

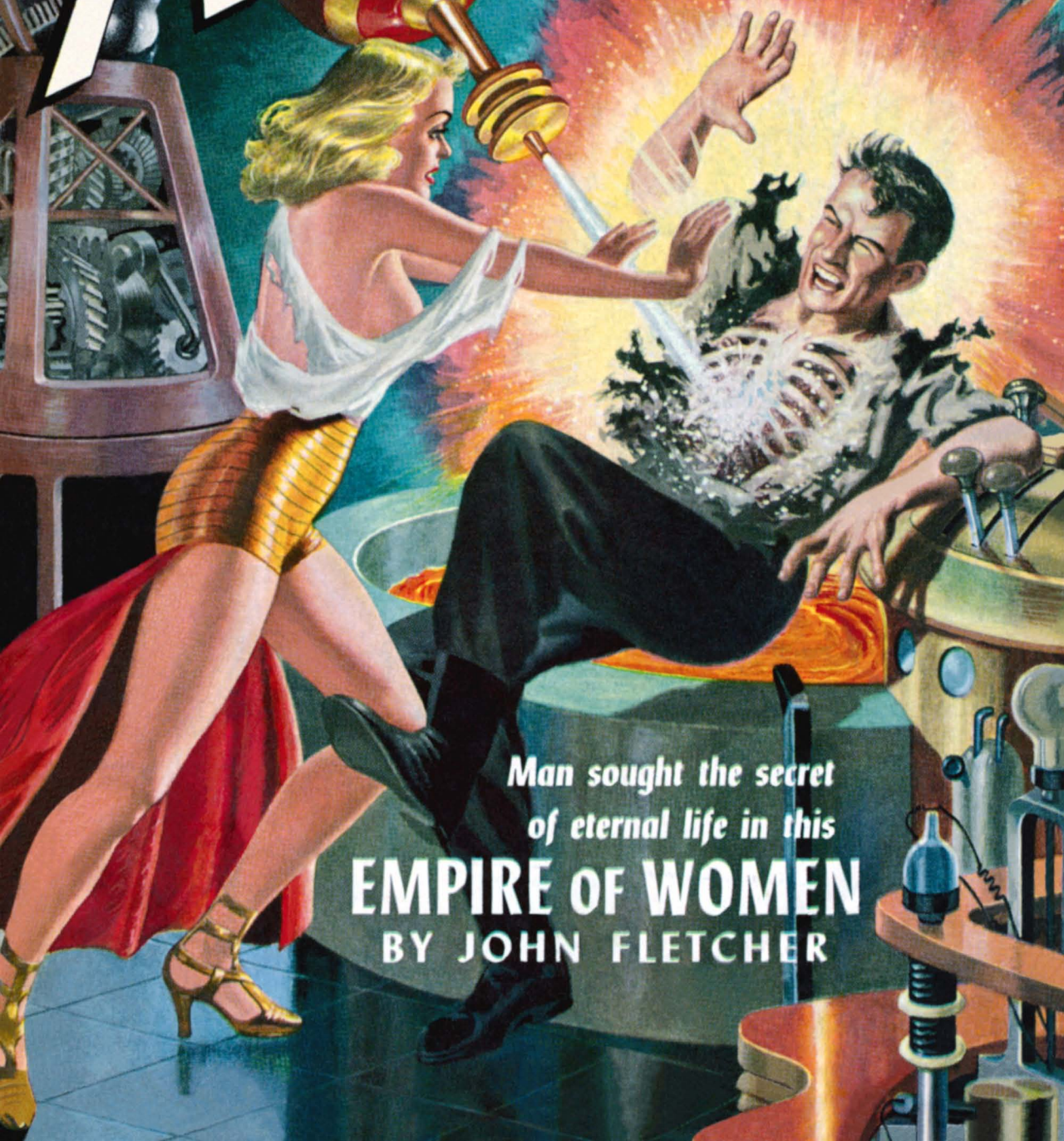
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## STORIES



Man sought the secret  
of eternal life in this

### EMPIRE OF WOMEN

BY JOHN FLETCHER

# AMAZING STORIES

MAY, 1952

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THE OBSERVATORY By The Editor .....	6
ROCKETS CAN BE ROUGH! By Frederic Booth .....	53
WHAT'S ALL THIS "VECTOR" BUSINESS? By Charles Recour .....	113
THE BIG BLOWUP By Omar Snyder .....	130
OUT OF CONTROL By Merritt Linn .....	137
THE CLUB HOUSE By Rog Phillips .....	138
ERRORS MAKE PERFECTION By A. T. Kedzie .....	145
SCIENCE FICTION BOOKCASE By Sam Merwin .....	146
FIFTH COLUMN GAS By Walt Crain .....	148
ATOMIC ARTILLERY By Tom Lynch .....	149
MAKE YOUR OWN CLOUD CHAMBER! By William Karney .....	149
THE READER'S FORUM By The Readers .....	150
TELEVISION IN THE CAN By Jack Winter .....	154
SUNDAY PUNCH By June Lurie .....	155
ROUTINE PATROL By Ralph Cox .....	156
MOLD CAN BE MURDER! By Saïem Lane .....	158
AIR CAN BE TOUGH! By Peter Dakin .....	159
FIGURES CAN BE FUN! By Leo Lewin .....	160
UNDER THE METAL MIND By Jon Barry .....	162

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*All* **STORIES** *Complete*



**EMPIRE OF WOMEN** (Novel—30,000) ..... by John Fletcher..... 8

Illustrated by Leo Ramon Summers and Ed Valigursky

When the empire of Myrmi-Atla beat back all attacks, there was only one weapon that might overthrow that world of women—a smooth-talking, hard-loving man!

**COME TO VENUS — AND DIE!** (Novelette—16,000) ..... by F. Willard Grey..... 54

Illustrated by Lawrence

All the girl wanted was to hire Greg to fly into the Venusian jungle and rescue her father. But for some strange reason a lot of people wanted him left there!

**THE WORLD OF WHISPERING WINGS** (Short novel—20,000) .. by Rog Phillips..... 82

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

After three thousand years, they were returning to Earth. Surely, after all that time it would be Utopia, a land of milk and honey. Instead, they found—

**MONKEY IN THE ICE BOX** (Short—9,000) ..... by Gerald Vance..... 114

Illustrated by Tom Beecham

With a chorus cutie, a guy with a gun and a shipload of pirates ready to kill them, Joe and Scorp lost all hope—until they found a nice frozen secret weapon

**MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE — II** (Short—5,000) ..... Author Unknown..... 131

Illustrated by Ed Valigursky

Have you ever wondered what our world, our solar system, even our galaxy will be like during the next, say, five hundred years? This article will tell you!

Front cover painting by Lawrence, suggested by

a scene from the story "Empire of Women"



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A shadow moved behind a pillar, and Cap's flash sent a quick beam of light toward it.





# EMPIRE OF WOMEN

*By John Fletcher*

**Nowhere in all space was there a man  
who could baffle against Cap Alain.  
Women, however, use different arms!**

**T**HE *WARSPPEAR* was loafing along under a half G acceleration somewhere between Denebola and Konapar, when the news tape started clicking out the story of the space battle that had served as a "declaration" of war between Konapar and Phira. The captain's hands reached for the controls, rang the acceleration alarm, and changed course. He upped the speed to a good ten G's.

Nobody takes that kind of acceleration if they can avoid it unless, like the Cap, they were raised on a two-G planet. Or unless there was a terrific reason which made it imperative, such as the reason in the Cap's

mind as his eyes glittered in retrospection over the war news and what it implied.

The *Warspear* had to pass Phira within a half-hour's distance. But the Cap swung closer to the gigantic gray-green globe now, turning on the vari-wave detectors to pick up any vibration that might be disturbing the ether around Phira. There was a scramble of sound, but it was all in code and nothing he could make sense of, though he tried.

A few moments after the war news had come through on the tape, the radar screen picked up a ship, dead ahead, making for the atmosphere of Phira under full rocket blast. The Cap signaled her for identification. That he had no business asking made no difference to him. Apparently that fact was known by the strange ship, for she refused to answer. The Cap leaned to his intercom.

"Mister DuChaile, put a torpedo across her bows," he said calmly.

Chan DuChaile was the first mate of the *Warspear*, and he deserved his post. Under his direction the torpedo crew put a guided missile across the stranger's bow so close the Cap couldn't see space between the fiery wake and the hull. The stranger's captain couldn't see it either, apparently, for he flashed a surrender signal immediately; not too surprisingly, because the *Warspear* could scare almost anything in space into a collapse. Especially merchant-men, which this ship was, and which the *Warspear* was built for. In plain words, the *Warspear* was a pirate.

When the prize crew boarded the captive, they found to their delight that they had indeed captured a prize. She was loaded to the bulkheads with explosives, and a hundred tons of fission-grenades, designed to be thrown by repulse rays in hand weapons.

These latter were outlawed wherever the Terran empire held sway. It was a terrible weapon to place in a common soldier's hands, and the Cap looked thoughtful when the prize crew reported the cargo to him. If the Phirans had much of that type of weapon, they must mean business, outlawed business they didn't intend to allow any Terran to rule, or any code of decency to forestall. Alid, on Phira, was proving herself to be the barbarian nation she was!

For an instant the Cap chuckled. If he'd touched the other ship with just one ray, that cargo would have sent both ships to glory.

But he stopped chuckling when he learned of the forty-odd slave girls bound for the Temple of the Matriarchs in Alid. They had been branded already with the blue hieroglyph of Myrmi-Atla, which meant a strictly manless future for them, were they delivered to the infamous temple.

The Cap went over to the prize and looked at them. They were just kids, only beginning to blossom into maidenhood. Obviously the crew wanted to take them aboard, but the Cap knew better than that. He ordered them sent to the hideaway on the Black Moon.

But for the first time in his career, one of his orders was obeyed with questioning glances and a few mumbles of "it ain't fair"...for the Cap bent too long a glance on a sprightly little being he called "Elvir" because she was so small and quick. An "elvir" is a baby eel. She was a pert little blonde, not at all like an eel except for her smooth and quick movements, but the name seemed to fit all the same. Perhaps it was the way she accepted it, and the way she wriggled into the Cap's heart. Anyway, Elvir came aboard the *Warspear*, and jealousy shone out of

the eyes of many of her crew. But it was a good kind of jealousy, for Elvir was only ten.

**T**HE PRIZE crew boarded the freighter and headed her for the hideaway on the rock named the Black Moon...the Cap could always get quick cash out of a cargo of explosives. Then the *Warspear* resumed course for Konapar.

Before long, Elvir's pert beauty and high sense of humor had endeared her to everyone. She was full of questions, and she carried a potent load of sunbeams in her laugh and in her child's way of playing. The crew got a boost out of her, and she was too young to have to worry about any fights starting over her...or so the captain thought. Pirates his men might be, but there's a soft spot in the core of every real man; and the hardy fighters aboard the *Warspear* were no exception.

Elvir had never been to space before she had been placed aboard the freighter, and she was determined to learn all about it, which was funny because it was so impossible.

"Where are we, Captain Alain?" she'd ask, and he'd take her on his knee and trace out their course through the stars on the chart with one broad, scarred finger, and tell her a whopping big lie about the people of each planet along the course. She'd swallow it all and come back for more.

"What is the Empire of Terra? Who are the pirates you have to fight for Terra?" The Cap had reversed the truth and told her the *Warspear* was engaged in exterminating pirates. He'd patiently explain how huge the Terran empire was, taking in a good portion of the galaxy, and how numberless the independent worlds where pirates could

hang out masquerading as honest merchant ships. Little Elvir drank it all in, her eyes sparkling as she absorbed the star charts he handed her, and you'd swear she understood it all as well as he before a week was out.

"Will I meet some pirates?" she'd ask...and the Cap would look at Chan DuChaile and wink.

"I hope not," he'd say. "Pirates are terrible bad men!"

"What do pirates look like?" she'd ask, and he'd have them with long whiskers and blasters as big as beer kegs and bandy-legged and cross-eyed.

Chan and the other officers would laugh, but the fact was they themselves were about as war-scarred a bunch of mercenaries as ever looted a city or sacked a ship; and just about as deadly as any story-time pirate could hope to be.

But Captain Gan Alain had contacts, a reputation for straight dealing, and had turned in plenty of honest jobs convoying trading ships that had had sense enough to hire him. The rims of the Terran Empire were rough and tough, and most everything went. But most of the men on the *Warspear* knew the value of a good record on the official books, and especially did Gan Alain know this. He'd done convoying long enough for the traders to know he never double-crossed an employer who paid his price.

There were others in the business, however, like Tiger Phelan, whose record included a half-dozen convoys that never reached port, and a dozen lame excuses by the Tiger as to where other cargoes had disappeared to—from his own holds. Men like the Tiger forced action against themselves by messing up the record. Out of a hundred trips, it was natural to lose one or two convoys. But it would be

a very dumb and blind trader who hired the Tiger to take him across the void from Dires to Delphon.

On the record, the Cap's nose was clean. He could cradle at almost any civilized port without a murmur from officialdom. So far, that is...

**ELVIR** was either well-developed for her age, or had adult instincts, for she fell for the captain. There was some excuse, for he *was* the kind most women make fools of themselves over. Full of vitality, ruddy-cheeked, curly-haired, he was taller and broader than most men of Earth stock. He'd been raised on a heavy planet, though he never talked much about exactly where it had been, and what kind of a home he'd had. On the *Warspear* everyone had secrets and sore spots—that's why they were there.

Captain Alain he was called, formally. In space some were allowed to call him "Cap", and a few called him Gan, off duty. He was a mild enough man, ordinarily; but so powerful that the mildness was deceptive. He didn't have to shout or bluster or throw his weight around to get obedience. His men had seen him break a man's back by hitting him in the belly in a fight, and they didn't give him any arguments. Big he was, with his mane of red-gold hair and beard making him look even bigger. Nobody pushed the Cap around. He could let out a bellow that made the plates in the hull rattle, but he seldom did. It wasn't necessary. Men leaped to obey his quietest whisper.

He was no ladies' man, but when there were ladies present, they did their best to make one out of him. Now little Elvir was on the same course, but somehow with her it was comical, she was so small. In spite of his attitude toward females, the

Cap made a fuss over her; and so did all the rest, but without the reaction she gave the Cap.

**IT** WAS mid-course between Phira and Konapar that the radar beams began to have grasshoppers. The telescope finally gave the answer: they were heading smack into a whopping big fleet, as DuChaile put it.

The Cap began to decelerate, then turned the controls over to Chan. Most of the crew guessed what was ahead, but if they'd suspected their captain was planning on plunging right into the middle of the Konapar war fleet, they'd have worried a lot more than they did.

Soon the fleet became visible, strung out in a series of V's too numerous to count. There were hundreds of them and, as they neared, the televisor began to bellow out questions at the *Warspear*. When the crew heard their captain's answer, they suddenly had reason to worry, and most of the officers felt sure this was IT—the lugubrious finish of the *Warspear's* career. But every man stood to his post, silent and grimly ready.

"Tell your commander this ship is the *Warspear*, heavy-cruiser class, with five-score seasoned fighting men, reporting for action against the Phiran tyranny."

Chan DuChaile, listening, had never heard the government of the Matriarchs called a tyranny before, and he didn't like the idea of fighting against women; but he knew Gan Alain well enough to realize there were wits at work, so he listened without too much amaze.

After a few seconds, the receiving screen came to life. Mentally, Chan analyzed the scene in his own peculiar way: A big, black-bearded mo-



gul in a monkey-suit trimmed with gold braid, garnished with medals, draped with golden spaghetti and epaulettes. Chan recognized him, after a snort of disdain, as the Regent of Konapar. He'd seen his picture in a dozen bars in ports across the Dires sun-cluster.

Yet, after a good look at him, Chan wouldn't have given more than two brass buttons for the young prince's chances of ever taking over the rule of Konapar from this fellow. He was neither bad looking nor particularly villainish in appearance; it was just that he was a man who got what he wanted, and who wanted everything. Too ambitious, Chan classified him.

He was big-necked, big-chested, black-haired, a very handsome man. His cheeks were a little too full and flushed with good living. His eyes, the deep sloe-black of most Konoparians, were just a little sleepy-lidded, with a gleam of temper veiled behind. His complexion was clear and his voice was hearty and pleasant. He was a man's man who knew how to be liked by those under him. Chan liked him, and Chan wouldn't have trusted him as far as he could throw the *Warspear* off the surface of Jupiter.

Captain Alain, also observing the lusty ambition in the man, saw that he was the kind who never grabs with one hand, but uses both.

"What are your arms, Captain?" the Konoparian ruler was saying, and those sleepy eyes were registering caution at sight of a man as powerful and as obviously experienced in space war as the Cap.

Gan Alain grinned, a kind of respectful, now-you're-joking grin, and said: "Ah-ahh! We mercenaries have our little secrets. We have to be a wee bit ahead of the average military armament to stay alive, you know. I'll

guarantee to best any ship my tonnage, and most of them twice that, if necessary."

Chan DuChaile snickered at the Cap's effrontery, here in the midst of a war-fleet of total strangers, and refraining from telling his armament or its range.

The Regent colored the slightest bit, but his face didn't move a muscle. "Now, by Satan, Captain, how can I direct your ship in battle if I don't know your range?"

"It won't be necessary to direct my ship in battle, Your Highness," answered the captain. "Employers invariably put mercenaries in the fore of every battle, since they do not have to pay dead men. My duties will consist only of guarding your person and your ship from surprise attack, let us say, by ambitious parties unknown who would stand to benefit by your demise. Agreed?"

**F**OR A LONG minute the Cap's eyes held the Regent's, eye to eye in a subtle exchange, a kind of measuring of each other. The Regent, whose name was Gunnar Tor Branthak, pulled his beard thoughtfully, and his color went back to its normal ruddy hue.

"I do not expect any attacks by unnamed parties, but I fully understand your meaning. Those are your terms, and I accept them. Your pay will be regular battle pay equal to that received by my native supporters of equal rank. Naturally you will receive a share in the loot, which should amount to a fortune. But, you are aware I am not contracting to protect *you* against any resentment your lack of enterprise under fire might arouse?"

It was Captain Alain's turn to flush with repressed anger, and his big fist came up in a gesture that

said more than any words. Just the same, he supplied the words to go with the fist. "If any man finds cause to reproach the *Warspear* for cowardly actions during battle, I will claim no share of any prize won by the forces of Konapar. The name of Captain Gan Alain should be warranty enough of the value of this ship to your project!"

"Agreed then!" the Regent snapped. "The *Warspear* will fight under my personal direction, and take orders from no other officers whatever." The visor went blank and Gan Alain turned and gave Chan a wink.

Chan grinned inwardly. What had happened was an example of the cool wits of his commander. The *Warspear* had jetted into an imperial warfleet staffed with jealous nobles and officers of royal blood, and contracted to guard the Regent from treachery from any one of them. Chan would have bet that there were a dozen sub-potentates who were at this moment boiling violently around the collar and unable to do anything about it but sizzle. Who but the Cap would realize and take advantage of the fact that every ruler has his enemies, and that they would be looking for an opportunity such as might occur in battle to blast the Regent's ship by "mistake".

Gan Alain had learned by sad experience that a mercenary takes an unequal chance in battle beside allies, many of whom are relatives. They will send a hireling to his doom every time in preference to a brother or a cousin or a rich neighbor. The Tor's deal gave him a ship which could have no ulterior motive, as the *Warspear's* crew stood to gain nothing unless the Tor remained alive.

**A**LL THIS time little Elvir sat silently in the control cabin,

perched on top of the file cabinet, her knees holding the chart book where the course to Konapar was scrawled out in red ink. She closed the big folder of charts and pushed it into the cabinet between her knees without getting down. Her eyes were half-shut, thoughtful, and the mate figured she was thinking about the women who ruled Phila and what was going to happen shortly to them. He chuckled her under her pretty, round chin and asked: "Are you worried about the Amazons, chicken? We won't hurt them, if they behave themselves."

She shook her head, gave him a peculiar smile. Then she qualified the gesture with a confidential whisper the Cap couldn't hear. "I'm really thinking about the women, but it's because I'm worrying about what will become of Captain Alain when he gets mixed up with a city full of nothing but old women."

To Elvir, any woman over eighteen was old.

The inference behind her words tickled Chan so that he laughed. She grinned too, her eyes sparkling up at him, woman-wise in a child's face. It hit him suddenly. "Don't worry about the Cap where women are concerned. He can take 'em or leave 'em alone." He eyed her with wonder in his gaze. The scamp was actually jealous, and not with any childish jealousy, either.

She shook her curls again. "You don't know about the Priestesses. I do! I was to be a slave in the Temple of Myrmi-Atla, the glorious All-Mother. The other slaves talked about them all the time. They're not ordinary women; they're sorceresses."

The mate pooh-poohed the idea. "There's no such thing as sorcery, child. Not on Phira, anyway."

"You'll see," she predicted direly, knowingly with the all-wisdom of a

child. "They'll wind the captain around their fingers. And I don't want to see it. I like him too much to see him made a fool of. If I was older, I'd do something about it."

Chan wanted to say bluntly: "What?" but sight of her serious face made him think better of it. Instead he said: "Tell you what, Elvir; you and I can look ahead a little. We can plan to outfigure them. If some of the Matriarchs get under his skin, we'll fix them, eh?"

She put her child's hand in the mate's horny paw and shook. "It's a deal, Chan."

**T**HE PHIRANS must have had plenty of warning of the attacking fleet, for their armada was sighted some four hours out of their solar system. Their ships were old, a style obsolete for half a century, which is a long time in the growth of galactic science. However, they had obviously been recently refitted and newly engined, for those blunt, clumsy power-hogs were fairly splitting the ether when Konoparian telescopes identified them.

They split their forces right and left, which could be taken either for feminine thinking or stupidity, for no man would have divided his power that way. Tor Branthak took immediate advantage of the weakness and blasted his forces into the opening between and poured fission bombs and detonator rays right and left into the Phiran fleet. It looked to Chan as if the battle were ended before it had begun. The women had lost.

Gan Alain kept the *Warspear* right on the Regent's tail where he could see what was going on and be ready to repel attack as per agreement.

Then the Phirans, old and delapidated as their fleet seemed, sprang a surprise. They had opened in the center just wide enough to get out of

the way of a huge dark shape coming up from their rear. They had kept a screen of ships between it and the Konoparians or it would have been seen before. Now it was too late. Chan recognized her after a minute and sang out a warning.

"That's a Mixar ship, Cap! She carries potent stuff!"

Chan knew Mixar was on the outer rim of the Dires cluster, and that this ship must have been a year making the trip to Phira; thus her presence here must be due solely to chance. But that chance looked like disaster to the Konoparians. This thing was a super-dreadnaught in size, and no one really knew what a Mixar ship packed in armament. The cult of Myrmi-Atla had originally come from the planets of the Regulus group, where the Mixar Amazons had kept out all intruders since the earliest days of space travel. When he said she was potent, Chan had understated the case. Tor Branthak's heart must have bounced in his boots when he saw her.

The big ship opened fire at once. A ray came out of her nose turret that must have been three feet wide at the orifice, and it broadened its bath. It struck the nearest of its enemies, a Konopar cruiser, then lanced swiftly right and left while Konoparian ships zoomed frantically right and left and up and down—any way to leave the vicinity of that dread, dark shape. The ships the ray had touched seemed unaffected as they drove straight on in their courses, through the Phiran fleet; but the fact they did not fire a shot revealed the truth—they were manned by dead men.

Chan took a look at the visiscreen to see what the fleet was doing as a whole. The *Warspear* and the Regent's big master-class cruiser were almost the only force now left in range of the Mixar threat, the rest

of the valiant Konaparians rapidly vanishing to the rear. Space torpedoes were blossoming into fire against the Mixar hull, but the men who had fired them had left the scene.

The torpedoes didn't seem to effect her armor. She boomed on inexorably nearer the Regent's ship, and it struck Gan Alain that the Regent was only waiting to see what his new employee could do about it—which was silly, as the Mixar was at least ten times the *Warspear's* size. Actually, the Regent was probably stunned with surprise, and had unconsciously looked to his newest ally for a possible salvation of the situation.

The Cap had a tight grin on his grim face, and Chan watched him pull the graviton-sphere hatch lever, watched the glowing sphere of charged metal drift out into space. Gan Alain was revealing one of his special weapons, and probably with it, its range. Perhaps the Regent would be surprised in a disagreeable as well as a pleasant way.

**G**AN FLICKED a repulsor ray against the sphere, and it moved sluggishly off toward the Mixar ship. Then the Cap spun the *Warspear* end-for-end and gave the rear jets to the deadly sphere. The *Warspear* went away fast, but the rough iron sphere of red hot metal bobbed equally fast, though more clumsily, on its way toward the big stranger, looking about as harmless as a hunk of asteroid rock.

The maneuver was probably as incomprehensible to the Mixars as it was to the Regent, who turned tail too, and fled after the *Warspear*. The graviton sphere is a device that is unknown in the Dires system. The *Warspear* had gone far to pick that up.

The sphere went humping along toward the enemy, who seemed to watch

it contemptuously. They swerved the Mixar gently aside to avoid it, no more than necessary. The sphere swerved too, and now picked up speed. The Mixar took alarm then and, like the *Warspear*, spun around and gave it their rear jets.

What they didn't know was that the sphere was carrying a motor generator creating gravitons, which was fueled by a fission metal which was also its warhead. It manufactured gravitons so fast that its artificial gravity was by now nearly equal to a big planet like Phira, and it was so close that all the blasts in the Mixar fuel tanks couldn't drive it away. They were trying to escape a thing that nothing ever escaped, unless, like Cap, they got away before the generator really got up speed. Since the sphere had no genuine inertia or mass of its own, its artificial gravity drew it toward any object inexorably, in spite of all attempts to escape.

The jets had no effect upon the sphere, for it wasn't the same chunk of iron it had been when the *Warspear's* jets started it on its way. Now it was a vast contact bomb, homing on the Mixar ship, and its graviton generators were stepping up more revolutions by the second.

The only effective defense against the thing now was to bomb or torpedo it so that it wasted its explosive force in space, but its size was so small that this was a virtual impossibility in the short time remaining. The Mixar had made the mistake of trying to blast it away with its jets, as it had seen the *Warspear* do.

The explosion blew a hole in the Mixar's rear into which the *Warspear* could have driven and parked, with room for a theater besides.

The Mixar dreadnaught lost way, drifted slowly in a circle, her jets guttering as she tried vainly to get

going again. Then she blew up, giving off a glare of light like a little star as her fuel fissioned.

The disaster took the heart out of Phira and put it back into the Konaparian fleet. The invaders appeared again from out of the blue yonder. The Phirans smashed into them, fighting heroically, but with no apparent tactic but desperation. They were well-weaponed, but outnumbered. With better tactics, they might have counted heavily, but it was evident they had based their hopes on the big ship from the neighboring solar system, and that it had contained their tactical brains, too.

The Cap grinned as he eased his big body from the control seat and motioned Chan to replace him. "It looks as if the Matriarchs are going to have to take masculine orders for awhile," he said to Chan, but the mate didn't smile.

"I don't like it, Captain," said Chan. "What have you got against the Phiran females you should knock their pins out for Konapar? How do you know it wouldn't have paid better to fight for the women, as it is natural for a man to do?"

Gan frowned, shook his head. "You'll find out, DuChaile. Wait until you understand the Matriarchs; then you'll agree."

The Phirans fled, reformed, tried to meet Konapar again on the edge of their solar system. But it was no go. They lost two to one in a brief, raging encounter. They fled again, a fifth of the fleet that had come out to meet the invaders. The rest drifted, hulls riddled, along the route they had so recently covered.

It was the only resistance to the invasion. When a scout party jetted down over Alid, a white flag of surrender floated over the spire of the Temple of Myrmi-Atla—and the

Temple of Alid rules all Phira.

C ELYS, high priestess of Myrmi-Atla, stood peering from the ornate leaded panes of her sanctum in the temple. She watched the orange sky where one by one the great warships of Konapar loomed out of the flaming horizon, grew huger, settled to a landing on the plateau above the valley where the Holy City stretched along the high, curving banks of the sacred river Kroon.

There were tears in the lovely emerald-flecked gold eyes of the priestess. Her long lashes were wet, and her slender hands upon the black and gold of the drapes trembled with anger. She knew quite well why Gunnar Tor Branthak had broken treaty with Phira. It was not for gold, not for loot, not for power. What the Tor wanted was *the secret!*

Beside the window the dark stones slid silently aside, revealing an opening and a passage within the seemingly solid wall. In the darkness a tall, pale figure moved like a cold flame, silent as a ghost. Celys turned as the figure reached out and touched her shoulder. The two stood with eyes fixed upon each other, then, as if moved by identical emotion, joined in close embrace. The one who had entered from the wall murmured: "It had been so very long, dear. The Mother has sent me to replace you. You are to return to Avalaon. She needs to take council in this crisis, and you should be there."

Celys released herself from the arms of the newcomer. As they turned about each other, the illusion of one slipping into the place of the other was magically perfect. Anyone watching would have sworn some mystery of identity was here, for the two women seemed to have changed places, yet Celys still stood by the

window. One glided into the wall, which returned to its seeming solidity, and the other moved into the identical posture in which Celys had stood, peering through the lifted drapes over the conquered city. And there was no change in her. It was Celys, high priestess of Myrmi-Atla, the supreme power over all the planet Phira until today.

Celys turned from the window, letting the dark drape fall and shut out the hated sight of the conquerors. She stood, a pale flame in the temple gloom, a lance of green in her diaphanous robe—the green that symbolized the lifeblood of the All-Mother—topped by the ruddy hue of her rich red-gold hair, curled and coiled high, bound in a net of emeralds. She stood, weeping silently, her face stiff from the effort to keep from sobbing aloud.

Across the polished stone paving of the temple chamber came a swiftly running white-robed figure, one of the acolytes, a girl of perhaps fourteen. She swept to a half-salaam before Celys, then clasped her about the waist, her voice choked: "Dear Mistress, I know how your heart twists in pain. But let us go—the Empress in Mixar offers asylum. The ship waits, why will you not go to safety? We do not matter, but *you* bear the very torch of the true religion in your breast. You must save it, to light the fire where it will not be snuffed out again."

Celys put her hand on the girl's head and raised her face. "No, little friend, I may not shame the Mother by running away. I, before all others, must face the conqueror without fear."

The girl clung to her silently for a moment, then as in an afterthought, said: "There is a little messenger come to you, a tiny wisp of a girl.

She says she comes from an enemy ship and bears a secret message. I thought she lied, or was mad, for it hardly makes sense."

"Send her to me," said Celys.

**L**ITTLE Elvir stood before Celys, somewhat abashed by her regal beauty and the sadness in her face. But her pretty chin squared with determination, and her child's heart beat madly, her mind spinning with plans.

She began: "I slipped away when no one was looking, to see for myself the city of Amazons, where women rule men, and men are but servants."

Celys' eyes went chill, and she half turned away. "If that is all the child wants, take her and put her outside the temple gates."

Eloi, the acolyte who had shown her into the sanctum, took Elvir firmly by the arm, but the little slave girl twisted free and darted behind the tall form of Celys.

"That isn't all. I bear an important message that Captain Gan Alain would trust to no one but me."

"What is the message, sparrow?" asked Celys coldly, withdrawing slightly from the somewhat grimy hand that clutched her immaculate skirts.

"Not Gan Alain, the pirate?" queried Eloi, pausing in her circling attempt to catch the quick little child.

Elvir shrieked at her, horrified at her words. "He's *not* a pirate! He's a privateer, and the bravest fighting man in all space."

"The difference is found only in the spelling of the word," commented Celys, smiling in spite of herself at the loyalty on the pert face.

Eloi's eyes caught those of Celys, both of them realizing that here might be some kind of a lever, some tiny opening in the conqueror's ar-



mor. Gan Alain was a mercenary, mercenaries can be bought, and here was contact with one in the pay of the enemy. Celys bent, then, her eyes searching the child's face for character, to know whether her words would be lies or not.

"Tell me quickly, child. Did your master send you, and is he in the employ of Tor Branthak?"

"That he did, and that he is. He wants you Amazon women to hide yourselves, to have no contact with the enemy in any way. Otherwise a terrible fate will befall you."

Celys laughed, suddenly perceiving the real mind behind the message. "And did your master truly say those words, little sparrow, or did you yourself get them from some storybook?"

But now, Eloi, who had again caught hold of Elvir's slender wrist, suddenly raised it so that Celys could see and cried out: "She has the sign of the Mother upon her forearm! She is one of our own temple slaves!"

Celys looked startled, bent and peered at the little blue scroll and enclosed symbol of Myrmi-Atla upon Elvir's arm.

"Where did you come from, imp? And what do you want? Answer truly, or I'll have you thrashed until you tell the truth!"

Elvir had been whipped before. Tears gathered in her eyes, and at last she blurted out: "I only wanted Captain Gan to stay away from the Amazons...and I didn't know what else to do."

Celys' further questions proved of no help. Her origin remained a mystery, except that it was obvious that the ship from which the Cap had taken her was one bought and paid for by a Phiran buyer, at which time Elvir had received the indelible tattoo of ownership. Celys had her sent to the slaves' quarters and proceeded to

forget about her. Tor Branthak would demand audience within the hour and she must make ready. She had no time for a silly child. As for Tor Branthak, she could not imagine what she should be ready for, except that it would not be pleasant.

ON THE great plateau above the city—where the fleet lay while the troops disembarked, formed ranks, marched down the steep highway into the city—a council of war was being held. In the salon of Tor Branthak's flagship officers stood at attention as the bearded Regent gave final orders for the occupation of Alid. One by one the officers saluted, wheeled, left on the double to join the waiting troops.

When the room was quite empty, Gan Alain found himself alone, facing the quizzical smile of the Regent. For a long moment the silence held as the two big men measured each other, then the Regent gave a booming laugh and reached out with a big hand to shake the Captain's. Gan smiled. The ruler was hard to resist. He had a way with men and it was evident that his officers admired him.

"I suppose, Captain, that you are wondering just where you fit in now that the nut is cracked? Whether you come out catbird or get some of the meat? To tell you the truth, to get the most out of you, I've got to offer you the most. Sit down."

The furnishings of the salon were screwed fast to the floor plates, and the only place to sit near at hand was the top of an ornate desk. Alain sat, swinging one booted leg from the edge. The Regent crossed behind it, swung open a door in the back, handed a tall flagon of blue liquor and two glasses to the Cap. Gan set the glasses down, and the Regent sat in the chair behind the desk. Gan filled the glasses,



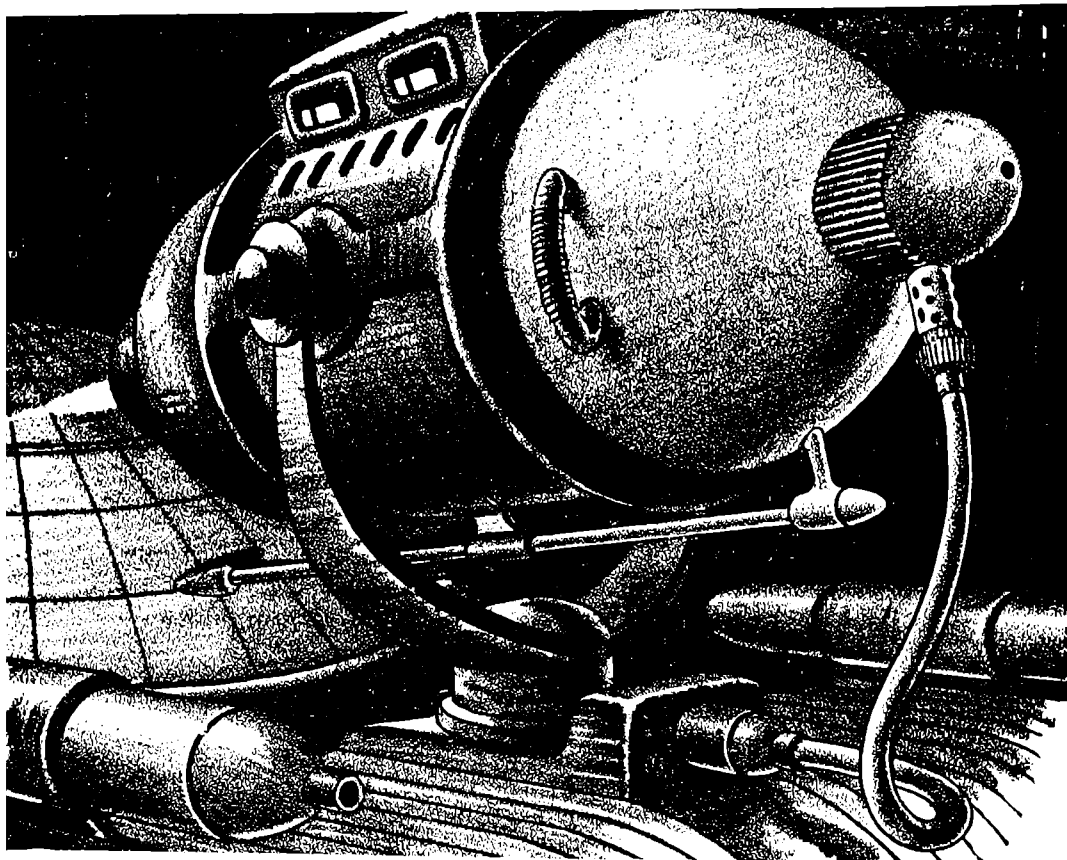
raised one to eye level, grinned as he toasted: "To Myrmi-Atla and her daughters, the priestesses of Sacred Alid. May they live...long."

Gan waited, his eyes on the suddenly wary eyes of Tor Branthak. Slowly the ruler picked up his glass and, as Gan touched his own to his lips, tossed the liquor down his throat with a quick motion and set the glass down hard as if he had made a decision.

"I was going to tell you anyway, Captain, but since you know, it makes it simpler. It's not generally known, you realize?"

Gan's voice was hard and even, without a shade of emotion. "On the contrary, it's well known."

"My officers do *not* know! As far as I have been able to learn, I'm the only man in all the forces of Konapar who does know for a certainty what



The odor of seared flesh permeated the room, and the man's horrible screams resounded

treasure these women hold in secret. For to whom could a man trust a secret so valuable?"

Gan Alain's voice remained even and calm as he echoed: "To whom trust—immortality?"

"My spies stole the record books from the temple some time ago. Those records reach back many centuries, Captain Alain. In those records are many deaths, and every death is male! Yet the whole organization of this religion of theirs is dominated, staffed—by women! It's impossible!"

Gan's voice echoed the Regent's once more: "Impossible but true, Your Highness. Quite true. And not the secret you think. I've heard it in rumor often. Once I had it by word

of mouth from one who claimed to know. They *don't* die, these women!"

The Regent's voice took on a note of awe, of puzzlement, and ended in an angry exclamation: "They live on and on! But how? Man, how?"

Alain shrugged, his face expressionless.

The Regent clenched a big fist, struck it on the table. "We're *men*, Captain. They are women who deny this thing to any man, deny it to any but members of their sacrosanct religious organization. We've got to wring it out of them some way. *Any* way. I can't go after it openly—my followers would think me mad to believe such an impossible story. But you and I, knowing, having them in

our hands, under our absolute power—it will be strange if we can't get the truth out of them, or out of at least *one* of them!"

**G**AN STOOD up, leaned over the desk to bring his face on a level with Tor Branthak's. "Give me a free hand, Tor Branthak! Back my play with your authority. Put my men in charge of the main temple and the priestesses. When I get the secret, then we open it up, make it known to all, and your conquest will be justified in all men's eyes and you will become a savior, a champion who fights for all men against an ugly, secretive monopoly—of life itself! We'll have proof..."

"If we tell them, Captain. It's a problem unique to my experience. A lot depends on the nature of the secret. Is it a drug, a medicine, a ray, or is it some damned impossible abracadabra of their religion, something we couldn't give away if we wanted to? For that matter, why tell anyone if we do find it?"

"We'll find it! What do you think I threw in with you for? What you do with it after we find it is entirely up to you, Tor Branthak. I'll know too, and I'll not deny such a thing to my friends. I've small respect for Myrmi-Atla if she teaches her worshippers to keep such a secret from all mankind. Or for her priestesses! They'll find my hand heavy enough, never fear."

Gan Alain straightened, his eyes still holding the dark, hot eyes of Tor Branthak. "Just one more thing, Your Highness. I've a reputation for square dealing. I've also a reputation for getting even. This thing is quite a prize, and a terrible temptation. I'll go along with you as long as I get aboveboard treatment. But *don't*, Tor Branthak, deal off the bottom of the deck. Don't even consider it!"

"You threaten me, Captain?"

For an instant there flashed between the two men a kind of still, terrible lightning; a leashed and fearful power of strange and threatening nature. That lightning came from the glance of Gan Alain's eyes upon Tor Branthak's, a piercing into him of personal power, so that for an instant the Regent's fingers shook on the stem of his glass. As Gan turned away, strode for the door, Tor Branthak poured the glass full again, sipped it slowly, his eyes brooding upon the door through which Gan's broad back disappeared. At last the ruler set his drink down with a hand that was steady again, and his full, sensuous lips twisted in a smile of pure delight—delight tinged with sinister exultation. It was the kind of smile a breaker of horses gives who has bought a seemingly average mount of good appearance, only to find, when astride it, a creature filled with wild, unbounded vitality—a horse hard to break, but infinitely valuable once broken. Tor Branthak spoke aloud to the empty room—and his words were a cold, heavy music ringing in the silence:

"Now that was a mistake, my captain, to show me *that* in you!"

**T**HE ANCIENT Temple of Myrmi-Atla was a vast pile, very old and many times rebuilt and enlarged. There were chambers within chambers, passages in the walls unknown even to the present occupants, and secret chambers known only to the inner circle.

Within one of these secret chambers stood now at attention a hundred young, strong women—warrior women bearing weapon harnesses as if the leather grew upon them. Their eyes were fixed upon a flaming-haired beauty who stood before their ranks

with hands outstretched in benediction.

"You go, war maidens, not in fear or in flight, but only to make ready the way for your return. Our Mother needs time to meet this new threat to the Matriarchy; but the rule of women will not perish from Phira. In every other world known to mankind, the male is dominant, save on Mixar. But it is here, and here alone, where woman fills her proper place in life. Here alone is woman not a downtrodden chattel, not a plaything, not a decoration or a mere bearer of children; but the end and aim of all of the race's existence. You go to Alavaon, not to hide, but to study our conqueror from far-off, and to learn his weaknesses; and when he has forgotten the warrior-women of Myrmi-Atla, we will strike. When all thoughts of peril from our ancient power has vanished from his mind—we will strike, and once again the All-Mother will rule in the same old way. Go, my sisters; go with love and without shame. Shame will come only when you forget our purpose and become again but fireside kittens purring at the feet of the dominant male."

Her words rang with a sincere and ardent determination. On the faces of all the handsome war-maidens the same purpose lived and shone from their eyes, glanced from the hardened muscles of their rosy jaws, breathed with each lift of lovely, proudly swelling young breasts—made for love yet hardened by teaching and encompassing steel to the taste for war and struggle. Red as new-shed blood were their uniforms, slim, graceful legs clad in sleek, shining plasticord, weapon belt with dagger and needle-gun holster hugging each graceful hip, torso and fair breasts covered with the brilliance of ray-proof flex-steel, shoulders bearing proudly the folded glide-

wings of the air-soldier, back wearing the small triple cylinders of the standard atomic jet drive for all glide-wings, strong and graceful arms ringed about with the deadly lightning rings, that Terran-forbidden device of prisoned electrons released only by the ray of the needle gun on their hips.

They were as well equipped, as well trained in appearance, as deadly a group of fighting humans as could be found in the entire galaxy. But for them to fight now, with the heavy-weaponed ships of Tor Branthak and his horde of Konaparians commanding the plateau overlooking the city—with their own fleet almost destroyed—was out of the question. So they saluted, filed into the passage and down to the hidden tunnel which would conduct them from the city. These were the temple guard, and from all the city that day similar groups of warrior women had been stealing away by secret ways to a rendezvous in hidden Avalaon.

Avalaon had served them in historic times more than once as a reservoir of hidden strength in similar crises. For the rule of women in Phira had been challenged by the war fleets of a dozen powers in times past, powers and empires now passed away and forgotten. But the rule of Myrmi-Atla and her warrior maids, of her teacher-priestesses, had survived.

After their going, the temple lay empty and waiting. There were present only the young acolytes, a few of the superior priestesses, and Celys, the present high-priestess, to await the advent of the conqueror and to render him homage.

**T**HE ACOLYTES of Myrmi-Atla were gathered in the great main chamber of worship, before an heroic stone figure of the All-Mother, where Celys led them in singing hymns.

They were awaiting their fate, and the furtive glances the young girls threw at the wide doorways for the first glimpse of the inrush of the male conquerors were of two kinds. For their contacts with men of any kind had been nonexistent, and though they had been taught to fear all men of teachings other than Myrmi-Atla's, still nature herself made their young hearts beat not only with fear but also with anticipation. In the case of Celys, however, the occasional glance she allowed herself would have betrayed her very real emotions to no one.

The expected rape of the temple seemed to have been delayed. The hymns went on and on, and when at last they heard the booted feet ringing upon the sacred paves of the dedicated halls, and raised their voices in even more fervent appeals to the All-Mother, the tramping feet came to a stamping halt some distance from the main doorway.

A single pair of feet moved close now, after a ringing command, and paused quite reverently at the very center of the arched opening. Just as all men of Phira who are devout must remain without any chamber which contains an image of the All-Mother enshrined, the booted conqueror remained.

Celys, her face puzzled at this courteous behavior from the enemy, waved a hand to Eloi, who took her place at the altar. Then Celys moved on silent, graceful feet to meet her fate.

There was a lone man waiting at the door. He was big, scarred, hard, muscular. He was handsome enough, she noted, his mane of hair like curled golden wires in the lamp light. His face was lined with creases of laughter about the mouth, deep crinkles about the corners of the eyes, fierce lines of anger and effort now relaxed. The observing eye of Celys caught

them all. His wide cheeks and heavy jaw were bronzed deeply, and his costume, she thought, was far too swashbuckling an assembly of colors and metals to be seemly for any but a blood-dyed pirate. On each thigh swung a hand weapon of a design Celys did not recognize. Had she known what those weapons had done and could do, it is possible she would have dropped in a faint before him.

Celys put him down as a man impatient of all restraint, a ruthless, domineering rogue, who used his looks and laughter only to disarm unsuspecting womankind. She was sure the straight-seeming honesty of his eyes was only a guise to outwit other rogues less clever than he.

Celys stood just inside the white line that marked the border where no male foot might treat without eternal damnation from the All-Mother, eyeing this monster out of space with all the chill she could muster against his smiling nonchalance. Gan waited, and she waited, each for the other to speak first. Celys lost the struggle.

She shook her head impatiently, stamped her slim, sandaled foot. "What do you want? Who are you? Why are you here?"

Gan did not answer at once, but stood eyeing her and allowing an expression of astonishment to spread slowly across his features. At last he said, with exaggerated respect: "I had expected a much older woman, Mother Celys! How old are you, anyway? Not a day over twenty-five, by appearance."

**A** FLUSH of embarrassment and anger swept upward from Celys' white neck, and her tongue seemed to stumble as she snapped: "My age is my business. It is also my business to know what you are doing in the temple at this hour of the evening?"



No male visitors are allowed except between the hours of three and four in the afternoon."

The smile left Gan Alain's face. His voice became hard and smooth as glass. "My lady, you know very well why I am here. This city has fallen into the hands of the Regent of Konapar. To ensure the safety of your priestesses and the rest of your henery, he has sent me, whom he considers honorable, to protect you from the looting and rapine of conquest. If you expect me to carry out this assignment efficiently, you had better come down off your horse and cooperate. I have already posted my men at the entrances to this warren of misguided female bigots. It would be better if you didn't mistake where the power rests from now on."

Celys' eyes searched the intruder's strong and bronzed face for an instant, then she bowed her head for a long-minute in silent prayer, her lips moving as she asked the All-Mother for guidance. But Gan moved his feet impatiently.

"It would be best if you showed me the place completely. It could well be that I have overlooked the entries and exits which most need guards. No one is to leave without my personal permission, Mother. Understand?"

As Celys raised her head from prayer, she moved silently out before him, expecting to precede him. But he swung into step beside her, and she started at the sound of a score of feet swinging into step behind them. She gave him a glance of pure irritation, but his handsome face remained inscrutable; mockingly so, she decided. She turned her eyes from him with difficulty. There was something indescribably fascinating in the man's presence, a power and dignity she could not recall having remarked in any other man. Mentally she gave

herself a kick at the incongruity of finding power and dignity in the gaudy garb of a pirate.

Celys was not familiar with the rich worlds of space traffic, the brawling, spawning ports of the spaceways. She could not know that Gan's worn corselet of dull gold leather, gemmed with synthetic rubies, his close-fitting breeches of black plasticord with gold piping, the black weapon belt and silver-handled explosive pellet guns made up a costume that in many places would have been considered plain to the point of shabbiness.

But in one way Celys was right. No clothing could conceal the rich wealth of vitality, the vaulting spirit, the leashed physical strength of the man. To Celys' eyes, the swell and ripple of muscles upon his bare arms, where the light glinted from little golden hairs everywhere, was positively vulgar. This barbarian, she muttered angrily to herself, had now all power over the temple, it seemed!

"Did you say something, Mother?" asked Alain, hiding a smile at her reaction to the way he used the word "mother".

Celys stilled her angry thoughts with a practiced facility and flashed him the first smile he had seen upon her face. "Why do you keep calling me 'mother'? Certainly you have lived longer than I."

"On my home planet," answered Gan easily, "we call all women of religious orders 'mother'. Does the word irk you?"

"Oh, no." And Celys gave her head a toss of impatience. "Not at all, Father."

Gan gave his chin a thoughtful massage with his palm. If she was intending to hide what Tor Branthak wanted, she had made a good start. It surely *seemed* that she considered herself younger than he. But then

again, the truth might be even more irritating, if she were indeed a creature who had lived several lifetimes in some strange renewal of youth. This was going to take some sharp work, he foresaw.

**T**HE TEMPLE was vast, and after two hours of steady pacing up and down stairs and halls, of peering into chambers filled with accumulations of centuries of female living, Gan was ready to call a halt.

"Before heaven, dear lady," he swore, "let us collect your charges into one corner of this compost heap and post our guards so that we may get some sleep. I've been through a hard day, if you have not."

Celys did not even pause in her long, lithe striding. Her voice was subtly mocking. "I had thought to find our conquerors spending the first night in celebration, in drinking and lewd wallowing with their captive women. Yet here is a great, brawny hero crying for bed like a sleepy boy. For shame!"

Gan was really tired, and her attitude was getting under his skin. He growled in utter irritation. "It might behoove your petty mightiness to keep a civil tongue, at least until this brawl really settles down. Anything can happen, including those things you have mentioned. They *will* happen if I don't guard you!"

In sudden meekness, Celys turned about and they returned to the main chamber, where the assembled female followers of the mysterious All-Mother still sang in weary voices.

Gan asked: "Isn't there any place where you study; any classrooms, laboratories, workshops where you teach crafts? Is there nothing but sleeping and praying rooms in the whole place?"

Celys' voice seemed to catch in her

throat as she said: "Not...not in the holy temple, Captain. In the schools, which lie without the temple walls, and in other places, are such things taught. Here we teach the Word of the All-Mother only."

"Hmmp!" Gan grunted, and turning on his heel, left her, calling over his shoulder, "Goodnight, Mother."

He was a little surprised that she returned only silence.

**W**ITH THE morning sun Tor Branthak came, at the head of two-score gorgeously uniformed personal guards, to "check the temple for resistance". He greeted Celys where she waited at the center of the great doorway into the shrine of the All-Mother. The Regent knew very well that no male was allowed to cross the white line upon pain of Myrmi-Atla's infinite anger. So he strode across and into the very center of the clustered young priestesses, smilingly eyeing them right and left as if measuring them for girdles. Celys pursued him with horrified face, catching up with him as he turned in wonder that no common soldier of his guard had followed him into the ancient shrine.

"It is forbidden! You intrude!" Celys was crying out, over and over, as if the words were a ritual. Her repeated cry at last angered the Regent.

"Young woman, it is the custom to address me as 'Your Majesty', as I am the virtual emperor of all the might of Konapar, and lately of Phira also. But of course, you being a woman, you could not be expected to recognize any authority but your own wilfulness. Or can you?"

Celys stood frozen, shock overcoming her at meeting the one being she had most dreaded to meet since the first hostilities. Tor Branthak went on speaking.

"Well, well, my charming priestess, had I known there were such attractive morsels of femininity here, I should have arrived much sooner. Somehow I had expected the Matriarch's intimates to be much older and much uglier than you. Now, dear lady, could you direct me to the creature in charge of this antiquated pile of obsolete masonry?"

Celys' shock was turning into anger at his disrespect for all things Phiran, and she found herself unable to answer. The Regent prodded her. "Come, come—someone looks after all these god-addled female wits, do they not? Where would I find such a one, or have her tasks overcome her mind, too?"

Celys drew herself up, anger and pride and humiliation all mingled in her voice. "I am known as the Supreme Matriarch, Your Majesty. You must forgive my not knowing who you were. I had no warning you would arrive at this time."

The Regent snorted. "You have had warning enough, woman. When the fleet settled down over Alid yesterday, you might know the temple would be visited today. But, you look so very young for such a high position. Tell me, what is your age?"

Celys remained silent, smiling aloofly, as if she had not heard his question. The Regent eyed her, his black eyes snapping with suppressed anger, his fingers clamped on the hilt of his decorative sword at his waist.

"You must know, if you are a Supreme Matriarch, something of the legend of longevity that is commonly related about you. In the records of Phiran events, there has been a certain Celys in office for some two hundred years. I want to know if you are that woman, or some other?"

Celys' voice was low and calm now, and her eyes veiled as if she recited

words from memory. "My name is Celys, it is true, but that is a ritual name. All Supreme Matriarchs take the name of Celys. It is but custom. I have not been in office for so very long."

The Regent pushed his face forward almost into hers. "*Just* how long, and what is your real name? Answer me! You were the Supreme Matriarch forty years ago; I have that from several eye-witnesses who recognized you. I want to know what is the secret of your perpetual youth?"

"There is no secret, your Highness, believe me. We of Phira come of a long-lived stock. There are the shorter-lived breeds scattered among us, so that our life spans vary from the so-called norm to three and four times the normal. That is all of the secret, and it will do no good to question me, for I can tell you no more than the truth."

**G**AN ALAIN, who had been awakened by his orderly, hurried up, buckling his belt, tugging his leather corselet straight. He hesitated at the forbidden white line, then grinned and strode across as the assembled young virgins glared at this repeated desecration. Gan's words were still slow with sleep.

"How went affairs in the city overnight, Commander?"

The Tor turned from his intent regard of the Matriarch's masklike white face and smiled broadly at Gan. His answer came with a chuckle: "The householders of Alid put up a spirited resistance, Captain, but aside from several flurries of armed resistance, all went well. The women resented our masculinity vigorously, and they repeatedly attempted to put our warriors in their place—namely out of doors. But all in all, love won, and the militancy of the female popula-

tion seems much abated today."

Gan grinned, realizing that it must have been quite a night for all concerned, and looking at Celys' white and furious face, at her jaws clamped on the furious rhetoric she would like to have used, he burst out laughing.

"That's capital news, Your Highness. It would have been too bad to have been forced to fight. The women of Phira are too pretty to kill. And the men do not fight, it seems."

Tor Branthak turned back to the Matriarch. "You say there is no secret? I would like more in that vein."

Celys composed herself with an effort, forcing her words into a semblance of civility. "It is just that you are unacquainted with the teachings of the All-Mother. Everyone who worships in our shrines, all over Phira and over some ten other planets, knows that the principle figures of the Matriarchate are supposed to be immortal. Few believe it, accepting it only as a pleasant fiction, a survival from a more ignorant time. As I have told you, the truth is we come of long-lived blood lines, and our offices are hereditary."

The Regent snorted again, his eyes cold now, his face no longer smiling, but with a black look like a gathering storm. "So it is a pleasant fiction? As it happens, my dear no-longer Supreme Matriarch, I have the records of the Matriarchy in my possession. Those worn books give rather intimate details of the inner workings of your fantastically powerful organization, reaching back some eight centuries. I know the truth, Celys. Why do you think I risked my life, my position and the honor of the Empire of Konapar in this war? I want that information!"

Celys' sudden laugh was superb acting. It was scornful of the Regent's ignorance and credulity. It rang with

merriment at the impossibly devastating results of one man's simple-minded belief in the impossible. It rang all through the gamut of ridicule, and as she laughed, the Regent's face paled, his eyes grew stormy and filled with a terrible anger, his ruddy cheeks sagged into murderous lines.

Celys, glancing into his eyes, paled suddenly and her laugh choked in her throat. She put out a hand as if to hold back the death she saw in his face. Her words were hurried and frightened.

"Of course the fiction is kept upon the books, Your Highness. Our people believe in their goddess and her infinite powers. They believe in us, her immortal representatives. But surely a worldly man like you, who know the religions of a dozen sun-systems, must understand such anachronisms in all mysticism? It is an ancient religion, this worship of the All-Mother, surviving from a dark past, kept up because of the simple natures of our more lowly supporters. Surely you can't believe..."

**G**AN ALAIN looked at her in open admiration. She was gambling her life upon her ability to lie; and doing a superb job—or else he was a fool, and the Regent a bigger one. Gan rubbed his chin, bristly with the early-rising kinks that only a brush would remove, and eyed the Tor quizzically.

Tor Branthak's eyes narrowed. He studied the woman's pale, exquisite countenance for a long half-minute. Then he growled: "You will submit proofs of the deaths of your predecessors, the dates, and show my men their graves. And you will do the same for every other supposedly immortal member of your female conspiracy against the natural dominance of mankind over womankind. That means I want proof of births and dates, and

no trumped-up forged papers will serve. You'll either prove what you have just said, and that soon, my yellow-eyed beauty, or I'll have the truth out of you with hot pincers. No woman can sport two hundred years as if they were but twenty-five and keep the method secret from all other human beings—not while Tor Branthak has a will and a way. Now get out of my sight, before I order worse to happen to you."

The Tor's black eyes burned into hers with an intensity that left her no doubt as to his sincerity. She put a hand to her face, and seemed about to falter, her knees bending with the effect of his anger upon her, then she turned slowly and moved away, weaving slightly with a sudden weakness. The hearts of both men went out to her, then they caught each other's eyes and the signs of sympathy upon each face, and suddenly both burst out laughing at allowing a woman's pretense of weakness to disarm them.

"A damned fine actress," murmured the Regent.

"A very experienced one, at the least, Tor Branthak," muttered Gan Alain in reply. "But are we mere mortals strong enough to put our threats into force? Will she not cozen you some way into believing that it takes no special equipment to outlive others until you tire of life? Could you actually put a hot iron to that lovely flesh?"

Tor Branthak's face grew dark again, and the sympathy disappeared. "I can and I will, Captain! But first you will try every other method that may occur to you, for I must confess I admire the woman too much to want to kill her. But know the truth we shall before too long, and you can place your money on that."

Then the Regent spun on his heel

and left, his boots ringing metallically on the stone pave, the virgin priestesses watching him go with horror in their soft young eyes.

Gan moved off in the wake of the vanishing figure of Celys, determined to spend as much time as possible with her, and to leave no stone unturned that might save her from a position that might actually be as she said—a mere relic from the dark past, an ancient artifice that was kept alive to fill the coffers of the temple.

Gan caught up with her where she stood alone in a corridor, leaning with one hand against the wall as if she had no strength to go further. It was in fact the first time in her life that she had been face to face with the threat of torture; and as she looked up from her reverie to find the scarred, bronzed visage of Gan Alain beside her, the reality of the horror that might be visited upon her found ample substantiation in his grim eyes. For Gan felt that if these women *did* conceal such a secret behind the facade of religious mummery, no fate was too evil for them.

**N**EITHER of them spoke, but they measured each other with intent eyes, looking for the hidden things behind, and finding in each other much of deep interest and attraction. The silence and the deep regard became embarrassing as there slowly flamed between them the inevitable fascination of vitality, which each possessed in so great a measure. Gan was looking for some slight evidence of a continued effort toward masquerade, toward the false drama he felt she knew could be her only defense. And he found that evidence, for he knew enough of women to know that the next card she would play would be her sex.

She came to him, as if drawn ir-

resistibly, and she did it perfectly, her hair a pale glory about her glowing, brilliant eyes in the dimness, her body soft and warm beneath the soft robe of diaphanous green, her eyes grown heavy and sweet as if with sleep. His arms went about her, and their lips halted but inches from the other's, parted and anticipating the thrill to come, hers seemingly heavy with unspoken questions that could be answered in but one way.

Then Gan crushed her to him and drank deep of her scarlet mouth. Her hands pressed him back ineffectually, then beat upon his chest, then suddenly relaxed and she became a limp weight in his arms. He released her, but she sagged downward and would have fallen had he not embraced her again. It was not until the weight in his arms told him that he had forgotten his strength and nearly crushed her that he felt remorse, and even then he was not sure but that it was only more acting. It was the logical next move, to play the part of an innocent virgin who faints at a kiss...but then these people of Phira could not have the strength that was his, their planet being but a third the weight of his own birthplace.

Long minutes later she raised her head and opened her eyes on his. She sighed. "Your arms are like steel bands. You can't be human!"

Gan was convinced. It had been an honest kiss, and his strength had caused unconsciousness. He determined to act as she would have expected had she been successful in deceiving him. He murmured: "I've been wanting to do that since I first saw you. Looking so sad and frightened, you were irresistible. Forgive me."

She released herself and her round, lovely arms raised, straightened her hair, the while she kept her eyes on

his, soberly measuring him still again.

Just then a tiny form came racing up the corridor, flung itself against Gan bodily, embracing him, sobbing in unashamed delight. "Oh Captain Gan, they kept me locked up. I couldn't get back to you. Don't let them whip me again."

**I**T WAS little Elvir, dressed now in the simple yellow tunic of the temple slaves, which left her pretty legs exposed to the thighs, but covered the rest of her very modestly. Gan dropped an amazed hand to her curls, then, as astonishment over her sudden appearance abated, her words soaked into his somewhat bemused mind. He started in anger.

"And have you been whipped, little one?" he asked, his voice taking on the undertones of the angry bellow of which his crew lived in dread. "Tell me who did it, and why?"

Elvir, seeing the tell-tale flushed cheeks and heavy eyes of Celys, suddenly remembered her original errand into the temple, and her wits began to whir in double time.

"They wouldn't believe that I'm off the *Warspear*, and they shut me up with their slaves. Yesterday they whipped me for lying to them. I hate the priestesses, and I hate their old temple and the whole mess of lies they tell, too. *I* didn't lie; *they* did!"

Alain looked at Celys, wrath gathering in his eyes. "Was it you had Elvir whipped, dear lady?"

Celys, feeling that every possible avenue of reasonable relationships with these conquerors was inexorably closing before her, only saw one more obstacle arising in this silly child's words. Her neck stiffened, her eyes flashed.

"She bears the temple mark on her arm. So far as I am concerned, she belongs to Myrmi-Atla, and may be



whipped if the priestesses desire."

"She happens to be my personal property," scowled Gan. "You will henceforth allow her the liberty of the temple and of the city. Do you understand, or must there be more words about the matter?"

Celys nodded slowly, not trusting herself to speak, but her eyes upon little Elvir's were pale as ice. She had had no idea it could be so terribly difficult to be in a subordinate position. Little things mattered so, suddenly. This was going to take masterly control, infinite tact and patience—and she had so little experience in the use of either.

Feeling that her days of liberty were numbered, she became suddenly frightened and whirled and took flight from this terrible bronzed man of space, hastening down the interminable corridor with undignified strides. Gan watched her go, then strode off to check his guards and to search the temple and the nearby "schools" for more concrete evidence of the Matriarch's secret pursuits. At his heels tripped Elvir, her heart full of glee that Gan and the "old" chieftainess of the stuck-up priestesses weren't hitting it off.

**D**AYS LATER, with the Regent increasingly impatient, Gan's search led him into the subterranean maze of passages beneath the ancient temple. Alone, with nothing in his hands but a flash for light, he was startled by a cry of pain ahead, for he had supposed these forgotten chambers to be empty of all life.

He put out his light, raced ahead on silent feet, guiding himself with a palm against the damp stone wall. A glow of light coming from several openings ahead brought him to a halt. He moved forward more cautiously, peering at last through a grille of or-

namental iron, rusted almost away.

The scene before him was startling. There were a dozen of the warrior maids in shining harness, looking like Valkyries with their folded shoulder glide wings. They had opened a concealed trap in the floor and were lowering some bulky mechanical device through it with the aid of ropes.

Gan could not make a move for fear of detection. They were armed and he was alone. He stood motionless and silent, but minutes ticked by and still they struggled with the weight, which seemed too large for the opening. He noted one of the girls had blood on her hand. Obviously the one who had cried out in pain.

He began a slow retreat, trying to steal away as unnoticed as he had come, only to have his holstered gun strike the wall with a loud thump.

He gave up all caution with the sound and sprinted off, flashing his light ahead for a glimpse of the corridor wall along which he had approached. But, unseen by him, one of the elder Matriarchs had been standing guard at a doorway near the window he had peered through. This officer, leader of the squad of war-maidens, darted out into the center of the corridor, saw his form outlined in his own momentary flash of light.

She fired, and her pellet blasted the pavement from under Gan's flying feet. He took a running dive into a doorway and brought up in the darkness with his head rammed against a soft, cowering form which whimpered with pain at his impact. He clamped hard hands about a throat and might have hurt her, but instead he relaxed his grip and asked: "Who are you? Quick!"

"It's only your little Elvir, Captain Gan. I was watching the priestess, and I followed her down here. When I saw what they were doing I started back

to get you, but they heard me. I ducked in here and they didn't even look for me. There's a door behind us, but it's locked."

**P**USHING the girl behind him, Gan fired once into the heavy door. The planks splintered and the thing hung half destroyed. Elvir gave a scream as flying splinters struck around them, but the pillars of the doorway protected them from the blast. Gan put his shoulder to the wreckage and shoved the door open. The hand-flash revealed rows of work benches, a litter of apparatus long unused, dust and disorder. A dim light hung in the center of the chamber, a worn-out glow lamp such as the Phirans use everywhere, but its light was near useless. Gan realized that this had once been a lavishly fitted laboratory, but was now long abandoned. This was the kind of evidence he was looking for, as Celys had claimed there was little scientific activity among the Matriarch order.

Racing feet behind them drove them forward into the aisles between the work benches, laden down with glassware, retorts, chemicals in jars, intricate experimental assemblies of tubes and fire-rods and glass containers, electrical wiring and other apparatus whose use and nature were wholly mysterious to Gan's searching eyes.

They crouched out of sight in the aisle between two rows of work benches, listening to the running feet pause at the doorway, then come forward hesitantly into the laboratory where they waited.

Gan peered between the interstices of the apparatus, caught a glimpse of the warrior's harness, that of an officer. Her face was flushed and angry, her pellet gun upraised, her eyes darting about the chamber. Gan could

not bring himself to fire, but held his sights on her and waited, thinking how pitiful a culture it was: these lovely creatures trying to repress their own natures and take over all man's duties and ways, with the result that they lived empty lives of envy and hate and a loveless ambition to surpass other women. It just wasn't natural for women to be that way, but then, what man wanted to be a soldier either, at heart?

Step by step she advanced into the room, the shattered door having told her the quarry was here. But her eyes and ears revealed nothing. At last Gan, wearied of the waiting, spoke angrily: "Drop the gun, woman, or I'll have to kill you. I don't want to, you know. I can't get used to the idea of shooting women."

The Amazon whirled, eyes wild with startled fear at the sound of his heavy, dominating voice, and conflict appeared on her face—the desire to drop that gun as she was ordered, the wish not to appear a weak, fearful woman making her clasp the gun more firmly. Her fingers trembled on the heavy saw-grip.

"Drop it, woman. I don't want to hurt you. There's a child with me; you can't fire on me anyway."

At the word *child* the Amazon suddenly relaxed, and Gan realized that he had hit on the one spring that unlocked the Amazons' frozen hearts—they loved children. The gun hand slowly dropped and the gun slipped to the floor.

"Go and pick it up, Elvir, but don't get between us," ordered Gan in a whisper.

Elvir scrambled from under the heavy bench, scuttled across the floor, grabbed up the gun and backed away. Gan stood upright, not ten feet from the Amazon.

"I don't know what you women are

trying to do with all this stealing about and trying to kill. You know Phira has fallen, and you know the Tor won't relax his hold on Alid for all your guerilla tactics. Why don't you give up and go back to being women again? Women weren't meant to rule, only to be loved."

**H**ER HEAD reared back, her eyes blazed at him. She was very beautiful in her metal harness, gleamingly polished and jeweled breast plates and the plumes woven into her dark hair. She drew her graceful legs straight under her and assumed a proud carriage as she cried: "We'll never give up while one Matriarch lives."

"It's such a waste," Gan growled. "Could you tell me one good reason for not giving it up?"

"Our knowledge shall not fall into the hands of murderers and thieves . . . and . . . *men*! You should be able to understand that the secret is a sacred trust, given to us by the All-Mother."

"Bah!" Gan Alain curled a scornful lip at the officer-maid. "Hypocritical cant. As if you believed that the Matriarch's keeping the secret of longevity from mankind was a good deed! It's a filthy sample of selfishness in a minority placing its own interests above every other human's health. Now admit it!"

Her head tossed again, for just an instant of angered pride, then the truth of his words and his charge against the Matriarch sank home. Her head lowered in shame. Gan stood, letting her think it out, watching the flush on her cheeks creep higher.

"It shows on your face," Gan said. "Yet you have never admitted it to yourself before."

Her eyes on his became curiously alive with intense inner mental ac-

tivity. It seemed she was trying to read his mind. At last she sighed, her eyes dropped from his and her head bowed lower. Her voice was muted and soft with deep new emotion.

"Yes, Captain. I have often thought your view might be the correct one, but never allowed myself to admit our wrong. It is so easy to accept teachings one hears all one's life. That is our creed—the dominance of women, the keeping of sciences to the priestesses, the dominance of the Matriarchy over the simpler people of our worlds. But I cannot honestly say that I do not see that our ways are not just or good."

Gan gave a short laugh of triumph. Here was what he had been looking for—one of the leaders who knew the truth, but d'd not approve of the Matriarchy. Gan moved closer. "Now you're talking sense, and it's the first time I've heard any from these addled females of the temple since I landed on Phira. Now, I'll make you a proposition: reveal this so-sacred secret of life to me, and I'll do my best to get you an adequate reward from the Regent of Konapar."

Her eyes saddened, and the idealistic light fled from her face. Her voice became harsh again, a voice used to command. "I am no traitor, Captain, even though I may not approve of our ways."

"Your oath, I suppose," mused the Cap, aloud. "But have you ever heard of honor? The path of honor for you would seem to dictate that you try to right the ancient wrong these female monopolists have committed, rather than to uphold their crime."

"My name is Apele, Captain. I have heard of you and know your reputation—all of it." Her eyes twinkled for an instant as she asked: "Are you sure you are completely qualified to talk thus of honor?"

Gan colored, then growled: "I have my code, and I live up to it. Do you? Have you the courage to throw aside your teachings and do the right thing by humanity?"

Her head lifted again in pride. "I have more courage than you, who only pretend to be honest. Suppose I make you a proposition? I will undertake to guide you to a place where the secret you seek may be learned."

"Then there is a secret, and it can be learned, can be taught, it's not some miracle of nature..." Gan was thinking aloud, his eyes measuring her, seeing trickery there, wondering how to out-smart her.

"You are afraid," her low, husky voice taunted him. "You fear I would lead you into a trap."

Gan laughed. "You have me in a trap already, Aphele. All you need do is raise your voice and your war-maidens will come running. Is that machine they were working to hide a part of this so-terrific secret?"

Aphele shook her head. "You could kill me before they arrived, and I do not know that you would not. I'll strike a bargain with you: I will not call out, you will go back to the upper levels. An hour from now I will meet you here alone, to take you on a journey of some days' duration across the desert land where no man travels. There, in a place forbidden to all men, much can be revealed to you."

**I**T WAS A MAD proposition; that he should give himself into the keeping of this woman, his life dependent upon her word alone, to be led to what fate he could only imagine. Yet there was a daring challenge on her face, a stirring call to his blood. He knew she was offering him more than her words seemed to

indicate. Just what, he could find out only by taking up the challenge. But he did not need to trust her wholly. There were ways unknown to her....

Gan nodded suddenly, his eyes seeming to take fire from her glance. "I'll take your offer, Amazon! I would not wish to place my life's value above that of every human in the galaxy, would you?"

With this parting shot, Gan turned and left, leading little Elvir by the hand. The woman strode after, whispering sharply. "Treachery means death, Captain. You talk of honor, so come in honesty and you will be dealt with honorably."

Gan nodded, did not turn his head. "In one hour I return alone, to see how you keep your word. I may be a fool, but never a coward."

Elvir walked beside him, sobbing little hushed sobs of defeat between clenched teeth. Gan turned and caught her up, holding her face level with his own. "Why the tears, little woman?"

"You've made a date with a sorceress, and you'll never get away from her. You're not mine anymore."

Gan put her down, pausing as he realized the girl knew what was supposed to be a secret to himself alone. Then he laughed and put aside the thought. She would either keep silent or not. It made no difference to him.

**I**N HIS quarters, Gan found the Regent of Konapar, seated on Gan's own chair, his fingers drumming impatiently upon the table. "Where have you been keeping yourself, Captain? Rendezvous with some captive Phiran priestess?"

Gan was irked by his attitude, did not smile. "Exactly, your Highness. That is just where I have been. I've arranged a meeting, supposedly with one who will reveal the secret we

seek. But I'm under oath not to reveal the matter to you."

The Regent scowled, puzzled. "But you've just broken that oath, haven't you?"

"No. I can't break it until I return. The oath may look different then, you know. They may try to kill me or keep me captive—hard to say what can happen. But I intend to learn whether it is a trap or the genuine thing."

"I'll have you followed. You're a valuable man to me, Captain. I'll not have this."

"Exactly why I brought the matter up at this time. My men will know where I am. There is no need for you to have me followed. You'll have to trust me, Your Highness. It's my neck I'm risking, you know."

The Regent looked thoughtful. "You have a point. If some blunder revealed you were followed by us, it could mean your death, right enough. Very well, Captain. Luck to you. But, to repeat a phrase I picked up from you—don't do it, Captain! Don't even think of it! I'll have you spitted over a slow fire."

Gan laughed. "I'll not keep it from you, Tor Branthak, though I may drive a hard bargain. I'll sell it to you once I get it."

The Tor grimaced. "I'll wager it will cost enough. But then there's always another means if you prove difficult." His eyes lighted. "After all, we will have two chances. I came here on suspicion, meaning to have it out with you, hammer and tongs. I have just ordered the so-called Supreme Matriarch, that young-looking one, taken to the plateau. There, on my own ship, we can give her a thorough going over with instruments, with truth serum, with lie-detectors, injections of drugs—get the facts out of her."

Gan heaved himself to his feet. Unaccountably, the order for Celys' arrest set his blood afire. Rage choked him. The idea of the noble Matriarch handled like a criminal, given dangerous injections, questioned interminably, put through an inquisition that could well ruin her health or worse, was one he could not accept without emotion. But with an effort he held his tongue until his wits cooled.

The Regent noticed nothing, went on drumming with his fingers on the table top. "I've taken quite a fancy to that woman...what's her name now...Celys, Pelys—something. Where the priestesses get their names I can't fathom. They seem to have no family names. The temple is their only family tie. She should make a most ornamental addition to the gems in my harem, if she proves reasonable."

Gan's breath nearly choked him with the hot fire in his lungs. He could not have foreseen this. The man had given no hint of his intentions toward the head Matriarch. Better to wait, bide his time. No good to speak of the thing now.

Gan was having his first full realization of his own attachment to the sharp-tongued Matriarch. This thought struck him, and he relaxed. He nearly smiled as he perceived that there had not been enough between them to give him any confidence that the woman would not prefer the Regent's harem to his own company. She thought of him as an unscrupulous adventurer. Gan stilled his anger, thrust some garments into a small duffle bag, slung it from his shoulder. Clips of pellets for his sidearms completed his preparations. He turned to the Regent and bowed slightly, his smile ironic.

"I trust my departure will cause you no inconvenience, Your Highness.

I expect to be gone but a short time, and I hope to find you well on my return. I have your best wishes for success?"

The Regent studied him for a second, then nodded stiffly. "Formality becomes you, Captain. Don't let the plagued women bamboozle you. Get the facts, and let them stuff their ideals and fine talk where it will do most good."

**G**AN TURNED on his heel and left. But he had no intention of leaving without making sure of something that was bothering him. He moved off toward the Mother's shrine, where he knew Celys might conceal herself in the sanctum if she had heard of the order to arrest her. It could be that she had not been found as yet.

His guess was correct. The Matriarch had been warned by her eavesdropping young acolytes of the order to take her to the plateau outside the city, and had slipped out of her usual regal green ritual robe and donned one of the simpler white gowns belonging to her acolyte, Eloi. Mingling with the chattering groups of adolescents, she was indiscernible to the searching eyes of the soldiery and had escaped recognition for several hours.

But a few hours ago, when they had all filed into the dining hall, one of the guards had recognized her and given a cry of alarm. Celys had fled headlong, dodging through the familiar and intricate passages with the skill of a hunted fox. Darkness had come on, and she had slipped into the great sacred shrine where the dim light and the huge pillars which supported the dome gave her effective cover.

The crew of Gan Alain were standing guard at their usual posts, while two-score of the Konaparian warriors

scoured the halls and rooms of the temple with search beams in their hands.

Gan paused for a moment beside Chan DuChaile's post before the big arch of the shrine of Myrmi-Atla, and murmured a question. "Have they caught the white bird yet, Chan?"

Chan glanced about, shook his head. Then he whispered: "If you're figuring on something else for her, I can tell you where she is, but not for the likes of Tor Branthak."

"I was planning on taking her to the Mother. Do you know what that means?"

Chan nodded, for he had discussed many things with the chattering young girls who were penned in the temple. "She's slipping from pillar to pillar in her own sacred shrine while the Konapar heroes steal about with lights...."

**C**ELYS crouched behind the great central pillar in the shrine of Myrmi-Atla, watching the swinging lights of the searching Konaparians and praying they would conclude she was not within the darkened shrine and pass on. She shrank back as one small beam swept toward her, then mysteriously blinked out. Feet whispered softly on the stone, and she nearly shrieked as a heavy hand clamped down on her face, shutting off her breath. In her ear a familiar voice whispered.

"Will you be quiet, you beautiful fool? Or must I beat sense through your hide with a whip? I am your friend. Now, tell me, how do we get out of this place before some of the Regent's men spot you?"

The hand slowly released its powerful grasp and Celys shuddered as breath came back into her lungs. The beast was still trying to trick her with his honest blue eyes, with his heart-



ensnaring curls and fearful brawny arms about her. There was nothing he would not stoop to! What was she to do? She who had thought men so simple and easy to fool before—and this one was not fooled in the least, whatever his game. If only he was what he seemed, an honest, strong man trying to do the right thing, rather than an amorous beast trying to undo her reason with his love-making in order to secure the ancient secret from her.

Celys, in a sudden flash of hatred for all things masculine and alien, tugged out a little dagger from a hidden sheath. Her hand drew back, darted forward, and Gan's hand caught her wrist just as the point touched his throat. A few drops of blood stained her wrist as she twisted, and the knife dropped with a sinister tinkling on the floor between them.

Gan had half a mind to call out and bring the searchers down upon her, but he growled softly into her ear: "For a woman who is unable to resist my arms, you show small gratitude for my affection. I come to help you escape the Regent's third-degree, and you try to knife me. Are you just a common murderess, and not the high-minded woman I thought?"

Celys was sincerely thankful the blade had done no harm. The spasm of rage had passed, and she realized she was near the breaking point from strain, or she would never have done such a thing. Tears came to her eyes, and at the same time anger burned in her cheeks, trembled in her hands—anger at her own impotence against these males from another world. She wanted so very much to believe in this man beside her, yet she felt certain he was but a scoundrel who mimicked the ways of honor to betray her.

Gan murmured: "Lead the way to the secret passages that lead from

this temple. I have a way of contacting your forces—in fact, a guide is even now awaiting me in the subterranean passages."

Celys nodded her head in mute acquiescence, her eyes on his with something of final defeat in them. Gan knew that it was the defeat of an overweening feminine pride, which could not bear to think of any man as superior. Her voice was very weak, whispering into his ear.

"Forgive me. I'm half out of my mind with strain. You embodied all the indignities I have suffered—I am not myself. I would have escaped long since through a passage nearby, but I have not been able to approach the entrance, as there has always been somebody about. Come..."

**G**AN TOOK her hand and let her guide him through the dimness. Then he saw her reason for choosing the shrine of the All-Mother's image for her hiding place. She pressed a carved ornament in the stone of a pillar pedestal and a segment of the pillar opened out. They slipped inside and Celys pulled the false stone back into place. The pillar itself was the top of a tiny stairway, so narrow that Gan had trouble squeezing his great shoulders past the winding steps that circled a center pole. Celys giggled audibly at his contortions.

"This wasn't meant for a fat Matriarch..."

"May you never grow fat...you are perfect as you are," he said, grunting.

Her eyes danced, but he did not know if it was because of his contorted face as he wriggled his way downward, or because of the compliment.

At the bottom Gan paused to re-adjust his leather corselet. There he discovered the woman had found

opportunity to lift one of his pellet guns from his belt. Gan shivered with sudden apprehension for if she meant to kill him, one of his own guns would prove more efficient than the slender blade with which she had failed.

"Better give me the gun, sister. It was never meant for female hands."

Her laugh was mocking, cool and quite possessed. "So now it's 'sister'? I have become younger since last night? Do you no longer consider me motherly?"

"The gun!" growled Gan, frowning. "You're much too impulsive with weapons to carry them about so carelessly."

"*You have a weapon. I have a weapon. What could be fairer?*"

Gan shrugged, his eyes meeting only a rather charming expression of deviltry in hers. Then he said: "Well, keep it. But let me warn you, the triggers have been filed. They're about half the standard pull. Also, there's another thing I must speak to you about. I had a similar altercation with one of your associates. She is waiting now in the subterranean passages to guide me to the Mother. She has my word of honor to reveal nothing of what I learn without permission, and I have hers for my safety. Now that you've led me into this secret passage of yours, you will have to guide me to her."

Rather abruptly she shoved the gun, which she had been holding behind her, toward him. "In that case, take your ugly weapon. I will have no need of it. The mother will decide your fate when we reach Avalaon. Come..."

Gan lifted the weapon gingerly from her hand, for it was actually hair-triggered, and she hadn't handled it too gently. In her hands, it would have been more dangerous to her than to him.

The beautiful Matriarch laughed again at his tense expression, then turned and moved off into the darkness. Here and there along the narrow passages little glow lamps were set, and Gan tried to figure his distance and position in the temple by the distance between lights. But he was hopelessly lost in the twisting of the narrow passage within the walls.

In short minutes she slid open a panel, let him out into the underground chambers where he had left the Amazon, Apele. She was waiting there, concealed by the shadows, alone. She moved out into the dim light.

"I thought you'd never come..."

Gan grunted. "I had to rescue the soubrette of the cast. The Tor was about to give her a going over. I suppose you know the Supreme Matriarch?"

Apele darted to the open panel, where Celys stood, and the two women touched hands for an instant. Apele turned back to Gan Alain. "Must she flee? Her Supremity is needed here. I don't understand."

Celys moved forward, facing Apele. "Where have you undertaken to lead this man, Lieutenant? Not to Avalaon?"

Apele stood proudly, facing her superior. "I realize the risk. But I believe he might be convinced when he knows all. It is worth trying."

Celys shook her head. "He is but the captain of a single ship, an adventurer of no influence, a mere mercenary under Tor Branthak's command. What good could he do our cause?"

The two women stood facing each other, and what passed between them was mysterious to Gan, for Celys turned away, shrugged, said: "Very well, I have nothing to say. But you are playing with a fire that is apt to

burn more than you think."

Almost immediately Lieutenant Aphele drew her pellet gun, leveled it at Gan. "Your weapons, Captain. I am sorry if I led you to believe you would not be my captive."

Gan gave them up.

**N**OW THE two women rather pointedly ignored him, and after they caught up with the waiting troops and Gan found himself marching in the center of a score of well-armed and well-disciplined warrior women, he rather doubted his own good sense.

Gan realized that the Matriarch's disappearance, coinciding with his own departure, was going to place Tor Branthak's trust of him under a strain. But the chances were he'd never have to worry about that. What really worried him were his men and his ship. It would have been best if he had demanded his share of the wealth of Alid and left immediately after the city had fallen. But he had been drawn by the damned *secret* and he doubted more strongly every moment that there *was* any secret.

The march continued for what Gan judged was an hour, perhaps some four miles of underground tunnels. Then they entered a line of mono-rail cars suspended from the ceiling of the tunnel. Gan reasoned that they left the cars outside the city because of the possible sound their use might make under the foundations.

The train was light and fast, designed for passenger use only. Gan judged they traveled around sixty miles an hour for several hours. Then the tunnel ended but, before ascending a ramp into the open air, the women donned garments of rough skins and sand hoods of soft leather. These were the garments of the wild nomads of the deserts of Phira, and

at the surface a herd of the horse-like beasts called *morts* was awaiting them.

From the air, the party would resemble any other mounted party of nomads and would cause no unwanted inquiry from the Konaparian scout planes patrolling the planet for possible organized resistance.

"Is the place distant?" asked Gan of Aphele, who rode beside him. Celys had taken her place at the head of the column, riding beside the officer who headed the detachment. Aphele twitched the head of her pop-eyed, horned mount closer to him and smiled as she lifted back the hood from her ears to reveal her wealth of soft brown hair.

"Two days' ride, Captain. Unless you are accustomed to riding, you will have callouses where none were before."

Gan shook his head. "I have never ridden anything not on wheels or jets before. I think I know what you mean already."

The woman's eyes were humorously sympathetic. "You will not enjoy the next two days, Captain. You will need whatever stoicism your nature provides."

Gan, already appreciating the monotony of the repeating dunes and the irritating qualities of sand down his neck, decided that the best way to ignore the unpleasantness was to keep on talking. He was somewhat nettled by the obvious dislike of himself expressed by the warrior women's concerted disregard of his presence. He threw back his own hood, letting the sun shine on his golden curls.

"Have you made this trip often, Aphele?"

"Hundreds of times, Captain. In the last hundred years, I have passed this way at least once every two years."

**G**AN GULPED. So this was another of the long-lived breed, according to Celys' version of the secret. She looked about twenty-two. The Phiran year was but ten days shorter than the Terran year, and the day was some two hours longer. Gan glanced up at the bright orange double star that served both Konapar and Phira as a sun. Menkis, they called it. On the charts it was labeled Menanger.

"What was that device you and your friends were lowering through the floor when you shot at me?" he asked, watching her face closely. She did not even look at him, watching instead the flight of a gold and blue bird hovering above their heads. Her voice was a discreet murmur, audible not three feet away.

"It was part of the secret which we did not wish the Konaparians to discover, as you suspect."

Gan felt a swift elation surge through him. So she was a convert to his way of thinking; was a friend and ally against the secretive selfishness of these so-holy priestesses.

Then she turned her head and laughed, and spoke more loudly. "What did you say? I am so sleepy..."

He spoke loudly himself. "Aren't you sorry you shot at me last night? You might have killed me."

Her eyes danced. "Oh, I could have, but you are too good-looking to kill. I meant only to take some of the smugness out of you."

"You did," Gan laughed. "I will admit that women can do as good a job of soldiering as men, and but short weeks ago I thought differently."

Aphele twitched the mort's ugly head closer again. She whispered: "I am sick to death of hearing the two sexes compared. Never mention it to

me again. Do you hear?"

"No sex conversation? What will we talk about?"

Aphele frowned. "That is not what I meant, and you know it. On Phira, when a woman decides she wants a Phiran male, she tells him so. I understand that, with Terrans, the opposite is true and the woman must never mention the subject closest to her heart, but wait for the man to speak his love."

Gan nodded, his eyes on hers doubtfully. He read the signs aright—she was his friend, and more! Up to now it had been his custom to avoid too close entanglement with any female. They had always meant trouble. Now it seemed he was in trouble again... But there was an honesty and candor on her face—and Aphele was not only very lovely, but she was also a woman who had already lived several lifetimes. Perhaps her mind, also, was so far ahead of his in perception that she knew exactly what he thought. Certainly the simple directness in her meant profound knowledge of the human mind rather than simplicity.

He asked: "You have lived so much longer than I, you should have greater wisdom, should be able to guess my every thought before I speak; can you tell me what I'm thinking?"

Though she looked at him whimsically, her lips gave a bitter twist. "I know you're afraid to have me say I am attracted to you. I know you are not affected by my beauty. I know that the first Matriarch is in your heart. But listen to me, Terran. Sometimes it is better to be loved than to love. I, at least, would be your friend, and I would expect no lease on your life in return. You know nothing of the nature of my mind. I can be more to you than she—if you will allow yourself to understand."

**G**AN WAS struck by her serious tone, as well as by the thread of her speech. But another thing occupied his attention: "You say the first Matriarch. Who is that? I had thought Celys was the Supreme Matriarch."

"There are several who play the part of the Supreme Matriarch. She is but a figurehead. The real power rests in the ancient one we travel to consult. She holds the keys to the mystery, the secret you seek. I want to guide you correctly, so that it may be possible for you to live beside me. You see, Terran, I have lost two mates in the years long past, because the secret is denied to males."

Her countenance was a bitter mask of strange loneliness for a second, and Gan realized that living for centuries was perhaps not all peaches and cream. Then the expression passed, and she smiled again, perhaps at his suddenly lugubrious expression over hearing of her former mates.

"You needn't fear me, Gan. I am an experienced woman, who has long ago given up the childish tricks by which young women gain their ends. If you need me, come to me. I will not pursue you."

She twitched at her mount's reins, as if to ride ahead beyond earshot. Gan reached out and seized the mort's reins in one big hand.

"You have read my mind, Apele, and answered my questions. Can you also read the admiration and liking I have for you?"

She settled back, her face relaxed from its bitterness as he went on: "I want to know one more thing, and then no more questions. Has Celys been married too, lost her mates the same way? Is she, too, centuries old?"

She laughed at his intent face; a laugh at once mocking and tender, as with a child. "You have a disappoint-

ment in store, my friend. Your Celys is not one, but several. Their ages are not young or old, for they are daughters each of the other. All of them are older than you, and have children. There is one, the youngest of the Matriarch line, who is but twice your age. You haven't met her, yet you would know her surely, so closely does she resemble her grandmother."

Gan turned toward the erect figure of Celys ahead. "Her grandmother! A grandmother, that one ahead?" He said it with a kind of dismayed awe.

Apele nodded, her eyes pitying, her lips twisted in a kind of sad smile. "That is why I tried to tell you, a love such as I offer you is at least less confusing than that which you are bent on pursuing. There is but one of me, and I am not too proud to say you are a man above men, and above most women I have known. Now I leave you to your thoughts."

She rode ahead, to pause beside the stiff, slender figure of Celys. Gan burned with curiosity to hear what they were saying, and if it concerned him. He knew that if he saw them laugh, he would feel like a fool. Just then the two women laughed and glanced back at him and he felt like a fool.

**A**T LAST the long and arduous trip in the saddle came to an end and they came to the hidden valley of Avalaon. It was a place of trees, tremendous in size. Cedars or redwoods, or some relative of the conifers, towered in aged splendor toward the sky, rich in foliage and mighty in trunk. That there was a city beneath the trees would have been indistinguishable from the air, and Gan could see that great care had

been taken to have no trails or roads leading into the valley. The mouth of the valley was a hilly pass, also heavily wooded, and it could have been defended by one man with an automatic rifle, as the sides were precipitous.

Winding down the faintly worn pathways into the dim depths of the wooded valley, Gan did not expect to find any great number of people or any structures, but he was surprised to find the flourishing city whose extent was difficult to estimate, so the forest growth obscured the vistas. The dwellings were built beneath the trees; several small streams wound about through them and joined in a river that seemed to end in a lake in the center of the valley. The houses were of stone, permanent and old-looking, as if they had been there undisturbed for centuries. But they were lived in, for figures moved along the paths beneath the trees carrying burdens of food or clothing or small cases of metal articles.

Aphele dismounted as they reached the first of these hidden dwellings, and came back to Gan, holding the mort's head as he dismounted.

"How is your backside?" she asked, smiling.

"I am more conscious of its presence than ever before," grinned Gan, bending and stretching.

"You are now in a place never before reached by the uninitiate," she said, her eyes measuring him with evident delight in her glance, a look full of desire and appreciation of his masculinity. "I am responsible for your being here, so if you have a care for my welfare, conduct yourself accordingly. No male has trod these paths for many centuries—since before we can remember. The sacred groves of Myrmi-Atla have been entered only by women who have passed very

stringent examinations and undergone long purification. You may be slain, you know, before I have a chance to make a case for you. I have long been a dissident from the idea of complete female supremacy, and am known as a rebel. Though there are others, we are in the minority. We want men in the organization, we need men. The others will not have it. There is much politics involved, but I will advise you. I am taking you to our true head, who has no title. She is over five hundred years old."

Gan nodded, feeling like a folly-stricken idiot treading where only angels would dare.

The warrior women shed the ugly and bad-smelling disguises, throwing them in a heap where Gan had doffed his own cloak and hood.

**S**EVERAL slight figures appeared from among the nearby trees and approached. Gan started as he realized they were young girls and quite naked. They came forward in innocent shamelessness, but suddenly one of them saw Gan's stalwart male figure with the curling red-gold beard proclaiming his essential masculinity. The girl gave a scream of utter horror, as if she were confronted by a banshee, and took to her heels. In an instant the grove was filled with the small naked figures running and screaming as the others saw the cause of the initial fright. The screams brought still more naked young numphs, who came running up. When they saw the great man-figure with the beard, they ran away as quickly as they had come.

There was not a laugh nor an expression in the whole troop of warrior women at this development. It was evident that they had expected it. There were several frowning glances at Aphele, who ignored them. Gan

saw that her idea of bringing him here was disapproved by many.

"No good can come from this violation of the inviolate grove of Avalaon," one of them said coldly to Aphele as they passed her with the saddles of their beasts. They had turned the beasts loose in the forest.

Gan, weaponless, was appreciating to the full the chances of his death now mentioned for the first time by Aphele. But he strode along beside her, just behind the tall and graceful form of Celys, who was still the center of attraction to him in spite of her newest character of grandmother to a woman who resembled her so closely as to be identical.

They passed several of the small stone houses and came to a much larger structure, placed between four of the forest giants so closely that the mighty trunks seemed to uphold the walls and roof. The guarding troop stopped and lined up on each side of the low, wide doorway of plain, rough timbers, deeply marked by time. Gan passed between them with somewhat the feeling of a criminal entering a jail, and the glittering uniforms and stern, if beautiful, faces of the women made him feel guilty for being a man.

Inside the rather dimly lit room there were several women working at desks and file cases, and a score of others seated on benches about the walls. The women at the desks were the first elderly women wearing the regalia of the priestesses of Myrmi-Atla that Gan had seen. These, in a Terran civilization, would have been women of sixty or sixty-five. Here, Gan had no idea of their ages.

In the center of the low-ceilinged place was a rough wooden dais and high-backed chair on which sat a woman Gan would have recognized

as the leader without a nudge from Aphele. The high dome of white brow, the weary-wise eyes, the strong mouth and chin, the proud look of her—Gan moved forward with Aphele and knelt on one knee as did his mentor.

The woman, showing her great age in a mass of wrinkles, but otherwise appearing to be very strong and able, inclined her head, studying them with her face bearing a slight smile. Her voice was high-pitched, but full; a firm and even musical voice.

"Aphele, you have led one of the enemy here?" Her voice was gently chiding. "Can you justify the indiscretion?"

**A**PHELE stood, thrust her high bosom out, and lifted one hand in a gesture of complete confidence.

"The conqueror, Tor Branthak of Konapar, seeks the secret. He hired this pirate captain to obtain it for him without his followers' knowing. Since of course he could unearth no secret, Tor Branthak has ordered the torture of the Supreme Matriarch until she tells. This man rescued our first Celys from her peril, brought her to me, came with us of his own free will. The rest is up to you and our council. I will have more to say in council and you already know my opinions on the matter of secrecy."

The old leader smiled and nodded. "We all know your opinions, Aphele, and none will accuse you of secrecy about them. You shout them out at every opportunity. So, he is not a captive nor yet a hostage, but merely a curious gentleman who wants to see for himself how we stay alive?"

Aphele did not answer, but stepped back one pace with smart military bearing, standing very erect and still. This left Gan facing the old leader of the Amazons alone, and a little sweat broke out on his brow as the

thought came to him that he was facing a person whose mind had been pitted against all men for some five centuries—and had won. Gan kept his eyes on hers unwaveringly, his face quite empty of expression, but he could not control the nerves of his hands, which kept opening and closing as if to grasp some material thing to aid him in this predicament.

The voice of the old woman took on a deeper note, a rasping, critical, angry tone of disapproval.

"Do you realize that these groves of Avalaon have not been violated by man's presence for near a thousand years? And now you come blundering in where the last strength of the female lords of Phira licks its wounds, expecting mercy and benevolence and perhaps romance from our so-pretty warrior maids? You are a bigger fool than the woman who brought you!"

An angry exhalation from the two-score female breasts in the room emphasized her words. It was a long, deep sigh, a kind of "aye", and it meant unanimous agreement with her. Gan, startled, let his glance sweep the room, where more and more of the women were clustering, as the curious took note of the strange meeting. Peeping between the red-uniformed legs of the guard at the door were a score of naked young nymphs, their mouths round with astonishment and fascination. Gan felt more out of place and off balance than he had ever been in his life. He opened his mouth to speak and found himself only able to croak, "Er...ah..." in a dismal sound like a sick frog.

The old woman relaxed suddenly, her hands dropping from their grip on the chair's rough wood arms, and leaned back. Then her voice became humorous. Sarcastically she mimicked him: "The man says, 'er...ah...'. If that is not profound wisdom, indeed!

Can you summon no defense, can you think of no good reason why our privacy and isolation should be destroyed by you? Off with you, then, while we take thought of your fate."

Then Gan found his voice, and all of it came boiling up; the many little insults and derogations these women had handed him since he set foot on Phira became a torrent of resentment, and he let out a great bellow such as had made his crew run rather than face him.

"Now listen to me. I've been insulted and chivvied about and made to feel foolish ever since I first met the so-holy priestesses of your All-Mother. I took it like a man, and was courteous and kind and tried my best to protect them from the soldiers of Konapar, and wasn't even thanked by one of you until I met Aphele. I saved your precious Celys from torture the first day on this planet, and had it put off from day to day until I contrived her escape. I have been the good friend of you high-nosed females at the risk of my own precious neck, and now you laugh at me. I am beginning to think the men who say that woman's place is in the hearth, kitchen and bedroom are right. It's a new idea to me, because I've always observed women's low estate on many barbarous planets with great pity. However, perhaps it is the nature of a woman to abuse power even more than men. It seems you enjoy the idea of having the whiphand over a male."

**HIS** ROARING voice, bringing with it the vast sense of space and the adventurous, roving life he had led, huge and strong and filled with masculine power and anger, filled with righteousness and indignation and contempt of the petty intentions of these women to shoot



their barbed arrows of scorn into him, expressing the rage at his treatment, did far more for him than any argument in words. When his voice ceased, there was a silence as if a god had spoken, and from each female breast there came a sigh, of longing at last realized, a desire at last gratified—to hear a male voice raised in the forest aisles of Avalaon.

The old leader's eyes glittered like diamonds in her face as she looked about at the bemused countenances of the men-starved women about her, each rapt as if still hearing the great male sound of Gan Alain roaring his rage. Whether they glittered with tears or with an evil anger, Gan could not tell. She said nothing in reply, but only waved a hand to Aphele, who tugged at Gan's sleeve of worn gold leather and led him out into the bright, clean air where the piney scent of the forest breathed silence and peace.

"You," murmured Aphele, her eyes glowing, "are a man after my heart. You really gave it to her and the rest of them. They are too long in the saddle to understand that the worlds were not exactly made just for the purpose of organizing women into trampling upon all men. Ah, it was worth the long ride to hear it!"

They had been walking now alone through the trees, and Aphele stopped him. "Now give me a good hard hug and a kiss, as if I were some sweet damsel you knew when you were young enough to think of nothing but kissing girls..."

Gan was not taken unawares by her request, but still he hesitated. Then he remembered how it used to be, when he was a boy walking in the evening with his chosen, how sweet a kiss could be—and he seized her and held her close, bent back her fair face and kissed her heartily. It

was sweet, bitter-sweet, full of memories of other loves, and none of them quite measuring up to Aphele's deep, hungry eyes, nor her strange mouth, so sweet and hungry, yet so sorrowful.

Her smile after the kiss was not the twisted smile she usually gave him, but a full and grateful thanks. Her voice was husky and low as she said: "Oh, it is good, even as it used to be when I believed in love and life and men. You are a man such as I have always longed for but never did quite believe existed. I put a spell upon you, Gan Alain—may you never forget the lips of Aphele, no matter the years or the space between us."

A low and scornful voice behind them made them both whirl, and standing there was Celys, saying: "Not long ago you were making love to me—Celys! Now you are embracing Aphele. What is a woman to think?"

Gan was angry. He gave a short, hard laugh. "Not long ago I did not know you were grandmother to a grown woman, Celys. May I meet the other Supreme Matriarchs?"

Celys flushed angrily, and her hand pointed suddenly at Aphele, her fist clenching tight. "You told him, you ancient thing, to get him for yourself! You know there's not a male like him on all Phira, and I have had his declaration first. I'll get even with you, Aphele! Wait."

Gan stood, somewhat dismayed at her display, and feeling that this was none of his argument. But Aphele needed no help.

"You made him unhappy with your disregard. Now you claim him, after he gives his kiss to me. There was no reason to think you ever wanted the man. I have not claimed him, I only kissed him. Terrans believe in freedom, not chains; and if I know him,

he will prefer my freedom to your dominance, my dear superior."

"That could well be, Celys," growled Gan, seeing now what Aphele had been telling him all along—these women thought they must dominate all things.

Aphele sensed his thought. "They would brand men like horses, Gan, and sometimes do." She went on, coloring as her circulation caught up with her anger. "They think marriage is a thing for a man to wear like a dog collar around his neck, instead of a glorious partnership and a joyous one."

**G**AN'S FIRST day in Avalaon drew to a close, and Aphele led him to an empty cabin beneath the trees, lit a fire in the rude stone fireplace, left him to his own devices. Almost exhausted, Gan drew off his boots, pulled a fur over himself and went to sleep on the rustic bunk built into the wall.

Some hours later he was awakened by the sound of giggling and soft footsteps. He sat up to find himself surrounded by the naked young girls who had at first shown such horror at his presence. They stood in a circle about his bunk, ranging from tiny tots to girls in their teens, peering at him in the dim firelight and discussing his appearance in excited whispers. One of them, older and bolder than the rest, stepped up.

"You are the first man we ever saw, and we want to apologize for our discourtesy this afternoon."

Gan grunted, slightly irritated to be the cynosure of so many eyes, and awakened thus for mere curiosity, and slightly embarrassed as his eyes roved over the slim but womanly body of the one who had addressed him. Then he realized that here was a

source of information not so likely to be close-mouthed as the older women.

"You children are apt to get yourself into trouble if you're caught here, to say nothing of me. But now that you're here, I'll give you a few minutes. Ask me any questions you want, and I'll answer, provided you answer some of mine in return."

The lovely heads nodded soberly, like angels gathered about a bier; and Gan wondered if that weren't pretty close to the truth. One asked: "You're from the Terran worlds, where men and women are equal. It must be fun to live that way, with boys and girls together."

"It is fun," answered Gan. "They don't run about exactly as you do, but they play together, and they are very happy. Tell me, don't you ever see boys at all?"

"Never, not until mating time. That's every two years, in the Fall, when the grown women chose a mate for three months. We see some of the boys then, but we daren't play with them or talk with them." There was a wistful note in the girl's voice as she stood there unabashed. "It seems wrong..."

"It is wrong," said Gan. "The whole idea is wrong, to my way of thinking. Men and women are happier when they live together."

"The old women are strict and mean and never let us have any real fun. What's the fun of being young if you never see a boy?"

Gan's heart went out to her suddenly. Here was one girl who really needed her first kiss. All at once he felt that if it was the last thing he did on this planet, or any other, he would smash this Matriarchy and set this one, and the others like her, free to enjoy the fruits she so desperately needed.

"Where do they keep all the men on Phira, anyway? I have seen very few since I've been here."

"They keep them in a place like this on the other side of the planet, except the ones who work as servants in the homes of the officials and tradespeople. It is a place called Manoa. There all young boys are taken and must stay until they grow up."

Gan growled. "A completely unnatural arrangement, contrary to nature. No wonder your elders grow to be psychotic. So there are only servants in the dwellings in the cities? No man-and-wife teams running the homes?"

"Oh, some break the rules and keep their men at home; but they have to keep pretty well under cover and not be seen often. According to the law, mating season lasts but three months, and then the man must go back to Manoa."

"Servants and studs," growled Gan angrily, looking over the serious young faces gathered close about his bed. "A sad thing you have made of men on Phira, eh?"

"It is not us," they chorused. "We think it is a sad thing, too. But the old laws and customs are so rigid, how could they be changed?"

**G**AN'S EYES widened. There were more "rebels" in the Matriarch camp than perhaps even the Matriarchy realized. "On Terran worlds," said Gan, "in the olden times, they would have elected a new government, new officials, passed new laws to suit themselves. Nowadays, since the Empire has been established, this is not so easy. But it is still done. Do you know what an election is?"

"No, we don't."

"Well." Gan looked at them sharply, "it's very simple. It means that you select a number of persons whom

you'd like to govern you, then you vote among yourselves. The winner, the one with the most votes, becomes your ruler, and she then rules you according to your group desires. That way you have laws that you like, and obey willingly."

A low whistle from outside sent the girls scurrying through the door, and in an instant the cabin was as empty as before. None too soon, for the sound of boots came up a pathway, and the door was flung open. A light flashed inside, an older woman's voice asked: "Is everything all right, Terran? I thought I saw movement about the cabin."

"Everything's all right," growled Gan, sleepily. "You woke me up, is all..."

The woman shut the door and went on along her rounds. For a few minutes Gan lay idly wondering, and was dropping off to sleep again when the door was opened stealthily and a slight figure came in clumsily, bearing several chunks of wood. These she put on the fire, then came to his bedside. Her whisper was husky. "We thought you might be chilly, you being from another world."

Gan looked at her, slender and beautiful as hand-rubbed marble, her dark eyes two question marks of youthful innocence in the firelight. She stood there unabashed, and after a few seconds crept closer until her body touched Gan's hand where it lay along the side of the bunk.

"Tell me more," she whispered. "Tell me about men. We talk and talk among ourselves, but we really know so little, and it's all so confusing."

Gan bunched up his surcoat, which he had balled under his head for a pillow, so that his eyes were near level with hers.

"More talk from me would do you

little good, girl. Your problem is one that plagues all youth, and nothing but time and experience will cure your ailment."

"Then show me," she begged, her lips pouting prettily. "Just show me what a kiss is like, and what love might be when I grow old enough to mate."

**G**AN GASPED, but the sweet young eyes begging of him what he was not unwilling to give were too much. He reached out and tugged her angelic young face close and touched his lips to hers, or meant to. But she pressed forward, clasped him tight, and her lips were burning hot on his, her young body shivering with delight under his hands. Abruptly he pushed her back and she stood with hands clasped together, her breath panting in rapture, her eyes dewed with wonder.

"So that is a kiss! It's wonderful. Love must be wonderful..."

Gan decided to stick strictly to words from here on, and pulled up his furs close about him.

"Yes, love can be wonderful, girl, when it comes to you. And if the rule of the Matriarchy can be broken, you'll have a chance to find it, which you have precious little as things stand. It is the lack of a solution to your problem which has embittered the old women about you. If I have my way..."

"I can help you," she whispered, her eyes glowing. "They mean to kill you, soon. First they will have a meeting, and pretend it is all legal and right. But they will decide you must die, as all men must die who find their way here, so that the sanctuary will stay hidden from men."

Gan scowled and whispered: "I had guessed as much when I first set eyes upon the old shrew whom you call Mother. But what puzzles me, is what can I do about it now? There is no

way of escape open to me."

"There is a way. If you accept one of the warrior maids in marriage. The law is so worded that they cannot kill a mate. They can beat you, but not kill."

Gan smiled grimly. "I doubt if they will allow me time or opportunity for that."

"I could hide you," the girl went on in an earnest whisper. "I know this forest well, and there are places where they would not find you easily. It would take many days, and we could keep on fleeing, on and on..."

"What would happen to you, sweet one, if we were caught?"

She hung her head. "If they did not sentence me to death, they would banish me to the desert, which is almost as certain."

Gan shook his head. "I'm afraid I will have to use my own devices, little angel. Go now, and don't worry about me. My own gods will care for me where your All-Mother will not. I will be safe. Go."

The girl went hesitantly, pausing to peer back at him in the flickering firelight, lovely in her pity and concern and her innocent nudity, so that Gan's heart went out to her as his own daughter. Then she closed the door and was gone.

Gan flicked the switch on the radio device upon his belt. He knew that, on his ship, Chan DuChaile would be waiting, tubes set for supersensitivity, and would not miss a whisper.

"Listen, Chan; try to get the ship aloft unobserved, and then home on this wave until it's beneath you. Then wait. When I shut off the wave, come down with your guns peeled for trouble."

Gan repeated the message a half-dozen times, at intervals of fifteen minutes. Then he drifted off to sleep much easier in his mind.

**I**N THE morning Gan Alain was awakened by the voice of Aphele, calling from outside. Gan slipped on his boots, opened the door to her. She had removed the masculine uniform with its harsh steel breast and abdomen plates, and was wearing instead a kind of sarong which left her breasts bare, and on her soft, floating hair a wreath of wood flowers gave her a dryad look of extreme attractiveness. Gan flushed guiltily at sight of her, for some reason he himself could not understand.

"It is good," said Aphele in a husky voice, "to dress as a woman and to wake a man with one's heart knocking at one's ribs. I had almost forgotten how good it could be. I give you good morning, and hope you will live the day out."

He grimaced, and she laughed, but not without worry.

"The council seems set upon your death, even though I am correct in guaranteeing your life and liberty under the normal status of a military truce. They are a bunch of abnormal old biddies, who see only evil in all men and most things related to sex."

"I may have a surprise for them," said Gan. "If they violate my neutrality; if they threaten me or take steps to execute me, I think they will find that I am not so helpless as they think."

Aphele pressed close against him, taking his hand. "Walk with me, and murmur sweet words into my ears. Gan, the forest is lovely at this time of year."

Gan moved out into the daylight, and the smell of cooking meat gave him hunger pangs. He groaned. "Aphele, never expect a man to make love on an empty stomach. And in the morning, of all times, a man cannot even be courteous until he has been fed. Do you know nothing of the

male whatever?"

She laughed and pointed. "I have built a fire, and what you smell is your meat cooking. The others will eat in their barracks, where you are not allowed. Come, or you get no breakfast."

Gan put his arm about her waist and moved toward the fire between the vast boles of the ancient trees. Her laughter and her beauty made the forest seem twice as lovely as yesterday. The breakfast she had prepared was very fine.

"You do understand the animal, man, after all, don't you?" Gan said, his mouth full of deer meat.

**T**HE COUNCIL, called in mid-morning, was out in the open air. There were several thousand females, of various ages, gathered on the grass and leaf-mold of the forest aisles, watching the ceremonial chair placed for the Mother. Watching the twenty other women seated at a long table of planks, before which Gan stood, like a criminal before the bar, there was little doubt as to their undivided opinion.

There was little ceremony wasted on the proceedings. Aphele was called to testify, and she told the simple truth: that she had thought the council might wish to barter the ancient secret Tor Branthak sought for the freedom of Phira, and therefore she had brought this man to negotiate the deal.

Celys was called, and for the first time Gan saw the three identical women, daughter, mother and grandmother, who had played Supreme Matriarch for the hidden council for some four centuries, according to Aphele's whispered information. To Gan's eyes, they were equally beautiful, the grandmother somewhat more mature in proportions, but all three would

have been taken for young women on any other world.

Celys testified to her part in the journey, and that Gan had been instrumental in her escape, if not essential. No one spoke a word against him, at first. After the two women had spoken, Gan found himself facing the old leader across the plank table.

"It has been our custom for an age," she began, her eyes glittering out of her wrinkled face and her lips straight and thin and hard, clipping off her words with machine precision, "to slay all men who found their way to this sanctuary of womanhood. It is now proposed that the ancient customs by which we live, customs which are time-hallowed laws, be set aside; that they be set aside because of the present crisis, the downfall of Alid, the defeat of our space fleet, the inrush of alien troops into our cities. It is proposed, moreover, that they be set aside in a cowardly act of barter, a barter in which we give immortality, our greatest single treasure, to the enemy in return for a dubious promise of immunity from their avowed plan of complete destruction of the power of Myrmi-Atla. I am definitely against this proposal. But the council may decide, and I will abide by their wishes, as always."

Gan was not asked to say a word in his defense. The old woman gave the nod to the women gathered about the table, who at once began to pass little slips of folded paper the length of the table, where they were gathered by the woman at the head of the table. She copied off the total of votes upon the papers and, after a moment, arose, facing Gan, who stood at the farther end of the table. Her voice was as impersonal and empty of human concern for Gan as a voice recorded.

"The council has voted, and the de-

cision is death."

**G**AN SWUNG about, and his hand went to his belt, shutting off the self-contained power unit which energized the little wave-generator in his belt. In an instant two tall, uniformed warrior maids sprang to his side, seized his arms, thinking to hold him.

Gan was furious at the prearranged inevitability of the "trial" and the way in which it was run off without discussion or proper consideration of all the factors involved.

He twisted one arm loose from the maid on his right, seized the other about the waist, holding her between himself and the other. In two swift movements he had seized her pellet gun and ring thrower, and as the other maid reached over to strike him with the long dagger which was the only weapon she could use safely here in the midst of thousands of innocent bystanders, he inadvertently held the woman in his arms between himself and the dagger so that she thrust it into her comrade's breast.

The warrior maid sprang-back at this sudden development, the bloody dagger in her hand, and her distraught face making the whole scene plain to the observers as in a drama.

Gan dropped the wounded woman, fitted a ring into the ring-thrower and faced the council table with the weapon, ready to toss the deadly fission ring directly into the midst of the council.

"We will now proceed to hold trial correctly," bellowed Gan. "Or else you can all immediately go up in the air in tiny pieces and we can elect a new council more to a man's liking. All of you not in favor may signify by remaining standing. The others, please be seated, as you see your wise old leader already doing."

It took them all of ten seconds to

get the order through their heads and resume their seats. Cap motioned with his weapon to Aphele.

"My dear lady, since you seem the only one here with human blood in your veins, will you preside in place of the old lady who prefers murder to legal procedure?"

Aphele's hand went to her mouth in sincere fear of the consequences of such an act, but Gan was adamant.

"You will note, Aphele, that the old woman has already made her seat vacant for you. Please take your place."

Aphele, knowing he had them all at his mercy with the explosive ring, capable of blowing the whole council table and all its members up in one stroke, seated herself on the rude chair of honor. After a second, she stood up again and called the meeting to order.

Under Gan's ruthless eyes, the trial was repeated, almost word for word, and the vote taken. No one man was surprised that the verdict was found to be unanimously in favor of the barter agreement, whereby the Matriarchy would give Tor Branthak the secret of their longevity for his removal of troops.

**T**HE TRIAL and vote were quite over, and everyone was standing about wondering apprehensively what next, when the *Warspear* loomed hugely down from overhead, settling on a pillar of flame, landing among the huge trees rather neatly. Instantly out of the ship poured Gan's crew—and Gan's description to little Elvir of what a pirate looked like was fulfilled, for they looked very bold and bad, and the blasters in their hands seemed very large indeed.

They quickly disarmed the warrior women, who could not bring themselves to begin firing in the mass of people present. Gan kept the deadly

fission ring gun trained upon the group of officers who had gathered about the old leader. As soon as things looked safely in their hands, Gan gave orders to his mates.

"Take that group of females about the old hag, there, aboard the *Warspear*. Then scout around and pick yourselves wives; you'll never get a better chance. If they behave, they can make our dismal rock hangout into a home for us. I see no reason why we can't let Tor Branthak search for the secret in his own way, now that we have it. These women know what the secret is and how to use it, and we will have it merely by taking them with us."

In some twenty minutes they had secured nearly a hundred and fifty captives from among the most beautiful of the warrior maids, as well as the dozen sleek officers of the Amazon army who had clustered about their leader, and the old woman also.

Aphele went aboard willingly, while Celys and her two look-alikes, her daughter and granddaughter, had to be dragged aboard. Then the *Warspear* lifted into the sky and Gan set course for far space, where the lonely Black Rock circled about a dying sun.

**I**T WAS some months later when the *Warspear* reappeared over Phira. She did not land, but dropped off a life-raft, moved on out of vision.

Within the life-raft Gan and Chan DuChaile, as well as the old Matriarch who had ruled for so long from hidden Avalaon, drifted slowly to a landing upon the plateau above the city. There were still a score of Konaparian vessels cradled there, as well as fifty or more damaged vessels of Phira which had been captured and brought in. The rest of Konapar's original war-fleet had returned home, or patrolled

the skies above Phira for the chance of retaliation by some ally of Phira.

Gan and his two companions were led before Tor Branthak in his ship, in the same chamber where Gan had toasted the long life of the Phiran women.

"You traitor!" shouted Tor Branthak when he recognized the Cap. "You dare return here? I had thought you would have better sense than to put yourself in my hands again."

"Why not?" Gan said. "Wasn't that our bargain; that I would return with the secret? So, I have returned. I didn't say when, as it was a question only to be determined by events. Tell me, Tor Branthak, have you discovered the secret yet?"

Gan laughed, and after a moment the Regent laughed too. "Tell your tale, Captain. But I must warn you, for this length of time I have considered you a liar and a scoundrel who stole away with the greatest treasure on Phira."

Gan said: "No, Your Highness. I did not steal it. I needed this time to get to the bottom of their secret. I abducted the core personnel and their leader because I believed there is only one way to get the secret—your tactics of pulling out their toenails seemed too drastic, and less liable to work than mine."

"And what is your method?"

Gan drew himself up to his full height, demonstrating the magnificent manhood in him. "Your Highness, when a human being has been without a vital element of life for a thousand years, that element should prove to be a very potent persuasive force. Besides, it has the advantage of not killing or maiming them."

The Tor grimaced at him. "Had you left me *any* core personnel at all, Captain Gan Alain, perhaps I *too* might have had the means to learn

the secret. But, go on, our bargain still holds."

Gan pointed to the old lady. "I have brought her to you. She knows the secret of their long life, and will give it to you, in return for consent to return Phira to the rule of women."

Tor Branthak scowled. "A hard bargain, that, but the method might be worth it. But how explain to the men who have fought and been wounded, who have settled here on lands deeded to them? How can I give it back?"

Gan shrugged. "That is *her* price. I promised to bring her here and present it. But, if you want *my* price, I can offer you an alternative. I have learned the details of their methods, a rather simple preparation of certain reagents which eliminate the substances which cause old age from the body, thus insuring perpetual youth. I will settle for a governorship on Phira, under your suzerainty, because I think you are a man's man, so that Phira would become in effect a province of Konapar, with me as its head. I have an itch to teach these Matriarchs something about the rights of the human male."

As Gan delivered these words, the old Matriarch turned on him with a sudden fierce exclamation, as if a serpent had bitten her. She flashed a knife from her full bosom, sprang upon Gan. The knife plunged into his chest. But the point turned on the heavy leather of his corselet, and he caught her wrist, twisted until her hand released the blade.

The Tor's eyes gleamed. "I understand your itch, exactly, Captain Gan Alain. Or, as I should say, from now on, Governor Gan Alain!"

Gan whipped up the Matriarch's knife and lifted it in salute. "To my Regent's long life!" he bellowed.



SO ENDED the ancient dominance of the female on Phira; and later, on the other worlds which had come under the sway of the Matriarchs of Myrmi-Atla. But, as can be seen, if it had not been for Gan Alain and his *Warspear*, the fleet of Konapar would have been driven back by the dreadnaught of Mixar, and with their monopoly of the *secret*, the Matriarchy would have grown in time to engulf all mankind.

Today, centuries after, the methods for fighting age developed by the Matriarchs have become the common property throughout the civilized portions of the galaxy. And on Phira, the harem of the mighty Gan Alain, Gov-

ernor of Phira, in Alid, is the most famous for its beauty and talent of any in all the polygamous worlds.

The favorite of the Governor's harem is a very lovely brunette named Apele, but the three identical beauties, Celys I, II and III are more celebrated. The woman called Elvir is also much spoken of, because of her pranks and her mischievous beauty; and so too is a slim young beauty who still remembers her first kiss, and gets as much of a kick out of each succeeding one.

And the children of Gan Alain number seven hundred and ten.

THE END