

PLANET STORIES



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AGAINST TETRARCH

By A. A. O. Gilmour

On that evil planet, broken men who had once trod Earth knew only two things for sure. One, they all were dying at twenty-five. Two, lovely Mona Darlanan was a dirty traitor.

ROD HARROW pawed futilely at the whirling sands in the gryxon mines on Tetrarch IV. Dimly, as through a dark mist, he could see the line of bobbing lamps that etched the tunnel outlines. He raised his pick for another weary stroke, when he noticed the slave next to him. The poor devil's face was ghastly under its close-fitting helmet. It was deeply lined, worn—and old. Rod saw his twisted grin when the man crumpled against the rocky abutment. A despairing cackle pierced his audiphones:

"I was twenty-five yesterday. I'll be glad to die!"

Rod eased him as he slid to the tunnel floor. He watched in bitter helplessness while the stricken fingers worked their way toward glazing eyes. Dribbles of foam splattered the inside of the man's helmet. Pity and a driving desire for vengeance struggled in Rod's mind when the slave's feeble shout died away. The doomed man's feet beat a weak tattoo on the sandy floor. The beat quickened spasmodically — and stopped.

Smoke issued from the inert nostrils. It clouded the froth-filled helmet. Hazily, the dead face took on a greenish glow. It glimmered like a crucified Satan for a moment, and then fell away to dry embers.

An eerie glow flashed. Rod knew, after only a day in the mines, that the tetrarchian guards were now on their way. Black-browed and huge—with their curiously similar features—they came to drag away the corpse.

A sniveling slave on Rod's left stopped to watch them. A guard turned and raised his weapon suggestively. The sniveler bent to his digging with renewed vigor.

When the tetrarchs had gone another slave slipped in to take the place left vacant by the dead man.

Rod winced in the act of lifting his

pick. The gash he had taken in his arm before he was captured on Earth was far from healed. He saw then that the new slave was a woman. She was young and slender. Her hair was glowing gold in the dim lit tunnel. Under her broad forehead her eyes were an unfathomable grey.

"Mona Darlanan!" he breathed in wonderment.

Even in the mines—in the serfdom of Tetrarch—her beauty caught him. This was the girl who would always make him uncomfortable...as it had back in the old days—when Earth was free. She had gone on the stage. He had buried himself in a science laboratory. They had lost touch. When the tetrarchs overran Earth he had lost all knowledge of her. Besides, he had been busy...busy on the most important project of Earth's Thirtieth Century A.D.

"How long have you been here?" he asked. He felt awkward. This was not the way he had pictured their meeting.

"I've been in the mines longer than you have." Her face was quiet, almost submissive. "Don't talk, or the guards will be back. Besides, I want to change places with you."

"Why? Does it make any difference?"

"Yes." She brushed him aside impatiently and turned to the sniveling youth at his side.

"Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

"They almost killed me," the whimpering slave was trembling.

"Oh, Jerry!"

"I hope we win them over."

"I know now that's the only way." The girl looked about her furtively, "I've been talking to Latham Koler..."

Rod swung his pick with a vicious twist and unearthed a red cloud of Mercury oxide. His reaction boiled like the crimson dust as it mingled with the swirl-



"Bring the slave, Mona Darlanan!"

ing sand in the tunnel. When he'd gotten control of himself he spoke flatly.

"A man just died here," he said. "Don't taunt his death with a traitor's name."

"Latham Koler's not a traitor!" the girl flashed. "At least he has enough influence to get some of us out of the mines."

Rod eyed her angrily. The memory of the human torch ripped words from him.

"We're humans! Remember? From Earth! There was a time when a human from Earth would prefer dying to licking a conqueror's boots!"

Mona shrugged her shoulders. She swung a pick on a gryxon outcropping. "That may be," she said briefly, "but we're slaves now. And we die within a day or so of our twenty-fifth birthday. If Latham Koler can get Jerry out of the mines," Mona indicated the youth by her side, "I'll mention his name—I'll do anything—if Jerry can be saved."

Jerry patted her shoulder. "He'll help us, I know," he soothed.

Rod Harrow bent to wisp sandy ice from a blob of red oxide. He put the crimson dust into his pocket.

"You'll be in the slave compartment tonight?" he asked.

The girl turned to her work. "There's no place else except the sleeping cubicles. I suppose I'll be there. When will you be twenty-five?" she asked abruptly.

"One month from today."

"I don't see why..." Mona's voice died away as the guards worked their way down the tunnel. They were herding the humans back to the slave compartment for the night.

ROD HARROW entered the compartment for the first time. He was one of the last on Earth to be captured and sent on the slave ship to Tetrarch IV. His eyes were narrow, waiting for the first sign of inevitable recognition.

He had divested himself of his tight, transparent space suit. Heated space suits were necessary on Tetrarch IV, except in the compartments assigned to human slaves. In them there was air and heat. The planet itself was bitterly cold. Its only atmosphere was inert Krypton which the tetrarchians breathe. Through this dead gas activated sand coursed in eternal swirls.

Slaves were pouring through the door in droves. There were no oldsters in this crowd. None over twenty-five. Earth's two hundred year life span had been considerably reduced.

A hard-thewed, ice-eyed youngster recognized him first. Steel fingers closed on Rod's wrist.

"Rod Harrow!" he whispered. "I'm Don Rickter. I thought you were holding out on Earth."

Rod kept his eyes on a card game that had started. "I left our hideaway in the Rockies when I found out how I could help up here. There was no way of getting here except by the slave route." He paused thoughtfully. "We haven't been idle on Earth—the few of us that are left."

"But, man!" Rickter was dubious. "We're trapped here. Right now those devils are watching us. We can't even talk, but that they know about it. Sometimes even before we say anything. I swear they can read our thoughts."

"It's not quite as bad as that. How about getting some of our old gang together for a game of cards?"

"Just as you say, Rod. But it won't do any good to talk business."

Rod grinned. "Remember the game we all played when we were kids?" He emphasized his remark with a quick gesture.

Rickter's answering grin was sufficient response. "I remember," he said.

"There's a grey-eyed girl around here. Name's Mona."

"Oh, Mona Darlanan. She's hipped on getting that adopted brother of hers out of the mines. The Lord knows why! He's a cowardly little wretch."

"Better keep her from kibitzing if you can. She might have played the same game...and I don't think she can be trusted."

The first hand had hardly been dealt when Rod threw his cards down and called for a new deck. He emphasized his dissatisfaction by shaking his hand with index finger outstretched, middle finger and thumb conjoined. Then he clenched his fist and shook it at the intent players first with the thumb down and then with the thumb up. His fingers stretched heavenward, except for the index finger when he swore the deck they were using was too dirty.

Don Rickter looked up in mock disgust.

The icy glint in his eyes deepened. Rod centered his displeasure on him. After a slight pause, Rickter argued back. His own gestures were just as aggressive. Soon all of them joined in. The chatter continued, hand after hand, but the real discussion remained in the deaf and dumb sign language—the game all of them had played on Earth before Earth succumbed to the tetrarchs.

"I let myself get caught," Rod commenced, "because of a note smuggled through to me on a tetrarchian space ship."

"Sounds like a trap." Rickter was succinct. "We couldn't get a message out from here."

"I don't think it came from here." Rod was equally terse. "I think it came from the survivors of the Hunt."

"What!" Rickter almost forgot to use his hands. "There can't be any survivors."

"But there are." Rod insisted. "They've learned how to live on Tetrach IV even when the oxygen in their space suits is exhausted."

At this point a rustling was heard among the gathering kibitzers. The crowd was drawing back in sullen anger while a tall, black-robed, cadaverous personage forced his way through.

"I'm Latham Koler," he announced, "I understand Rod Harrow is here."

Rod pushed his chair back. Silence settled over the crowd. It was broken suddenly by a scuffle in the far corner of the compartment. A golden-haired girl struggled in the arms of a slave who tried vainly to clamp his hand over her mouth.

"He's here all right." Mona Darlanan's disheveled hair fell over her shoulders. She pushed the slave from her and struck him sharply. Her clear voice shattered the quiet.

"He's here. And he's plotting rebellion. I just realized they've been talking to each other in sign language!"

THE WALLS of the slave compartment seemed to glow with thousands of almost microscopic specks of violet light. A scant moment later the door to the compartment burst open and the guards entered. They marched with beautiful precision, calmly, impassively.

Rod watched them as he rose from his

chair. He took quick note of the masks they wore to protect themselves from the air and then he launched himself head first.

His skull landed with a satisfying plunk in the middle of the first guard's stomach. His reaching arms clasped the tetrarchian legs just below the knees and the tetrarchian landed on the floor—hard. He slipped the guard's blaster from its holster on the way down, knocked the tetrarchian mask loose and rolled to meet the next attacker. His turn was just in time to miss a pair of boots—lead-heeled—that were jamming down on his head. As he twisted, Rod saw another boot. It was coming toward him in the full arc of a fast kick. Rod caught it and twisted. He was slightly surprised when the ankle turned a full three hundred and sixty degrees. The guard fell heavily.

He'd gotten to his feet, blaster in hand, when they rushed him. With a savage grin, Rod let go. It was good to put electronic slugs in the advancing guards. A small return payment for the slave who had glowed to his death! Rod wasn't sure but what his eyes were playing him tricks. He swore the guard was still coming at him. The one with the hole in him! Only the unmasked tetrarch was inert on the floor.

He aimed carefully and let go again. The guard was still coming. The lights went out entirely. Rod blasted four times in quick succession, then jumped and twisted sidewise to the floor. As a feint it did him little good. The guards were up, on him—including the one with five holes in his carcass. Rod was held in a vise-like grip while they kicked the blaster out of his hand and zipped a space suit over his frame.

As he was hustled out of the compartment he heard Rickter's voice. "I'm sorry, Rod. But I guess it's useless—and I couldn't have helped you. I'll be twenty-five next month!"

"I'll be twenty-five myself," Rod yelled back. "We'll have a swell birthday party."

The last sound he heard was Mona's hysterical laughter.

The heavy door closed softly and Rod found himself in the stinging sand of outside Tetrarch. But only for a moment. The guards took off their masks with ob-

vious relief and guided him to a small building some fifty yards from the slave compartment.

He was thrust through a circular aperture and turned to see himself viewed by an elderly tetrarch. It spoke with the peculiar sibilance with which the tetrarchians handled human speech.

"You are a rassh yonge manss, Ross Harros. Howefser, there iss ssomething I mustt ssay to you. With no one else of my rasce pressent."

A door back of the tetrarch opened silently. Latham Koler slid noiselessly through the opening. Rod scowled into the quisling's peering owl eyes. It was an effort to resist the impulse to cover both of them with a left jab before crossing his right on the bony chin.

"I'm sorry our helmets keep me from spitting in your face," he remarked.

The tetrarch motioned Koler forward.

"You are not as mature as I expected." Koler's voice rustled like his dark garments, "And your wits need more exercise. You'd be quarry for the Hunt at this moment, if I hadn't interceded on your behalf."

"Quarry?" Rod's eyebrows raised.

"Yes. Every so often one of the hot-heads decides to escape. The tetrarchs love it. Sometimes, they deliberately give them the chance."

HE pointed to the oxygen cannisters attached to the back of Rod's space suit. "The cylinders in our human space suits supply enough air to last for eight hours. When the air is exhausted it seems to be a natural reaction to rip the suit open.

"Imagine breathing this stuff!" Koler grasped a handful of the sand swirling about them. "That's the climax of the Hunt. We—uh—they allow about an hour's head start and then stalk the quarry. The idea is to catch him just as he rips his suit. And to get him to the operating chamber just before he dies.

"The tetrarchs are brilliant technicians, even if they are weak on theory. So I've helped them. We are anxious to find out why humans exposed to gryxon die on their twenty-fifth birthday. They think research on still-living humans will give them the answer."

The tetrarch waved an arm. "He is a good sscientisst," he commented.

Koler's rustling voice paused while the owl-eyes continued to peer. "But that's of minor interest. I've persuaded them to save you."

"Why?"

"You have influence." Latham Koler's voice rustled while the tetrarch nodded approvingly. "We are well aware you were President of the Terran Science Association. And that you served in the terran army with distinction in the fruitless fight against the tetrarchs. And we know that you have thousands of devoted followers."

Koler paused. He peered with bloodshot eyes to see if his remarks were taking effect. "The tetrarchs are anxious to expand their conquests. They need those that are spending their time guarding the humans now. If you will throw in with us—the rest will follow..."

"As slaves! With time hanging a glowing torch over our heads! Try another tack, Koler."

The bitter anguish in Rod's voice tightened the skin on the traitor's cadaverous skull. Unconsciously, he stepped back before Rod's overwhelming fury.

"Some day we'll rid ourselves of the tetrarchs. The time will come when Earth again will be free. When it comes, Koler, kill yourself. At least you'll have your choice of the various kinds of death."

Koler peered doubtfully at the tetrarch who nodded and walked to the aperture. A guard stood at attention.

"Bring the sslave, Mona Darlanan," the tetrarch commanded.

When she entered Rod faced her impassively. "You've turned traitor too, I see."

The girl faced him. She looked remote and submissive, but somehow untouched. Her hand sought unconsciously to brush back the heavy golden hair under the confines of her helmet.

"I have a brother," she said simply, "the baby of our family. We're all that's left. My parents adopted him to look after him. I've taken over."

"Sslave Darlanan," the tetrarch interrupted, "we wissh you to convinisce Ross Harros of the sstupidity of further resisstance."

"If you do," Koler's voice rustled, "perhaps Jerry—your brother—can be put to work in the compartment instead of the mines."

Mona turned her breath-taking beauty on Rod. Her eyes glowed with passionate conviction. "Don't you see," she said softly, "we only make things worse by resisting? The tetrarchs want more slaves. Let them get them—from other planets—other galaxies. If we help them perhaps they will send us back to Earth. You've got to understand."

BEFORE HER his reason was powerless. Unconsciously, his arms encircled her waist. He couldn't bring himself to fight her.

She dropped her head on his chest. Then she raised her eyes, "You will help—with you and Latham Koler in the confidence of the tetrarchs..."

The spell was destroyed. Rod stiffened. "Not Koler!" He grasped her by the wrists and thrust her away. "Koler!" His voice deepened in contempt.

"We knew him on Earth before these slave-makers lulled us into a false sense of security with their friendship and their gadgets. Koler never amounted to anything then. He was always on the fringe of things. Here, he's venting his spite on the few of us that are left—and he's gotten that opportunity by toadying to these lousy, so-called powers."

"No sso fast," the tetrarch put out a restraining arm. "We are simply following the destiny by enslaving you. Our rasce iss to be the overlords of all the galassies. You can have a sshare if you wissh."

"I can see your point though," Rod ignored the tetrarch to face Mona, "but don't you see there are some things more important than your brother—that in spite of him—you can't turn traitor?"

"Do you remember, Mona, how the tetrarchs first came to Earth—how friendly they were and how they loaded us with those amazing labor-eliminating gadgets? Press a button and everything was done—power for our gyros, heat for our buildings, force for our machines—anything and everything. With all our work eliminated we lost our watchfulness. They never let us know what powered the gad-

gets—we never knew about gryxon power until the tetrarchs took over.

"We found out about gryxon then—in the mines. Once it's sheathed by radium and the radium sheathed with lead—it's harmless. But—when human life is used to handle the raw ore—!"

The vibrant timbre of Rod's voice seemed to die away to death's whisper, "Well, we all expect to die when we're twenty-five...and time's passing. Try weighing what you might loosely call the human race against one brother!

"And as for you—" Rod stepped forward quickly and slammed his fist against the air tank attached to Koler's space suit. He wrenched it loose and threw it away. Not waiting to see the result, he stepped out of the aperture and gave the guard the same treatment.

He raced through the city, wondering why he was not pursued. Then it came to him. There would be a Hunt.

As he ran across rocky ground he wondered how Koler was taking to a silica diet.

His course was hazily sketched in his mind. The smuggled note that had started him from Earth had not been too specific. It couldn't have been. There was too much chance of its being intercepted. But he had a good working knowledge of Tetrarch's surface. The problem was to get to the Survivors—those who had somehow escaped the gryxon mines and escaped the hunting tetrarchians—and in getting to them he had to throw his pursuers off the trail. There was a test in this, he was sure. He thought he had certain clues to that.

Why, for instance, did a tetrarch with a slug in him keep on fighting? Why did the unearthly glow precede the coming of the guards? He felt he ought to be glad about that eerie flash. It was a warning—something like a rattlesnake's.

His course led him to rocky foothills. He had skirted them when another gnawing thought came. When did Mona adopt a brother? He'd never known of one. He shrugged the thought aside. He was coming to a broad pass. He kept his course straight, for it was still dark. When dawn came he would seek cover—or did darkness mean anything to the tetrarchians? It probably didn't.

He covered the pass and worked his way up the far right of three towering mountains. It was cold—colder even than the bitter keenness of the level lands. He notched the heating element in his suit to the top position and continued his climb. In the deep darkness that preceded dawn he felt his way along the edge of narrow, jagged ravines. The swirling sands made sight impossible. His progress became slower.

He had reached almost to the top when dawn glimmered over the horizon. Far down over the rocky crags intermittent flashes glowed. Rod sat back on his haunches and watched their approach.

In the dawn's half-light the glowing lights dimmed but he was able to mark their progress. Assuming their current speed and allowing for lost trails and going off course, they would overtake him in about two hours—if he continued at his past speed. They had established a nice calculation—precisely balanced to catch him at the moment his air supply hit zero.

He would soon be fair bait for the operating room.

He watched the flaring lights more intently. As they swarmed over the foothills they seemed to lose some of their capacity for glimmering. Rod nodded comprehension and turned to clamber up the almost vertical slope.

It was hard going and he was in plain view by the time he reached the top. Up here the shifting sand was finer. There was less of it, and it hugged the ground more closely than in the lowlands.

Another hour passed before the flames sensed him. They were working toward him but more slowly. They had lost all semblance of glimmer and had taken on the aspects of a solid sheet, of flame. Rod glanced back and noted there was no sign of any figures following the flashes. He nodded decisively.

The facts had fallen into a definite pattern!

BEFORE HIM stretched a plateau, rock-strewn and sand-swept. Beyond it, the topmost peak of the range towered to challenge the pale tetrarchian sun. Rod checked his air supply. There was just enough to get him across the plateau.

He examined the heating element in his suit more carefully and probed an exploratory finger across the pocket over his short ribs. The package was still there. The gash under his arm was bothering him again. Well and good! Maybe there would be a chance for it to heal properly, if he ever won through.

He started across the plateau at a fast trot.

He glanced back at first. But after an hour's steady progress there was no need to. He knew the flames were gaining on him. His breathing was thick and labored. The air gauge in his suit was oscillating at zero. As he slowed the pursuing flames speeded forward. One shot ahead of the rest and circled over him like a gleam-buzzard. It watched him stagger while it poised motionless. Then it swooped.

It darted toward him. He paused and swung an almost drunken punch at it. His fist went through it and he recoiled, stricken at the terrific shock that traveled along his arm. The flame retreated sullenly to continue circling.

He drew a deep breath and held it. The peak wavered before him. It was close now. His head throbbed and the gash in his arm had opened. Warm blood was seeping through his sleeve. His leaden feet refused to go further. He fell to his knees and crawled toward the base of the peak. Sobbing, each breath a burning hell, he worked his way over the last few yards. He reached the rocky slope and scrambled up crabwise until he collapsed.

The hovering flames paused. They reached glowing tentacles toward him while he ripped frantically at his cloying, confining space suit.

He rolled over on his back when the fastenings gave way. The flames huddled closer in the intense cold of the upper slope when Rod shorted the heating element. It glowed white while he ripped his pocket in a desperate search for red dust—red oxide from the gryxon mines.

His face was blue when he dropped the dust on the white hot heat coil. The red dust changed to gleaming droplets of mercury. Oxygen—rich pure oxygen was released in the change. He breathed the life-giving fumes through pinched nostrils.

When strength came pouring back into his air-starved system he advanced on the

weakened flames. They hugged the rocks—inert in the savage cold of the mountain. Some of them had changed to glowing liquid. One, higher on the slope than the rest, had frozen to an opalescent solid. When the newly generated oxygen flowed over them they exploded harmlessly to grey powder. As the last one disappeared Rod turned to face a grinning, space-clad figure.

"Nice work, Rod," the figure called, "I see you answer your mail."

"Bill Williamson!" Rod grinned his relief. "Oblige me, pal, by not writing any more notes."

Williamson was beside him. He slipped a fresh cannister of air into place on Rod's space suit and supported him while they clambered further up the mountain-side.

"That oxygen trick!" he exulted. "That's a nice wrinkle! They sounded like popcorn going off."

Williamson led him to a cave entrance buried deep in a gorge. The concealed opening was covered with a heavy wind-proofed canvas. They entered through the double fold.

"Oxygen equipped!" Rod stared his surprise.

"We have our creature comforts." Williamson unlatched his helmet. "Crude but effective. We've been heating mercury oxide. There's lots of it around. Set awhile—while I call the gang. They'll be glad to see you."

When the handshaking was over, Rod faced the hardbitten, sand-burned Survivors. These were the men who, like himself, had come through the testing. They had found the way to live on this planet—in the teeth of the conquerors of Earth. Now they needed him—needed his genius to guide them along the path to freedom—to conquest over the hated tetrarchs.

ROD looked at the intent faces about him. "First," he said, "I want the answers to some questions. I've figured part of it out myself—check me if I go wrong.

"The Tetrarchs are not human in shape. They're really flame-like gobs of energy—probably phosphoric in nature. For some reason, they fashioned plastic bodies which resembled human figures. They have al-

ways used these bodies in their dealings with humans—unless they're hunting."

Williamson nodded approvingly. "We stole a few of those imitation bodies. They're all pretty much the same, except for the masks. The ones they use on Earth are built in. Here in Tetrarch they're removable. They fashioned them to conceal their real structure after they investigated Earth. We humans never knew of them until they made their appearance in camouflage. They studied us first, devised the body and then established relations."

"Yeah," a Survivor interrupted, "When they took us in, they took us over—but good! They couldn't have done it any other way—with their one lousy town on a two-bit planet."

"Under normal temperature conditions," Rod continued, "they're gaseous. As it gets colder they become less active and then they turn to liquid."

"That's right, chief, and when it gets really cold," another Survivor added, "they turn to solid. When we win this fight I'm going to get me a tetrarch, freeze it, and use it for a light in my fishing lodge."

"Oh no, you're not," a barrel-chested earthman, incongruously named Bunny, informed him, "you're going to contribute it to help spell Mona Darlanan's name in lights on Broadway."

"What' that again?" Rod's tone had sharpened.

"Mona Darlanan, boss. She's the greatest actress of them all—bar none." Bunny grinned disarmingly. "Bet you didn't know you was her messenger boy."

"That's right, Rod." Bill Williamson picked up Rod's discarded space suit. "Here," he suppressed a smile with difficulty, "she's put a note on your helmet latching. It's in code and says she expects to get called in to start you on your way."

There was no stopping Williamson's laughter, "Look! It says here she's known you a long time and you're an old sober-sides. She expects to hug you before you start out and she hopes you'll like it."

"Nice goin', chief. She didn't hug me." Bunny was glum on this point.

"Wait a minute, guys." Rod silenced the laughter. "You're all wrong. That girl betrayed me—she's gone over to the tetrarchs—lock, stock and barrel."

"Let's hear about it, Rod." Williamson was intent.

Rod recounted briefly what had happened when Mona Darlanan had read his sign language.

When he was through, Bill Williamson was silent for a long moment. Then he spoke slowly, "Rod, you're the only one who ever arrived on Tetrarch knowing of our existence. As a matter of fact, Mona was responsible for smuggling that note aboard the space ship—the one that brought you here. You came close to giving the whole show away with your sign language gag. Mona Darlanan was smart enough to realize that and she took the one sure way to get you on your way to us."

"I don't catch." Rod Harrow's face was a study in bewilderment.

"I'm not surprised." Williamson was half smiling. "Mona does that to guys. We first got in touch with her when one of the boys—he's gone the glowing way now—used one of our captured humanoid suits and made like a guard. We selected Mona as our contact because she's completely and utterly loyal. And she's probably the finest actress there is.

"To get herself solid with the tetrarchs she 'adopted' that little jerk, Jerry Wilson. That was to convince them that she was sincere."

Rod, listening intently, nodded—he understood the why of that gnawing thought back on the lowlands now.

"She keeps us informed of what the tetrarchs are planning—and she's got them hoodwinked—particularly that rat, Latham Koler.

"Guys are always trying to escape from the mines. Sometimes they survive. When they do there's always some message from her. When they go she tells them how to get to us. But they have to promise to destroy the note if it looks as though they won't get through."

"She didn't say anything like that to me," Rod flared.

"She had faith in you," Williamson said shortly, "besides she knew you knew."

"If you say so, Bill. I admit I missed the boat." Rod's thoughts were veering crazily.

"But to get back to business, Rod," Bill Williamson said, "I don't know how

long we're going to be safe here. Our one lucky string is the tetrarch's principle of the Hunt."

"I was going to ask you about that." Rod was now alert. "Why don't the tetrarchs account for every human that escaped?"

"Well, boss," the barrel-chested Bunny spoke, "they figure, how can they lose? All of us are due for the torch parade once we hit twenty-five."

"Further," Williamson added, "from the info I've gotten from Mona, the tetrarchs use the Hunt to test themselves. For each quarry caught without aid of any kind a tetrarchian guard gets promoted. If the guard himself is overcome—on his home field—so to speak—the idea is they're well rid of him. That means a constant process of self selection . . . And it leaves us facing highly dangerous adversaries."

THE canvass covering the cave entrance rippled and a Survivor entered. "Look alive, pals," he said, "there's another guy looks like he's going to get through to us."

"Hope he makes it," the barrel-chested Bunny rose. "It's my turn to put out the welcome mat."

"What does he plan to do?" Rod turned to Bill Williamson.

"'Bout the same thing I did for you. If the fellow gets far enough along, the tetrarchs will retreat, or freeze, and the big fellow will bring him in."

"Why don't we help the guy?"

"What do you mean? What can we do?"

"You said we had plenty of oxygen, didn't you?"

"Yeah. We got it stored in tanks we stole from the tetrarchs."

"Well, c'mon, Bill. Let's explode a few or four."

"Lor Lumme! Tetrarch popcorn! What all will we need, Rod?"

"About eight men. Two teams — two each — for diversion. And four men for the push. We'll try it small scale for size."

The oxygen tanks were quickly distributed. Rod gave eight Survivors rapid instructions. "I'll give you ten minutes to get in position," he finished, "Williamson and I will watch from the top heights."

By the time Rod and Williamson had taken their position high on the mountain-

side the staggering human had won to within a hundred yards of the final slope. The flames were circling—darting forward—retreating—only to renew the attack. They were so intent on their prey they missed the helpless second figure—until he set up a hoarse scream for help.

When the flames realized there was a second quarry they hesitated—but not for long. If anything, the second man was farther gone than the one who was now scrambling up the slope.

The new quarry was bent over a cylinder of some sort. His legs kicked feebly. His arms were jerking spasmodically as he tried to tear his suit fastenings.

Almost half the flames raced to him. Tentacles outstretched, they swooped—into the oblivion of hissing oxygen. A few tried to escape. Another human stepped from behind a concealing boulder. Rod watched him play an oxygen stream over them like a pest-sprayer.

The flames which had remained behind reacted instinctively. They retreated. Their vanguard exploded before two more humans who rose from the sand-misted shadows of a narrow gorge in the plateau.

They broke then. They fled in wild disorder in the only direction open. Now, four men rose from concealed positions to bar their way.

The annihilation was complete!

On the heights above, Williamson was dancing a war jig. "We wowed 'em, Rod," he screeched. "We wowed 'em. Look at that grey powder! Look at it! Them's dead tetrarchs, me boy."

He pounded Rod on the back in complete forgetfulness of the glowing doom. "When we get back to earth I'm gonna marry me a nice girl. And I'm gonna throw pop corn parties every night in the week. And I'm gonna invite all the neighbors. And when the kernels go 'Pop' I'm gonna say, 'That's what we did to the tetrarchs.'"

He was still pounding Rod's back when Bunny came puffing up. "You'd better come in a hurry, boss," he said, "that guy down there wants to talk to you and he ain't got much time left."

Rod frowned. "Lets go," he said briefly.

He ran down the slope to the inert figure that lay like a blade of mown grass at the base.

When the others arrived he was kneeling by the fallen slave, supporting him by the head and shoulders. There was no mistaking the ghastly pallor spreading over the waxen face.

His breathing was jerky—almost spasmodic as he whispered, "And then they worked on Rickter. They had grown suspicious when things started to disappear . . . when more slaves escaped and never got caught."

His breathing paused. The skin on the man's forehead lost its waxy pallor. It became dry—harsh—yellow-tinged.

Rod braced him more firmly—the tortured chest heaved again. "When they found out . . . about the Survivors . . . they decided to finish us. They had been working to find out about a cure for the gryxon burn. Koler worked with them and discovered how to make it work faster . . . said it was a catalyst . . . forced us to eat it . . . one by one."

"Mona?" Rod asked gently.

"They've saved her and a few more... going to experiment... operate...say humans no use as slaves...too stiff-necked...make better guinea pigs...we're finished."

THE slave tried to speak again. But his chest was rigid, fixed. His eyes filmed. He ceased the struggle.

Rod laid him down, still gently and straightened him, crossing his hands over his chest. Smoke came in a fine haze from the flaring nostrils. Bloody froth flew from between the drawn lips. The Satanic grin came with the onslaught of the greenish glow.

And then—there were ashes!

"We're ready, boss." Bunny's voice was quiet.

"Yes," Williamson's voice was equally low, "we've got time until we're twenty-five—to exterminate every tetrarch on the planet. The best we can hope for is a dead draw. Shall we get started, Rod? There's little time left to us."

"We'll have the advantage of surprise," Rod agreed, "unless we walk into a trap. But I think we can outmaneuver them."

He turned quickly. "Anyone here within a week of their twenty-fifth birthday?"

"I don't think so, Rod."

"Anyone within a month of their twen-

ty-fifth birthday who is also from the Mediterranean section of Earth?"

He paused. Their silence gave him his answer.

"Good," he said, "in this game we've still got our hole card.

"Now, remember this one thing. Our objective is the science building—they operate there—and that's where they'll store the catalyst. Anything else is secondary.

"We'll try a feint on the slave compartment. We'll drive in force on all communication centers. I'll make maps showing their locations—I made it my job to get that info before I left Earth. And we've got to kill every tetrarchian space ship crew either at the same time or immediately after we destroy communications. We've none too much oxygen for a job of this size. That's our main weapon. So make it count. We'll use what blasters we have. And if you run into any tetrarchians with space suits on aim for the mask. That's all you need to do before you give him the explosion treatment. Is everything clear?"

"All we need is to know who's going to lead who to where," Bunny said.

"I'll have plans drawn up at headquarters in half an hour," Rod promised. "Meantime leave a twenty-percent reserve of oxygen here and break the rest down from tanks to all the cannisters you can get your hands on."

Rod walked rapidly up the hill outlining details of the battle plan to Williamson as they entered the cave.

The slave compartment feint-party left first. Communications-destroyers left in four groups. Space-hangar attack-parties followed. Under Bunny's direction, they had managed to rig up a fairly creditable camouflage.

There was an argument about command of the main force against the science building. Rod had assumed it without second thought. Williamson was obdurate.

"I don't care who handles it, Rod," he said, "but you can't. If anything goes wrong there'll be no one left to carry the fight. You've got to stay here until we control the lowlands."

"I'll be twenty-five next month," Rod said briefly. "So it can't matter much one way or the other."

"Sorry, Rod. I forgot about that. I've only six weeks to go myself. One of the youngsters will have to take over the reserve."

"Then you and I will take a whack at this together."

Williamson draped two cannisters of oxygen about his waist. "Let's go," he said.

Their pace down the mountain was swift but unhurried. On the plateau Williamson scuffled tetrarchian ashes whenever he found them. They were fast disappearing in the swirling sand.

They scattered their force when they left the foothills. There was an occasional tetrarch flame to draw the men's fire.

THEY encountered their first resistance within blaster range of the mines. From the roof of the slave compartment purple blaster arcs rained down. The fire was scattered at first but it increased in volume when the main body of the Survivors surged into view.

The tetrarchs were no mean marksmen. The stench of burning, smoking flesh tainted the atmosphere.

As the men broke for cover Rod demonstrated counter measures. He took position behind a corner wall and fired three times. Each shot punctured a tetrarchian mask. When the enemy huddled to replace them he lobbed an oxygen cannister over the roof and blasted it as it poised at the height of its arc. The hissing gas struck quickly. He saw one of the unprotected tetrarchs collapse. Its imitation body toppled over the parapet to the ground. A Survivor wiggled toward it and snatched a blaster from its limp hand. He accounted for three more on the roof before they killed him.

His sacrifice gave his fellows an opportunity. While he had engaged the tetrarchs two Survivors wedged themselves in the corner of a supporting abutment. One had clambered on the other's shoulders. The men scrambled up this living ladder and over the parapet.

In the midst of a wild melee support came—through the roof. The feinting force that had attacked earlier had taken the interior of the slave compartment. They cut through the roof when they heard the scuffling. Oxygen roared through the

opening into Tetrarch's dead atmosphere. The struggle was brief—and without quarter to the tetrarchs.

Rod, meanwhile, had reorganized his forces and directed them to proceed to the science building and surround it.

His Survivors were better equipped now. They had gained blasters. The feint on the slave compartment had won them the oxygen-making equipment. It had diverted the enemy from Rod's main objective. And the men of the feint party now stood ready to reinforce him.

A courier dashed to him. Bunny was reporting that all space ship hangars had been immobilized. He had then turned to assist in the communications clean up. He wanted further orders.

The orders were brief: to explode all tetrarchians encountered while proceeding to the science building.

His own men waited in silence. They waited before a quiet, ominous building. It stood—a squat, sullen pile—a citadel of science perverted—of infamous torture.

And from it—through a door quickly opened and as quickly shut—a human emerged. A human who limped and snuffled as he crossed the clearing toward the Survivors.

"Harrow," he called, "I'm an emissary to Rod Harrow. I want to speak to Rod Harrow."

"All right. What is it?" Rod strode forward despite Williamson's restraining hand.

The whimpering slave gathered himself together and spoke as if he had memorized his piece.

"The tetrarchs say if you'll surrender yourself they'll spare the rest of the humans."

"Bluff! A miserable bluff!" Williamson had come forward blazing with indignation. His contempt at the servile gestures of the slave was mounting. "We'll kill every tetrarch on the planet—and you with them, if you're not careful. You can sniffle on back there and tell them that their position is hopeless."

"But don't you see," the coward was almost in tears, "they've got the catalyst." The tears, no longer denied, streaked down his face. "At first it would work in eight hours no matter what our age. Now, La-

tham Koler's got it so it can work in five min—O-oh! I've been hit!"

Rod caught a quick glimpse of Latham Koler's saturnine grin. He had appeared at the building opening for a moment and fired.

Rod couldn't see the weapon he had used but its results were plain. A tiny dart had pierced the coward's helmet. It protruded from the back of his neck.

Williamson plucked the dart and held it in his hand. "It doesn't look dangerous," he said. But Jerry had collapsed.

Rod pointed to the fallen coward. A familiar pallor was spreading over his features.

"The glow! Rod! Look at it! It's working already!"

"It's a stepped-up catalyst all right." Rod was thoughtful. "That dart is really a hypo needle. Lets get to cover and see what we can do about it."

When Rod outlined his plan Williamson was adamant. They couldn't go through with it. He, Williamson, wasn't going to permit it. But Rod had his way.

They picked the best marksmen arbitrarily. There were volunteers in plenty to storm the building if the ruse worked.

It took a little time to stuff their clothes with sand. Williamson checked them personally to make sure that the layer under their clothes was at least three inches thick.

When everything was ready Rod strode forward like Achilles taunting the Trojans. He exhausted his vocabulary. All the vituperative terms he could remember and a few that came to him extempore were hauled out to describe the tetrarchs. He told them they would be frozen to provide lights for their own mines—that the humans would break them into small chunks to make jewels for Earth's women.

It worked. It was more than teararch nature could take.

DOORS opened for a fleeting second. The vengeful flames showered him with darts.

In that brief interval they were met with withering blasts from the marksmen. The humans had brought the oxygen machinery up from the slave compartment. It streamed toward the building like water from a pressure hose.

At the same instant the volunteers rushed. For an instant the fight teetered in the balance—and then they were in.

Rod bristled with sand-blunted darts as he battered his way through the honey-combed building, searching for the operating chamber. He burst through the entrance—to face Mona Darlanan.

They hadn't had time to work on her. But they'd done their best. They'd tied her to a vertical platform first.

The dart in her breast had drawn blood!

Latham Koler squirmed from behind the platform. His cadaverous face was transfixed with the grin of a skeleton skull. He aimed a blaster point blank at Rod and fired.

The streaming arc buried itself harmlessly in the three-inch sand layer over Rod's chest. And he was on Koler like a berserk.

He broke the traitor's helmet first. And forced fingers and thumb around his wind-pipe. When the peering eyes protruded and the thin-lipped mouth hung agape Rod lifted the dart gently from Mona Darlanan's body.

He jammed it down Koler's throat.

Williamson came pounding in. "We've got them all, Rod. Tetrarch IV is in our hands!"

Rod was frantically tearing at his sleeve. "Get me a knife," he ordered, "quickly."

He ripped the sleeve off. As more and more Survivors came piling into the room he ordered liters of distilled water.

Meanwhile he was busily plying the scalpel Williamson brought to him. The gash on his arm had never quite healed was getting probed. Rod dug with the scalpel as though he were going after a bullet.

The small platinum capsule he forced from the cut in his arm was not unlike one.

He glanced anxiously at Mona's face. The pallor had gone. A harshening of her exquisite skin had taken its place.

The contents of the capsule dissolved in five liters of water in a matter of seconds. Rod picked an unfilled dart from a litter on a table. He filled it with his newly made solution and injected it in the girl's arm.

They waited.

"Will it do any good, Rod?" Williamson was solemn in the quiet room.

"I don't know. We developed it on Earth in our lab in the Rockies. There was plenty of gryxon in our machines. Volunteers exposed themselves to it. That capsule, Bill, was purchased at the price of martyrdom."

"If it works, our race is saved."

"That's how they felt about it. We found that raw gryxon was instant death to humans over twenty-five. Those under twenty-five were immune unless they came from stock that matured early—as the Mediterranean peoples. They succumbed before twenty-five. That was what really gave us our answer. We knew that ankylosis—joining of certain spinal vertebrae—occurred earlier in humans that matured earlier—and that age twenty-five was the time for the joinder to occur. So we turned to the serums that had increased human life spans by retarding ankylosis—and developed this one."

They studied Mona's face again.

WAS it possible that the yellow tinge was stayed—was turned to waxen ivory? The girl's breast rose and fell—ever so gently.

"I concealed our serum," Rod went on slowly, "from the tetrarchs by burying it in my arm. I had to get a hypo needle before I could use it here."

"Have I had a fever, Rod?" Mona's grey eyes were open. "Or is this delirium?"

Rod Harrow crossed to her swiftly. He cradled her head in his arms. She was smiling again—relaxed.

Then he turned to Williamson. "Line 'em up, Bill. With five liters we can inoculate every human on Tetrarch IV. There'll never be a gryxon glow again.

"And as soon as a company has had all men injected, send them to the cave to bring back the reserves. We'll need their help."

"To celebrate?" Williamson wanted to know.

"Not particularly." Rod was impatient. "We'll have to do some planet cleaning."

"Planet cleaning!"

"Right! We're ready now to wipe the tetrarchs off our Earth."