

# FUTURE FICTION

Vol. 1, No. 3



July, 1940

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# THE CITY UNDER THE SEA

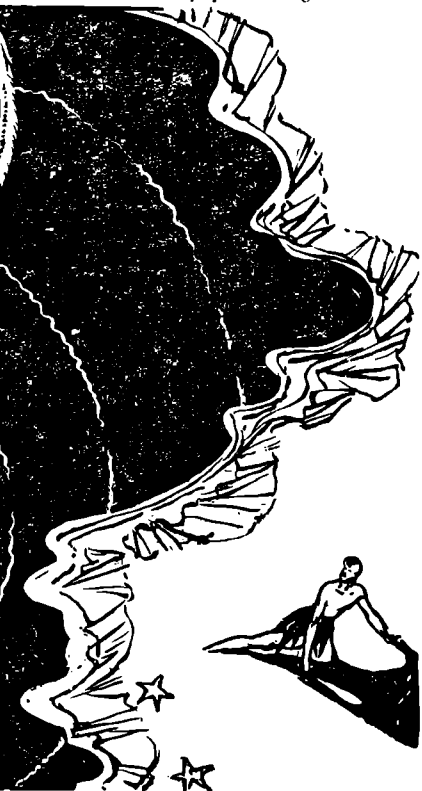
by DUANE W. RIMEL

Two men of the modern world are cast into a strange undersea kingdom!—Belton, traitor to the surface world, who plans to conspire with the rulers of the lost city to use their super-science against the nations of the upperworld—and Huffman, who fights a hopeless battle to save his world from ruin!



I KNOW that my story of the lost race will sound incredible, but you must believe it. I have waited many years to tell this—waited so that I could present a picture undistorted by imagination and nightmare—waited and hoped that time would dim that horror and the exquisite memory of a love forever lost. No balm will heal that wound, no drug nor bottle can ever let me forget Ala the wondrous—

*It was more than a wave . . . a monstrous column of pale sea-green!*



MESKIN

Ala, the beautiful creature from the city beneath the sea. And sometimes, I am glad that I can remember . . .

The curious wine-colored diving suit hangs in my study today, and locked within my safe is the slip of vellum covered with odd hieroglyphics that no etymologist can decipher. It is best, perhaps, that they cannot, for the world is yet too savage and warlike to use such knowledge wisely. Scientists who have examined the diving suit admit that it is decades ahead of anything on the market today, but they think some crank invented it! Let them laugh; some day that race of super-men beneath Khersoness will arise and astound the world!

The episode began on the floor of the Black Sea, two miles from Sebastopol. I was a diver with the Grinevich Expedition, tabulating certain information concerning the ancient Greek city of Khersoness, which sank beneath the sea two thousand years ago. We were sending information—by phones in our helmets—to technicians and draftsmen on the “mother ship,” who were drawing maps of the place.

WHILE the dredging and exploration was under way, you may have read Consolidated Press items regarding two divers who were lost and reported dead, their cables and air-hoses mysteriously slashed on the ocean bottom. These men were Kurt Belton and Jon Huffmann, an American. Then three days later, you doubtless read about the man picked up on a desert isle near Sebastopol—a man carrying a strange diving suit and professing to be one Jon Huffmann. You may have joined the press in smiling at his wild tales of a vast undersea city, where he had lived, he said, the whole time since his disappearance. The world would not believe that this man was Huffmann, although his resemblance to photographs of the original Jon was striking. And then the world sighed and forgot the raving lunatic. *I* was that man.

Our work was slow and tedious. I had

bluffed my way into the service through the influence of my friend, Kurt Belton, a Baravianian, and an experienced diver. Later I regretted my boldness. I knew little about under-sea operations, but Belton and I usually worked together, and he knew enough to keep me on for three weeks—until the curious accident occurred.

That day we were assigned to a deeper and unexplored area, where visibility was poor and verbal description difficult. We moved slowly through deep silt, seeing, amidst fantastic clumps of vegetation, great, lichen-covered pillars, dating unmistakably from the Hellenistic period, yet so obscured by debris that accurate observation was almost impossible. The ocean floor was unusually rough\*. Suddenly Belton lifted his arm; a danger signal.

I WADED toward him. He pointed down, close to his metal-shod feet. The beam from my torch lit his helmet. His round face beyond the barred glass seemed excited. I looked. His light revealed a wide stairway slanting downward into the watery gloom of a large cavern. Over twenty feet below the steps ended, and the passage turned at right angles. A stair so remarkably preserved and so free of rubble was amazing, uncanny. No current swirled from this puzzling shaft.

Belton touched my arm, motioned that he would descend. I started to give an account over the phone, but he halted me with a familiar gesture. This was against regulations, but, why not? My friend called for more cable and started down, his torch gleaming weirdly on the steps, which I noticed were rounded and worn, as if from centuries of use. What kept the tunnel so clean?

I followed, telling Uroff we were entering a deep ravine. We went downward slowly, came to the bottom of the stair and turned. No debris blocked our way. Incredible!

Our lights stabbed ahead, revealing a side

stone corridor. Dark, unfamiliar fish darted past. The passage continued for perhaps thirty feet, and ended, at a door. At least, it appeared to be a door.

We advanced cautiously, keeping our cables and air-lines free. Belton touched the smooth stone obstruction, flashed his torch over it. Then I saw a handle—a curious protuberance which did not resemble any we had seen in the sunken city above. Belton reached for it. I had a sudden impulse to stay his hand, and later I cursed myself for not doing so. I felt that we were entering a forbidden place. But I was eager as he to explore the mystery.

Belton tugged. The door moved, outward! I helped, and the crack widened. Our torches lit another passage, like the first. Its walls, too, were polished clean.

We moved slowly. Our cables were getting heavy. We couldn't go much further. Something in front of us moved. We halted. At the end of the corridor a stone slab was opening! Then we saw the impossible!

Two red-helmeted figures appeared as if by magic from behind the massive portal—*human* figures. They held strange weapons. Pink lights on top of their shiny helmets illuminated the entire tunnel, dwarfing our yellow beams. Only their eyes were visible.

They indicated, by odd motions, that we surrender. I was so dumfounded, I could not move or think. Belton's hand started toward the metal hook at his belt. From the weapons flashed two bright blue rays. They struck his helmet, and he slumped, his face twisted with pain. Slowly he fell to the stone floor. Damn them; had they killed him? I moved toward him, but the figure ahead waved its gun. I decided to stand still.

They came forward cautiously. The leader motioned at the door behind him. I walked. The second creature seized Belton and dragged him like a sack of grain. Suddenly I came to my senses. I shouted into my phone. I waited. No reply. I tried

again, but no welcome voice rang in my ears. The line was dead . . . shorted, perhaps, by the strange blue ray, which seemed to be some kind of an electrical impulse.

I was guided to the stone door whence they had emerged. Intelligent beings here—beneath the Black Sea? Weird beams of light that killed at a distance . . . Had they killed? Poor Belton lay face downward, limp, unmoving. I cursed and prayed for a chance to strike back.

The door opened. Beyond it I glimpsed other red-suited figures! Madness to turn on my guard. I was outnumbered, and the men were swift and sure in their movements, as if they had lived in water all their lives.

Bewildered and amazed, I was pushed through the doorway. We entered a square room, lighted by red nodes on the ceiling. The two men who captured us moved toward the door, began closing it. My air-line would be smashed!—Belton's, too. If he still lived . . . These red suits had no attachments.

The door closed. At that instant, the leader raised his arm and a ray of blue stabbed me. My brain turned to ice. I slipped and fell into a great abyss.

I AWOKE slowly, painfully. My ears roared, my head seemed to be sheathed in snow which melted drop by drop to release my jangled thoughts. I was lying on my back, breathing air. No helmet—no diving suit . . . Where in hell? I opened my eyes; sat up. Weird, red light slanted through barred windows in the ceiling. Four stone walls surrounded me. I was alone. The blue ray must have had a paralyzing effect only. If so, was Belton alive?

Soft paddings sounded overhead—strange, inaudible voices. A section of the ceiling moved. I scrambled to my feet, swaying drunkenly. My head sang and I fought nausea. A narrow ladder was lowered, and a face bulked into that square of red light—an angular, evil face, white as

alabaster. The man held a weapon. Another blue-ray gun?

"Come up," said the creature, in English—my native tongue—here! I shook my head dazedly and climbed the ladder, stepped upon the smooth floor of a slender corridor. The man held my attention instantly. He was about five feet eight, frail of body, and had the whitest skin I ever saw. A black, square-cut beard jutted from his chin. His prominent cheek-bones, long thin nose and lean face reminded me of pictures of ancient Greeks or Egyptians. He wore a loose yellow cap over raven locks that hung to his shoulders; yellow jacket, and shorts that ended above his knees. His broad forehead and deep-set, piercing eyes denoted intelligence.

I rubbed my chin—a three-day growth of beard. Had I lain in that hole all the time?

The stranger smiled wryly. "Walk, Mr. Huffmann," he said, in clipped, precise English.

"Who in blazes are you?" I snarled. "Where am I?"

"Proceed," he said stonily.

I watched for a chance to dig my thumbs in his lean neck, but the gun was on me. I walked down the corridor.

We passed many branching avenues and curtained doorways. Bright red lights were everywhere. Finally we came to an ornately carved panel that reminded me of certain Egyptian bas-reliefs. Yet, these were different, almost alien—a departure from all orthodox or worldly designs. Armed guards beside the door stared at me curiously and sneered.

The jailer opened the carved rectangle. I faced a great assembly room. Several natives stood beside a raised platform, which was draped beautifully with purple satin. In a chair on the rostrum sat a middle-aged man whose distinguished look and bearing set him head and shoulders above the men around him. And beside that man was—Belton!

#### TRAITOR TO THE SURFACE WORLD

I RAN forward. "Belton! You old son-of-a-gun! Where—"

"Halt!" the guard shouted, leaping in front of me. "You will say nothing until King Khorlu asks you a question."

Belton did not smile or raise a hand. He was garbed in their hateful yellow! What ailed him? The guard ushered me nearer the throne, but the Baravianian would not look at me.

"You are here to be sentenced for trespassing on the kingdom of Altair!" Khorlu said sternly. His pale, thin lips writhed into a grin; his bleak eyes blazed fiercely.

"Wait!" I cried. "What about Kurt—?"

"Silence!" roared the guard. "You heard. Bellow again, and I will blast off your ears!"

Pent-up rage stormed my brain. The throne room wavered and seemed to dance. I was weak, weak . . . I staggered, righted myself before I fell. The gravity seemed tremendous. How deep in the earth were we?

The King's voice came faintly. "—put in a suit and given one hour's supply of oxygen. If you find the land of the sun, you may live. Guard, take him away. His ignorant rage no longer amuses me."

I retreated, shaking my fist. Curse Belton! The black-hearted traitor smiled as the jailer dragged me away. How had he squirmed into the King's confidence?

Hours later, in my cell, I was awakened by a light tapping overhead. I crawled from the cold stone floor, weak and dizzy. Food and drink had been given me, but I was still ravenous. The tapping came again.

"Who's there?" I growled.

"Quiet," said a soft voice.

I peered upward. Beyond the bars I saw a small, delicate face. A woman! She held her finger to her lips. I could see little more than a dim silhouette, but her manner gave me hope.

"Mister Huffmann?" Her voice was rich, vibrant.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"I saw you today—in the throne-room. I think I can help—"

"Listen," I snapped. "If this is a trick, get out!"

"Hush," she whispered, patiently. "Someone will hear you. I sent the guard on an errand to the laboratories. He won't be gone long." She pressed a package through the bars.

"Here is more food. I know what they give prisoners."

The fragrant odor of cooked meat tempted me to wolf it on the spot. Maybe she was telling the truth . . .

"How can I get out of here?" I inquired.

She sighed. "That is difficult, but I think I know a way. Here is a red-ray gun. It should melt the bars. You will have to be very careful—" She passed the strange pistol to me. I seized it, gloating—far from freedom, but a fighting chance.

"You are my savior!" I choked. "What is your name?"

"Ala, of the First—" She paused as if afraid to finish.

"Call me Jon, if you wish," I said.

"I like that," she said simply. "Now listen closely while I tell you where to go, and how to reach the air-locks—if you get out. I wish I could go with you, but that is impossible . . ."

I listened. My life depended on it. "I have a paid assistant at the gates," she continued. "He has a suit hidden there for you, with enough oxygen for many days. You can surely reach the island above Altair. It isn't far and our suits are light."

"How will I recognize this—paid man?"

"Don't worry; he will recognize you and show you where the equipment is. After that, you take your own chances."

"Wait," I said. "What about Belton? Is he crazy?"

"He and Khorlu have large plans."

"Plans—"

"Yes. They are going to conquer Russia."

Her simple statement flooded me. Then I laughed.

SHE shook her head. "You make fun of me. I mean what I say. My people are very wise. They know things about the sea that your races never suspect. They know how to *control* it; make it live and work."

"Water—*alive*?" I snorted. "You're crazy. Water has no body; no—"

"It is true, I tell you!" she flared. "Long ago my people discovered the secret of the atom's power and the formula that moulds water and makes it alive. The Guardian of the Secret can make water monsters, and my people command them, as you did your negroes before the Civil War."

"You know American history?"

"We learn many things here, Jon."

"So Belton and Khorlu are going to conquer Russia—with water . . ."

"It can be done," she said emphatically. "There are no size limitations."

Cold water seemed to trickle down my back. Great God! The entire world would be thrown into a panic. Monstrous columns of water sweeping over cities; killing, crushing . . .

"I can't leave now," I groaned. "Not with all that—"

"No!" she cried. "You must do as I say—go to the gates as quickly as you can. This is the sleeping period. The time for your banishment is not far off—two hours by your count. Promise me you will go. I will take care of Belton."

"How?" I demanded. "If what you say is true, what can you do against a king and a madman?"

"Never mind," she said. "I know a way. Will you promise?"

"All right," I said, reluctantly. "If you kill that traitor, it's okay with me. Wait. Why are you so kind to me, an outsider?"

"That is a mystery, perhaps," she said, looking away. The scarlet light made her dark hair a halo of lambent flame. An in-

toxicating perfume stole into my cell.

"How long has your race lived here?" I inquired.

"For ages and ages, Jon. They came to Crimea from ancient Egypt, a small band of adventurers who foresaw the decay of their civilization in Africa. They established a city where Khersoness once stood. Then the Greeks filtered in and began driving them out. Xando, a great leader of ours, conceived the fantastic plan of living under the sea. He was very wise and worked half his life on the idea. At last he and his followers had a small retreat built, which he called Altair. Some of my ancestors had mingled with the Greeks and would not go, but a handful of the faithful retreated from the land of the sun, and we, their ancestors, are here today.

"Later the Greeks became very powerful, and my people heard that they were planning to destroy us, because we had grown and flourished and they were afraid of us. Meanwhile my people had discovered the Secret of the Water. Before the Greeks could strike (exactly *how* they were going to destroy us I have never learned) our scientists sent great water things to the city. They undermined it, and Khersoness sank beneath the waves. No nation has troubled us since that day—"

"By the Great Father!" I swore. "I wish Grinevich knew about that—"

"Listen!" she hissed. "The guard is coming. I must go. Good-by, Jon—" Her voice sounded queer.

"So long, Ala," I said. "You're a peach."

Then she was gone, swiftly as a shadow. Strange girl . . .

I heard the guard's footsteps. I crouched on the floor, the queer weapon in my hand. Melt the bars? Why not kill the guard and snatch the keys? I waited tensely, but the man did not come near the barred windows. The footfalls retreated and a tomb-like silence shrouded my cell.

I gulped the food and the flagon of sweet wine. Hope surged like fire in my

veins. Seizing the weapon, I held it close to the center bar and squeezed the trigger. A piercing red beam shot from the black muzzle. I focused the ray at one end of the bar. The metal smoked and turned crimson. White drops splashed on the stone floor, and I had to step lively. The bar came in two. Then I melted the other end and the red-hot rod fell to the floor with a clatter. I eased up on the trigger. How long would this flame-ray work? I shuddered when I realized what it could do to flesh and bone. Had the guard heard the commotion?

I STUFFED the gun into my overalls and leaped at the two remaining bars. There was room to squeeze between them. I hoisted my legs through and squirmed out upon the floor. No one was in sight. I sneaked along the dim, red corridor, found the door Ala had indicated. It was unlocked. I threw it open—a curtained room, low divans against the frescoed walls. Empty.

I strode across the deep carpet, ray-gun held ready. Cautiously I parted the curtain that led to the next corridor. I saw two armed guards, walking toward me. They would pass the aperture. I slipped the curtain into place and backed against the wall. My legs struck something. A stool! I tottered and fell into the curtain. The men shouted.

I leaped backward and crouched. They smashed into the veil. I ripped the cloth away and fired. The first man screamed and crumpled. Caught off balance, the second guard released a blast. The gauze near my neck flamed and I returned his fire. His white face contorted and he slid to the floor, a great hole scorched in his chest. Blood gushed on the purple carpet. I shuddered. Killing wasn't my game, but . . .

Along the brilliant corridor I ran. So far I had found the place as Ala had described it. Every second counted now.

Soon the dead men would be found, an alarm sounded. I raced on. Suddenly I heard a familiar voice, and I halted, breathing deeply. Red anger engulfed me. That voice was Belton's.

Beyond a curtained doorway the traitor was speaking, in Baravianian. I moved toward the sound and listened.

" . . . ready in twenty-four hours. I'll return and direct the land and air forces. Our armies are ready to seize the Ukan. You advance from the sea. We'll attack together. Once Russia falls we'll go on! Nothing can stop us!"

The man was mad . . .

"That is fine," came another voice. Khorlu. "But you cannot have the Secret."

"Why not?" Belton demanded. "Your scientists can make a copy. I promise that Barvania will not use it, but our military authorities should know what you are going to do, and how . . ."

"No. Years ago, Lennox the Great discovered the Secret of the power over water. But he did not *write* the formula. He knew it was a dangerous thing. Instead, he told it to two men, who were sworn to silence save at the nation's peril. These men are permitted, by law, to create small water-slaves for our own use. We have made no giant ones for ages. However, since Russia is planning to blow us to bits, I think it wise to attack first. You can do what you like with the land. *We* don't want it!"

"That's great," Belton grunted. "Who are those two men that possess the knowledge?"

Khorlu laughed, a thin, mocking laugh. "That, too, is a mystery. But never fear; the monsters will be made, and we shall conquer the Ukan. They will frighten the enemy so badly you can march in without firing a shot!"

"You have strange customs, Khorlu."

"Strange, to you, perhaps; but just."

I pressed closer to the curtain.

"None of your people know who the

Guardians are?" Belton inquired, his voice somewhat thick.

"Only a chosen few. And those who know it not are silent about it. Naturally I know— Why are you so interested? I've told you I will never part with that information—"

"*You* never will?" Belton snarled. "So. I thought as much! Back against that wall. Quick! Now tell me or I'll blast you to hell!"

"Curse you!" Khorlu screamed. "You sneaking skunk!"

"Shut up. Tell me—and hurry! Better yet, write it on a piece of paper. Here. At this desk. Now, damn you, write!"

What to do? Enter now? Belton's gun must be out. I crouched and listened. The scratch of a pen. . . . Khorlu was writing the Secret that would give Barvania a weapon against the world. . . .

I parted the curtain, slowly. Khorlu was poised over a small desk, writing furiously. His captor's back was turned

"Drop that gun!" I barked.

Belton spun. I fired at his hand. The metal weapon burst; he staggered backward. I should have killed him then, but memories of our friendship stabbed me, made me falter. Khorlu bounded to his feet.

"Hold!" I snapped, as his hand snaked toward the slip of paper.

"I'll take that," I said, walking to the desk. I folded the thick vellum and put it in my shirt pocket. The king trembled, his pale face knotted with rage.

#### STRUGGLE IN THE UNDERWORLD

**A** CLAMOR sounded in the hall behind me. Guards had found the bodies. Feet raced along the corridor. Khorlu smiled. Belton's face was ashen; he nursed his bleeding hand and swore.

The curtain ripped. I wheeled as Khorlu laughed. I wanted to blast him, but . . . the doorway belched three armed



men. I burned the foremost. The second guard blazed at the light node on the ceiling. Darkness. . . .

I leaped and slid behind a couch. Red beams seared the floor where I had stood an instant before. Bodies thudded about the room; hoarse screams rattled on my ear drums. I saw the doorway, barely visible in the murky darkness, and lunged for it. I caromed into a man. We locked arms and went down, pounding and threshing. My gun was booted from my hand.

"Here he is!" the man cried.

I fought like a demon, but clawed fingers and writhing bodies hammered me to the floor. A spiked boot crushed my right hand. Something struck my head and I went limp. I was conscious, but couldn't move a finger. Deft hands bound my wrists and ankles. Hope dashed. . . . I had the Secret, but for how long? My head whirled; my body ached from the terrific mauling. I was dragged across the floor. The lights were on, but I couldn't open my eyes.

Someone cried. "Where is Khorlu? Where is Belton?"

"Look!" shouted another. "There on the floor is the king's cape—"

"He has been carried off!"

"Belton—"

"Take this prisoner—lock him up. I'll sweat that guard later. We go to search for Khorlu!"

I fainted.

**A**WARENESS returned. Two guards were hustling me along the dim, red corridor that led to the prison. I was weak and dazed, my mangled hand bled and throbbed savagely. One man held me while the other opened a door in the floor. I was pushed to the edge of the pit, hurled downward. The floor crashed into me. My bruised body screamed as I tried to crawl. I lay still, sick with nausea. The guards tramped away. Silence.

Where had Khorlu gone? Had Belton

seized him? I had the Secret. The guards hadn't known about that. Perhaps it wasn't the Secret. Khorlu was tricky. Belton was desperate—no telling what he'd do. Russia planning to attack Altair? They didn't know the place existed, didn't care! Another lie of Belton's.

A tapping on the bars above startled me. I rolled over and groaned as my broken hand slapped the cold stone.

"Jon! Jon!" said a soft voice. "Are you there?"

I grunted.

"Oh! I stole the keys. You must come—quickly!" I heard a faint click; the grate rattled and raised. She lowered the ladder. I wobbled to my knees, giddy and exhausted. My throat burned.

I seized the ladder and climbed, using my left hand. "Ala! You have saved me again!"

She gripped my hand, pulled me out on the floor.

"You are hurt, Jon— But you *must* hurry! Guards are running everywhere. Khorlu is missing. . . ."

"How did you know I was here?"

"I took a chance—you never came to the gates." She pressed a ray-gun into my left hand. "Follow me, Jon. I think we can reach the air-locks."

She crossed the hall, touched a spot in the queer, decorated wall. A whirring noise, and a small door appeared! Taking my arm, she led me into a well of blackness. Her flashlight gleamed on a steep, winding stair. We sneaked aloft, swiftly. My head cleared as new hope burned within me. She led on; I thought the steps would never end. I gasped and panted as strength ebbed in a flood.

At last we stood before a door. Ala put her ear to it. Her pale, lovely face was drawn with fear. Poor kid! Her curved lips trembled.

"There is a great commotion at the locks; we cannot go now. Khorlu must be missing still."

"Why didn't you tell me about this stair?" I inquired, admiring her slim, voluptuous figure beneath the gauzy robe.

"You couldn't have opened the secret door—"

"We've got to go," I said. "If you want to save Khorlu. I think Belton abducted him."

"Oh, no!" she cried, her dark eyes flashing. "That would be sacrilege!"

"Belton is mad," I snapped. "He'd do anything to get the Secret. When he found out Khorlu knew, he seized him." I didn't think it wise to mention the slip of paper. . . .

"How did you know this, Jon?"

I told her about the wild episode in Khorlu's chambers.

"That is awful," she said. "Perhaps I should have let you know before . . . Khorlu is my father."

For an instant I was stunned. "Great Lord! Now we've got to find him—"

"Listen—hear the men? They are organizing an expedition out into the sea, to look for my father. He is not in Altair . . . that is what they say."

"I was afraid of that," I said. "But how am I going to get a diving suit with all that going on?"

"We shall have to wait until the men are gone. They will leave a guard, but I think I can go out and get a suit without arousing suspicion."

"That will work," I replied, "if they don't discover you're helping their prisoner escape—"

**S**HE stood rigidly beside the door, listening. The noises and voices subsided. She turned and clutched my arm.

"I will try—" she whispered. I started to grab her, but she opened the door and went through. I waited, uneasily: no sounds beyond the panels. If they knew— The awful quiet jangled my nerves. I reached for the door; suddenly it burst open. Ala staggered through under the weight of two

suits. I slammed the door and bolted it.

"All is clear, so far," she panted, dropping the gear. Swiftly we donned the suits. They were light but durable, more seaworthy than any diving suits I had ever seen—no cables or air hoses, condensed oxygen; unique sponges to absorb waste gases. Ingenious. Once the helmets were screwed in place, I was startled by Ala's voice. The suits had radio hook-ups!

"Follow me, Jon, and do what I do. We are joining the expedition to search for Khorlu. Only your eyes are visible—you should not be recognized. When we get beyond the gates, watch your chance and head for the surface. Remember the small island. You can make that easily."

"Ala," I stammered. "I hate to leave you—like this. Let me help search for your father. If they find out you helped me, you'll be killed for treason—"

"Perhaps," her soft voice replied. "I won't leave you, Jon, if you don't want me to—"

"Ala, darling—" I gripped her shoulders and wished I'd come to my senses sooner. Now we were in suits. . . . I opened the door.

We walked boldly into a wide, familiar corridor. Two helmeted guards eyed us suspiciously. I tried to move without limping. My gun was back there, behind that door. Having it might spoil our chances of escape. . . . And the red-ray guns were useless in water.

Ala crossed the floor, approached the airlocks and pressed a button that sprouted from a decorated switchboard. The huge, transparent door lifted. We slipped into the narrow compartment between it and the gate that held back the sea. The panel behind us lowered, operated, I guessed, by a timed, automatic device. Would the guards get wise? I dared not look at them. I adjusted my gear as water gushed from vents in the floor. Soon it covered us. Ala looked at me, and her dark eyes seemed to smile.

I glanced at the suited guards beyond the

door. They had come very near, but the churning water made them mere blurred shadows. The chamber filled and the water quieted. The guards watched me closely. One of them leaped forward; pointed at my right arm. I looked down—a red stain on the rubber suit. I'd been careless putting it on. Ala, too, had seen.

One man sprang to the controls. The second gate lifted two feet—and stopped. Ala touched my arm, and we dove at the crack. I pushed her through, but not all the way. She wouldn't budge from beneath the heavy jamb.

"Hurry, Jon!" her strained voice rang in my ear-phones.

The gate inched downward, stopped again. They saw her lying under the gate. Would they lower it—on the princess? I snatched her hand, but the obstinate little fool wouldn't budge. Risking her life to save me. . . .

I crawled under the portal. Suddenly it moved—down. They were going to do it! I seized her arms; dragged her through. Her right foot caught. Barely six inches left. . . . I gave a mighty tug. Her metal-shod foot came free, but a small rip appeared in the rubber at her ankle!

Ala gripped her leg, tried to hold back the water. I found a small rope at my belt, and swiftly tied it below her knee, above the break. It might hold. . . . Her eyes seemed to mirror fear and pain. She stood, slowly; raised her arms, and made strange motions in the water.

The guards were emptying the lock. They were following. I seized her arm and pulled her along the corridor.

**S**UDDENLY the water near me moved, as if alive! No currents here—we had not passed the second door. . . . A mighty, invisible claw gripped me, lifted Ala from the floor. We were hurled along the sea-green tunnel. The huge door ahead opened as if a great hand had struck it. We flew on into blackness. The dark stair swirled

beneath us; the ocean floor. . . . What dark power was this?

We swept upward in the clutch of that monster. Water monster? Great God! Was this the thing Belton sought? Ala the other Guardian? No time to marvel or speculate further. It happened too quickly.

We were thrown on a sandy beach. I gasped. Coming upward so swiftly we'd have the "bends" for certain. . . . But I was able to move.

"Ala! Are you all right?"

No answer in my phones. I clambered to my feet. She lay very still, eyes closed. I unscrewed her helmet, ripped away the suit. I lifted her and carried her to dry sand. She was soaked; water ran from her nose and mouth. Her pale, lovely face was blue. . . .

I turned her over, gently, and gave her artificial respiration. I worked for long, agonizing moments. She quivered and coughed, spat pink water. She gulped air. The poor girl was suffering terribly.

"Ala," I cried. "Are you better—are you—"

Her eyelids fluttered and opened. She tried to smile. Brave darling! I held her hands and realized suddenly that my suit was still on! I scrambled out of it, and the cold struck me like a knife. No wonder her face was blue! Three days in that heated madland had made me soft. The sun was setting. On the tiny island grew shrubs and stunted trees. I must build a fire. . . .

Above the wash of the surf, a voice cracked. "Hold it, Huffmann! You're covered."

I turned. Belton! His round, sallow face puckered into a grin.

"Damn your black heart!" I screamed. "If it hadn't been for you—"

He laughed. "Take it easy, Jon. All I want is that slip of paper. Then I can turn old Khorlu loose—if he ever wakes up. I got him back on the island."

"To hell with you!" I snarled.

His ray-gun came nearer, as a sneer twisted his whiskered face. "Listen, Huff, I want that paper, and I don't care how I get it. Hand it over!"

I prayed for a chance to fight. Ala had fallen unconscious again. Belton advanced, smiling. I lunged.

**H**IS gun jerked up—but no blast scorched me. A click. The thing was dead. I smashed a left to his jaw that sent him spinning. He crouched and tackled. I ducked and caught his wrist. I knew I had to use a trick; my right hand was useless. We went down, and I twisted his arm as we rolled in the sand. He wrenched free, smashed me in the mouth. I was weak—couldn't last long.

He held me down, his fists jabbing my jaw. I twisted and seized his arm. He broke the hold and hammered me again. I was sinking. . . .

Suddenly Ala screamed. Belton quit pounding as the roar of water seemed to bear down upon us. He cursed and jumped away. I rolled and opened my eyes.

A great wave cascaded around me, washing over Belton and Ala! It was more than a wave—a monstrous column of pale sea-

green that rippled across the sand like a huge snake. It writhed near me, but did not touch me; then it slithered toward the pounding surf. In that mountain of water were Ala, Khorlu and Belton!

"Ala! Ala!" I screamed as the tentacle parted the waves. I had a last glimpse of the curious trio before the sea claimed them. And I thought I saw Ala lift her hand. . . . Then they were gone. The ocean near the beach heaved and whirled strangely, and the green waves rolled across the sand, as they had rolled for ages.

Khorlu had awakened on the island, and had returned for revenge!

The following day a whaling ship out of Sebastopol sighted my crude flag and took me aboard. Later, I made my way to America on a tramp steamer.

As I said at the beginning, no one will believe my story—not that it matters, really, for Belton's mad dreams of empire are vanished, and the world is safe from that watery horror, and the Kingdom of Altair. Is Ala dead, or still living in that lost empire beneath Khersoness? Some day, perhaps, I shall try to return, but deep in my heart I know that I shall never see her again.