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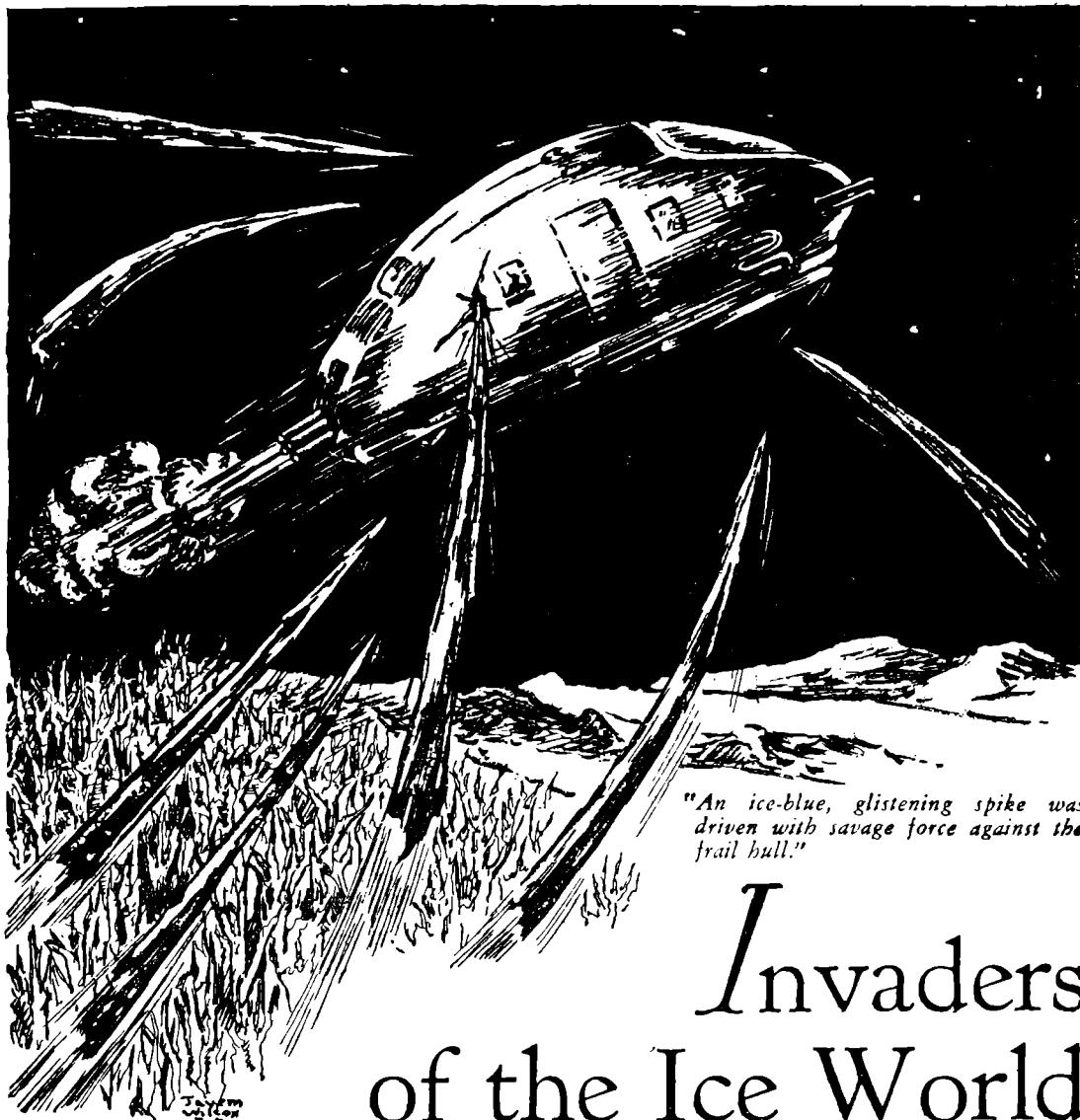
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

W.T.—1





"An ice-blue, glistening spike was driven with savage force against the frail hull."

Invaders of the Ice World

By JACK WILLIAMSON

*An astounding tale of the far-distant future, when the sun grows wan,
and sentient creatures spawned by the frost make war
upon the survivors of the human race*

1. *Phantoms of the Frost*

THE Tower of the Kars lifted its red and ancient bulk upon a rugged mountain crest. Above it the sky was for ever dark, save for the cold far gleams of stars; for the sun had ages since cooled to a black and ice-rimmed sphere, robbing even the frozen moon of its reflected radiance.

From the huge looming cylinder of the

tower fell steep and grim defiles, choked with ghostly banks of the eternal snow. Far below the gorges and precipitous slopes of the isolated peak stretched barren, frosty plains that once had been buried two miles beneath the Pacific, broken with the armored sheets of shallow seas whose ice had not been thawed in ten thousand years.

The world was black, a domain of

cruel silent winter and endless night. Cold constellations wheeled eternally through a sky that no longer knew the dawn. Snow lay ghostly white in the starshine, from age to frigid age. That dark, immutable sky was never clouded, and the bitter air was still, for even the wind had died with the passing sun.

From the upper apartments of the tower, Fal-Kar was staring down through a thick window of insulating crystal, at the weird dark realm of unending winter. A splendid specimen was he of the hardy, resourceful remnant of humanity that clung on upon a dead planet, defying a nature turned grim destroyer.

Seven feet tall Fal-Kar stood; his form mighty, though gracefully proportioned —those survivors of the ages could have been no weaklings. His straight, magnificent body was covered with a very short, smooth fur of golden brown; and in the room, which was heated with the precious fire of radium, he wore no clothing.

Save for his gigantic size and his golden fur he differed little in appearance from the men of the age when science was born. His eyes, though hypersensitive that they might penetrate the perpetual gloom, were not unduly large. Their blue, sober keenness gave his rugged, hairless face an air of iron determination. But those blue eyes now were haunted.

From the lofty window Fal-Kar stared down over snow-swept rugged slopes and vast black plains, over seas that were sheets of ice. He overlooked a world of death, of desolation, of doom. Nothing there was green. Nothing lived. Nothing had moved or changed there in a thousand centuries.

Yet it seemed sometimes to Fal-Kar that living hostile forces lurked unseen beyond the dark horizons. The cruel menace of the frozen world sometimes

took life in his fancy, a brooding, alien monster, that grasped at him with frozen fingers of fear.

Fal-Kar's mind was haunted by phantoms of the frost, phantoms that seemed to creep upon him, invisible on icy plain and frozen sea and dark mountain range, watching, waiting. Waiting until the last man was dead, until they could rule the world.

"You are brooding again, my son," a strong genial voice rang in the high chamber. "You must forget those fancies. We have work to do—and not long to finish it!"

FAL-KAR turned to look at his father, who had just entered the metal-walled room, snapping on the radium light-tube that flooded it with warm, pinkish radiance.

Tro-Kar was tall as his mighty son; and age had not much weakened his great body, though the fine short fur that covered him had all become silver. Like his son's, his eyes were blue; they twinkled with a good humor, an optimism, that was indomitable.

"But Father, can't you feel them?" Fal-Kar demanded, with a fearful gesture toward the window. "The phantoms of the frost! Waiting out there in the frozen night. Mocking at our labor. Laughing, while they wait for the last man to die!"

Tro-Kar laughed; he seized his son's shoulders with strong, great hands, and wheeled him from the window.

"Don't give way to your imagination, Fal-Kar," he urged. "I know that the shadow of vast peril is on us, and humanity. But one city left, of the four that survived when I came first to the Tower of the Kars. And even the radium mines under the city of Zen are now exhausted, so that it must soon fall before the

conquering cold, unless our work is done.

"Great, I realize, is the danger. But all the more reason for effort! Enough of giving way to dreams!"

"You're right, Father. Forgive me!"

Fal-Kar laughed, and lifted the white giant affectionately in his mighty arms.

"Yet we will cheat those specters of their victory, and drive them from the planet with the rays of our new atomic sun!"

"Put it so if you will," gasped the older man, as Fal-Kar set him down. "And now to the laboratory, my son, to check your new electronic reactions. They promise us much."

Arm in arm, golden-brown giant and silvered one, they walked from the room, bearing upon their great shoulders the hopes of humanity.

It was long since Fal-Kar had left the lone surviving city of Zen, splendid metropolis beneath the shimmering green dome of its insulating Zone, to come to this lonely mountain tower. He had been only a youth, then, a weakling, ignorant of the great work of the Kars and his own part in it.

But often he recalled the time—as he recalled also the girl, Del-Ara, whom he had left unwillingly behind at the shimmering ray-screens of the Zone.

His father had met him as he stepped from the silvered shell of the little rocket-driven sky-sled, at the base of the looming red tower. Without a word they moved the light vehicle into the building, through the massive valves that shut out the cold. Both were shivering, then, from their brief exposure; and they bent over the glowing red coil of a radium heater.

"This is the Tower of the Kars," his father boomed, speaking for the first time. "Within it we have labored for ten generations, my son, working at the

greatest task that men have ever attempted. It is not done. Nor will it be finished in my life. That, Fal-Kar, is why I sent for you."

"What's that, Father? I always have wondered why you should imprison yourself in this cold, lonely tower, when Zen is so bright and so beautiful beneath her glowing Zone."

"You will understand, my son. I want you to work with me, and carry our task on to completion after I am dead."

"You mean I must live in this gloomy place?"

"Our laboratory is here, Fal-Kar. The work is too dangerous to be carried on in the city. And I must warn you, though I am sorry, that you will not have much time to visit Zen. Our labor will demand all that is in you."

"But I can't leave Zen! I know a girl there—Del-Ara is her name. She was studying with me in the Hall of Science. Father, she is a lovely being—if you could see her!"

"I'm afraid our task will leave you no time in youth for love, my son," the older man said slowly. "When you are about to grow old, if you see that you can not finish the task of the Kars, you must have a son to carry on the work. But it is far too soon for you to think of that."

"But Father," Fal-Kar protested urgently, "I can't give her up!" He took Tro-Kar's arm. "I know you are a scientist. Science is wonderful, but life—"

"Wait, my son, until I have told you what the task is, what it means to humanity, to life."

Young, then, and a little headstrong, Fal-Kar looked across the gleaming red coil at his father. He stared almost as at a stranger, for he had lived with his mother in Zen until she died in a rocket liner that was lost in the ice-gripped

mountains northward, and then in the Hall of Science. His father he had seen only briefly and rarely, when he came to the city for equipment and supplies.

Impatiently, unwillingly, he listened.

I KNOW that Zen is bright and beautiful, my son, beneath the green, glorious crown of her Zone. But that beauty is frail. The cruel talons of the cold ever menace it, waiting to snatch away her gay people if the Zone should fall.

"You know, Fal-Kar" — the older man's voice had become deep and very earnest—"you know that we have drawn upon the energy of radium to heat and light our cities, to do all our work, for the thousands of centuries since the sun grew cold. But in the last few millennia the supplies of radium have failed. One by one the mines have been exhausted and abandoned. Every deposit in the crust of the planet has been worked out. The radium is used up! The supply of it that remains in Zen will not keep the Zone burning even through your own lifetime."

"I had guessed that much, Father," admitted Fal-Kar, "though the Six make a secret of how much radium remains in the vaults. But what can be done? We can't hope to stop the cold. We can't restore the dead sun. Better to forget what is inevitable, and enjoy the little time that remains. Del-Ara and I have talked of it."

Tro-Kar smiled soberly, and leaned across the glowing coil to set a great hand on his son's shoulder.

"We *can* hope, my son! Many generations ago the house of Kar foresaw this crisis. Our fathers set themselves the task of meeting it. They built this mountain laboratory; for ten generations we Kars have labored here."

"But the sun is dead, Father. The heat of the earth's interior was long ago used up. The wind and the tides have become too feeble to serve us. Now the radium is gone. What else is there? What can we hope to do?"

"We have all about us, Fal-Kar, a more powerful source of energy than any you name. The atoms of every substance are reservoirs of pure electricity. Tap them, and we have means to warm and illuminate the whole planet again — for all time."

"The atom, yes. But they taught us in the Hall of Science that its locked energies can never be released."

The great hand closed like a steel vise on Fal-Kar's shoulder; his father's voice grew deeper with stiff determination.

"Others have tried and failed, my son. But the Kars never fail. Ten generations have we labored. And you are fortunate, Fal-Kar. Nine of us have died with our task unfinished. So, I foresaw long ago, should I. But you shall witness our triumph!"

"How can you know that?"

"You *must*!" Great fingers dug into Fal-Kar's shoulder. "You must! For the radium in the vaults of Zen will not last out your life. The atom must be conquered in your lifetime, to save Zen, to save mankind. Even to save the girl you spoke of—think of that! You will do it, my son. The Kars can not fail."

THAT meeting of father and son had fallen far into the past. Fal-Kar had learned much, changed much, since then. In body and in spirit, he had grown. No longer was he a youth, but a strong man, driving with unfailing energy and resolution toward accomplishment of the task the Kars had set themselves.

But even so he had not forgotten Del-Ara. Sometimes, on the rare occasions

when he drove his tiny radium-powered sky-sled to Zen for supplies, he was with her for a few joyous hours. Her beauty, he thought, had increased with time, as her lithe strong body developed beneath its velvet, snow-white fur. She, too, had found a work, attending the great generators of the Zone.

"Thus," she told Fal-Kar, "I, too, can serve the race until your great work is done. It makes it easier to wait for you until we may be together again."

Fal-Kar had the great tower laboratory now largely to himself; he had taken the reins of the research in his own hands and forged ahead beyond his father. Tro-Kar had become little more than a gifted assistant, most aiding his son by his courage, his enthusiasm, his boundless faith in the Kars.

The old man had so far relinquished his active part in the ancient quest as to erect an observatory upon the great roof of the tower, and spend there many hours studying the dead, dark moon which still followed the freezing world, like a haunting specter.

Even in the intense absorption of his labor, Fal-Kar saw that his father was worried at what he saw upon the black satellite, and demanded what it might be.

"The ancient task of the Kars is enough to absorb all your faculties, my son," was his answer. "To share this new problem would unwisely increase your burden. You must leave it in my hands."

And Fal-Kar toiled on in the laboratory, fighting off the fears and gloomy fancies that descended upon him with the twilight of a dying world. Then came the day when he swarmed up the metal ladder to his father's high observatory, and burst eagerly into its instrument-crowded dome.

"The phantoms of the frost are con-

quered!" he shouted, seizing Tro-Kar's silvery shoulder to jerk him from the ocular of a great telescope. "I have checked the last reaction. You yourself will see the atomic generator, Father. The new sun! And soon!"

The old man remained wearily in his seat, with Fal-Kar's eager hand resting on his passive shoulder.

In the midst of his elation, Fal-Kar was struck abruptly with the gravity of his father's expression, with the naked dread haunting his blue eyes.

"Why, Father," he cried in sudden concern. "What troubles you? Is it you who now fear the phantoms of the frost? And when the labor of the Kars is done?"

"But it is not done," Tro-Kar said, with slow solemnity. "Not until our new sun flames above the mountain. And it must be done very soon—or never! Even now, perhaps, it is too late."

"But, Father, what do you mean?"

"For a long time, my son," the old man whispered, "I have been studying the face of our dead neighbor, the moon. I have not let you concern yourself with what I have seen. But it is a strange thing, weird and fearful."

"Tell me—what is it?"

"Wait, my son. I shall let you see it with your own eyes. But it is something, I believe, like your haunting phantoms of the frost. Your subconscious mind, perhaps, was warning you of the same things that the telescope reveals—sinister entities born of the cold on a frozen dead world, to war against warmth and light and the life we know."

2. *The Menace of the Moon*

HIS mighty body was trembling a little as Fal-Kar seated himself at the eye-piece of the gigantic telescope from which he had, a few moments ago, so joyously pulled his father.

The field of vision was a dark circle before his eye, sifted with diamond dust of stars. Fingers quivering with the dread that filled him, he adjusted the instrument; and the frozen moon crept into the field, a dark blot against the gleaming net of stars.

"I see nothing here to fear," he said. "The moon is black and dead, as it has been since the sun went out."

"Wait, Fal-Kar, until I increase the power."

The dark, ominous disk swelled until it filled almost the whole vast field. And Fal-Kar saw abruptly that it was no longer completely black. Weird phosphorescent flickerings raced across its somber face, evanescent gleams of icy blue and frozen violet.

Strange changing lights of cold blue-violet wove fantastic patterns upon the surface of the somber satellite. They flowed in rivers of chill radiance across jagged lunar mountains. They condensed into swirling balls of gelid flame above abysmal craters.

Whirling masses of frigid luminescence gathered and thickened, and seemed to leap away from the rugged face of the moon.

"I do see something," Fal-Kar breathed at last. "Moving cold lights on the moon. What are they? What do they mean? They seem almost—*living*!"

"They are living," said Tro-Kar, "but not as we live, it is true. You have seen a new form of life, Fal-Kar, born of the cold: living entities, made up of substances and forces that are alien to our sort of life, hostile, destructive. They belong to a new order of existence, risen by the inevitable law of nature to people the frozen planets of a dead universe."

Fal-Kar sought to recover himself from the momentary horror that had seized him.

"Even so, Father, what is their threat to us? The moon is far away. Soon, with our new atomic sun flaming above the tower, we shall be for ever secure from the cold."

"So I hoped, Fal-Kar, at first," the old man said, wearily. "But the new life has not remained upon the moon. Since cold is its nature, it finds the frozen dark vacuum and the strange energies of interplanetary space a bridge, as we always found them an impassable barrier."

"You mean," Fal-Kar gasped incredulously, "the things—the lights—that I saw will be able to come across to the earth?"

"They are not only able to do it," his father said heavily. "That I have long known. Only today did I discover that they have already done it."

"Already!" cried Fal-Kar. "Already on the earth?"

"They are. More, they have found Zen. And hating light and warmth and our kind of life as they must, they are a menace, my son. A peril beyond conception."

"But what are they? What are they like?"

"I don't know. But like nothing we are familiar with, certainly. They are formed of chemical combinations that can exist only at the low temperatures of a dead world. Their alien forms of being will seem strange to us, my son, perhaps incredible. And they may attack us with forces beyond our experience. Unless the new sun is burning very soon, Fal-Kar, the long tale of humanity is ended. How soon can it be ready?"

Strained eagerness was in the old man's tones; as Fal-Kar considered, he cried again, "How soon?"

"The formulæ are simple, Father," Fal-Kar said at last. "I shall ask you to derive them for me; you can do it in a

day. But we must have power to inaugurate the process, more power than can be supplied by our own generators."

"Then we are lost," Tro-Kar breathed in dismay.

"No," smiled Fal-Kar, grimly. "While you are deriving the formulae and setting up the other apparatus, I shall go to Zen and bring back one of the great radium cells that are used to maintain the Zone."

"It is a time of danger," Tro-Kar objected. "And the Six have none too much radium. They are not likely to let you take a cell; they never thought highly of this quest of the Kars. Their own scientists ever said we were mad to attempt to unlock the atom."

"I shall bring back the cell," Fal-Kar promised grimly, rising from the telescope.

His father smiled fondly, and embraced him.

"You are a Kar, my son. You can not fail! But you must set out at once. And hasten. Already the invaders make travel perilous. Remember, the fate of humanity rests with you. And that of your lovely Del-Ara! And the odds are against you! Hasten!"

3. *Creatures of Cold*

FAL-KAR and his father opened the mighty valves in the base of the red, ancient tower, dragged the slender bright shell of the sky-sled out upon the frost-rimmed platform. Quickly, in the piercing chill of the motionless, bitter air, they embraced. Then the white giant ran back into the tower, and Fal-Kar slipped swiftly within the torpedo-shaped frail hull of crystal and argent metal.

The door sealed and the heater coil glowing red at his feet, he touched the controls. Golden flame leapt backward and downward from the radium-activated rockets; and the silvery shell lifted from

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the platform to soar away across crag-walled gorges and ghostly slopes of snow.

The sky was a black bowl inverted. The stars burned in it, living points, bright and diamond-hard. The galaxy was a streak of silver fire spilled across its velvet darkness. And against a white star-cloud hung the moon, a blot somberly and ominously dark.

The voice of the rockets was a shrilling scream; and trails of golden flame hung in the darkness behind the hurtling sky-sled, as it flashed across the lower snow-swept slopes of the lofty peak on which the tower stood, across deserts of star-lit frost beyond, and over ghostly flat ice-plains that were seas.

Fal-Kar drove toward the far city of Zen. This flight he had made many times, on his brief visits to the city. Every dark rock and leprous patch of snow was familiar to him. . . . And he saw abruptly, with wonder and heart-stilling dread, that the grim landscape ahead had changed, as it had not changed in centuries of centuries.

A forest had sprung up on the dark ice-plains before him, such a forest as no man had imagined. Its growths were spiked, sword-like things, rather than trees, branching crazily. They were more gigantic than anything that ever had grown upon the planet, lifting the points of their bright spears thousands of feet, to Fal-Kar's customary level of flight.

The forest glittered. The jagged blades of its uncanny growths shimmered as if formed of frozen pale light. They were like sharp crystals condensed from some fluid of pure cold; ice-blue and chill violet.

Even as Fal-Kar steered the frail sky-sled toward it, slanting upward to avoid its glistening spears, the forest altered. It grew.

Keen bright crystalline blades stabbed

with startling abruptness from parent stalks. Thin arrows of frozen radiance, violet-blue, broke from the spiked tangle, darted away above the luminous mass, endowed with incomprehensible powers of motion.

Fal-Kar watched one shimmering crystal arrow that plunged down athwart his path and drove into the dark soil below. For a moment it stood there unchanged, a shaft of pale, icy radiance, itself a hundred feet in height.

Then it grew like a plant taking root in the frozen planet. Sword-like branches were thrust out from it, abruptly, at fantastic angles. Soon it was a veritable tree of weird shimmering blades; its development was uncannily, incredibly swift.

This, Fal-Kar knew, was the invading life from the moon; the life of cold and darkness, whose incomprehensible advance could be checked only by the new sun of atomic energy that the Kars had labored so long to create above the mountain. Its development on earth must have begun when some such shaft struck the planet after a flight across the interplanetary void.

He was staggered by the vastness and strangeness of the alien forest, by the weird and unsuspected powers of the invaders. His mind shrank from thought of the obstacles yet to be overcome before the new atomic sun could stop the advance of this astounding lunar life.

Numb with dread as much as with the pitiless cold that was creeping even into the sealed hull of the sky-sled, Fal-Kar drove upward at a higher angle, accelerating the rocket-feed until the song of the motors was a deafening bellow.

Then the invading entities from the moon demonstrated their awareness and their enmity.

Fal-Kar had been flying amply high to

clear the forest. Now a new towering wall of palely shimmering glass-like spears was thrust suddenly up before him.

Desperately he fought to avoid them, but an ice-blue, glistening spike was driven with savage force against the frail hull of the sky-sled. Its thin metal was caved in; a crystal panel shattered.

Fal-Kar flung the vehicle up; he cleared the menacing wall. But already he was shivering before the blast of frigid air that poured through the broken panel.

In moments he was beyond the spiked bright forest.

Before him lay the frosty deserts and smooth ice-plains that stretched away to unseen Zen. The spreading area covered by the invading life was behind. But he had not escaped.

Bright arrows came after him.

Hissing in easy flight, like living, sportive javelins shaped of blue-violet flame frozen into needle-shaped crystals, they pursued him, darted curiously about the crippled sky-sled, drove toward it menacingly.

Even with the rocket-motors open to the full, Fal-Kar could not distance them. Easily they kept pace, arching in smooth flight above him, racing with him challengingly.

Half frozen by the blast of cold through the shattered window, he saw that he must play at the deadly game of the invaders.

When the next keen blue lance darted at him, he dived to meet it until collision appeared unavoidable, then cut in his forward rocket battery, in the nose of the sky-sled. Bright golden flame roared out ahead of him; the plunging dive was abruptly checked, and yellow fire wrapped the thin lance of cold.

The blue arrow was consumed. Like an icicle thrust into a furnace, it dissolved in a wraith of dissipating vapor.

Clenching his chattering teeth, Fal-Kar crouched his trembling body over the controls and drove at another of his weird pursuers. It swerved, fled from him with a speed the sky-sled could not equal. The invaders had learned his power. With the heat of the flaming rocket-blast he could protect himself; but plainly he was helpless to inflict any further injury upon the enemy.

He turned again and flew toward Zen.

The glittering arrows followed, cut daringly near him, arched tantalizingly above him, plainly mocking him, tempting him to pursue them, yet never again venturing within range of his incandescent rocket-jets.

Intense cold invaded the slender hull. His breath swirled out in clouds of ice crystals, freezing on his thin golden fur, frosting the observation panels so that he could hardly see. The numbing ache of cold crept up his limbs; his stiff hands could scarcely move the controls.

Ever the fleeting arrows of chill-blue crystal came mockingly nearer—keen bright blades of frozen light. He knew they were laughing at him, waiting for him to freeze and die.

"The phantoms of the frost," he muttered through stiff cold lips. "They laugh, and wait. But they wait in vain. The Kars never fail."

Still he drove on, until the bright Zone above Zen rose like the limb of a warm green sun above the dead ice-fields, against a black, star-dusted sky.

The bright arrows made a final taunting plunge at his crippled flyer, and then hung safely back beyond the Zone, mocking, waiting. . . .

4. When the Zone Fell

FAL-KAR could never recall how he drove the sky-sled through the green insulating ray-screens of the Zone and

landed it safely in the gardens of Zen. His memory held nothing from the turning back of the enigmatic flying arrows to his awakening on a couch in the roof-gardens of Zen.

He sat up, beneath a gay light awning, and looked upon the brilliant wonders of Zen, last outpost of a dwindling humanity.

Warm air breathed about him, fragrant with the scent of blooms. Green masses of hypertrophied shrubs and vines surrounded his couch, riotous with vivid flowers and heavy with huge ripening fruits, red and golden.

Beyond the garden railing he saw the towers of Zen, graceful slim spires of white metal and many-hued crystal, terraced and crowned with brilliant gardens.

All above was the shimmering green of the Zone, flooding the dark sky with supernal light, the city's only shield against universal cold. A frail thing, the Zone looked, so sheer that the chill bright stars shone through it. Yet, Fal-Kar knew, for many ages that thin dome of vibration was all that had kept the fair slender towers and vivid gardens of Zen beyond the hungry talons of eternal winter.

A few moments he sat there, memory slowly returning. He had no sense of ill-being; his mighty body, with its marvelous capacity for recuperation, had recovered from the exhaustion and exposure of his flight to Zen; he was conscious that he had slept long, far more deeply than usual.

A few moments he sat there; then he was on his feet in abrupt alarm.

This glory of Zen faced deadly peril! Unthinkable, incredible invaders from the moon menaced it with the alien energies of their life of cold. Upon him rested the burden of saving it. And he had been asleep! Vital time was gone!

Every muscle tense in the magnificent body beneath his sleek, golden-brown fur, he ran across the roof-garden, peered anxiously over the bright metal railing into the street below.

And his first illusion of the quiet peace of Zen was shattered.

Of white metal and gayly colored crystal, the walls of the building fell beneath him for many stories, to broad garden-spaces. Those gardens, so bright with bloom and ripening fruit when Fal-Kar last had seen them, were now torn and trampled by panic-stricken multitudes.

Shouting thousands were streaming across them, blind, aimless, mad with the desperation of terror. Behind the fugitives, vivid vegetation was a trampled ruin. Their cries reached Fal-Kar's ears, mingled in a ragged wail of fear.

"What—what has happened?" he muttered, leaning over the rail in motionless surprize and alarm. "Already—"

"It is a frozen horror, come out of the dark wastes to destroy us."

THERE was no panic, no terror in the cool, familiar voice that spoke beside him. Fal-Kar turned, in glad surprize, and saw Del-Ara.

She was standing close to him, staring down at the terrorized throngs, her small strong hands unconsciously tearing the petals from a huge red flower. Not so tall as mighty Fal-Kar, she was lithely slender. The smooth velvet fur on her body was snow-white; against it the long hair of her head fell in a golden cascade. The eyes in her white, clear face, sober, sorrowful as she looked slowly up again at Fal-Kar, were warmly brown.

"Del-Ara!" he gasped. And he whispered again, "Del-Ara!"

He strode to her and picked her up in his golden mighty arms. Her white arms went clingly around his great

shoulders; for a little time the two were pressed heart to heart. Then she slipped quickly away from him.

"I came to wake you, Fal-Kar." Something strange and new was in her voice. "Your sleep was so peaceful . . . I did not like to disturb it with such dreadful tidings. . . . You had been very cold and tired. . . . But the need is urgent!"

She smiled seriously, and patted his great shoulder. He tried to take her back into his arms, but she held herself away.

"Wait until I have told you!" she gasped. "Zen is attacked—beleaguered by strange invaders. A wall of shining spears—a weird, incredible forest of them—has grown up while you slept, outside the Zone. The things—the invaders—are attacking the Zone!"

"Attacking the Zone!" Fal-Kar stepped back in amazement. "How?"

"No one knows. A new life has risen against us, a life of strange and mighty energies. Some force it commands that is tearing down the Zone. We can do nothing to stop it. I told the Six that you might save us. None in Zen can equal the learning of the Kars."

She smiled at him proudly.

"You must come with me to the generators of the Zone. Perhaps you can understand the weapon our enemies are using. I *know* you can!"

"The case is desperate, Fal-Kar. Already our generators are strained to the limit of their power; they must soon burn out unless we slow them down. And the attacking forces, whatever they may be, are growing steadily stronger. Very soon, unless *you* will aid us, the Zone must fall.

"Here is your sky-sled. I have repaired it for you. Come with me!"

"But I can't!" cried Fal-Kar. "I must lose no time; already I have been delayed too long. I came for a radium cell. The

ancient work of the Kars is done, but for power to set flaming the new sun of atomic energy. I came to get one of the great radium cells that maintain the Zone; I must take it to my father."

"You can't do that," insisted Del-Ara. "You can't leave Zen. The city is walled with living spears, guarded by flying crystals of the new cold life. Nor will the Six let you take one of the precious cells. Every one is required to maintain the Zone against the attack of the invaders. And you *must* help!"

"Very well; I shall try. But I must soon obtain a cell and take it to our tower. My father is waiting there, alone."

"This way. The sky-sled."

Eagerly Del-Ara took his arm.

The bright torpedo-shape of the rocket-vehicle, repaired, lay on the roof behind a copse of shrubbery. They slipped into its glistening hull. Fal-Kar stepped again to the familiar controls; screaming motors jetted golden flame and the trim flyer lifted above the roof-garden.

"That way." Del-Ara pointed with a smooth white arm. "The Tower of the Zone. The generators are on its roof."

The lofty, many-hued buildings and the broad bright gardens of Zen dropped beneath them, as the sky-sled soared toward the arching green rays of the shimmering Zone. Cold stars burned through the frail, supernal wonder of it; the dark rocks and snow-fields of the ice world beyond were visible through it, weirdly tinged with green.

Now Fal-Kar could see the invaders. He let the sky-sled drift aimlessly while he stared at them.

A towering wall of crystal swords rimmed the city, safely back from the Zone. A tangled forest of colossal keen blades, violet and ice-blue, rising in an impenetrable barrier. A thick mass of gleaming, frosty crystalline spokes, mov-

ing, advancing, thrusting out new blades with uncanny abruptness.

Above that titanic luminescent jungle flew radiant arrows of violet-blue, darting, wheeling, spinning. They dived at the fragile Zone, arched swiftly above it, sportive, mocking, waiting. . . . The invading new life triumphant, but waiting for the inevitable death of the old.

"Phantoms . . . phantoms of the forest . . . waiting for the last of us to die. . . ."

Fal-Kar breathed the words through clenched teeth, and shuddered as he stood at the steering-dial.

Del-Ara cried out suddenly; her small fingers dug into his shoulder.

"The Zone! The Zone! You are too late, Fal-Kar. The Zone has failed!"

Fal-Kar saw that the splendid dome of green radiance above the city appeared suddenly unstable. It was flickering. Great rents came in it, irregular patches of black, that widened and closed and opened again, ever more frequent, ever larger.

SETTING the nose of the flyer toward the central great tower, Fal-Kar opened the rockets wide. Golden fire shrieked back from the exhausts; the sky-sled plunged toward the generators of the Zone.

"Hurry!" urged Del-Ara, strong small fingers sunk into his shoulder. "The invaders are piercing the Zone."

Before them the green wall flickered, faded. From the black sky the stars burst through with new brilliance. The wall of blue-violet spiked forest marched closer across the ghostly ice-plains without. Fal-Kar saw cold, shimmering lances diving at the momentary opening. Then the green dome was whole again; the diving lances of frosty crystal wheeled and darted back, waiting. . . .

"They are generating an interfering wave," muttered Fal-Kar. "When synchronized with the vibrations of the Zone it annihilates them, tears down the barrier. If we are in time, if the generators could be retuned——"

The Zone flickered again.

Moving patches of black came in it, spread. Cold, immutable, the far stars shone through. The bright, spiked forest again crept forward, thrusting out new titanic blades toward the doomed city. And again the flying arrows dived.

A moment the Zone grew stronger. Then it flickered, vanished; mangled ribbons of green light came back, went out. And the Zone was gone.

With a groan of despair, Fal-Kar shut off the driving motors, let the sky-sled wheel above the fallen city.

Cruel cold stars leered down upon naked Zen from a sky gone utterly black. The icy fingers of ultimate winter closed upon the last outpost of man. White snow was frozen from the humid air that had been prisoned under the Zone; its flurries wrapped the darkened necropolis in ghostly shrouds.

The frozen blue-violet wall of the invaders tightened again, an inexorable ring of shimmering, crystal death.

Down upon defenseless gardens rained the flying arrows. They stabbed into the soil, remained standing for moments as titanic, monolithic shafts of chill radiance. Then sharp bright crystalline blades stabbed out from them with crashing abruptness; they grew crazily into fantastic trees of insane and alien life.

Shuddering with horror, Fal-Kar watched the people of Zen, huddling together against the sudden blast of descending cold, crowding vainly into buildings. Bright lances impaled them. Strange blades grew twistedly into buildings after them. . . .

Buildings collapsed before the advancing forest, pushed over by its inexorable mass, their ruins buried under shimmering, spiky tangles.

Zen was overcome with incredible swiftness. For a little time Fal-Kar and Del-Ara watched the movements of the panic-stricken people, struggling desperately, madly, pitifully, to escape a universal doom. But the Zone had been the whole defense of Zen; with it had gone all hope.

Very soon human movement ceased. The lunar life had spread over the city like the flood of a shimmering dark sea; only the shattered wrecks of a few buildings rose above it, like lonely vaults of the departed human race.

Del-Ara's hand relaxed its hard grasp upon Fal-Kar's shoulder.

"The Zone is gone!" she whispered, in strange, shrill tones. "And Zen is dead, for ever. The invaders and the cold have won."

She burst into sobbing, hysterical laughter.

"We are the last alive! The last of man!"

5. *Darkness of Doom*

FAL-KAR drove the sky-sled once more toward the Tower of the Zone. It was a mighty building of metal and bright crystal. Gigantic mechanisms loomed upon its roof, under the dark sky—the generators of the Zone. They were deserted, now, still for ever. Frost had already touched them with ghostly white.

Beside the building had stabbed down one of the blue-violet arrows. From it a tree of mad frozen life had sprung up, shooting out jagged keen blades, palely radiant. And the tide of the crystal sea had flowed against it; the great tower-

rose dark and lonely above the eldritch radiance of the lunar jungle.

"The radium cells?" Fal-Kar demanded. "They are in the tower?"

Beside him Del-Ara was laughing wildly, helplessly; she ignored his question.

"Tell me," he repeated. "Where are the radium cells?"

"Why think—why think about them?" she gasped through sobbing laughter. "The cells can do us no good. Zen is gone. The invaders have won. We are the last—the last!"

"Stop laughing, Del-Ara! Tell me!"

She was shaking again with hysteria. He seized her slender white shoulder with one great hand, shook her.

"Tell me! You *must* tell me. Zen is gone, but the work of the Kars can yet be finished. I am going to take the cell to our tower, and set the new sun to flaming above the mountain. I am going to end the darkness and the cold and these monsters from the moon."

She looked at him. Madness and fear faded out of her eyes; they were clear again, warmly brown. The trembling of her white body ceased and she drew closer against him.

"Yes," she whispered, "the work of the Kars will yet be finished. And hope for mankind is not gone, while we are alive."

He smiled at her, drew her slim form close as he stood at the controls.

"Brave Del-Ara! We are not conquered. Hope is slender enough, but we shall fight. Where is the cell?"

"In the vault beneath the tower's foundation," she whispered, and added softly, "We shall fight—together. And together we shall die—or live—for mankind!"

Almost vertically, Fal-Kar brought the sky-sled down into the coldly shimmer-

ing tangle of jagged crystal growth about the base of the tower. He cut in the bow tubes, and a bellowing rush of flame flared before the rocket vehicle, checking its downward plunge. Like frost before a torch, the alien line was disintegrated by the roaring flame.

The sky-sled came to rest on the little space the blast had cleared. Del-Ara opened the door; the two sprang out.

Cold met them like a palpable barrier; they shrank from it, shivered, gasping for breath in the frigid air. Weird fearful radiance of the dread forest shone upon them. Glittering crystal blades were thrust toward them quickly, closing up the tiny open space.

"This way!" gasped Del-Ara through chattering teeth.

She turned a lever; a massive door opened in the metal wall which had thus far withstood the terrific pressure of the invading forest. Beyond lay a flight of steps. She led the way down, through another thick door, and into a long dim vault that was lined with the square black masses of the precious radium cells.

With an eager cry, Fal-Kar was upon one in an instant, reading the gages to determine its condition, then furiously working to unfasten the connections that held it in place. In moments he had torn it free. Muscles cracked in his mighty body as he lifted it to his shoulders and staggered up the stair, Del-Ara running ahead of him.

THE cell was a burden for four men, yet he reached the upper door with it, white clouds puffing into the frigid air from his laboring lungs. But on the threshold he staggered, stumbled, fell with his precious load to the frosty ground.

The sky-sled was but yards away. Fal-Kar dragged himself to his feet, tugged

at the heavy cell with numb, dead hands.

With silent, fearful quickness, a yard-broad lance of ice-blue glittering crystal stabbed across between the two and the tiny vehicle. Weird violet radiance flickered about them as the swiftly advancing lunar life shut out the ebon, wintry sky.

The heavy cell slipped from Fal-Kar's numb hands. He knew, freezing and exhausted as he was, that he could not lift the priceless thing across this keen-edged barrier.

Then Del-Ara's white form leapt forward ahead of him. With a lithe bound she cleared the titanic menacing blade, and ran into the sky-sled. Fal-Kar saw her touch the controls, and hot golden flame jetted screaming from the reaction motors, fore and aft. Their balanced pressure, forward and backward, held the trembling vehicle stationary, while licking tongues of yellow fire once more devoured the nearest crystal blades.

Warmed a little by the reverberation of the heat that had swept the ragged blade from before him, Fal-Kar lifted the great square mass of the cell again, toiled to the sky-sled with it as Del-Ara shut off the motors. He thrust it aside, fell over, and lay there, gasping, only half aware that the girl was closing the door and sending the vehicle screaming upward.

The glowing red coil of the heater warmed him; he was soon beside her at the controls.

Over a strange world they flew, toward the mountain laboratory.

The invading lunar life had spread indeed with fearful swiftness. Frosty, rugged deserts, flat ice-plains, grim black mountains—all had been conquered by it. Fal-Kar saw beneath him a new and unfamiliar world, a-shimmer with the blue-violet light of the weird invaders.

Indeed the life of cold had conquered. Beneath the frozen dark dome of the immutable sky, the radiant crystal forest stretched from horizon to black horizon. Zen was gone; the last human city—dead! Winter and darkness and the weird spawn of the cold moon held the planet in their inevitable grasp.

In that strange landscape covered with gleaming tangles of blue-violet spikes, Fal-Kar scarcely recognized the mountain of his fathers. It was buried to the summit with the alien blades—a mountain of frozen, blue-violet flame.

Above it, against the hard black sky, wheeled by thousands the shining lances, the flying crystal arrows of the invading life. In a bright, fearful swarm, they swirled about the ancient red tower of the Kars.

The sky-sled swept down; and Fal-Kar's heart constricted with alarm.

The tower was dark. The sea of glittering jungle had broken over it; only the high dome of Tro-Kar's observatory remained completely visible. And the wide crystal windows of the upper stories were shattered; stabbing blades had entered them.

The invaders, Fal-Kar knew with fatal, numbing certainty, had broken into the tower, destroyed his father, seized the great work of the Kars. The darkness of those broken windows was the darkness of doom; the darkness of victorious and unending winter now reigning unbroken throughout the planet.

6. *The Conquest of Cold.*

NUMBED with the shock of grief and horror, Fal-Kar stared down at the dark ancient tower of his fathers, while his hands automatically kept the aimless sky-sled wheeling. In silent sympathy Del-Ara moved close to his side; her small hand caressed his shoulder tenderly.

The bright uncanny forest grew higher about the tower; jagged keen blades were thrust from the upper windows, as if they had found some dread nourishment within.

Fal-Kar shook himself suddenly, burst from his grief-stricken daze into desperate activity.

"We still live!" he cried. "And the equipment in the tower was not delicate; it may not be completely wrecked. We must not surrender now! The Kars can not fail—so my father always said. And we must not fail him."

He drove the sky-sled downward, plunging recklessly into the pale, glistening jungle of lunar life. Once more he cut in the bow tubes, and enormous hungry tongues of golden fire licked from the motors at either end of the narrow hull, consuming the crystalline growth.

Held between two terrific forces that struggled to move her in opposite directions, the frail vehicle trembled and spun. With cold, deadly efficiency, Fal-Kar fought the controls. He made the sky-sled perform feats for which it had never been designed. He bathed the mountain-top and the dark tower in flame until they were clear of the eldritch lunar invaders. He played roaring torrents of flame through the broken windows. Then he landed at the base of the tower.

Del-Ara flung open the door; and the air of the ice world struck them again, like a frigid wall. Fal-Kar lifted the huge cell and staggered toward the tower's entrance. Frost crackled beneath his feet. Stars burned cold and distant in the ebon sky; and strange lights flickered over the snow, from the creeping lunar forest that was swiftly closing up the wound cut by the searing rocket jets.

Within the great door they found Tro-Kar.

The invaders must have fed upon him,

for certain elements had been robbed from his collapsed and distorted body. Jagged blades had cut it to red ribbons; now it was frozen to the hardness of iron.

But the remains of one hand were still locked about the ends of two insulated cables, which ran up the stairs in the direction of the laboratory. At a glance Fal-Kar knew them to be the power leads of the atomic generator.

"My father is dead," he whispered slowly. "But before he died he had all prepared for us. He even brought the ends of the cables down here, ready to attach to the new cell. Always he told me that the Kars do not fail."

A moment longer he stood above the red, stiff corpse. Leaden ache of cold was seizing his fingers, creeping up his arms. The frosty air seemed to burn his lungs; he could hardly breathe. He was shivering, and his skin felt like stiff, dead armor, contracting mercilessly about him.

With numb hands he began to fasten the cables to the great cell.

Del-Ara, looking from the door into the violet-lit night of the ice world, gasped something voicelessly, and made an imperative gesture of warning. She tried to close the massive valve.

A crystalline, glistening blade burst the heavy door open again, flinging the girl back against the wall, where she lay quietly. The keen edge of it grazed Fal-Kar's breast. Thick blood started sluggishly and froze on his golden-brown fur. He was shaken by a chill of unendurable cold that seemed to pierce his very heart. His hands were useless; he was suddenly blind.

He bent under the titanic bright spear that had stabbed into the room. With stiff, aching lips he found the last connection, and tightened it with his teeth. Then he slumped down beside the thick black radium cell. . . .

Fal-Kar was conscious again; he stretched his painful body, and sat up. He saw that he was still in the tower of the Kars, just within the great open valve, beside the squat bulk of the radium cell. And he was warm again.

Beyond the open door was a square of sky, not black as it had been for centuries of centuries, but deeply and freshly blue. Strong light streamed through the opening, and a delightful warm breeze blew upon him. He sat there until he heard a glad laugh, and looked up to see Del-Ara in the doorway, framed against the new blue of the sky, slenderly lovely.

"Come, Fal-Kar," she cried joyously. "See your new sun! It flames above the tower. And the invaders are gone!"

She ran to him solicitously as he got to his feet. Arm in arm they walked out upon the summit of the mountain, at the base of the ancient red tower. Upward they looked, into a sky that was softly blue.

Above the massive tower reached up a pallid finger of radiance, a ray of pure

force, vibrant, a little unsteady, almost invisible but faintly green. And far above, at the end of the greenish shaft, burned a huge warm orb of golden light, the globe of the new sun, whose fires were fed upon illimitable atomic energy.

The eldritch gleaming tangles of the lunar life were gone from the broad valleys and vast plains below the mountain. White frost was melting to reveal streaks of rich black soil; silvery streams, ice-locked for millenia, were flowing again.

Arm linked in arm, Fal-Kar and Del-Ara stood on the crest of the mountain, looking down on a world now all their own.

"Now the naked soil is black and the streams are swift muddy torrents," Fal-Kar said at last. "But soon green will cover the black, and the cleared streams will be bordered with flowers. Winter and night are conquered. Spring and dawn are here again, to endure for ever."

"Dawn and spring," softly murmured Del-Ara. "For the world. For us. And our children."
