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AERITA OF THE LIGHT COUNTRY

By Ray Cummings

Alan Grant stepped into the tawdry side-show to kill an idle hour—and found himself plunged head-over-heels into a maelstrom of battling adventure that took him across a hundred million miles of space, involved him in a vast civil war on an alien planet, and shouldered him with the fearsome responsibility for the safety of Earth!

Complete Book-Length Novel

SUPER SCIENCE NOVELS MAGAZINE

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CHAPTER ONE

Girl With Wings

"Admission only one-hundred-thousandth part of a decimar, friends. Think of it—one-tenth of a miserable little gold-dollar to see the wonder Freak Show of the ages. Come up and get your tickets, friends. See the faceless boy from Borneo. See the beautiful girl with wings. Little flying virgin in all her breath-taking beauty. Who is she? Where is she from? What weird language does she speak? Twelve foot spread of feathered wings, my friends. Human girl of glorious beauty. Flying virgin—the world's greatest mystery ... Get in line there—one at a time, please. A tenth part of a gold-dollar, to see the girl with wings—"

Grant's interest in the so-called winged girl was purely casual until he went into the side-show and saw her. Her wings were real! And the story behind her presence on Earth was stranger than anything the carnival barker could invent!

The barker's voice droned on. Young Alan Grant stood among the little crowd which milled here at the entrance of "Wilkins' Wonder Freak Show of the Ages." A girl with wings? He smiled to himself as he dropped his arrant-cylinder, ground it out with his heel and shoved toward the ticket booth. A fake, of course, like the "Faceless Boy from Borneo" and the "Living Mummy from the Valley of the Nile."

And then he was inside a dim smoky room, staring at a small dais which was illumined by a spot of blue tubelight. An announcer appeared.

"And now, Ladies and Gentlemen, I take great pleasure in presenting the world's greatest mystery. The girl with wings! Watch her closely, friends. Thrill to her breath-taking beauty. Who is she? What weird language does she speak? You will hear her talk—perhaps one of you can tell us where she is from ... Now—here she comes!"

The announcer stepped aside. From the semi-darkness soft weird music was welling through the smoky little room. And then from behind a curtain the girl with wings glided forward into the blue sheen of the overhead tubelight. Young Alan Grant sucked in his breath with a gasp. What he saw was a small girl, hardly more than five feet tall. She was dressed in a long, flowing, gauze-like robe of drapery—pale-blue robe which shimmered in the sheen of the tubelight.

A breath-taking beauty? She was all that—a fragile-looking, ethereal little face framed by long silver hair that hung in two thick braids forward over her shoulders. Girl with wings! Two huge blue-feathered wings arched out from behind her shoulders, folded across her back with their feathered tips almost sweeping the ground.

For a moment she stood staring out from the dais at the smoke-filled room with its circle of curious faces gazing up at her. A girl no more than sixteen, or seventeen perhaps. Yet Grant could see that her queerly frail-looking body was rounded almost into the maturity of young womanhood. A face of ethereal, delicate beauty, but of what nationality? Strangely he could not tell.

For that moment she stood gazing at her audience as though in confusion, with a little half-smile trembling on her coral lips. Grant felt his heart pounding. The wings were a fake, of course. But somehow that faint trembling smile seemed pathetic. As though she were frightened?

"Her name is Aerita," the announcer's voice was murmuring from the dimness. "First she will dance for us ... Now, Aerita—you understand me?"

At his question she turned and nodded. And now to the slow exotic rhythm of the music she was swaying her hips, then gracefully waving her slim, pink-white arms. And still her tremulous smile persisted.

From the dimness of the audience a raucous voice suddenly protested: "Jess! What about her wings?"

A fake of course. Grant's heart unaccountably was pounding; but he told himself that now he would see where the wings were attached to her shoulders; and if she moved them he would try and see how the thing was worked. Through the standing group of onlookers he had quietly shoved himself forward until now he was at the edge of the dais, within three feet of the girl.

"Her wings?" the announcer responded quickly. "But first, I want you to hear her talk. Who is she? Where is she from? What weird language does she speak? She's the mystery of the ages, my friends."

There was a rippling murmur of derision from the audience on what seemed his stalling; but he ignored it. "Now Aerita—you may stop dancing."

The music died. The girl stood motionless; drooping. Her head was half turned toward the announcer's voice.

"Now," he said, "you understand me, Aerita?"

"Yes. I understan' you—"

Weird, breathless little voice. It had a queer soft intonation; and she spoke the words so slowly, so measured that they seemed automatic. As though she were a huge mechanical doll. Gruesome. Or was it very clever acting?

"Now, Aerita—tell us something in your own language—anything you like."

For a second there was a hushed silence; then the girl spoke—a soft, rippling flow of weird glib syllables. She gestured with them; and suddenly an animation had come to her face. Her eyes, luminous dark pools under long dark lashes, swept the nearer circle of her audience. Then her gaze seemed to land upon Grant as he stood breathlessly staring. For a moment it clung to his face. Was that fear in her eyes? A desperation? Whatever it was, in a second it was gone as her glance turned away.

Then she had finished speaking. "Well, you heard her?" the announcer said triumphantly. "What did she say? What language did she speak?"

Had it been only clever, rehearsed gibberish? Assuredly Grant did not think so.

"Her wings—" Several voices from the audience were calling it now. "Hey Mister, what about them wings?"

Suavely the announcer accepted challenge. "Her wings—why of course. Show us your wings, Aerita."

It was an amazing thing. Grant craned forward as abruptly now the great blue-feathered wings spread out. For a moment they spread at right angles to her little body—ten or twelve feet across them. And then they were slowly flapping. The rush of air from them fanned Grant's hot face. Slowly flapping wings, so that now, under them, the girl's slim, frail little body was poised on tiptoe. Seemingly almost weightless as gracefully she balanced herself.

A fake? Her draped gaze-robe had fallen away a little at the back of her shoulders where the wings seemed to join her body. Grant thought that he would see the weaving muscles there, pink-white where the feathers ended at the base of the wings. Weightless little thing now. Only the toe-tips of one bare foot touched the floor. It was as though in another second she would have risen into the air. Then she dropped her wings, came flat-footed to the floor; and with a little bow, turned and ran behind the side curtain ...

A ripple of awed applause floated out from the audience. At the front edge of the platform-dais, Grant stood silent, numbed by his pounding emotions ... Aerita. Like a premonition it seemed to him then as though, having seen this strange girl, he had glimpsed something of a destiny which was his. A destiny of—what? Love? Terror? There had been terror in her eyes, unmistakable ...

Thoughts are instant things. For that moment Grant's mind was a turmoil of weird conjectures ... He was an extraordinarily big fellow. Among the pressing group of onlookers around him he towered nearly a head over them all—blond, handsome with a sun-bronzed face and crisp curly brown hair. Silent, he stared; and as the applause still held, the weird little girl came from behind the curtain to acknowledge it.

And now it seemed that all her gaze was for Grant, there where he loomed in the dimness above the others who crowded him ... His gaze and hers, for that instant meeting. Who shall say what can be carried in the crossing gaze of a man and a woman? A tingling surge swept Grant. It was only an instant; then Aerita had turned and again was gone. But in that instant Grant had interpreted her look—a mute, pathetic, terrified appeal!

CHAPTER TWO

Departure From Earth

The tawdry show went on. For a while longer, Grant stood watching as the "Living Mummy from the Valley of the Nile," was displayed; and then, with a stream of others leaving, he went outside ... Aerita. Queer that she had affected him so strangely. He tried to tell himself that she was merely some theatrical little waif who had gotten into this cheap show, and by trickery was pretending to be a girl with wings ...

Grant was twenty-four, that summer of 2093. His home was in one of the big Northern suburbs of New York City, where he lived with his younger brother, Philip. They were orphans. Philip, now only eighteen, had graduated from the Government-school and was employed in a research laboratory of experimental physics. Alan, less of scientific bent, was a salesman of the new Government power-batteries for private aircraft. He was traveling now, and had stopped for the night in this curiously secluded little up-State town ...

He had no plans, that evening as he stood lingering near the front entrance of the Wilkins' Museum of Nature's Freaks. The outside barker was still pattering about the "Flying Virgin—mystery of the Ages." Grant hardly heard him; there was only in his mind the vision of that pathetic little face—exquisite with ethereal, fragile beauty. Slim, pointed chin; eyes which had seemed aslant. Oriental? She did not seem so. Again weird conjectures flooded him ...

Upon impulse, abruptly Grant went to a side entrance and demanded to see the Manager of the show.

"You wait here," he was told. "I'll see."

Then Wilkins came into the dingy little back office. He was a burly, bald-headed fellow of about sixty.

"Want to see me?" he demanded with sour impatience.

"Yes," Grant said. "I'm a stranger here—traveling salesman. I saw your show—I was interested in that girl with wings —"

"What about her?"

"Nothing at all," Grant said. "But I just got the idea that her wings are real. Weird sort of thing—"

Wilkins' beady little eyes narrowed with his chuckle. "Yes, ain't it? That's what I specialize in—mystery of the ages—Wilkins' Wonders—"

"So I just thought you might not mind telling me where you found her," Grant cut in. He drew a gold-coin from his pocket for a bribe. "I don't mind paying—just curious, you know. And just between us, of course—"

Wilkins took the coin with alacrity. The smell of alcoholite wafted from his breath. "Well, thanks," he said. "You're a real gentle'm. Where did I get her?" He leaned forward and his voice fell to a confidential murmur. "Funny damn thing—I found her, only about twenty miles from here. Over by Twin Peaks. This is between us? By God, if you—"

"Of course," Grant said. He sat tense. Was Wilkins lying? He did not seem to be. He was telling now how three months ago, in a bad storm, he had been driving by night through a nearby valley and had seen the girl, drenched, terrified, crouching by the roadside.

"An' there you are," Wilkins finished. "So I took her in. Been takin' care of her ever since. Funny thing. I don't know no more about her than you do. Every damn word of English she knows, I've taught her, an' she knows plenty. Pretty quick, she is. Sops it up like a sponge does water. She's a good asset, but she's causin' me a lot of trouble now. By the Gods, if she thinks she can get away from me after what I've done for her—"

He suddenly realized that he had said too much. He sat up with an unsteady jerk. "Say," he added, "what in the devil you interested in her for? If you think—"

"And you've never reported her to the authorities?" Grant murmured. "Naturally it's just assumed she's a fake—like your living mummy—"

"And where would I wind up?" Wilkins demanded. "Some science society takin' her—where's my profit?" He was suddenly alarmed. He climbed to his feet; his heavy-joweled face was red-purple. "Hey listen, you—get the Hell out of here. My living mummy a fake? Well it ain't. But the girl with wings is." He grinned with a foxy look. "You're the fine nit-wit—thought her wings was real? An' you didn't see how she was workin' them wings with wires? Come aroun some other night—I'll show you. Now go on—get out of here—"

Wordlessly Grant retreated. The side door of the Museum slammed in his face. The little metal street here was dark. He crossed it; lost himself in the shadows of an inclined ramp. And then he crouched in the darkness. What weird mystery was this?

An hour passed. From where Grant lurked he could see the front of the Museum. There were no people going in now, and a steady stream came out. Then the show obviously was over. Still Grant had no plans, except that vaguely he was contemplating notifying the authorities, or some scientific society, in the morning. Would they take him seriously when he demanded an investigation? Would Wilkins be frightened now so that he would try and spirit the girl away ... Weird little captive. She was no more than that, Grant realized. Wilkins had intimated that she was trying to escape from him.

A shaft of dim tubelight from the opening side door of the Museum brought Grant from his roving thoughts. Two cloaked figures came out; a big one—the light for a second was on it so that Grant saw it was Wilkins. He was gripping a much smaller figure—a little upright dark blob. As they crossed the street Grant could see the bulge of the dark cloak over the girl's folded wings. Then he saw a small black air-roller parked here under the ramp. Wilkins and the girl headed for it.

And suddenly there was a scuffle. "Damn you—stop that—" It was Wilkins' muttering voice. The girl had tried to twitch from his grasp. He cuffed her; slammed her into the little car; and as he climbed in after her Grant saw that he was holding a flashgun in his hand ... Grant was unarmed. He was still twenty feet away when the little black roller backed out and headed for the ramp entrance. In the darkness Grant made a run. He leaped as the car rolled onto the incline. There was a thump as he landed upon the car's rear fin; but the thump was lost in the rattle of the metal planking as they went up the incline. Then the car's wings slid out; on the ramp it gathered speed, came to a take-off jump and slid smoothly up into the air.

From his precarious perch there was only starlight above the clinging Grant; a vision of the town sliding away beneath him and a rush of air past his ears. A rear window of the small tonneau of the air-roller showed him its dim interior—Wilkins at the controls and the girl huddled beside him. For another five minutes or so Grant clung to the fin. The car was mounting; Grant was calculating that he would need altitude if it went out of control. Then presently he hitched himself to the side running board. One of the back windows was open; he drew himself up, slid through it ...

Wilkins' voice was audible now, "Guess I'll have to hide you for a while, Aerita—a little trouble tonight—"

"You—let me go—"

"Guess you'd like to jump out one of these windows, eh?" He chuckled. "An' then you'd fly away? Well, I guess you could do that, for a fact." His arm went around her as he drew her to him. "Listen—my wife ain't gonna take care of you any more—I'm tellin' her you escaped, get the idea? So you an' me—I got a little place up here in the hills—so we'll get better acquainted. I ain't such a bad feller—get the idea?"

Wilkins did not see the blob of Grant as he slowly shifted forward and pounced. The girl screamed as locked together the two men fell over the controls. But it was a brief struggle. Wilkins' gun was on the seat beside him. He snatched at it; tried to level it. But Grant's fist caught him under the jaw. The gun hissed with a bolt that sizzled into the roof of the metal cabin and sent down a shower of sparks. Then Grant had the gun; crashed it down on Wilkins' head.

In the dim little tonneau of the air-roller, Grant sat staring at the terrified girl. Wilkins lay on the floor; dead or unconscious. The car had fallen about a thousand feet, but Grant had righted it now.

"You—came?" Aerita suddenly murmured. The starlight was on her face, the terror there fading so that now she was staring at Grant with awe, and with what other emotions he could only imagine by the response within himself. What would he do now? Land the car? Take her to the police? And then lose her in the turmoil of scientific investigation which would engulf her. A freak of nature? Somehow the term was suddenly abhorrent to him ...

"Well," he murmured. "Look here—you seem to speak English pretty well. Who are you?"

"I—Aerita—"

"He said he found you wandering out here somewhere. Where did you come from? You're the only girl on Earth with wings. How did—"

They were futile questions. He checked himself. Quite obviously she did not understand him. His vehemence terrified her; she twitched away as his hand went to her arm. She was gazing down out of the window now at the mountainous wooded terrain some three thousand feet below them. And abruptly she gave a little cry.

"There, is where I came from. See—down there."

She was pointing. The Twin Peaks which Wilkins had mentioned. They loomed off to the north a few miles away. A broad meadowed valley was here to one side, with a ribbon of lonely road threading it.

"There—" Aerita insisted. "See?"

She was excited now, her face flushed; and as she gazed again intently at Grant her eyes were glowing as though with a sudden determination. "You come," she reiterated. "I will show you."

Was her place—her home, down here in this valley? Impossible ... He landed the car on the little road and brought it to a stop.

"What do you mean, Aerita? That this is where Wilkins found you? How did you get here?"

It was a side road, with no traffic at this hour of the night. "All right," he said. "I hope you're not trying to fool me. Come on out and show me."

She smiled; and as he opened the door she threw off her cloak and leaped from the car. Little blue-draped figure in the moonlight. And suddenly she spread her great blue-feathered wings. He gasped, stood amazed. Here suddenly was the reality he had pictured. And yet he had never quite believed it ... Like a great graceful bird slowly she rose into the air, her little body tilted diagonal from the rush of wind, her drapes and her long silver hair fluttering. Numbly he stared, as with great, flapping, blue-feathered wings she sped over the trees and was gone ...

Grant stood numbed. What a fool he had been—to have lost her ... His chagrin mingled with a stab within him ... his sense of loss ... It was as though she had meant to him, not just something of interest to science; not just a mystery to be solved ... Something—momentous ...

Then he heard again the flap of giant wings and out of the dimness beyond the trees she came soaring, fluttering down with back-flapping wings until in another moment she landed poised on tiptoe almost beside him. She was panting; breathless.

"So bad the flying here—it is very hard for me." Then at his expression, she laughed—little liquid ripple of soft laughter. "You come," she added. "I will show—to you—"

She seemed wholly to have lost her fear of him now. An eagerness was on her as she gripped his hand, leading him. They went off the road, down into the wooded meadow. Queer ... He had vaguely fancied that if she walked, or ran—she would be like a little elf, with fairy lightness. But now as she walked along the path under the trees a sluggishness seemed on her. As though she weighed too much ...

Then Grant suddenly saw the thing to which she was leading him. It lay in a wooded dell, some distance off the path and by chance wholly hidden by brush and foliage until they were quite close to it. A long, dull-black, narrow cylinder. It seemed some twenty feet high at its central bulge, and perhaps fifty feet from tip to tip. It lay sprawled in the brush like a great weird fish, with side fins, and pointed head and tail.

A space-ship? Grant stared in startled astonishment. He had heard of course, that nearly a hundred and fifty years ago, here on Earth, a flying cube had been invented. Vaguely he remembered that he had read somewhere of a Dr. Norton Grenfell, and a Bolton Flying Cube. It had gone to Mercury, and later had been destroyed so that the science of Interplanetary navigation was lost to Earth.

Was this girl from Mercury? Young Alan Grant was a practical fellow. He had never more than half believed the things he had heard of those weird incidents so long ago. He recalled now that they had concerned strange girls with wings. That part of the tales which his great-grandfather had been fond of telling him when he was a little boy, he had wholly disbelieved. Yet here was the reality before him!

Aerita was urging him forward. They reached the little cylinder. A small side doorway stood open. Grant's heart was racing; suddenly it seemed that an eagerness was on him; a lust for adventure ... His life, and this girl's, destined to be so strangely interwoven ...

"Come—I will show you," Aerita was murmuring. "You will go with me? Oh, never did I want to come here to your Earth—"

He followed her through the doorway. The blackness sprang into a luminous gloom as she touched a lever on the metal side-wall. A tiny incline with a few steps led up into a small circular turret. Grant saw a table with a little bench before it—rows of strange-looking controls—levers, little switches, lines of triangular buttons and a score of indicator dials.

Aerita was staring at him, her face eagerly smiling. Her eyes were luminous with the mist of her emotion.

"You could help me—help us—so much," she said softly. "And I would not be so afraid of the trip. Oh, you will come?"

"Yes," he murmured. Still startled, he stood watching as she shifted one of the levers. From down the incline a click sounded as the entrance door slid closed. Then she was on the bench at the controls. Certainly she seemed to know what she was doing—her deft fingers were pulling levers, pressing some of the little triangular buttons. The pallid interior was humming now—a slow, rhythmic hum, and Grant could feel a draft of moving interior air as the ventilating system began operating.

And through a vizer-pane, like a thick transparent bullseye here in the side of the circular turret, he could see the outside ground dropping away. Soon it was gone as the little cylinder, with a luminous rocket-stream like a comet-tail behind it, slanted up toward the stars that lay strewn, a myriad glittering gems on the blue-black velvet of the sky.

CHAPTER THREE

The Attack on the Palace

From the control turret of the space-cylinder, where he sat with Aerita, Grant gazed down upon the tumbled landscape of the little planet, Mercury. He knew now that Mercury presents always the same face to the Sun—one hemisphere eternally in darkness, and the other fiery with heat and glaring light. Aerita had guided her small vehicle now into a twilight zone, where to one side the horizon sky was faintly red-yellow with reflected glow and to the other there was only pallid starlight.

It was a weird and tumbled landscape upon which Grant now, from a height of some ten thousand feet, gazed silently down: a barren waste of metallic, coppery hills with peaks of towering jagged spires; canons like gashes slashed by some monstrous metalworker in mountains of the red metal.

It was a bleak landscape indeed. From here there seemed no life—just bleak glistening hills, in places gleaming with starlight and in others black and ominous with the shadow of low-scudding, turgid red and green clouds. No blade of vegetation was visible. There was no soil, save a glittering red-brown metallic dust, worn by the rain and wind from the metal mountains.

"This—your Light Country?" Grant murmured.

"Yes. The Fire Country is off there." She gestured toward the dull, red-yellow horizon. And then in the opposite direction: "And that way—the Dark Country."

It had been a long trip from Earth; Grant almost had lost track of the passing time with no day nor night here, just the great black abyss of Interplanetary Space with its myriad blazing, distance worlds. Two weeks of Earth-time had passed. It had been an amazing journey, with this strange girl of another world. But with his startled astonishment past, a spirit of grim romantic adventure had come upon him so that he had settled into his life here in these little cubby rooms, impatient for the arrival.

To Grant, never before interested greatly in science save as it applied to the mechanics of Earth's modern aircraft, Aerita's little space-ship was at once a wonder and a fascination. Its rocket streams of electroidal gases, escaping under pressure, were like a comet's tail behind it. Then, leaving Earth's stratosphere, the rocket mechanisms had been shut off; and the intricate system of shifting gravity plates went into operation—attraction and repulsion so that the great masses of the distant stars acted upon the tiny mass of the ship; a flight toward the Sun; cutting the orbit of Venus; and then at last they had come within Mercury's attraction....

To Grant the voyage was an amazement, far beyond the wonders of Interplanetary Space which now were spread around him. There was Aerita—the amazing things she had to tell him. They were incredible things—yet some of them fitted with what his great-grandfather had told him ...

Aerita had not learned English from Wilkins! She had been frightened; had wanted only to tell nothing of herself and escape from him. Her grandfather, an aged scientist, had built this space-cylinder—the only one of its kind now on Mercury. Her grandfather had taught her English; part of her education, as his father and grandfather had taught him.

"You see," Aerita explained, "many years ago Earth people came to Mercury. One of our girls—her name I think was Tama—the legends say that she married an Earthman. We had terrible weapons then on Mercury. I do not know much of what things were like so long ago—it is forbidden now to study it."

"Why?" Grant demanded.

"Because much evil came from those weapons and things of science. Many people were killed. And so—I do not know how—all that was destroyed by our rulers. Our little world and your great Earth—better that they should remain separate. At least, so our rulers have thought for more than a hundred years."

And Aerita was descended through six or seven generations, from that girl of Mercury and that Earthman. Mercury wanted no connection with Earth. Grant, thinking of Earth's great wars—Earth's horrible instruments of diabolic science for the killing of humans—could well understand that attitude of Mercury's rulers!

But the ability to speak English had come down through Aerita's family. Her grandfather spoke it quite well, she said. So did Alto Jeenoh, the present Great Ruler of her people; and a few other leading men of the government spoke it also. To them it was a sign of culture, as a savant on Earth is proud of his knowledge of the dead languages.

It was a strange situation existing now on Mercury—a situation which a hundred and fifty Earth-years before had existed, and seemed to have been solved. But it had not, for now it was smouldering, threatening the little civilization of Aerita's people with disaster. They were the people of the Light Country; their capital was known as the Hill City.

To each world, perhaps over all the Universe, it would seem that the Creator has sown its own allotted portion of the causes of strife! On Mercury, only the females of the Light Country race had wings. And for generations up to now, it had been the law that upon marriage the wings of the young virgins must be clipped, and with a horrible mutilation the muscles cut so that never again could they be used. It was like a badge of submission to the husband. The young girls had been brought up to consider it that, so that they submitted.

Grant could so easily understand how the custom had grown. The physical superiority of the male—to every normal male human, surely that must be an instinct. And these young girls of Mercury, free as fluttering birds in the air—inevitably in contact with them, the Mercurian young men, chained to the ground, felt inferior, humiliated, resentful. Grant's mind went back to that night with Aerita just before they left Earth. Out on the dark little road, she had suddenly escaped from him, fluttered up into the air and like a bird, was gone. He recalled his chagrin; his sense of futility.

And so here on Mercury, no wife could have wings. Then at last, just a year ago, the young virgins had rebelled. A thousand of them in the Hill City, led by Aerita, had vowed that never would they marry until the law was changed and they could keep their wings. Many of them had fled the city; established a wild little eyrie far up in the metal mountains which no man could reach; and much of their time was spent there.

"But my grandfather," Aerita explained, "he really thinks now that the girls are right. He is trying to persuade Alto Jeenoh, our ruler, to change the law. But that has angered our young men—especially those among the workers. They want to use force upon us virgins—those of us that they can catch." She was smiling whimsically. "That is their trouble—they cannot catch us."

"I can well understand that," Grant retorted.

Then she went on to tell him that on Mercury there were only two races—the Light Country people, and savages who lived in the Dark Country. Among the savages, there were now some four hundred criminals, Hill City men who in the past generation had been banished for crimes. One of them, their leader now, was named Rahgg. He was a man of scientific learning who once had worked for her grandfather. He had committed a crime against a young girl—had been exiled to live among the Dark Country savages.

"Your grandfather doesn't believe in the idea of keeping Earth from contact with Mercury?" Grant asked. "If he built this ship—"

"Oh but yes, he does," Aerita exclaimed. "He built this little vessel only with the idea of transportation around Mercury. Or perhaps an adventure to some nearby asteroid."

The cylinder had been built, but not yet tested; and one night Rahgg had come furtively to the Hill City, seizing it and Aerita, carrying her off in it to the Dark Country.

"But I escaped from him," she was saying. "And I got the cylinder—" She gazed at Grant slantwise in a way that made his heart pound. "A woman may think she knows much of science—my grandfather he was trying to teach me—and so I escaped in the cylinder."

A little knowledge is such a dangerous thing. She had thought she understood the workings of the complicated

mechanisms so that she could pilot the cylinder from Rahgg's stronghold in the Dark Country, back to the Hill City. And suddenly she had found herself hurtling out through the Mercurian stratosphere, into the abyss of Interplanetary Space ... It had been a terrifying voyage. But she had survived it; had been only able to understand the intricate workings of the rocket-streams and the little gravity plates when she found herself near the great globe of Earth ... And she had landed and wandered, terrified, confused by the drag of Earth's gravity; not knowing where to go or what to do until in the violence of that summer electrical storm Wilkins had found her ...

To Grant, as he sat now staring down at the naked coppery hills of Mercury with the destination of her home so near at hand, it was as though Nature had woven a monstrous, intricate pattern of weird events—all the pattern of his life and hers—weaving the separate threads until now so strangely they were being-intertwined ...

Swiftly, silently the cylinder slanted downward. The Mercurian twilight of the Light Country had been deepened by heavy, luridly colored clouds which now were close overhead. A rainstorm obviously had passed here. Rivulets of water were cascading down the naked copper hills. Pools of it lay glistening in the hollows. And then Grant saw little patches of soil and trees—oases where rock which was not too metallic had been worn into a soil. And with the heavy, humid heat, a luxurious vegetation had sprung. The cylinder presently passed directly over a little patch of forest. Grant saw great spiny shafts of blue-red trees. They glistened in the dimness with in infra-red glow of the chemistry within them. Vegetation picking carbon dioxide from the swirling air after the storm so that the leaves were palpitating with red luminosity. It was a weird little patch of jungle. The trees seemed flimsy, porous; they were heavy with hanging air-vines of giant spreading leaves and vivid, exotic flowers.

"My home," Aerita suddenly murmured. "Off there—see it?"

The patch of jungle was past; the naked copper hills had come again. Then there was a valley, of trees and fields. And now it seemed to Grant that he could see figures working in the fields where things were growing.

The Hill City lay on the bottom and on the inner sides of a great bowl-like depression in the monster upper plateau of copper wastes which surrounded it. It was a strange little five mile spread of houses—squat metal dwellings of gleaming burnished copper. On the level cauldron floor the houses were set in crescent rows, with streets curving between them. They were sparsely set houses, each with its garden and its little field.

The outskirts of the city went up the inner slopes of the bowl. There were wider streets, like boulevards in concentric rings each a level higher on the slope. And there were other little streets that ascended, running like spokes of a wheel from the center of the valley floor to the thousand foot height of the upper circular rim.

Near to the top, on a great broad coppery ledge with a giant flight of terraced metal steps down from it, a larger dwelling seemed like a government palace perhaps.

A profusion of flowers banked it, and adorned its broad flat roof.

Aerita gestured. "That is my home. My grandfather, he lives there with the Great Counsellor and his men who rule us."

The cylinder was dropping close now. In the semi-darkness with the lurid clouds still overhead, spots of light flared in the weird little city. They were flickering glows, as though from the light of braziers or burning little torches. Aerita was heading for the upper rim where near the palace there was a dark, seemingly level field where she could safely land. The scene outside the sealed cylinder still was soundless. But as they dropped lower, it seemed suddenly to Grant as though there must be undue activity down there. In the lower streets, down at the bottom of the valley, torchlights now were swiftly moving. Then Grant saw a group of milling human figures. And nearer at hand, on the flowered roof of the palace a man was running, plunging down into an opening that led below. Then from the lower palace doorway, other men came out. One was holding a great blazing torch. Its red-yellow light painted their robed figures. For a moment they stood staring down at the city as though with apprehension; and then they retreated back into the building, slamming its huge metal door after them.

"What the devil—" Grant murmured.

Beside him, Aerita was suddenly grim, almost terrified. "The workers, attacking the palace! Oh, they have been threatening to do that."

"But why?"

"Because our girls have been refusing marriage unless the law is changed so that we can keep our wings. The people want us to be forced into marriage! They've threatened to kill Alto Jeenoh, our ruler, unless he will do that!"

A revolt of the workers, storming the palace now to kill the men of government so that they could have their own laws! Aerita shook off Grant's hold as she gasped it. And all her attention was needed now at the cylinder's controls. She had changed her landing place, heading them now for the broad roof garden of the palace. Grant held his breath with perturbation as slowly, with a slight side-drift, the cylinder sank down. They crashed through a spindly tree of the roof garden. There was a thump that shook him and Aerita; but they safely landed.

"Good enough," he exclaimed. She was on her feet with him; triumphant, but frightened. Trembling with haste, she slid open the little pressure door at the bottom of the turret. Grant followed her out; heavy humid air rushed at him—air that for a moment choked him; made his senses reel. He was conscious, as he leaped down into the roof garden of an unfamiliar lightness—the gravity here so much less than that of Earth.

In the luminous heavy haze of the stormy night-air, the torchlight down in the little city to Grant was at first only a blur. Sounds were audible now—the blended murmur of voices floating up—voices of angry menace. And now, far down at the bottom of the giant staircase, he could see where an angry milling crowd was gathering. Torchlit figures waving crude weapons. Then they were starting to mount the terraced steps ...

"Oh come—" In agitation Aerita was pulling at him. "You be careful—not try to jump—you have so much strength—"

It was weird. He felt as though with a leap he could sail twenty feet or more. Aerita was drawing him toward stairs where a winding flight went down into the palace. The interior sounds were floating up—running footsteps; men's excited, frightened voices in the strange Mercutian language.

Grant was clad in long tight trousers of grey-black pin-stripes, with broad leather belt and white silkite shirt. He was bareheaded—his curly brown hair touseled. In the heat his face was flushed—and flushed too with the excitement of this weird crisis into which he was plunging. He was a young Viking Earthman; six feet four; obviously a strange sight here to these little Mercutians ... In one of the upper halls he and Aerita encountered three or four little men. They were perhaps five and a half feet tall; some of them shorter—grey-skinned men with black and silver streaked hair, bushy to the base of the neck. Flowing, glistening fabric-robos of gaudy colors enveloped them.

"Aerita—Aerita—" They gasped as they saw and recognized her. And then they saw Grant—stared mute, stricken with sudden awe and terror. In another moment they scattered, fled into a dark door oval near at hand.

Grant still had the small flashgun which he had taken from Wilkins. It was jammed in his belt; he drew it out now. Aerita saw it and gripped him. Her flushed face was grim.

"That—maybe—" she murmured. "But I hope not to have bloodshed."

He followed her as they went down another big staircase. Near the bottom, instinctively Aerita spread her great wings and fluttered down. Grant took a leap, sailed a dozen feet and landed sprawling. He heard a cry of awe and fear. Another group of the palace inmates was down here—two or three older men; and an older woman. Her white hair was braided and piled on her head. Her folded wings arched behind her shoulders—wings scrawny with feathers moulted in places from them, and shriveled from lack of use. A gaudy tasseled drape hanging down her back partially covered them.

"You come—" Aerita again was dragging at him. She slid the big metal door-slide of the front entrance, and he rushed out with her to the terrace at the top of the great staircase.

It was a tumultuous sight. The milling crowd on the steps was more than half way up now. There were a thousand people at least—men, and a few women. The women carried blazing torches. The men brandished crude weapons—implements

of the fields; knives like swords; huge sticks for bludgeons ...

As Aerita and Grant appeared, a great cry went up. And then a shower of copper stones came hurtling. Most of them fell short, rattling like hail on the burnished copper of the steps. But one or two whizzed by, barely missing Aerita.

Grant seized her. "You come inside—you'll get hurt—killed—"

She flung him off. "I will do this—I will stop them—"

At the edge of the great flight she stood poised—an imperious little figure, facing her angry, frenzied people with her blue-feathered wings spread wide and her arms lifted in a gesture commanding silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

From the Crimson Storm

For a moment the angry throng on the steps was awed into silence. They were grey-skinned men, garbed in what seemed leather garments—jacket and knee-length trousers. The torchlight painted them; and illumined the figures of the women; short, squat, muscular-looking females with folded, atrophied wings. In milling, shoving ranks on the huge staircase they stood staring up at Aerita.

And now she was talking—a liquid flow of syllables, soft, persuasive at first, then rising into an imperious note of command as with an upflung hand she evidently ordered them back down the steps.

Grant, in a shadow of a copper column of the big building, stood watching, holding his breath. From the doorway behind him he was aware that an old man had come. The man had white flowing hair; a seamed, patrician grey face. Aerita's grandfather? And with him was a man perhaps Grant's age—a tall fellow, almost six feet, with bushy coal black hair, long to the base of his neck; a handsome face; high-bridged, hawklike nose, wide mouth and queerly pointed chin. He stood for a moment gazing out at the scene; and momentarily the light from within the palace disclosed his face clearly. He was smiling; queer smile, Grant thought ... a smile that was half a leer. Then he started forward as though to move to Aerita's side; but the old man called him.

"Talone—Talone—" And with a gesture summoned him back.

A stone suddenly whizzed up from down the staircase. It brought Grant's attention back to Aerita. At her command, for a time the crowd had wavered. Then some leader down there rallied them. The stone came hurtling; and as though it were a spark flung into gunpowder, a murmur of angry muttering went up. There were imprecations; then a roar of threats. Another stone came ... Another; then a hail of them as again the menacing crowd began surging upward.

Aerita had lost. A stone struck one of her outstretched wings so that it quivered, flapped with the pain. But still she held her ground, her little voice calling with imperious command ... With a leap, Grant was beside her.

"Aerita—Aerita dear—" He waved his flashgun at her. There was no way of re-charging it here on Mercury, but he knew that it had two or three brief bolts left in it. "Aerita, I'll show them—"

"Oh—Oh Alan—my people—"

But surely it was necessary. Grant could see now one of the leaders down there—a big grey fellow with a gaudy rag around his forehead. Brandishing a glittering, spearlike implement, he was mounting the steps, urging the others after him. Grant leveled his little weapon. The crowd had not noticed him before, but it saw him now and a great shout went up—the gasping of a few voices, then others until a thousand throats were crying out with astonishment and awe.

Grant's flashgun in that same second spat its little bolt—a hissing, sizzling pencilray of electroidal charge, violet-red in the twilight dimness. It caught the big man full in the chest. His scream was lost in the roar of the crowd as he tumbled forward. In a heap his body hit the copper stairs, wavered and then fell backwards—gathering momentum as it went down end over end, then rolling with limp flailing arms and legs—down the steps until it crashed into the terrified crowd behind it ...

It was just one shot of the little Earth-gun. To the Mercutians it was miraculous. For that moment the throng, awed into terrified silence, stood mutely staring. Some, far in the rear, were still shouting in anger, but those in front began wavering until in another moment they all fled in terror. The giant staircase was empty, with just the huddled form of the dead man lying there alone.

"Well, we did it," Grant murmured. "But if they come back—" He stared ruefully at his little weapon.

"Oh they will," Aerita gasped. "Not tonight maybe. But they have dared once—and they have been threatening it so long. We will have to see with my grandfather what is to be done."

She was staring out over the horizon. Storm-clouds seemed again gathering out there—weird clouds with a lurid red sheen to them. And now there was a puff of wind.

"A crimson storm coming," Aerita murmured. "They will not attack the palace again—not now if a storm comes. You come inside, Alan. You will meet my grandfather—and Alto Jeenoh."

Those first hours on Mercury, to Grant, were strange indeed. He and Aerita were given supper in one of the big palace rooms while the girl breathlessly explained what had happened to her. The old man whom Grant had seen behind them on the terrace was Polter, her grandfather. With Alto Jeenoh, grey-bearded ruler in a long brocaded robe, they sat talking of Aerita's adventures; and then Grant was telling them of Earth. The young Mercutian who had been called Talone had vanished. He was, Grant understood now, one of Jeenoh's young lieutenants in the administration of Government affairs. They all spoke in English, seeming proud to be able to speak it.

Outside the palace, Grant could hear that the weird Mercutian storm was coming closer. The puffs of wind were more frequent and more violent. The twilight gloom was deepening into night—an outer darkness lurid with a red sheen. Here in the palace room, with its low vaulted metal ceiling, metal furniture and luxurious fabric-drapes, the brazier cast a yellow flickering glow. But at the oval windows the blood light of the darkness outside was like a red stain in the night. And now it began raining—a rattle against the palace walls and on its metal roof ...

Old Polter had been questioning Grant with a keen, grave intelligence on the recent history of Earth. He had seen Grant's flashgun; smiling gravely, he had made Grant fire the tiny bolt through the window until the gun's charge was exhausted. He had heard Grant tell of Earth's horrible lethal weapons, so huge in size that a thousand men might be killed in one flash from them ... And then he said gravely,

"When your visit here is over, Earthman, should you take my little space-car to go back to Earth, then you will promise me to smash it when you arrive. Here on Mercury we have no science like that. Perhaps we are better for it."

Then young Talone silently appeared and came and joined them. Aerita, with Grant, had withdrawn to a side of the room, where they sat together, silently listening as the two older men, and Talone, excitedly discussed the rebellion of the workers.

"I do not understand our people," the grey-bearded Jeenoh was saying. "I have promised them that I will do my best to persuade the young virgins—"

"But they do not believe you," Talone put in. He was standing a little apart from the others; tall, graceful figure in blue-grey trousers and shirt, with a swaggering cloak hanging from his shoulders. Light from the room's burning brazier illumined his handsome, hawk-nosed face; and on it Grant saw that same half-smile, almost like a leer. It made him tense. Somehow he sensed that he wasn't going to like this young Talone. He tried to shrug it off, wondering if it was because Talone had seemed affectionate with Aerita.

"And now," old Polter was saying, "the workers even seem to be having new complaints. Their conditions of work—their houses—"

Could it be that the people were being incited into discontent? The thought leaped into Grant's mind.

"I do not know what we should do," Jeenoh went on. He turned momentarily toward Aerita and Grant. "You, Aerita—I have let you influence me. And now we have another danger. Those accursed savages of the Dark Country—never have they dared attack us for half my lifetime. But now I have had rumours that they are planning something. That damnable fellow Rahgg whom we banished—if he would dare organize them—"

Was Rahgg and his murderous little band of Hill City criminals, out there among the savages of the Dark Country, planning now an invasion? A conquest so that he and his men would rule here, and force the flying girls to their will? If that were so, this discontent of the workers here would be exactly what he wanted.

"If you would try and build us some weapons of science, Polter," Jeenoh was saying. "Or send young Grant to Earth, to

get some—"

"Never!" Polter exclaimed. "When man arms to kill, always will he find reasons to kill. The example of Earth is not for us."

The talk went on. After a time, young Talone withdrew. Outside the palace, Grant now could hear that it was raining with a torrential downpour; and through the crescent windows the green-yellow and crimson glow of the storm-clouds was even more lurid. The rain was now a clatter against the metal building; and there was the roar of the irrigation-flumes—wide metal chutes which carried the water down from the metal hills beyond the city, carrying it far out to some of the distant fields which between storms were parched by the heat and by the fire storms which came at intervals from the Fire Country ...

Then Aerita withdrew upon some household duty. In a corner of the room, Grant was left alone. An uneasiness was on him; a sense of something of evil which might be impending now. Old Polter and Jeenoh were still arguing. But Grant hardly listened to them. And suddenly, out in the roar of the weird Mercutian storm, it seemed that he heard a faint cry. Then there was a fluttering of wings; and through an open window on the lee side of the room a young girl came fluttering.

Her name was Arma. Grant had heard of her from Aerita. She was one of Aerita's closest friends—an ardent worker in the cause of the virgins. Drenched so that her pallid robe clung to her little body, her long pale hair stringy with the rain, she fluttered to the floor. She was panting, gasping out in her own language. Then she saw Grant.

"Oh," she gasped, "An Earthman? You see, I speak the English—Aerita, she taught me. I have just come from our mountain nest, to see you and Aerita—"

These Mercutian girls were like birds, able to wing so swiftly from one place to another! One of the Hill City girls had flown with the news that Aerita and a strange man from another world were in the palace.

"And one of our girls was flying today high over the Dark Country," Arma added breathlessly. "There is something that they are doing there—strange lights, and men are assembling. Where is Aerita?"

The threatened invasion of the savages, and Rahgg's criminals? Was that coming now?

"Where is Aerita?" Arma insisted. Grant was on his feet. And suddenly he was stricken with a stab of horror. Through the palace a distant scream sounded; A girl's scream of terror! Aerita! Her scream welled out; and then abruptly it was smothered, choked with a ghastly abruptness so that it died away into shuddering, horrible silence!



CHAPTER FIVE

The Flight on the Flying Platform

In that breathless second, Arma, the young flying girl, stood with old Polter and Jeenoh—all three of them numbed, transfixed. Grant got his wits. Instantly he turned, dashed from the room. The scream had seemed to come from a nearby corridor. He plunged into it; saw a distant opened doorway with the light of a brazier streaming out from it. Then a bounding leap took him almost to the corridor ceiling, and landed him at the door.

On the floor of the room Aerita was lying, apparently unconscious. Her wings were bound behind her; and over her a man was bending, with fabric rope tying her ankles and wrists. From his gigantic leap, Grant had landed in a heap in the doorway. The man saw him; straightened from Aerita. It was Talone. His face was grim in the brazier light; his dark eyes were flashing.

Grant was scrambling to his feet, but Talone was quicker. A table was near him, with a heavy copper ornament upon it. He seized the missel; hurled it. Grant had no time to duck. He was aware of the crash of the metal blob on his head. And the room seemed to burst into roaring light as he fell. Dimly he was aware that Talone contemptuously had kicked him. And that Talone was lifting Aerita; carrying her through a nearby window, out into the roar of the storm ... Then for Grant everything faded into the blank abyss of unconsciousness ...

Then he was aware that within a minute or two he was recovering. He found himself sitting up, with blood matting his hair and his senses still reeling. Arma, Polter and Jeenoh were just entering the room.

Grant staggered to his feet. "Talone!" he gasped. "He took her—"

They crowded after him as with returning strength he staggered to the window. The rain and lurid storm-murk made the scene outside a turgid blur. Then a vivid flash of crimson lightning split the sky. For a second or two the rain-swept copper hills were illumined. Far away to one side at the edge of one of the giant flumes, Talone was visible, carrying Aerita. And then with her he leaped into the flume. The darkness closed in, but in a moment there was another flash. Far down the roaring flume, Grant had an instant glimpse of what seemed a tiny raft with Talone and Aerita upon it, riding it down the ten mile long chute of roaring water ...

For an instant Grant stood numbed. No man could follow that plunging little craft. Then he thought of Polter's space-cylinder, up on the palace roof. He seized Arma. "You come with me. We'll go after her—"

"Oh yes—I can fly. But you—"

"In the space-cylinder. It's here on the roof."

Polter was standing confused. Jeenoh was at the doorway, shouting futile orders at the other palace attendants who came running. Grant ignored them all; with Arma after him they hurried out of the room; up the palace stairs, out onto the rain-swept roof.

The space-cylinder was gone! There was no sign of it here, save the small tree which it had crushed in landing ... Into Grant's mind leaped the memory that Talone had been missing for an hour or more earlier in the evening. He and perhaps some confederate had doubtless stolen the ship then; and with the storm, no one had happened to come up here and discover its loss.

Grant stared numbly at the winged girl beside him. A searching party of men on foot would hardly be able to overtake and locate Talone now in a storm like this.

"I can fly to find them," Arma timidly offered.

Grant shook his head. "You couldn't do anything if you did. He'll make for the Dark Country—join some of his men out there somewhere, very probably." He gripped her. "Arma listen—if you could fly now and get some of your girls. Just

seven—here in the city—"

"For the platform? And on it, we carry you—"

"Yes."

Aerita had told him how she had built a little platform on which the flying girls could carry her grandfather. They had practiced with it, but old Polter had disdained it—being carried by girls was beneath his dignity. The platform, Grant knew, was stored here on the palace roof, under a shed at one end. The dark outlines of the shed were visible now, blurred by the storm murk.

"If it's here, Anna—"

"Oh yes, I do hope so."

They rushed across the roof. The platform was here, under the protecting shed—a six foot, oblong raft-like affair made of light porous wood. It was built so that eight of the girls, four on each side, could carry it through the air.

"I will go now," Anna said. "I can get the girls—you wait here—I be not long." A gust of wind carried her fluttering body sidewise as she rose into the air; then she steadied herself, and with great flapping wings, sped off into the murk ... It seemed an eternity to the apprehensive Grant as he waited on the roof. He could picture the villainous Talone now out there somewhere in the storm with Aerita, beyond the distant end of the flume, heading up into the mountains for the Dark Country ... It was Talone, of course, a spy of Rahgg's here, who had been inciting the workers into revolt ... If only Grant had known that. How easy it would have been to wring the fellow's neck!...

The wind of the storm seemed easing a little, but the rain still was torrential ... Then at last a flash of the weird crimson lightning showed him blobs in the nearby air. They were a cluster of girls ... They came fluttering down with back-flapping wings; Arma and seven of her little companions. Flushed, panting and eager they ran at Grant with jabbering little voices in their own language. Then Arma shoved them to the platform. Four long rods were fastened under it, projecting out at each side so as to give the girls room to fly. In a moment Grant was lying prone on it, gripping its hand-holds.

It was a weird flight. Carried by the eight girls, the platform rose from the garden roof. The storm-wind caught it; tossed it crazily. For a moment Grant feared that it would turn over, or be wrenched from the girls' hands. Beside him, four on each side, they struggled with frantic flapping wings. Then the gust eased a little; the platform came into control, leveled as the girls, settling into a rhythmic beat of wings, flew swiftly onward.

For a time Grant could see very little. The great sheets of rain, crimson in the stormlight, pelted him. The wind and the rain thudded past his ears. There was only a blur of drenched naked coppery ground far down, the turgid, red-green and crimson cloud-masses overhead; and the reality of the flying girls here beside him.

He called to Arma. The wind tore at his words and hurled them away. "Out past that flume-end, Arma. A few miles and then circle—flying low—we ought to be able to see them—"

She nodded. The girls were swooping lower now; the glistening rain-swept hills seemed only a few hundred feet down. They passed the flume-end where it divided into a ramified network at a huge cultivated field, beside which the water was dammed into a system of small canals to be used when needed. There was no sign of any fleeing figures down there.

The frail, wind-tossed platform swept on. Beneath it Grant saw only naked, undulating copper plains now. The stormlight gleamed on them with a crimson sheen. Somehow it made Grant shudder with a new stab of apprehension. It was a blood-red little landscape. Even the wet-clinging drapes, the hair and the beating wings of the girls flying beside him—all were tainted with the blood-glare. It was as though this were an omen of things to come ...

Abruptly Grant was aware that Arma was gesturing; then he heard her excited words: "See? Down there ahead—"

Far ahead, down on a ragged little plateau, a cluster of dark blobs was visible. They grew in a moment to be revealed as

hurrying men. Talone, with Aerita beside him. And they had been joined now by a party of a dozen or more. They were not the coppery almost naked savages which Aerita had described, but men in the fashion of the Light Country people. With dark cloaks shrouding them, they were hurrying forward. They were criminals of Rahgg's murderous band of outlaws, Grant realized.

"Arma—wait—" he called. Could he hope successfully to attack these men?... Grant's little flashgun had been exhausted. He had only a long, thin-bladed knife here now ...

He was suddenly aware that the platform was swooping down; and beside him, with one hand free the flying Arma gestured.

"We have knives—all of us—you will see—"

Her hand waved the little knife. The storm-glare glinted blood-red on its naked copper blade. Before Grant had time to give any commands or to plan anything, the platform had swooped ahead of the dark little band of men down on the rocks. They saw it, and a shout floated up. They stopped; gathered in a group with Aerita in their midst.

Then, two or three hundred feet beyond them, in the crimson haze of rain and semi-darkness the platform landed with a thump. Grant, knife in hand, leaped to his feet.

"Anna—look here—you girls—"

But they had dropped the platform-handles; heedless of him, they were flapping up into the air; gathering into a fluttering group. For a second Grant stared up at them, transfixed with astonishment. Off in the gloom he could see the figures of Talone and his men. On a run, he started toward them, and close over his head the girls were fluttering. They went past him like a little flock of birds; luffed up into the wind until they were over Talone's men. And then with great wings poised motionless, they swooped down to the attack!

It was a blur of chaos to Grant as with huge bounding leaps he went forward through the rain. He was still nearly two hundred feet away when the girls swooped down, like an amazing little covey of giant birds. The grouped men, with the weird attack taking them by surprise, for an instant were confused. Armed with knives and swords, they tried to stab upward at the fluttering figures above them. It was an instant of melee. Grant could dimly see the men standing on the rocks, wildly flailing their arms, confused by the bird-like attack of the girls who came fluttering, stabbed down and instantly darted up again. One of the men fell; then another. A girl who had darted down and up again, seemed wounded. For a second she flapped, and then plummeted down, crashing on the rocks where she lay motionless with only her wings quivering as she died ...

Grant realized that he was shouting now—shouting defiance to draw attention to himself. He could see that Aerita was on her feet; her wings were still bound, and the figure of Talone was beside her, gripping her. The fluttering girls, in a menacing little group were hovering ten feet above the clustered men; and then again they dove ...

Grant was within thirty feet of the melee when suddenly he checked his advance. Beneath the frenzied, darting attack of the winged girls, several of the men now had fallen. Two or three others were making away in the lurid, storm-swept darkness. And Grant saw that Talone had swept Aerita off her feet into his arms—carrying her, running with her. A girl pounced from the murk above him, but Talone beat her off. He was heading for a great cluster of metal rocks which lay against the side of a nearby ascending slope. Grant turned, made after him.

Clouds of crimson storm-vapour were here now, wisps of fog, red as blood, trailing close above the ground. Through them, Grant just barely could see the figure of Talone as he climbed the rocks. Then like a bounding antelope with fifteen foot leaps Grant was upon him, so that Talone dropped Aerita and turned. His sword-knife was in his hand; the blood light of the crimson fog illumined his contorted face, stamped with his murderous fury.

Grant's sailing body catapulted into him. A stab like a thrust of hot steel went through Grant's shoulder as Talone's knife sank deep. They fell together as Talone went backwards from the impact; locked together, rolling, plunging. Grant's knife had clattered from his hand. The long thin blade of Talone's knife broke off in Grant's shoulder as they fell. Grant's

senses for an instant swooped with the pain of his wound. He was aware that the agile Talone had twitched loose and leaped to his feet. With his head reeling, Grant staggered up, stood for a second staring dizzily into the murk of the storm. Then he saw Talone running over the rocks, making away, and in another instant he had vanished.

Aerita was here on the ground, seeming dazed. Grant bent over her, "You're all right, Aerita? Not hurt—"

"All right—" she murmured. "But, oh Alan, you—your shoulder—"

"Damn him—he got away—" He turned to run after Talone, but Aerita seized him.

"No, Alan—your shoulder—the blood there ... Let him go. He can do us no harm now."

Her wings still were bound. She held Grant as he staggered; he almost fell; and she made him sit on the ground until the girls came and gathered around them.

On the flying platform, the wounded Grant lay with Aerita beside him as the girls sped back through the dying storm ... It was a triumphant return. But out there on the rocks, two of the girls were lying ... Aerita was still dazed from the drug Talone had forced upon her, but she was recovering now ...

She clung to Grant, holding him with one of her little hands caressing his rain-drenched hair. "You are all right now?" she murmured. "Alan—you—not hurt too badly?"

"No, it's nothing, Aerita. Just a flesh wound. I'm all right. And you are too? Thank God."

Beside them the six flying girls labored on through the red rain and wind which now were abating. Grant was pondering. Would Rahgg dare now or some time soon, to attack the Hill City?

"He has the space-cylinder now," Grant told Aerita. "Heaven knows what he'll try and do with it. Aerita, your grandfather said that he had built a tiny affair with which we might send a message to Earth. If Earth only knew that we needed electroidal weapons here—"

"Maybe we can send it, Alan. I think even that grandfather would have sent it himself, if we had not returned tonight. He is very stubborn about not wanting any connection with Earth. But he would want Earth weapons very quickly, if he knew that any terrible danger threatened me. He is very worried about us by now, Alan."

Then she lay with his arm around her, for a moment silent as the crimson murk swirled past them. And Grant was conscious that she was regarding him with her quaint whimsical smile.

"I was thinking," she murmured, "I am still eager for our cause—not to have our wings mutilated." Her great wings, unbound now, spread a little. She was gazing at Grant slantwise, and she added shyly,

"But I know now, I could love a man so much he—he could cut my wings when I was his wife, if—if that is what he wanted."

"But it isn't," Grant responded. His heart was pounding. His arm tightened around her. "My wife will have her wings—to fly free—glorious. That's what I want."

She had no answer; there was just the trembling pressure of her hand on his. Then suddenly a cry from one of the girls sounded. Following her gesture, Grant and Aerita stared into the crimson storm murk. Far ahead and to one side, a blob showed in the gloom—cylindrical finned blob with a luminous stream of gas like a tail behind it.

It was the space-ship! It carried Rahgg's men! They had seen the struggling little platform, undoubtedly. In a great crescent, the ship was swooping down. All the flying girls had seen it now. For an instant they fluttered in a panic. Then Arma steadied them with vehement words of command.

The harried little platform was buffeted by the wind as the girls struggled through the storm. There were only six of them. Carrying both Aerita and Grant, from the start it had been too heavy; and the girls were tired now. Vainly they tried to

sweep sidewise, to escape the oncoming ship; but it saw them, turned its swift-sailing course again to cut them off. Then it was close; hardly more than a hundred feet. Grant could see that its lower doorway was open; men were standing there.

And then a light sprang from the doorway—a little blue-white searchbeam that caught the platform, bathed it in a glare. In the silence of a wind-lull a voice shouted with a triumphant jibe.

"Turn us!" Grant murmured tensely. "They can't turn as quickly."

The platform darted sidewise. But the light clung; the little cylinder-ship, agile with its rocket streams, made another swooping arc. It was behind them now—five hundred feet, but with its greater speed, it was overhauling them. Then it turned a little; again came almost abreast.

"Aerita listen—" Grant murmured. He seized her by the shoulders. "Tell your girls to land us—quickly now. They can scatter and fly away—"

"No! No, Alan—"

The light still clung to them. In the illumined doorway, Grant saw one of the men raise his arm as though hurling a sling-shot. A coppery knife-blade glinted—little foot-long naked blade of copper with a finned fan-tail. It glistened as it came speeding like an arrow in the shaft of light. And it struck one of the girls. She screamed with a horrible, suppressed little cry; wavered against the platform handle she was gripping. The blade was in her breast. For a second, like a great mortally wounded bird she flopped. The platform handle broke off as her body hung on it; and then she was flopping down and backward in the darkness.

"Good God—" Grant gasped. "Aerita—land us, I tell you!"

"Oh Alan—you—you'll be killed—"

Another little blade came flying; then another. Two more of the girls were hit; one of them dropped. Grant was shouting that they must land. The platform was wavering, lurching. Beneath him Grant could see, some two hundred feet down, the dark, backward-sliding spread of crimsoned copper rocks. Only five frightened girls to struggle with it now, and one of them was hanging almost a dead weight on her handle with her wings quivering where a copper blade had buried itself in her shoulders between them.

It was a chaos to Grant. He was aware that he was trying to lurch to his feet, to jump from the swaying platform so that the girls would drop it and wing away.

"No!" Aerita screamed. "Alan, no! You will be killed—"

They were a hundred feet over the rocks now. Grant half fell, half jumped from the platform into the air; and in that same second Aerita had leaped and seized him; clung to him, her arms around him, her wings wildly flopping, trying to break the fall ...

"Oh—Alan dear—"

They wavered down ... Grant saw uprushing, gleaming red-brown rocks ... He was conscious only of Aerita clinging to him, her wings wildly flapping ...

"Aerita—let me go—" He was trying to push her away.

"Oh Alan dear—"

The uprushing, jagged rocks were close. He was vaguely conscious of the crash—all his body seeming stabbed with pain for just a second as his senses were hurled off into the blank dark abyss of unconsciousness! It was a blankness lasting only a moment. He came out of it with Aerita still clinging to him. Bruised and battered he tried dizzily to stand up; tried to force her away from him so that she might save herself.

The space-ship had landed nearby. Then Rahgg's men came rushing; seized Aerita and Grant. In a moment more they were carried triumphantly and slammed into the ship; and it rose, sailed swiftly away for Rahgg's stronghold, far up in the black metal mountains of the Dark Country!

CHAPTER SIX

Raiders from Space

In the living room of his home, in one of the Northern distant suburbs of the great New York City, Philip Grant sat staring at a sheaf of charred fragments of paper-like sheets which lay on the table before him. He was a handsome young fellow, this brother of Alan Grant—tall, slim with a touseled mop of black curly hair. He looked older than his eighteen years—perhaps especially old tonight as with grim face and puzzled dark eyes he gazed moodily at the cryptic charred sheets. This fragmentary message, seemingly from another world—why in the devil had it been addressed to him? Why indeed, unless it had something to do with Alan's disappearance.

It was mid-August, 2093—a month and five days since so mysteriously Alan Grant had vanished—when on a beach of one of the Hawaiian islands, a small, bullet-like contrivance of shining copper was found. A projectile which seemingly had fallen from the sky; its outer copper casing was fused and pitted with the heat of falling through Earth's atmosphere. And it had crashed, so that most of its weird mechanisms were broken. The native who found it had notified the local authorities. And then they discovered that there was a message—or at least it seemed like something of the sort—upon a strange form of paper within the projectile's interior. They were words scrawled in English. But the heat had charred the paper, parchment or whatever it was, so that most of the words were unintelligible. Its address was legible—to Philip Grant—his address in the suburb of New York City.

And the signature was the single word—"Polter."

The weird little copper mechanism was examined by several scientists; but its mechanisms were so smashed that they could make almost nothing of it. The cryptic, fragmentary little message was studied; and then by aircar it was forwarded to Philip Grant.

Philip, all this day, had been studying it with the authorities of his district; and with his employers in the Government Laboratories of Research Physics, where he worked. Now, baffled, he had taken it home, carefully placing it on his table under the blue-white glare of a tubelight—staring as though by sheer will power he could draw from its charred ashes the secret hidden there.

They were tantalizing fragments. He studied them over and over, pondering them with wild conjectures ... "*Need the help from you of weapons*—" That phrase was fairly clear. Someone needed help. And then there seemed a more sinister hint: "*And so you ... beware if Rahgg comes ...*"

The burned scroll gave nothing else which could be construed to have any meaning at all ... Except the words: "*Please—you hurry*—"

Young Phil Grant, with a hand rumpling his wavy black hair, sat sprawled before his table. It was now nearly midnight. This home where for several years he had been living with Alan, was a small metal cottage in a lonely neighborhood of the little hills which stretched back from the shining Hudson river. His housekeeper had gone for the night. He was alone here. The living room was dim, with just its spot of tubelight on the table where the charred fragments of the message were lying.

"*And so you ... beware if Rahgg comes ...*" The scrawled words in quaintly formed letters stared up at Phil as though mutely trying to add something else ... "*And so you*—" Did that mean him personally? Probably it did, since "Polter" whoever he was, had addressed the message to Phil Grant. "*Beware if Rahgg comes*—" Who in the devil was Rahgg?

In the silence of his living room, Phil shifted uneasily in his chair. Somehow he felt as though even now there was a menace here—something weird, gruesome perhaps, which might be stalking him. The room was on the ground floor of the little cottage. The opened windows were dark triangles with a splash of blackness from the trees which were outside.

Then the silence abruptly was broken by a buzz, so unexpected that it jangled with Phil's taut nerves and brought him to

his feet. But it was only the warning signal from his news-service audiphone—the signal to its subscribers that something of unusual interest was about to be broadcast.

He turned on the instrument, and in a moment the newscaster's voice began droning:

"Dobb's Ferry, Hudson River Arsenal Raided! Government Storehouse of the New Errentine High-power Short-Range Hand-flash Projectors Attacked by Mysterious Raiders ..."

Tense, breathless, Phil sat listening. The raid had just been discovered; there were as yet, few details. Three of the watchmen at the Government storehouse had been found dead—slashed throats and one had a strange copper knife-blade, with a finned tip like an arrow, buried in his heart ... How many of the small, hand projectors were gone was not as yet known. A thousand perhaps ...

The Dobb's Ferry Arsenal was hardly more than three miles down the river from Phil's home here. He stared around his dim little living room; and again that phrase of the cryptic burned message leaped into his mind. *"Need the help from you of weapons—"* Polter needed Earth weapons. Was it this Polter who now had raided the arsenal? But there was that other phrase: *"Beware if Rahgg comes—"*

The newscaster's voice droned on. Then there was another announcement:

"Mackay Projector Plant Raided! Murderous Dobb's Perry Raiders Also Assail the Big Mackay Munitions Plant and Research Laboratories! Eight Workmen on Night-shift found Dead!"

The Mackay Plant! It was in the Dobb's Ferry Neighborhood—a factory where the modern giant-flash, long-range projectors were being built! Five of them were found to be missing. The Mackay Research Laboratories recently had been taken over by the Anglo-American Government, and it was there that Phil worked. He reached for his public-wave audiphone to try and call his employer. But another even more startling announcement from the newscaster checked him.

"Mysterious Clue Found Near Raided Mackay Plant!"

In a small level field where evidently something had landed, crushing the grass and a few saplings, a small white oblong of what might be a strange form of paper had been found. Words in English were scribbled on it, in brown-red—what perhaps might prove to be blood. It was a weird inexplicable message, the newscaster was saying. The words were:

"Phil—watch out—after XL-Z2—"

It was evidently a hastily written little message. The signature was only an illegible scrawl ...

But Phil understood it! He sat breathless, tense, staring numbly at the grid of his newsphone. That little message in blood was addressed to him. XL-Z2 was a formula for a new-type electroid flash of greater duration and higher voltage—research work which he had been doing here at home—in his own private little laboratory here which adjoined the living room. He had hoped to perfect it and then present it to the Government. No one knew of it, except Alan!

Then Alan must be here among these raiders! Alan was trying to warn him!...

The newscaster's voice was still droning, but Phil hardly heard it. From a desk drawer near at hand he seized his small flash gun; and then the newscaster was saying something additionally startling, so that he dropped back into his seat, with the gun on his lap ...

"Mt. Killington Observatory Reports Strange Object Detected This Afternoon close beyond Earth's Stratosphere ... Tiny flying Meteorite Perhaps ..."

It could not be the little projectile which had brought the message from "Polter"; that had dropped from the sky over the Pacific yesterday. This was this afternoon ... These raiders—

Abruptly Phil's weird thoughts were stricken away. Mingled with the soft drone of the newscaster's voice there seemed a sound over by one of his windows. He stared; but the window, twenty feet away from him, was only an empty dark

triangle. Phil's flashgun was alert in his hand. Then his gaze drifted to the little sheaf of charred paper which lay on his table.

The charred papers were moving! Trembling; quivering! And then all in that second the charred sheaf was sliding on the table toward the window. Air was sucking it! The sheets broke apart, scattering as with a rush they went out of the window!

Phil was on his feet now; and weirdly he could feel the suction—all the air in the room, suddenly rushing at the window so that there was a breeze from behind him of air coming in the door from the house corridor. He braced himself in the blast, but the rug on which he was standing was sliding with his body toward the window. The door behind him banged as it swung wide open.

It all happened in a few seconds. Something—some mechanism—was at the window, sucking out the room's air; pulling Phil forward! Then it seemed that he saw a dark moving blur there. His flash sizzled through the opening—spat its blue-white bolt; evidently missed, for he heard a low startled oath, and then a guttural laugh.

The thump of Phil's body against the window casement all but knocked the breath from him. But the suction was gone now. He shoved himself back into the room, with his weapon leveled, spitting again out into the darkness. Then he was aware that something had been thrown at him through the window. It seemed to be a tiny globe. It struck his forehead; shattered like thin, splintering glass. Something wet ran down his face. He dashed it away with his coat-sleeve; and then, with a leap, snapped out the room-light and crouched behind a chair, with the flashgun up on its seat, again leveled at the empty window.

They'd have a pretty hard time getting in here at him. If they tried a rush, he'd kill as many as he could ... His public-wave audiphone was here on the table; cautiously he reached for it ... The wet stuff on his face was pungent with an acrid smell. Was that what was making his head roar?...

Phil's groping hand never reached his audiphone. The roaring in his head was suddenly like a Niagara torrent. The dim outlines of the silent room were blurring, fading into a black abyss with luminous spots like pin-points of tiny stars. Vaguely he knew now that he was drugged ... That damnable little drug-bomb breaking on his forehead ...

Dimly he heard the clatter of his gun as it fell from his numbed hand. And it seemed that outside the dark window there was another low guttural laugh. Then he knew that his body had crumpled and fallen onto the polished metal floor. Dark weird figures seemed to be coming through the window; bending over him.

He was powerless to move, drugged, but still dimly conscious. Low guttural voices in a strange language sounded as the men lifted him; carried him through the window. Then like a limp sack he felt himself thrown over the shoulder of one of them. The dark tree-branches of the woods here were over him. He was aware of the swaying, rhythmic tread of the man carrying him, with the others, weird dark forms, crowding around him. Then the outlines of a low, cylindrical thing of metal loomed ahead. A little space-ship. Its doorway was open, and Phil was carried into it.

His head was roaring. He felt himself dropped onto a soft padded floor; and then his consciousness completely faded.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lost in the Copper Desert

Phil came to himself with the feeling that a long time must have elapsed. He felt that he was still lying on something soft; and that his body was bathed in cold sweat. But he seemed uninjured; and as he opened his eyes he could feel his strength swiftly coming back to him. Dim room walls were faintly visible—walls of a narrow little cubby here. It glowed with a weird sheen and throbbed with a low rhythmic distant hum ...

"Oh Phil—speak to me—" It was a familiar, anxious voice. Then he realized that Alan was here beside him, bending anxiously over him.

His older brother Alan, like himself was a prisoner here in the small space-cylinder, on its way now to Mercury ... Phil, still dazed by the drug which only now after many hours was wearing off, lay listening to his brother—trying to understand these weird things ...

Alan and Aerita had been captured by Rahgg and his band of criminals, that night in the crimson storm when the flying platform had fallen. And now Rahgg had come to Earth in the stolen little ship which Aerita's grandfather, old Polter, had built.

"They brought Aerita and me with them," Alan was saying. His voice turned grim. "They've threatened her with torture—to make me tell what I knew of Earth. Where weapons could be found—and about you—your formula XL-Z2. Did they get it, Phil?"

"No, I guess not," Phil murmured. "I had it locked in my desk in the lab. I don't know—that damn drug-bomb knocked me out—" He gripped Alan. "I heard a newscaster tell about that message from you—"

Alan's handsome, rugged face bore a faint wry smile. "I stuck my finger—used the blood. Just a chance that it would get to you."

In the darkness of the cubby, for a time Phil lay quiet, trying to understand what Alan was telling him of Mercury; of this Rahgg who was planning an invasion of the Light Country, and its capital, the Hill City. And Rahgg had the weapons now that he needed.

"Did you hear what was taken?" Alan was asking. "They kept me confined here on the ship—after they'd forced me to tell them where to land."

"A thousand or so of the Errentine short-range hand-guns," Phil said. "And at the Mackay plant—I guess only five of the big projectors."

"And flare-bombs probably," Alan muttered. He seemed shuddering. "Phil, good Lord, if you could realize what weapons like that will do to the little Hill City—with not much more than flying girls—maybe a thousand of them—to protect it."

Phil had no answer. He was still weak and dazed; his head was roaring. But every moment now he could feel his senses clearing and his strength coming back. The rhythmic distant hum was a faint throb ... It seemed to lull him, as though it would put him back to sleep. He roused himself, shook off his lethargy and sat up beside Alan.

"Where are we?" he demanded.

"On the way back to Mercury."

"Far out?"

"Well beyond the Earth's stratosphere," Alan said. "You were—"

He checked himself. Phil heard a door-slide open; a shaft of faint pallid light came in from what seemed a small vaulted corridor; and a dark figure was there. It was a woman. Phil stared blankly as she came forward with a tray of food and drink for Alan in her hands.

"Oh—thank you, Zara," Alan said.

"He—that your brother—" she murmured in soft, broken English. "He—better now?"

"Yes, thanks, he's all right."

"I tell to Rahgg."

She put down her tray and then she lingered, staring at Phil and then at Alan. The corridor light disclosed her now to be young, a girl hardly more than twenty perhaps. A strange, barbaric young girl. She was short, no more than five feet tall, clad in a brief scarf-like red robe. The skin of her limbs, neck and face gleamed in the pallid light—bronze skin, glistening like burnished copper. Her face, flat-nosed, with a wide mouth faintly smiling now, was queerly sensuous. One could have imagined that among her own savage people she was beautiful, exotic. She had no wings. The copper skin of her bare back was smooth as burnished metal. On her head, her sleek black hair was piled high, with glittering baubles for ornaments stuck in it.

She was a savage woman of the Dark Country people. Phil realized it by what Alan already had told him. Baubles dangled from her wrists and knees; they tinkled as she moved. Then she lingered, with hands on her hips, her dark eyes staring at Alan with a smouldering gleam.

"Your brother, not so big—like you," she murmured.

"No—that's right, Zara," Alan said. He spoke to her as though she were a child. "You tell Rahgg my brother is all right now."

"Yes." But still she lingered. "You like—food there? It good?"

"Oh yes. Thanks, Zara."

She turned; the door-slide clicked closed and locked after her.

"Well, I'll be damned," Phil murmured. "She likes the look of you, doesn't she? What's the idea?"

Alan laughed; but it was a grim laugh. "Seems to have taken a fancy to me. Because I'm so big, she says. She's been waiting on me ever since we left Mercury."

"You taught her English in that little time?"

"She knew some of it—learned it from Rahgg. She's been his serving maid." Alan's smile faded. He lowered his voice, leaning closer to Phil over the tray as they ate the food. "If we're ever to escape, Phil—it will be through Zara," he murmured. "She'll do anything for me if it gets me away from Aerita—"

"I get you."

"Well if you do," Alan retorted, "you keep your mouth shut about it. Not a word, where there would be any chance we'd be overheard."

"All right."

They finished the meal. Then footsteps sounded. The slide opened again.

"Oh, you Talone," Alan greeted. "What do you want?"

Phil stared as the handsome Light Country villain came into the cubby and stood gazing down at them. Talone's dark cloak was slung over one of his shoulders with his accustomed swagger; his grey, hawk-nosed face bore a faint leering smile.

"The Master wants to see your brother," he said. "You come with me."

The tiny cubby was in the stern of the cylinder. Silently Phil followed Alan and Talone to the small central control turret. And Phil had his first sight of Aerita—strange little flying virgin of the Light Country. She was on her feet near the turret doorway—ethereal little creature in brief, pale-blue drape, with her silver hair braided, falling forward over her shoulders. And behind her, the folded blue-feathered wings stretched down with their soft tips almost brushing the floor.

"You are Phil?" she murmured.

Mutely Phil nodded; and then as Talone shoved at him, he stumbled past her into the pallid turret where Rahgg stood at the bench by the ship's banks of controls.

The Master!... Murderous criminal, planning now the conquest of his little world!... He stood up to face his newest captive. He was a six foot burly fellow, wide-shouldered, powerful, clad in coppery gleaming garments of spun and woven metal—sheath-like tunic and short trousers out of which his legs came like great, greyish pillars of hairy strength.

Phil for that moment stood numbed, fascinated. There was a radiance of power about this fellow Rahgg. The aura of genius—murderous, perverted genius, without doubt. A shining coppery cloak hung from his shoulders down his back. He flung it around him as he stood up. His heavy, grey, smooth and hairless face was arresting in the power of its ugliness—a wide forehead, surmounted by a bullet head of close-clipped black hair; nose, high-bridged, with wide-nostrils; and a queerly pointed chin. The mouth, smiling faintly now, was cruel, thin-lipped. His eyes, deep-sunk under heavy black brows, stared at Phil with an ironic gleam.

"So?" he murmured with a slow, guttural drawl. "You are recovered now? Your name—Philip Grant?"

"Yes," Phil murmured.

"I am Rahgg—the Master. Has your brother told you that you must cause me no trouble?" He swung and gaped at Alan and his smile broadened. "Young Alan and I—we have had trouble. But that is over now. His directions were good—we got what we wanted."

He stared at Phil through another silence, "And now what?" Phil demanded abruptly.

Rahgg's gesture—his powerful grey hand heavy with ornaments—was deprecating. "You are young. Heedless—already you should know not to question the Master." His fingers were toying with his belt. Phil saw a strange-looking little sling-shot device hanging there; and a thin copper blade with finned tip like an arrow. And already Rahgg had hung there one of his stolen flash-guns.

"There was a formula we could not find," Rahgg said abruptly. "I will not need it for this conquest of the little Hill City. But later—you have it in your mind, young Grant? You will be able to help me, when the time comes that on Mercury we build more of your Earth weapons?"

Phil hesitated. Beside him he heard Alan murmuring, "Of course—"

"Yes," Phil said. "You won't have any trouble with me."

"That is good." Then Rahgg's dark ironic gaze swept to Aerita. "Come here by me, little Aerita," he added. "You and I—we must plan the ruling of the Light Country—there are many things I have not yet talked with you. I have the weapons now. Our invasion will be ready very quickly."

He was ignoring Phil and Alan as he sat Aerita beside him on the control bench. It was as though he were amusing himself with these captives—toying with them. "I am worried over the flying virgins of the Hill City," he was saying. His ironic smile broadened. "They seem to be fighters—you remember those eight who carried the little flying platform, they were all killed. I did not like that. My men are too interested in your thousand young girls to have them killed now in the great battle I am planning. They must live."

"They will fight," Aerita murmured. "Yes. I know they will. I was wondering—perhaps if when we reach Mercury I would set you loose, you would fly and tell them not to fight?"

"Yes—you turn me loose—" Aerita agreed.

It made him laugh. "Ho! You see? I know how to please my little Aerita. Like a bird she would fly away from me if I gave her the chance. But I won't. I like you too well, Aerita. For ever since I worked for your grandfather and you were only a child then—always was I dreaming of this coming day." His voice was low, intense now. To Phil the gleam in his eyes was like a smoldering madness. But he was only mad with his dreams of conquest—mad with his lust for power.

"Rahgg, the Master," he was saying softly. "Rahgg—Emperor of Mercury. And then—perhaps Master of the great Earth—of all the Universe—who knows? And you, my little Aerita—you would like to share that with me?"

His arm went around her. Across the pallid turret Phil suddenly saw young Talone, standing staring at Aerita. And then staring at his Master Rahgg—staring with a slow secretive smile. A smile of treachery!...

The days passed. Days? To Phil they were a succession of weird, seemingly endless intervals of living-routine, here in the tiny cubbies of the space-cylinder as it plunged so silently forward through the great black, star-strewn abyss. He and Alan spent much of their time in the cubby near the stern of the cylinder. Zara brought their meals. She was an alluring, copper-skinned little savage—with voluptuous gestures and smoldering eyes, always she lingered, gazing at Alan, talking to him in her quaint broken English.

Gradually Phil found that he and Alan more and more were permitted to move about the ship. Apparently, sometimes, almost free to do what they liked. But always, it seemed, one of Rahgg's villainous, grey-skinned Light Country criminals lurked near them ... Alan was planning something with Zara. Phil was aware of it ...

The small space-cylinder plunged on, heading for the Sun, crossing the orbit of Venus; and then at last approaching Mercury. It was a tiny world of itself, those endless hours—this cylinder plunging with immense velocity on its trajectory through Interplanetary Space. With what truth one can say that wherever humans exist, smoldering strife will be with them! Often Phil pondered it—this motley little group of humans cooped up here. Rahgg with his dreams of conquest ... Alan and Zara, each with their own secret plans out of which violence could come.

Then at last, with what to them was night of their living routine, the space-ship was through the stratosphere of Mercury; it dropped down through weird banks of gathering storm-clouds, lurid with crimson and yellow sheen; and through the bullseye of their dark cubby, Phil had his first view of the naked copper plains of the little planet. All he could see was a gleaming, tumbled desolation of copper rocks, wet with rain, glistening with a sodden crimson sheen as though they had been drenched with blood.

Phil stared in awe. "It looks empty of everything. Are we near the Hill City?"

"Yes. I think so. Aerita told me it would be in an hour now, perhaps less when we pass at our closest to it. We're heading for the Dark Country." He lowered his voice until it was barely a whisper. "I think no one can hear us—listen, I've got everything ready."

Phil knew now what Alan so carefully had been planning with Zara. With the little savage girl to watch that he was not seen, he had been able to load most of the small Errentine hand-weapons upon an emergency glider which was stored in a hull pressure porte.

"You think we can make it without getting caught?" Phil tensely whispered. Now that the time had come he found his heart racing. If they got caught, it would be death.

"Yes. And there's a storm gathering. We ought to try it in half an hour now. In the storm they won't see us dropping down."

Then Alan whispered the full details. Zara thought that only Aerita would escape in the little winged glider. Zara was glad to be rid of the Light Country girl—jealous of her with a smoldering jealousy which sometimes had made Alan

shudder inwardly for Aerita's safety here.

"You get down into the porte, Phil," Alan was whispering. "I'll watch my chance and bring Aerita down there. Zara will be preparing a meal for Rahgg. She thinks she's going to help me get Aerita away a little later."

Talone would be in the turret with Rahgg. Most of the other men would be forward—a dining cubby there where Zara was serving them food. It seemed a good opportunity now.

"I'll go up to the turret," Alan whispered, "and get Aerita."

Tensely, Phil nodded. "You'll find me in the porte. Make it soon, Alan. And—watch yourself. We won't live long if Rahgg gets onto this."

Alan opened the door-slide, and closed it after him. For a few minutes Phil sat waiting in the dark silence. The distant rhythm of the cylinder's mechanisms seemed to blend with the thumping of his heart. Then he decided that he had waited long enough. Cautiously he drew the slide. The small vaulted corridor was empty. He moved like a shadow back along the corridor where it narrowed into the finned peak of the stern. The rocket-tail mechanisms were thrumming and hissing here. Phil went down a short incline, into the pressure porte which was a downward bulge in the stern-hull.

The little glider was here by the closed outer pressure emergency door-slide. The glider was a twelve foot oblong affair, with its wings folded now. Phil was skilled in the operation of somewhat similar gliders of Earth. He examined the controls here; they looked simple enough. In the hooded central cockpit the Errentine flash-weapons were piled; lashed down and with a square of fabric over them.

Then at the inner doorway of the dark pressure chamber, Phil crouched and waited. Why didn't Alan and Aerita come?... The minutes passed. There was nothing but the hum and hiss of the rocket-stream mechanisms ... Had something gone wrong with Alan?

Abruptly Phil heard a faint footstep, and a dark blob rose up beside him. It was Alan.

"All right, Phil," he whispered. "So far, so good."

"Where's Aerita?"

"Coming. Rahgg called her back into the turret. She'll get away in a minute, and then—"

His whisper died. He gripped Phil as they stood tense in the darkness of the little pressure-chamber. A low murmur of voices sounded from up the small incline.

"Talone—" It was Aerita's voice! Her sharp cry of protest, with words in her own language. And then Phil heard Talone's voice; and the sound of him and Aerita in a scuffle.

Alan tensed, with a low muttered oath. He started for the incline, but Phil gripped him. "Wait—I'll go with you—we can catch that fellow Talone up there—kill him—"

Could that be done without an alarm that would bring half a dozen of the men down here?

"Listen," Alan was swiftly murmuring, "we're heading for the Dark Country now. Too late to glide for the Hill City, if we don't get started. You go, Phil—you can make it—remember what Aerita told you of the landmarks?" Phil felt Alan shoving at him. Then Alan, in the little space at the foot of the incline, was closing the pressure-chamber door-slide ... Aerita had screamed, up the incline where quite evidently Talone was forcing his embraces on her. There were other, more distant voices up there now—men of the crew coming to investigate.

"You go," Alan was insisting, with swift vehemence. "I'll stay with her. Give the weapons to old Polter. Tell him—when the invasion comes—do the best he can."

The slide banged between them; Alan was gone. In the darkness of the emergency escape room, Phil opened the outer

slide. In a moment he had the glider wings partly spread ... The little glider lurched wildly up into the wind as Phil launched himself; spreading the wings full, throwing the weight of his body against the lurches until he had his frail craft steadied. For a second or two he was engulfed in the luminous gases of the cylinder's rocket streams. Then the spaceship glided on. And like a bird with motionless wings, Phil soared downward and outward until in a few moments more the ship was gone; just the streams of its tails were merging with the luminous gloom until they too, had vanished.

On the swaying little glider Phil lay prone, manipulating its controls. There was a steady breeze, with which he knew he could guide his soaring craft for a very considerable distance. But which way should he go? He gazed down, awed by the bleak copper wastes. They were still far down; six or eight thousand feet, it seemed. Overhead, the crimson cloud masses were breaking so that little patches of starry sky were visible. The crimson storm apparently was not coming. But far off to one side, the yellow-red radiance that streamed up from the horizon seemed in places getting brighter. The Fire Country was off there, Alan had told him.

Which way was the Hill City? Like a puzzled, lost bird he circled, flying lower now. There seemed nothing here that Aerita had described—nothing here but a barren, tumbled desolation of copper hills and sleek metal plains ... That yellow glare from the distant Fire Country most certainly was intensifying. He could see a dark cloud rising from the horizon off there. A cloud? It looked more like a puff of upward-rising turgid smoke, than cloud-vapour. And suddenly on the breeze it seemed that there was a new smell to the air—acrid, chemical smell like sulphur. Was a fire storm coming?

Phil was really perturbed now. Surely he would have to locate the Hill City quickly. To be lost out here—caught in a weird horrible storm—would probably be the end of him.

Suddenly in the distant darkness, away from the rising fiery glare, he thought that he could see little dots in the air. He headed for them and presently saw that they were tiny fluttering figures above a wild, tumbled rocky peak.

It was the mountain fastness of the rebelling flying virgins who had fled from the Hill City. Like great birds they came circling around Phil's glider as he soared down into their eyrie and landed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Monster of the Fire Storm

"We can do it, Zara. And now is our time."

"Yes, Alan. Now—our time—so I be with you—for always."

In a dim grotto room of Rahgg's encampment in the Dark Country, Alan sat with the little savage girl, Zara, planning with her how now his chance to escape had come.

Her dark eyes were smoldering, her breast heaving with her emotions as she gripped him, staring at him with fierce barbaric passion.

"I do this," she murmured, "I love you. Rahgg—he kill you maybe—if you stay here."

"I wouldn't wonder," Alan agreed. But there was no humor in his voice.

The Space-cylinder had landed at Rahgg's stronghold, far up in the ragged black mountains of the Dark Country. It was a tumbled, wild region, of dark, fearsome desolation, with wide, black deep canyons of sheer black walls and peaks rising like pointed needles—a ragged, tumbled land, rent and torn as though by some giant cataclysm of nature, ages gone by.

At the head of one of the broad, valley-like canyons, where the cliffs were honey-combed with tunnels, caves and grottos, Rahgg and his men had established their encampment, with one of the primitive, squalid little villages of the Dark Country savages located nearby ...

There had been a chaotic, tense time on the space-ship, just before it landed—when Rahgg had discovered that Phil had escaped, taking most of the smaller weapons with him. Rahgg's fury then was Satanic. He had lashed half a dozen of his men; but Alan had escaped his wrath. It had turned also on Talone—who had been found with Aerita in the ship's corridor, with Alan protecting her from Talone's unwelcome attentions. Rahgg had seemed pleased.

"You do well to serve your Master's interests," Rahgg had told Alan. "You would let no harm come to my little Aerita—that is good." But there had been a sardonic gleam in his dark eyes as he had said it. And when contemptuously he ordered Talone away from him where they were gathered in the control turret, he turned again to Alan. "You think you fool me," he added. "But you do not." Little lightnings were darting from his dark eyes. "With you I will deal later."

And now Alan, with Zara, saw his chance to escape. The series of grotto rooms here were half artificial—broken subterranean walls of copper rock which were boarded in places with planking. This one, to which Alan had been assigned, had a wall of boards, dividing it from others like itself. It was crudely furnished; draped with dark fabrics; and dimly, eerily illumined by a little brazier. On a low couch in its corner, now an hour or two after the cylinder had landed, Alan sat planning with the amorous Zara. A rift in the broken rock ceiling admitted the night air of the deep broad canyon. A little patch of the black sky was visible—a growing red-yellow sheen was up there. Occasionally a puff of wind came down, bringing an ominous sulphurous smell. Fire storm weather? Alan murmured it to Zara, and she nodded, shuddering.

"Yes—maybe. We go quick now—fire storm she is bad—"

Their plan was simple; Alan could only pray that it would succeed. Aerita, Alan knew, was in a little grotto room, only thirty feet along a small tunnel passage. The exits to the grottos were guarded now by Rahgg's men. Two of them were standing at a nearby corridor mouth, beyond which was the broad dark floor of the canyon. It was Zara's plan to engage the guards' attention, distracting them so that Alan could slip past them. Then out among the rocks of the canyon floor he would wait until she had joined him.

"In the Hill City," he was earnestly whispering to her now, "I will make sure that they appreciate you, Zara. You're a good girl—you'll be rewarded for this—treated well always among the Light Country people." He meant it sincerely; but

what he did not tell her, was that Aerita would escape with them. It was fifty miles from here to the Hill City. Once they were safely on their way, Aerita would fly ahead, and come back with one of the platforms carried by flying girls which would take them swiftly for the remainder of the journey ...

Zara's arm was pressing him against her. "In the Hill City—always I be with you—"

He nodded. "Yes. Get going now—get those guards as far away from the entrance as you can—"

The ornaments hanging upon her copper-colored knees and wrists tinkled as she moved into the little exit passage. Alan sat tense. If only now Aerita was alone in that other cave. He could get her in here, and in five or ten minutes they would try slipping past the guards ...

In the silence of the subterranean rooms, sounds from outside were dimly audible. For an hour now the outer canyon had been a bustle of activity. Rahgg's invasion of the Light Country was in swift preparation; the big projectors which had been brought from Earth were being assembled; mounted on huge wheeled carts. And an army of savages was assembling ... Their jabbering, guttural voices were faintly audible; and the voices of Rahgg's men ... Within an hour or two the motley army would be starting down the canyon ...

The listening Alan abruptly tensed, went cold. From the small interior tunnel passage between his grotto and Aerita's her voice, sharply raised came floating. Someone was in there with her! But she knew that Alan, about now, would be coming for her, and she had expected to be alone. Rahgg had gone outside, busy with the assembling of his men and had left Zara to wait upon her.

Swiftly Alan crept into the small dark tunnel. A curtain draped its further end. In a moment he was crouching there, cautiously moving an edge of the dark drape. Within the other little grotto, Aerita was sitting on a couch with Rahgg standing behind her. A blue plaited rope of vines was in his hand.

"No! No—" she protested.

He answered with soft ironic words in his own language as he smilingly lashed her wings together. He was planning to take her with his expedition to the Hill City, no doubt, and did not want to chance her escaping from him.

Then as he stared, Alan was suddenly stricken by sight of one of the dark wall-drapes behind Rahgg. It hung apparently over a recess in the rocky wall—and now it was moving silently aside. Talone was standing there, wrapped in his dark cloak! The brazier light gleamed on his contorted, leering face, his eyes, smoldering now with murderous fury as silently he shifted forward. And the light glinted on the naked copper blade in his hand, as he poised it to stab Rahgg.

For that second the crouching Alan breathlessly stared. Then Talone must have made some slight noise; Rahgg whirled, saw the blade stabbing at his back. His voice like an infuriated animal, rose with a roar as he struck at Talone's wrist. The knife clattered away; and then the burly Rahgg was upon Talone with a blow that knocked him backward. It was a swift, weird combat, grisly with its sheer brutality. Before Talone could recover his balance, Rahgg had leaped away and drawn a long bronze sword. But he did not stab. Instead, he slashed with the blunt edge of the sword, with a skillful blow that struck Talone on the cheek. He wavered on his feet, tried to gather himself for a leap. But the sword swished through the air again, cuffing Talone's other cheek; and then the side of his throat; and his forehead. They were swishing, slashing blows as though the flexible sword were a whip ...

"No—no—" Aerita screamed.

Talone had crumpled to his knees now. His face was swelling with bruises and pulpy red with oozing blood. His eyes were closing, and blinded by blood. And still Rahgg slashed, silent with his grim fury. Talone fell; but with a thick powerful hand Rahgg lifted him up, pounding his face now with the sword-hilt. Through an interior doorway men had come running; but Rahgg scattered them, and silently they followed him as he carried Talone out, with the sound of the blows still gruesomely reverberating ...

In the grotto momentarily Aerita was alone, crouching on the floor, her face covered by her hands. It was Alan's chance. He dashed in. "Aerita dear—our chance now—come on—"

He did not stop to unlash her wings. With his arm around her, they hurried back through the other grotto, then out through the other hundred foot long little tunnel. The sounds of Rahgg and Talone evidently had not carried out here. The exit mouth was empty. Crouching there with Aerita for a moment, Alan could see the dark figures of the two guards, fifty feet or so away. Zara was between them; one of them was embracing her. They were too occupied to notice the dark silent figure of Aerita and Alan slipping past them ...

"Far enough," Alan whispered presently. "We'll wait here for Zara. I promised her—and if we left her now, Rahgg would punish her for our escape."

They crouched in the dark shadows of a rock cluster. The honey-combed cliff which was the end of the canyon was here close beside them. Five hundred feet away the rocky canyon was dotted with lights and groups of moving figures—Rahgg's men and the assembling savages. Every moment as they waited, Alan feared that their escape would be discovered. Then at last an approaching dark figure was visible—Zara coming to join them. Softly Alan called to her.

"Here, Zara—"

She came with a little cry of triumph. "So good! Now we go—I show to you-a tunnel here to another valley—"

And then she saw Aerita. The storm-clouds overhead were yellow-red, with little dots of flame licking through them—smoldering gases carried by an abnormal wind from the Fire Country, bursting now into tongues of flame. The light gleamed on Zara's bronze face. Her jaw dropped with her amazement. Then disillusionment, rage, jealousy contorted her features. And suddenly she sprang at Aerita.

"You!" she blazed. "So—you try take him from me?"

Alan seized her. "Don't be silly, Zara. We're going to the Hill City. Come on now—"

The scuffle, and Zara's raised voice, floated out over the rocks. From overhead, there was a shout. Staring up, Alan had a brief glimpse of figures up there on the canyon rim—men gazing down. Then something came whizzing down, clattering on the rocks within a few feet of Zara and Aerita. It was a fin-tipped knife-blade. And then another came hurtling. Zara gave a low moan; staggered and fell. The blade quivered in her breast, where a red stain was spreading.

"Oh Zara—Zara dear—" Aerita gasped. She bent down. Zara's feeble hand was trying to push her away, clutching for Alan.

"You—my man—so big and strong—" Zara faintly gasped.

Alan bent to her. "Oh Zara—I'm so sorry—"

"No—run now—men coming—"

A paroxysm shook her; then she stiffened with a last gasping breath as the light went out of her eyes and she was gone. Alan jumped to his feet. Another flying blade came hurtling down. He gripped Aerita's hand as together they plunged into the nearest tunnel opening, running in the darkness.

"Will this lead us into that other valley, Aerita?"

"Yes, I think so."

There seemed no pursuit. In the darkness Alan stopped, fumbled until he had cast the ropes loose from Aerita's wings. Ahead of them a yellow-red sheen showed where the tunnel emerged; and in a moment more they were out. It was a scene of wild desolation here—a spread of dark rocks and little ravines with masses of black naked cliffs rising in tiers, with the great metal mountains of the Dark Country behind them.

A descending narrow ravine seemed to lead down into open country in the other direction. Its rocky floor was piled with strewn boulders and crags. The light from the flaming clouds painted them with its lurid glare and cast monstrous inky shadows in the hollows. Clinging together Alan and Aerita stumbled forward. They could feel the storm-wind now—little puffs, acrid with the smell of sulphur. And suddenly from a wheeling black cloud close overhead, a tongue of flame licked down like a living thing trying to seize them.

It lasted just a second, and then the smoldering gases of it burned out and it was gone.

"Aerita dear—you fly ahead—"

"And leave you here? No—"

He tried to shove her away from him, but she clung. "Aerita—don't be foolish. These storms don't last long, you said. I'll be all right. When it's over you can come back with some of the girls and a platform to carry me—"

He checked himself suddenly. Close ahead of them, two dark figures suddenly rose up!

Alan knocked Aerita behind him; tensed himself for a leap.

"Alan!" One of the figures suddenly called it. "You—Alan!"

It was Phil's voice! And over him, little Arma was fluttering. She came with back-flapping wings, landed beside Aerita and Alan.

"You escaped?" Arma gasped. "We were hoping to help you—"

Then Phil was here, eagerly gripping Alan. "Good enough, Alan! Arma wanted to leave me, but I came—"

Phil had landed with his weapons in the girls' eyrie; had told Arma what had happened on the space-cylinder.

"We've got a platform near here," Phil was saying. "Only about a mile down the ravine. A dozen flying girls—we told them to wait there. Come on—"

"I will fly and bring them," Aerita interjected. "This storm—perhaps we had better stay underground, until—"

Her words ended with a gasp as she sucked in her breath. All four of them, stricken with horror, stood staring. Close ahead of them, down the dark narrow ravine, a blob of yellow glare had appeared on the ground. It was a weird living thing! It seemed to enlarge as it came from a smothering hole in the ground—expanding until it was a ten foot round blob.

"A fire monster!" Aerita gasped.

They could see now that it was a weird, palpitating blob of living tissue. Tongues of yellow-red light-fire radiance streamed from it like an aura. Monster of the Fire Country, it was wandering here as it followed the sulphurous wind—a huge, headless, palpitating thing, but it had a cluster of weaving legs supporting it; and a belt of eyes at its middle. The eyes were like glaring fire-dots.

Then it saw the four human figures. Its voice hissed like water poured on hot coals; its eyes brightened with triumph as it came lunging forward!

CHAPTER NINE

The Battle in the Copper Desert

The weird glowing monster was in an instant no more than fifteen feet from them. Alan shoved at his companions. "Can't fight it—scatter—get out of here!" He shoved at the girls. "You fly—"

With beating wings they fluttered vertically up. Phil made a leap; his body, here with the slight gravity of Mercury, sailed in an arc directly over the quivering, oncoming monster. Alan, delayed by urging the girls, had no time to jump; and all in that second, with a weird lunging pounce, the monstrous jelly-like, fire-thing was upon him.

Alan had tried to leap sidewise; but from the monster a great weaving tentacle-arm like a tongue of red-yellow flame licked out and wrapped itself around him. It was jelly-like, hissing ooze; hot and sticky; flimsy, ghastly stuff, luminous with a radiant glow. It closed around Alan, pulling him. And then the thing's quivering luminous body engulfed him. He fought to keep his feet. With flailing arms and legs he wrenched the flimsy, weird ooze apart. The heat of it burned his flesh. It hissed in the air as he flung gobs of it away ... He knew he mustn't fall. That would be the end ... The damnable thing, as he broke it apart, like viscous hot rubber flowed together, healing its wounds. Its horrible little voice was gibbering now; the cluster of its eyes, deep in its glowing middle, was like a mass of shining red-white coals.

A slap of the sticky stuff hit his face. He wiped it away. Then he was aware that Phil had come back with another leap; Phil frantically pulling at him. And now the two girls were flapping in the air close over the monster, reaching down, plucking at it.

"You keep away!" Alan shouted. "Keep back!"

The glutinous ooze of the damnable thing, as Phil and he tore at it, occasionally burst into flame—combustible gases within it, released as it wrenched apart, igniting with the oxygen of the air. Alan felt his clothes burning. He beat at them with seared hands.

At last Phil tore him loose. Together they staggered away, as the monster, distracted by the fluttering girls, was bouncing heavily into the air, trying to reach them. Baffled, suddenly it was lurching off along the rocks, until in a moment it plunged into a hole, crouching sullen with the yellow-red light-glare from it streaming out into the darkness.

Alan and Phil, with Arma and Aerita leading them, plunged on down the ravine. Then Arma fled ahead; and presently through the lurid yellow-red storm-murk, the platform carried by twelve of the girls came fluttering. Alan and Phil climbed on it; lying prone as the girls gripped its handles and with rhythmic beating wing-strokes lifted it into the air.

Heading for the mountain eyrie of the rebelling virgins of the Hill City, the platform sailed swiftly forward through the smoky glare of the gathering fire storm.

"It is reaching its worst now," Aerita murmured. "In a little while it will be past."

With Alan she crouched in the shelter of a rock cluster on the mountain top of the girl's eyrie. Arma and Phil were nearby, and among the crags and small cave crevices groups of girls were huddled. The weird fire storm seemed now to have reached its height.

It was a wild, eerie flaming scene. Great wheeling cloud masses were circling overhead—smoky black vapor with little tongues of red-yellow flame licking through it. The wind was circular now, a hot sulphurous breath heavy with choking gas fumes. Occasionally the circling cloud seemed exploding—rent as though by yellow-red lightning with a thunder-clap as some pocket of pent-up gas was ignited.

It was a demoniac cataclysm of nature. The flame-lightning spit through the clouds so that the rent vapors rolled apart and upward like great masses of lurid smoke, hurled skyward in massive columns, then clapping together and coming down again. Sometimes the huge tongues of flame licked toward the ground, swirling for a second or two as they seared the copper desert and then puffed into nothingness.

It lasted half an hour. Then Alan could see that the storm center was past; over the black, naked peaks of the distant Dark Country mountains, the blazing, snapping turmoil seemed now at its worst. And then the rain came—slanting sheets on the dying wind; rain that hissed out of the overhead murk, sizzling like water on a fire. The glare now rapidly was fading from the clouds; darkness again was falling upon the naked tumbled wastes of the copper plains ...

"It is over," Aerita murmured. "Now our girls can start."

The little hand projectors of the Errentine flash, which Phil had taken from the space-ship, had been distributed among the flying girls. It was thought that Rahgg's expedition must already have started from his Dark Country lair. Traveling on foot, they ought still be in the descending canyon-valley.

"The storm must have stopped them," Aerita was saying. "But they will be starting again. We must hurry, Alan."

The flying girls were fluttering with excitement among the crags of the little mountain-top, with Arma among them, making sure that each had her weapons; organizing them, with directions of what they should try to do. Their jabbering, excited little voices mingled with the flapping of their great wings. It was a weird little army, preparing now for battle. About a thousand of them were here.

"But listen," Alan protested, as he had several times before. "You can't let your girls do this—so many of them will be killed—you know it—"

Aerita's little face was grim, solemn, but her eyes flashed. "It is our only chance. And that you know—"

He did indeed. Earlier in the night, girls had flown with the news to the Hill City. An army of young men was organizing there, making ready to march out and meet Rahgg's men and his horde of savages—to meet them out on the copper desert, try and turn them back before they could get within range and devastate the Hill City. But men on foot, armed only with flash-projectors of thirty foot range—what chance would they have against those giant machines Rahgg was bringing? Rahgg had five huge projectors of the Mackay high-voltage flash which would bring death at three hundred feet or more. The young men would be slaughtered.

"We girls, from the air, will have a better chance," Aerita was saying. "You must see it, Alan. And think too—we have been in rebellion against those young men, so that by law our wings may not be cut. But many of those men—we love. They will be our husbands, when this terrible time is over. How can we let them now go out, to be killed in a battle where they have no chance?"

Alan, and Phil who now had joined them, had to yield. They could see it was hopeless to dissuade these excited, crusading girls. And there was, indeed, no argument against Aerita's logic.

Then presently the girls were ready; each of them belted with the thirty foot Errentine flash; and with little slingshots and finned copper knife-arrows. In small groups they began fluttering upward; wheeling, like birds gathering in coveys. They were amazingly, fantastically beautiful with pink-white limbs, fluttering drapes and hair; and the giant blue and white feathered wings flapping as they poised, with excited little voices calling down to their comrades to hurry.

Alan and Phil, silent and grim, finally took their places on the oblong platform, with twelve girls gripping its handles as with beating wings they lifted it into the air. Aerita and Arma were flying free, with the girls in small groups strung out behind them. Like a great migration of flying birds swiftly they winged forward to the battle ...

"You and Arma—stay close by us," Alan called to Aerita who was flying nearby. "What we say to do—you can tell the girls."

"Yes. All right." But in his heart, Alan knew that these reckless girls would quickly be beyond command. At an altitude of five hundred feet, gazing down as he lay prone on the platform floor, Alan could see the glistening copper spread of desert. The entrance to the broad valley lay ahead. And from it now, in the dim half light the winding cortege of the enemy was visible—little lines of dots down there—Rahgg's three hundred men, on foot; and gathered around them, an unorganized horde of two thousand or more of the Dark Country savages. They saw the oncoming girls. There was a flurry down among them—the men in front stopping; and those in the rear pressing forward. Within a minute they seemed

in confusion—a milling throng, suddenly startled by this enemy in the air above them.

In the center of the throng Alan could see nearly a dozen huge wheeled carts. Then as the platform swooped lower, he was able to make out that five of the carts each carried one of the giant Mackay projectors, raised a few feet above it on a metal chassis. The other carts doubtless were loaded with bombs and miscellaneous equipment.

At five hundred feet, Alan shouted, "Keep away for a moment; and when you attack, head for the carts. No closer than twenty feet—fire—and then come up."

Aerita and Arma, flying overhead, called back agreement. In the dull, red-yellow night-glare, Alan had a glimpse of their set white faces. Then from below, a sudden bolt stabbed up—a little violet pencilray of electronic voltage. For a second of duration it sizzled and then died.

"Three hundred foot range is right," Phil muttered.

It fell short of the hovering girls, so that they jibed with a murmuring defiance. A little less grim dismay was within Alan as he saw that tentative bolt from the enemy. This was the Mackay pencilray—narrow beam hardly more than a few inches in breadth. It would not be easy to strike a fluttering, swiftly moving girl with it and hold it upon her for that second or two. At least they had a chance.

"There they go!" Phil suddenly ejaculated. "Start us down, Alan!"

At Alan's command to his leading girl, the platform swooped in a long curving downward spiral. To Alan, lying prone beside his brother, weapon in hand, it was a chaos of shifting, fluttering figures and crazily swaying vision of the dim copper desert and the sky; and the girls were swooping even more swiftly. In little fluttering groups they passed close over the carts, fired their thirty foot bolt and mounted again into the air.

To Alan it was a moment of wild chaos. Flashes were hissing up from the carts as the girls swooped down. Alan caught his breath with a stab of horror as he saw the first girl struck—swooping blue-draped little creature with the pencilray of the giant flash striking her full. For an instant she fluttered with one of her great wings melted away, then her little body flopped, turning end over end until like a wounded bird she crashed into the horde of savages—tumbling coppery figures engulfing her like vultures.

The platform in another few seconds was sailing close above one of the carts. Alan and Phil fired their little bolts down over the platform edge. A hit! One of Rahgg's cloaked men, manipulating the huge projector, fell upon it. An upward-stabbing flash caught a corner of the platform, melting it away, leprous. And then they were past, and rose, with one of the forward girls hanging upon the handle, her legs melted away where the flash had struck her.

Alan reached for her. "You come up and lie here with us."

She was one who spoke a little English. "No," she gasped. "Still can fly."

Anna was passing, and took her place at the handle. And in a moment she had persuaded the wounded girl to leave. Grimly Alan stared as the girl wavered through the turgid darkness, winging for the Hill City.

Again at some five hundred feet of altitude, the platform hovered, with the girls circling around it. But there was so many less of them now! Some were flopping away in straggling groups toward the Hill City; and others were slowly fluttering to the ground where still others were strewn.

"But we gained something," Phil was muttering. There were dead figures of men strewn down there, and one of the carts now seemed on fire. Then suddenly its projector exploded—a puff of flame and resounding report, with flying fragments of wood, metal and human bodies. It started a little panic among Rahgg's crowding savages; that section of them, hurled back by the explosion, suddenly was wildly milling and then stampeding off into the darkness.

Flare-bombs were mounting now from others of the carts—hissing flares of electronic light that came up and burst with a vivid orange glare. One of them struck a wheeling girl at the edge of the formation. As it burst there was just a horrible

little charred blob, and then nothingness, where the girl had been.

Then again the girls swooped, with the platform among them. It was a sustained attack this time, each girl for herself so that now the glaring scene was a wild, fantastic chaos. Ten minutes? Half an hour? Alan and Phil, crouching there on the swaying little platform as it swooped, mounted, and swooped again and again, lost all track of time. They were aware only of the horrible chaos of flaring lights, spitting, hissing flashes, with strewn bodies on the ground; wildly milling, frightened savages trying now to escape; and fluttering, frenzied girls.

Alan saw presently that Phil beside him, was wounded—Phil, with his left arm gone at the elbow, and in his right hand his last little projector was empty of its charge. His face was pallid, strained. He sank back, prone.

"Can't—keep at it, Alan," he gasped. "But we're getting them?"

"Yes. We're getting them."

Down through the glare on the copper ground, fires were flaming. All but one of the huge projectors had exploded now, or were out of action. Only one was left, so that now the girls were attacking more freely. And the dark horde of savages and some of Rahgg's remaining men were scattering in rout, with the girl fluttering singly after them—stabbing at them with the little bolts, or dropping upon them to stab with their flying arrows used as swords.

"Just one projector left," Alan muttered. "That looks like Rahgg, standing there manning it. We're going down—"

Aerita fluttered past—still unhurt, thank God. Throughout it all, Alan had been in an agony of apprehension for her.

"You stay up here," he shouted. "Almost over, Aerita."

Little Arma was hanging on the handle, exhausted. Alan drew her up; put her beside Phil. There were only eight girls left at the handles now; the platform wavered, then steadied and swooped.

It was Rahgg, standing there on his last cart amid the burning wreckage of the strewn ground. He saw the platform coming as it aimed to sail close over his head. He was trying to twist his broken projector to train it on Alan. Then he gave it up, and shouted to try and rally his fleeing men.

In a swooping arc, the platform dove and straightened. From its forward end, for that breathless instant Alan stared down. His little flash-weapon was aimed. Then from no more than ten feet, he saw Rahgg's face with the fire-glare lighting it. It was a grim, white, heavy face; and on it was stamped his disillusionment—this, the final wreckage of his mad dream of conquest ... disillusionment of a mad-man-genius ... wild despair ...

The staring Alan, for some reason which he could not have named, withheld his shot. The platform sailed past, rising again. And Alan turned; gazed behind him. Rahgg was still standing there, clinging to his broken projector. For a second he swung around, staring up at Alan; and on his face there was a defiant, ironic smile. Then he gripped the big projector, wrenched it loose from its raised chassis; and hugging it, toppled sidewise with it, down into the flames of an adjacent burning cart. There was a second of silence; then a puff of red-yellow glare and the roar of the explosion—flying dark fragments of the cart and the projector, and the body of the man who had thought to make himself the Great Master of Mercury ...

High overhead, the pitiful remnants of the flying girls gathered with the platform in their midst. Far down, the copper desert was lighted by the dying yellow fires.... Huddled, broken dead forms were strewn everywhere.... And then a heavy black pall of smoke was settling like a shroud to hide the mute, tragic scene of death ...

Alan and Phil were married in the Hill City, to Aerita and Arma—a huge wedding at which two hundred or more of the girls were joined to the young men of their choice. There was no talk of the mutilation of the wings of the young wives.

No further connection with Earth was established—old Polter stood firm against that. But Alan and Phil secretly felt that they would like to go, of course. Perhaps, some day, they would go back ...

THE END.

[The end of *Aerita of the light country* by Ray Cummings]