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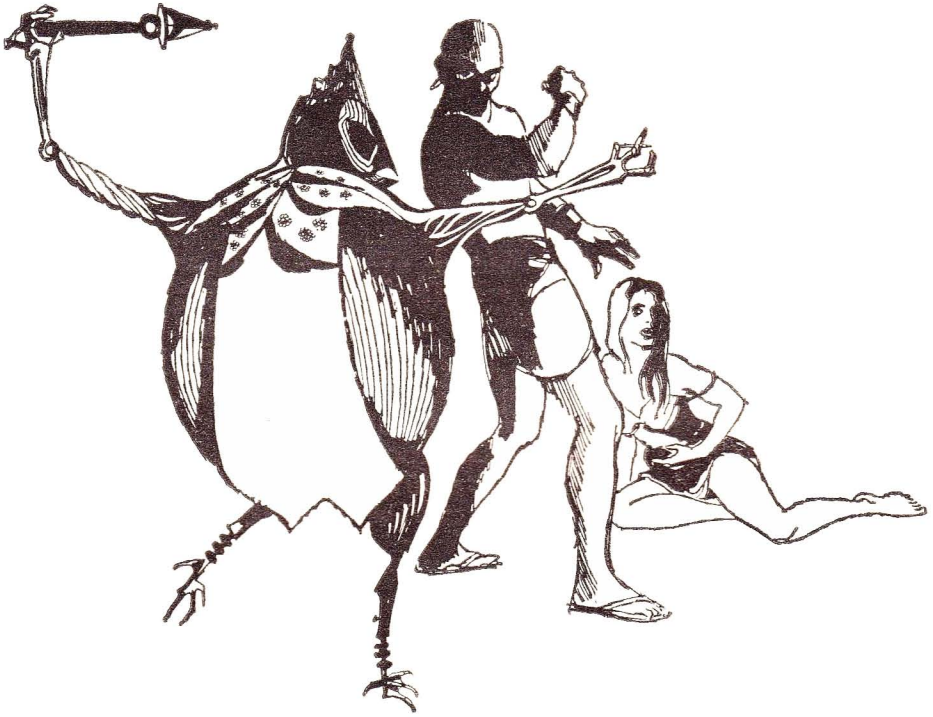
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The Gladiator

by THOMAS PYNE

THE SLOW moving freighter flew east over the weed-grown devastations of earth riding the puff of its airjets just above the ground. Hissing loudly in the night air, it nosed upward, its string of loaded platforms streaming smoothly behind, as it rose above the mound of a burned-out city. The binding lines creaked as the weight of the cages shifted. The last platform tossed in a wind turbulence and a chain snapped. One of the immense iron-barred cages slid to the edge and tumbled over before the autogyro could right the platform. The cage, carrying its helpless occupants, thudded to the ground tumbling down the rubble-strewn slope to land heavily on its side. The freighter flew on, the Antad guards unmindful of their loss.

Inside the cage the gladiators stirred testing their limbs. They were all half naked, wearing only breechcloths on their muscular bodies. Some, unable to rise, lay moaning in

pain or unconscious. Those that were able braced themselves against the crazily tilted sides and got to their feet. No one spoke. They simply stood there staring up at the empty sky, the moonlight striping their fear-filled faces with the shadows of the thick iron bars. Finally one man spoke the thought that was in all their minds.

"It may be hours before they miss us and come back. We won't reach the arena in time."

It was a broken, hysterical whisper splitting the silence. It triggered a babble of frightened voices: "The Imperial Games!... Lord Jak will be in a rage... Another whipping will kill me... Why didn't they hear?... I shouted... Damn that broken chain..."

An injured man screamed in pain as the pile of bodies in the lowest corner jerked convulsively and a huge figure fought free. Even for a gladiator this was a monstrous man.

He stood a head taller than those around him, every muscle in his sloping shoulders and deep chest bulging round and hard in the pale light. His breech-clout, like all the rest, was decorated with a crouching red lion.

"Why aren't the whippers here?" he demanded, scanning the dark sky intently.

"They were up front, Largo, in the freighter," replied Chezik, the old man whose dress flap bore the yellow border of a teacher. "They've gone on."

"Gone on?"

Largo glanced at the dead-white faces of his friends as the meaning of the words penetrated, then his gaze swept eagerly over their transport-cell. "We can escape!" he cried triumphantly. He pointed to where the steel frame of the bars had sprung the width of a man's body from the heavy-timbered roof.

"You're mad, Largo!" muttered a heavy-muscled figure. "Where is there to go in this wasteland?"

"The Antads would find us and..." Chezik's voice broke, "and whip us."

Largo exploded in quick anger. "Whip us! Cage us like beasts!" he roared. "We might as well be dead as living like this! Earthmen were free once—Chezik, your father told you how it was."

"We're all that's left," the older man mumbled dully. "Slaves. They killed all the rest. There are no more free men."

"There are...there must be..." Largo's thoughts ran ahead of his words. He had seen animals out there, and birds too, from the freighter. If they had survived, so had men. Impatiently his gaze swept the circle of frightened faces about him. "Even if there's only one freeman left," he said fiercely, "we belong there with him—trying to fight back! Can't you feel that? You, Essek? Imor, you?"

"Fight back?" Essek's voice was incredulous. He gave a nervous laugh.

The men cast furtive glances at one

another, but no one else spoke. In the shadows Imor raised his deeply scarred face to look at the moon, as if hoping the black dot on its surface had disappeared.

Largo cursed, slamming his fist into his palm. His eyes blazed with scorn. Gripping the thick bars, he pulled himself hand over hand to the gaping breach under the roof.

"Don't be a fool, Largo." Essek pleaded. "What can you do out there alone?"

Largo paused. In his mind one phrase had been repeating itself over and over since the cage had tumbled from the platform. A rumor heard in the training pits, a whisper in the night between cells—*there are free men outside in the forests!*

Tensing his muscles, Largo threw one leg over the steel frame. "Do you come with me or not?" he asked hoarsely.

Even as he stared down at them, he knew the answer. These were men who fought lions and tigers in the arena, and yet now the stench of their fear was drifting up to his nostrils in the cool air.

Chezik nudged the man next to him. "Lord Jak may whip us all if Largo escapes," he whined.

"That's right—he will!" cried Essek. "Largo is champion of the pack!"

"Don't let him get away!" someone shouted.

"Pull him down!"

The gladiators burst into action, climbing the bars and jumping up to catch the big man, but Largo had thrown himself backward through the hole to land sprawling and rolling outside the cage. He brought up sharply against an enormous mound of fused stone and metal that had once been a building. Struggling to his feet he took off over the ruins stumbling in the dark, sandals slipping on the rubble-strewn ground.

Largo headed directly west toward the forest he had seen from the air, running through the long night with-

out a rest. Hour after hour his powerful muscles carried him almost without effort, as though his endless training had been just for this grueling run instead of for the ruler's sport. As the property of Lord Jak from birth, his body had been developed solely for killing in the amphitheaters, like the lord's rabbit hawks and his fighting dogs. The thought made him smile. He owed his strength to Antad cruelty.

It was near dawn when he finally reached the screening branches of the first scrub tree. He could see more of the same stunted trees scattered for miles before him. They were all the forest there was anymore, but birds sang lustily in their branches, and under them animals moved in the brush. The earth is fighting back, Largo thought. Not half a century has passed since the Big Burning and already the land is covering itself.

The thought should have heartened him, but instead, as he looked at the scene a vague doubt stirred like a shadow at the back of his mind. Abruptly he began to walk, beginning his search for a sign of freemen. Before he had gone a mile, the familiar hiss of a patrol ship, ground-flying, sent him burrowing into the brush, sweat breaking out on his forehead.

As the snub-nosed craft passed over, Largo caught a quick glimpse of the Antad seated within the transparent plastomer bubble of the observation deck. No cloak of nobility—a whipper! Largo's fists clenched, but he lay hidden until the ship disappeared.

Largo searched all day, walking slowly at first avoiding the raylanes and other clearings, looking for places where men might gather and hide. As the day wore on, the vague shadow of doubt in his mind began to darken and take form. He moved far more swiftly then, searching desperately, frantically, running from spot to spot—unwilling to admit what his reason had told him when

he first saw this open, light-shot forest.

Exhausted at last he stopped running, stood swaying, sucking in air, glaring about him in despair. These runty little trees were barely cover for one man moving cautiously! There could be no band of freemen hiding here! Not a band strong enough in weapons to blast the black dot of their pyro-beam from the moon!

Largo sank wearily to the ground, covering his head with his arms. What now, freeman? he thought bitterly. How do you fight invaders who wipe out all resistance before they set foot on a planet? Chezik, the gutless toad, had been right, the gladiators were all that were left—and they were afraid to come out from behind their bars!

There was a sudden scurry and the heavy sound of flight into a thicket in front of him. No small animal, this! Largo slid to his feet in one smooth motion, crashing through undergrowth, tearing the branches apart with his powerful arms. He stopped short—

A prize-girl!

Largo grunted in disgust. Searching for freemen and he turned up a breeder!

"How did you escape?" he demanded of the woman who was sprawled under the thicket trying to hide.

She eyed him in suspicious silence staring fixedly at his gold champion's belt and the mark of the red lion on the dress flap of his clout.

"Don't be so shy," Largo growled. "If this were the Hutch, you'd talk to me quickly enough."

Beyond a tightening of the lips the young face looking up at him showed more closely. She didn't look like the pale-skinned, fat-bodied prize-girls he had known. She wore a leather tunic that covered her breasts for one thing and she was slender, lean almost, and tanned by the sun. He shrugged. What other breeders were

there? His mother had been a prize-girl, and his father some gladiator who had won her from the Hutch for a night.

"I'm looking for freemen," he said, annoyance making his voice rise. "Answer me, have you seen anyone?"

The girl gathered her long legs under her, watched him warily.

"Answer me, woman!" he snapped, out of all patience with her arrogance. He bent down to jerk her to her feet.

Whack!

The girl hit him on the head with a large rock she had concealed behind her. "Alien slave!" she hissed, darting under his arm as he tripped, stumbling backward.

Largo snorted in surprise, made a futile grab for her. Regaining his feet he chased after her, but she was fast and agile, twisting around trees and under thickets with the grace of a cat. She eluded him easily, bursting at last out of the brush, heading across the open clearing of a raylane.

Largo hesitated a moment at the edge of the woods. There was no overhead cover on raylanes. Not even grass grew on these scorched, mile-wide ribbons that crisscrossed the land in every direction. Here the earth itself had bubbled and warped fusing into metallic hardness under the sun's heat, focused into one terrible ray by the Antad's pyro-beam.

Only for a moment did Largo watch the girl's bare legs carry her further away, then he charged across the raylane after her. The footing was treacherous on the lava-hard ground and the girl stumbled several times, falling at last on a steep slope where the earth had bulged upward under the ray. Largo seized her roughly lifting her in his arms. Her flesh was soft for all her leanness, but she was strong, twisting and turning, fighting him in angry silence. Suddenly she froze.

"Aliens!" she cried, staring wide-eyed over his head. "Aliens!"

Largo turned, still carrying the girl, and ran dodging toward the trees. A patrol ship slid alongside, hovering. Largo glanced up just once to see a whipper standing under the plastomer shield, the black ball of his body shining in the sunlight. Braced on his knobby, stick-like legs, the whipper was raising his long thin arm and aiming the silver tube of the whip.

The last thing Largo noticed was the crouching red lion, mark of Lord Jak, blazoned on the ship's hull. As the neuro-ray lashed across his back, he flung the girl clear. He doubled up and rolled on the ground writhing, the world around him lost in a yellow blaze of agony. The ray attacked every raw nerve end in his quivering body, moving relentlessly back and forth over his flesh, setting waves of pain exploding in his head, biting deep inside of him, piercing his very bones.

Screams broke uncontrollably from Largo's throat as the whipper, a cold light gleaming in his eye cluster, continued to wave the silver tube back and forth. Not until the big man lay inert did the relentless motion stop.

The cloying reek of the big cats was the first thing Largo sensed as he came to. Without opening his eyes, he knew where he was. In a ready-cell underneath Agonistics IV. One of the many rat-infested cells where the gladiator packs of the different lords were penned while waiting to fight in the arena above.

Largo moaned as a wave of pain rolled across his body. At least he would not be fighting today. He was burning with after-whip fever and covered with aching red welts. His strength was completely gone—too weak even to raise himself from the floor—but he was alive. The neuro-ray had been set to torture, not to kill.

Largo turned his burning face down and licked the moisture from

the damp stones under his head.

"Curse of a broken jettek on you, Largo!"

Whispers dry as bleached bones drifted along the floor to his ears. The voices were weak, but he knew them instantly.

"We were all whipped...because of you..." Imor's voice, hoarse, accusing.

"Curse you!" The whine of the teacher, Chezik. "Curse you...trouble maker...how I ache..."

Largo stirred, opened his eyes. All the men of his pack were scattered about the big cell, their red-welted bodies twitching on the stones as helplessly as his own. Lord Jak must have been in a purple-eyed rage to whip his whole pack! There would be no one at all to fight for his red lion mark today.

Largo twisted his head. He could see the gladiators of the other packs, wearing the marks of their respective lords on their clouts, seated along the walls of the big cell. There were others, he knew, in cells across the narrow aisle. None of these men paid any attention to the whispers of the whipped pack lying at their feet. Their minds were busy thinking about the gaunt-bodied tigers and lions—shipped like themselves from the breeding farms—that were padding restlessly right now in cells like these at the other end of the arena.

Largo closed his eyes, tried to ease his aching flesh. He pictured himself in the arena, throwing his weapons aside, offering himself to the talons of the hungry beasts. Even as he thought of it, his mind rejected the idea. That was a slave's way out. If he was going to die it would be like a man, fighting his enemy—fighting a cold-blooded, torture-loving Antad!

He gritted his teeth as a sudden seizure tormented him. He must be out of his head with fever to forget that the Antads had the whip. How could a man get past the silver tube? And if he did, what weapons would

he need to hurt those beetle-black bodies? Bodies that could stand temperatures high enough to char human flesh, bodies not affected by the neuro-ray!

The narrow aisle between the cells suddenly rang with the shrilling of womens' voices laughing and giggling, mixing instantly with the welcoming shouts of the gladiators. Largo heaved himself up on one elbow, feeling the cold knot tense instinctively in his belly, before he remembered that he was not fighting today.

This parade of the prize-girls was the first part of the ritual that would end when the screaming of men and snarling of beasts echoed under the transparent covering of plastomer that arched high over the whole amphitheater. The prize-girls were being marched through the corridor before the eyes of those who would soon compete. The Antads were stirring up the blood of their prize fighting animals.

The gladiators rattled the cell doors and thrust their hands out through the bars as the women walked by, each man shouting that he would open the Hatch and carry a prize from the arena.

"I am Arlak, the swift, my darlings!" shouted one. "I will knock first on your door!"

"Look at me! Estaban, the strongest! Look at me!"

Suddenly Largo pushed himself up on shaky arms. The girl! The one he had left on the raylane! She was walking toward him now, in the midst of the jostling women, dressed in the filmy laces of a prize-girl. She stood tall among the others, head erect, holding herself apart from the confusion. She seemed to be observing, rather than being a part of it. Her calm gaze sweeping over the men in the cells, hesitated for an instant on Largo. Her eyes lit briefly with recognition that turned at once to the same distrust and scorn he had seen there before. She looked away.

Even as he writhed under her withering glance, Largo could feel the hot tide of anger rise in his throat. Who did she think she was, wearing breeder rags and looking down on him? Scorn on her lips—contempt in her gaze! Curse her arrogance! Let her feel the sting of the silver tube once, then maybe...

Largo gasped. Under the filmy scarves—the red welts! Just two lashes, but even two lashes on such a slender body!

He studied her with new respect. Then it came to him. With startling clearness he saw what his anger had blinded him to before. Ignoring the jolting pain, he dragged himself to the front of his cell, frantically scrabbling over the rough stones. He had to talk to this girl. He had to know why the shadow of fear that fifty years of Antad torture had put into men's eyes was missing from hers!

He reached out his arm toward her, through the bars, but his body contorted violently under a cramping thrust of agony and he fell back, retching dryly, unable to move until the spasm passed.

"Who takes the skinny one?" a man yelled as the girl went by. "You, Arlak?"

"By the Ray, no! She's too well done!"

Laughter swept through the pit. Estaban, a thickset man nearly as tall as Largo, pounded on the door of his cell across the aisle.

"She's mine!" he bellowed. "I take that proud one tonight! Here me, she's Estaban's!"

"No!" Largo was pulling himself to his feet. "No!" Jaw set, fighting back the nausea and the weakness, he forced his body to stand. "I am champion Largo!" he cried, hanging on the bars, trembling with the effort. "She's mine!"

"You seem a little tired, champion," laughed Arlak. "What would you do with her if you did get her?"

Abrupt silence fell on the aisle as

the lords whose packs were fighting today, and their whipper attendants, appeared riding up the corridor on small airjet platforms which were encased in the usual shock-resistant plastomer bubbles. The gladiators all knelt and bowed their heads as the rulers passed. The prize-girls moved on ahead of them, down the underground passage that led to the Hutch, the circular cage in the center of the arena.

Lord Jak and his whipper rode last along the aisle. The men of his pack tensed, almost forgetting the pain in their whipped bodies as they groveled in quick fear. He had no gladiators able to fight. What was he doing here?

The platform stopped, hovering inches above the ground. The Antad noble tossed his cloak off in anger, exposing his shiny globular body, as he recognized Largo hanging weakly against the bars of his cell. The big man was staring at the passageway where the tall girl's figure had vanished. The hissing of the airjets broke the spell and Largo turned his head.

"Lord Jak! Let me fight!" he shouted. "Let me go in today!"

"You stand in my presence." Lord Jak said in the clacking ruler tongue. His voice, muted by the bubble, was ominously low. "Kneel, beast!"

Largo sank to his knees quickly, eagerly. "Let me fight," he pleaded. "I'll bring glory to your name, honor to your mark—I am strong..."

"Strong?" The metallic voice rose, clacking higher and higher. "You're not fit for lion food! You would disgrace my mark before my friends! Fight? You will lie screaming on your back, you gnettig!" Violently he motioned to the whipper, his thin arms flailing about his glistening black head.

Largo gripped the bars and ground his head against them as the ray struck him. "Let me fight," he choked.

"Whip all of them!" Lord Jak

screached, his eye cluster darkening to a purple glow. "All the filthy gnettings!"

He seized the silver tube from the whipper, aimed it himself. He played the ray over his men only, but the other packs crowded swiftly to the back of their cells. When an Antad raged, it was unreasoning hate and at any moment he might turn the ray on every man he could reach. The return of the other lords to protect their own fighters stopped the torture. A fierce clacking vibrated from the damp walls as they slowly forced Lord Jak's platform back.

"Hai—ai! Largo! Come and fight!"

The voice seemed to come from very far away, and the laughter echoed dully inside Largo's skull. With a supreme effort he opened his eyes. Iron bars and grinning faces spun sickeningly before him. He shut them again quickly.

His body felt numb, suspended. It was good to lie here. He didn't want to move, but something in his subconscious mind was bothering him, urging him to get up. Annoyed, he twisted to one side—abruptly pain came surging back through the numbness. He groaned aloud.

"The champion isn't feeling well today?" The solicitous tone was Arlak's.

"Jab him with your jettek. See if that helps." The deep boom of Estaban's voice.

Largo winced as a sharp point dug into his side. They have their weapons, he thought hazily. The robot control must have unlocked the cells. Good. Then at any moment the stone gate to the arena will open and they will be gone. Then I can lie here...

"He's not responding to treatment, Arlak."

"Ah? Sad! You may have to take care of that tall wench all by yourself."

The girl! Largo clawed his way to his knees. He had to get to the arena.

He waited, shivering, until his tormentors stopped swimming before his eyes, then he grasped the bars and hauled himself laboriously to his feet. He tried to walk. Twin fires flared in both his legs, and the strength ran out of his muscles like melted wax. He toppled to the floor.

The gladiators were silent. Amazed and unbelieving, they watched him struggle. Even Arlak was quiet.

Largo could see their bare legs ringing him in. Like the trees in the forest, he thought. He rolled over, fought his way to his knees. He no longer knew just why he had to get up. He was acting out of an inborn stubbornness—some tough core handed down to him from a bull-headed freeman in the long line of his ancestors.

This time his legs held. He stood braced in the open cell door glaring at the wavering images of the gladiators. They parted slowly and he staggered past them into the aisle, noisily sucking in air and gasping sharply at every step.

Behind him on the cell floor, the old man Chezik watched, hate burning in his feverish eyes. He turned his head trying to shout. "Largo is going...he's getting away...again..." It came out a hoarse croak, but the others heard him. "Lord Jak will... whip us!"

"He's mad!" Essek moaned. "Kill him...troublemaker..."

"Kill him!" the men of Largo's pack took it up. "Kill the troublemaker!"

Imor lifted himself to one elbow. "Kill Largo for us!" he cried to the gladiators in the aisle. "Estaban... Arlak... Kill him in the arena...for us..."

Largo paused at the end of the aisle, swaying unsteadily before the weapons rack. He saw one caach left, the curved wooden shield big enough to curl up under. He doubted he could carry it today! A jettek was all he would take. A needle-shaped jet-

tek, long as a man's body and balanced for throwing. That was his best chance. He stepped forward to reach for one.

The flat of a heavy blade struck his arm down, and the point of a jettek dug into his chest.

"No weapons for you, champion!" said Estaban brusquely. The gladiators lined up beside him, grimly ringing Largo in as though he were an animal gone berserk.

"Let the lions do the job," Arlak said nervously. "Do you want the rulers to know?"

Largo felt the hot sun strike his back as the stone gates opened behind him. He studied the faces of the gladiators opposing him. It was there in every one—the shadow. It clouded their crazed eyes.

"You're not men, not any of you," he said, speaking slowly, deliberately. "You fight the cats because you fear the whip more. Now you turn on your own like fighting dogs. Why don't you make fear your mark and wear it on your clouts?"

He turned his back on them clenching his teeth against the agony of moving his body, and strode into the arena.

The spectators, overflowing the seats of the amphitheatre, clacked and clattered in their metallic tongue as the gladiators entered. The sound rose to an eerie pitch as they saw the unarmed man in the lead. There was a flurry of noble's cloaks at the emperor's box, and Lord Jak's name spread through the stands. This was his man.

The heat under the arching cover of plastomer rose in shimmering lines from the sand. Largo pushed forward slowly, picking his feet up as though plodding through hot tar. At every step he expected the whip ray from Lord Jak's seat to strike him down. Loss of honor from such an act was the only thing that could be holding it back.

The roaring and spitting of the big

carnivores as they spewed into the arena on the far side brought Largo to a halt. He felt naked without a weapon. Unbuckling his gold belt, he wrapped it cestus-like over his right arm.

The hungry, gaunt-ribbed beasts were padding around the Hutch in the center of the arena, clawing the bars and snarling in frustrated rage at the prize-girls who huddled together on the floor in a flutter of colored scarves.

A tiger broke away with a roar and came charging at the line of gladiators. The men advanced quickly, spreading out. These were the cats to take—the ones that came running. The treacherous killers were the black humps that lay waiting on the yellow sand, only their tufted tails moving.

"Mine!" shouted Estaban and moved forward jettek raised to meet the tiger.

Largo began to run, forcing his legs to carry him. He ran straight toward the Hutch. Around him the battle raged. Dust flew as men and beasts fought and died for the pleasure of the Antad lords. A wounded cat snarled. The shriek of a man, talon-ripped and dying, added to the din. But above all the sounds in the arena, drowning them out, rose a noise like the snapping and buckling of a thousand thin sheets of metal in a high wind—the alien clatter from the stands.

Almost in the shadow of the circular cage, Largo dug his heels in violently, skittering to a halt. A heavy-maned lion crouched on the sands blocking his way. Ears flattened, eyes slitted, the great cat inched imperceptively toward him. Instinctively Largo stepped into throwing position—but there was no jettek in his hand! He crouched defensively, heavy shoulders hunched, waiting without motion—watching the tufted tail.

It twitched nervously back and

forth, throwing up gusts of sand. Suddenly it flicked out straight and stiff and the lion sprang!

But Largo was gone. He had thrown himself forward at the tell-tale sign, rolling under the heavy cat's leap and coming to his feet behind the animal as it landed. Without a pause he flung himself onto its back, tangling his hands in the stiff mane, digging his legs deep under it, low on its belly.

The lion flung itself up, rearing and falling back, its powerful hind talons ripping and clawing, trying in vain to reach the clutching legs. Man and beast rolled in the choking dust, Largo clinging desperately, fighting the bone-aching weakness of his flesh.

When the lion rolled to its feet for an instant, Largo thrust his bound arm into its snarling mouth. Now! he thought pulling back abruptly, bringing the cat's head up, putting his knee below its neck, arching it slowly backward!

Largo clenched his jaws, the cords of his neck standing out like pillars as he strained. Muscles that had always sprung to his bidding swelled and tightened now with maddening slowness. White hot flashes ran up the column of his back exploding against the top of his skull. His whole fever-weakened body screamed for rest. But he held on, grimly, doggedly, tightening his grip on the struggling lion. Gradually his strength bent it backward, further and further backward.

The lion's neck broke and the animal fell dead on the sand. Largo fell beside it, unable to stand.

The transparent roof of the amphitheater threw back the clacking, clattering roar from the stands. A champion ovation! The harsh sound grated on Largo's ears. It wouldn't let him rest. He pulled himself up in anger. They thought he had performed a champion feat for *them*! "Lord Jak has bred a gigantic fighting animal,"

they were howling. And their insect eyes were bright!

"Aliens!" Largo screamed. He knelt on the lion's ribs and shook his fist at the stands that spun around before his eyes. "Go back where you came from! Leave us..."

His words died unheard in the shrieking clatter. He fell forward his head in the dusty mane, the red mists whirling dizzily. "I didn't fight for them!" he sobbed into the dead lion's ear. "I'm not a slave...I'm a freeman...there are freemen outside in the forest..."

Freemen! The word was like a hand reaching out to steady the spinning world. The sound of it blew the red mists out of Largo's brain, and he sat up.

In the arena, most of the fighting was over. Some lions had won—they were feasting. Some gladiators had won—those that were on their feet were moving toward the Hutch. Estaban was not among them. Largo rose on trembling legs and walked toward the door of the cage.

"Take me! Take me!"

Wild-eyed, the prize-girls fought one another to be nearest the opening door. Their faces showed their terror. If no winner claimed them, the lions would. They crowded around Largo as he let the door down, pulling at him, forcing their bodies against him.

"You stink of fear!" Largo shouted in their faces. "Dirty alien fear! Do you breed that into your sons?"

He drove them back, shoving them roughly aside, pushing his way through—searching.

She was standing alone in the middle of the floor watching him. "Come to claim your prize?" she asked defiantly, but her face was white and she dropped her gaze for an uncertain moment to the torn flesh of his right arm.

"You're going to talk to me this time," Largo said hotly.

"You're an alien-trained slave," she

said quickly almost defensively.

Largo stared at the stiff unyielding figure before him. How could he talk to her? How could he break down that distrust? Abruptly he seized her arm and dragged her out of the Hutch into the arena. He pulled her across the sand toward the little gold door under the stands that he knew was unlocked. It led to the breeding nests under the building. No one would bother them there—the winner and his prize-girl.

A caach lay on the sand, the phosphrene paint on its heavy wooden surface smeared with blood. Largo picked it up. The girl could hide under it if one of the roving beasts attacked.

They made the door in safety. Largo pushed the girl ahead of him along the twisting passage that led under the stands. The clatter of the spectators died out as they moved deeper into the outer shell of the amphitheatre.

Suddenly a panel slid open in front of them on the street side of the building. Largo halted, bewildered. Something was wrong. There were no bars between them and the street outside!

Before either of them could move, Lord Jak's patrol ship settled in the opening, and Lord Jak himself stepped out awkwardly on his stiff-jointed bird legs and walked toward them. His whipper followed close behind, clacking in protest.

"You've brought glory to my name, Largo!" Lord Jak cried his excited clacking echoing off the stone walls, his eye cluster burning like red phosphorus. Largo had never seen the Antad like this—so close—walking. "Bare-handed! By Logar, you are the strongest slave on..."

The other gladiators and their prize-girls were coming up the corridor. At sight of the Lord they dropped to their knees. Lord Jak looked at them, stopped his clacking. He cocked his head up at Largo,

stepped back hastily. Largo saw the red glow in his eyes flicker, grow white.

"Kneel, you slaves!" the Antad clacked still backing. "Kneel! Whipper! Whipper!"

The whipper was already moving forward. There was a wild scurrying in the passage as the gladiators and the women ran back toward the arena. The whipper raised his arm toward the girl. Largo darted in front of her, thrusting her behind him. He braced himself for the shock.

Nothing happened!

Over the caach he still carried on his arm, Largo could see the whipper waving the tube right at his chest—but he felt no pain. The caach! Something in the big shield was blocking the ray! The wood? The phosphrene paint?

Largo whispered it in disbelief. "The ray can be stopped!"

Then he became aware of the girl's small hands on his back. She was leaning against him, shivering. The thought of the neuro-ray almost searing her tender flesh filled Largo with blind rage. Without thinking of weapons or ways he lunged at the whipper, the caach held out before him.

The shield struck the silver tube, knocking it to the floor. The whipper scrambled after it. Dropping the shield, Largo sprang after the Antad with his bare hands. He swung his fist wildly catching the glossy round body a glancing blow.

It burst open like a dry seed pod!

A scattering of dust, a trickle of fluid—nothing more—as the broken shell sank to the floor. The black head stared upward, but there was no light in any of its nine eyes.

Largo teetered, spread-eagled over the dead creature, staring in amazement at his hands. Conquerors? Rulers? These insects died at a touch! No wonder they had all but destroyed the race of man before they dared invade the earth; no wonder

they huddled under plastomer shields; no wonder they clacked and clattered over the strength of men!

Largo swung around eagerly, staring at Lord Jak. His eyes blazed and a lifetime of hatred burst from his lips in one word.

"Alien!"

Lord Jak gave a startled clack and started for the safety of his patrol ship. Largo was on him in two bounds. Seizing the squealing Antad in his hands he raised him high over his head to dash him to the floor.

"Don't kill him!" the girl shouted. "Don't kill him!"

Largo twisted about still holding Lord Jak over his head.

"We'll need him for information," she said quickly. "We have never taken a live one before."

"We?"

The girl ran scooping up the silver tube and the heavy shield, staggering under the weight. "We'll need these, too," she said, her face elated. "There's an answer here we never hoped for!"

"We?" Largo repeated. "Who? Will you tell me, woman? Who?"

The girl paused, looked squarely at him. "The freemen of earth," she said. She smiled, her eyes warm and trust-

ing. "Freemen like you, lion-killer. Now hurry that alien into the ship!"

The street outside was empty as they ran out and clambered into the empty patrol ship. Largo handled his prisoner as gently as he would an egg. In the pilot's compartment, the girl reached for the control panel with the quiet assurance of one who knew its working.

The ship rose hissing on ground-jets. She expertly kicked it into air-flight, and it climbed till the arena was a speck below them, then turned and headed for the forest. The forest where the entrance was to the caverns and the endless miles of intersecting tunnels that had been formed under the raylanes when the earth warped and buckled in the Big Burning. Caverns and tunnels where the freemen of earth had hidden for fifty years, working slowly, inevitably toward the day when they could win back their planet.

A white glow flickered in Lord Jak's eye cluster every time Largo clenched and unclenched his powerful hands. The big man smiled grimly.

"By Logar, he will talk for me," he told the girl sitting beside him. "I was alien trained!"