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The VENGEANCE OF MARTIN BRAND

By G.H. IRWIN

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Secret of the

EARTH STAR



The jewel glowed and death leaped from the gun

Secret of the EARTH STAR

By
HENRY KUTTNER

First published *Amazing Stories*, August 1942.

The theft of the Earth Star blazed a trail of death to a weird city under the Sahara.

CHAPTER I

Despite the blazing heat of the hot Indian night, this air-conditioned room in the palace was cool and comfortable. It was a bit too luxurious for a business office; otherwise, it might have been any New York suite. Three men sat at a small glass-topped table, on which stood a Gladstone bag.

They rose as two Indians entered, bowing respectfully to the Rajah. The latter was a small, weak-faced man with a straggling moustache and lips too large and red for his sallow face. He barely acknowledged the greetings, his gaze riveted on the leather bag.

“You have the Earth Star?” he asked.

“Yes,” said one of the three Europeans. He opened the bag, unlocked a metal case built into it, and withdrew a jewel-case. This he opened and placed flat on the table.

The Rajah’s mouth went dry. He could not repress a little shiver. “The Earth Star . . .” he whispered.

On black velvet the great gem flamed. It was lens-shaped and supernally lovely, with rays of living light flaming out from its heart. The colors latent within it changed and shifted under the soft illumination. It was like a diamond—yet no diamond had ever possessed the wonder of the Earth Star.

The Rajah’s secretary breathed deeply. “Carbon,” he murmured. “A tree-fern some million years ago—”

One of the Europeans interrupted, though he did not look away from the jewel. “A little more than that, sir. It took unusual pressure to make the Earth Star. It came from the new cavern mines under the Atlantic, you know, when they were taking cores to test from immense depths. A tree-fern made the Earth Star—but that fern was somehow buried deeper than man has ever thought possible. It’s immensely harder than diamond, though it’s carbon, of course. And the only one in existence—”

The Rajah said softly, “There is an Earth Star in the crown of your ruler.”

A subdued smile went the rounds of the group. “So there is, and an excellent imitation, too. I repeat: you will be the owner of the only Earth Star in existence.”

The Rajah placed his slim hand, glittering with invaluable jeweled rings, flat on the table-top. “Then it is a bargain. My secretary will give you a check.”

Abruptly the moonlight was blotted out. The figure of a man seemed to rush out of the night, leaping in through the open window to land lightly on the deep carpet. And that window overlooked a sheer abyss, reaching down to the river gorge far below.

The sudden movements of the Europeans, and the quick gesture of the Rajah’s secretary, were arrested at sight of an oddly shaped pistol in a gloved hand. The intruder stood motionless, one hand gripping a light metal ladder that extended up through the window and out of sight. He wore ordinary flying togs, but his face was hidden by a black silk mask.

“Don’t move,” he said, in a low voice that was obviously disguised. “No—don’t do that!” The pistol jerked slightly; otherwise there was no indication that the trigger had been pulled. But one of the Europeans cursed softly as his arm dropped to his side, paralyzed.

“A neurogun,” the masked man observed pleasantly. “It *can* kill, you know. . . . I’ll thank you not to move. Now—” He hooked the flexible ladder across a chair and moved warily to the table. “The Earth Star, eh?”

“Don’t be a fool,” the secretary said. “You can’t hope to sell that. It’s unique.”

The intruder did not answer, but his quizzical gaze was amused. The tallest of the Europeans snarled, “Sell it? Jackass—haven’t you ever heard of the Merlin?”

As he spoke, his foot moved slightly toward the chair to which the ladder was attached. He froze as the Merlin turned toward him.

“You recognize me?”

“I’ve heard of you.”

“Good!” The Merlin’s voice was suddenly sharp. “Then listen! I have ways of finding out what I want to know. I discovered that certain powers ruling your country had decided to sell the Earth Star to our friend the Rajah. The price I don’t know, but it must be fabulous. If that money were to go to needed purposes, I’d not have come here tonight.”

The tall European kicked the chair gently. The metal ladder slipped off, slid across the carpet, and vanished out the window. The Merlin apparently did not notice, though his retreat was now cut off.

He went on: “But the money is to be used for armaments. And you gentlemen, and those behind you, are trying to foment a new war. As for you—” He glanced at the Rajah. “You are a degenerate moron. *Don’t move!* It’s probably the first time you’ve ever heard the truth, but you’re going to hear it now. You’re the wealthiest man in the Orient, and you inherited your fortune, as well as your powers. You won’t buy the Earth Star out of your own treasury, though. It’ll mean taxes for your people, who are starving already. Another reason why I’m here.”

The Merlin glanced down. “This bit of carbon is causing trouble, I think. So I’ll take it along. The imitation that was made to replace it won’t interest the Rajah. So—”

He slipped the jewel in his pocket and moved back toward the window. The others watched him narrowly. The Merlin apparently did not notice the absence of his metal ladder.

The gun was still steady in one hand, but in the other he now held an object like a small flashlight. “You may be interested in knowing how I evaded your guards and alarms. I came in a gyroship.”

“But—my motor-killing rays—” The Rajah’s eyes were wide.

“They extend up only 300 feet. I hovered well above that point and came down a ladder. And here it is.”

The ladder swung in from the darkness. The Merlin’s voice was amused as he slipped the “flashlight” into his flying suit.

“A clever trick—but I have a very powerful magnet. I’ll leave you, gentlemen—”

For an instant his attention was distracted as he put one foot on the window-sill. Simultaneously the tallest European acted. With a deep-voiced oath he sprang forward, seized the Merlin, and clamped one hand over the outlaw’s gun-wrist.

“Hold him!” the secretary shrieked. He dived for an alarm buzzer. The other Europeans closed in.

The Merlin fought in silence. His opponent was trying to drag him back into the room—and that would be fatal. The outlaw dropped his weapon and gripped the ladder, with both hands now.

He pulled himself up, putting all his weight on his arms. Inevitably the European was lifted too. Overbalanced, the two went arcing into the night as clutching fingers missed their mark by a fraction.

“Shoot!” the Rajah screamed. “Shoot him!”

Guns blazed from the window. Dim in the moonlight two figures were struggling on a frail metal ladder, suspended above nothingness. A scrap of cloth went fluttering down.

“His mask—”

Out of the dark came a voice, sharp and clear.

“*Martell!*”

It rose in a scream. One of the figures went plunging down.

The secretary was at the window, a flashlight in his hand. He focused the beam on the quarry, a man in flying togs who kept his face turned from the light. Now other rays shot out from the roof, bathing the Merlin in merciless brilliance. A shot cracked sharply.

“They’ll get him,” the Rajah said. “I’ve sub-machine guns on the roof.”

The Merlin’s hand lifted, fumbled over the ladder. And—suddenly—he was gone! Ladder and outlaw vanished!

The Rajah stared in blank amazement. “How—”

“Automatic winding device in his plane. It just wound him up.” The European who spoke looked at his empty gun. “Better get your planes after him.”

At a nod from the Rajah the secretary hurried from the room. “We’ll get him,” royalty remarked.

“No, you won’t. The Merlin’s got a fast plane. He’s pulled off these things before. But this time—well, he lost his mask.”

“Did you recognize him?”

“Stone did, before he fell. He screamed a name. Remember? Martell.”

“A common name,” the Rajah frowned.

“Stone and I worked closely together. He knew no Martells. He recognized the name and the face from elsewhere. Newsreels—newspapers—everybody knows Seth Martell and his sons. I’ll get in touch with my government immediately. May I use your televisor?”

“Yes. Recover the Earth Star, and I’ll buy it.”

“That,” said the European grimly, “is a bargain.”

CHAPTER II

Escape

Seth Martell's craggy, strong face was set in harsh lines as he sat staring at a folded paper on his desk. Sunlight came warmly through the windows of the penthouse apartment above New York, silvering Martell's iron-gray hair and clipped moustache. He looked hard as nails—till he lifted his lids and gazed at the three young men before him.

Seth Martell was one of the biggest men in America. Connected with the military, high up in the government, his honesty had never been questioned, nor his devotion to his country. Always he had been unswerving in serving his own ideals, no matter what self-sacrifice it entailed. Now—

Now there was pain in his gray eyes.

He looked at his three sons and hesitated, tapping the folded document with stubby, calloused fingers.

“Well?”

None of the three spoke.

Martell reached for a buzzer, and then drew back his hand. He looked at the tallest of the three.

“Tony. Are you the Merlin?”

Tony—a dark, lean young man, with very keen black eyes and a thin eager face—cocked up a quizzical eyebrow. “I, sir? The—”

Martell's restraint failed for an instant as he snapped, “Answer me!”

Tony sobered. “No, sir,” he said quietly. “I'm not.”

“Phil.”

The second youth, blond and stocky, took a stubby pipe out of his mouth.

“No, sir.”

“Jimmy.”

The third of the trio looked somewhat like Tony, though a less matured man. The eagerness in Tony's face was enthusiasm in Jimmy's, boyish and pleasant. He shot a quick glance at the others, hesitated, and finally said, with a little frown, “I'm not the Merlin, sir.”

Martell sighed. “All right. Go in the sun-room and wait, boys. The investigators will be in presently.” He sat steadily regarding his nails till his sons had departed.

Tony left them at the door. “Be with you directly,” he murmured, and hurried off along the corridor. The others went into the room, and ten minutes later the oldest of the three came in, his face blandly impassive. He went to the window and stood staring out over the skyscrapers of New York, waiting on the verge of the 21st century. He began to whistle ruminatively.

“Seth insisted on interviewing us before the detecs. Good of him.”

Young Jimmy, nervously lighting a cigarette, nodded. “Damn good. But all this. . . . I don't understand it.”

Phil's serious eyes were questioning. “Are you sure? There's no doubt the authorities think one of us is a crook. I wonder—”

There was a little silence. Finally Jimmy asked, “Who is this Merlin, anyway?”

“Cleverest crook in the world,” said Tony, turning. “At least, he's been kicking around for two years. That means a lot these days. He's pretty much of a Robin Hood. Only kills in self-

defense—and never for personal profit.”

Phil broke in, “Plenty of criminals have evaded capture for years, but they’re the small fry. Not important enough to attract attention. But the Merlin—everyone thinks he’s had years of experience. Remember when Janison died? The governor? The Merlin killed him, and nobody knew why till they found out Janison was one of the biggest political racketeers in the country. He’s a Robin Hood of sorts, but the law won’t stand for Robin Hoods.”

“And,” said Tony sardonically, “one of us is the Merlin. So they say.”

Phil grinned. “Which one?”

“Oh, they’ll find out. They’ll chart our psychology—our character patterns—and check it with the analysis of the Merlin’s activities. Their lie-detectors will tell them which one of us is the Merlin. That’s positive identification, you know.”

Jimmy crushed out his cigarette, lips working. He swung suddenly on the others.

“You’re damn flippant about it! What if it’s true? What if one of us *is* this crook—d’you know what that’ll mean to Seth? His son shown to the world as a thief and a murderer. Seth will stick by us; I know that. But I know what his honor means to him. He got that silver plate in his skull because he thought more of honor than his life. And now—”

“Shut up, Jimmy,” Phil said quietly. “We know all that. But what can we do about it?”

Tony murmured, “Our youngest brother is about to suggest that the Merlin confess. A touching sentiment. Headlines all over the world announcing the news. Seth resigning all his offices immediately—he’d do that. Everyone knowing that a son of Seth Martell was—the Merlin.”

Phil said, “The Merlin might . . . disappear.”

“He’d have to disappear for good. Suppose I’m the lad, Philip, and suppose I disappear. A signed confession would be just as effective. The moment I disappear, it proves I’m the Merlin. No one has ever watched us. As Seth’s sons, we’re above the routine character-checks. We reported to Seth once a month. Otherwise we were free, all of us, with plenty of time to do as we pleased. Including brigandage!”

Phil grunted. “Anyway, people can’t simply drop out of sight in this day and age. Not with television, specialized wireless, telephotography, and so forth. Where the devil could a man hide for years?”

“In the Foreign Legion,” Tony said, and waited. His gaze searched the faces of the other two.

Surprise, astonishment, and incredulity showed. And vanished. Into Phil’s eyes came a look of dogged grimness. And Jimmy’s face showed—excitement.

“The Legion?” he asked.

“Yeah. No extradition. Since 1960, when the company started. No government has a hand in the Legion. They rent its services from the company, just as the Hessian dukes used to sell their soldiers to fight for other countries. When there’s a job to be done too dirty for anyone else, they ask the Legion—and waive extradition. The Polar fortresses. The Sub-Sahara. The Canal Patrols on Mars. Dangerous space-lane patrols. It isn’t like the ancient French Legion. This one’s privately owned, and, once you get in, nothing on Earth or Mars can touch you. As long as you’re in the Legion. Men don’t live long in it, as a rule.”

“Cheerful thought,” Phil grunted, puffing at his pipe. “By the way, which of us *is* the Merlin?”

Tony smiled. "I'm the guy, lads. And that's what I've been building up to. I'm going to drop out of sight. Head for the Legion. And—well, I wanted you two to know about it. I can't tell Seth, of course. But—"

"I'll be damned," Phil said in blank amazement. "You've got the Earth Star?"

"That's right."

"Odd. I happen to have it myself. In a hollow tooth."

"You're both crazy," said Jimmy. "I've got it."

Tony shook his head. "It's no use. There's no point in the three of us going into the Legion. One's enough. So—"

Phil said, "Wait a minute. Suppose all three of us disappear? Nobody'd press a charge against three men, when obviously two were innocent. I happen to have the jewel myself—"

"Yeah," Tony grunted. "But slow down. You're both going off the deep-end. I'm leaving now. Heading for the Legion, and you're both staying here."

Jimmy said, "We'll meet you there."

The argument kept on—with no result. Jimmy and Phil were adamant. Each one insisted he had the stolen gem. And, if they didn't accompany Tony, they'd simply go after him on their own hook. "So we'd better stick together," Phil said at last. "We'll have a better chance that way."

Tony's lips were compressed. "You crazy fools! You'd do it, too . . . well, stay here. I'm going after an amphiplane."

"What if the investigators get here first?" Phil asked.

"Stall 'em. And keep your eye on that window."

Jimmy was chewing his lip. "How do you expect to get out? If there are guards—"

Tony's grin flashed. "You'll find out." He turned to the door—and was gone, apparently unruffled. But as he hurried along the passage there was a gnawing uneasiness in his mind. Guards would no doubt be watching to prevent just such an attempt at escape as this. Only blind luck could help now.

He went into the big, gleaming kitchen, a bare room with murals on its walls. Every appliance had been built-in, so that stove, tables, and so forth, could be swung out from their cubbyholes by the pressure of a button. The room was empty.

Tony's sharp eyes flickered about, resting at last on a panel near by. He went to it, swung it open, and revealed a black hole beyond. The dumbwaiter. A glance upward informed him that the little car was below, though how far he did not know. Deftly Tony swung his legs through the hole and seized the ropes in strong fingers.

He closed the panel behind him.

It wasn't entirely dark. A diffused pale glow filtered down from above, and gently, carefully, Tony let himself slip toward the shaft's bottom. It was a long chance. Unless he found footing on the dumbwaiter car soon, his fingers would inevitably lose their cramped grip. For this was a penthouse apartment in a skyscraper.

Down he went into the shaft. Skin scraped from his hands. It grew darker, and below him was only unfathomable blackness. Tony hooked his legs about the rope and rested for a few moments, though he dared not delay long. Time was vitally important.

Then down he went again. He was in pitch darkness now, every muscle strained and beginning to ache. His hands stung painfully. His shoulders were throbbing.

Tony's feet thumped softly upon the peaked top of the car.

Gasping with relief, he relaxed, keeping the ropes wound about his wrist so that his weight would not carry the car to the bottom too suddenly. But a moment later he was plummeting down, occasionally checking his speed when caution grew stronger than the imperative need for haste. Up in the penthouse Jimmy and Phil were waiting, perhaps being questioned even now by the investigators. And Seth—unseen in the darkness, Tony’s face grew grim. Seth was suffering. The old man’s devotion to his ideals, to humanity was pitted against his genuine love for his three step-sons. And one of those three was the Merlin.

Finally the car thumped against the bottom of the shaft. A little crack of light indicated the panel opening into the porter’s cellar. Tony used his knife-blade to open it, easing the door outward little by little till he discovered that the room was vacant.

The rest was surprisingly easy. A pair of overalls and a cap in a closet made a satisfactory disguise, and, carrying a can of rubbish, Tony walked blandly past the service man posted on guard outside. He deposited his burden on the sidewalk, and without a pause began to hurry toward the corner. A hail stopped him.

“You, there! Wait a minute!”

Tony turned. The guard was following him, gaze probing. A thick finger thrust out suspiciously.

“Where’re you going?”

The street was almost empty. Tony didn’t wait for the guard. He hastened toward him, arms hanging loosely at his side—until the last moment. Then, as recognition came into the man’s eyes and as his hand dived into a pocket, Tony brought up his fist in a vicious uppercut. The blow was delivered at such close quarters that it went unobserved by passers-by. The dull thwack of bone against bone was the only sound. Tony caught the guard as he fell, pulled him swiftly back into the cellar, and left him there. The man was out for the count.

There were no other guards. Tony’s progress was not halted again. He reached his destination, secured a small, swift amphiblane, equipped with gyros, and lifted it through the port in the roof. Luckily, he had plenty of money in his pocket—enough to buy the plane instead of renting it, had he desired to do so. But, like most ships of this type, the instrument board was fitted with a “homing pigeon” device, by which the plane could be set to return to its garage along a radio beam whenever desired.

Tony’s fingers flickered over the controls. The ship was a honey—small and swift, built like a thick cigar, with retractable wings and props. He swung up in a wide arc that presently brought him directly over the penthouse that was his goal.

Briefly he wondered what had happened there, and whether Phil and Jimmy were still waiting. Well—fast work was vital now. The investigators were already on guard. Sight of an approaching plane would warn them of trouble. Tony checked his controls, took a few deep breaths—and dropped faster than was safe. The wind shrieked up into a high-pitched whine past the ship, almost beyond the threshold of hearing.

The skyscraper leaped toward him like a driving lance. Its top seemed about to impale him. But the controls had been expertly set, and the craft fled down safely to one side, stopping with a bone-wrenching jolt as the automatics took hold. Tony fought back giddiness and stared out through swimming eyes. His blurred vision focused. Too far to the left—

He slid the ship forward. This was the window. Inside, he could see Phil’s broad back, and one hand extended in a sign of warning. So the investigators had already arrived. But where was Jimmy? Tony couldn’t be sure.

A voice he didn't recognize was talking. One of the investigators . . .

"Well, we'll find him. And the lie-detectors will give us the information we want. Trying to frame Seth Martell is the dirtiest thing the Merlin ever did."

Jimmy said, "You're nuts."

"Yeah? One of our men saw it. The Merlin was opening Martell's safe—trying to put the Earth Star in it and throw the blame on Martell. But he didn't have time. Our man was too close, and the Merlin had to scam in a hurry. Now—which one of you was it?"

Tony's eyebrows lifted. A new element had entered into the affair. Trying to throw the blame on Seth—yeah, that *was* a hell of a lousy trick. So—

Tony whistled softly, and saw Phil jerk aside, crying out something. A slim form came hurtling toward the window. Tony got a glimpse of Jimmy's pale young face; then the boy was hurtling out into space, almost overshooting the mark in his eagerness. Tony seized his arm and pulled him back as he swayed on the ship's edge. The craft dipped slightly under the additional weight, and then lifted again as compensatory stabilizers went into action.

From within the room came a crash, and a sharp cry of pain. Phil appeared, his face stolid and expressionless. He jumped, landing accurately, and immediately whirled. In his hand, Tony saw, was a bronze figurine he had snatched up from a table.

"Run for it!" he snapped. There were faces in the window. A gun snarled viciously. Phil hurled the figurine with deadly aim, shattering the glass above the group, and the investigators dodged back as shards and splinters showered them. Almost immediately they were back—but Tony's hands had found the controls.

The ship fled up. As it fled it curved southward, till far below could be seen the shining waters of Long Island Sound.

Jimmy said tautly, "They're coming after us. I can see planes—"

Phil touched a lever. The upper framework of the plane was instantly sheathed with transparent walls, making it more than ever resemble a fat, shining cigar.

Tony sent the craft rocketing down. Almost at the surface of the water, he pulled out into a glide, swooping almost without a splash into the Sound. The light was blotted out by green translucence that grew darker as the ship slanted into the depths.

"Not too deep," Phil suggested. "The hull won't stand a crack-up."

Tony didn't answer. He was fingering the controls, trying to get every possible bit of speed out of the ship before the pursuers located it with their search-rays. If they could reach the outer Atlantic, they'd be safe—barring accident. But they were not safe in the Sound.

Abruptly the water ahead sizzled and bubbled with heat. An aerial torpedo had been launched. Tony shot up and then almost immediately dived again, shifting sharply to the left. Before his companions could get their breath, the ship was rushing back along the way it had come, retracing its path. Jimmy said sharply, "What the hell—"

Phil's fingers dug into the youngster's arm. "Good idea, Tony."

The latter nodded. "Maybe. We'll dig in at the mouth of the Hudson. They'll never look for us there. Then tonight we can slip out, take the air again—and head for the Company."

Jimmy said, "Once we're there, we're safe. There's no extradition from the Legion, eh?"

"Only to Hell," Tony remarked, grinning.

CHAPTER III

Legion of the Lost

“So,” said the fat little man with the shaved head, “so you want to join the Legion. Eh?”

Tony looked him over. The dingy office in the outskirts of the North African city was unimpressive. But, somehow, the little man was not. He wore dirty white tropical linens, his face glistened with sweat, but to the three brothers he represented fate. On his decision their destiny would depend.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “We want to join. Well?”

The little man smiled, tapping pudgy fingers on the crowded desk. “Well. Let’s see. You passed the physical examination. Your names are—Anthony. Phillips. Jameson.” The pale blue eyes sparkled maliciously. “Better remember ’em. Sometimes it’s hard at first, but you’ll get used to them. I’m sure I don’t know why everyone who enters the Legion changes his name. There’s no extradition. However . . . You are joining for a term of five years. If you wish to leave before then, you can buy your freedom if you have the money. If you have not, you must serve your term.

“You may try to escape. You may succeed. You may fail, and in that case will be assigned to the guards in the uranium pits of Mars. No one has ever escaped from there. It is not advisable—” The blue eyes were hard as steel now. “It is scarcely wise to attempt escape. Aside from all else, when you leave us, you are no longer under the Company’s protection.”

He passed a plump hand over his shining head. “Anything more?”

Tony glanced at his brothers and shook his head. “Not a thing. What happens next?”

“The Sub-Sahara post needs men. It’s an easy job for recruits, keeping the Copts in check and seeing they don’t go outside raiding. Here!” A buzzer rang, and soon a man entered, clad in the dull gray uniform of the Legion. He saluted casually.

“Sir.”

“Captain Brady,” said the fat little man, “these three are assigned to Sub-Sahara. Rookies. Anthony, Phillips, Jameson. Break ’em in.” He immediately became engrossed in the papers piled high on his desk.

Tony looked at the officer with interest. He saw a spare figure, and a worn, tired face, deeply lined, with sunken eyes and a clipped moustache. An adventurer gone to seed, he thought—grown tired.

Brady said, “Come along,” and led the way out of the room. They emerged in blazing white sunlight. A helicopter stood a few rods away, and the captain gestured toward it.

“*ntr*. We’ll fly, and talk as we go. Discipline needn’t begin till we reach Sub-Sahara, so if you’ve any questions—I’m at your service.”

He pointed toward the plane, and followed the brothers into it. With quick, familiar motions he lifted the craft into the air and sent it winging southward.

“I’ll stop at Azouad. That’s an oasis on the way. You can get smokes and equipment there—personal stuff you may want. That is—if you have any money.”

Tony’s eyes narrowed, but he merely said, “We’ve a little.” He shifted on the worn leather seat, glancing aside at Captain Brady. The man’s haggard face was immobile, the eyes mere slits as he squinted into the flaming sunlight.

From the rear of the plane came Jimmy’s voice. “Just what is Sub-Sahara?”

Brady's voice went dull with routine. "Well—twenty years or more ago a labyrinth of caverns was discovered under the Sahara. It was inhabited by survivors of prehistoric Egyptians—Copts. They were trapped underground in some ancient catastrophe, and got along there, gradually growing accustomed to their environment. Matter of fact—there was a sort of colony in the old pre-dynastic days down there. The Copts worked mines, and there was a—well, a city of miners under the Sahara. When the entrance was blocked, the miners couldn't get out—so they stayed there."

"What about food?" Jimmy asked. "And oxygen?"

"There's a lot about that Copt tribe we don't know. Food—well, fish and mushrooms are staples. The Midnight Sea lies under the Sahara. Ages ago the water in it made the desert itself a sea, but it drained underground at last. As for oxygen, there must have been outlets before we blasted some, though they've never been discovered. Possibly through river caves that drain into the sea."

Captain Brady rubbed his eyes with the back of one mahogany hand. "A lot we don't know about the Copts. Savage, ferocious—but marvelous miners. The Legion's posted there to keep order. Prevent raids on the surface tribes. The Copts worship Isis, or the Moon—I dunno which. Probably they're the same. Keep clear of them unless you're armed; don't monkey with their religion; and don't enter any passages engraved with the emblems of the Moon and the sistrum."

"Why not?"

"Religion, youngster. No white man has ever seen the Ka'aba—the Black Stone—at Mecca. It's sacred to the Moslem, just as the Alu—the group of deepest caverns—are sacred to the Copts. They say Amon-Ra is down there."

Jimmy's eyebrows lifted. "Amon-Ra? The ancient Egyptian god?"

"Right. 'The Hidden Light.' We have a sort of armed truce with the Copts, provided we don't interfere too much. When they get out of line, we whip them back. Figuratively, of course." Brady's hand touched the buttoned holster at his thigh.

"What did you say the sacred caves were called?" Phil asked suddenly.

"Alu."

"What does it mean?"

"The Land of Light." Brady looked around. His face was alight with interest. "Have you studied Egyptology?"

"No—afraid not."

The captain's eyes lost their glow. "Um. Bit of a hobby of mine. Land of Light—Hidden Light—Isis, the Moon goddess—I've always wondered what exists in Alu. Never found out. Never expect to. But I shouldn't be surprised if there's the wreckage of a civilization down there."

He chuckled. "Not that the commander agrees with me—Commander Desquer, you'll be under him. But he can't tell me how the Pyramids were built, or the explanation of so many mysteries of Egypt. In my opinion, space travel was understood ages before Europeans achieved it. Yes . . ." He nodded thoughtfully. "A puzzle. A nomadic civilization on the Nile, and then, without warning, a civilization full-blown and decadent. Where did it come from? It was decadent when it reached Egypt. I wonder . . ."

He turned to the controls. "Here's Azouad. Half an hour. You'll find plenty of shops. Don't buy any wines—they won't keep in Sub-Sahara. Brandy's good. And pipes wear better than

cigarettes in the Legion.”

Below the gyro was a patch of gray on the brownish, rolling Sahara plain. Small dots of faded green were visible, trees struggling desperately for moisture and life. In a clearing Captain Brady set down the ship.

“All out,” he grunted. “*Parte!* Half an hour, remember.”

The brothers watched the lean figure move briskly across the sun-baked square, to disappear into the depths of a cantina. Then they looked at one another.

“Well!” Jimmy murmured. “So we’re in the Legion!”

“Sub-Sahara. Um. Come on; we’ve only half an hour. Let’s look over Azouad.” Tony hesitated, gripped Phil’s arm, and glanced up. “That a plane?”

“Yeah.” Phil squinted aloft. “Wait . . . not a government plane. Private. Anyway, so what? There’s no extradition.”

“I know,” Tony said softly. “But the Earth Star’s plenty valuable. Somebody might have . . . ideas.”

“Maybe I’d better mail it back home,” Jimmy grinned.

Three glances crossed. And, curiously, at that moment a shadow drifted across the brothers—the shadow of a plane, chilling them momentarily after the blast of the African sun. It was like an omen.

Phil said, “I wonder which of us really has it?”

“I have,” Tony remarked. “Come along. I want a drink.”

He led the way, shouldering through a crowd of assorted riff-raff, the usual scum of a bordertown. Odors of sesame, oils, and less familiar stench were sickeningly strong. Dozens of mongrels roved hungrily about; the flies were countless.

They bought smokes and entered a cantina, dark and muggy. A fat native served them squareface gin, waddling toward the dim corner where they sat. Behind them, Tony noticed, was a door, half opened less to permit fresh air to enter than to allow foul to emerge. He pushed it shut with a casual foot.

The gin wasn’t good, but it was strong. Also, it was inordinately expensive. Jimmy made a wry face.

“Hell of a lot of good money will do us now. We’ve ten minutes. Think we’ll like Sub-Sahara?”

“It sounds—interesting,” Phil said slowly. “Captain Brady’s certainly hipped on his Land of Light. I wonder what sort the Copts are?”

“Tough hombres,” Tony grunted. There was a brief silence. The waiter appeared, refilled glasses, and departed. Then—

“*Merlin!*” a soft voice whispered.

Tony’s fingers tightened around his glass. Phil sat perfectly motionless. Jimmy’s head jerked slightly; then he was immobile.

Tony looked around, and the others followed his lead.

Standing beside them was a small, round-faced man, his beady dark eyes glinting beneath a sun-helmet, his tropical whites looking freshly laundered. His gaze swiveled sharply from one to another of the trio. A shadow of disappointment flickered over his features and was gone.

Tony said, “Who the devil are you?”

The stranger flashed white teeth. “The private secretary of a certain Rajah. One of you has seen me before. I do not know which one. However—”

“He’s crazy,” Phil grunted. “Batty as a bedbug. Drink up, boys.”

“My name is Zadah,” the man went on without heeding the interruption. “I know that one of you is the Merlin and has the Earth Star. I want it.”

Tony looked at the man. “Do you think anybody’d who’d stolen a jewel would be fool enough to keep it on him?”

“The Merlin would. Because he’d want to make certain that a certain—deal—wouldn’t ever be completed. An imitation of the stone was made, so perfect that the deception can be discovered only by comparison with the original. Someone might try to sell the imitation as the original jewel—and the Merlin could block such a transaction only by producing the real Earth Star. He won’t get rid of it. Not unless—he’s forced to.”

Tony drank gin reflectively. “There’s an offensive odor in this place,” he remarked. “Notice it, anybody?”

Zadah said, “I do not want the police to find you or the Earth Star. If I recover it myself, the Rajah will pay me any price to have the jewel—and the original owners can prove nothing. My private operatives have traced you this far. Now—” He took out a small gun. “You will stand up and walk one by one through the door behind you. Stay in single file. My plane is just near by. We will fly to my country, and there—” Again the teeth flashed. “There I think it will not be too hard to learn which of you is the Merlin.”

Tony hesitated, remembering the plane he had seen in the sky. Zadah held the gun almost hidden under his coat, but of its deadliness there could be no doubt. The brothers exchanged glances.

“Stand up!” Zadah whispered.

Tony obeyed. He turned toward the door, opened it, and stepped out into sunlight. The others followed. Zadah said, “To the left.”

They moved slowly through an alley, littered with refuse and foul with odors. Not a soul was visible—only a stray cur that ran past, tail between its legs.

“Across the square. The gun is in my pocket, but I have my finger on the trigger. Make no suspicious move.”

Tony’s lips were white. He guessed well enough what would happen once he and his brothers were captives aboard the plane. Zadah would not stop at torture to achieve his ends. If only—

But there was no sign of help. Across the square they went, toward a small gyro in its center. Loungers in the shadows of the low buildings eyed the group incuriously as they passed. They walked on, toward a cantina, past its door—

Captain Brady came out. He hesitated, his sunken eyes intent on the spectacle. Then he moved like an uncoiled spring.

Zadah sensed danger. He started to whirl, dragging his gun from his pocket. But Brady’s hand chopped down viciously, the edge of the palm smashing against the secretary’s spine, at the nape of the neck.

A little grunt came from Zadah. He went down like a wet sack of flour. Casually Brady bent, picked up the gun, and pocketed it. His humorless eyes were without any hint of emotion.

“Time to go,” he said. “Come along.”

Silently the brothers followed Brady to the latter's plane. Without a word they took off, speeding south until the desert-stain of Azouad was lost beneath the horizon.

And not once, during the journey, did Captain Brady refer to the affair in which he had played Saviour. Tony, grinning to himself, remarked in an undertone, "There's no extradition from the Legion."

"Yeah," Phil nodded. "The devil protects his own."

Jimmy said nothing. He was too busy peering out at the rolling dunes and endless plains of the Sahara.

Sub-Sahara! Underground labyrinth—an oasis under a burning, lifeless expanse of wilderness! To the three Martells it was, at first, a relief, after the flaming heat of the desert. Though even in the beginning there was a feeling of oppression as the metal car sank down into its shaft and the weight of earth overhead was felt almost tangibly.

It seemed hours later when the car stopped and a panel in its bare side slid open. Pale radiance flickered in through the gap, lighting the men's faces eerily. The glow seemed to come from the walls itself.

"Phosphorescent paint," Brady said, nodding. "Saves trouble. We spray the walls and ceiling once a year, and it's bright enough for our needs. Come along."

The four stepped out into a passageway. It wasn't long. It ended before a metallic door; Brady took a rod from his pocket and held it briefly pointed at the lock. The panel opened.

Beyond the threshold lay a cavern.

Huge and dim and alien as a distant world it seemed, a gigantic hollow hemisphere in the solid Earth. It was, as far as Tony could judge, about two miles in diameter, with a jagged floor that had been cleared in a few spots. The dim light filtered down from the ceiling, as sunlight through heavy cloud. When Brady spoke, his voice was incongruous in this place of silvery soft grayness.

"There's the fort. Over there—" He pointed. "That's the entrance to the Coptic tunnels. We guard the entrance to the surface. Though the Copts haven't tried to make any surface raids for a long time." He swung out along a rough path, the others following. "They hate the Bedouins, just as the ancient Egyptians did. They don't especially dislike us, unless we get in their way. If the mineral deposits the Copts work weren't valuable, though, they'd be left to themselves. But the Legion's paid to make sure the mines are kept active."

Tony didn't answer. His eyes were slowly accustoming themselves to this strange light. He glanced up at a ceiling that was both visible and invisible. No details could be seen. A veil of shining cloud seemed to obscure the rock far above. The vault of a world, Tony thought. A world created here, perhaps, when the Sahara was a sea instead of a desert. What had Brady said a while ago? Something about a prehistoric, mighty civilization in ante-dynastic Egypt . . . and, far and far below, the Copts still worshiped Isis, in the hidden caverns of Alu where no white man had ever penetrated. "The wreckage of a civilization down there," Brady had said.

In this eery cavern-world it was easy to believe in almost anything. A scrap of half-forgotten verse drifted through Tony's mind:

*"But you have seen the hieroglyphs on the great sandstone obelisks,
And you have talked with Basilisks, and you have walked with hippogriffs . . ."*

They were at the fort. Nothing could be seen beyond a palisade of strong, dully-gleaming metal. But a bell rang sharply; a gate opened, and a man in legionnaire uniform appeared.

Even in the odd light his face seemed strangely pallid—drained of all color, like bleached papyrus. He was gaunt and fleshless almost to the point of emaciation, so that his eyes and mouth were black hollows. It seemed as though a skull wore the rakish Legion cap atop its dome.

He saluted, and Brady responded.

“Hello, Jacklyn. Tell Commander Desquer I’m here.”

Jacklyn stood aside to let the others enter. Tony discovered that within the palisade were a dozen metal shacks, prefabricated, and without sign of life. So this would be their home from now on!

Brady said, “Well? Didn’t you—”

Jacklyn’s voice was strained. “Glad you’re back, sir. The commander left for the surface an hour ago. He got a message. . . . There’s trouble, sir. The Copts—they’ve kidnapped Ruggiero.”

Captain Brady looked at his fingernails. “It’s full moon, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right. I need four men. Completely armed. We’ll leave as soon as they’re ready.”

Jacklyn hurried away. Tony asked, “Is this—the usual thing, down here?”

Brady shook his head. “No. At full moon the Copts choose a victim to represent Osiris. The Husband of Isis. Usually it’s all done quietly, and the sacrifice is a Copt, of course.”

Jimmy inquired rather weakly, “What sort of sacrifice is it?”

“Degenerate form of Egyptian religion. According to legend, Seth, the evil god, was jealous of Osiris. He put him to death, tearing his body into fourteen pieces. The Copts are . . . literal-minded.”

Brady sucked in his breath. “I wish I knew more of their mythos. The ceremony glorifies Isis of the Moon. A Copt has always served before. But now . . .” He pulled at the clipped gray moustache. “Ruggiero has been taken to Alu to be sacrificed. This means trouble—plenty of it.” But there was no fear in the sunken eyes; only excited anticipation. “Alu! The Land of Light!”

And suddenly Tony understood. For years Brady had wondered about the half-mythical cavern world below, a place forbidden to him by rigid rules. Now, in the absence of the commander, it was Brady’s duty to rescue the kidnapped legionnaire. His duty—and his chance.

Tony said, “Let us go with you, captain. Eh?”

Jimmy and Phil exchanged surprised glances. Then Phil nodded. “Yeah! How about it?”

Brady hesitated. “You’re untrained. You don’t know the ropes—”

“We know how to handle guns.”

“Carbon-pistols?”

“We can learn easily enough.”

“Yes . . . they’re simple. But—all right,” the captain said with sudden decision. “You’re new, and that means you’re not scared stiff of Alu. The three of you and Jacklyn. Right!”

He bawled for the skull-faced man. “Jacklyn! Get equipment! I’m taking these three recruits. *Allons!*”

Tony grinned at his brothers. Their introduction to the Legion was to be exciting, after all—if not fatal!

CHAPTER IV

Sub-Sahara

Jacklyn said, "Fifty years nearly I've been here. It never changes. First time I've ever seen the Copts get out of hand. Sure, they'd try to get out once in a while to butcher the Bedouins, but they never had anything against us. Funny."

The group was marching swiftly through a dim tunnel, Captain Brady in the lead, the others trailing. They had been moving for an hour, in a labyrinth of passages through which the captain unerringly found his way. Now he looked back and remarked:

"That's right. I know this maze pretty well, but Jacklyn knows it blindfolded. He's practically a Copt himself. Hasn't been above ground for fifty years."

"You must like it here," Jimmy remarked.

Jacklyn said, very softly, "It's hell. You been in New York lately? Yeah? How does the old burg look now?"

"It's changed in fifty years," Phil said. "But you know that already."

"Times Square, though—that's there, eh? I remember I used to feel empty whenever I got out of the old town. God, I'd like to see it again—but not on a televisor. In fact," he went on slowly, "I'd like to smell fresh air again. Not this artificial ventilation. See starlight and green growing things."

"And the Sun," Jimmy nodded understandingly. He glanced at Jacklyn—and then caught his breath at sight of the expression on the legionnaire's pallid face. Horror—and hate!

It was gone immediately. Jacklyn ignored the remark. He said, "I was one of the first spacemen. There've been plenty of improvements since my time, what with liquid fuels instead of powder, and those new magnetic induced-gravity screens they're working on. But it's like shipping, I guess—steam or sail, it'll never really change. There'll be the sea under you, or space around you. We—"

"*Sh-h!*" Brady held up a warning finger. "Hold it!"

They paused, but no sound came. The captain relaxed.

"Thought I heard an explosion. Guess not. Well—by the way, are you sure you know how to use the carbon-pistols?"

"It's not hard," Tony said. He took out his weapon, resembling an oversized revolver with a cup-shaped hollow where the hammer should have been. From his pocket he withdrew a bit of coal, slipped it into the cup, where prongs held it firmly in place, and hefted the gun. "Not so easy to sight as a Colt, but the force-charge scatters, doesn't it?"

Jacklyn said, "Right. Watch the recoil, though. Ease the trigger-button down. And don't run out of coal."

"Funny," Tony remarked. "Coal doesn't seem much good in a pistol."

Captain Brady laughed a little. "The thing's based on atomic force—liberation of quanta, though I don't understand the scientific principles of it myself. Works only on carbon. Coal's carbon—and cheap. So, if the Copts get out of hand, we fight 'em with the coal they dig for us. Rather unfair, but it's all in the Legion's work."

"Practically everything is," Tony said dryly. "How much farther, captain?"

"We've been going down steadily—wait! Here's someone. Don't touch your guns unless I give the word."

Tony stared ahead. For a second he saw nothing; then abruptly the tunnel was filled with a dozen bizarre figures. Clad in skin-fitting garments of unfamiliar texture, white-skinned, with blue veins showing plainly through the flesh, the men's faces were aquiline and strong, with beaked noses and abnormally large eyes, in which the pupils nearly eclipsed the irises. The Copts' hair—they had none on their faces—was like bleached straw, tightly curled. They seemed unarmed, yet Brady's whole body subtly tensed as he stood waiting.

The foremost of the Copts, taller than the rest, and wearing a tapering headdress, came forward, hand lifted. He spoke in English.

"Captain Brady, why are you here?"

Brady said, "If any harm comes to a legionnaire, it will not be well with the Copts, priest."

The man nodded. "I understand. That was a mistake. Some of our younger men—they have already been suitably punished for meddling in affairs beyond them. Your legionnaire is back in the fort, Captain Brady. You will find him there if you return."

Tony detected a half-veiled glance the priest sent at his fellows. Brady saw it also, and tugged at his moustache.

"You are speaking true words?"

"I speak true words."

"Suppose we do not believe. Suppose we—go on."

A stir shook the Copts; they looked at one another askance. The priest said, "The Moon passages begin not far from here. Those you may not enter."

Brady seemed undecided. "We shall go back. But if our man is not safely in the fort—"

The priest's smile was apparently guileless. "He will be there."

"All right. About face! *Allons!*"

Tony turned with the others. But before a foot was lifted there came an interruption. The priest's voice was raised in an urgent command in an unfamiliar tongue. He, with the others, had seen the bloodstained, tattered, huge figure that sprang out from concealment behind a rock.

"Kill those men!" a bull voice shouted. "Blast 'em down!"

"Commander Desquer!" Brady clipped—and then—

"Out guns!"

For from the ranks of the Copts a pale ray had lanced, striking full upon Desquer's bison chest, bared by a tattered tunic. Another ray touched Tony; he felt a wave of intolerable heat as he snatched out the carbon-gun at his belt.

Cr-rack! Brady's weapon snarled viciously, and the heat-ray left Tony. He slipped a coal-cartridge into the cup and triggered almost without aiming. The deadly little guns worked havoc. But there were almost a dozen Copts, and for a few moments the tunnel was a chaotic Maelstrom of battle, dominated by Desquer's deep voice roaring commands.

"Get them! All of them! Aim at their bellies!"

Smoke drifted away. The Copts lay in helpless huddles amid red stains. Tony lowered his gun and stared around anxiously. Jimmy was painfully rubbing his arm where a heat-ray had cindered the cloth. Phil was apparently untouched, and so was Jacklyn, but Captain Brady was rubbing his thigh and cursing quietly. As for Commander Desquer, it was impossible to judge whether he had been injured in the conflict. He was already wounded in a dozen places.

Tony's fascinated gaze clung to the man. The mighty body was thewed like an auroch-bull, the matted, deep chest heaving convulsively with exhaustion. The commander's head

was shaved, but nevertheless there was something leonine about his face. Shaggy, tufted eyebrows overhung glittering small eyes, and thick, sensual lips were pressed tightly together. Desquer reminded Tony, somehow, of a Nero or a Caligula—a degenerate Roman despot.

Now Desquer flung back his huge head in an arrogant gesture. “Jacklyn! See if the priest’s got a healing-ray. We need it.” As the legionnaire hurried forward the commander turned his eyes to the others. Tony felt a curious shiver ripple down his spine as the cold gaze touched him. Desquer looked long and intently at Tony, and not until he had stared equally long at Phil and Jimmy did he turn his attention to Brady.

“The fort’s gone,” he said. “The Copts smashed it and massacred every man. They blew up the shaft to the surface just after I reached Sub-Sahara. I just managed to get away . . . the cavern’s overrun with ’em.”

Jacklyn came back with a small flat box, in which a lens was set. He touched a button and turned the lens to focus upon Brady’s thigh.

“Thanks . . . up a bit . . . You know they kidnapped Ruggiero?”

Desquer nodded “Yes. I found a Copt alone and induced him to give me a little information.” He glanced at his hands, took out a small knife, and began to clean his nails. “What this means I don’t know. A *jihad*—a holy war, possibly. Though it’s without precedent.”

The captain lifted his hand. “Enough, Jacklyn. Tend to the commander.”

But Desquer shook his head impatiently. “No time.” He drew Brady aside, as Jacklyn turned to the others. The two officers withdrew a few steps and lowered their voices.

Tony stared at the lensed box as Jacklyn used it on Jimmy’s arm. “What the devil’s that?”

“A gadget the Copts have. Nobody knows how it works. They don’t themselves. It was handed down . . . it’s a ray that increases cell activity. Builds up cell tissue. Prevents infection . . . how’s that?”

“Swell,” said Jimmy, touching his arm. “It still hurts a bit, though.”

“It won’t for long—”

Desquer said, “You three recruits—listen to me. We’re going down. Into Alu. Jacklyn, you’ll go for help.”

The skull-faced legionnaire’s body jerked convulsively. He stared at the commander.

“For—help?”

Desquer nodded. “Right. You know these caves. There are other openings to the surface. Get help. We’ll hide out and wait for you. The Copts won’t expect us to go right to their headquarters, so that’s just what we’ll do.”

“But—” Jacklyn moistened dry lips. “I’ll have to go to the surface?” There was a curious note of horror in his voice.

“Don’t argue. Move! You’ll have a better chance alone than with companions, so—*allez!*”

Jacklyn moved a pace away, stopped, and turned back. He said woodenly, “I can’t go to the surface, Commander.”

Desquer said very softly, “Why not?”

“Sunlight will kill me.”

There was a little silence.

“Why?”

“I was space-burned. That’s why I joined the Legion. It’s a kind of allergy, you know—I was so badly burned in space by direct solar rays that even filtered sunlight will kill me now

in a few hours.”

Tony felt his stomach move sickeningly. So that was why Jacklyn had remained in Sub-Sahara for fifty years. A prison with its mockery of freedom—

“Let one of the others go, sir!”

“I’ll go,” Jimmy offered—but Desquer snarled at him.

“Silence! You know these caves, Jacklyn—”

“The captain knows them!”

“He’s badly burned. That heat-ray touched the bone. He couldn’t stand a long trek. Here!” Desquer bent over the dead Copts and rapidly began to strip them of their garments. “If sunlight will kill you, stay out of it.”

“In the desert?”

“Bandages, you fool—bandages! Wrap yourself up in these. Travel by night if you have to, after you reach the surface.”

Silently Jacklyn began to don the garments. He said without expression, “It will kill me.”

Desquer threw him an armful of clothes and grinned. “You’ll live long enough to get help. If the Copts break out of Sub-Sahara, it’ll be like rounding up a thousand fleas. Besides, I don’t know what’s back of this—but it’s nothing small, I can promise you. If—”

He leaped like a panther. His shod foot came down with a sickening crunch on flesh and bone. Tony, startled by the sudden movement, saw that Desquer had sprung upon the Coptic priest, from whose hand a ray-projector had dropped. The priest’s blood-smeared face, twisted in agony, lifted toward the ceiling as he cried out.

“Not dead, eh?” Desquer whispered, his voice taut with savage fury. “Well—you soon will be.”

He drew back his foot. But the priest’s lifted arm somehow halted him. The Copt dragged himself half erect. His thin voice shrilled, “Go down to Alu, fools! But you will be too late. Isis has risen—and with her the gods who dwell in Alu. Before the opening to the outer world can be cleared again, we shall have triumphed—and the Earth will tremble before the power of the Ancients! Aye—the Ancients who ruled over the Four Rivers before their sons fled to Egypt!

“Go down to Alu, fools! *You shall find death!*”

The priest fell back—and died.

CHAPTER V

Five Against the Gods

Hours had passed. The legionnaires, headed by Commander Desquer, were encamped by a small, rocky inlet on the Midnight Sea, a fathomless lake of inky water that stretched beyond the limit of vision. A pallid glow came from the cavern roof far above, rippling over the surface of the tideless, sluggish sea. It was a scene fantastic almost beyond belief, and Tony, on guard at the mouth of a crevasse where the others slept, could scarcely realize that he was still on Earth, and not beneath the surface of some alien world.

They had come far and fast, slipping stealthily past the guards the Copts had posted, taking advantage of every unused tunnel, guided more by instinct than by knowledge. The city of the Copts they had skirted, descending ever deeper to the forbidden gates of Alu. And now, on the shore of the Midnight Sea, they were ready for the plunge into the unknown.

“We can’t stay here,” Desquer grunted. “They’d find us sooner or later. But in Alu we have a chance. The element of surprise will be on our side, at least.”

He was right. Tony knew. He shifted uneasily, glancing at the carbon pistol and checking its load. His thoughts went back to New York, and the civilization of a world that seemed a billion miles distant. A world lost to him—and his brothers—forever. And in exchange they had gained—this!

A hand fell on Tony’s shoulder. Desquer said, “All right. We’re marching.” The commander’s heavy jaw jutted as he stared out over the water.

The others appeared one by one, ragged, disheveled, and unshaved. Brady was wincing with the pain in his stiffened leg as he walked. Jimmy’s face was haggard; he had not the stamina of the others. But Phil seemed as sturdy and untroubled as ever.

Desquer turned; his cold eyes took stock of his command. “All right. March!”

He led the way. Brady behind him. The brothers followed. Tony caught a wink from Phil, and lagged behind somewhat, till the officers were out of earshot of a whisper.

“Yeah?”

Phil’s hand touched his tunic pocket. “Somebody searched me while I was asleep. I thought I was dreaming, but when I woke up, this pocket was unbuttoned.”

Tony’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh-oh!” He squinted ahead. “Who—”

“Dunno. But—somebody. Just thought I’d tell you. We’d better keep our eyes peeled after this.”

Phil exchanged a meaningful glance with Tony and increased his pace. The latter frowned, trying to figure out what this new development meant. The Earth Star? It was scarcely probable that anyone in Sub-Sahara would know the details of the theft and its aftermath. More likely the motive was merely petty robbery—unless, indeed, Phil had actually dreamed it. But in his heart, somehow, Tony sensed impending danger. The baleful fires of the Earth Star still burned far below the surface of the planet.

Desquer? He could scarcely know anything of the jewel. Brady? Perhaps the encounter with Zadah, the Rajah’s secretary, had aroused the captain’s suspicions. Or—Jimmy? Was he searching for the Earth Star, trying to learn which of his brothers carried it? That might have been more plausible had not Jimmy kept insisting, with his brothers, that he himself had stolen the gem.

Tony's face did not change, but his hand touched the butt of the carbon-pistol. He felt safer with the weapon at his thigh. For a time he plodded on, every sense alert for sign of danger. The immediate peril was from the Copts, of course.

None of the underground race appeared as the group skirted the Midnight Sea. They came at last to a tunnel mouth where Desquer paused, hesitating, to confer with Brady. The latter pointed to a sign cut out of the rock above the entrance—a full moon surmounted by a crescent.

“Moon and sistrum,” the captain nodded. “This is one of the forbidden gateways. A door to Alu.”

Desquer grunted. “Very well. Come along. Watch out for traps.”

They entered the tunnel. It was darker, though a vague illumination filtered from the walls and roof, due, perhaps, to some sort of radioactivity. The passage slanted down steeply. It was apparently little used, and in spots almost blocked by debris, where the legionnaires had to crawl through painfully. Desquer's bull strength came in useful there. The giant commandant was untiring, and there came a time when he was almost carrying Brady along as the captain's weak leg grew weaker.

“Wonder if Jacklyn will make it,” Jimmy muttered to Tony.

“God knows. If he doesn't, we're in the soup.”

Phil grinned. “What if he does? We're still in Alu!”

The tunnel grew steeper. Now half-obliterated carvings were visible on the walls, symbols that bore the trace of immeasurable antiquity. One sign puzzled Tony; it was a cross within a circle. It reminded him, somehow, of the dying Coptic priest's words—“. . . the Ancients who ruled over the Four Rivers before their sons fled to Egypt.” The circled cross struck a chord of memory in Tony's mind, and he knew, somehow, that the cross was supposed to represent four rivers. But—try as he might—he could recall no more.

There were other carvings, most of them showing the sistrum and the lunar disk. They had been cut out of the rock, Tony felt, long before the Pharaohs had reigned in Egypt, before the uraeus crown had come to represent a dynasty. A little chill touched Tony as he thought of the endless centuries that had ravaged the world above and left the road to Alu untouched.

Before Egypt—a civilization. And in Alu—*what?*

No premonition troubled Commander Desquer. His great frame marched on untiringly, practically carrying the exhausted Brady. Down and down they went. Tony's legs began to ache, and Jimmy was drooping with fatigue. Phil's stolid face showed no emotion, but there were lines of strain about his mouth.

Down—and down! Into Earth's secret heart—into the forbidden land. And what caused Tony the most uneasiness was the fact that they went on unchallenged. Perhaps the Copts had not discovered the intruders. Or, perhaps, the Copts knew that there was no need to guard the road to Alu.

Occasionally Tony would intercept a glance from Desquer, who would impartially stare at the three brothers as though in puzzled curiosity. But the commander said nothing, till at last they came out in a large cavern from which three tunnel-mouths opened, besides the one on the threshold of which they stood. Desquer paused, his gaze searching.

“We'll camp here,” he said shortly. “In the middle. That way, our retreat won't be cut off if the Copts find us. That middle passage is our road. Eh, Captain?”

Brady nodded. “Yes. The Moon and sistrum is over it.”

In silence the five moved wearily to the center of the cavern and dropped rather than relaxed on the rock floor. They were tired out. Desquer alone sat straddle-legged, his gun ready in his hand, icy eyes flashing about.

“Sleep,” he said. “I’ll guard.”

Tony gratefully obeyed. Stillness closed over the cave. But—it was broken.

Very faintly, as though from an infinite distance, came a rhythmic chanting. Muffled and scarcely audible it whispered, almost below the threshold of hearing.

Brady’s breath hissed between his teeth. “Hear that?”

Desquer said, “Well?”

“The Chant of Set. Somewhere they’re beginning the ceremony of Osiris, where they’ll sacrifice Ruggiero.”

Tony said, “That’s where they tear the victim into pieces, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Commander—” Brady didn’t finish. One look at Desquer’s grim face was enough.

“Don’t be a fool, captain. Get your rest—and the rest of you, too. You’ll need it. You know well enough we can’t rescue Ruggiero.”

That, Tony thought as he relaxed, was true; but nevertheless he had a curiously unpleasant feeling at the base of his spine. Somewhere amid these caverns a white man was being horribly sacrificed, and it was not a thought conducive to sound sleep. Yet Desquer was right. The legionnaires’ only chance was to remain hidden . . .

Once Tony roused sleepily to find the Commander lying down and Captain Brady on guard. Brady was wandering about the cavern, staring up at the carving of the Moon and sistrum. He was a gaunt, scarecrow figure in the dim light. As Tony drifted off again to sleep he realized that the faint chanting had grown louder—

That it was different now in tone—triumphant!

And then Desquer was shaking Tony’s shoulder, his hand pressed over the legionnaire’s lips. The commander’s eyes were glittering brightly.

“*Sh-h!* Not a sound! Rouse the others.”

Silently Tony obeyed. There was no sign of Captain Brady, he realized.

On cat feet Desquer led the three into the tunnel. Hidden by the first turn, he whispered, “Brady’s gone. When I woke up—”

Jimmy asked, “What happened to him? The Copts?”

“Perhaps.”

“But wouldn’t they have killed us, then?”

Desquer passed a hand over his shaven head. “Not necessarily. They may have other plans.” He smiled, not pleasantly. “So Brady’s gone. That leaves the four of us.” There was an oddly secretive look in the cold eyes. “Come on. We’re still heading for Alu.”

“What’s the use?” Tony asked. “If the Copts have discovered us—”

“They may not have. Brady may have gone off to try and save Ruggiero. I doubt that, though—but we mustn’t overlook any chances. Alu is our destination. So—*allons!*”

The three brothers exchanged glances. One by one their number was being cut down. First the entire garrison of the fort; then Jacklyn; now Captain Brady. Tony felt a twinge of sympathy for the weatherbeaten old soldier. Whatever had happened to the man, Brady would have gone down fighting.

“He didn’t try to warn us,” Jimmy muttered.

Desquer grunted. "We don't know all the weapons of those Copts. Where they get them God knows. Every once in a while they'll pop up with some super-scientific device far beyond their power to manufacture. It's a mystery. Maybe we'll find the answer in Alu."

That, to Tony, was a strange paradox. A search amid the ruins of a forgotten past for the super-science of the future. And yet—whence had come the mighty civilization of Egypt? What mystery lay behind the cryptic powers of the Copts?

There could be no answer, as yet. The four men marched on, down into the depths. They were beneath the Midnight Sea now, Tony decided, since the tunnel had curved in a long loop. Not only beneath the Sahara Desert, but under a sunken sea as well.

Endlessly the road stretched before them. But the end came unexpectedly. So exhausted were the four that they scarcely realized that the silvery radiance of the tunnel had given place to a reddish glow, brighter and reminiscent of volcanic activity. Desquer lifted his hand in warning. He went on to reconnoitre, and presently beckoned the others. His burly figure was rigid, Tony saw.

And, as he went on, he saw something else. The tunnel ended. It opened upon a cavern.

A cavern that was a world!

A world beneath a desert and a sea! Alu, the Land of Light, lay before the adventurers, and human eyes had never gazed upon a stranger sight. A metropolis of antiquity, with the wrecks of mighty buildings and fallen pillars strewing the flat floor of the cave. It was like Pompeii, and far older than Pompeii. It was grander than Karnak, more alien than crumbling Ang-kor-Vat. In the distance a pyramid rose toward the roof of the cave—touching it, supporting it as the fabled tree Yggdrasil is supposed to support the Earth.

Red light flamed from beyond the pyramid.

Alu! Old beyond imagination, cradle of a race that had ruled long and long ago! Alu, which the Egyptians had incorporated into their mythology as their heaven.

The sheer, overwhelming majesty of the panorama struck the men dumb, as a hand might strike an impious lip. Huge and desolate and dead the lost world stretched before them, holding its secret fast, as it had held it since before the Pharaohs reigned. No wonder the pyramids were a mystery—built by some alien science. The same science that had reared the colossal structures of Alu!

A hundred feet away a square white marble building towered, Doric pillars on either side of its open gateway. Some indefinable urge drew Tony's eyes to it.

Desquer said, "Hear that?"

The others listened, but detected no sound. The commander grunted.

"It came from that temple. Get your guns ready. We're going in. If there's trouble, shoot first."

The four moved softly across the flat rock of the floor. Halfway to the door of the building Jimmy clutched Tony's arm. He pointed, his face chalk-white.

"Look at that!"

Tony followed his brother's gaze, as did the others. Far away were two structures connected by an arched span. Across this span figures were moving.

Figures with human bodies—but inhuman heads!

At the distance it was impossible to make out details, but it was plain that there was something definitely abnormal about the beings who walked across the span. They moved in stately file and were gone. Jimmy whispered:

“Remember what the priest said? The gods live in Alu!”

Tony thought of the Egyptian gods, men with the heads of beasts and birds and reptiles. Could some monstrous hybrids have survived in this cavern? He shrugged off the thought.

“Masks, Jimmy! Don’t be an idiot. Come on.”

Desquer urged them toward the square building. “Quick! We can hide here, until we know more about this place. Keep your guns ready.”

The commander’s icy eyes were searching the gloom of the temple as they crossed the threshold. The symbol of Osiris, sign of the horned bull, was carved everywhere. Crumbling, broken pillars made the interior of the temple a labyrinth. The floor was littered with smashed blocks of stone.

It was very dim here, but one ray of red light flamed like a sword-blade through a gap in the wall and fell directly upon the throne that stood on a dais at the farther end of the room. Tony and the others looked down a long aisle toward the throne and the statue upon it—the statue of a man, clad in stylized flowing robes, with the head of a bull upon the human shoulders.

“Come on!” Desquer whispered. He gripped his gun. Tony felt the butt of his own weapon cold against his palm as he walked on. The approach to the dais seemed endless. Incredible journey amid the wreckage of a forgotten civilization! So might a lost soul have journeyed to Osiris . . . A scrap of verse came unbidden to Tony.

*“Ten hundred shaven priests did bow to Ammon’s altar day and night,
Ten hundred lamps did wave their light through Ammon’s carven house—and now
Foul snake and speckled adder with their young ones crawl from stone to stone
For ruined is the house and prone the great rose-marble monolith!”*

Desquer stopped. His figure stood rock-still for a moment. The gun swung up, aimed at the statue on the throne.

And now Tony saw what the commander had already realized. It was no statue that faced them. The being was alive!

CHAPTER VI

Before the Gods

Only one thing could have stopped Desquer's finger on the trigger—and that thing happened. The monster on the throne spoke. Thick and almost unintelligible, its voice poured out from the inhuman muzzle, as the hands twitched on the arms of the throne.

"Don't!" the bull-headed creature moaned. "It's Brady—Brady!"

Sheer amazement petrified Desquer. He lowered his gun at last, shaved scalp shining with sweat. Tony swallowed a lump in his dry throat, glaring at the hybrid on the dais.

Brady? Captain Brady?

"Those devils did this to me," the thick voice went on. "Surgery, commander—super-surgery. Remember their healing ray? They grafted the flesh and skin of a bull on to my head and speeded up the cellular activity tremendously with their ray. I—I don't dare move. This head is so heavy it would snap my spine if—if—"

Desquer said in a low voice, "Are we in danger now?" His eyes searched the shadows.

"You're doomed," Brady mouthed. "Thotmes told me the hellish plan behind all this. Thotmes is the high priest. He's one of the very few that know the secret of Alu. He told me—almost everything. It tickled his ego, I think, to gloat over his triumph . . ."

The bull head lolled forward and came back into place again abruptly. Brady said, "Maybe there's a chance. I don't know. Your guns . . . Listen! If you can get to the pyramid and blast the machine out of existence—"

"What machine?" Desquer asked.

"The machine that will destroy Europe! The same kind of machine that created Earth's Moon, ages ago! The machine that sank Atlantis!"

Tony's breath caught in his throat. Atlantis? Now he remembered the significance of the sign of the cross-and-circle. It was the symbol of Atlantis, the four rivers on the island continent. Softly he whispered, "The Ancients who ruled over the Four Rivers before their sons fled to Egypt."

Brady said, "Yes. That's the secret of Egypt, and its civilization. Men have guessed at that before now. Ages ago, when Europe was filled with nomadic tribes, Atlantis was a continent of culture and science. It was unstable—volcanic activity went on endlessly beneath it. And the land began to sink. Thotmes told me how the scientists of Atlantis planned to prevent their doom.

"They made a Moon. Out of the bed of the Pacific Ocean they tore part of the Earth and sent it driving out into space. They thought that would release the pressure under Atlantis and save their civilization.

"They failed. The forces they controlled were too mighty. Atlantis sank, taking with it a science such as the world has never known and perhaps may never know again. But before the deluge, a few Atlanteans fled eastward, through the Pillars of Hercules, to Egypt."

The bull head nodded. "They were the ancestors of the underground Copts. They found Sub-Sahara centuries before the Pharaohs, and they found Alu. There they built a city such as had existed in the Atlantean valleys. They sent forth some of their number to civilize the Nile peoples, and those Atlanteans became the high priests of the gods. They created the gods!

“As they created me—they made gods with heads of bulls and crocodiles and jackals, to terrify the superstitious tribes that needed tangible gods to worship. And then the road to the surface was closed by some ancient cataclysm, so that the Atlanteans were trapped here. Some few of the priests kept their culture. The others degenerated. They became—the Copts.

“But the priests still kept the old religion alive, using their surgery and their healing-rays to make new gods, and ruling the Copts through fear. Now they plan to make a second Moon, and to raise Atlantis; they wish to rule the Earth as they did once, long ago.”

Brady’s thin hands clenched into fists. “They caught me in the cavern where I was standing guard—used some sort of paralyzing ray on me. They brought me down here and told me what they intend. There’s a machine that’s capable of ripping all Europe from the face of the Earth and sending it out in space, to be another Moon.”

Tony said, “But that would wreck the world!”

“That is part of their plan. They have lost all their science, possessing only a few machines and devices that have come down since the days of the Atlantean exodus. And these are gradually losing their power. In sunken Atlantis Thotmes and his followers can find weapons and secrets that will enable them to rule the world. But first they plan to make another moon—to destroy Europe—and to wreck most of the Earth with quakes, tidal waves, and storms. They’ll be safe here in Alu. They’ll emerge after the Atlantic has drained into the great abyss that will be left by the destruction of Europe, and they’ll return to Atlantis, west of the Canary Islands.”

“A machine to make a Moon!” Desquer’s voice was almost scornful. “Unbelievable!”

“It was done once. The principle is that of vibration. A file of men marching in unison can shake down a bridge—you know that. The right vibration can wreck a building. Sonic waves can disrupt the molecular framework of the Earth, and Thotmes has a machine that can be focused *through* the body of the planet. There will be little temblors in Europe at first, then heavy quakes. They will grow stronger. And finally the entire continent will be ripped away, and centrifugal force will carry it out to its orbit. Thotmes explained it in detail . . .”

The bull head jerked forward suddenly. There was a sharp, brittle snap. And, slowly, the body of Captain Brady leaned and bent. It toppled.

Desquer sprang forward with a curse. He touched the monstrous muzzle, jerked his hand away, and then felt for Brady’s heart-beat. After a moment he shrugged.

“Well, he told us enough. Now . . .” The commander stood up, his gaze traveling slowly from face to face. “Now we must find that machine and destroy it—eh?”

He seemed vaguely displeased when the three brothers nodded as one. But his words were commonplace enough.

“We need information. *Bon*. First, we must find someone who can supply it. Preferably this Thotmes—but we cannot pick and choose, I suppose.”

Jimmy said on impulse, “You believe Captain Brady’s story?”

For answer Desquer waved his hand around. “Look at this. No modern civilization built it. I’ve lived in Sub-Sahara for a long time, and—well, at least I’ll verify the story before I act. Let me remind you that it is not your business to ask questions.” His cold gaze held the youngster.

Tony said quickly, “I’ll get the information, commander.”

Desquer nodded. “Very well. I need tell you nothing you do not already know. Most of the Copts know English; if not, bring your captive back here. We shall wait.”

Tony looked once at the sprawled, terrible body that had been Captain Brady, waved casually to Phil and Jimmy—and went out. Along the shadowed aisle of pillars he hurried, pausing only when he emerged from the temple. There, crouching in the dimness, he paused, looking about.

There was no sign of life. In the distance loomed the tunnel mouth by which they had entered Alu. Tony slid along the side of the building and peered gingerly around the corner. He could see the arched ramp along which the “gods” had passed, but it was vacant now. What was the logical course to pursue?

The lost city stretched about for miles, an apparently tenantless ruin. Yet it was peopled, Tony knew, by Thotmes the high priest and his servitors—perhaps by Copts, though probably not, since the latter were confined to their own city above. At the thought Tony involuntarily glanced up. Beyond the cavern roof was the Midnight Sea, above that the Coptic city, and still further above, Sub-Sahara itself. The weight of innumerable tons of Earth pressing down on him was almost suffocating. However—

Tony shook off the feeling and set out at random, after taking careful bearings. He had a compass, but it was useless in this environment, as he found after brief experimentation. But he could gauge direction fairly well from the great pyramid, which was visible from almost any point in the city of Alu.

He kept in the shadows, which were concealingly dark where the flickering red light did not shine. What caused that volcanic glow Tony did not know, though he hazarded a few guesses. He went toward the pyramid.

It was a metropolis of the dead. Eons ago it had been inhabited, by the survivors of sunken Atlantis, but now only the dust of ages filled it. Silence, and everywhere the symbol of Isis, Moon-goddess, carved upon the stones. Silence . . .

The pyramid drew nearer, and Tony was amazed anew at its hugeness. It towered up and up to the very ceiling of the cavern, seeming to support it like a pillar. Perhaps it did—he could not tell. But as he came closer he saw that the pyramid was hollow, for there were lighted embrasures here and there in the sloping expanse of its sides.

And still there was no sound, no movement, no trace of life.

Tony grew more cautious, though there seemed no need. An arched opening loomed in the side of the pyramid near him, and he slunk toward it watchfully. No guards were posted. He hesitated near the threshold. Should he take the risk of entering what might be a stronghold of his enemies? To search the deserted city was seemingly a vain task, and, shrugging, Tony walked boldly toward the opening. But his gun was in his hand, and a coal-cartridge in its cup, ready for instant use.

A passageway sloped upward within the pyramid. It was lighted dimly by gleaming bars like neon-tubes that ran the length of the ceiling. In the vague glow Tony went stealthily on.

The corridor was featureless and without doors—at first. But, suddenly, he noticed what had at first evaded his attention, a series of panels set in the walls. The secret of their locks was beyond him, until at last one seemed simpler than the others. Tony pressed a spring that was not too deftly hidden—and the panel opened.

He looked through metal bars into a great cage.

Briefly he thought of a menagerie, and then went sick and dizzy with nausea. This was, indeed, a “zoo”—but it did not hold animals. It held—gods!

The artificial monsters created by Thotmes and his servants roamed within the cage, men with the heads of teratological mythos. Here, indeed, were the gods of Egypt, jackal-headed, ibis-headed, bull-headed, even some with the heads of crocodiles set hideously upon the human shoulders. So brightly lit was the cage that the beings did not see Tony, and he drew back swiftly, closing the panel. Obviously he could get no information here. He suppressed a strong impulse to use his carbon-gun to put these pitiful beings out of the unending nightmare of their existence. If this was a sample of Thotmes' power, it would not be well for the Atlantean to rule over Earth!

Tony went on along the corridor. From his slight knowledge of Egyptology, he knew that not all of the gods were malevolent, like Set. Both Osiris and Amon-Ra were benevolent, and so, indeed, was Isis. Perhaps in the beginning the whole religion had been a good one, and had become decadent and degenerate with the passage of ages in this hidden cavern-world. The obvious parallel was Satanism . . .

Yet this wasn't a question of superstition. It was one of logic and science, of cold facts in which the mythology of a race had been rooted. Behind the veil of so-called "magic" lay an alien and powerful culture, born in Atlantis long before Ur and Akkad had risen in Sumeria, along the Tigris and Euphrates.

On and on Tony went, a cold uneasiness rising within him. No one appeared to bar his path. More than once he glanced at the carbon-gun—but he was unprepared when the floor dropped beneath him, and he fell, writhing and twisting, into darkness.

He landed heavily on a hard surface, and went down with a grunt and an oath. Before he could rise, he felt the weight of muscular bodies upon him. Handicapped by the darkness, he fought doggedly, but the gun was torn from his grasp almost at the outset of the struggle. He was not in complete blackness; there was a vague dim glow, but Tony's eyes were not conditioned to it, as those of his enemies were. At last he lay prostrate, held motionless by iron hands that gripped him.

A deep voice murmured a command. The light grew brighter. Tony blinked, staring up from his position spread-eagled on a stone floor. He discovered that he was in a bare chamber, with a barred door of metal grating set in one wall. Five strong-thewed Copts held him—but almost immediately Tony saw that they were not Copts. Their faces lacked the degeneracy of the underground mining race. They were cruel instead of stupid. Cruel—and arrogant, proud! Proud with the knowledge of a culture that stretched back into the mists of a lost antiquity.

One man stood against the wall—and he was a giant. He wore a short spade beard, and soft, glossy black hair fell in curled, oily ringlets about his face. He was handsome with the beauty of a sword-blade, strong and powerful and deadly, and his beaked nose was hooked like a scimitar. Pale blue eyes watched Tony unwinkingly.

In not-quite-perfect English, he said, "I am Thotmes." Tony could not repress a slight movement, and the blue eyes narrowed; but the priest merely smiled. "You know me? That is strange. Perhaps you have spoke to . . . Osiris!"

He nodded to the priests, who relaxed their grip on Tony. The legionnaire sprang up, but made no hostile movement. He stood silent, watching Thotmes.

The Atlantean stroked his beard. "You are wise. This will be your prison, and, if you cause no trouble, you can live for a time. We do not murder unnecessarily."

"Only nine-tenths of the world's population," Tony said gently.

“That,” Thotmes smiled, “is necessary. We are a handful, against billions. Not even the powers we shall recover from Atlantis would enable us to conquer Earth—unless Earth is already conquered, her navies and aircraft and weapons smashed by cataclysms.”

“You actually expect to make a second Moon?” Tony’s voice held skepticism. But the priest was not offended.

“Yes. Such a thing was done once before. The machine that made the Moon was built in Atlantis, and we have built a duplicate here. It took centuries, but at last it is finished. In the heart of the pyramid it lies—and already it is in operation.”

“In operation?” Involuntarily Tony glanced around. “I don’t—”

“You feel nothing here and now, of course. Later you may, though we are safe in Alu. The machine sets up vibration and molecular disruption in certain strata under Europe, and gradually the intensity of the vibration will be increased—until Europe shakes itself literally to pieces. In a week or even less the final cataclysm will take place. Europe will vanish, leaving an abyss into which the waters of the Atlantic will pour. And Atlantis will rise again!”

“That,” said Tony, “will be Old Home Week, eh?”

Thotmes didn’t answer. He turned to the others and gestured. One of them slid open the barred grating, and the group filed out. The door slammed.

Beyond it, Thotmes smiled at his captive. “Your companions will join you soon. We shall not trouble to search for them. They will walk into our midst soon enough, and then you will have company.”

“Look out you don’t get your head blown off by one of them,” Tony remarked.

Thotmes lost his smile. He tugged at his spade beard and said, “Few men jest in Alu. There is always a need for new gods—and you would look well with a jackal’s head on your shoulders.”

“You’d look lovely with a rat’s,” Tony agreed, “only you already have one.”

The high priest said something indistinguishable, glared and departed. Tony was left alone. He shrugged and took stock of his possessions.

He had been searched completely. His pockets were empty. Carbon-gun and coal-cartridges had been taken from him. He had no tool by which he might leave the cell.

On the other hand, there might possibly be a concealed panel somewhere. It took an hour for Tony to convince himself that none existed. Finally he sat down and waited. There was nothing else to do. He had got the information for which he had come. The machine of the Atlantians was in the heart of the pyramid. But he was unarmed, and had no way of conveying a message to Desquer or his brothers. Briefly he wondered what was happening to Phil and Jimmy, and how long they would wait. And when they got tired of waiting—what would they do?

What could they do—trapped in Alu, city of science and fathomless antiquity? Four men, Desquer and the brothers, against the mighty powers of the greatest civilization Earth had ever known. Four against the might that had made Egypt an invincible empire.

Four against the gods!

CHAPTER VII

The Might of Atlantis

A thump from above brought Tony from his crouching position to stand rigidly erect, gaze riveted to the ceiling. He was in time to see a section of it swing down on hinges, letting the body of a man, with arms and legs flailing, drop into the prison. Tony sprang forward, breaking the man's fall. It was Phil.

Phil's blond hair was disheveled, a stubble of yellow beard on his face; but his stocky body was as steel-muscled as ever. He still gripped the carbon-gun he had been holding, and his eyes met Tony's with relief.

"You okay?"

"Yeah." There was no need for more, so deep was the understanding between the brothers. Tony said swiftly, "Anybody after you?"

"Didn't see anybody."

"Took 'em by surprise, perhaps. But they'll be along. We've got to work fast while we've a chance of getting out of here." He glanced at the barred door. "We could blast out there with the carbon-gun, but I don't know the road. Hop on my shoulders, kid. We're going out through the ceiling."

Phil handed his brother the gun and climbed deftly onto Tony's shoulders as the latter knelt. Slowly he rose, steadying Phil with one hand.

"Got—got worried about you when you didn't show up. I went after you."

"See if you can open the panel . . . Jimmy all right?"

"He's okay. The kid's pretty tough . . . Got it!"

The hinged panel slid down as Phil's stubby fingers closed over the edge of the opening. Tony heaved up strongly. For a second Phil hung there; then his body wriggled up, and his weight was gone from Tony's shoulders.

Simultaneously a cry came from beyond the barred door.

A pale ray lanced out. Tony felt a twinge of agony in his side. Involuntarily he flung up the carbon-gun and fired. The metal door vanished in a blaze of white fires. Whoever had been beyond it had also disappeared without trace.

But there were others coming. Tony traded shots with them. He heard Phil's voice and risked a glance up. Phil was lying flat, his arm extended down.

"Jump for it!"

"Can't," Tony said. "They'd wing me . . ."

"You've got to. I can hear them coming up here, too."

"Beat it. Get back to Desquer. Tell him the machine's in the base of this pyramid. I'm going out this way; there'll be a better chance of one of us getting through if we take different routes. Beat it!"

There was a pause, punctuated by the snarl of the carbon-gun. Then Phil said, "Okay. Luck!"

His feet scraped on the stone above. The panel slammed shut. Tony made a wry face, realizing that Phil was unarmed. But he had a better chance of escape than Tony himself, for a dozen or more of priests was blocking the passage that led—perhaps!—to freedom.

Tony fired again. The foremost of the priests went down, and the others hesitated. The gun crackled savagely. One priest broke and fled—and the others followed.

Tony hurried after them, every sense on the alert. The passage was apparently bare, and silent save for the dying thump of flying feet; but he guessed that there might be traps. Would this road lead to escape? And—had Phil escaped safely? There was no way of knowing—yet.

The passage stretched empty before Tony. He gripped the gun, feeling in its cold metal a reassurance against even the danger of Thotmes and his powers. There was no limit to the weapon's potentialities. The stronger the charge, the more effective the results. With a powerful enough charge, Tony thought sardonically, he could bring down the whole pyramid. Unfortunately he had no ammunition, save for the clip in the gun's butt.

At a side passage he hesitated, realizing that the new tunnel led up. The priests would not expect him to take this path—so he did so. And, as it turned out, he was wise.

He came out on a little balcony overlooking the sloping ramp of the pyramid. Beneath him the massive piles of masonry fled down like gigantic steps, and Tony hesitated as he glanced down. A noise from behind him, along the passage, helped him make his decision.

It was almost too late. A priest burst into view, mouth open in a soundless scream, raising a short metal rod in one hand. Tony flung up the carbon-gun and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened.

The ammunition was exhausted.

Tony's reaction was involuntary and instinctive. He flung the gun straight at the priest's face and ducked, diving in at his opponent. A beam of light lanced out over Tony's head. Then he crashed into the priest's knees and brought the man down heavily.



“Don’t move! Not if you value your lives!”

There was no time for ethics. Tony struck low and hard. He left the priest unconscious and vaulted the balcony’s rail. Down the slope of the pyramid he sprang, leaping along the huge

steps made by the giant blocks, risking his neck at every jump. But—he made it.

Once at the base of the pyramid, he was comparatively safe. Out of the red glow the shadows were heavy, and Tony took advantage of them to slink away toward the wall of the cavern he could see far ahead of him. But before he did so he made a brief scouting trip, hoping to find Phil. It was useless. Either Phil had already made good his escape, or else he had fallen victim to the priests of Thotmes.

There was no sign of excitement. Tony wondered why. Perhaps the escape of prisoners was of little importance to the Atlanteans. They were too self-confident—with good reason, it might be. Science that could rip the Earth asunder was not easily to be conquered.

Near the door of the Temple of Osiris Tony quickened his pace. The sound of hoarse breathing and shuffling footsteps came to his ears. On the threshold he hesitated, staring, but saw nothing in the dimness of the interior. Wait! Far down beneath the dais were two motionless bodies. One was that of Captain Brady, of course. But the other—

Tony broke into a run. Yet he retained caution enough to move as silently as possible, though he could hardly repress a shouted question. Had the Atlanteans found the intruders in Alu? Was the body that of Desquer, or—Jimmy?

It was neither! Tony stumbled over a carbon-gun, snatched it up in one motion, and simultaneously saw that beside the figure of Brady lay Phil, unconscious and bloodstained, red fluid seeping from a gaping hole in his chest. But Tony could spare only one glance at his brother. Beside him, between the pillars that towered to the roof, two men were locked in conflict—Jimmy and Commander Desquer!

Jimmy was getting the worst of it. He was weaponless and trying to hold on to the hand in which Desquer held his gun. The commander was slowly breaking his opponent's grip. No expression showed in the Legion officer's face, but his eyes were black and deadly as wet velvet. Jimmy was gasping and bleeding from a cut over one eye, almost exhausted.

Tony said, his voice like a whiplash, "*Drop that gun, Desquer!*"

The commander's reaction was unexpected. All in one swift motion he released Jimmy and flung himself back. Hidden in the shadow of the pillars, he fired at Tony.

The shot missed. Tony lifted his own weapon—the one Jimmy had apparently dropped—but Desquer was fleeing, dodging in and out like a phantom. Why the devil—! Then Tony knew why. Desquer was no coward. But, on the other hand, he was no fool. He had run out of ammunition. A cartridge belt on the floor, its buckle torn off, explained the reason. In the fight Desquer had lost the belt.

He vanished through the door of the temple and was gone. Tony stared at Jimmy. "What the hell?"

The boy was white and gasping. "Phil got back. He'd seen you in the pyramid—told us where the machine was. But he'd been wounded—"

"Yeah. Keep talking, kid." Tony was kneeling beside the unconscious form of Phil, rendering such first aid as he could.

"Desquer sent me outside to keep guard. I heard Phil yell, and came running in. I was just in time to see Desquer—" The boy swallowed. "He killed Phil, Tony. Shot him through the chest. I tried to stop him—and then you came in."

Phil's eyelashes flickered. Tony gave Jimmy the gun. "Okay. Run along and keep guard again. Watch out for Desquer. If he shows up—"

"I'll use the gun." There was deadly grimness in the young voice. Jimmy's hand closed over the weapon; he hurried off down the dark aisle.

Phil was looking up at his brother, a wry grin twisting his lips. "So you got out of the pyramid too, eh? Good."

"What happened, boy?" Tony was futilely trying to stanch the flow of blood.

"Nothing much. Desquer didn't bandage me up after I got here. He searched me, instead. Found nothing, of course. But—he asked me where the Earth Star was."

There was a little silence. Tony whispered, "How—"

"I don't know. Desquer found out something. He's after the gem. Thought I had it, and when he couldn't find it on me, he tried to make me talk. His methods weren't very—nice. That's when I yelled, I guess. I jumped at Desquer. Found out I wasn't as badly wounded as I'd thought. He shot me through the chest."

Phil coughed. "Might as well stop trying, Tony. I'm the first of us to go. I've a hunch there'll be another. But one of us three ought to pull through."

"I'll get Desquer," Tony said very softly. His thin, dark face was a grim mask of copper.

"Thanks. And keep an eye on the kid, will you? I—I—" A gush of blood came from Phil's mouth. He coughed rackingly. Tony hurriedly ripped off his shirt to improvise an additional bandage.

But it was useless. Ten minutes later Tony stood silently beside the body of his brother, looking down at the stolid features, relaxed utterly now in death. The shadows of the temple of Osiris pressed in heavily. It was, in a way, fitting that death should have come for Phil in Alu, the asphodel land where Egyptians thought the souls went to roam endlessly.

Tony turned and walked slowly along the aisle. At the threshold of the temple he turned and looked back. Phil would rest there forever, perhaps—and it was such a sarcophagus as few men have ever possessed.

"Don't move," a low voice commanded. "Not an inch! *Careful!*"

But Tony's reaction was involuntary as he whirled. Almost beside him, but out of easy reach, was Commander Desquer. In his hand was a carbon-gun, and another was in his holster. The man's glittering eyes watched Tony icily from under the shaggy penthouse brows.

"Careful!" Desquer repeated. "Your brother wasn't."

"Where is he?"

"There. . . . He isn't hurt. He'll wake up in a few minutes. Just stunned. My gun wasn't loaded, but his was. So—"

Desquer grinned and passed his palm over his shaved scalp. "Revive him. Quick!" he barked as Tony hesitated.

The latter silently went to where Jimmy lay huddled against the wall of the temple. He knelt beside the boy and began to slap his cheeks. He glanced up once to see the Commander watching him narrowly.

Desquer said, "Where's the Earth Star? You got it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tony grunted.

"No? Then let me explain. That televisor call that took me to the surface—it was from a man named Zadah, the secretary of a certain Rajah. He told me all about you. Offered me a fortune if I got the jewel back for him. Well—I intend to. I'm sick of the Legion, and this is my chance to buy my way out and live like a prince. So—where's the stone?"

Tony told him, but his remark was unprintable. Desquer's thick lips twisted in a sneer.

“Very well. But I’ll get it, remember that.”

“A lot of good it’ll do you now.”

“I’ll get out of here. But first we’re going to destroy that machine of Thotmes. Your brother’s waking up. Bring him along. We’re heading for the pyramid.”

Grimly Tony hoisted the half-unconscious Jimmy to his feet and supported him. “We’re unarmed. There are scores of priests—”

“You’re going to stay unarmed,” Desquer snapped. “I can handle a gun better than any three men. *Allons!*”

Tony grunted and started out, carrying most of Jimmy’s weight on his shoulders as the boy slowly recovered from the blow that had stunned him. His lips were a tight, pale line. Both he and Jimmy were completely in Desquer’s power, and the man was so completely an egotist that he had not hesitated to carry out his own plans even in the face of a doom that threatened the entire Earth. Ruthless Desquer was—but of his icy courage there could be no doubt. Nor of his greed! Tony sensed something of the driving power within the man, the desolate years of loneliness in Sub-Sahara, a prison worse for Desquer, perhaps, than for any other man there.

They moved toward the pyramid, keeping to the shadows. Tony and Jimmy preceded their captor, conscious always of the gun leveled unerringly at their backs. There was neither sign nor movement to indicate the presence of the Atlanteans.

“How do you expect to get to the machine?” Tony asked finally. “It’s guarded.”

“I can outshoot a dozen Copts,” Desquer said confidently. “We’re going straight in. We’ll find a guide—make him guide us. If anyone gets in our way, he’ll regret it. We’re going in, smash the machine, and come out again. And then—I’ll find out which of you has the Earth Star.”

Tony didn’t reply. He went on, his mind desperately searching for a plan. But it seemed hopeless. There was no way out.

Finally only a broad plaza separated them from the pyramid. At its edge the trio paused. Desquer said, “We’ll skirt around to that building—see it? It juts into the open space . . . I don’t see any guards, but there may be some.”

The three were standing in the shadow at the corner of a tall stone obelisk. And without warning a score of figures dropped down upon them, in utter silence—and with murderous fury.

Desquer’s guns were in his hands. The snarling crackle of the carbon-pistols rapped out, awakening echoes in the dead city. Tony could not see the commander; he was borne down under a press of bodies, struggling furiously. Beside him he heard Jimmy cursing and striking out weakly. The Atlantean priests were not using their ray-projectors, perhaps because they depended on weight of numbers. That was their mistake!

It was Desquer’s fearless savagery turned the tide of battle. His guns bellowed without ceasing. Thrice he went down, rising at last a gargoylish, hideous figure, dripping with blood from a dozen wounds, his bare scalp shining blackly in the red light. One by one and two by two he killed, mercilessly, viciously, finally clubbing his pistol to dispose of the last of the priests, who was atop Tony.

“Can’t waste ammunition,” he growled. “Get up! Both of you! Hurry!”

Tony stood up, Jimmy beside him. A few of the priests *had* escaped, he saw, and were even now fleeing toward the temple. Desquer raised his gun, hesitated, and lowered it.

“Come on!”

Tony stared. Scores—no, more than a hundred priests were pouring from the pyramid, forming a phalanx massing itself to guard the threshold. In the lead stood Thotmes, his spade beard making him easily recognizable. The fleeing priests joined their companions, and the little army stood in silence.

“Not using their ray-projectors,” Tony said. “Guess they’re good only at short range.”

Desquer snarled, “Come on!” His guns snouted forward, urging his captives on. Slowly they moved across the plaza.

The commander fired. A priest fell, screaming. The ranks closed in, hiding him from view.

Again and again Desquer fired. His gun clicked on an empty chamber; he emptied the other one. Then he reached for his belt—and Tony heard him curse.

“*Dieu!* Those damned Copts! The priests—they got my ammunition belt in the fight!”

Tony stopped, turned. Desquer was standing straddle-legged, the carbon-pistols, futile without coal, pointing at the priests. His face was set into rock-hard lines.

Thotmes shouted something and lifted the missing ammunition belt in one hand. He raised it tauntingly.

“Got any coal?” Desquer rasped. The other two men shook their heads.

The priests began to move forward.

Tony said, “You can’t destroy the machine now, Desquer. You’ve doomed the world—and yourself.”

Desquer’s knuckles were white; he stood as though carved from granite. His jet eyes squinted at the oncoming mob.

Jimmy started to laugh. “How do you like it, Desquer?” he mocked. “You’re not the commander now. You’re just a guy with an empty gun. And—you’re going to die, Desquer. *You’re going to die!*”

CHAPTER VIII

The New Atlantis

The tension grew unendurable. The priests were advancing slowly, as though assured that their quarry could not escape. In the lead Thotmes was smiling and stroking his beard with one hand.

“Surrender,” he called out. “No harm will come to you—for a while. Not till we need new beast-gods!”

Desquer’s face went a mottled red. But still there was no fear in the man. He faced the throng, still holding his guns—and suddenly sheathed one and began to search his pockets. His low voice rapped out.

“Quick, you fools! See if there’s anything on you we can use for ammunition. It doesn’t have to be coal—carbon will do.”

Tony shot one hurried glance at the mob of priests. Desquer gave a little cry of triumph and brought out a single coal-cartridge from his tunic pocket. “Good! Only one, but—” He slipped it into the gun’s firing cup.

There was a queer look, almost of amusement, on Tony’s dark face. He gripped Jimmy’s arm and whispered, “Wait!”

Desquer stepped forward. He raised his gun and called, “Halt!”

A flashing smile came from Thotmes. The high priest did not reply. He kept on. . . .

And Desquer fired.

Thotmes seemed surprised. He paused, lifting his hands to a chest that was a gory mass of red ruin. He stared at his bloodstained fingers.

From the priests went up a whisper of terror—as Thotmes fell! The high priest of Alu was dead!

Desquer did not pause. He took one step forward, and another, as though expecting his enemies to give back. But they did not.

They massed together grimly—and advanced.

This time the commander paused, his thick lips twisting. His hand dived into his tunic pocket in a futile gesture. But there was no more ammunition.

Tony was smiling. He touched Desquer’s arm.

“I’ve a bullet for you, commander.”

“Eh?” The glittering eyes widened. “Where—”

Desquer’s gaze focused on what Tony held in his palm. Lens-shaped and lovely the great gem lay there, flashing in the red light of Alu. Like a diamond it was—but it was not a diamond.

Jimmy said breathlessly, “Tony! You—”

“*The Earth Star!*” There was sweat on Desquer’s face.

“Go on,” Tony whispered. “Take it, commander! It’s carbon. You can use it as a bullet. A coal-cartridge will kill a man. This jewel’s much harder than stone. There’s no limit to the power of a carbon gun. You can bring down the pyramid with this—commander!”

Desquer still did not move, and Tony deftly slipped the jewel into the gun’s cup. It rested there in its strange setting, beautiful beyond imagination, holding within its fiery heart

fortunes and grandeur and death. A jewel—but it was carbon, too. And Desquer’s eyes did not move from the great gem.

“Shoot,” Tony said. “If you do, you lose the Earth Star. If you don’t—it means death.”

The commander’s face was shining with sweat. He glanced up once to the mob of priests, very close now. His gross frame shook with the agony of indecision. To possess the Earth Star—and to know that its possession meant certain doom! He had only to squeeze the trigger, and his enemies would be blasted out of existence. But if he did that—

He would lose the Earth Star!

He snarled at Tony, “So you were the one! The Merlin—”

“*Fire!*”

Almost involuntarily Desquer brought up the gun and aimed it. He was whispering curses under his breath, putting off until the last moment the decision that must be made sooner or later. And he dared not wait too long. The priests came closer.

The flickering red glow made Desquer’s features scarlet and black; his eyes burned balefully, tortured and terrible. He said, “Damn you! I—I’ll—”

His finger tightened on the trigger. And—stopped.

For the priests had paused. They were staring at the Earth Star. They, too, were frozen motionless.

One cried, “The jewel! The jewel!”

The tableau held. Abruptly the priests gave back, hesitating. Tony heard Jimmy’s gasp. He, too, was wondering what this meant.

He was never to know. Perhaps, in long-forgotten ages, another Earth Star had been dug out from beneath the Atlantic, to form part of the religion of Atlantis. Tony could not know. But he realized that the priests recognized the jewel, or thought they did. They bowed before it!

Instantly Desquer realized his opportunity. He said quietly, “Come on. We’re going into the pyramid—and smash the machine.”

Tony said, “You’re crazy. The priests won’t stand for *that!*”

Desquer grinned unpleasantly. Without warning the other gun was in his hand; he clubbed it and swung. Tony felt a crashing blow on his head as he ducked. Gasping with pain, he reeled in and closed with the giant commander.

Jimmy had hold of Desquer’s arm but with one sweeping motion the officer sent the boy sprawling. Desquer and Tony went down with a crash on the stones. Soft cries came from the priests. They began to move forward again, their superstitious terror gone.

Desquer’s stubby fingers were sunk into Tony’s throat; he squeezed viciously, his tiny eyes glinting. Though he lay undermost, he was getting the better of the battle. Tony pumped blow after blow at the commander’s face, but apparently without effect. He felt Jimmy at his side, saw the boy try to tear the iron fingers from his brother’s neck.

And, too, Tony saw the carbon-pistol lying on the stones near by.

“Jimmy!” His voice was a cracked wheeze. “Gun—pyramid—”

Into Desquer’s eyes sprang murder-light. The fingers contracted, sending agony down Tony’s spine. Jimmy understood, though, and dived for the pistol. He snatched it up, leveled it at the pyramid and the oncoming priests.

Desquer yelled like a beast. His fingers relaxed. Somehow he writhed free, sprang up, plunged toward Jimmy.

“Don’t!” he bellowed. “Don’t—”

From the gun’s muzzle burst a raving blast of searing flame. The incredible pressure that had made the Earth Star was released. Straight through the ranks of the priests it bored an aisle, into the heart of the pyramid, melting and wrecking solid stone with the terrific power of its thrust. The volcanic fires of Earth itself seemed to be latent in that—bullet!

Over the cries of the priests came a rumbling, crashing thunder. A block fell, clattering down the pyramid’s side. The structure buckled. Its whole side was torn out. The summit toppled and came thundering down, amid clouds of smoking dust and ruin.

Tony staggered erect, staring up. Something was happening to the cavern roof. The pyramid *had* been a pillar, supporting it. And now the support was gone—

Rocks fell from above. Cracks ran out like a great spider web. Something silvery flashed down from above, glinting red in the crimson glow. Tony remembered that above Alu was—the Midnight Sea!

And that sunless, tideless ocean was pouring into the cavern world through the crevasse that had been torn in its floor!

The falling water became a column, a torrent, a bellowing Niagara. It drowned the wreckage of the pyramid. Down the flood came thundering, and icy tides lapped at Tony’s feet. He seized Jimmy’s arm, pushed him along.

“We’ve got to get out of here!”

“How—how can we?”

“We can try—”

Their voices, raised to shouts, sounded like thin whispers above the mighty rush of the ocean that was pouring into Alu. The priests ran about aimlessly, and among them, Tony saw, was Commander Desquer. A knot of the Atlanteans surrounded the officer. They were trying to pull him down, like wolves surrounding a bison. Unarmed, Desquer yet was stronger than his opponents.

Silently Jimmy pointed. Tony’s teeth showed in a mirthless grin.

“So what?” his lips formed. He was remembering Phil . . .

The brothers plunged along the street, already knee deep in surging black water. A louder thunder came from behind them. A new sound filled the cavern—a deep hissing, like steam. Beyond the wreck of the pyramid, Tony saw with a quick glance, crimson clouds were lifting. So the red light of Alu was actually due to volcanic activity. And now the icy waters of the Midnight Sea were finding the molten fires of lava—

More rocks fell thunderously. Looking back, Tony saw a single figure charging after them—Desquer, a battered, bleeding giant who splashed on through the water amid a hail of stone that dropped from the vaulted heaven of Alu. All about him that deadly hail dropped. One glance Tony had of Desquer rushing on, heavy shoulders hunched, teeth bared in a mirthless grin—

Then he was gone! The avalanche from the cracking skies buried him. A pile of rocks showed for an instant where he had been, and that, too, vanished as the rising waters seethed past.

Tony said nothing, but as he fought past the temple of Osiris where Phil’s body lay, he lifted his hand in a queer, quick salute. Perhaps Phil would know, now, that his death had been avenged . . .

Already the dark tides were seething at the tunnel-mouth that led to the upper world. On the threshold Tony paused, to take one last look at ruined Alu. The red light was darker now, and somber. The flaming clouds boiled up endlessly; the rock shook and quaked underfoot. The Niagara that poured from the roof of the cave looked like a solid obelisk, and an odd thought came into Tony's mind.

"A pillar of cloud by day . . . and a pillar of smoke by night . . ."

Alu, daughter of Atlantis, was dying as the mother continent had died. Earth-fires and deluge were slaying her, wiping out all life, wrecking the culture that had survived from the misty, unknown eons before Egypt was. The huge temples, half submerged in seething tides, were falling in ruin. All over the vast cavern darkness was falling.

The arched ramp they had seen on entering Alu was still visible, far away. And now Tony saw that there were figures upon it, as there had been at first. Figures with strange, misshapen heads—

The pitiable, terrible beast-gods of Alu, created by dead Thotmes' science!

One glimpse Tony had of those far figures, outlined blackly against red smoke. Then—the ramp fell.

Over Alu the roaring desolation of death and ruin held sway!

Tony turned to the white-faced Jimmy. Already the water was tearing at their thighs.

"Come on," he shouted. "We're getting out of here. Fast!"

They fled up the tunnel . . .

The rest was sheer nightmare. Somehow they found their way, following always the passages that led up, hiding from terrified, frantic Copts, fleeing through corridors whose walls shook with the grip of earthquake. Up and up they went, finding at last a frightened Copt who agreed to guide them to the surface. His own world was falling in pieces about him, and he wished only to escape. A cave-in crushed him not long after, but the passage stretched unbroken before the brothers. They toiled on . . .

Daylight filtered in yellow brilliance through a crack in the rock. Exhausted, haggard, filthy scarecrows, the two squeezed through into blazing sunlight. About them lay rolling dunes. They were in a rocky little valley.

They dropped to the sand and lay there motionless for hours, scarcely conscious of the burning sun.

The soft mutter of a gyro motor woke them. Tony sat up, blinking. He was in time to see a plane land softly not far away, and a figure in flying uniform step out.

Jimmy was still sleeping. Tony lurched forward to greet the new arrival. His eyes were misty with sleep, and he did not at first recognize the pilot—not till the latter took out an automatic and held it ready.

Then he saw it was Zadah, the Rajah's secretary.

Tony stopped, swaying a little, his arms hanging limp at his sides. Zadah's round face was triumphant. The beady eyes shone with triumph.

"Luck," he said. "I've been cruising about for hours just on an off chance. I just happened to sight you—"

"The Copts." Tony said thickly. "They—"

Zadah nodded. "I know. Your legionnaire got through—Jacklyn. There's an army of troopers at the mouth of Sub-Sahara. But—where's the Earth Star? If you escaped, that means Desquer didn't get it."

“It’s gone. Desquer got it—and used it. The Earth Star’s destroyed, Zadah.”

The other hesitated. Something he saw in Tony’s eyes made him realize that the latter spoke truth. Abruptly baffled rage sprang into Zadah’s round face.

“Gone! Then—”

He lifted the gun, his lips white with fury at the wreckage of his plans. “Maybe! If you’re lying, I’ll find the jewel on your bodies.”

Tony tensed himself for a spring that he knew in advance would be futile. But, before he could move, another figure hurled itself forward. Jimmy’s slight frame dived at the killer.

Zadah’s gun barked. Jimmy cried out; the Oriental swung his weapon back to Tony. But he was too late. His wrist was held in a grip of iron. Tony’s dark face was close to his own, and there was death in the somber eyes.

Zadah screamed.

Tony said not a word. Very slowly, very carefully, he bent Zadah’s hand back. The latter’s finger was still on the trigger. The gun pointed at last at the killer’s heart.

Then Tony smiled—and the muscles of his hand contracted.

The report was shatteringly loud in the desert stillness.

Tony let the limp body slide down, and turned back to Jimmy. The boy was dead. Zadah’s bullet had made a neat little hole in the brown shirt.

After a moment Tony carried the body of his brother to the plane and put it aboard. He followed. He sent the gyro winging up over the desert.

Beneath him the Sahara stretched, a white wilderness under the flaming heat of the Sun. To the north could be seen an encampment, the troopers that had arrived, too late, at the mouth of Sub-Sahara. Tony set the controls and fled beyond them.

The desert gave place to the Mediterranean, and that, in turn, to the Pacific Ocean. The cool blueness of night folded down. Moonlight silvered the waves.

Tony opened a trap-door in the floor and let the body of his brother slide through. Phil rested in the temple of Osiris—and Jimmy would lie beneath the waves that hid Atlantis.

He went back to the controls, staring ahead at an empty horizon. Westward lay New York. He could go back there now; the motive for keeping hidden had vanished. No one would know who the Merlin was. Some men might guess, might be convinced that either Phil or Jimmy had stolen the Earth Star—but they would never dare make an accusation, and Seth Martell would need make no compromises with his honor and his ideals.

Only Tony would know that the Merlin had been his brother Phil.

For ten minutes he had been alone with Phil in the Temple of Osiris. And, before the youth died, he had told Tony the truth—that he was the Merlin. He had given his brother the Earth Star to keep. But no one would ever know that now.

Tony’s throat was tight. He stared at the dim horizon of sky and sea, knowing that beyond it lay New York, and a life he could take up again where he had left it. A life he must live—alone.

A faint glow brightened to the west. The tallest towers of Manhattan were pillars of light against the sky.

[The end of *Secret of the Earth Star* by Henry Kuttner]