as to dwarf the men and vehicles moving around them

Even now, Craig was in the second room reporting over the transceiver to Commander Bryne. From his vantage point, chosen so that he could give warning if police approached, Alex wondered what Bryne's reactions would be. He took out his pocket receiver, tuned it, and placed the tiny grille to his ear.

"Everything proceeds as planned." Craig's voice came loudly from the apparatus in the adjoining room. I shall report, again to-morrow at the same hour."

" Excellent." It was Bryne's voice, beamed from distant Chadelio, "And your companion?"

" He will be disposed of almost immediately as arranged."

"‘ Good." There was satisfaction in Bryne's tone. "Remember Jocelyn must die." The ether went dead.

Alex returned his receiver to his pocket. So Lincoln had been right. In the next room, he could hear Craig replacing the floorboards, his task accomplished. Alex tiptoed to the window. Bryne should not find him quite such an easy victim! he decided. He halted abruptly, hand half raised to the catch.

Below, men in the black uniform of Thundam police were ringing the building. As he watched, others sprang from arriving vehicles, weapons ready at hip level.

"We appear to be surrounded."

Alex spun round. Craig stood in the connecting door, a smile on his lips. Heavy footfalls were already approaching along the corridor.

" If they discover who we are we shall be executed at dawn," murmured Craig.

In his words Alex read the truth. This was Bryne's plan. One set of identification papers would pass scrutiny; the others would be seen to be faked and reveal their possessor was a spy.

" Yes, Craig," he said slowly. " There will be an execution to-morrow."

He strolled across the room, deposited his tobacco canister on a table, and returned to the door. Any attempt at resistance or escape would be both futile and foolish. A true citizen of Thundam would not try to hinder the city's police . . .

The door was kicked open and two officers stood there, weapons ready. One jerked his head towards the corridor.

"We've had information there's a spy in the building. Coming quietly?"

"We are." said Alex.

Chapter Two

THEY went with twenty others into the bleak, walled, and doubly-guarded prison building. One by one they slowly passed before a long desk behind which three officers sat. Each time the line moved forward Alex thought of Bryne's plan, angered by the treachery of it. " Jocelyn must die." Bryne had said and everything had been arranged to assure there was no escape.

Alex came before the desk and questions were shot at him. "Age? Occupation? Where are your papers?"

Alex answered smartly. He had already memorised the details of his adopted role and laid his identification papers upon the desk, not by the flicker of an eyelid betraying the unease he felt. Life and death were in the balance; it had been his intuition against Bryne's careful planning.

"Correct. Next."

The papers in his hand, Alex found himself marching from the room. He shot a glance back and his lips compressed. Craig had been next in sequence and now stood before the desk. His face showed astonishment and bewilderment, then fear and terror. Alex felt no pity. Treachery was always contemptible. The officials were examining Craig's papers, frowning.

"Keep him under continued arrest for third degree!" one snapped.

Alex lingered to hear no more. His intuitive guess had been correct; only his immediate action in substituting his own papers for Craig's before leaving Chadelio had averted personal disaster. Those documents, obvious forgeries, had not passed scrutiny; it had never been intended they should. Yes, Alex thought as he passed out into the street, Bryne's plan had been carefully devised.

Once outside, Alex quickened his step. From the corner of the great police building he looked back. Two officers in black uniform were following. He frowned and went on. Ahead was a junction between high walls and slipping into it he looked back. The officers sauntered round the corner into view; one looked quickly each way, then, side by side, they turned towards the junction. Alex withdrew from sight and ran silently to the end of the road, doubled right between high buildings, took two left turns down a narrow branching alley, and emerged into a broad thoroughfare.

An officer in dark uniform had just come from a side road ahead, he moved his hand in an almost imperceptible signal and Alex looked to his left. The second officer was strolling down the thoroughfare, his attention apparently directed carelessly on

passers-by. Only because his memory had been trained to remember faces did Alex know these two men were those who had originally followed him. Making no sign, he went on briskly; at the corner, pretending to look about him, he glanced over his shoulder. The black uniformed men were once again together, and much nearer.

Alex hurried. The heavy steps behind rang quicker. A hand descended on his shoulder and Alex knew flight would prove his guilt.

" Our Commander wishes to interview you."

Each officer had a hand upon his holster. Alex shrugged with feigned indifference. They turned smartly. Guarded each side, he retraced the way he had come.

In his private office deep within the police buildings High-Commander Erinald returned Alex's identification documents to the desk before him and rested back heavily in his chair. Alex had sustained a barrage of searching questions and knew his deception had not been discovered -yet. He was wanted in the role of the man whose identity he had adopted and whose papers he carried.

"We are too in need of atomic physicists to let your knowledge go unutilised," Erinald stated ponderously. " There is work for you to do in Thundam that our enemies may be destroyed the quicker."

Alex clicked his heels respectfully. "I am a mere civilian, Commander," he stated deprecatingly.

" In total war civilians play their part," Erinald snapped. " You will work in the E21 South-West Block and sleep in the billeting camp adjoining. You will obey orders immediately. If Thundam requires you make personal sacrifices, you will make them. That is all."

The South-West Block proved to be enormous. Alex was given a pass, a bunk in the nearby camp, and assigned to difficult though routine work which taxed all his ability. The things he saw filled him with fear for Chadelio and the other cities against which the mighty fury of Thundam would be unleashed. Atomic rockets stood ready for launching, their trajectories already calculated and their auto-pilot mechanisms set. Many more were made ready daily. Alex longed to get back to the transceiver concealed beneath the floor in the rooms he had used, but could not.

In the adjoining block technicians worked on a complicated apparatus he had no opportunity to examine. Enormous conductors carried power to it; it rose in a towering lattice structure, topped by magnetrons, radiating antennae, and conical parabolic reflectors thirty feet across. Alex wondered what purpose it could have, uneasy as the reflectors swung ponderously about their gimbals and blue sparks arced and crackled

from the antennae.

On the second day a fat man plumped down beside him in the mess where he was forced to eat. After gulping soup and coffee, he grinned at Alex. "All planned for the big blow-up?" he asked, chewing. Alex started. " The big blow-up?" "Sure, hadn't you heard. Three days from now- wooosh up go the rockets! No warning, no declaration of war, strike first, and when the enemy doesn't expect it- that's the way!" The fat man chuckled and wiped his chin. " The bigger the enemy cities, the bigger will be the craters which show where they was! Me and the boys who been sweatin' these twelvemonths on them rockets can't hardly wait, we're that eager!"

When he left the mess Alex did not return to work, Three days. He must get a warning through.

He circled a block, passed through the camp printing works where instructions and blueprints were produced, and approached one of the exits. Two soldiers stood on guard and Alex knew he would not be allowed through. He went on, eyeing the, wall. It was twenty feet high. smooth unscaleable concrete. Along the top ran electrified wires. After an hours search- the longest time he dared spend, he knew escape from the camp was impossible. That night he did not sleep. The next day he heard officially the attack was to be launched in two days. On the evening of that day he had a desperate plan ready and did not undress when darkness came. An hour after the guards had made their round of the bunkhouses he crept out.

In many places gangs still worked under daylight lamps. Keeping in the shadows, he gained the printing works unseen. Here, every window was dark and silent. With the tools he had stolen for the task he opened a window and entered. By the light of a torch he had taken from a workman's kit he found the basement and a small high speed flat bed press used for printing data leaflets . Here, he chanced a light and began to set up type. Two hours later, when the motor of the press whined into silence, he had as many thousands of leaflets printed as he could carry. Each bore a warning and the date when Thundam would attack. With the parcels of leaflets under his arms, he left the building.

At the entrance to the rocket launching site a sentry stood. Silent in his rubber boots, Alex kept to the shadows. The sentry did not hear him until he was a pace away; his upflung arms were too late to stay the down-slicing lead tubing. Alex laid him in concealing shadows and went between the rows of gleaming projectiles.

A rocket destined to pass over Chadelio and a hundred miles on west stood ready poised upon its ramp. Alex unscrewed its lower entrance port and clambered up the tiny metal ladder inside, his torch shining before him. When at last he descended and replaced the door he no longer carried the leaflets. The atomic warhead had been immobilised; the timing mechanism had been set for a bare half hour ahead, and the

leaflets were in the automatic projecting tubes which had been designed to sow bacteria upon the cities over which the rocket passed, but which had been left unused because Thundam scientists feared prisoners might spread the plague to their own lines.

Alex had reached the gate when the first whine of the rocket began. It was a murmer, then a shriek, then an ear-shattering scream which echoed through the night. The earth shook; there was a flash of scarlet fire burning up into the sky, and the rocket had gone. Departing at ultrasonic velocity, it dwindled to a mere red spark in the sky, then was gone from sight in a trajectory which Alex knew would take it a hundred miles high in its diving swoop over Chadelio.

Satisfied, he turned and noticed the body of the sentry was gone. Something descended on his head from behind and consciousness departed in the blinding pain of the concussion. Alex did not feel himself strike the ground .

"The rocket must have fired through some technical slip" Alex repeated weakly.

The fourth intelligence officer to interrogate him since his capture twelve hours before snorted and his knuckles drew blood from the prisoner's lips.

"That does not explain your presence there!"

Alex winced. "I couldn't sleep and went for a walk."

"Lies!" The officer thrust a fist under A1ex's nose. " Who knocked out the guard? Why was there lead tubing in your pocket?"

" I must have put it there accidentally at work."

"And it would be an accident, too, that the guard was knocked unconscious with just such tubing?" The officer's voice was heavy with fury and sarcasm.

Alex sighed. He had suffered this bullying for nearly ten hours. Desperately tired, weak from loss of food and sleep, he wondered how much longer he could keep this up.

"I'm not good at riddles," he explained patiently.

" Bah!" The officer turned from him to a messenger who had entered. He took an orange envelope, tore it open, and Alex saw his face go white as he read. Simultaneously, far in the distance, sounded a heavy explosion which made the windows rattle and then grumbled away into silence. Men came hurrying and the officer barked orders. "Thundam is to be evacuated! Get a closed car for the prisoner!"

After hectic minutes Alex found himself being whirled through the streets of Thundam. From the launching site rockets whined skyward at thirty-second intervals. Everywhere was activity. Vehicles sped for the. open country south; eyes turned fearfully skywards. Once, ten miles away, a fearful blue atomic explosion burned low over the horizon, dimming the very light of day, and Alex gave a quick, dry laugh. Evidently Thundam's enemies were striking back immediately.

One with the fleeing populace, they sped south. As they waited for a road-block to clear a man leaned in to the driver.

"They say Chadelio's been destroyed!" he cried. "We took them almost by surprise!"

The vehicle went on, sometimes churning remorselessly through those on foot.. Behind, an atomic missile burst into glaring fury over Thundam itself, now miles behind. Tall buildings, outlined vividly in the blue glow, swayed like child's toys and avalanched into crumbling rubble. Nearer, high in the path of the car, the blue fission of another missile blinked on. Shrieking sound assailed Alex's ears; the armoured vehicle was picked up like a leaf and flung spinning over and over upon its side. A roaring sounded in his head, than silence and darkness...

Chapter Three

RUINS OF CHADELIO

SWEATING in the gas-tight suit and helmet, Alex kept the staff car on the road south. He had recovered consciousness first and taken the opportunity thus offered; during the whole of the morning he had driven the stolen vehicle southwards along congested roads where stricken refugees streamed for imagined safety. But at midday the atomic dust began to settle slowly from projectiles detonating miles above. Men had screamed in panic and agony as the searing isotopes settled in their lungs. Within the closed armoured car Alex had struggled into the suit and helmet. Then he had pressed on.

Now, no one moved upon the road. Bodies huddled where they had fallen, skin blistering as the atomic-activated dust settled like mist out of the sky. The very trees lining the way had shed their leaves in a single hour and turned yellow as they died. In that hour the grass and herbage besides the road had become like rotten straw. Nowhere did a living form move and nowhere did a plant or tree survive. And still the dust came from the grey sky, a fine power like pulverised stone which lay over everything, glowing faintly blue with its own luminosity so that the world through which Alex drove had become a nightmare.

On a blasted aerodrome near the road he found a solitary jet-plane, undamaged except for the tip of one wing. He took it up into the night sky, turning for Chadelio. Far as

the eye could see in each direction Alex made out the holocaust of atomic-kindled fires. They burned in the night from horizon to horizon; far to the north, immeasurably distant, the blue flashes of fission bombs winked. What of Esther? Alex wondered. Drawing near Chadelio, his tormented unease increased and his gaze strained ahead. The winding river from the coast was there, and the hills. Chadelio had gone. He brought the plane lower and saw that where the city had been was a mere levelled expanse of masonry and broken steel. No man moved there in the moonlight; no building remained intact. So complete was the devastation even the roadways could not he found.

Sickened, he zoomed towards the boundary where Esther had lived and worked. Here, a bomb must have struck direct. There was a saucer-shaped crater fully a half-mile across, utterly devoid of any distinguishing feature.

He landed on the outskirts of the churned ruins with the first light of dawn. There was no deadly atomic dust here, but as he gazed at what had once been Chadelio Alex knew no living person could remain there.

On the hillslopes beyond the ruins were quarries for long but little used. From the lip of one Alex looked down. A work-man's hut, protected by the towering rock above, stood halfintact; outside it something white flapped in the morning breeze. Alex descended; a newspaper might at least record whether his warning had reached Chadelio in time to save its population.

There were large headlines: "Commander Bryne reveals story of treachery. £10,000 reward offered." Astounded, Alex read on. A spy sent into Thundam had failed to warn Chadelio, Bryne stated. The spy had reported daily but said nothing of any impending attack. The name of the man who had betrayed his country was set in big type: Alex Jocelyn.

The paper slipped from Alex's fingers. This tissue of lies, fabricated by Bryne, had a twofold motive, he guessed. It made a scapegoat, absolving Bryne from blame. Secondly, the reward was for "The body of Alex Jocelyn, dead or alive." Thus had Bryne assured his rival could never return openly to his country.

Embittered, Alex left the quarry and turned south. As he trudged over the scarred countryside he wondered what Esther had thought of this faked news, assuming she had lived to read it.

He followed the river, sleeping the night under low bushes. He awoke to hear men's voices. A dozen figures in tattered garments were approaching; their leader, an unshaven tough, waved at Alex as he came into the open. The others encircled him curiously.

" Know anything of Jocelyn?" the leader demanded.

Alex started. The words which first came to his lips unuttered, he shook his head.

The man stroked his rough chin. " What's your name?"

"Smythe -- Alan Smythe," Alex lied evenly. "Why do you want Jocelyn?"

"For the reward, of course. We're bent on getting it- eh; men?"

There were growls of eager agreement. Alex saw that if these men realised who he was they would slay him on the spot.

"We'd still want to get him even if there was no reward." a second man declared. "Death is too good for him."

Alex remained silent. Wisdom counselled he should and the leader was examining him suspiciously.

"Where did you come from, stranger?" he demanded.

"North." Alex met his gaze unflinchingly. "I was a pilot. A bomb made matchwood of our planes,"

The other seemed half satisfied. "Tag along," he said. "We like to watch strangers a bit, see."

During the whole of the day Alex remained with the men, seeing that they would be suspicious and follow if he slipped away. With nightfall a chance of escape should arise. Meanwhile, he learned that those who had flown immediately from Chadelio had reached a little-damaged town well south and on the sea-coast. He wondered whether Esther had been among them.

Evening brought a newcomer-- a man with a haversack and wicker-work basket Alex recognised as the man who had first called him on the teleview screen and afterwards shown him into Bryne‘s office. Alex withdrew a little from the light of the fire they had made, regretful that the safe moment for escape had not yet come. Always, as throughout the day, one or more of the ragged toughs seemed to be watching him, never far away. An hour later he turned at a quiet step behind him and found himself face to face with the newcomer. Alex instinctively dropped a hand towards his hip, then remembered he was without weapon.

" Keep still and listen." The newcomers voice was very low and his quick gaze swept over the men talking, cleaning their weapons, and preparing bedding under the trees.

"I'm a government agent. The name's Henry Moon. We're organising in Sundaville, down river on the coast. We want good men, but not rabble such as these."

He indicated the roughs and Alex realised that, as if by a miracle, Henry Moon had not recognised him,

"There's no space in Sundaville for rabble.". Moon continued in a whisper. "'I can see you're no mere roughneck. If you're a pilot or technician there will be important work for you south. When Chadelio went many good men perished with it. We need everyone able to help re-develop civilisation. Communications are destroyed, roads ruined." He gestured at his basket. "I'm reduced to carrier pigeon! Things must be re-built., That's where such as you come in. Listen. Go south along the river to Sundaville. We're giving every man we choose a symbol. It's a piece of loadstone--without it you won't be admitted."

"But these toughs seem to be watching me," objected Alex, his spirit soaring at this news that there was work yet to be done and that everything he had known was not utterly destroyed.

"I'll see you get a chance to escape," Moon declared. " Take this. It's loadstone, common enough in these parts not to arouse suspicion, but remember its possession entitles you to enter Sundaville. Keep it safe."

Henry Moon rose and moved away. As he looked back on the man he had just left, and who was even now stowing the loadstone in his inner pocket, a cruel smile twisted his lips. He had recognised Alex Jocelyn immediately. Only his craft had stayed immediate betrayal of Jocelyn into the hands of the gang. Why thus cause the reward to be divided? Moon asked himself as he took out one of the tiny aluminium cylinders in which messages were despatched.

Instead, it had been easy to deceive his victim. On the tiny sheet of thin paper he wrote: "To Commander Bryne. A man will enter Sundaville with loadstone in his pocket. I have sent him and claim the reward. He is Alex Jocelyn. He will keep the loadstone, believing it important. From Henry Moon." Minutes later the message, rolled in its cylinder, had been attached to the fastest pigeon from the basket. Triumphantly Moon watched the bird rise and turn south for Sundaville. Then he chuckled, complimenting himself on his own astuteness.

Two hours later a pigeon swept into Sundaville from the north and alighted on a flatroofed building. A waiting officer at once detached the tiny sealed cylinder and bore it below. When he had opened and read the message Commander Bryne looked up sharply. "Search every man entering the city," he ordered. " You will find one carrying a piece of loadstone. Bring him here and prepare for a public execution. In such times as these the anger of the population must be given ample recompense."

Alex waited until complete darkness had come. He felt doubly grateful to Henry Moon as Moon kept the men talking near the camp fire and left the way of escape clear. Soon the glow of the fire was left far behind. He followed the general course of the river, climbing slowly. From this elevation he could see far into the night. North and west in the distance flames flicked up from gigantic conflagrations, reddening the clouds of heavy drifting smoke. From far away came heavy shuddering concussions, making the earth tremble. Alex turned and went on. To the south was only mysterious, utter darkness,

He marched through the whole of the following day, seeing no one. Once he had to make a long detour; an atomic missile had fallen in the river itself and the vast, churned-up area of mud and earth was impassible. The ground still steamed though the projectile must have screamed from the heaven fully four days before.

Towards evening he saw a flutter of cloth under trees up a rise. He hurried, and an astounded exclamation came from his lips.

"Esther!"

She was motionless, crumpled half under protecting bushes. Her face was white as chalk except where congealed blood stained her forehead. Her eyes were closed, but he found her heart still stirred hesitantly.

He lifted her, making a couch of bracken, and placed his coat over her. Throughout the night he never moved from her side and towards morning saw with joy that colour was returning to her cheeks and that she breathed more naturally. He went down to the river to replenish his flask; when he returned she was sitting up, his coat clasped around her shoulders, The questions springing to his lips were stayed. Recognition dawned in her eyes- and hate.

"You!" She rose unsteadily, hand outstretched to keep him away. "Traitor! I would never have believed that you would be bribed by the enemy! Have you seen Chadelio? Have you gloated over the ruins? Oh, how I hate you!"

She stumbled from him, voice rising hysterically. "Keep away! Don't touch me!"

Turning, she ran down the slope, his coat flapping about her shoulders. Alex took a, single pace and stopped. - Such was her apparent fear of him he could not seem to chase her. He watched, inexpressible pain lining his face, until she had gone from sight through the trees ahead. Taking up his flask, he followed slowly.

Thus were Bryne's words believed, he thought bitterly.

Against the damning evidence of the Commander's statement no excuse or explanation could prevail. He could only hope that his ragged, unshaven appearance would of sufficient disguise. There could be no turning back. A Jocelyn never turned back. Early in the afternoon he topped a slope and saw Sundaville ahead. Hurrying now, he went down to where armed guards stood at the entrance to the city. This was the moment to show the loadstone Moon had given him, he decided. The guards would understand its import. They barred his path; two weapons were levelled at his heart and a third man stepped forward hands going expertly through Alex's pockets.

" We have orders to search all newcomers," he said.

" Of course." Alex nodded, feeling for the loadstone... .

Chapter Four

MACHINE OF NAGONDTU .

ALEX realised then that the loadstone had gone; it had been in an inner pocket of the coat wrapped about Esther's shoulders. In her dismay at recognising him she had forgotten the coat and might have it still.

" This is not the man Commander Bryne wants," said the guard.

Trained as he was to quick thinking, Alex let his mind flash over probabilities. If Moon had recognised him the loadstone could be a trap. Yes, it would be best to remain silent. His explanations unuttered, Alex went on as the guards parted for him to pass.

Sundaville, outwardly an insignificant seaside town, had escaped direct damage. Alex recalled rumours of a secret base to the south of Chadelio had been current in the secret service block: apparently that base had been Sundaville. Here, the remnant of humanity which had escaped the fury of the atomic bombardments was being reorganised. Passing a corner Alex saw a rough notice fixed to a wall. A man was reading it, back towards him, and Alex paused in his turn.

"If you have technical knowledge and ability Sundaville needs you urgently," the announcement stated. "There is work of re-organisation and reconstruction; we must make order from chaos and defeat our still-existing enemy."

The man turned from the notice and Alex found himself face to face with his friend Lincoln. Recognition on both sides was instantaneous. Alex hesitated, but the other slapped his shoulder.

"How in wonder's name did you get here alive?"

"I could ask that of you." Alex warmed to his friend's greeting, then a shadow crossed his face. " Remember I'm a wanted man."

Lincoln made an explosive sound. "I don't believe that faked-up story! Bryne is simply planning to dispose of you."

"Others may believe him more readily,", Alex warned. He gestured towards the announcement. " I'd like to help. With a change of clothing and a fictitious name I should pass."

Lincoln nodded eagerly. "I'm going to join in too. We'll go together."

They were set to work in the electronic and communications department where their technical knowledge would be of the greatest use. Alex found that a substantial section of the forces quartered in Thundam had escaped to a tiny port called Nagondtu, immediately outside Sundaville, but separated from them by fully thirty miles of open sea where no ship moved.

"You can bet they had Nagondtu all ready just as we made secret preparations to equip Sundaville for an emergency," Lincoln said one day as they finished work. " This war isn't going to end with the firing of a few atomic missiles- there are worse, far worse, things to come,"

"Such as?" Alex prompted.

"Time will show."' Lincoln pointed. From where they were the sea was visible, running a brisk tide under the drive of early winter winds. " What purpose has this tower they're erecting in Nagondtu? The pilot who reported it said it appeared a priority Job. No one wastes men and time on a thing that's unimportant."

Alex frowned. Lincoln's words reminded him of the strange, fantastically enormous structure he had seen in Thundam. It was not inconceivable that the structure had been removed to Nagondtu before open hostilities broke. And that morning he had spent searching radio-frequency wavelengths for signals that might tell other stations still operated somewhere on the planet. No hoped for signals had come and he feared the rage of atomic warfare had encircled the earth, leaving no town standing. But the ether had not been wholly silent. Low down in the radio-frequency spectrum had sounded a burbling, unevenly-modulated hiss. Curious, he had checked it with directive apparatus. It came from Nagondtu. Now came Lincoln's words to increase his unease.

"There may be weapons worse than atomic bombs," Lincoln murmured.

Without replying Alex drew him into the concealing shadow of a doorway. Two figures

were approaching- Esther and Commander Bryne. They were talking animatedly; Bryne laughed and took Esther's arm. They passed quite near, Bryne looking straight ahead. For a moment Esther's gaze flickered towards the doorway, but Alex did not know whether she had penetrated the gloom and seen him. In silent fury he watched them pass and turn from sight.

"A near thing," breathed Lincoln.

Alex stepped into the road. " Very near," he agreed. "If I get caught no one will give a second's attention to my explanations. It would be my word against Bryne's.

In her private room Esther Howard sat in troubled thought. She had wondered whether Alex would enter Sundaville and had scarcely suppressed her start of recognition at seeing him in the shadowy doorway. Now she was torn desperately between duty and love. Yes, she had to admit her love for Alex Jocelyn was not wholly dead, strive as she would to strangle it with memories of the story of his treachery and the doom that had swept over Chadelio. The first missiles had come almost without warning. But the surprise was not total; earlier, leaflets had rained on the city from a rocket that had whined away westwards. The authorities had been prepared; evacuation had begun immediately.

A teleview screen sprang to life, materialising the voice and features of Commander Bryne.

"We've still no news of what they're up to in Nagondtu," he stated.

" You mean the tower?"

" Yes. But I haven't called you for that. I'm sending out a general warning. Important information has been leaking from our technicians here. We had two salvaged planes hidden in a wood up the hills. An hour ago a radio-controlled bomb- ordinary explosives- was launched from Nagondtu. It pin-pointed those craft and made so much matchwood of them."

As she listened Esther's heart sank. This meant treachery once again; after the tremendous destruction of earlier days those two jet-planes had become of immense importance. Craft had been destroyed by the thousand, the factories with them. Not for many months could new planes be made.

"We suspect one of those who wandered into Sundaville and joined the technicians' group." Bryne concluded and the screen went blank.

Alex, thought Esther. It had to be Alex. This development compelled her to unmask him. In time of war duty must come first. It would be a painful duty yet one she knew

she could not avoid.

Alex worked on, each moment expecting a hand to descend on his shoulder. He was not sure if Esther had seen him, or whether she would delay before informing Bryne if she had. Worse, Henry Moon had entered Sundaville, passing one evening almost within touching distance of him. Food was scarce. The coming winter portended severe weather which would tax their resources. From reports made by the pilot of the only jet-craft still airworthy, Alex learned work on the mysterious machine in Nagondtu proceeded under pressure. The hiss on the radio band was still there, stronger now, and by correlating it with the hours at which reports said blue radiations had been seen round the Nagondtu tower he knew that the etheric disturbance indeed came from there.

"I've heard rumours there's been a leakage of information from our section," Lincoln said one day as they ate a hurried meal. "I understand there's going to be a detailed personal examination of every technician in the service."

" Which means they'll find out I'm Jocelyn." Alex said bitterly. He finished his tasteless coffee, the best Sundaville could provide. At the end of a long table across the dining-hall stood a vivid blonde he had seen often the previous few days. He pointed her out through the hurrying throng.

Lincoln glanced over his shoulder "Everyone knows her. Joilda Kain. Bryne's private secretary."

" She spoke to me yesterday when I went out," Alex said. From Lincoln's expression he knew no further words were necessary. Possibly his identity was already known and he was being kept under observation ready for the moment Bryne considered opportune. Alex got up. It was nerve- wracking not to know. As he went out the blonde met his eye and smiled.

In the technicians' block was uneasy puzzlement as to the purpose of the tower, unseen over the wintry sea horizon. Aerial photographs were examined; the cine-reels showed a great army of workmen busied about the structure by both night and day and Alex saw the tower was indeed the one he had noticed in Thundam.

" I'd like to have a bomb dropped smack on that thing," Lincoln declared.

Alex agreed. "Unfortunately that's impossible. It's too well guarded. The pilot had difficulty getting near enough even for telephoto infra-red photography. We haven't even a single radio-controlled rocket left- they were all used in the first twenty-four hours of battle. We're building, of course, but that takes time, especially with so much plant destroyed."

"Do you make anything of the radiations from it?" Lincoln wondered.

Alex shook his head. "Not yet. I believe they're only a preliminary. I've done cathode-ray checks on the waveform hourly and each time some new feature had been added. The radiations are becoming extremely complex; it's too early yet to determine their purpose. There are ultrasonic frequencies there similar to those used to kill bacteria in food-purification plants -though I'm not suggesting that is the purpose Nagondtu has in view."

Lincoln laughed shortly and without mirth. " If you can't find out what the radiations are, no one can, Alex. You take too many things for granted. We haven't all been trained in electronic-technology and nuclear physics since childhood. If Bryne has you executed he'll be killing our best man."

Alex worked until past midnight. The radiations from the Nagondtu tower had assumed a complex yet regular pattern. As he stood before the screens of his oscilloscopes watching the weird, weaving lines of the radiated waveforms and reviewing his data, a terrible possibility began to dawn in Alex's mind, as yet unformed, it could scarcely be expressed in words. Yet it alarmed him, fraught with dreadful possibilities as it was. Finally he switched off his instrument and slowly left the building.

A man waited outside the building opposite. Trained as he was to emotional control, Alex neither started, hesitated, nor turned back. He went on and into the first intersecting roadway. When he looked back Henry Moon had gone.

Alex went on through the dark streets. So Henry Moon had discovered him and was doubtless planning how he could assure the reward came undivided into his betraying hands. That much was clear. From it Alex developed two

[the printed copy seems to be missing a passage here]

assure his silence- not for personal reasons, but because what he had found out back in the laboratory suggested Sundaville's existence itself might depend upon the skill with which he, Alex Jocelyn, fought the threat to the tower. And secondly, the moment for action could not be delayed longer. He must go over Nagondtu himself and see the structure at close quarters.

The airstrip where the jet-plane was kept proved to be poorly-guarded. Knowing of the electric fence which encircled the whole drome Alex had brought thick rubber gloves and boots. He climbed up and over the top, keeping his body off the strands through which lethal currents surged.

Soon he had the plane screaming towards the stars at a steep angle. Sundaville passed

from sight behind. The sea was very dark below and at a high altitude he reached Nagondtu and swept in a great circle round it.

The structure was immediately obvious, a thing about which leapt green, orange and blue static, fitfully illuminating the tracery of tall girders and the great cone reflectors. With the plane at minimum speed. under automatic control Alex examined the tower through powerful night-glasses. The reflectors were directed towards Sundaville, just over the horizon westward; From the antennae streamers of electronic fire ran out, radiating in the direction of its unseen target. Alex circled. and saw that heavy screening circled the tower so that the radiations could touch no part of Nagondtu itself. A mile out to sea in the darkness a faint mauve haze glowed. He swung towards it, high in the sky, abruptly climbing for altitude as he realised the significance of what he saw.

The mauve haze formed a wall which extended in a regular semi-circle with the tower aft its centre. Where it touched the sea, the waves leapt into steaming foam and dancing spray and with every moment the mauve band advanced farther out to sea. High above it, Alex realised many things.. The mauve band was being radiated from the structure in Nagondtu and was directed towards Sundavllle.

It was extending slowly farther and farther towards its target, doubtlessly in response to a steady increase in power applied by the technicians in Nagondtu. Worse, it was formed from radiations utterly destructive in their nature and as he thought of his waveform analysis back in Sundaville Alex blanched. The sea boiled where the mauve circle touched; walls and buildings would grow red-hot and collapse into disintegrated dust.

A solitary night bird coming in low over the sea passed into the radiation and was instantaneously a mere whisp of smoke drifting downwind. Alex climbed for height to assure he would be above the mauve wall and sped for Sundaville. From his calculations he saw that it would take only twenty-four hours at the most before the mauve band reached Sundaville itself.

Chapter Five

CITY BESIEGED

ALEX landed the plane outside Sundaville and made for the city, now soon to awaken with dawn to the knowledge that a bare twenty-four hours of life remained. He aroused Lincoln and explained.

"The transmitter at Nagondtu must be destroyed," he concluded.

Lincoln scratched his sandy head. " We've no rockets left. Take too long to build one,

too."

"We've a plane,"

" But if the radiations extend above the tower as well as out in this direction that would be suicide! Until our new atomic pile is ready we have ordinary explosives only. Such a bomb would need to land very near its target to be any use."

"I intend to try," Alex declared. "If that transmitter isn't destroyed Sundaville perishes."

"Suicide!" Lincoln repeated, frowning ," You'll have to dive right down on to the tower or chance missing."

"I shan't risk missing. The difficulty is to get hold of a bomb."

"Which will probably explode and blow you and the plane to atoms!"

"I'll chance that. I've examined the reflectors on the tower and feel sure the radiations are much weaker towards the zenith- those reflectors are designed to direct the output towards us, I can risk a steep dive to a low level."

"Then it's a thousand-to-one chance you'll never come back!"

Alex shrugged. " We'll argue about that after! Meanwhile there's only one person with authority round here who can help me get a bomb- Esther. She won't betray me when she hears I plan this attack on the tower. The reward means nothing to her and she‘ll at least allow me this chance of-- self-sacrifice."

Alex turned from the room, ending bitterly. He went through the silent streets and entered an apartment whose location he had carefully noted. When he switched on the light Esther blinked and sat up in her sleeping-suit.

"Keep quiet and listen," Alex ordered grimly. "If you scream it will be the last time. I've risked my life to come here. I want a bomb."

"A bomb?" She blinked, hardly comprehending.

"Yes, for the tower in Nagondtu. You're not without influence and authority."

He explained quickly.. When he had finished Esther nodded. " I understand. You'll be going to almost certain death."

"What if I am? As Alex Jocelyn my life's worth little enough," retorted Alex bitterly.

"Better to lose it in smashing this transmitter than in making a spectacle for a mob."

" But it's not logical," said Esther softly. " You're willing to sacrifice yourself to destroy the tower. That must mean you didn't betray Chadelio. It just doesn't make sense!'

"Of course not! Lies seldom do!"

"Then it was all faked."

Understanding came into her eyes and voice. It was followed by tormented self-reproach.

"And I betrayed you!" She pointed at the table near the window. " I believed it my duty. The vase-- it relays to Bryne's office."

Two strides took Alex to it; He lifted it and saw it was a self-contained midget transmitter and microphone.

"We thought you might come here," Esther said. The receiver it operates in Commander Bryne's office is never unattended."

Alex recalled what he had said. "So I now stand self-confessed as Jocelyn." he pointed out bitterly.

Esther seemed to wilt. She placed her hands to her face and her shoulders quivered. Sobs came and she looked up at him with tear-stained eyes.

" I've betrayed you. Oh Alex. What a fool that I should be deceived by Bryne's contemptible treachery! How I hate him for his lies and for this!" Horror crossed her features. "He may even be an enemy agent himself! Have you thought of that?"

She stopped quickly. The horror became terror; her gaze; sought the object Alex still held.

" The transmitter," she whispered.

Shocked, Alex realised he still held it-- that it was even now relaying their words to Bryne's office. With an oath he flung it to the floor. It smashed, tiny valves and microphone scattered on the carpet.

" Dress! Hurry!" Alex ordered.

The indicator in the corridor showed the lift was coming up and they sprinted for the stairs. Alex longed for a weapon, a thing impossible to get, feeling helpless and

defenceless without it. At the third level the blonde he had pointed out to Lincoln waited. Alex halted.

" You followed me!"

" Of course." She appeared almost disinterested. Her gaze travelled to Esther and her eyes burned with jealous hate. "You'll be Commander Bryne's pet no longer, my dear," she declared maliciously. "Better start thinking up some pretty explanations."

Alex caught Esther's arm. This was no time to admit hindrances. They leapt on, but four men were mounting the next flight; they halted, staring upwards and firing from the hip. Heat bolts seared up the stairs over Alex; wood kindled into flame and plaster fell, smoking.

"Back!" cried Alex.

With Esther at his heels he leapt back the way he had come three stairs at a time. Above, men who had piled from the lift looked down from the cover of the angle of the corridor. A bolt, burned redly down the stairs, reducing carpet and boards to charred cinders a yard from Alex's feet.

"Better surrender!" a voice cried.

Alex looked back. The four had reached the top of the stairs. Their leader had his weapon levelled.

"I give you five seconds, Jocelyn!" he spat across the intervening space. "Surrender or I'll burn you to ashes where you stand!"

Alex spun round. The men above were advancing cautiously down the stairs; confident now that they saw he was unarmed. His gaze travelled to Esther, and he rose his hands.

"I surrender."

As they were taken down under guard Alex wondered how much Esther's life would be worth after her damning admission, relayed and recorded in Bryne's office. But for her, he would have sprang on the four men below and taken his chance.

"I see no reason why you should not be taken out and executed immediately," Bryne snarled from behind his desk. "It would improve the city's morale." , His angry eyes settled on Esther. " You also. In time of war traitors should die."

"I am no traitor, nor is Alex!"

"Silence!" Bryne's lips curled. "No one is interested in your lying excuses." He thumbed a button. " I shall have you both publicly executed."

"I think not!" snapped Alex.

"Indeed?" Bryne's sarcasm was biting,"And why?"

"Because vibrations are being radiated from Nagondtu which will reduce Sundaville and everyone in it to red-hot dust- and no one here except myself knows the form of those radiations or how they may he halted!"

Bryne's face had become white. To the officer who had entered he snapped: "Check it!" Then, he leaned back heavily in his chair.

The silence grew. Five minutes. Ten, There were hurried steps and a high-ranking official entered, saluting smartly.

"A wall of mauve haze is slowly approaching over the sea, Commander. A surface craft investigating was rendered incandescent and vanished, leaving no sign and no survivors."

Bryne became a shade more pale. "Have every available technician set to work immediately. They must determine the nature of the radiations and how they may be stopped."

"I can tell you the nature of the radiations," Alex said evenly as the official saluted and withdrew. "First, there is the carrier frequency, harmless in itself. You'll find it right down in the microwave band. Modulating it is a frequency akin to the nuclear frequencies of atoms; when that strikes matter the nuclei are set into such violent oscillation the matter immediately reaches volatilising-temperature.

The effect is the same with all material including living matter. The mauve haze is the ignition and combustion of hydrogen and oxygen atoms in the air. No shield or wall of steel or concrete will halt the radiations. The sea itself boils instantly where the rays touch. If the technicians in Nagondtu wish, they will be able to shave Sundaville and a hundred feet thick section of the earth's crust upon which it rests away so effectively neither might ever have been. According to my calculations, little more than eighteen hours can still remain before the radiations reach us."

Bryne's face was like chalk when Alex had finished. After an hour had passed the Commanders forehead was beaded with the sweat of fear. Messengers came and went hurriedly; the teleview screens were never silent. All told the same story-- the technicians of Sundaville could prepare no defence against the advancing wall of

mauve death. Heat-resisting shields sent out in small boats vanished with the incandescent metal of the vessels themselves; no material existing remained intact for the thousandth of a second. An armoured destroyer with its six hundred men became- in the blink of an eyelid- a mere haze of smoke drifting sullenly towards the horizon.

Alex fumed at the wasted hours. The mauve haze was visible from Sundaville itself when Bryne summoned him.

"Can this thing be stopped?" he demanded, leaning forward amid the mass of reports littering his desk.

"Of course."

"Then stop it!" growled Bryne.

" I should have done so hours ago if I had not been kept prisoner, Commander," Alex said mockingly.

Bryne snorted, red with anger. "Jocelyn is to be freed," he order the guard, "Have four men keep him under open arrest, but his activities are not to be hindered."

Armed with a priority chit, Alex had Lincoln join him. Time was short. Hours had been wasted. Under the supervision of the armed guards Alex made his calculations and gathered his materials.

"The only protection lies in radiations which will oppose those transmitted from Nagondtu," he told Lincoln as they sped through the streets where panic-stricken groups hurried by or gazed fearfully out to sea. "Armourplate, rock and concrete are useless."

They entered the short wave communications station which stood in the centre of the city. Aerials were removed, hurriedly-constructed reflectors substituted, and additional power lines run from the generating station at the edge of the city. Looking up from a table covered with formula and waveform data, Alex met Lincoln's eye.

"It should be possible to devise a waveform which will make the Nagondtu vibrations give up their latent energy when the two meet," Alex said, "That's the line I'm taking."

It was almost evening before the transmitter was ready. The mauve line had swept in nearer over the sea, and was clearly visible beyond the rocky coast where Sundaville harbour lay deserted. Alex had decided that the Nagondtu technicians could only unleash the mighty power at their command slowly; but for that their enemy would have been destroyed almost simultaneously with the throwing into action of the Nagondtu transmitter.

Alex ordered that their own transmitter be brought into action. A slow build up of power was necessary; the delay seemed unending and the mauve wall was much closer before electronic streamers of static began to appear around the Sundaville aerials, increasing in strength with almost imperceptible slowness.

From the top of the control building Alex stared out to sea. An hour had passed and the aerials above him arced and crackled fiercely with the radiations he had caused to be directed towards the mauve band glowing and shimmering in the night sky. Nothing would happen until the Sundaville transmitter balanced the power employed in distant Nagondtu.

Abruptly there was a vivid streak of coloured fire, arcing, crackling and coruscating in red, green, gold and blinding blue. The combat between the warring transmitters was joined. A mile out to sea the sky was riven from sea to heavens; blinding electronic fire burned in living, dancing flame. A continuous roar drifted over Sundaville, token of the enormous forces liberated where the vibrations met. From north to south as far as the eye could see the searing flames burned in ever-changing, leaping colour.

Alex snapped an order. Minutes later Lincoln ran from below.

"The advance of the radiations from Nagondtu has been halted." he declared.

CHAPTER SIX

OVER THE BARRIER

THROUGHOUT the night the wall of burning electronic fire leapt and flamed two miles from the rocky coast of Sundaville. It cast a ruddy, flickering light over the buildings, illuminating them as at midday, but with such a radiance as no human eye had ever beheld. Alex slept, exhausted of brain and limb, and awoke to Lincoln's urgent voice.

"The fire-wall is coming nearer, Alex," he declared anxiously. " The movement is only slow, but it seems sure, enough."

Alex left his hastily-made bunk and gazed east from the top window of the station control building. The advance of the radiation from Nagondtu had been retarded, not stopped, he saw. Dawn had come, but the sun was unseen behind the weaving streamers of red and golden fire, which now advanced slowly towards their objective once more.

"Its position depends on the relative power of the transmitters," Alex said without looking round. "They've increased power in Nagondtu and that is forcing the 1ine where the radiations meet towards us. The only way to drive them back is by

increasing output here."

"I thought as much," said Lincoln. "How long can we hold out?"

Alex did not reply. He knew Sundaville had insufficient power to hold back the leaping atomic destruction for long. A time would come when Nagondtu, by sheer weight of the electrical energy at its disposal, would force the line of battle into Sundaville itself.

" Order every available source of power to be made available for our transmitter " Alex decided "Have all resources of the city concentrated for use."

But throughout the morning the wall of conflicting radiation advanced towards its target. Alex knew that if his transmitter once failed Sundaville would be obliterated.

He knew, too, that they could not hold the Nagondtu transmitter, superior in power, at bay. The wall, burning vividly even in the sunlight, was a bare mile from the coast, and still advancing, when the telescreen in the control room came on.

"Jocelyn, you are to report to me immediately."

It was Bryne. When Alex reached the office under the escort of guards Bryne was pacing up and down.

"Sundaville will be destroyed in a matter of days at the most," he snapped.

Alex nodded. "We have no time to make available sufficient power to overcome the Nagondtu transmitter."

"Then we must destroy it," declared Bryne. "I heard everything you said before your capture. The plane has been made ready with a single bomb. You will take it and attack the tower as you planned."

Alex saw triumph on Bryne's face. He hesitated. The dive on the enemy tower would be exactly what Lincoln had named it- a suicidal act.

"Come," sneered Bryne. " Where are your mock heroics? We have only one airworthy plane and a single bomb. As you are a good pilot and most familiar with the factors involved the choice naturally falls on you." He balanced on the balls of his feet, hands on hips and lips twisted.

"I will go."

Alex knew that he was beaten. In the lurid light of the flaming barrier he made ready to go. Once there was a temporary weakening in the Sundaville transmitter; the

fire-wall surged up to the coast itself, leaping and roaring like continuous thunder. Men ran panic-stricken through the streets; when the bedlam had subsided Alex found Lincoln by his side.

"Esther has escaped, Alex!" he cried. There was time for no more. Still guarded, Alex entered the closed car which was to drive him to the airstrip. They alighted amid shouting. The rotors of the jet-plane were screaming; before Alex's astonished gaze it took off, slanting steeply to pass over the leaping fire

"A damned girl!" someone cried.

Alex was stone while realisation came, then he raced for the aerodrome radio control room. A code-operator barred his way, was sent unconscious to the floor with a left to the Jaw. A locked door splintered under Alex's flying shoulder. Then he was in the control room and had the two-way radio working.

Minutes passed before he picked up the plane above the hissing static of the Nagondtu transmitter.

"Esther, come hack!" he cried.

"Oh, it's you, Alex." Her voice came back clearly above the interference. "Can't come back- I've a bomb to deliver.".

"That's my job!" Alex roared. " Come back!"

" We Howards never turn back." She seemed to be laughing.." Why should you pinch all the most exciting jobs."

Alex snorted. "Return immediately- that‘s an order! This is no job for a girl!"

"It is for this girl." Her words were weaker, half over- ridden by the static from the wall. " I always thought you, were a rotten pilot, Alex Jocelyn. That's why I wouldn't trust you on this job."

Alex swore. "Come back!"

There was an interval, then the words: "It's a lovely view from here _ . ." Silence followed. She had passed from range.

Alex - silenced the spluttering, static-ridden receiver, and went out. A mechanic was staring into the sky.

" That's the finish of her," he said. "She'd got guts."

Alex seized his shoulder, "What d'you mean?"

The man winced. "Easy on. Commander Bryne ordered only sufficient fuel for a one-way trip be put in. Guess he wanted to fix someone."

From above the line where the radiations met was even more fearful. Looking down, Alex eased the old jet-fighter he had re-commissioned through the eddy-currents of scorched air rising for miles above the flaming wall, now temporarily held at bay just off the Sundaville coast. Four hours had elapsed since Esther's going: that meant the bomb had never reached the Nagondtu tower.

He glided down behind hills beyond the city. Abandoning the fighter and anything which could incriminate him he hiked into Nagondtu. The tower beaming its destructive rays towards Sundaville was conspicuous. Circling the streets towards it, Alex passed a great guarded enclosure. There was a whine, and a whoosh; he spun about. A projectile was screaming towards the heavens, fire pluming from its rocket tubes. In seconds it had gone from the ken of ear and eye.

Curiously Alex found a crack in the stockade. Another projectile was being prepared; many others stood waiting on lorries or were reared on tail fins, pointing to the sky. Two men in leather suits appeared. They entered the projectile and the tiny circular door was closed. Alex watched in amazement as the rocket began to roar down flame upon the concrete: for a moment it seemed to hover, then it was gone at enormous velocity into the sky.

Running feet came behind him. Alex spun round. A man collapsed at his feet groaning, one hand clasped to a seared shoulder. Alex dropped on his knees and the man looked up at him.

"They shot me," he whispered, gasping. "A heat gun. I escaped. Remember, remember, the knight's move."

Alex could not tell whether he was dead. He rose. Other men were running towards him, guns ready, each in the black of the Nagondtu police. Quicker than thought they seized Alex; a third jabbed a gun in his back.

"Take him to the boss," the leader snapped. He jerked a thumb at the crumpled form. " If he's dead it'll save the firing-squad a job."

Alex found himself face to face with High-Commander Erinald, once commander of Thundam. Erinald was fully fifteen paces away at the far end of a long room; with curiosity Alex saw that the whole floor space, except for a strip upon which he himself stood, was covered with black and silver checkered squares right up to the

High-Commander's desk. Each square was perhaps a foot across.

"You come from Sundaville," Erinald grated. "Your plane has been found. Explain how our radiations are held at bay and you shall be permitted to live."

Alex shrugged. "I know nothing of it."

Erinald frowned and snapped orders. A movie-projection unit was brought in and directed at the wall behind his desk. "Watch," he commanded. "We have ways of seeing what happens in Sundaville."

The unit flashed on, projecting a moving picture Alex realised must have been taken by infra-red remote telephotography. He saw himself hurrying into the transmitting station and supervising the modification of the aerials. It showed him in other parts of the city, too, and he held his breath as Esther and Lincoln came into the picture.

"Bring the female prisoner in," Erinald snapped. He faced Alex over the checkered floor. "I must warn you each of these squares is of metal and insulated from its neighbours. Some of them- most, I might say- are connected to an electric supply of such voltage you would be electrocuted immediately if you touched one, rubber boots notwithstanding. A few, very few are safe, and known only to me. I find it a most effective safeguard against attack, yet can cross myself whenever I will"

Esther was brought in, bound, and left on the narrow strip of insulated floor. Erinald gazed on Alex mockingly.

"How are our radiations held at bay?"

Alex was silent, his relief at seeing Esther had somehow landed safely thwarted by this new threat to her.

"Talk, or she dies," Erinald said evenly.

Esther struggled unavailingly. "Let them kill me. Don't tell," she pleaded.

Alex groaned. Betray Sundaville's method of defence, or see Esther die? Each possibility was equally unthinkable.

"Perhaps the guards should try a little encouragement," Erinald suggested as the silence grew.

One produced a rubber truncheon. Alex clenched his fists. . .

"Don't tell them," Esther pleaded, white-lipped.

The man raised the truncheon.

"Don't" cried Alex, "don't! I'll tell."

He talked quickly and thought with even greater speed. His explanation of the technicalities of the Sundaville transmitter was convincing yet inaccurate- so inaccurate as to be wholly useless, though no hint of that fact passed his lips or showed on his face. When he had finished he could not meet the scorn in Esther's gaze.

" So you are a traitor this time!" she said contemptuously as she was dragged away.

Alex closed his lips in a thin, hard line. He could make no sign that he had deceived Erinald. What would Erinald do, he wondered, if he knew that the Sundaville transmitter was a hundred times more dangerous than he had made it appear. If the waves radiated from Sundaville ever reached the Nagondtu tower, even for a second, the latter would detonate .

Alex did not pace the confines of his prison in useless activity, but began to search for some way of escape. He must rescue Esther and find out the secret of the manned projectiles which were being launched. With every passing moment the threat to Sundaville increased.

He attacked the barred window with the file moulded into the sole of his right shoe during manufacture. It proved a desperately slow job; in an hour only one bar was severed and he stopped as footsteps approached the door. It was hung open, revealing two guards and an officer.

"Your lady friend is for it," he growled. "There'll be no playing this time. When the technical group-captain reported your data didn't work out and must be lies the boss blew up. He swears you'll talk sense this time, or leave two corpses on our hands."

A guard each side, Alex was marched away down the corridor.

Chapter Seven

BURNING BRIGHT

ERINALD sprawled behind his desk, his mighty body overflowing from the heavy swivel-chair, his hard eyes snapping and his lips like iron. Beside the desk Esther stood, wrists bound tightly at her back. Alex gazed over the whole length of the squared floor at them; he had been thrust in and the door closed by the withdrawing guards. They were alone.

" In time of war the lives of individuals are wholly without significance," Erinald stated harshly. He glared at Alex. "I shall get the truth this time or neither of you will leave this room alive. How is our transmitter prevented from destroying Sundaville?"

Silence followed his words. Though pale, Esther did not move. Alex knew he could not play the same trick a second time and wondered whether they would leave the building alive. Erinald rose ponderously from his chair.

" We shan't tell you," Esther said clearly.

Erinald looked at her calculatingly; abruptly his fist shot out in a back-handed blow which brought a trickle of blood to her lip. She swayed, glaring back at him unflinchingly. Alex took a single angry pace forward and paused upon the very edge of the squared floor.

"You'll tell!" grated Erinald. "Your lives mean less to me than that," he snapped his fingers and faced Alex. "Come upon the squared floor!" he taunted. " See, I am unarmed! Who knows, you might even reach me alive. Or possibly the first square upon which you step may shrivel you to ashes. Once, a man came half-way across the floor before he stopped, afraid to advance or return. I left him there. In the night, we heard him shouting to be saved. It was amusing. The next morning-" Erinald made an expressive gesture. He opened a drawer and took out a leather whip, tapping with it on his desk. "Perhaps it would be diverting to have our little queen here out upon my chess-board." He cracked the whip a foot from Esthers face. "Hurry, I grow bored. Who knows, you might make one step-six-even a dozen before setting foot upon a wrong square. I shall love to see you dance upon my floor."

Esther's face was utterly colourless. Alex clenched his fists helplessly; worse torment than this could scarcely be conceived. Clearly their enemy fully intended to force Esther out upon the floor and to a terrible, certain death He swung the whip, pushing her towards the first row of squares. Esther moved forwards very slowly, looked straight ahead at Alex.

" Don't tell," she whispered. " I'd rather die."

Alex saw that she was about to step upon the checkered floor. His thoughts flew with more than accustomed speed integrating isolated clues. A man had once escaped over this floor- the little man who had collapsed, dying, at Alex's feet. That man had realised Erinald would use some foolproof mnemonic so that he himself could always cross the floor in safety. The knight's move in Chess, the man had said.

Alex knew he must take this chance; Esther was upon the very edge of the floor, about to step upon the first row of squares.

"Stop!"

Alex sprang into activity. In chess, the knight starts one square from the corner, moving forward in a zig-zag sequence which took it two squares ahead and one to the side.

As Alex bounded from square to square he expected the utter shock of the deadly power so near to sear upward through him. Half-way, his spirit almost failed but he would not let himself stop. On, on, two ahead and one to the side in a fantastic, zig-zag course.

Erinald scarcely had time to raise his whip in self-defence

Then Alex was upon him, fists flying, beating him to the floor with all the fury of his fully-aroused anger.

With a sweep of his arm Alex gathered up Esther and flung her over his shoulder; then he was back upon the checkered floor racing for freedom, two squares ahead and one to the side, two ahead and one to the side. Erinald was staggering up, pressing buttons upon his desk. Men burst in from the door behind him; one sent a heat-bolt scorching past the fugitives; a second's momentum carried him upon the squares. Sizzling blue fire shot up his body from feet to head; a scarcely-uttered scream was stilled for ever upon his lips.

Alex gained the insulated strip and burst from the door. The streets were dark. He dropped Esther upon her feet and cut away her bonds.

" Follow me!" he cried.

They hared between the blacked-out buildings.

"I made a forced landing and my plane was captured!" Esther cried.

Alex bent his flying steps round corners he remembered. " So was mine. We've got to get out of Nagondtu quick, and I've got a way!"

He stopped outside the enclosure from which the manned projectiles had sped heavenwards. It was dark and silent; a guard slept in a shed at the high entrance gates. They crept in and towards the projectiles which stood vertically on their tail-fins, ready for take-off.

" Men have been going up in these, so they must be safe and guideable," Alex explained. "This gives us a double chance to escape and find out what these things are

at the same time."

They entered one he found ready and he screwed shut the port. There was a control panel and padded seats suspended on hydraulic buffers to ease the shock of taking off. After a few minutes' examination Alex nodded in satisfaction.

"Strap yourself in. I can manage this."

They blasted up into the night sky with a tremendous roar. View-screens showed the terrene below. So great was their velocity the projectile reached the upper level of the stratosphere before Alex could level out; the sea and the fiery band of radiations passed below and behind. Sundaville itself faded away from sight as the rocket thrummed westwards.

The pressure of acceleration gone, Alex released himself from his seat.

"They're faster than I thought," he said. "Turning's almost impossible at this velocity."

"Orbit round Earth and come in more slowly to Sundaville," Esther suggested.

Alex nodded. Such was their speed it would not be many hours to encircle the planet completely. Soon they swept out of darkness and the illuminated side of the earth lay below, clearly seen except where blanketed from view by the clouds.

They gazed wordlessly below. Every continent was pitted with atomic-bomb craters; nowhere did a city stand intact No ships sailed the seas; the roads and countryside were deserted except for an occasional ant-like wanderer. Indescribable chaos was everywhere.

Once, far ahead, two silver specks, caught by the sun glinted high above the curvature of the earth. Some of the other projectiles which had been launched from Nagondtu Alex decided. He wondered what their purpose could be. All the forward part of their rocket was shut off by an impassable bulkhead and it was impossible to decide what lay there.

The landing was violent and far south of Sundaville, as it screamed down into the atmosphere the projectile become difficult to handle and Alex fought with the controls almost unavailingly. They shot low over hills and forests and struck the earth at an oblique angle, tearing through bushes and saplings to a shuddering halt. The hour following proved a nightmare to Alex.

Mechanisms in the forward section of the rocket began to hum. There was no way to reach them to discover their purpose, but soon the rocket was too hot to touch. The hum became a whine as the temperature increased until the projectile glowed and

smoke arose from the earth around it. They ran, and when they looked back from a hilltop the vessel was so brilliantly hot the eye could scarcely rest upon it. Even at such a distance Alex felt his skin tingling.

"It's some kind of sub-atomic radiation set off by automatic apparatus," he declared. "It may remain like that for months and if my guess is correct no one will be able to come within half a mile of it. I see their plan now- one or two in and around Sundaville would make the city uninhabitable."

They turned their back to the ascending spiral of smoke which marked the charred area around the projectile, an area already half a mile in diameter. Snow floated heavily from a leaden sky; cold winds whined over the hills, scarred where atomic bombs had fallen. They sheltered a little while in a copse, going on when they heard the sound of wild animals drawing near. Once there was a hungry howling which echoed through the dark trees until they had passed on up a snow-covered hillside. Alex saw a sheltered spot under an overhanging rock.

"Let's stay the night there," he suggested.

He had found a heat-bolt gun in the projectile and its possession cheered him. Exhausted, they settled down to sleep, forgetting even the wind sighing outside and the constant, ravening howl from the dark smudge of the forest.

Alex awoke abruptly and realised he was alone. Dawn had come and the snow lay thick upon the hillside. Men's footprints slanted down the hill; Esther's met them as if she had seen the men coming and gone out to speak. There were signs of a struggle in the snow, then a line of footprints led away northwards. Sick at heart, Alex followed the trail almost until midday. The snow began to grow thin: in places the sun had melted it completely and at last he reached a green slope from which he could follow the footprints no more.

As he searched a high-pitched whine jerked him upright. One of the projectiles was screaming through the upper-reaches of the air, slanting earthwards in the direction where he judged Sundaville must lie. Within seconds it had gone from view.

Soon this second plan of the technicians in Nagondtu would be thrown into action, Alex decided. If the projectile and a few others of its type came down near Sundaville the city would have to be evacuated. If so, there was no further base from which an attack on Nagondtu could be launched.

At last he abandoned his unavailing search for fresh tracks and struck off over the hills northwards. Once, from far ahead, the wind brought the sound of coarse voices.

Chapter Eight

GAVIAL OF THE POISON TREE

Three days passed and Alex had not found Esther. Pressing north, he reached a swampy area where camp fires burned in the night.. A man swaggered towards him. With a start Alex saw the man was wholly bald, though scarcely forty.

"Welcome stranger!" The man laughed loudly and winked. "Join up with us -we've food and we're going north. I'm Monroe- they call me Monroe the Mad. Guess we're all crazy here, anyway." He winked again and stroked his head. " See that? All me hair gone! Atomic burn did that; shows you what radio-active bombs will do. Made my head all prickly, it did, right inside. You had it, eh? No, I see you ain't. Guess you'll be the only sane man among us." Roaring with laughter he led the way with rolling gait into the camp.

Alex followed uneasily. Here, many curious things had obviously happened, all the result of radioactivity. Fully-grown trees had writhed into serpentine shapes patches of grass, cells mutated by the radiations, had become a creamy-white and shot up to waist level; the same freak of growth had made the swamp plants twice as high as a man and Monroe led the way between them.

"The bomb they dropped on us didn't explode," he cried looking back. "It just burned like a shovelful of sun all night." He shook with laughter "Made all these plants funny, too."

They reached the others and Monroe the Mad waved his hand at them. "Baldies, every one! All our hair fell out. Ugly lot, ain't we?". He chuckled. A big man scowled at Alex. "Give him to the poison tree, Monroe," he suggested. "We ain't got no use for strangers."

Monroe raised a hand. "Leave him be! I took a liking to him." He slapped Alex on the back. "He's got brain what ain't addled an' we can use him."

"Better to throw him to the tree," the big man objected.

Monroe's hand shot inside his coat. There was the searing flash of a heat-ray pistol and the big man dropped dead upon the turf. Monroe laughed and slapped his side.

"What a startler!" Didn't I take him by surprise nice, eh?"

"Now chuck him to the tree, men! That'll keep it goin' till we take the girl."

Startled, Alex could only follow the procession into the depths of the swamp. The mutations in the vegetation became more and more pronounced and he judged they

must be approaching the point where the bomb had landed. They emerged in a clearing puddled with slime and water. Near its centre was a deep pool, flanked by broken rocks and a tree of a kind Alex had never before seen. It had thick, fleshy stems and leaves while here and there a gourd hung, making it resemble some enormous species of the fly-trap plant. With disgust he saw bones were scattered around the tree and pond.

The body was dropped at the edge of the water and the men withdrew. The stems of the giant plant bent slowly; with a swish of ripples the body vanished. For a moment. Alex thought he saw a scaley head then he turned away in disgust.

What of Esther, he wondered as he tried to sleep that night. Had these half-crazed men captured her? He awoke once to the sound of dogs howling nearby. The men were hunched together, such weapons as they possessed ready.

"It's the dogs," hissed Monroe. "The wild dogs- guess they must have had a dose of radiation themselves. They're mad as hares; tear us limb from limb. Worse, they ain't fraid of fire and guns like ordinary wild animals." At last the chorus subsided, showing the pack had gone, Uneasy at heart, Alex wondered anew how Esther had fared in this dangerous wilderness of strange men and stranger animals.

The next day he searched but found nothing of interest except an old broken lorry on a shattered highway beyond the swamp. It carried a load of cable and a large generator. He summoned Monroe.

"I'm searching for a girl who might have passed this way." he said cautiously.

Monroe grinned as at a secret joke. "Ain't many women left in these parts, stranger," he declared.

Alex nodded. "I'll make a bargain- if you think you can help me find her, I'll fix your camp so that you won't be troubled by animals any more."

"An' the mad dogs?" Monroe demanded.

" Yes, I can fix things so they're kept away too."

Monroe slapped his thigh. " Then it's a bargain! Set to work, stranger! Maybe I knows about girls who have come here, an' maybe I don't, see. But you fix our camp safe and I can tell you about one girl as came here, see." Laughing hugely, he strode off.

Alex frowned, supposing the half-insane must always be humoured. He worked all day getting the lorry and power-driven generator into commission and set Monroe's men fitting strands of cable round the camp.

" You've got enough voltage there to electrocute a rhino," he told them when he had finished. "Soon as there's any danger of an attack, start the generator."

He looked at Monroe expectantly, but the man only shook his bald head. "I'll tell me little story when we've seen this gadgetry really works, stranger."

Alex knew he must be content with that and spent the remaining daylight hour assuring that the lorry itself was in good running order. He had had the generator removed from it, possibilities of a hurried escape in mind.

Long after midnight the baying was heard approaching from the distant hills.

"They're mad and hungry," Monroe declared. "There's scores of 'em. Ravening for food they are."

Alex started the generator. In uneasy silence he watched the pack bound down the slopes, sometimes clearly seen in the moonlight, sometimes concealed behind bushes or hidden in the tall grass. The angry barking swept nearer. The plants beyond the slender fence waved and dark shapes leapt from cover. The leaders swept into the electric fence, howled sharply, and were still. The smell of burning flesh, and fur drifted on the wind. The others halted. scenting danger they did not understand, then turned aside to flank the camp. Their chorus faded into the distance and Alex turned off the generator.

"A startler,eh?" chortled Monroe. "That surprised 'em, eh!"

" And the girl?" asked Alex quickly.

Monroe grinned at him. "Ain't safe to go out now. Tell you all about it first thing in the morning!"

Alex fumed until daybreak. With a roguish gesture Monroe appeared and beckoned him. They passed along a path and with a start. of dismay Alex saw they were making for the poison tree.

"Save me a lot of trouble explaining," Monroe said, and he winked.

They emerged into the clearing and Monroe pointed. Alex gazed at the tree, and his heart sank. On one of the outstretched stems of the fantastic plant a piece of blue material fluttered- a scarf. Esther's. He recognised it instantly; Alex was about to spring forward, but Monroe caught his arm.

" Don't get too close, stranger. Them as gets close never comes back."

Alex turned on him fiercely. " Is this the way you keep your bargains?"

"The best bargains be always one-sided, stranger!"

Laughing heartily, Monroe turned back the way he had come. Alex dashed a tortured glance at the pitiful flapping object that had once been Esther's and followed him. Monroe's hand had been inside his coat, doubtless clenched upon the heat-gun he carried, and any act equivalent to suicide could help no one.

During the day Alex realised the men's attitude towards him had changed. He tried to slip away, but four roughs barred his path and forced him back into camp; here, every eye that met his was unfriendly. , Monroe's mood had changed. He swaggered up to Alex, thrusting his face near aggressively.

"You ain's one of us, stranger," he declared. "You ain't mad an' we don't trust you."

"You needn't worry," Alex said evenly. "I'm going on north to-morrow."

"Oh no you ain't!" Monroe swore and rolled his red eyes. "We ain't havin' you tell folk of our snug little hiding place; we ain't that mad, not to-day." He snorted. "We're going to throw you to the gavial, see."

"The gavial ?"

"Sure." The idea seemed to have restored some or Monroe's good-humour. " The big crocodile that lives under the poison tree." He chuckled. "Lots of funny animals about these swamps. I've seen 'em, Monkeys, bears, serpents -everything. Some big zoo busted open most likely. Right, men!"

Before Alex realised it was a signal he was seized from behind by a dozen eager hands. Cords were thrown round his wrists and ankles, struggle as he would.Helpless, securely bound, he was flung to the turf at Monroe's feet.

"A startler, eh?" cried Monroe. "Took you by surprise, eh? To the tree with him as soon as it's dark, men!"

Evening had come when Monroe led the procession through the contorted vegetation which made the narrow ways little more than twilight-lit tunnels. The scarf still hung from the stem of the poison tree and Alex wondered how many days had elapsed since Esther had shared this same fate.

Monroe stopped at the edge of the clearing. "Two of you carry him over," he ordered " Don't forget the gavial isn't particular so don't give it a chance to seize you as well!

That would startle you, eh?" he chuckled.

Alex struggled unavailingly as they carried him across the marshy clearing and dropped him beside the shadowy pool. Bound as he was, helpless, he could do nothing as they scampered back to safety.

The smell of rotten vegetation was all around him. In the pool under the tree something moved heavily, sending ripples across the filthy water. Far back in the shadow of the marsh plants, Monroe and his men waited, listening for his cries as he was dragged under. Abruptly Alex felt something seize his legs. Struggling, helpless, he was dragged slowly into the water towards the broken rocks.

Chapter Nine

SUNDAVILLE SURROUNDED

"SCREAM! " urged a voice. "They're listening!"

Educated to ultra-rapid thought as it was, Alex's mind accepted the totally-unexpected situation and reacted to it instantaneously. Agonised shrieks passed his lips, ululating and echoing across the clearing. He was dragged through a narrow slit between rocks and sat up to face Esther in the gloom.

"That should convince them," she whispered "Now silence until the gavial goes away."

Heavy splashes sounded outside. A blunt snout appeared at the slit, jaws opening to display long teeth as the creature strove to get in. A clawed forefoot scraped at the rocks, dislodging pebbles in an attempt to enlarge the entrance. After what seemed an eternity of snorting and splashing there was the sound of the beast returning to its lair and Alex breathed freely.

"They didn't bind me when they put me at the edge of the pool," Esther whispered, listening. " I'd fainted. They didn't dare come close to watch and I scrambled through to this cavern just in time. The creature is too large to enter," She shivered.

Alex sighed his relief. " Then the scarf was a signal?" he asked.

"Yes; I knew you'd recognise it. I didn't dare show myself."

They sat a long time in silence. When it was quite dark Alex put this head out through the crevasse and listened. Except for the drip of moisture into the pool all was silent.

"If we can reach the old lorry I repaired we should make a getaway,"` he whispered.

They crept from the swampy cave and gained solid ground. Alex led along the winding paths to the fence he had devised; he listened, assuring the generator was not running, and they climbed over. Ahead was the lorry; beside it a man walked: up and down, hand resting on the flame-gun he carried.

"Didn't know it would he guarded," Alex whispered. " Wait while I circle to the other side."

He made a detour and slipped from cover to the vehicle. He sprang silently to the cab roof, crawling towards the guard. He felt no mercy for these men who had tried to kill him, and the butt of his weapon sliced down, felling the man unconscious in his tracks. Esther ran up as Alex started the engine and they jolted on along the uneven road.

"Look," Esther said when they had left the swamp behind.

Far ahead to the north, high in the sky, a wavering gold, red and green reflection glowed. Alex realised it was the fiery barrier existing between Nagondtu and Sundaville, mirrored in the heavens, but showing at least that their own city was not yet vanquished.

They trundled along rising roads for an hour, seldom able to make the speed. Alex wished. Once, a little town blocked the road, pushed flat into rubble by the atomic blast of a near-miss. At a second attempt Alex skirted the expanse of debris. On a steep hill beyond the engine stalled. Alex got down, looked under the bonnet, and opened the cab door.

"We'll have to walk. The fuel's all gone. It's been leaking and we've no more."

They climbed to the top of the hill. Beyond, the country lay dark and silent to Sundaville itself. The barrier of flame flickered and burned, colouring the whole night sky, and Alex appraised it critically.

"It must be very near Sundaville. Looks as if we have a walk of eight or ten miles across open country yet."

Esther nodded. "Ssst! " She was listening. "Whats that? " she asked at length.

Alex strained his ears. Far behind a chorus of howls filled the night. He shivered. The dogs - and drawing nearer as if scenting them and eager for the kill.

"We must hurry," Alex urged.

They descended through wooded fields and soon he knew they would be overtaken. Once a wild horse looked at them from a group of trees, neighing fiercely. Five

minutes later they heard it, whinny in fear and a chorus of yapping filled the air.Listening, Alex knew the explanation of the sounds. The dogs had sprung upon the horse, borne it down, and the ensuing silence told they now devoured it.

"I doubt if I have more than a bolt or two left in this gun. Esther." he said quietly.

He knew he need say no more; she understood. They began to run. After a long descent the way became more rocky and uneven and began to ascend. Patches of snow showed white in the gloom; in places deep drifts swept against the slopes by the wind lay. Behind, there was a long yowl and a chorus of barking which told that the dogs were again on the scent.

Alex pressed on along a path winding upon the hillside; below was a steep drop over a slope strewn with boulders and patched with snow. Above them the drifts lay thickly in every depression. Abruptly Esther stopped and looking back Alex saw that she was nursing her ankle. Her lips twitched with pain. She put her foot to the ground and winced.

" I- can't go on, Alex," she whispered.

He looked at her ankle; she flinched when he touched it, the then gazed back the way they had come. The dogs were visible on the curve of the hill, a large pack in full cry, yelping as it came.

"Leave me." Esther tried to push him away. "You may get on to Sundaville alone."

" We Jocelyns never leave our pals," Alex declared; " Hold tight!"

He swept her up on to his back and jogged on, stumbling on the uneven path, unsure of foot where the snow lay thick.

"They're catching up quickly," his burden murmured.

Alex looked back and, saw he would soon be overtaken. The foremost dog was on his heels, the pack close behind. He scrambled rapidly up a steep incline, drawing his heat-bolt pistol as he went. At the top he swung round, letting Esther drop to the ground, and flared a bolt back over the foremost dogs. Their carcasses tumbled back upon the dogs following, who sprang upon them, tearing at the quivering flesh. Alex scrambled up a little higher, a glance showing him he had only one more charge left.

"The snow! " Esther cried as he raised the weapon. Instantly Alex saw what she meant. Above the way they had passed a huge drift rested, piled high between a ledge of rocks. He turned the muzzle up and the full heat of the blast struck under the rocks and snow. Steam hissed up with an explosive sizzling; the boulders moved; the

dislodged snow pressed downwards, gaining body and velocity, carrying pebbles and stones in a growing avalanche. The snow-fall struck the pack of dogs, bearing them on and over into the depth of the valley below. When the rumble and thunder of it had subsided an utter, uncanny silence descended.

"And now on to Sundaville." Alex said quietly, and they turned in the direction of the shimmering band of fire that burned in the sky northwards.

* * * * * * * * *

"So you see we can't hope to hold back the Nagondtu transmitter much longer," Lincoln said.

Alex nodded, gazing out upon the unfamiliar outlines that were now the buildings of Sundaville. Every wall, roof and doorway was covered with a tangled mass of yellow-brown lichen. It hung in festoons from the corners of buildings and carpeted the roadway itself except where passing vehicles had ground it to pulp. It fringed the windows with tiny tendrils, excluding the light except where it was cleared away, and had already pressed inside ` some of the lesser-used rooms.

" We don't know whether it came from spores mutated by radio-activity or whether the enemy dropped it from projectiles" Lincoln said. "'It's the very deuce of a nuisance and spreads at a fantastic speed."

Alex turned his gaze away from it away towards the extreme northern boundary of the city. Smoke rose sullenly illuminated by a white radiance from the ground.

"One of the manned projectiles you told me of," Lincoln said, following his gaze. "It landed yesterday morning. We saw nothing of the men in it - expect they escaped. It's emitting a lot of heat, including sub-atomic vibrations and gamma rays. There's not a building left standing within a full half mile of it - they became red hot and crumbled to dust. Buildings farther away are intact, but uninhabitable. One of our generating stations went. It's only a tump of hot ash now. The other generating plant is overloaded, while Nagondtu seems to be putting on more power. Listen."

Alex could here the continuous thunder and crackle of the fire wall; its light illuminated the lichen covered buildings grotesquely, casting hard shadows. He saw that Lincoln was dead tired; as was everyone who moved in the yellow-brown festooned streets. Abruptly a wall-screen went on, showing an officer who saluted.

"Another projectile has landed just east of the city," he reported. "It is expected a considerable area will have to be evacuated within the next few hours."

Lincoln groaned and turned the televiewscreen off. "Things grow worse! Seems to be

a case of which will get us first - the Nagondtu transmitter or these new missiles they're landing around us!"

Alex nodded. "If a few more land, Sundaville will be uninhabitable. We've no other base?"

"No. If we're forced to leave Sundaville we're finished "

Alex considered carefully. Only one effective way to reach the other side of the barrier existed. Once there, it might be possible to gain Nagondtu and make a surprise attack directed at the transmitter.

"I've noticed an intact submarine in the harbour," he said pensively. "If it's not already manned, have it prepared to sail immediately. I'm going under the fire-wall to Nagondtu."

* * * * * * *

A few hours later Alex entered the submarine and ordered it to submerge. For'ad, a dozen armed and picked men waited. The crew acted quickly; the vessel had already cleared the harbour and as the tanks filled it dropped slowly beneath the waves, Alex ordered full speed and a course for Nagondtu.

Viewscreens showed the dark waters around them and ahead. Only a dim light penetrated the fathoms above the vessel except when they passed under the wall of fire. The radiance of it was easily seen, diffused as it was, and there was a noticeable turbulence of the water. Alex felt relieved when the dancing reflections had passed astern.

A moment later Alex started. The viewscreens showed dark shapes in the sea beside them, driving steadily in the opposite direction. He gazed in amazement at the long smooth forms. Enemy submarines making for Sundaville. To port he could see two; starboard was another, but he guessed it was not alone. More distant vessels would be hidden in the murky water.

An officer appeared, saluting. "We've been seen, sir! Two enemy craft are following. Shall I warn the crew to expect depth-charges?"

"Yes!" Alex snapped.

His eyes went to the screen which showed the sea behind and above. Astern, but gaining rapidly, came two long dark shapes, deploying so that each could pass directly over the submarine's course. There was an imperceptible swirl on the surface, a pause, and then a thudding detonation which made Alex's ears ring. A second

concussion followed, much nearer. The vessel pitched; Alex caught a handrail as a third explosion struck like ringing thunder on their hull and the lights flickered out. In the utter darkness Alex heard the rush of water and the scream of escaping air. The unseen floor was at a steep angle under his feet, sloping more abruptly every moment.

"Surface!" he rapped. "Blow the tanks!".

* * * * * * *

Far away behind Sundaville, troops in black uniform rolled steadily over the plain in their caterpillar vehicles. With them rolled heavy weapon-carrying carriages bearing guns that would reduce a building to red-hot ash from a range of ten miles. The troops rode jocularly, confident of easy victory. In his staff-car, six-wheeled, armoured and high-powered, the Field Commander ordered Nagondtu be contacted. Above the static he spoke confidently.

"We should be within effective range of Sundaville within a few hours. There are no signs of any defence or fortifications."

He listened for a while, then turned off the two-way radio. In Nagondtu, his superiors had been well satisfied. For himself, he was content. The detour had been great, but with the rapid land-vehicles at their command the Nagondtu troops had speedily come within sight of their objective. Ahead over the hills Sundaville lay, effectively unguarded. It would be an easy victory, the Field Commander decided as he looked back over his troops, riding so confidently in the great caterpillar vehicles, uncovering and preparing their weapons even as they swept onwards.

Chapter Ten

KILL THEM !

BRACED against the handrail Alex snapped shut the helmet of his life-saving suit and splashed towards the conning-tower; the men had already gone in obedience to his order. He turned on the suit air and rose through the water, bobbing to the choppy surface. A boat was picking up the men. Alex kicked his way round and swam strongly in the other direction towards the distant fire-wall. He did not intend to become a prisoner or war.

Submarines still moved slowly towards the fire-wall submerging only as they drew near it. Alex swam to converge upon one, knowing he would scarcely be seen amid the wind-whipped waves. He gained the superstructure of a craft that was dropping from view in a flurry of spray and clung with all his strength. The tug of the sea past him almost bore his grip away: agony made fire of his straining arms; the suit air seemed to come too slowly, but he could not spare a hand to adjust the flow.

He passed under the coloured flickering radiance; when it was well behind he released his grip and rose to the surface. The submarine and its companions were unseen but he knew they were converging on Sundaville, lying stealthily in the sea until the moment to strike came. A faint blue underwater glow ahead drew his gaze and he swam towards it ....

* * * * *

"So you see its pretty well the end." Lincoln said.

Alex divested of his life-suit but still shivering from the intense chill of the sea, nodded.

"The submarine crews are using atomic-disintegration blasters to make tunnels under the city," he said. "They may appear in surprise attacks in any part of the city."

"That should scarcely be necessary," Lincoln pointed out bitterly. "The Nagondtu transmitter is steadily driving its radiations nearer to Sundaville. They've actually sent us an ultimatum- unconditional surrender or complete destruction." He laughed shortly and without mirth. " We're beaten and they know it."

Outside was a chorus of shouting; the door burst open. Esther entered and stood with her hack to the closed panels, breathing quickly. Her gaze settled on Alex.

"Bryne has started a campaign against us! Says we're enemies-- that the responsibility of the disaster rests on us! "

Alex looked from the window. In the lichen covered streets, illuminated by the sparkle and glow of the fearfully destructive forces radiated from Nagondtu, a crowd surged, waving their fists at the building. Their cries drifted up angrily.

"Kill them! Kill the traitors!"

" It's not safe for you to stop here." Lincoln said gravely .

"We can try to escape over the monorail bridge at the back," Alex decided quickly. "Esther, come with me. You stay here, Lincoln."

They hurried to the top of the building, whence branched the spidery lattice-work of the giant spans that had carried monorail passengers high over the city in pleasanter days. The lichen was here, festooned from every girder and spar. They pressed on along the slender bridge, slipping often. Out over she harbour the wall of electronic fire danced and burned, streamers of red, green and gold flowing from sea to sky.

They returned to ground level in quiet streets from which Alex judged he could reach the control tower of the Sundaville radio transmitter. The wall of fire was steadily drawing nearer to the city and it was here the final battle would be fought out, he decided. Minutes later there was an urgent rapping on the door.

"Lincoln here!" a voice called.

Alex opened. Lincoln closed the door quickly and dropped a bundle on the floor.

"Disguises of a sort! " he explained. "Make you less noticeable. Listen: Bryne himself is on his way here. He's coming, to see if we can put on more power to hold back the Nagondtu radiations; if not, he's leaving the city. Now hurry: I guessed you'd come here."

Alex had scarcely put the workman's overalls over his uniform when a thunderous knocking came at the door.

"Commander Bryne demands admittance! " a woman's voice called.

Lincoln opened the door to reveal Bryne himself with Jolido Kain close behind. He let them enter, then relocked the door.

"Mustn't let the excited rabble in here,", he explained.

Bryne glared angrily round, "Why haven't we more power? " He frowned at Alex. " Why aren't you at work! Why..." His voice trailed off: recognition sprang into his eyes. His hand shot to his hip. "Jocelyn!"

Alex caught Bryne's wrist as it rose and twisted; the weapon clattered to the floor and with a movement of his foot Alex sent it spinning into a corner.

"You're a traitor, Bryne, and a liar! We secret service men aren't dumb! I've known for six months you're in the pay of our enemies; I knew, too, no one would believe me. It would be the word of a junior officer against Commander 'Big' Bryne! Yes, it's the show-down now, Bryne. You've played your part well enough; you've tried to dispose of me but failed, and now you've decided it's time to clear out before Sundaville is atomised! "

Bryne jerked back, freeing himself, and sprang for the window. A slender fire-escape ran across to the adjacent building and Alex guessed that his enemy had everything prepared for his flight from the doomed city.

Bryne was on the centre of the catwalk before Alex caught him. Locked in combat, they swayed and fought ten floors above the empty street. Livid with fury, Bryne was a

man possessed, seemingly with the strength of ten. Alex went down. Bryne kicked at his head with iron-shod boots, missed as Alex writhed away, and stumbled as Alex caught his foot and heaved.. Arms flailing, face horrified, mouth opened in a long-drawn scream, he went backwards off the catwalk. Alex rose slowly and returned to the window.. He felt no regret.

Back in the control room Jolida Kain said simply: "I did not know he was a traitor. If I can help I am with you, Alex Jocelyn."

From where he stood Alex could see the burning electronic wall over the harbour. It had already reached ships anchored a little way out, changing them in the instant to mere smoke that drifted in over the city.

" It's much closer," Lincoln said.

Alex turned to the control panels before him. Meter needles stood high at maximum; megawatts were being radiated against the enemy barrier, but still proved insufficient. At his side the televiewscreen snapped on, revealing an anguished official.

"I wish to speak to Commander Bryne." he snapped.

Alex nodded. " We will take the message."

"Very well. Enemy forces are moving up from the west in considerable strength, We have no defence.. They will reach the city in less than an hour and cannot be repelled. They have superior arms and considerably outnumber us. What are your orders? "

"Hold them,"

"It is impossible! "

Alex switched off; the words and gesticulating face faded.

"The enemy has everything carefully prepared," he said pensively. " Yet too many simultaneous attacks can become a weakness."

"What do you mean," demanded Lincoln. "Seems to me they're all set to win either way! The forces moving up behind Sundaville will be in radio contact with Nagondtu. They will capture our city- if the Nagondtu transmitter doesn't reduce it to dust first! "

He gestured towards the crackling wall of fire which filled the sky with a continuous thunder. Alex thought even the heat of it could be felt so near was it.

"We have one chance," he said, "one very slight chance."

He took his place at the control panel. Sundaville was besieged by superior power on all sides- threatened with total annihilation. If victory was still to be gained it would be only by out-thinking the enemy, turning his strength to his own disadvantage and beating him by wit and superior skill.

Almost imperceptibly Alex began to slacken off the power radiating from the aerials above. The meter needles began to fall back a little at a time and behind him Lincoln moved uneasily.

"You'll let the Nagondtu radiations come in over the city! " he declared.

"I don't aim to allow quite that," Alex said, not looking round, "Remember the Nagondtu technicians will be kept in touch with the movements of the land forces. " As the repulsive power we radiate slackens, they will reduce power themselves to assure the vibrations do not pass completely over Sundaville and kill their own men. I'm banking on that."

Keyed to absolute concentration, he stood tensed before the control panels, his eyes flickering from needle to needle; his hands never still upon the controls. Through the opened window came the sound of the electronic holocaust; the smell of burning ozone was strong in the room and reflections from the dancing electronic fire glared on the walls. Back went the meters, slowly, so slowly as he balanced the Sundaville transmitter against the power radiated from Nagondtu, yet always, almost imperceptibly, reduced output. Only once did he look over his shoulder. Esther and Lincoln were watching him in utter silence, faces white as chalk. Jolida Kain had ceased to watch; her face was hidden in her hands and her shoulders quivered with terror and suppressed weeping.

"Esther, Lincoln," Alex said, his eyes on the controls. "There may be time for you to leave the city. The armoured car that was to take Bryne is below. Strike south."

" I'll stay and see it through." Lincoln's voice was hard with tension.

" And I, Alex."

Alex said no more. Opposing all the skill of the Nagondtu technicians, he was still reducing power, calculating when the right moment would come. Once the building shook; thunder roared and red flame danced on the walls, while below a panic-stricken outcry floated up.

" Part of the harbour has gone," Lincoln murmured.

Alex still reduced power. Sometimes a slight momentary increase was demanded as

the electronic wall burned too near; sometimes he could turn back the controls more quickly and at last the needles of the meters were standing but a little way above zero.

"Remember the Nagondtu transmitter could only be brought up to maximum power by slow stages," he rapped, and flung the controls to maximum.

He sprang to the window. The wall of fire was receding over the sea, driven back by the sudden increase of power from Sundaville. It burned like a rainbow in the sky, miles away now, sweeping back on Nagondtu. It glowed on the horizon, then was gone, visible only in the dancing reflections on the clouds. A minute passed; two, then a flash illuminated the whole hemisphere of the heavens eastward. Intensely, vivid blue, it burned up through cloud and sky, a fierce holocaust of utter destruction.

"Our waves reached the Nagondtu transmitter," Alex said. He wiped his brow and found it damp.

Now, far far away over the miles of sea a tremendous cloud of black dust drifted, dimming the light of the sun itself.

" The remains of Nagondtu," Alex murmured.

Moments later the sound of the explosion came, a grumbling, thunderous roar which made every building in Sundaville tremble before it echoed away into silence.

Alex snapped on the teleview screen, coding for official headquarters. "If the land forces behind Sundaville do not surrender immediately, inform their commander that our transmitter will be turned against them." he ordered.

"It would also be wise to detail a few units to mop up the enemy forces landed by submarine. It is unlikely they will try to resist now. "

He switched off, smiling as he met Esthers admiring gaze. There would be a new world to build out of the chaos - work in plenty for them all.