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# **SUPER SCIENCE STORIES**

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*— BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION —*

## **THE BLACK SUN RISES**

A NOVEL OF  
STRANGE  
WORLDS

by **HENRY  
KUTTNER**

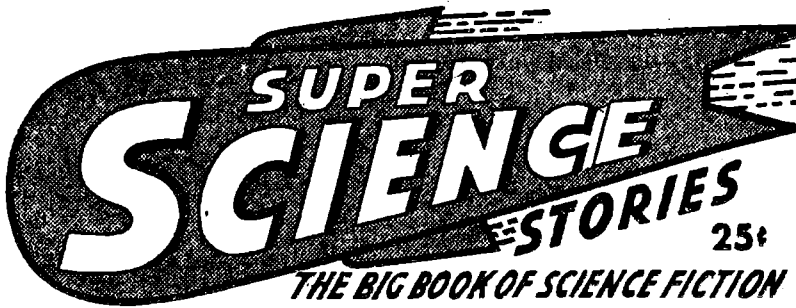
## **THE SILENCE**

by **RAY  
BRADBURY**

**CARTMILL  
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MANY OTHERS**



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NO. 1

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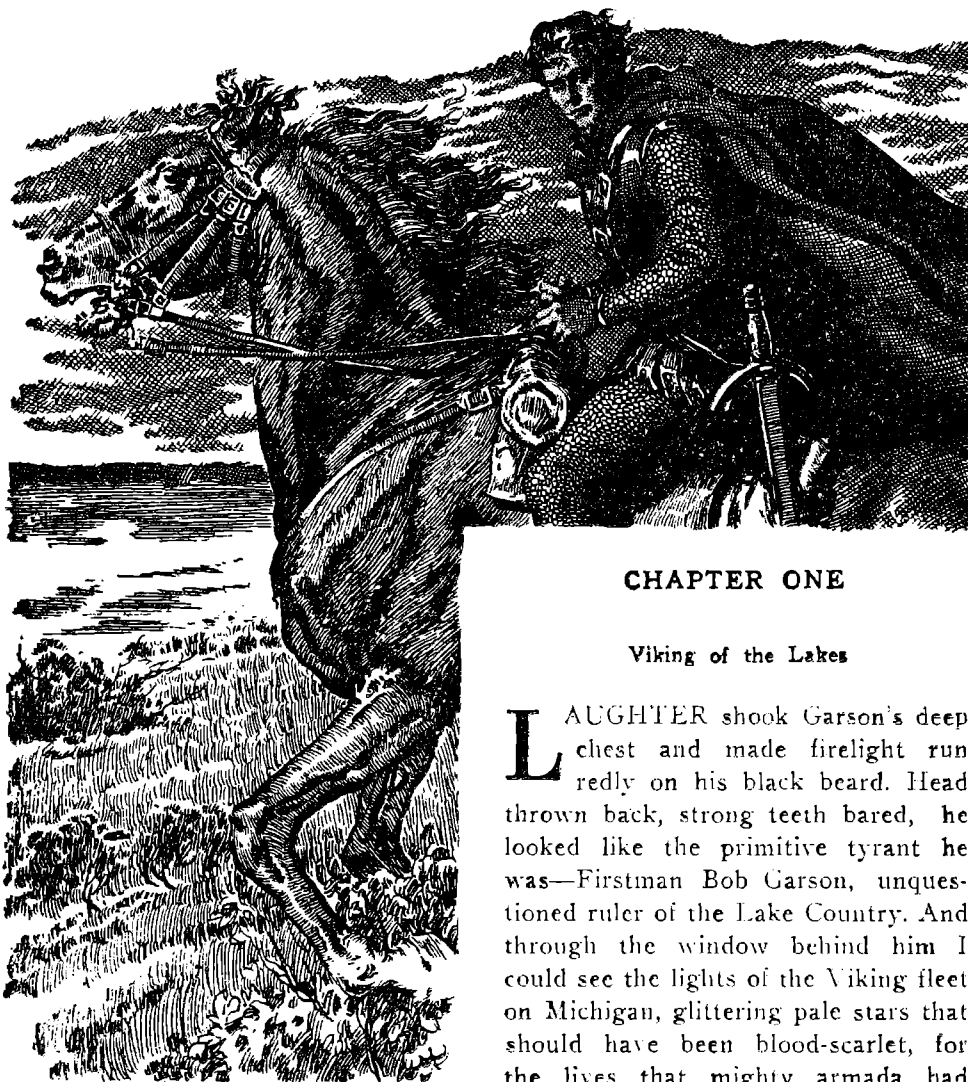
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*"We have slowly begun to realize that this is the end of a day—and there will be years, perhaps, of darkness before another morning."*

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## A Novel by Henry Kuttner



### CHAPTER ONE

#### Viking of the Lakes

**L**AUGHTER shook Garson's deep chest and made firelight run redly on his black beard. Head thrown back, strong teeth bared, he looked like the primitive tyrant he was—Firstman Bob Garson, unquestioned ruler of the Lake Country. And through the window behind him I could see the lights of the Viking fleet on Michigan, glittering pale stars that should have been blood-scarlet, for the lives that mighty armada had spilled since Firstman Garson rose to power.

It seemed to me that the riders of the apocalypse paced me . . . For in Earth's morning sky rose a black sun . . .

Against my doeskin tunic a small



## THE BLACK SUN RISES

knife swung; the misericordia all free-men carried. I took it from its sheath and, with a quick snap of my wrist, flung it into the desk where Garson sat.

He sobered. His eyes, and mine, watched the knife as it sang, quivered, and finally stood at rest.

Then he looked up, his brown eyes masked and unreadable.

"Meaning what, Dale?"

I said viciously, "I'm through. This is my resignation, Firstman. You gave me that knife ten years ago—"

He touched a scar on his bearded

cheek. "I remember. The cold winter of nineteen-eighty. I'd have died then if you hadn't put your blade into that Kodiak bear. And so I gave you the knife."

His eyes were warm, remembering.

"It meant something once," I said to him. "Friendship. And a man I thought I could trust and believe in. The Firstman of the Great Lakes! A damned—murderer!"

Briefly Garson's eyes filmed with a cold, deadly glaze I knew well. His left arm came into view; it ended at the wrist, and a steel hook took the

place of his hand. He tapped his hook against the misericordia, while a brown flush crept up his neck and as slowly receded.

"A man forges with fire and iron," he said steadily. "Not with talk, Dale Heath. I've trusted you, too, because I thought you understood my plans."

"Conquest and pillage—fire and iron. Yes, I understand, now. If we go southward now, into the Indiana country and the Lesser Lakes, I'll know. They're peaceful folk down there, agriculturalists and scientists, of a sort—they're working for civilization and rebuilding more than we are. Bob, if you go through with this, you'll do it without me!"

He thrust out his good hand and caught my arm in a grip like a python's. He dragged me toward him, so that I sprawled half across the desk, my eyes glaring angrily into his own. His breath was hot on my cheek.

I said, "Okay, rip out my throat with your hook. A good way to settle arguments."

"No. No. You try my patience sometimes, but I know you're the only friend I have."

"Good reason. You're the best hated man in the country."

"And the strongest," he said somberly, releasing me. "I don't think you can ever understand. Rebuilding the world—you can't do that with a soft hand. I've been rough, sure, and in twenty years I've drawn together an empire. It won't fall apart now—if I have to kill you and all the southerners to boot!"

"You'll rule a world of corpses," I snarled.

He pointed up to the great, vivid tapestry, bright with purple and green and gold, hiding the walls of the room.

"There's the past. Read it. What d'you see there?"

It was clear to read. Even a man from another planet could have gathered the import of those scenes. The world in the 1940's, growing, building, reaching out toward ultimate civilization. Then great cannons bellowing smoke and flame, juggernauts of the skies blasting cities into ruin—war, a war of attrition that had persisted for decades. The earth had not realized that social cancers cannot be nursed back to health, that surgery was the only answer. So sentimentalism had triumphed—and, after a while, after a troubled period of false peace, Armageddon had come. This time it was battle to the death.

More than thirty years of it. Across that monstrous tapestry the tale wound its grim course: new weapons that unleashed the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and drenched a planet in blood. Then—Darkness.

From Japan to the British Isles, New York to California, almost from pole to pole, there was peace—as a dying man might be peaceful. Ruins . . .

New York City was a seething volcano of radioactive poisons. London and Moscow were volcanoes. And there were others.

The years of darkness had come.

But at the end of the tapestry was the symbol of Firstman Bob Garson: a black sun, rising in a golden sky. A sun that might have been made of black, cold iron. For Garson had gathered the reins of empire into his single hand and fought his way to leadership of the lakes, built himself a city north of the holocaust that had been Milwaukee—and ruled.

TEN years I had been with him, his lieutenant. I had watched him, helped him grind his juggernaut along the road to civilization. It hadn't been easy. We fought with nature as well as man. From the Canadian fastness came wolf-packs and the gigantic Kodiak bears. Cats gone wild, small treacherous demons with razor claws, made the woods perilous. And we had few weapons.

Garson drove his men mercilessly. Pirate though he was, he knew the values of science, and, if the rest of his people starved, his technicians would be well fed in their warm laboratories. To rebuild, science was needed. But too often Garson demanded weapons.

The City—it had no other name—was for him the seed from which mankind would rise again. Other tribes and nations must eventually lend their aid, or be crushed. Meantime—he must be strong.

Then, some day, the Black Sun would rise indeed, Garson's golden banner floating over all the world, a world where tall cities towered once more, and there would be peace. But the peace must be won.

So the Viking fleets went forth! Like winds of flame we raged through the Lake Country, bringing tribute back to the City. Our swords flashed; our guns thundered. And on the western shore the scientists toiled—and other nations watched us, and feared.

One unit, homogeneous and able to protect itself—that was Garson's aim; after that, absorption and amalgamation. But for a long time I had wondered whether this was the way.

Now he thrust out his heavy boots toward the fire and watched me side-wise beneath his shaggy brows.

"We've got to have food, or we'll starve this winter. There's food in Indiana."

"Why don't we practice agriculture?"

"We do."

"Damn'd little," I said. "You can't spare the men."

He glowered at me. "We need men for other purposes—in the shops, in the laboratories, for special training, and to fight. Even the hydroponic gardens aren't enough this year. I'm not going to have another bad winter because of your soft-heartedness, you damned fool. We're working for mankind; they should be glad to feed us."

"Not when we take their crops with a gun at their heads."

"We've tried arbitration. They want too much. Products from our laboratories—weapons! We have a chance to rebuild civilization because we're strong. Let another tribe get on equal footing with us and there'll be war."

"There's war now."

"No," he said with a flash of wry humor, "our enemies haven't the weapons for that. Later, when we're self-supporting, we'll leave them alone—till we're ready to invite them to join us. But the ruling nation must have no schisms. There'll be amalgamation till that nation is the world. It won't come in my time. I know that. Yet—the Black Sun banner will float over the Earth some day, Dale."

It was the wrong way. I knew that; I knew, now, that there could never be peace as long as Garson had his way. He was honest; he thought he was right. That was the tragedy of it—I could never convince him.

I said—and my voice must have betrayed my desperation—"Let me medi-

ate, Bob! Let me try to find some other course!"

He swung around, staring. "Snap out of it, Dale!" he said. The brown, hairy hand closed on my dagger; he sprang up and, leaning across the desk, slipped it back into the scabbard. "The fleet sails as soon as it's ready; we're delaying in hopes Wellingham gets his ray finished in time. You're in command—"

"No."

Again his heavy face flushed. I thought he would slip out the dagger and use it on me. I didn't move. I saw Garson's gaze go past me, and, with an effort, he relaxed and dropped back into the chair.

"Well, Horsten?" he said. "I'm busy."

"I'm leaving," I flung at him, and, turning, met the calculating, pale eyes of John Horsten, the geopolitician. He was a dwarfed, large-headed man with thick lips, and his brows were always lifted as though in skeptical astonishment. I made no attempt to conceal my dislike of the warped, vicious little creature; I never had, since the day I'd caught him practicing torture on a prisoner, and had slashed him with his own whip. But he was capable, and his knowledge was valuable to Garson.

I went out without looking back and stood in the antechamber, by the window, glowering down at the ships. A full moon had risen, picking out the tall towers of masts as they swayed gently with the tide. A fresh wind blew in from Lake Michigan, heralding winter. A cold winter, with little food in the storage chambers. Short rations, unless our Viking fleet struck at the peaceable southerners.

After a while Horsten came out and

offered me a cigarette. I shook my head. He lit one of the perfumed green cylinders, watching me under his pale lashes.

"There's nothing amiss, I hope, Ser Heath."

"Why should there be?" I snapped.

He dry-washed his hands. "The Firstman is—eh—upset. The raid on Indiana—it is about that?"

"Maybe."

Horsten chuckled drily. "If Wellingham's ray is finished—"

The anger in me flashed up. I whirled on Horsten, white to the lips. "You'd like that," I said. "A heat-ray—men burning and screaming and dying slowly as you watched! Torture's one of your specialties, isn't it?"

"Ser Heath! Have I offended you?"

I looked at him in silence, and he wriggled uncomfortably. "The heat-ray can destroy in an instant, if it's turned to full power. But—for the psychological effect—a slow, painful death might prove salutary at times. Don't you agree?"

"Yeah," I said, and left him. As I went down the ramp into the open air I discovered that the misericordia was in my hand, and that, gripping it, I had drawn blood from my palm. It didn't matter. I wrapped a pocket cloth about it and went on.

Warm golden light spilled from the window far above me, fading into darkness toward the beach. Searchlights shot spears of white upward from the plaza on my left, trained on the great flagpole that held the banner of Firstman Bob Garson. Here in the Lake Country, amid the ruins of a desolated world, the first stirrings of civilization were alive.

But too fast—and growing warped! The Black Sun was rising, but when it





I felt bubbles crawl up my suit. A man was  
dying there . . . many were dying.

reached its noonday the fury of the gods would be unleashed on an Earth already too long racked with anguish.

And yet—this was the birthplace of a new civilization. Here was the man I had known and trusted, the man at whose side I had fought so often, the man who was more than brother to me . . . .

I thought, And I must betray him!

## CHAPTER TWO

### Lilith

FROM the Pavilion came the murmur of low music and the flicker of lanterns. The swaying figures of dancers made silhouettes there. It was, I remembered, the birthday of Joanna, Firstman Garson's wife, and both Bob and I should have been at that celebration. But our work came first.

As I circled the Pavilion I glimpsed Joanna, tall, lovely, ash-blonde, surrounded by a dozen Viking officers in their light dress-armor and golden cloaks, emblazoned with the Black Sun. Joanna's headdress, too, bore the same insigne: a jet-black pearl set in gold. Her tinkling laughter sounded in the cool wind from the lake.

I went on toward Wellingham's laboratory. Under my tunic I wore the usual bullet-proof shirt, and the sword at my side was heavier than the one I generally wore in the city. From a pocket I drew a knuckle-gun and made sure it was charged: a dangerous weapon, this, made both for striking and shooting.

The portico of Wellingham's block-like house loomed ahead. I mounted the terrace and touched the bell. A drop of sweat, ice cold, trickled down my side. For I knew I must get the

secret of the new ray from Wellingham, and make sure that he would never duplicate his experiment. Till now I had not let myself think of this. To murder the harmless, gentle old man—!

The door opened. From the shadows beyond a blast of gun-fire spat furiously at me. I felt a jolting blow on my middle, but the wire-woven shirt saved me. My breath was gone. I folded up, realizing that there was no time to reach the knuckle-gun, and that the dark figure rushing forward from beyond the threshold had his pistol aimed for another shot.

I fell sidewise, the familiar cool hilt of my sword against my palm; I heard the faint whisper of sound as it shipped from its scabbard. I thrust up, feeling the blade go smoothly into my opponent's belly and rasp against his spine. His gun blazed, missing me, and he fell forward with a gasping scream. He was dressed in black, and masked. Behind him, from the door, other men came running. They too wore masks.

But now I was up, catching my breath, and with the knuckle-gun ready. I lunged forward at the leader. His sword cut hair from my head as I ducked. I slammed my fist against his jaw, squeezing the trigger at the same time, and his face exploded in red, horrible ruin. He had no time to cry out before he died.

But there were too many of them, and I could not hold them in the passage. The sound of shots had raised an alarm; I heard distant cries. My opponents wanted to escape, and they came at me helter-skelter, guns barking, blades shining. A bullet grazed my cheek. Others were stopped by my shirt, but the impact dazed me,

made me lower my guard for a moment. That was time enough.

Four men came out of the hallway, staring around with quick, fearful glances. Had they waited, they could have killed me. As it was, they fled, shooting back at me—with bad aim—as I staggered up to renew the fight. They were gone in the underbrush around the terrace, leaving two corpses at my feet.

Someone had struck first, forestalled me. I didn't know who, or why. I sheathed the sword and hurried into the house, making straight for Wellingham's underground workshop.

He was there, his body crumpled across a bench, blood on his gray smock and a smear of red on his white hair. I ripped open his shirt and put my ear against his thin chest. I could barely hear his heart-beat. After a moment I let my gaze search the laboratory. The heat-ray model was gone.

I put Wellingham on a couch, locked the door, and investigated the medicine cabinet. There was adrenalin. I opened a syringe, filled it, and slid the needle delicately between Wellingham's ribs, till I knew I'd touched the heart. The stimulant worked.

Someone knocked on the outer door. I ignored it. I watched Wellingham come back to life, watched his pale eyelids stir and lift, and pain blaze in his faded eyes. But I dared not give him morphine.. I could not even let him die in peace.

"Heath—" he whispered. "Dale Heath?"

I said, "That's right, Wellingham. What happened?"

"The—adrenalin? I'm dying?" He saw my nod, and sighed. "The model—heat-ray—stolen."

"Did you complete it?"

"Yes. Only model—destroyed plans—easy to build projectors from—model—"

"Who stole it, Wellingham?"

"Horsten," he said. "John Horsten. He plans—overthrow—the Firstman.—Joanna—helping him! She knows—knows—"

**H**E DIED. This time it was final. The knocking on the door was louder now; a torch was burning at the lock. I looked around. There was another door in the corner. I opened it warily and went out into a hall. Distant footsteps thumped on stairs. I saw a cupboard not far away. I slid into it and waited, while the footsteps went past me and entered the laboratory.

Presently I emerged and climbed the stairs. I could have outbluffed the guards, but I didn't want to waste time. I made my escape without difficulty.

In a public washroom I made repairs. A coin opened the medical kit on the wall. Antiseptic and liquid-skin fixed the graze on my cheek, and I used cold water to remove bloodstains from my clothes. After that, I telephoned Administration.

Horsten wasn't there. They couldn't locate him.

I said "Thanks" and went out, looking toward the Pavilion. The dance was still going on. I headed in that direction, my mind a turmoil. Immersed in my own plans, I hadn't realized that others might be plotting too—plotting murderously. A coup to overthrow Garson, with Horsten behind it? And Joanna aiding that warped, vicious geopolitican? Why the devil?

I meant to find out. The heat-ray model had to be recovered. But I couldn't ask Bob Garson to help me; not when I was plotting against him myself.

They let me into the Pavilion when they recognized me, though I wasn't in costume, and I made my way through the dancers to where Joanna Garson was gliding in a waltz with a golden-cloaked officer. I tapped his shoulder. She came into my arms gracefully, smiling up at me, though she was nearly as tall as I. Her body was steel under satin.

A lovely woman, Joanna Garson. Till now I'd never thought her especially intelligent. I wasn't sure about it yet, nor would I be till I knew why she'd tied up with Horsten. Honey-colored eyes watched me. She had been drinking champagne, looted perhaps from the ruined Chicago cellars, and the sparkle of the stuff showed in the look she gave me.

"I shouldn't dance with you, Dale. You're late, and you're not dressed for my party."

"I had a tough time getting here at all."

"Is Bob still working?"

"He was when I left him. The fleet's sailing soon, you know, Joanna."

Laughter curved her full, red lips. "He loves his fleet more than me."

I said, "You know that's not so. Without you—I don't know if he'd have the strength to go on with his job."

"Well—perhaps. Why talk of that tonight? Thanks for the present, Dale. It was a lovely necklace."

"I've another present," I said, and steered her to a terrace. She looked a little startled, but yielded. We danced out into the coolness of the

night, lit with hanging lanterns from the trees.

"Down here."

"Oh, this is far enough. My gown—"

I took her arm, too roughly. She tried to pull away, and there was startled alarm suddenly in her face. I saw her mouth opening; in a moment, I knew, she'd scream. There was one way to stop it. I jerked her close, clamped my lips down upon hers in a savage kiss. And she relaxed in my grip.

Before she could recover or could realize my intention, I had her down the steps of the terrace and into the thick of the bushes. My hand gagged her effectively. She struggled, but I laid the edge of my misericordia against her throat.

"Don't yell," I said very softly. "I'll put the knife in you, if I have to, and take my chances."

She didn't quite believe that, but she was frightened. "Dale," she whispered. "You're insane. What—"

"Wellingham's dead," I said.

Her start of surprise wasn't convincing. "But—I don't understand—"

"There's not much time. I know about Horsten's plotting. I know you're in with him. Suppose I told Bob?"

Briefly her face was an impassive mask as she thought it over. "You're still insane, Dale. Take that knife away!"

FOR answer I pressed a little harder.

"Try screaming," I suggested. "I'm not joking, I want the heat-ray projector back."

"You wouldn't dare kill me," Joanna said. "Bob would—"

"What? After he knew you were betraying him?" Fine words for me,

I thought. A game of double betrayal. But I had to do this job my way.

I showed Joanna my knuckle-gun. "Do you know how this works? These spikes—they can make hash of a man's face. Or a woman's. Listen to me. I'm pulling out tonight; I'm leaving the City. I won't be coming back. I want the heat-ray to take with me. You get the point. I won't be talking to Bob—about you or Horsten or anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Figure it out. Since I'm leaving, I won't mind killing you before I go—"

"I'm not afraid of death," she said.

"—or using this knuckle-gun on you," I finished. "I've used it once already tonight. The man's dead, but that's because I aimed for his brain. I wouldn't kill you, Joanna—but you'd wish I had."

She shrank away from me, her ivory skin whiter than ever. I went on inexorably.

"This man—he wasn't pretty when I finished. He had no nose. His lower jaw was gone. And I'd do a better job on you, Joanna. Plastic surgeons couldn't do much after I'd worked you over."

"My God, Dale," she whispered, a pulse beating in her throat. "What have I done to you to make you hate me like this?"

"I don't hate you. I don't give a damn about you. I just won't let anyone get in my way."

She was ice-cold in my arms. "What do you want?"

"Where's the heat-ray model?"

"John has it."

"Where?"

"A hideout—under the lake—"

"His plans?"

"To make portable projectors—

many of them. And overthrow the—the Firstman—"

I wondered what she was getting out of the deal, but I didn't ask. "How do you get to this hideout?"

"Water suits. I'd have to show you—"

"Fine," I said, and meant it. I read her mind. If she could lure me into a trap, making sure I wouldn't talk to Bob Garson—that was the way she'd want it. But it fitted my plans, too. I had to get my hands on the model and make certain that Garson would never recover it.

I slipped the knuckle-gun onto my hand and gripped Joanna's arm, so that the weapon was concealed by the drapery of her sleeve. "We'll go there now."

"I'll need a wrap."

"No."

She gave in and we mounted the path that led along the lake front. Behind us the music from the Pavilion faded and died. My heart hammered against my ribs, and I was conscious of a curious shortness of breath. Outside the illusory brilliance of the City's lights, the world was in darkness, and men still fought and murdered in the ruins.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Under the Lake

THE cut on my hand, where I had gripped my own misericordia as I left Garson, was still painful. I managed to start the blood flowing afresh. Droplets of blood marked our path. But there wasn't much, and Joanna did not notice. She was too busy making sure that we were not being trailed.

We had not far to go. A jetty

reached out into the lake like a probing, curved finger, higher than our heads. We walked along the narrow path at its base, spray cold on our legs. I left my crimson trail where the water would not reach; the mark of bloody fingers now and then was sufficient. The guards would be out tonight, after Wellingham's murderer. They would be searching the city. Those trained, shrewd ferrets would see blood, and follow. I wondered how much time I would have.

Joanna moved before me, her steps sure. The curving jetty had by now shut off the shore lights. Only the blackness of Lake Michigan stretched into emptiness on our left. The wind was icy.

We walked for a long time. Near the end of the quay Joanna stopped and ran her fingers over the concrete. An opening gaped there.

I took a flashbulb from my tunic and let its pale beam probe ahead. A chamber had been hollowed out of the jetty at this point: a ladder descended into gloom.

I had noticed the location of the spring Joanna touched to open the panel, and I marked it with blood. Then, while she blinked in the sudden light, I stepped past her into the tiny room, and she closed the door upon us.

"Down here, Joanna?"

"Yes. I said it was under water." The watchful, honey-colored eyes dwelt on me.

"I'll go first."

We descended the ladder; I don't know how long it was, but the lake was fairly deep at this point. We must have gone clear to the bottom. At last my feet struck solid ground, and we were in a circular chamber, quite

bare, except for a score of regulation water-suits piled carelessly in a corner. There was a valve-door in one wall.

Joanna picked up one of the suits and tossed me another. I didn't don the one she gave me. I didn't trust her enough for that. I found another in the pile that fitted fairly well, checked the lead weights on the soles, and watched her adjust the transparent, tough material, with its tiny built-in air-kit.

"Who built all this?" I said.

Joanna didn't look frightened any more. I guessed that she'd worked out a satisfactory plan for my elimination. A little smile quirked her lips as she looked at me.

"I don't know. The jetty's old — nineteen sixty or earlier. We—improved it."

"What now?"

"I'll show you."

She slid her face-plate closed, and after that we couldn't talk; there was no radio in these light suits. Following her example, I went toward the door in the wall. I couldn't leave any more signs for the guards, with my wounded hand in its tight glove, but I hoped that the way would be clear from now on.

Luckily, it was.

THE DOOR opened into a tiny room empty except for a wire pulley. There were clasp-hooks on these. It was a conveyor belt of some sort.

Behind us the door shut; Joanna showed me how to snap a buckle of my suit onto the pulley. She did the same. She pulled a lever set in the wall, at her side, and the wall before us opened slowly, letting the dark waters of Lake Michigan spurt in upon

us. I still held my flash-bulb. I kept it focussed steadily on Joanna, but in that racing turmoil I could scarcely glimpse her. We were buffeted and hammered. Only our pulley wire kept us from being knocked unconscious against the walls.

Then a calm, quiet, deep silence filled the room, and we were moving forward slowly along the wire. I turned off the light for an instant. Instantly a terrifying, utter blackness shut me off from life. Deep as we were, no moonlight could penetrate the lake. I felt trailing weeds brush me as I was carried along.

Blindly I groped out ahead of me and touched Joanna's arm. I prisoned her wrist. She did not try to pull free.

After a time the forward motion stopped. I used the light again, and saw Joanna unbuckling herself from the wire. I did the same. We were in a small room, the duplicate of the one we had left, even to the lever in the wall.

Joanna pulled this down, and the valve closed, shutting us in. The water began to recede till only puddles were left at our feet.

We went through a door into the next, larger room. There were a dozen or so water-suits stacked in a corner. Joanna moved toward a translucent panel but I was there before her. I could see nothing, but I felt keen, questioning eyes upon me.

"We're alone," I said. "Tell Horsten we're here."

Presently a concealed door opened. The size of the underground hall amazed me, till I remembered the uncompleted trans-lake tunnel started in 1950 and abandoned a few years later. This was part of that tube.

The few dim lights left great blotches of shadow on the dank roof and sides of the place. There were a dozen or so metal chairs, a number of pallets, and a knock-down desk behind which John Horsten sat, his brows lifted, his eyes intent under their pale lashes. His gaze flashed to Joanna and then to me again.

There were about twenty men here, some of whom, I thought, bore the marks of my sword and knuckle-gun. They looked at me, watchfully, and though no weapons were drawn, I felt their menace.

I opened my face-plate. Joanna had already done the same. She cried, "Keep your guns on him! Don't let him move." Then she ran past me to the desk where Horsten waited. His thick lips twisted in a crooked grin.

"Ser Heath!" he said. "I hadn't expected . . . What happened, Joanna?"

"Kill him!" she whispered. "He's alone. He made me bring him here—"

"How did he find out?"

"I'm not sure. He told me he was leaving the City—and he wanted the projector."

Horsten fingered his lips. "Leaving—commanding the Vikings on the southern raid, eh? You came here alone, Ser Heath? That was not wise."

I looked around at the grim-faced circle of men, and felt that cool wind of death blow past me. It would not do to show weakness now. I walked forward, not too fast, till I reached the desk. Joanna shrank away from me. Horsten's face was wary; I saw his hidden hand move.

"If you're talking to me," I said, "—stand up!"

His head jerked back. A mottled flush darkened his cheeks. But after a

moment he smiled, in a twisted, malicious way, and rose, with a mocking half-bow.

"My apologies," he said smoothly. "You rank me, of course, Ser Heath. For the present!"

"I rank you anywhere—at any time," I told him. "Whether we serve the Firstman or depose him, together. You!" I thrust my hand toward one of the men. "A chair!"

He hesitated, looked at Horsten, and then obeyed. I sat down. So did Horsten. Joanna hovered by the desk, waiting. I read too well the look she gave the little devil. Some women are attracted by ugliness and viciousness and unscrupulous strength in a man. She—loved him!

I said, "You blundering fool, Horsten! If this is a sample of your plotting, the Firstman has damned little to worry about."

"Talk," he said. "Talk as you like. You'll end your talking soon enough."

"Not here. Not at your hands. I know you'd like to kill me, but I'm too valuable to die yet. Your men will realize that."

"Have you brought the guards here?"

Joanna broke in quickly. "I made certain we weren't followed."

"Then that's good." He nodded slowly.

I RAISED my hand. "Listen. I hadn't known of your organization till tonight. Only your blundering told me. I'd already decided to pull out—to leave the City, and not with the fleet, either. I've quarreled with Garson once too often. I waited only till Wellingham had finished his heat-ray model. Then I planned to leave,

go south and buy my safety with the Indiana folk. They'd be glad enough to have the heat-ray. They'd give me whatever I wanted. And with the heat ray I'd be safe from Garson."

"Indeed?"

"Listen and shut up. That was my best course because I'd no one behind me! I was looking out for myself. One man, alone, couldn't conquer the City, even with the ray. But you—well, let me guess your plans. You'll manufacture enough of the projectors to arm your men. You'll have a coup d'etat. With the Firstman dead, the Black Sun will go down. Was I on your murder list?"

Horsten's eyes flickered. I laughed.

"Sure. A knife in the back for me, and—the Firstman? No, you wouldn't dare risk that with him. He's too tough. Joanna—" I swung toward her. "What was your part in this? Poison?"

"I think you've talked enough," Horsten said.

His right hand was still hidden behind the desk.

"Not quite," I told him. "My talking can save your lives and your coup. I'm willing to throw in with you. You've got the projector and the men. As for me, the people trust me, and they don't trust you. Also, I've more brains than all of you."

"A generous offer," Joanna said.

"Very. I've commanded the Vikings for years. I've earned my place as Garson's right hand. I can save your lives now — if I want to. So. My plans are changed. I'll join you, but my orders must be obeyed."

Horsten's breath hissed between his teeth. "Kind of you, Ser Heath!"

"I'm not serving under you—you're



too stupid. Dangerously so. We must be on equal terms at least."

My bluff, I saw, was succeeding. I could not hope to convince Horsten, but his men were hesitating. And all I wanted now was time—a few minutes or an hour, I did not know how long.

Joanna gripped Horsten's arm. "You're not believing any of this!"

I turned to the men and said, with lashing contempt, "We want no women with us—except to obey our commands. They cannot be trusted. As for this wench, she's already betrayed you. She led me here. She should have let me kill her before that."

Joanna went white to the lips. She sprang up, leaping toward me, fingers clawed. I showed her my balled fist—and she stopped.

"John!" She was choking with humiliated fury. "You—you—let this swine—"

"Tell her to shut up," I said to Horsten. "I want to know your plans."

"Wait, Joanna," Horsten said smoothly. "There's time enough for everything." He turned to me. "I'm sure you'd like to know our plans. Ser Heath. But, you see, I'm not quite as stupid as you seem to think."

"I've no interest in the coup itself. Not till our arrangements are settled, at least. I'm talking about afterward. What then? Piracy?"

"Piracy? Why, we will continue—as always."

"Equality?"

He pulled at his lips. "Of course—for us. For our oligarchy. There must be serfs, of course. And we'll expand. We'll raid. We'll be more powerful than ever. We must be strong, to guard against attack. Be-

sides—" He smiled. "We shall attack. Garson is too soft. He holds his hand too often. My rule will be iron."

"The old line," I said. "A ruling class in a world of slaves. World dominion's your ultimate idea, I suppose."

"Yes."

"And yet you can't even steal an invention without leaving yourselves open to destruction. You're trapped now, Horsten—or you would be, if I hadn't come."

I caught a murmur from the men. Joanna said, "No one trailed us, I'm certain of that."

"When you kill—kill!" I told Horsten. "Sever the spine or smash the brain. Don't let your victims live till the guards arrive and he can talk."

"Wellingham?" Horsten said softly. His cold gaze flickered across the hall. "Someone blundered, eh? But you interfered, Ser Heath. You tried to block my men's escape."

"After they'd left Wellingham dying but still able to talk. How did I know who they were? I learned enough from Wellingham to find Joanna."

"Wellingham knew little. He did not tell you how to come here. You had to find that out from Joanna. The guards won't know, either."

"Wellingham knew. He fainted before he could tell me. I had to get out quickly because the guards were at the door. They've probably already got the truth from Wellingham, with adrenalin if necessary."

"Wellingham doesn't know the way here."

"He told me he did," I insisted. "I came to warn you, because I'm joining your organization. And by God, you need a man with brains!"

The soft sound of an alarm whirred suddenly from the shadows of the ceiling. I read the meaning in a dozen faces.

"That's the answer." I said, in the tingling silence. "Now no more talk. If you haven't provided an emergency exit, Horsten, you're more of a fool than I thought."

"There's no other way out," one of the men said.

I grinned at him. "If Horsten told you that, he lied. He looks out for his own skin. He might leave you here to die, but not himself. And he wouldn't leave you to talk to the guards, either."

They got the implication of that, and they didn't like it. Horsten, his face contorted, jerked his arm as he leaped to his feet.

"This way!" he said.

The alarm hummed monotonously from the darkness above.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Water Death

**A**S I had hoped, Horsten opened a drawer in the desk, and brought out a small dark satchel, with straps dangling from it. The heat-ray model — within reach, now. But Horsten held his gun ready, and Joanna, too, was watchful.

We went along a narrow passage that ended in a blank wall. Horsten opened a panel. It was another water-lock, with suits scattered around it.

"I did arrange for escape," he said. "And for everyone."

The mood of the men was changing. Had Horsten commanded them to shoot me down then, they would have obeyed. I saw that, and forestalled it

by action. There was a lever set in the wall; I knew its use.

There was a moment of confusion as the group hurried toward the pile of suits. I started to join them, spun, and dived toward the lever. Horsten yelled, and Joanna's shrill scream rang out. A bullet sang past me and splashed, star-shaped, on the wall.

Then the lever was cold against my palm, and I jerked it down strongly, closing the face-plate of my suit with my free hand.

Water spouted in from the opening valve, at first a single jet, than a feathery torrent, and at last a deluge. The lights carried by the men bobbed and swung. I saw Horsten snatch up a suit, rip the helmet free, and jerk it over his head. The others were busy, too. That was why they didn't kill me; they were too frantic trying to save their own lives.

All but Joanna. She already wore her suit, and had closed the face-plate as I did. She snatched up a gun someone had dropped and fired directly at me. I dived toward her, low, and we went down together, blinded by the cascading flood.

We were torn apart. I had marked Horsten's position, and floundered toward him. I got my hands on the straps of the satchel and pulled it free. I couldn't see Horsten for the chaos that filled the valve-room as the lake-water poured in.

A few lights danced like meteors gone mad. I was flung against the wall. By the time I regained my feet, the water was quiet, and the glowing globes were drifting down. A vague figure moved toward me, ebony against the undersea night.

I went, bending forward, toward the

mouth of the valve. A hand gripped my ankle. I kicked free. I felt bubbles crawl up my suit. A man was dying there . . . many were dying.

I felt cold and strung to wire-tense alertness.

Outside, in the open lake, I kicked the weights from my soles and shot up. There was little danger of the bends; there wasn't sufficient pressure. But I bobbed out of the water like a cork. Moonlight blinded me.

Not far away a Viking ship swung at anchor. Beyond it other masts and spars made slow-moving patterns against the purple sky.

I swam toward the anchor chain, opened my face-plate, and shouted. The lookout called. A mesh ladder was dropped overside. I went up it, clinging to the satchel.

I was recognized, of course. A big gray-haired man in uniform pushed through the crowd surrounding me.

"Ser Heath," he said. "Trouble?"

"A little. Drop a boat; I'm going ashore, Captain. And turn on a searchlight."

He saluted. The white ray swung across the waters. There were floating dark things; bodies. I wondered if Joanna and Horsten had died there, too, under the lake.

"Excitement ashore," Captain Daly told me. "I don't know what's stirring, but the guards are not. We're sailing south, though, aren't we, Ser?"

I didn't answer. I'd led the Vikings on too many raids in the past; they wouldn't understand my change of heart. I wasn't sure I understood it

myself. Only I was tired of following a blind god of destruction.

I looked up at the Black Sun banner floating in the cold wind.

THE boat took me to a jetty, and, still carrying the satchel, I saluted the Vikings and left them. My water-suit I had already discarded. A guard was lounging nearby. He sprang to attention as he saw me.

"Ser Heath!"

"What is happening?"

He pointed toward the lake. "Scientist Wellingham—killed. A bloody trail leading out to a quay. That's all I know; but there's something stirring, Ser."

I said, "Get me a horse. A good one—strong, and fast."

While he was gone I strapped the satchel securely to my back. My sword hung once more unhindered at my thigh. I could have used a rifle, but the guard did not have one, and I had little time.

I mounted. I scribbled on a scrap of paper and thrust it at the guard; it was written in the code that only Bob Garson and I knew. "Take this to the Firstman," I said. "Immediately."

He would be warned, at least, if Joanna and Horsten escaped death by drowning. He might not believe, but I knew he would investigate.

That would be enough.

I spurred the horse, a sturdy gray, built for endurance, and hoofs clattered as we galloped southward. Once I looked behind.

Above the plaza the Black Sun flag was straining, stiff as iron, in the chill blast from the lake.

I went on, cold and wet, and the ramparts of the City were lost behind me. Until now, I could have drawn

back. No more. The burden on my back was heavy.

What rode at my heels I did not know. It seemed to me that the riders of the apocalypse paced me, there in the windy shouting night along the lake shore, and that I galloped to the outrun dawn. For in Earth's morning sky rose a black sun.

To southward men were building again, and building in peace. The warring nations were long since dust. Humanity, wiser now, was rising from the ruins.

I knew the paths of power; for power is a raging drink that makes men mad. Ten years ago Bob Garson had been worthy of trust. Ten years hence . . . I looked in the future and saw the Firstman's golden banner flaming above scorched earth and bloody waters. The road runs straight; there is no turning back.

I had marked his rise. In ten years Garson would have extended his dominion, and the City would be the Rome of the Midwest. The Viking fleets and the armies would go forth to conquer . . . In the end, the result would be the same, whether Garson or John Horsten were at the reins. With Horsten the end would come more swiftly; that was all.

And above me as I rode, the great swelling curves of the earth rose on all sides. The fertile land that stood eternal and uncomplaining beneath tyrants and free men. Moonlight was luminous on the hills.

My horse stumbled and came down, and when I examined him I found that his leg was broken.

I shot him.

Then I went southward again, on foot.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## The Goblet of Power

LUCK had been against me from the start, probably. Unless I found another steed, I could not hope to reach Indiana. The white glow in the sky ahead marked the radioactive hell of Milwaukee; I had to detour around that. On a summit I paused and stared ahead. The ruined city was a lake of cold flame. From it a winding tongue of fire crept into the dark lake and faded; the river, alight with radioactivity, dissipating itself in the greater expanse.

I looked behind me, and there were horsemen racing swiftly on my track.

Once more I wished for a rifle. My knuckle-gun was good only for close-range work, and I had nothing else except cold steel. My pursuers had seen me. It was useless to seek cover. The horsemen circled, surrounding the knoll where I stood.

The Firstman's—or Horsten's men? I was not sure till I saw the Black Sun emblem on their cloaks. Even then, I thought, there might be traitors in Garson's ranks. And my lips twisted bitterly enough—for I knew of one traitor, at least!

I waited.

Rifles were leveled at my chest. The leader dismounted and walked toward me, one hand resting lightly on his pistol-butt. I recognized him.

"Lieutenant Mackay," I said.

"Ser Heath." He saluted. "I've orders from the Firstman. You must come back with us."

I felt the acrid taste of bitterness in my mouth. "All right," I said. "Here." I extended my sword, hilt first, but he shook his head.

"You're not a prisoner, Ser. But I must take this—" He slipped the sat-

chel from my back and strapped it under his golden cloak.

I saw worry and questioning in his eyes. Still, he was faithful to Garson, and I knew I could get no help from him. Amid the silent circle of men, I mounted, caught the reins, and fell in behind Mackay.

"You rank me, Ser. Will you lead?"

I nodded. The road back lay dark and empty before me.

We reached the City some hours after dawn, and I was escorted to my apartments, where I made a quick toilet. Garson was waiting for me, Mackay said, in Administration Hall. There I found him, at the head of the long table in the great room, with thirty others. Breakfast, like most other meals, was an event of state in the City.

Golden cloaks, starred with the Black Sun, flashed colorfully; the bright dresses of women were ranged like flowers along the table. Joanna was beside the Firstman, looking fresh and lovely. Her gaze met mine in a honey-colored flash of cold hatred, concealed instantly. Bob Garson was toying with a blown-glass goblet of wine. His face was somber.

From the looks cast at me, I judged that few knew of my flight. Garson beckoned. I came forward, and he rose, gripped my arm, and led me into the next room, a small sound-proof antechamber. My eyes went to the satchel on a side-table, and the guard standing beside it.

Garson said, "You may go now." The man saluted and left. I heard the door behind me open, and as I turned quickly, John Horsten came in.

At his heels was Joanna.

"Close the door," Garson said. He took a few strides back and forth, pulling at his beard. The morning sun-

light glistened on its glossy blackness. I waited.

After a time he jerked his hook at the satchel. "What about this, Dale?" he asked.

I shrugged.

His brows made a heavy bar, meeting above the nose. "Is that all?"

"When am I to be executed?" I said.

At that Garson thrust out his good arm and gripped my shoulder with agonizing painfulness. "I'm asking you questions, and I want answers. Joanna and Horsten have brought a charge against you. They called you traitor. I didn't believe it. But you were seen riding out of the City last night, and you had—this—with you." He indicated the satchel.

"All right."

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"I sent a message to you last night, Firstman, I named Joanna and Horsten traitors."

"I got no message—" he began, but Horsten interrupted smoothly.

"Heath is trying to throw dust in your eyes, Firstman. He knows he's trapped, and hopes to escape by discrediting his accusers." The thin shoulder rose in a shrug. "It is not wise of him. To accuse me—Well, I have no defense, except to say that he lies. But to accuse your wife—"

Joanna had drawn herself up and stood, proud, icy, implacable, watching us all.

Garson looked at her and then back at me. "Perhaps you should apologize to Joanna, Dale."

I felt slow, burning anger rising within me. "Sorry," I said. "I don't feel quite up to it. But I'll talk a bit, if I may."

**T**HE Firstman nodded slightly. I saw lines of strain on his harsh face.

"Very well," I said. "I'm no traitor.

I'm not even a complete turncoat. If I had been, I'd have killed you first; you were always my greatest danger."

The room filled with deadly silence as I paused.

I went on. "Ten years ago I believed in you and trusted you. I thought you wanted peace. I thought you wanted to rebuild civilization. But you don't — not the right way. You're riding a tiger now. These raids—they're unnecessary. The Indiana folk would have given us food for the winter—"

"They wanted weapons."

"And they need weapons. The wolves and cats and wild-dogs are destroying their crops. They're agriculturists. We're military scientists. What we needed was a treaty, not a raid. You're strong now; you can go on raiding and killing and looting, but it's sowing the whirlwind. Some day the tribes will unite and come against us."

"We have the weapons."

"Do you think I fear our destruction?" I snarled at him. "It would be a good thing if the City were smashed now! The seeds of war are right here! You can't see that now, Firstman, though you did once. You've been blinded with power. You've come to worship the City and your people."

He narrowed his eyes. "They are—my people."

"Different, then, from others? They're flesh and blood. And so are the Indiana folk — and all the rest. What right have you to set up your tribe as the rulers?"

"Should we give weapons to the Indiana group and let them attack us?" Horsten put in, smiling crookedly.

"They want only free trade with us. I know them. I've spoken to them.

As for the heat-ray—I planned to take that south and give it to the Indians."

"And he calls me traitor!" Horsten said.

I ignored him. "You'd not have dared make a Viking raid against heat-rays," I told Garson. "The Indiana folk would have been able to protect their crops from animals and from you."

The Firstman walked to the table and idly swung his hook against the satchel.

"This is our most powerful weapon," he said. "It must not leave our hands. For the rest, I think you are mad, Dale."

"I was mad. I'm saner now. In ten years you'll be the most hated tyrant in America."

"But the City will be safe."

"Safe as the Tower of Babel. Civilization should be rebuilt from a large base—not from one tiny group. But you can't see that, and you never will."

"We'll forget this matter," Garson said quietly. "You're still in command of the fleet, Dale."

"You can't buy my loyalty," I told him. "My mistake was in not killing you."

As I said it, I realized I was wrong. Had Garson died at my hands, John

Horsten would have taken over the reins of power. And there were no ideals, no matter how faltering, to check his course.

As long as Horsten lived—!

I caught the tail-end of a swift, complacent glance between Joanna and Horsten, and knew its meaning. They were safe. And, later, they would strike again.

Yes—Garson was the wrong man to rule. But far better than John Horsten!

In an instant, almost without thinking, I acted. I stepped forward and swung my palm viciously at Horsten's face. He had no time to dodge. The sharp crack of the blow sounded loud in the silence. Horsten staggered back, and his hand dropped to his side, reaching for a gun. A blazing deadly anger showed in Joanna's eyes—masked instantly.

Garson's hook caught Horsten's elbow. "No guns," he said, and looked at me.

I grinned. "Right," I said. "It's a challenge. No man of honor would draw back from a duel."

"Well?" Garson said.

Had Horsten been wiser, he would have crawled. But humiliation was like a boiling flood inside him. He had hated me too long, and he was psycho-

logically incapable of backing down now, with Joanna and the Firstman watching.

"I accept," he whispered, his sharp teeth bared.

**G**ARSON opened the door and called guards. "The duel," he said, indicating Horsten and me. "Make them ready."

And so we went into the great hall again, and halfway down it, to where two pillars were set about thirty feet apart. We were bound to these, our arms left free. All our weapons were removed, except for the misericordia each of us held in his right hand. The space between and behind us was cleared.

Duels were nothing new; the standards of military chivalry had caused the revival of the ancient custom. But a duel between John Horsten and Dale Heath was an event, and every eye at the long table was fixed on us with wondering attention.

Garson resumed his place, and a servant poured fresh wine into his goblet. Joanna slipped into a seat beside him.

I looked at Horsten. The man's thick lips were twisted in a grimace. I knew his quickness with the knife. I expected to die. But I knew also that I would take Horsten down into Limbo with me.

"When I count to five," the Firstman said. "One—"

The hilt of the misericordia felt like living flesh against my palm. I balanced it, caught it by the point for the fast spin throw, and waited.

"Two— Three—"

Horsten's eyes were sallow behind the pale lashes. I glanced again at the table.

I saw Joanna's hand flash to the

Firstman's goblet, and I saw a drop of clear liquid fall without a splash into the red wine.

"Four—"

Poison. And Garson had not seen. When he drank, he would die.

"Five!"

Horsten was tensed for the throw. I saw the muscles ripple along his thin, hairy arm.

I twisted in my bonds and snapped the dagger at Garson.

It flamed across the hall like light. My aim was good. The misericordia struck the goblet, smashed it, wine gushing in a crimson flood on the white cloth.

As I turned, I realized that Horsten had not made his throw. He was smiling, taking his time, now. From the table Joanna sent him a glance of agonized pleading. It was as if she cried, "Kill Heath! Kill him before he can talk!"

From golden-cloaked officers, from the brightly-dressed women, a low, murmuring cry went up. An attempt by Dale Heath to murder the Firstman . . .

Horsten raised his arm. Cold morning light glinted like ice on the knife-blade.

Something sprouted from his throat as I heard the dull thump of the blow. I saw the hilt of my own misericordia in Horsten's flesh.

He tried to scream. Blood gushed from his mouth, cascading down his breast. Quite suddenly he slumped in his bonds, while his knife dropped clattering to the floor.

At the table Garson's arm was still extended in throwing position.

Now he drew back. "Release Heath," he said shortly. As movement stirred beside him, his hook shot out and caught Joanna by the shoulder.



She was drawn toward him, her white face a Grecian mask of tragedy, mouth open in a silently screaming square.

Garson said, "You have an hour, Joanna. Take what you want and leave the City. If I see you again after that, I'll kill you."

Garson beckoned to me and, as my ropes were slashed, I followed him into the room adjoining. He closed the door on the amazed, questioning stares of the court.

But he did not speak for a while. He went to the window and stood looking out at something I could not see.

I said, "I'm still a traitor, by your standards."

"All right. You wouldn't kill me, though. She would have poisoned me."

"You saw—"

The heavy shoulders moved uneasily. "Of course. Your message last night reached me safely. I pretended I hadn't got it. I sent guards after you, and let Horsten and—and his accomplice play out their hands. I waited for them to betray themselves. If it had not worked out one way, I'd have used another method. Your challenge to Horsten brought matters to a climax."

I didn't answer.

Garson said, "Why the devil did you save me, when you knew Horsten would kill you, unarmed?"

"How the hell should I know?" I asked.

"Come here," he said, beckoning to me.

I went to the window, and he pointed out to where the banner of the Black Sun stood stiff and triumphant in the morning wind. Beyond it the Viking fleet stood at anchor, leashed gray destroyers.

"I need your help, Dale," he said. "I can't let you go now, if I ever could. Civilization must be rebuilt."

"On sand?"

The black beard juttet. "You're soft-hearted. But there'll be no raids this year. Indiana's safe. We'll get food somewhere — live on short rations, if we have to. I owe you that much, at least."

I said nothing. I saw his gaze fasten on the flag out there, and felt the intolerable pride on every line of his iron face.

"You could have killed me," he said. "And you didn't."

Suddenly I felt sick and weak, and my throat was clamped shut.

"We'll work it out somehow," Garson said.

And after a moment or two I nodded.

That was a year ago.

Garson has kept his word. There were no raids during the winter. But the scientists in the City made new weapons. There are many heat-ray projectors now. And I know what that means.

Firstman Garson had gone too far along the road of power to see anything but the mirage at its end. There were no raids last year, but there will be raids again.

Garson is my friend, and he trusts me; but I know that he is the Enemy. When I drank wine with him yesterday, I could scarcely down the bitter stuff, for all the while I was thinking that the mad, drunken lust for power was in every cup that Garson drained, every crumb he ate, every breath he took. We drank together, and as we did, the thought was suddenly certain in my mind.

Some day I must kill him.