

**Imaginative
Tales**

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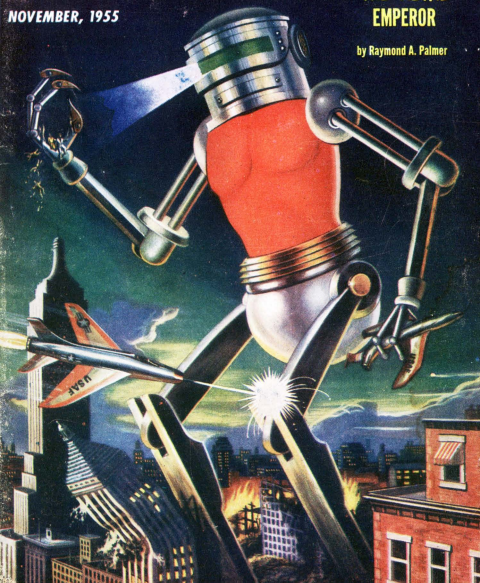
ACTION-PACKED SCIENCE FICTION

35¢

NOVEMBER, 1955

THE METAL EMPEROR

by Raymond A. Palmer



Introducing the

AUTHOR



Raymond A. Palmer



ME? What can I say about myself that wouldn't be true? Yes, I'm called the "son" of science fiction (I've got a plaque given me at the 2nd Chicon to prove it). There's some guff on this plaque about the services I rendered to science fiction during the past 29 years, but don't you believe it—the service has been the other way around. I'm nuts about science fiction, and can't help messing around with it. However, since I dislike talking about myself (modesty). I'll quote a few things others have said about me:

"The Shaver Mystery is a black blot on your escutcheon and you should be crucified by the dero."

"You talk too much about your-

self, and we're sick of it."

"You ruined *Amazing Stories*, and we'll never forgive you. Eleven years with you at the helm is enough to kill any magazine!"

"Nobody but an idiot would read **OTHER WORLDS**, which is a disgrace to the finest editor in the field." (Now how did *that* get in there?— oh yes, literary license on the part of the editor . . . you know, "we reserve the right to edit and revise to suit requirements").

"So you wrote your first story, "The Time Ray of Jandra" in 1926 and sold it to your "Dad." Hugo Gernsback? Better you should have stood in bed!" (Ed. Note: Gernsback has a plaque which says he is the father of

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NOVEMBER 1955

Imaginative Tales

ALL STORIES
NEW AND
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling
Editor

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Interior illustrations by Lloyd Rognan, W. E. Terry, and H. W. McCauley
Cartoons by Stan Fino, Bill Reid, and Luther Scheffy.

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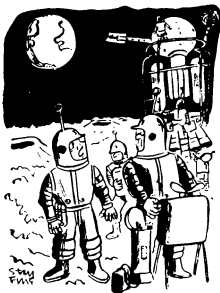
The Editorial.....

LIKE the cover on this issue? We'll bet you do—and we'd like to take a few words to introduce our new science fiction artist, Lloyd Rognan. Lloyd walked into our office several months ago with a pile of art samples. We looked them over and were impressed with his talent as a commercial artist. But since he had never tried his hand at science fiction—and read it only occasionally—we were a bit dubious about him doing work for *Madge* or *Tales*.

WE asked him if he'd care to work up a sketch and he said he would. He did. We promptly okayed it and the result is this month's cover. Needless to say we told Lloyd to go ahead and prepare other sketches. This he has done. The results you will see on forthcoming issues of **IMAGINATION** and **IMAGINATIVE TALES**. . . . By coincidence, Ray Palmer happened to be visiting us when Lloyd delivered his robot cover. Ray was impressed too. So much so that when we suggested he might like to do a story around the cover, Ray agreed to work one into his busy schedule as editor of *Other Worlds* and *Mystic Magazine*. An old master at action and adventure, Ray wrote **THE METAL EMPEROR** in a style reminiscent of his great work for **AMAZING** some years back. We think it proves the "son of science fiction" is still the favorite of the

family!

ONE other bit of news: you'll note another innovation in this issue, interior color. Not just one added color—but two! And as time goes on we'll give you even more. We feel the addition of color adds the final stamp of quality to the book. Just another indication that we're striving at all times to give you nothing but the best! And since, as the man said, "The best is yet to come!"—we'll see you next issue with



"I want to go back!"



**From out of Earth's forgotten past sprang
a terrible menace to all mankind. Sweeping down
from the void came an invading horde, led by —**

The Metal Emperor

by

Raymond A. Palmer

“OPEN hatches and drop
the uranium bombs into
the crater!”

The red warning signal flashed
on the control panel of the giant
spaceship, and the Rif captain
clutched his fingers about the mic-
rophone.

Having said the words, he turn-
ed to stare at the television screen

before him, and at the scene de-
picted upon its glowing surface.
Red flame and black smoke almost
obscured the view, but through
rifts in them could be seen the
glowing crater of the volcano two
miles below. And now, plainly vis-
ible in the screen, were the rapidly
diminishing diameters of the uran-
ium bombs as they fell toward the



center of the crater. There was no explosion as they dropped into the seething lava, for these were bombs only in the sense of their shape to guide the tons of pure uranium into the crater's mouth. Actually they were only "food" for the volcano's vitals, to create a chain reaction in its atomically digestive bowels that would eventually build up to an atomic explosion beyond all belief in its violence as a whole volcano exploded and destroyed the greatest city on all the earth.

The warning light on the control panel of the spaceship dimmed and went out. The deed was done.

A strange metallic-sounding voice, awesome in its deep rumbling, sounded now in the control room. The captain listened.

"Good! I have seen. Now drop your agents into the city environs itself, and set them about their duties. And when you have done that, signal the transports to descend and disembark their armies according to plan."

"Yes, Sire," said the Rif captain, respectfully. "It shall be done. Earth will know again, after these many thousands of years, the heavy tread of the Rif, and of your metal majesty, the Emperor of Mu!" The captain raised his hand in a symbolic salute, then spoke once more into the micro-

phone.

"Agents parachute! And when you have made your way into the city tunnels under cover of darkness, await the signal for the planned sabotage. And above all, destroy the governmental heads as planned. Mazhart must die—yet seem to live!"

The Rif captain leaned back, a grim smile on his lips. And far out in the void, in the largest spaceship of all, awaiting the moment to descend to the planet and take up his rule, sat the Metal Emperor, who was not smiling at all.

THE home planet of the Rif was a strange world, secret and impenetrable to all but the more foolhardy of traders, those who failed to note how few of them returned. Strangest of all the many dark and secret places of that planet was the Golden Dome of Nalenq, the hidden city of the jungles where the green webs of the spider folk kept all mankind from the forest paths.

In that golden dome lived the Metal Emperor, who was worshipped not only as an emperor and supreme ruler, but as a god. Not human was he, but metal, and gigantic. He had always existed, first (according to his own word) on a planet called Earth, many thousands of years gone, when it was

a youthful planet and filled with a great science and a great civilization. Mu had been the name of the civilization, and there the Rif had lived, although none remembered except the Emperor. Long ago, to escape a disaster that overwhelmed Mu, the Rifians had escaped, in spaceships, led by their Emperor. Now, with the Rif planet insufficient in its resources to build such a civilization as had existed on Earth, the Emperor was going back. Agents, sent back to Earth, had reported it once more habitable, and in fact, possessing a great new civilization. Not more than a hundred years previously, the instruments of Rif had recorded strange emanations from Earth, which had stirred the Metal Emperor to action. There was life on Earth! It was now possible to return to the home planet.

But the strange emanations had turned out to be powerful ones, the result of a great war, wherein atomic energy was employed. It had almost wiped out that civilization the spies had discovered, but a new one, tremendously advanced in science, had emerged. If allowed to progress further, it might be impossible to invade and conquer. So the deed had to be done now or never. And the Metal Emperor had prepared carefully. Key to the situation was the capitol city, Mekka, and its chained volcano,

with its national atomic reactor providing unlimited power. Destroy that, and the planet would fall. And once fallen, the Rif would again take up their abode on their ancient home, and the Metal Emperor would rule, as he had ruled ages before.

Sitting in his spaceship, the Emperor reflected on the results of his opening skirmish. He'd sent a fleet of invading warships, and in a great space battle, they had been repulsed. The armadas of the Rif, accustomed to much raiding in their own System, had gone forth from the planet of war, had descended upon Mekka—and had lost the battle! No infant civilization, this!

The huge warships of the Rif had been driven off, and although the defenders of Mekka had never known the origin of the attackers, they had been alerted. In any future attack, the Metal Emperor knew one thing—Mekka had to be destroyed, with its central power plant, to ground and render impotent her air fleet and her armies. This, now, was the vital attack. If it succeeded, the Earth was helpless. And it would succeed—for the volcano had been primed! Nothing on Earth could halt the holocaust that would follow.

Also, when his armies landed, they would fight with a ferocity

beyond imagination, for after the first defeat, the Metal Emperor had crushed the lives out of many generals, many chieftains, many famous warriors, upon the altars of his wrath. They would die rather than retreat once more, full knowing the fate that defeat would mean to them.

Many were the younger Rifs who grumbled at the ancient cruelty of the Metal Emperor, for they felt that in this day of the machine, such dark and evil things should not be. But their grumbling went unheard, or was heard and caused their deaths.

MEKKA! The mechanical city! Mazhart, heart of the Mazarind clan, ruler of Mekka by popular vote, stood combing his curly black beard before the great round mirror that was not a mirror, but the polished receptor plate of his private penetrating ray and central command installation. Turning his sleek head to admire his noble and truly handsome appearance, he wondered if any thought him too young to rule a great city? But was not Mekka queen of the world under his rule? Was not peace a thing of years' duration since the repulse of the mysterious Rif from outer space, some undiscovered planet away? Were they not alerted and ready for any repetition?

And was it not all his work, his alert foresight, his support of the scientists who had made Mekka great?

Satisfied, he put away the comb, turned from the big mirror—and found himself facing an individual who had entered without sound. He retreated one step in complete amazement, for this man was no one he knew, yet he was as familiar as the image in his own mirror! In fact, it *was* himself, to all practical purposes; the same eagle eye bright above the straight nose, the same luxurious red lips, the same strong cheekbones, the same curling black beard. Himself, even to the shining black metal-cloth fitting sleekly over the muscled shoulders, accentuating the powerful thighs with inwoven gems in patterns of the Mazarind flower, the gentian. Identical, from top to toe, it was evident the man had made his way in here by impersonating Mazhart.

The only detectable difference lay in the needle-ray he carried in his hand, the tiny opening in the blunt muzzle staring at Mazhart like an hypnotic eye. Mazhart reached backward for the toggle switch of his mirror ray. At least the thing would automatically connect him with the central exchange and the operator would observe and take action

KAY Lin, current favorite of the ruler of Mekka city, was a woman built on a generous pattern. Her skin was that translucent milk-white found only in certain red-haired types. Her hair, a bright copper made more vivid with a dye, lay in generous masses of ringlets about a strong but shapely throat. Big-framed but graceful, her body was sleekly covered with that layer of velvet-soft flesh which is the possession of the most feminine of women when in perfect health and the flower of their youth. And Kay Lin was boisterously healthy, and likewise young enough to delight any eyes.

Just now she was intent upon her own beauty, repeated before her in a mirror similar to Mazhart's—for it was a gift from him, and was equipment denied any but the most favored people in the city. She had just awakened, and sat clad only in a filmy sleeping garment which she had slipped to her shoulders so that it lay in a soft cloud over the proud arches of her hips, leaving her unbelievably beautifully formed breasts completely bare.

The huge machine of which the mirror was only the visible part, was supported between the beaks of two great red metal birds. The controls were concealed by the metal feathers, of which they were

a part. Beneath the floor the great dynamos hummed a silent song of waiting power. For Mekka was a city of rays, and nearly every moment of the inhabitants' active day was taken up in some use or other of the myriad of wave-lengths at their disposal. Nothing but was done by means of rays. There were the stimulating pleasure rays; the beams which gave them instant vision into any distance of the city built in and at the base of the mountain; the healing rays which gave them the very life-force itself.

Kay Lin's installation was peculiar in but one respect: it was in continual connection with Mazhart's home over a fixed beam, requiring no focus adjustment, so that but a flip of a switch gave them instant contact with each other, a contact which, because of the pleasure rays, was sometimes very interesting indeed.

But now, at this instant, Mazhart's startled hand, unconsciously moving in an habitual way, flipped the switch connecting him to his beloved, Kay Lin, rather than the switch alongside, which would have connected him to the central command. On such little errors do the lives of men sometimes depend.

Yet, it was not Kay Lin's face that appeared in the mirror, but the back of her head—for in that same instant a young and muscu-

lar young man had burst open the door and plunged into her boudoir, and she had swung about.

Her striking eyes (tinted by a dye injection to a more startling shade of blue best calculated to contrast with her white skin and copper hair) fixed in fascinated and not unpleased surprise upon the intruder's rugged face. His whole bearing was that of intense preoccupation, or repressed excitement.

Neither of them saw the repeated image of Mazhart and his double, nor the deadly needle ray half concealed in the double's hand. Neither of them noticed the hiss of the discharge, nor the body of one of them slumping out of view within the mirror-screen—and with good reason, for Kay Lin had her back to the mirror, while the young man had his eyes implacably chained upon the beauty of Kay Lin.

ALLOWING herself the proper long instant of surprised immobility, Kay Lin reached embarrassedly for her dressing gown, pulling it loosely about her nude shoulders, nor noticed that her elbow struck the feathers of the great red bird, switching off contact with Mazhart. And, which she carefully failed to conceal aught but her shoulders, she covertly reached for another feather and depressed it.

An invisible beam sprang from the floor upward into the face of the young man, holding him motionless. And instead of Mazhart's death-scene upon the mirror, there now appeared the thought images of the young man, laid bare by the probing power of the forbidden mental ray.

Kay Lin turned aside from him so that she might watch both the young man and his thoughts, as they flashed across the mirror's bright surface. She turned up the power to a forbidden strength, fixing rigid control upon him. Such power was permitted officially only to the police during emergencies. But Kay Lin knew she would be immune from criticism, nor cared if she were. Caught like a fly in a trap, his inner self was but a waiting comfit box for Kay Lin to open at her leisure.

She turned away and began to comb her coppery hair as she suggested question after question, violating all the ethics of polite society by prying open the very soul of the young man. On her lips was a mocking smile. Did not the man deserve what he was getting, bursting in thus upon her privacy? And she deliberately suggested questions to which the answers would be most embarrassing, and her eyes lighted with extreme interest at some of the answers. As she

watched, she grew desirous to know who he actually was.

"Who are you, and why are you here?" asked Kay Lin. Helplessly his mind began to tell her his story, as it had happened to him, in actual picturization on the screen . . .

Kay Lin, who now learned he was Jac Azad, Engineer of the Third Tier of the Thermal Patrol, saw him glide upon a levitor sled toward his post in the offices directly beneath the Vulcana. Suddenly he jerked back the drive lever. The sled dropped to its runners with a screech of steel upon stone, ran across the polished floor for yards among the fantastic mechanisms of the Grot of the Magic Hands.

This was a section of underground factories, directly connected to the power outlets of the Vulcana, where endless aisles of machines toiled and built a steady flow of fabrications from numberless materials. Boxes, barrels, decorative fabrics on great looms, metal sheets bent swiftly into all manner of shapes—being stacked or woven or assembled, and without a workman in sight. Every visible operation, however, was performed by a pair of life-like floating hands apparently unsupported by any material means.

These hands were really metal, under automatic magnetic force

control, so built that the whole vast space seemed inhabited by invisible workmen, tireless and infinitely accurate, whose hands alone could be seen. It was an illusion contrived by the inventor of the basic machine at work there, a machine whose moving parts conquered friction by floating in powerful supporting magnetic fields; fields manipulated in predetermined patterns by an extension of the principle by which a television beam is manipulated within the tube to form an image. The moving metal parts passed through intricate magnetic field patterns of weaving or construction whose design was itself a science and a trade among the men of Mekka.

But Jac Azad stood only for an instant watching the awesome mystery of the creating hands. To him it was no mystery, but a somewhat outmoded robot factory. More interesting was a spurt of almost invisible vapor from a crevice in the polished stone walls. That insignificant spurt of vapor had caused every nerve of his body to scream an alarm of peril.

JAC stood watching it until his eyes adjusted to the dim lights, then he put his hands to his head with a groan of despair. Newly formed, high in the wall face, the angry crack angled across the mir-

ror-bright polished rock! He would be sent to the jungles along with most of his comrades of the Thermal Patrol for this! Only negligence or worse could have allowed such a disaster!

He leaped back to the sled more swiftly than he had gotten off, a vicious warrior's oath crackling from his lips (and Kay Lin, watching his image on her mirror, put her shapely hands to her ears), and the levitor sled sped away. A second later and a mile away, it settled beside a big red alarm box. Jac pulled the great general alarm lever. Then he began trundling out the rolls of woven metal hose before even the repair robots stirred from their wall niches. Within minutes a score of the mechanical statue-like metal men had moved ponderously to help him, and his immediate superior, a dark-browed young giant named Dee Atzin, arrived to take charge.

"I'll take over, Jac. You get up to the main observation lab and run a ray tracer to the source of this thing. If that crack is clear through to the Can itself, instead of just a burst pipe near the mains, it not only means we are out of a berth on the Patrol, it means that all Mekka is in peril. Get going, and give me that hose. Trace that fissure, then go to the Mazarind! We've caught a Rif spy, and there

is no doubt this is some of their work!"

Dee Atzin turned away to direct the placing and bolting of the pressure plates to the rocks of the wall, and the pumping of the liquid thermal plastic into the fissure. This was a compound designed to harden in heat, remain liquid at normal temperature. Filling the fissure with the cement would only temporarily restrain the terrible forces that had caused the fissure.

On the screen Kay Lin saw Jac's mind leap a bridge of time now, back to the surprise attack of the Rif forces from space. She herself had not been concerned then in affairs of government, being in the southern hemisphere at a famous school for beauty culture. She had only a hazy knowledge of the attack, and she did not know how narrowly the Air Force of Mekka had averted disaster for them all. But she learned now.

As Jac's sled raced away toward the main laboratory under the fires of the Vulcana, his mind was busily matching bits of memory from that time with certain similarities of today's conditions, coming to the suspicion that this was not just sabotage, but the beginning of a new and more dangerous attack. His mind went back to those former battles, and with them to a young and lovely lieutenant of Wo-

men's Air Force Reserve, the beautiful Freya Velt.

KAY Lin, in spite of the fact she realized this was a situation of gravity, could not help being womanly, and more, could not resist this chance to lay bare the inner secrets of this young man's mind in relation to the pretty girl whose face kept flitting across the screen, intermingled with his racing thoughts. She flicked a second small beam to his motionless head, suggesting further thought concerning the girl. Jac's mind automatically and helplessly furnished the fact that the girl had died in the war.

A twinge of unexpected jealousy burned for an instant in Kay Lin's intense blue eyes; was repressed. Why should she care who this young man had loved? Also, he was not as young as he looked, she noted, in more ways than one. Not only had he seen action during the war with Rifia, it was obvious that he had been quite in love with the dashing Amazon of the Air Force. Not the sort of love of a Mazarind for a courtesan, but a tender, vital love . . .

Kay Lin brushed her unexpected reaction aside, noting that her heart was disposed to take unwonted interest in this young man with something of self-scorn; watched

while the images on the screen ran over the high points of his war career. She glimpsed a score of savage space battles, Jac's one-man fighter plunging and rearing with the terrible concussions of space bombs, his eyes blinded with the unchecked fires of atomic fission sweeping over the ships of his comrades.

All this while she held him in hypnotic subjection with her powerful neural ray, her natural instincts getting a sensual satisfaction out of so holding the fiery inner man here before her mind's eye, to do with as she wished. But at last she released him, but not before she had impressed upon him an unforgettable hypnotic compulsion to see her as she wished to be seen, a command she had used before with telling and entertaining effect.

As he relaxed, the tension of the subjecting flow of neural electricity subsiding, his own body taking charge again with its own energies, she knew that he was telling her the truth. The Vulcana, the great central heating and power plant of the frigid underground factory portion of Mekka, was about to blow up because of a secretly administered dose of fissionable material into the great outer cone of the fire. And he had come to her as the quickest way to Mazhart.

Somehow she was not in the least flattered that he had done so . . .

JAC Azad, coming out of the mental bondage that had been so complete, suddenly realized time was passing while he was engaged in an endless mental dalliance with this sex-minded female. He stood half-angrily on his feet, even though he saw her now as actually fine-charactered as well as superbly bodied.

"You should be flogged with a length of cable! There is no time for this sort of thing. Send for Mazhart at once, or I'll go to his home, even if it means death under these conditions!"

Kay Lin only smiled seductively, mockingly. "The great one will arrive here very shortly, Jac Azad, as he does every day—in about twenty swings of the pendulum of the clock there on the wall. I could not hurry him, I could not stop him. He is as regular as the magnetic flow of the time cable. And usually about as exciting. He comes and goes, Jac, with somewhat the same inexorable unconcern for the wishes of others that the sea exhibits in her tides. Make yourself comfortable, you have only to wait. I am not as dense as you think; I understand the urgency of the situation. But I could not help take advantage of

an opportunity ordinarily denied me—that of seeing exactly what makes a man tick inside. Most men are so bashful about the springs of ego, you know."

Jac sat, his eyes watching the great golden pendulum of the clock on the wall. Its swing was halted, then released, by impulses from a central source along a cable. The thing stopped and swung, stopped and swung, with maddening deliberation. Yet, in spite of his boiling anxiety, he could not keep his eyes upon the pendulum and off the sleek perfection of Kay Lin's physical opulence, still far from concealed in any way by the draping of her night dress. He could not help noting how her breasts rose and fell, rose and fell, in perfect cadence with the pendulum, but he did note the gleam in her eye as she so timed her respiration to attract his attention. Kay Lin had violated the ethics of the period mightily when she had held his mind open with her illegally powerful ray, when she had peered beneath his defenses into the secrets of his past. Not yet could he release his mind from its magnetic contact with hers. The burning sensuous images she had allowed to alternate back and forth between them still burned upon the now violent-hued curtains of his thought. This sensuous woman had

impregnated all his inner self with a consciousness of her vital femaleness.

Suddenly he associated the swing of the pendulum with her breathing. "Even in the face of annihilation for the whole city you cannot help being a woman, can you, Kay Lin?"

"You are welcome to the same privilege, if you wish to retaliate, Jac," she smiled suggestively. "You can use the ray on me."

"I wonder! If that is a promise, I will call upon you at some future date to fulfill it. I am sure there is no other mind whose memories would prove more diverting!"

At his answer, which could be construed as an insult, she began an angry retort, but at that instant a terrific lurch and shudder of the very floor beneath their feet cut short their half-angry, half-fascinated conversation. Shortly after came a blast of ear-painful sound. A fragile vase crashed from a niche to the floor at Jac's feet.

Following the shock of the explosion, there came a repeated thrum and twang as of great bow strings, sounds that told Jac the street patrols were firing the great rifles mounted at the street intersections. There was fighting in the very street outside Kay Lin's door!

SECONDS went by while they stared at each other, held by sheer surprise. Then Kay Lin, a poem of sudden swift motion, sprang for the opened door, reached it just in time to crash into a tall bearded form. The man staggered and would have fallen, but she embraced him with a cry of relief. He leaned upon her weakly, his boldly carved face now dull with shock, stained with dark dust from some near explosion.

"Someone threw a hand bomb at your gate, Kay. Stupid Rif, trying to assassinate me! If they only realized that no one else in charge could make as many plunders as I, they could have remained alive. The street patrol has become alerted and is firing on their hiding places."

Kay Lin asked swiftly: "What makes you think it is the Rif, Mazhart? There hasn't been a Rif caught in the city for years!"

The big man sank weakly on a divan and Kay Lin wiped the dust from his face with the soft fabric of her night dress.

"I think I know a Rif when I see one, Kay," he murmured, leaning back, his eyes shooting repeatedly to Jac, as if not sure whether to recognize him or castigate him. "They plotted to kill me here. We have caught a few of their spies today."

"It is more than a plot against your life, Sire!" said Jac. "If that was a Rif bomb, the two events are linked. It is a step in a plan to annihilate the city, for the Vulcana is about to burst!"

The man put his two hands to the divan, pushed himself forward, and peered at Jac as if the place was dark, which it was not.

"Just who are you, and how do you know the Vulcana is not her usual complacent self? And too, what are you doing in this particular boudoir at a time an attempt is made upon my life? It seems a bit opportune, to me!"

"There is no time for such petty thinking, Mazhart! The Vulcana has been sabotaged. Fissionable material has been dumped in from the stratosphere, unobserved. She is going up—just when can be known only to those who dropped the materials. By my observations, I give her about ten hours to complete eruption. That I am a member of the Thermal Patrol should be passport enough at this time to your concubine's bedroom—if that is necessary to reach you!"

"Couldn't you bring your business to my offices?"

"You weren't there, and everyone knows where else you are most likely to be."

The famous Mazarind stood up ponderously, his hands pressed to

his temples, his face averted. Jac decided he was an over-rated stuffed shirt, but hoped that his impression was due to the state of shock in which the concussion had left the ruler. He seemed to be in the grip of complex emotions, endeavoring to concentrate while he grappled with the natural anger at the attempt made upon his person and the fact that his dignity had been ripped at the seams. He glared about suddenly like a great bear looking for some one to blame everything upon.

"You Thermal troops have let the Vulcana get out of hand, then you come to me with a tale of an attack! Why, the Rif have not dared to show their faces in Mekka since their defeat!"

Jac noted Mazhart was contradicting his earlier statement, but ignored it. "There is no time for blame or any action but evacuation. It is too late to stop the culmination of the chain reaction now building up within the fire center. Please pull yourself together, Sire! The life of all our people is at stake, and you alone can give the order for a council meeting to order an evacuation."

THE big man sank as if bemused to the divan. Jac gestured to Kay Lin with a meaningful expression. She understood,

smoothed the ruler's brow with one velvet palm while she clucked motheringly into his ear. He relaxed upon the divan, and after long minutes of silence during which neither moved, murmured: "Kay, call the offices and command an immediate meeting of the officers of state. Make it imperative that all attend."

Jac stepped forward angrily. "Mazarind, that would play directly into their hands! You couldn't give a worse order if you were working for them. The council must be held by way of ray central as expeditiously as possible, and openly and for all to hear, or not at all! You could call more than half of them to a death that is undeniably waiting for them, by your own experience! The Rif are in the city in force; didn't that bomb and the fighting you hear outside tell you that?"

The huge man stared at Jac almost venomously. Seemingly his mind tried in vain to reason out what to do with this creature who kept telling his important self what not to do. His eyes drifted to the sidearm which Jac nervously fingered, and at last he roared out: "What would you have me do, you oracle of wisdom?"

"Connect the central command with Thermal headquarters under Vulcana. Let them give a gener-

al report to each officer in the city. Call a vote for evacuation or a try to put out the chain reaction now building within the cone, whichever is most feasible. Abide then by that vote, swiftly, with everyone alerted to the danger and its nature. Do it now, not when it is too late!"

After another precious minute of apparently labored thought, the flushed and angry face relaxed reluctantly. Mazhart sighed.

"Do it his way, Kay Lin. I seem to have lost my wits, it's true. Set things in motion for me. I can't seem to think at all."

Kay Lin went to her ray controls and did as she was bid. In a few short moments Jac was coupled to nearly every ray beam in the city, his voice going out to every important mind in Mekka. Mazhart had given him the needed permission to explain the sudden crisis.

"People of Mekka, we face annihilation in short hours! The Vulcana has been tampered with, and our heating plant has become an atom fission pile. Just what ingredients were dumped into the cone by a new plot of the Rif, we don't know, or canceling out their work would be simple."

In a low voice, Mazhart, whose form showed on the sending screen just behind Jac's, murmured:

"Explain what has to be done, how they should conduct themselves. I don't trust myself to speak now."

"As you all know, ordinarily our volcano is a source of heat and power in these normally frigid manufacturing excavations of ours, and is not difficult to control. But when the fires within the great central cone we call the 'Can' are made explosive by the addition of chain reaction materials of an unknown nature, then we can only experiment, hoping to strike the right damping combinations. Until we bring the increasing pressures of the Vulcana under our control again, it would be wisest for our city to be evacuated. Quietly, without panic, without looting or disorder, leave the city by the routes nearest to each of you. Do not all crowd onto the stem toward Old Philadelphia, nor rush into the trains for the forests—but each of you go as normally as possible to the nearest long route exit and leave Mekka. We will try to bring the Vulcana under control. If we fail, we will have only to build a new and greater Mekka. But if you remain in your homes, or if you disobey and cause riots that block off exits, it means that many of us will die in the holocaust of fire that is coming to Mekka. Now go: you have perhaps twelve hours, perhaps eight. Be careful and good-

bye."

JAC'S voice rang with a sad command, and he waved his hand with a finality of dismissal. Kay Lin cut the switch that connected her beam to the central command beam.

Mazhart, ruler of the doomed city, leader of his family, sat with a curious air of frustration, as if he would not have allowed the broadcast had he seen how to prevent it. He had not said a word to the people.

Jac spoke to him with an incisive, clear-cut scorn. "Now the Rif will attack, when the people get beyond the city's fixed installations of guns and rays. What do you plan to do to protect them then?"

The man stirred, his face twisted in an enigmatic smile. "Such emergencies are provided for in Central Command staff training. They have certain plans ready to put into instant action. It will be attended to without special orders."

"It might be effective," answered Jac, "to gather a group of volunteer fighting men and be ready to counter-attack when the Rif show their hand. This thing is well planned, and it is quite likely that ordinary methods will not suffice. I know where such men can be found. I have some ideas where the

Rif may lay in wait to massacre people. We might be able to scotch the Rif snake before it bites us seriously."

Mazhart eyed the young man who seemed so experienced a hand at struggle and death. "Where has one so young seen action before?"

Kay Lin answered for him. "This seemingly youthful person is a veteran of the former war with the Rif, having been in every major engagement. He piloted his own fighter jet in the last two great battles. Not only that, he was Halvor's chief aide in the counter-attack which was not expected to succeed, but did. To its success we owe the life of every person in Mekka. Yet what little publicity, what pitiful reward the people of Mekka gave to the men who accomplished it that you do not even know them!"

Mazhart nodded with an irritated motion of his hand. "I see. There is some reason and excuse in your proffering a Mazarind your advice, then." Mazhart took a pad from his pocket, scribbled upon it, tore off a slip of the tough plastic, gave it to Jac. "There is an emergency commission as captain of volunteer forces, whatever their number, that you are able to gather. Go ahead and make your attempt to foil the Rif plot. I am

first going to see that the Mazarind clan reaches safety, and then make sure everything is being done to damp out the atomic fires you say have broken out in the Vulcana. I know something about atomics, and I have never heard of a pile that could not be damped."

"But the Vulcana is not a pile, it is merely a vast fire in the rocks, fed by natural coal deposits. It has been primed with fissionable materials, and it is not equipped with built-in barriers, not intended for the necessity that has arisen. We can dump in cadmium, yes, but we can't get proper distribution in the irregularly shaped fire chambers of the Vulcana. You can't halt that chain reaction, and I am sure Mekka is doomed. If I had been in charge of the Rif forces, the materials I would have used would have been completely unstoppable under the given conditions."

JAC turned away from the obviously confused leader, stared for an instant at Kay Lin, who stood with her lips parted as if to speak, but said nothing. Then he went out the door on the dead run, clutching his emergency powers in his hand. He wondered if he could find anyone calm enough to listen to him or to care how many emergency powers had been

given to him.

"A capable young squirt," growled Mazhart to Kay Lin, "but somehow I detest him."

"One dislikes people for no reason, sometimes," murmured Kay Lin, turning away to hide a sudden tell-tale flush. In her heart she knew exactly why Mazhart disliked Jac Azad, knew that he sensed her own emotions toward the young man. Too, Jac had been none too polite to the ruler. She could not help feeling that Mazhart was showing himself an incompetent in an emergency, as well as a heartless sort of creature. He seemed worried only about the loss of power and prestige, and not about the people. She sighed, for a moment all thought of her own peril banished from her mind by a sudden realization that in grasping for fame and wealth by taking up with Mazarind, she had only gained notoriety and had lost her own self respect. But now, there was something she must do or lose even more. What did this man intend for her, if Mekka truly perished?

She seated herself before the mirror that was so much more than a mirror. She flicked the decorative feather that was the switch, turned the metal ornament that was the focus control, and the beam suddenly licked out upon

Mazhart, freezing him in an instant to subjection to her will, just as it had Jac Azad.

As she scanned his inner, hidden thoughts, a terrible series of scenes from an alien mind stole nightmarishly across the mirror. Kay Lin probed deeper, in a fog of horror that piled terror upon terror in her mind as she knew him for an interloper in the body of her own Mazhart! Rage began to burn over the horror within her. How long had this thing been posing as the ruler? Just who and what this monster was came clear to her at last, penetrating her benumbed understanding, and her rage flamed into a frenzy—a bright anger that moved her hand to the head of the great metal bird and pulled it down with a savage triumph. A lambent ray licked out over the man, a flame no more intense than her own flaming anger, spread and grew over the false Mazhart's face and limbs. His body became for an instant transparent as molten glass, and as swiftly melted away. There was left of the Rif spy only a bad smell and some wisps of ash of the metal fabric of his clothing. Kay Lin's hands sank trembling to her lap.

"Mazhart is dead!" she moaned. "Mekka comes leaderless to her doom, and I . . . what comes for me without Mazhart?"

As she sat there, dejection personified, far more beautiful than usual, her mirror glowed slightly and a whispering, metallic-sounding voice came to her from an imposed enemy ray. It mocked her softly.

"We have fooled you, Kay Lin! He whom you loved and now have murdered, was the real Mazhart. There was no substitution or impersonation! By reading my imposed ray instead of Mazhart's thoughts, you have seen in his mind what I placed there for you to see. How does it feel to be a murderess, to have killed the one you loved? What a patriot, what intelligence, how proud of yourself you must feel!"

For an instant Kay Lin was held in rigid horror, realization surging through her. Then she sprang with a scream to her feet and plunged out of the room, unable to bear the self-accusation of her conscience. She had been tricked by one of the oldest of thought-mirror deceptions, the substitution of thought, and her only excuse was that she had forgotten to expect enemy tampering here in the heart of Mekka. It had not occurred to her she could be so completely fooled as to commit murder! She ran sobbing down the aisles of her home, in mental agony.

And behind her, on the polished surface of the mirror, a monstrous

metal form loomed for an instant, peering after her, something which, had she seen it, would have stayed her horror, but piled something even worse upon it. And through the room the humorless chuckle of the Metal Emperor echoed in rasping tones.

JAC Azad, coming into the city terminals in his levitor sled, found them filled with hurrying Mekkans. It was evident that panic flight was in their minds, and that orderly evacuation was going to be hard to achieve. Sleds darted hither and thither, or turned on their tracks as drivers remembered some valuable left behind—in a place considered immutable and time-proof, but now to be thought of as evanescent, to be gone on the morrow. Jac sped above the growing turmoil, in the express levels, where only official conveyances on special errands and the regular freight carriers were permitted.

He was on his way to a rallying place of his own. It was a club, membered by veterans of the Rif war, and older warriors who had lived through the wars of the beginning of Mekka, after the great war that had destroyed the old civilization. As he went, the sorrow-to-be; the gathering weighty peril for each of these handsome men and lovely women below him, for

each chubby angelic babe, for each gangling youngster, was like an increasing pain in Jac's chest as full realization of the doom of Mekka came to him. A far-off shudder ran through the rocks at regular intervals, and Jac knew, if the others did not, that that shuddering was the shock waves of the increasing atomic reaction building up in the Vulcana's fiery heart. Interspersing this almost inaudible but increasingly fearful shudder of the rocks was a far-off intermittent twang and thrum and twang again of the big mounted rifles, fighting off some attack in one of the city tubes. Jac suspected that this warfare in the distance was the feint attack, designed to draw off the defense of the doomed city to some point which would leave the nerve center of the city undefended. The real attack would come only when such feints had been successful, and after the exploding Vulcana had destroyed the factories and the city's fighting potential, its fixed installations.

"Without a whisper of warning the bloody Rif have got this far toward the death of us all!" Jac cursed to himself. "This damned Mazhart is probably the greatest fool ever to hold the helm of Mekka, or of any other city. He has probably been keeping all warnings quiet on the assumption that they

were the prattle of alarmists seeking to discredit his regime."

THE trickle of early evacuees grew rapidly as Jac's sled sped across the city. A steady stream of vehicles flickered beneath his own and beneath these, along the footways, more and more people were hurrying, carrying bundles of necessities, wrapped in rich tapestries and other fabrics they considered indispensable to their future. As this throng grew in turmoil, Jac realized that not all of them would reach a rendezvous with some vehicle of some friend or relative. This growing conviction that the city could never be evacuated in the short time left was made more certain by a sudden shock and a splitting of the rock wall that cracked with a noise like thunder, throwing out a cloud of burning gas which flickered and went out.

It was this incident that made him see the scene that drew his speeding sled to a stop and a dive toward the tunnel floor. Here the walkways along the side were filled with hurrying figures. The sudden flare of brilliant red light from the gases emitted by the volcanic crack had given Jac a glimpse of a scene on the walkway; struggling figures about one central figure playing about with a bright wand. It was a weapon from which the surround-

ing figures leaped back, only to come in again.

Jac halted his sled just above the heads of the group. There were a half-dozen dark-clad men, and in the center, one silver-clad young woman. Her legs were cased in scaled metal hose, her hair a mass of tossing midnight about her tense, anger-flushed face. She was breathing hard, but the wand in her hand pulsed with electric flame. Jac recognized it as an animal trainer's defense weapon, harmless but numbing in its effects. Jac called down.

"What's the trouble, lion-tamer? Can I be of any help?"

The men glanced up, aware of him now. One slunk away into the shadows and took to his heels, another tugged at a gun in his short coat. But Jac flicked his own needle-ray from its holster and showed the man its muzzle. He dropped his hands to his sides, stood irresolute. As he turned away, the others joined him, and they hurried off, leaving the woman standing alone. The wand of ruddy flame in her hand was no brighter than her grateful eyes and flushed face as she turned her head upward to Jac.

"Can I come aboard, soldier? They wanted me to accompany them to a place of safety. Safety, with them, hah! I think not."

HER voice was a clear, sharp contralto. Jac could imagine it

cracking with command as she put a monster of the jungle through its paces for the entertainment of a crowd of thrill-seekers. He lowered the sled to her side. She stepped aboard lithe and supple, and her strength of hand as she seized the fore rail to settle in her seat gave Jac a queer thrill of admiration such as no female had ever aroused. It was very odd to admire a woman for strength and agility, and at the same time feel drawn by the softer feminine qualities so apparent on her flower-petal cheeks, in her deep midnight eyes.

"What is the matter with the Vulcana soldier? Is it as bad as the announcers made out?"

"It's worse!" growled Jac, rocketing the sled up through the speeding traffic and forward again at full speed. The animal trainer gave a gasp at his daring, and Jac smiled.

"Don't tell me that a levitor sled can thrill you?"

"I don't mind the biggest cat out of Africa, but speed gives me butterflies. What do you mean, it's worse? Is the city really going to be filled with lava?"

Jac waved below. "Plenty of those people hurrying to get passage out of the city aren't going to make it! What is your name?"

"It wouldn't mean a thing to you; it's a stage name. You may have seen my billing as 'Armora,

the Fearless'. My real name is Jill Lang. My family have been on the stage for generations, and I was born on the road. My father was Lou Lang, the greatest stunt flier ever thrilled a crowd by risking his neck. But the jets got him in the end. You can't stick at that game when your nerves begin to slow up, and he did. He was killed in an exhibition flight over Chicago."

"I remember him," said Jac. "I was there with Darreg with the Space Patrol during the Rif war."

"You knew Darreg? I knew him when I was a kid. He used to visit our tent on the Midway."

"I knew him the way a pilot knows a general, from a respectful distance. That's different from being dandled on his knee."

"He and Dad used to talk ships until all hours. I use to fall asleep at their feet, like a dog."

"So we have mutual friends, Miss Lang. I'm called Jac, which is short for Jac-alin. My mother wanted a girl. My family name is Azad, the north branch. But the family money in the western clans has something to do with my need for a job. I inherited none of it. So I make a living with the Thermal Patrol, engineer third tier on the official papers."

"You should be on duty at the Vulcana. Are you deserting in the face of danger? They'll have you

shot!"

Jac flushed a little at the sudden scorn in her face. Her voice had chilled instantly to distant impersonality.

"I'm on a special mission, Miss Lang. It might be wiser if you remained at the Club on the chance you can get a hop out of the city. I am going to pick up some buddies and take a shot at the people back of this."

Her face changed again, this time to a warm interest and curiosity. Her voice slid down the scale to a husky note of apology. "Couldn't I go along? I can shoot, and I'm not exactly a coward?"

JAC set the sled down before the great sleeping stone dragon which was the symbol of the veteran's organization. It was an apt symbol, for these men were for the most part pilots of the fiery-breathed war-jets, and in time of trouble would come out of civilian life to take their place as riders of the flaming coffins that jets in war-time so often become.

As Jac came in the round hole of the doorway, made to resemble the entrance port of a big space liner, a chorus of cries greeted him.

"Here he is now, the great Maz-arind's chief counsellor!"

"Yeah, here he is. That spiel he made left out the most important

part—how did the Vulcana get that way? And why isn't Jac Azad at his post?

"Talk, Azad! You've got some explaining to do!"

The men were gathered around the centrally located newscaster, a large spherical screen which sat like a bubble of light in the middle of the lobby. It was the meeting place of the famous warriors of Mekka. Every man who had achieved any notice for courage in battle was invited to join, though any veteran who had been in battle was eligible. There were about two-score men gathered about the screen, within which the figure of the city's chief coordinator was visible. He was giving orders to some force of police in action, and this was one of the few emergency channels opened now to provide the central command with supplementary forces.

The veterans gathered were waiting for an assignment in the expected attack by the forces behind the eruption. The borings beneath the club house contained a full complement of fast ships, both sport and regular battle planes, owned by the members. The poorest of them, like Jac, owned levitor sleds for getting about the city, the richest owned as high as twenty planes of all kinds, from sport jets to full-armored battle craft—

and they were all very proud of the privilege given the club to own such fighting ships. They were really an auxiliary reserve organization, subsidized by the government to keep them ready for military action.

The full membership of the club was over five hundred, two hundred and more of whom were quartered in the club building itself. Jac wondered where the rest were, till the man at the spherical screens shifted the view and he saw the space over Vulcana, two miles up, was filled with fighting planes, while lancing down from space came huge troop-bearing space craft, their fore-jets blasting as they slowed to landing speed. The vast cone of the Vulcana made the scene lurid even in the darkness with an intermittent blast of fiery rocks, and a steady flare of flaming gases, reaching a half-mile into the air. It was a terrific scene and Jac could only mumble to the many questions being thrown at him.

"Special mission. I'm here to pick up a volunteer force. It's too late for the Thermal Patrol to do anything with the Vulcana. She's going to blow in a few hours."

"What's the mission, Jac? I might volunteer." Hugh Spear, a man who had seen action in the same outfit with him, spoke up. He was a squat man for a Mekkan,

but as broad as two of Jac.

"I had figured the Rif might be holed up in the new construction under the north slope. There are a lot of dwelling chambers built and no one even guards them. The whole place is empty except for the automatic borers and a few oilers who stay there to keep an eye on the machinery. I figured we might bottle them up before they come down on the city. But this landing on the South slopes of the cone makes me wonder if I was right."

"You're right, and you don't know it. I hadn't thought of the new borings! They are waiting till we swarm up to repel the surface attack, then they'll come out and mow down the city forces. It makes sense! Let's go take a look anyway. No one's going to send for us till they run into something they can't handle, and everything's under control so far except the broken heart of the Vulcana."

THERE was a terrific tension in the room as the veterans watched the Rif forces disembarking under fire, disappearing into openings in the side of the vast slope of the south shoulders of the Vulcana.

"They must know to the second when the Vulcana is due to blow, otherwise they would never trust an army to those tunnels," said

Spear.

"If we could hold 'em there, delay them, the Vulcana might do us a favor and take care of them," Jac muttered to Spear.

Jill Lang spoke up. "Jac, where is our fleet? They are making that landing with only a token resistance. There aren't a thousand fighters in the air!"

"Probably out in space fighting off the main force of the Rif. These transports have made a circle around the main engagement, perhaps unobserved by the main fleet. It's up to us to handle them until the fleet returns. You never know, in battle, just where and why everything takes place. You have to do a lot of guessing, and when you guess wrong, you get killed."

"You mean our fleet hasn't maintained contact? Doesn't anyone know where they are?"

"Sure, the brass in Central Command know where everyone is, but they don't tell every non-combatant and reserve pilot the details. We may never learn the true details of the very battles we are going to engage in during the next few hours. That's war, Jill."

Spear, who had been waiting for the answer to a message, was approached by a uniformed attendant of the club who handed him a armload of equipment. There were two rifles, the deadly needle-

ray rifles of Mekka, good up to five miles of 'scope vision. There were two suits of metal-cloth designed to shed the most dangerous emanations and everything except a direct hit with rays, and there were a score of tiny and various instruments some of which even Jac did not understand.

"Come on, Jac, let's take a look at the north borings," Spear shouted, setting off on a dead run for the escalator down into the hangar chambers beneath.

As Jac followed Spear, he noticed that Jill was running at his side. At his questioning look she murmured: "You didn't say goodbye so I figured you expected to take me along."

"Oh no! This is dangerous Jill! You had better stay here and cadge a ride out of the city. If we do run into Rif in the borings, we may not get back again."

"Nonsense. I'm a good pilot, and if you want to use those two rifles, someone will have to handle the levitor wheel."

Spear's armored fighter was no mere jet job, but had both jets and an interplanetary drive—an etheric vortice engine such as is usually used only in the large ships for long space flights. It had also an auxiliary levitor drive and lifter for surface work on any planet.

AS the trio clambered into the stubby, nearly cylindrical and unwinged ship, Spear flashed a beam into the club's coordinator chamber, requesting a tractor ray to follow their flight in case their deductions as to the location of the Rif forces were accurate and they were attacked and overwhelmed by superior numbers and could not return or report. Then he set the autopilot of the levitor drive, which device kept a ship centered in a boring, making it impossible to crash the walls. Without it all swift flight in the great subterranean factory network that was the life-blond of Mekka would have been impossible. As the ship lifted to the center channel of the main tunnel through the center of the Mekkan industrial area, it continually shifted aside with a disturbing suddenness to let pass the unending stream of traffic caused by the evacuation.

They sped across the emptying city. The sense of sorrow at all these people abandoning loved homes was constant and painful as they watched the milling throngs in the walkways boarding the passenger levitor platforms or making last minute purchases in the still operating provision automats. They were a beautiful people, light-hearted even in the face of the imminent fiery death about to

consume the city, and there were tears in Jill Lang's dark eyes as she watched them pass beneath; knowing that surely many of them would soon pass into the limbo of the past unless the luck of Mekka were tremendous. For with the forces of the Rif circling the southern half of the city, the main exits to the southward were already closed. The east and western ways would soon be closed, and unless the northern ways remained open, many of the people of the underground portion of Mekka would be bottled up in the doomed borings. Strangely, the reason for building the manufacturing portion of the city underground, a lesson learned in the Atomic War, was now proving to be erroneous and disastrous, by reason of the sabotaging of the Vulcana. The danger now was from within, not without.

The ship swung now into the empty north borings, where lay the partially finished new manufacturing areas which were not yet connected at the extremities with the regular network of tunnels. When finished, they had been planned to form a complete underground suburb of Mekka. The great new transport platforms lay unfinished all along the wide tunnel floors, giving a chaotic appearance to the scene. Tools and equipment lay scattered in all dir-

ections. Here and there a small service light burned over some throbbing machine keeping pressure in the air lines or pumping fuel to the temporary turbines. These tunnels were the safest in Mekka right now, as there were no heat pipes or power lines installed and no connection made to the vast inferno of the Vulcana.

"Jac and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water," said Jill, as if to herself.

Jac flashed her a glance. It had not occurred to him how their names jingled in the old rhyme. It gave him an odd thrill of kinship with this lean whiplash of feminine courage and too much ability to be perfectly feminine. She would make someone a perfect mate. One would never have to coddle her; she could take care of herself.

SUDDENLY a voice out of nowhere whispered in his ear. "Oh no you don't, Jac Azad. You won't have to think of such things!"

With these words his brain whirled dizzily and a hypnotic pressure on his senses brought him a completely overwhelming realization of the proxy presence of Kay Lin. He realized she had been keeping contact with him since he had left her chambers, and the thought of

this famous beauty, one whom the whole city looked upon as irresistible, had fastened her desires upon him was a sensation of delight and anticipation of transports to come — an anticipation which Jac knew was being suggested by Kay Lin's mind within his own, but which was no less irresistible in absorbing vistas of future passion because of that.

In answer to a suggestion by Kay Lin, he took the slip of vellum from his pocket on which Mazhart had written. Scanning it, he gave an exclamation of rage. For it was an order for his arrest as a spy, signed with both Mazhart's signature and a tiny mark beneath that he recognized as the old Rif symbol.

He did not hear Kay Lin's sigh of infinite relief as he scanned the paper. She knew now she had been right in killing the spy. It *hadn't* been Mazhart.

Jac turned to Jill to find she had been watching his sudden plunge into hypnotic absorption.

"Now who was that? Venus herself, by the look on your face."

"Just a friend." murmured Jac, his voice shaking a little.

"She would like to be more than a friend, and she has equipment only possessed by specially privileged persons, to be able to follow and reach you here. Who is

she?"

For some unaccountable reason, Jac felt defiant. "It was Kay Lin, the mistress of the ruler, Mazhart."

"Just a friend, eh?" murmured Jill, sensing his defiance.

He flushed. "I met her today for the first time, trying to get word to Mazhart that the Vulcana was about to blow up. I couldn't find him at his office, so I paid a social call on the most logical place to find him."

Jill looked knowingly at him and there was an exaggerated soothing note in her voice. "And she was impressed with the handsome soldier. Say no more. I understand."

"No you don't!" said Jac angrily. "I . . ."

Jill turned her attention to a map of the city which Hugh Spear had produced. Spear reached across and put his finger on the place where they were now. She nodded. Jac turned back to the side port, watching for some sign of Rif occupation. But the innumerable openings into the future dwellings of the workers were empty of any signs of life.

Spear, with his better vision from the transparent nose of the ship, saw something amiss in the dark tunnel, shot gas into the fore-jets, settling the ship to the rocky floor.

Quickly he rose from his seat at the controls, took one step toward the side port. At that instant a ray bolt slashed through the armor of the cabin and bisected the nose of the ship with a great splash of molten metal. If he had not risen, he would have been very dead now. Swiftly he bent over the control panel, pulled back the levitor lever and turned on the fore jets. The ship lifted and shot backward just as two more flaming bolts of energy split the air where the ship had been settled. Jac admired his quick decision. The ordinary man would have risen off the ground with a forward motion and been caught like a clay pigeon.

SPEAR flew the ship backward at full speed, then suddenly darted sideways and up a black tunnel without a light. He had shut off the dim cabin light in the meanwhile. As he set the darkened ship down on the rock again, a feat itself done in the dark only by the sharpest of flyer's instinct, Jill read off a communicator tape.

"Our tracer ray contact has seen the attack upon us. The operator assures us forces will be dispatched immediately to handle whatever was hidden there—and commanding us to return to the club of the Sleeping Dragon."

"How about that?" asked Spear of both companions. "Do we run back home now that danger appears?"

"Let's look around first and see what we can learn about their numbers," answered Jac. "It could be an imposed message and our tracer ray shorted out. But if it was, it wouldn't send us back. It just doesn't make sense."

"Everything in Mekka is mixed up—the Vulcana exploding is in itself an impossibility, but it is happening. The Rif must have been a long time preparing this coup."

"I say we scout this section on foot. We can keep out of sight, look around till we learn something."

Jac turned to Jill. "You stay with the ship. We'll look over the borings in this section."

"No you don't! I'm going along. Hide the ship in one of the empty chambers."

They slid the weightless ship within one of the empty dwelling chambers which still did not have its partitions installed, and closed the rough temporary wooden door on it. Then they set off on foot toward the section from which they had been fired upon.

They ascended a stairway, were advancing along a railed balcony overlooking a great central cham-

ber such as all dwellings contain, when a racket beneath them gave them pause. They stood, silent and alert, only to hear the noise of wheels and the hiss of high-powered levitors the steady burtle and murmur of a great force of men and equipment getting underway. Then they came into view.

There were great sleds loaded down with the heaviest type of ray cannon, manned and ready to fire—at least a hundred floated slowly by beneath them, followed by a number twice as great of one man sleds equipped with deadly needle-ray rifles mounted on swivels.

"We are too late," whispered Jac. "They are departing to attack the city from the north."

"They will run smack into our Sleeping Dragons!" said Spear. "Let's hope they are not asleep now!"

"If we could figure some way to muddle them up here as they gather to leave . . ." whispered Jill Lang.

There was little need of any effort to keep quiet. The rush and crush of the force beneath them drowned the place with echo upon echo of footsteps on the rock of the floor, with the jangle of loose chain against anchored cannon and the lighter ring of side weapons against harness buckle.

THERE was a deadly air of brutal, serious intent to kill in that gathering force, bedded here for no one knew how long, waiting for things to ripen in the city to the south. There was a sickening efficiency in the speed of their going in the grim-lipped set faces, like masks of death in the dim lights from the sleds' control panels.

"Get back in the tunnel," ordered Jac suddenly. Jill obeyed, but stood watching as he raised the weapon he carried, sighted at the high center arch of the domed chamber. Beside him, Spear raised a similar weapon and the two rifles hissed venomously together. From overhead the report of the explosive bullets was deafening, and down upon the entrance out of which the procession of man and weapons was coming, fragments of rock as big as men's heads rained down. Nothing of a size sufficient to more than worry them, but still, as Jill had suggested, enough to "muddle them."

Again they fired, this time at the key point of the arch over the entry-way, and the double charge of explosive pellets knocked a fragment of rock loose weighing at least a ton. It dropped down upon a heavy levitor sled, tipped it over on its side and blocking the whole doorway with its weight. With which success, Jack and Hugh

darted back from the railed edge of the balcony and sprinted up the passage behind, brushing against Jill as they passed, but not seeing her. She ran after them, but they were but misleading echoes of footsteps overhead, where they bounded up the stairways. These stairways were but narrow emergency borings, to be sealed up after the place was finished, useful only during construction before the levitor passages and usual means of getting about were installed. All Mekka buildings used a levitor beam for elevators, making anything placed in a vertical boring weightless so that it could be floated up or down. It was this which made their flight sensible, as nothing bigger than one man could follow up these narrow stairways. At the top they knelt, and Jill, panting after, nearly got herself shot before they remembered her.

"Well, we muddle 'em up all right! Now they will hunt us down like rats through these warrens, and your friends will arrive just in time to bury us." Jill was quite certain about it, and Spear laughed grimly.

"We're in no danger. They won't change plans for that, won't send more than a few men after us. We've only delayed them for seconds, but those seconds may be just what is needed to throw them out

of stride when the Dragons hit 'em."

As if in answer to his words there came a terrific hiss and sputter as of a gigantic fuse suddenly lit, and after it came a concussion, shuddering deafeningly about them as the air tore apart in the pressure. This was followed by a steady series of shocks as the ray rifles of some heavily armored craft went into action, splitting the rocks of the cavern with sudden heat.

How the encounter between their Sleeping Dragons and the concealed Rif forces came out, they were not to learn for as they turned to make their way to the front walls of the boring to see the battle outside through some air shaft or opening, a sudden light broke out upon them, a sugar-sweet female voice said mockingly:

"Ah, we have caught the spies who fired upon our caravan of death!"

They could see nothing but the blinding brightness of the spot of light directed upon them, but Jac threw up his rifle and let go a bolt at the light itself. The rifle was knocked from his grasp by a force beam even as it discharged. The pellet only shattered the roof overhead, letting down a rain of rock dust over the scene.

SPEAR dropped his own weapon, realizing there was no sense

getting killed when no resistance was possible. Jac stood wringing his painful hands, burning with the shock of the force ray. Jill merely smiled at the blinding light; she had faced so many spotlights it seemed quite natural.

The voice directed them to march ahead, and presently they brought up before a wide door, of rough wood. It was opened and they stepped through to find half a hundred women. Jac realized these were wives and sweethearts of the Rif forces, who expected to wait here till Mekka was destroyed, then join in the looting and celebrations afterward.

The woman who had captured them stood well behind them, still with her hand light and force beam pistol, and motioned them onward across the room. They were locked into a small dark closet, and left to listen to the chatter of the Rif camp-followers.

Jac uttered a muffled curse. "Captured by women!"

"We're still alive," Jill's voice was light, half laughing, half bitter.

"But better dead. Now we'll be taken back to the Rif cities even if they are defeated, and spend the rest of our lives working as slaves for people we detest."

Spear sat down against the wall, unlatched his empty weapon belt, made himself comfortable. Jac

bent to the tiny slit of light from the doorway, peering for a chink to look out at the Rif women. Jill shoved him aside.

"No need your watching those creatures! I'll do it for you."

"It is just as well you do," muttered Jac, sitting down beside Spear. "It would be a sad fate indeed if I were to fall in love with one of them."

"I wouldn't put it past you," said Jill, grimacing.

In the closet, the air grew humid, almost unbearable. Jill kept her eye glued to the slit of the door; Spear and Jac sat motionless, waiting for whatever unpleasantness was in store for them. Jill occasionally gave little sounds of disgust.

Then a broad broom of rays swept hissing across the scene outside. The women screamed and ran. The sounds of their feet thudding off down the passages was all that was left of them. Jill gave a cry of delight, and for the faintest fraction of an instant their own bodies felt the intolerable pain of that ray before it followed the fleeing women. Someone had pierced the defenses of the place with a neural wave, generating maddening impulses of an unbearable pain in the bodies of all it touched.

The husky, throaty voice of Kay Lin came to Jac's inner ear, murmuring: "I have found you, Jac

Azad. A prisoner of the Rif camp women. I am surprised and disappointed." The faint tinge of mockery in her tones caused Jac to flush in the darkness, but he only grinned at the invisible woman. He knew his own face must be looking out of her mirror in her boudoir. He could imagine her quite clearly, sitting there as if the whole city was not aboil with chaotic activity, fleeing citizens, rumbling fires beneath, marching armies and strafing planes.

"Did your patrol run off and leave you?" whispered Jac, curious as to how it happened the Mazarind had not seen that she was safely out of the city by now.

KAY Lin made a split-second decision and lied. "Believe it or not, Jac Azad, our ruler seems to have done just that. No one knows where he has gone or how to reach him. His family will have to exile him to save the reputation of the Mazarind Clan. Mazhart is no longer the heart of the clan, if I read the cards right."

"Kay Lin, if we could get out of this closet, we could join you. Together we might find a way to strike at these Rif armies, or at least make a sensible exit ourselves before the Vulcana consumes the empty city."

"It is far from empty. There is

a pitched battle going on in the western tunnels, and the Vulcana tremors mount steadily on the dials in the seismograph office. The city is calmly evacuating otherwise, and a large part of the Rif invasion force has been sealed off from the city blasting down the western doors. The openings remaining are where the battle is taking place."

"The real danger, then, is the Vulcana itself. Find out exactly when the Rif technician expect her to let go with the big blast. You can find it out if you look into a few Rif minds with your pretty plaything. They must have been briefed on how long a time they have to loot the city."

"I have already done that, and more, Jac Azad. The time is about one hour from this instant, and they are frantically trying to get out of the city themselves. But the battle has blasted down so many gates, a lot of them aren't going to get away in time."

"Good!" cried Jac, at which Jill and Spear shook him, thinking he was asleep and dreaming.

"There's nothing good about this hole, wake up!" cried Spear into Jac's ear.

"I'm awake," said Jac. "Hold still a minute. I'm in contact with Kay Lin. She is working to release us, and she will come for us. The Vulcana is due to blow up in an

hour."

Even as he spoke, a heat ray began eating at the doorway. The wood flared, blackened, fell to ash. Within moments they were free and racing down the passage outside.

"Make your way toward my place along the main routes. I will start out in my own private plane to pick you up," ordered Kay Lin in Jac's ear. "Then we will leave this madness behind us and seek calmer climes for our future."

As the ray left them, Spear grinned at Jac. "It's right handy to have so many women worried about you, eh Jac?"

Jac only looked serious. "I don't feel that we should run away and leave Mekka just because the whole place is doomed to go up in smoke."

Jill spoke up. "There won't be time for more than that, Jac. We can die nobly running around like ants on a crushed anthill, or we can get out and be sensible. After all, you've got to think of your girl friend!" There was derision in her voice, and again Jac flushed.

They set out on foot, running along the corridors toward the place they had hidden the plane. They found it efficiently sabotaged by the Rif women or soldiers. In was useless to anyone now.

THEY went on down the avenues of darkness toward the inhab-

ited portion of the city. Somewhere they hoped Kay Lin would run into them. It was their only chance of escaping from the endless warrens of the factory-city. The whole under-rock was now shuddering deeply, constantly, with an increasing reverberation which they realized was the atomic explosions in the far-off crater, building up to a climax as the various materials deposited by the Rif reached their critical mass and fissioned.

"Part of that concussion," panted Spear, running heavily beside his lighter-bodied companions, "is probably bombs by our own forces seeking to bottle up the Rif by blowing down the cavern roofs. If they can get 'em sealed off in time, they will be destroyed by their own deviltry. That will be justice!"

"I can't run away while our outfit is still fighting, Hugh. We've got to get to the front and report. They will need us. Once out of the city in Kay Lin's ship, we've got to stick close and fight with the rest to the last second."

"We can't do a thing without a ship, man. We'll have to take over Kay Lin's ship by force, if she insists on running to a lover's rendezvous with you."

Jac's face set in grim lines as the long gray sport ship of the rich woman settled to the cavern

floor in the center of the now deserted North highway. They ran up to the ship, but the entry port—a curiously shaped door resembling a shield with four points on top—remained closed. In their ears they could hear her voice over the ray with which she was checking them.

"Oh no you don't, you two patriots! You are too fiery for me. I want none of your last ditch heroism. If you come aboard, it will be on your word of honor to take my orders. I have a plan of my own, and information you are unaware of. You're not setting me afoot in the forest outside the city while you run off to fight a war that was lost before it started."

She had taken a look at their thoughts from habitual caution and surprised their just-formed plan to take over her ship. Jac frowned and Spear grinned.

"Okay, sister, you win. Open the door and we'll behave like little lambs."

With which promise, Kay Lin swung the door wide and they stepped into the upholstered sleekness of her richly emblazoned sport flyer. Gray leather seats, polished wood paneling, a multiplicity of gleaming gadgets, and beyond the glass paneling between the pilot's seat and the cabin, Kay Lin's lushly lovely face a little

grim. She did not open the heavy glass panel between the cabin and herself, but motioned them to seats and took off, screaming away from Mekka Industrial City up the exact center of the tunnel. Behind them the narrowing perspective of the great bore suddenly gleamed with a light brighter than the sun, and the ship lurched as a blast of air struck them from the rear. Fire and heat rays shot past the ports. The ship became hot as a furnace inside from the sudden blast of the distant explosion—and each of them knew that Mekka was no more, even as they plunged out of the bore and flashed across the smoking ruined city outside.

"If you two had had your way, we would have been back there just in time to get the full force of that," came Kay Lin's voice.

But Jac and Spear and Jill were not listening. Instead they were staring down at a rapidly vanishing scene behind them. There towering many hundreds of feet into the air, smashing buildings with grotesque metal arms, and ponderous metal legs was a figure that was so like a man that it staggered their imaginations.

"A robot giant!" exclaimed Jill.

"Something new for the Rif," said Spear, "It will be hard to stop things like that, but they can't have many of them."

KAY Lin's voice came to them, as they zoomed out of sight of the city over the mountain and out beyond, over the silent forest that covered the area between the city and the sea. "That is the only one and it is not a robot, not exactly."

"What do you mean, Kay Lin?" asked Jac. "How can it be not 'exactly' a robot?"

"That is the Metal Emperor, the ruler of the Rif, and it is not a robot, because it has a human mind."

"A human mind," breathed Spear. "How can that be?"

"It is metal, but in its skull case is a brain, an ancient brain many thousands of years old."

"But the size of that head," cried Jill. "Surely, it need not be that large to house a human brain."

"It needs to be that large to house *this* human brain," said Kay Lin. "I know, for I probed it with my 'pretty plaything,' as you called it."

The speedy ship was now over the ocean, flashing forward at top speed, and Kay Lin set the automatic controls, then stepped into the cabin with them.

"It is a long story," she said, sitting down on a leather-covered divan. "If you'll be patient, I'll tell you about it, and what we intend to do."

"But where are we going?" asked Jac. "Why flee in terror over the sea, this way?"

"Listen, and I will explain. In order that you might understand, I will have to go back to the very beginning. First, Mazhart was murdered by a spy, whom I later killed myself, when he came to my apartment, no doubt to do what he could to aid the invasion and try to track down more of the Mazarind Clan." Kay Lin glossed over the real truth of her experience which still caused her some perturbation in spite of the fact she had been justified in her action

"In my search, immediately afterward, for the Mazarind, I checked back on the recording tape of my television mirror, and saw a picture of that great metal monster you saw back in Outer Mekka. Somehow it had been directing the spy to me, and managed to get a message to him over my own apparatus when I was not looking

..." A bit of a flush stole over Kay Lin's face at the bit of fiction she was weaving into her otherwise truthful story, but she went on without otherwise betraying the fact.

"I traced the signal back, and found this Metal Emperor, as the Rif call him, approaching Earth in his giant space ship. I pried into his mind, just as I did into

yours, but not with the compulsion that can be achieved over a mere human mind. I did it secretly, and I learned an amazing story.

"A long time ago, many thousands of years before our present civilization, the Rif were inhabitants of Earth."

JAC Azad gasped. "Inhabitants of Earth! How could that be?"

"It is true, nonetheless," Kay Lin went on. "They were a highly mechanized race, living on a continent that has come down to us in legend as Mu, in what is now the Pacific Ocean, which is where we are heading . . ."

"But why?" interrupted Spear.

"Never mind that now, suffice it to say that we are not just fleeing in terror, but have a definite objective in view. But to go on, this Rifian civilization was a vastly mechanical one, and, then, just as they really are now, they were enslaved to their machines. In fact, their ruler was a machine, with a human brain, grown greatly by its defeat of death and age through its separation from a physical body, just as that monster you saw destroying Mekka."

"Just as, you say?" asked Jac, sensing her implied meaning.

"Exactly. The ancient Rif were ruled by a Metal Emperor, but there were more than one of these giant

robots. A whole race of them existed then, and the humans were but the merest slaves, and would eventually have been entirely eliminated. But a great disaster struck this planet, a disaster that sank the continent of Mu into the depths. But it was not a disaster that came too suddenly. It was prepared for, and one great spaceship escaped, bearing one of the metal giants, and his crew of human Rif slaves. It had been planned that each of the giant robots would escape in a separate ship, with his slaves, then when Earth was habitable once more, they would return. When I probed the mind of the Metal Emperor, I found that he had been the sole survivor. None of the other ships reached their pre-planned destination, and he was marooned for thousands of years by the damaging of his spaceship, and the difficulty of reconstructing his mechanical civilization. There was a revolt of the slaves, and on their new world, two factions sprang up. For centuries they waged wars, and finally the Metal Emperor triumphed. Then he built up his civilization again, and finally, was able to send scouts to Earth to determine if it was once more habitable, because Earth is a far superior planet, and he wished to return.

"And so he found it. And so he planned to come back. His first

attack was repulsed, through underestimating our mechanical status, largely because our own atomic war had forced our true mechanical civilization underground, where he failed to find it in its proper perspective. Now, in his second attack, he has succeeded. The Metal Emperor has returned to the planet of his birth, bringing his Rif slaves with him, and it is his intent to wipe Earth clean of its present population, and resume once more what he considers his rightful place as supreme and sole ruler."

"It is incredible," said Jac. "But we saw him, and your story must be true. And because it is, there seems little hope for Earth now. With Mekka destroyed, the other smaller cities will fall. There seems nothing we can do."

"At least not here," said Spear. "Why are we plunging out over the ocean to nowhere? I say we must go back and fight, no matter how hopeless it seems. Even if we escape, the Metal Emperor and his Rif slaves will eventually seek us out, and that will be our end. I, for one, do not set so much store by a period of dalliance at love, as by an honorable death. We must go back. Jac, I am surprised that you would even consider the proposition of Kay Lin, no matter what her physical charm. Are you a traitor for so small a cause as a

bit of perfumed flesh?"

"Stay!" came Kay Lin's voice harshly. "Don't condemn my flesh before you know my mind! It is true that I was Mazhart's mistress, but I am also human, as you and no traitor, nor so dishonorable as you seem to think. We will continue to our destination."

"And that is what?" asked Jill, a dangerous light flaring into her dark eyes.

KAY Lin eyed her almost hostilely. "A small deserted island paradise in the southern Pacific, if you must know," she said stiffly.

"I thought so!" said Spear harshly. "And I do condemn you!"

"Thank you," said Kay Lin. "And you, Jac? Do you also condemn me without a hearing?"

Up from his subconscious came the hypnotic compulsion that still governed him in respect to his thoughts about Kay Lin. "No, Kay Lin, I do not. I will listen to you, if you will speak. After you have spoken we shall see."

"Then listen, all of you. With my 'pretty plaything' I managed to pry one interesting bit of information from the Metal Emperor's mind, a piece of information I have already given you—that there were originally more than one robot giant. As I thought about that,

I began to wonder if the Metal Emperor were really the original ruler of Mu, or if he was a lesser one. And I wondered about all the others, whether they had actually died in space unable to reach their destination. And I remembered the ancient legends of Mu, which predict that one day she will rise again. They couldn't have come from this particular metal giant, out of contact with Earth, so I reasoned that not all of them left the planet, and likewise, not all of them died, or their memory would have died with them. So, with my ray, I sought an answer to the secret. Deep down in the depths of the Pacific I found it."

Jac and his two comrades stared at her. "What did you find?" they asked in unison.

She smiled tantalizingly at them. "I found—the *real* Metal Emperor. And I got the *real* story. Believe it or not, that ancient civilization of metal giants still exists, on the bottom of the Pacific, miles beneath the surface, a race of immortal metal men, with enormous human brains, wise beyond all belief, perfectly aware of the life on the surface, but content to remain where they are. But because of the weakness of my transmitting ray, I could not contact them. So, that is why we make this trip. In this ship, I have an exact duplicate of the

'plaything' of my boudoir, and with it I hope to contact that Metal Emperor and enlist his help."

Jac and Spear and Jill sat stunned. The enormity of the facts that Kay Lin had related to them were almost beyond belief, but yet they must be true.

"Kay Lin," said Spear, "I must apologize. You are an infinitely clever and brilliant woman, to go along with your great beauty. And I must confess that you have discovered the only way we can defeat the Rif, and restore Mekka and all Earth to its former glory. But are you sure you can contact the Metal Emperor, and if you do, will he help us?"

Kay Lin looked at him. "Even the Metal Emperor has a human brain. And being human, I feel sure that I can do to him as I have done to many others. Perhaps my peculiar fleshly charms may have some practical use after all."

Jill Lang looked at Kay Lin a bit strangely, but then she spoke. "Perhaps what you have said is not all egotism. In any other case, I would hope so, but in this, I am all for you. But I wonder if the Metal Emperor will be anywhere near the big bowl of mush that is Jac Azad?"

Jac flushed, turned to her, about to give an angry retort, when he saw her smile. Instead he grinned

sheepishly. "I would expect such a remark from a lion-tamer."

Now it was Jill's turn to flush, and Kay Lin turned a lingering glance upon Jac Azad that left him quite flustered.

HOURS later Kay Lin set the ship down on a coral islet in the vast desert of shining water that was the Pacific. Here, she said, it rolled over the ancient land of Mu, and far below, forever free of ordinary men's probing adventurings, was a mechanical civilization that had never before been equalled throughout the cosmos, a race of mechanical giants, living a life forever bulwarked against interference, impervious to outside influence, and content to remain in its impregnable fortress of water.

The three Mekkans watched anxiously as Kay Lin set her apparatus into action, sending its probing rays down into the dark water, down, down until, miles deep, as seen on the polished mirror, not even fish were visible, only perpetual blackness, lighted only by her rays. At last a tremendous scene burst into view. Here was a city! A tremendous bulking city of imperishable metal, and in it moving figures, giant figures—metal men!

"It's true!" exclaimed Jill. "And I am proud to be a woman, if only to be able to share the glory of

your achievement in guessing the truth and having the mental ability to find it, Kay Lin."

Kay Lin flashed her a glance of appreciation, then turned back to her control panel. As she flicked lever after lever, at last on the mirror a single great building was focused, and finally, a great room inside that building. And here, sitting on a great throne in an attitude of meditation, was a metal giant fully a mile tall, and with a brain almost unbelievable in size. And Kay Lin spoke to it.

"Emperor of ancient Mu," she said, her tones soft and cooing, like a dove's: "Listen to me. I am Kay Lin, one of the surface people who live and love and die far above your head. I have come to you for help, and to give you a piece of information of great import to you."

The giant figure on the throne stirred and looked about, then its great mechanical eyes looked upward, peering through the metal of the building's roof, up through the water with x-ray vision, and into the little flyer in which the four Mekkans sat. But he did not speak. It was obvious that for the moment he listened.

"From a far planet one of your own members, who escaped thousands of years ago from the holocaust that you yourself escaped in

another way, by preparing a city that could live on the bottom of the ocean, has returned to Earth, and is at this moment waging a war of extermination on the surface people. It is in his mind to take back the planet of his birth, and to rule it as the sole emperor, for he does not know that you survive, and your companions with you. His mind is poisoned by his contact with the rays of outer space, and he is no longer sane. When he learns of you, as he will, he will make war on you. He is a great danger to you, if he is allowed to consolidate his position here on Earth. Look for yourself, and see that I speak the truth!"

And now, Kay Lin's rays reached out across the surface of Earth, and brought the smoking ruin of Mekka onto her mirror, and there in the midst of it, the other-world Metal Emperor.

DOWN below, the gigantic metal man rose to his feet, staring upward at the scene. Then, like the rumble of Earth's largest volcano itself, his voice came to them.

"I have seen, beautiful woman of the surface. And I will help you. I come now. Await me."

The shining surface of Kay Lin's mirror became dark, and nothing she could do could bring

back the picture of the metal city on the ocean floor far below.

"We shall never see it again!" said Kay Lin with conviction. "The true Metal Emperor knows now, and he will maintain his impregnability against interference. It must be a great mind that he has, indeed, to live for eternity in those dark depths, meditating on things beyond mere fleshly scope."

"I believe you are right," said Spear, almost reverently. "We are fortunate above all surface people, to have seen what we have seen."

"Let us watch the sea outside the port," said Kay Lin. "It should not be long before the Metal Emperor emerges."

They crowded to the side ports and stared out, over the glistening ocean that extended to infinity. For long moments it remained an unbroken surface, and then a white line of surf appeared far out, as though a reef was there, but there had been no reef previously. It approached now, nearer to shore and a dark object began rising out of it. It advanced swiftly, ever rising, and what were obviously half-mile strides, and soon the whole head loomed up above the water, then tremendous shoulders, gigantic torso, and at last the stunning reality of towering columnar legs. The Metal Emperor loomed into the sky, fully a mile tall, and

at last stood in the shallow water a thousand feet away from the island. As they watched in awe a huge hand reached out, grasped their ship gently in tremendous metal fingers, and lifted them aloft. Then, with a stride as gentle as waves, with a lofting, lilting motion, the Metal Emperor began wading, following the shallows, so that always, he was able to hold the flyer above water, even though at times his head was submerged.

The wind whistled about the flyer, and Spear marveled. "We could not have flown this fast!"

"We shall be in Mekka before we know it!" said Jill.

IN less than four hours the shoreline of ancient America appeared. And a few minutes later, the gigantic pall of smoke that was the erupting Vulcana became visible. Here the Metal Emperor set the tiny flyer free, by opening his palm and allowing Kay Lin to lift the ship off as from a landing field. Then he strode on, purposefully and grimly. Kay Lin followed as fast as she could in the flyer.

They were yet far away when the two metal giants met. But Kay Lin picked up the scene on her television mirror, and the battle that followed kept them all silent

in awe, stunned beyond speaking by the enormity of it. It seemed unbelievable, yet it was happening before them.

From the beginning it was obvious that the giant from the depths of sunken Mu was far superior in strength and mental ability, and as the duel went on, the Metal Emperor led it skillfully from the city, into the depths of the forest, and there he proceeded to batter the invading emperor of the Rif into a shapeless pile of metal. Yet he carefully avoided damage to the head, and finally, when he wrested it from the body, he set it down carefully in the forest, and turned back to the city.

Now his huge voice came to them in the ship. "What is the matter with the volcano?"

"It has been sabotaged with radioactive materials, so that it is a gigantic fissioning pile. It will have to be damped."

The giant turned now to the volcano, and he seemed intent on it, staring at it with his great lenses. Finally he seemed to nod a bit, and he strode off into the distance. "Where is he going?" asked Jill.

"He has some plan in mind," answered Jac. "I believe in some way he has analyzed what is necessary to damp the Vulcana, and is off to find the material."

Kay Lin followed the Metal Emperor with her rays, and on the mirror, they saw him stoop finally and wrest the top off a stony outcropping, one of a group of small mountains in the Appalachian chain. Then he came striding back.

AT length he stood almost astride the Vulcana, its flames and smoke billowing between his legs, and its lava flowing past his feet. Then he lifted the huge boulder on high and with tremendous force, jammed it down into the crater. It disappeared in the depths, and almost instantly the crimson glow that lighted the smoky sky began to dim. The brilliant white fire glowing from the now choked openings of the tunnels of Mekka to a dull red, then a gray, and finally turned black. The atomic fire was going out.

Then, as the four watched, struck dumb with awe, the Metal Emperor strode back to the forest, and almost tenderly picked up the head of the Rifian Emperor. For a moment he held it up, looking into its eye pieces, then he tucked it under his arm and began striding toward the sea.

"He's going back to his under-ocean city," said Kay Lin. "We must thank him!"

She turned to her apparatus and pressed several switches, then she

spoke into the microphone. "Thank you, Emperor of Mu. We shall never forget you!"

The answer came, rumbling through the sky like the thunder of the gods. "I hear, beautiful one. And if ever you need me again, you need but call. It will be my pleasure."

And then, as they watched, the giant figure waded out into the water, ever deeper, until finally nothing remained but a tremendous wave that washed away and was gone.

Spear turned to Jill Lang. "You haven't got a chance in the world with Jac Azad," he said. "Even the Metal Emperor has fallen for her like a ton of bricks. So, if you don't mind, how about concentrating on something you can get?"

Jill looked at Kay Lin, then turned to Spear. "What makes you think I ever wanted our pretty boy? I'll take a man with muscles any time. It wouldn't be right for a man to have a wife who can beat him at anything, even if it's only lion taming."

Spear grinned. "Okay, Jill. But I'm warning you, I don't tame as easy as Jac, there. But if you want to know, I'd rather have my girl use her natural weapons without benefit of machine. Sort of gives a guy a fighting chance."

Jac Azad looked at them both,

and flusher¹ to the roots of his hair. But Kay Lin only laughed. She turned off the ray machine.

"Come here, soldier," she said in a cooing contralto.

"Do I look like a fool?" said Jac. And he came.

* * *

MEKKA was gone, but Jac and Kay Lin stood now on the hills of black lava that marked its ancient site, into the white dome over the many openings that marked the new Mekka abuilding deep under the surface.

"She will be more beautiful and greater than ever," said Jac.

"Yes, my emperor," murmured

Kay Lin, "and I am very glad that you are not made of metal."

Jac looked down at her. "So am I! For if I were, I would be afraid of melting!"

He took her in his arms, and for a long moment there was silence. Then she gasped and pulled away. "My," she cried. "The Vulcana must be erupting again!"

Jac grinned down at her. "That's one thing we need never worry about," he said. "That old cone is as dead as any volcano will ever be."

"And you know," she said, "I don't much care—as long as you are about"

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ *Raymond A. Palmer* ★

(Continued from page 2)

science fiction, which makes him a bloodless relative.)

"You've actually written six million words? But why?"

"I buy your magazines for the editorials."

"So you were born in 1910 (August 1, for those who wish to send birthday presents)? And you got run over by a truck at the age of seven? Well, seven is the age of reason, they say, and I can see the idea the truck driver had in mind. He must have been psychic! Should have a medal—no, he should be hanged by the neck for failing!"

"You edited how many magazines? Let's see: *Amazing Stories*, *Fantastic Adventures*, *Air Adventures*, *South Sea Stories*, *Mammoth Western*, *Mammoth Mystery*, *Mammoth Detective*, *Mammoth Adventure*, *Amazing Stories Quarterly*, *Fantastic Adventures Quarterly*, *Fate*, *Mystic*, *Science Stories*, *Other Worlds*, *Universe*. And you published the following books: *Dawn of Flame* (Weinbaum Memorial Volume), *The Coming of the Saucers*, *The Secret of the Saucers*. You were one of the editors of the first sf fan magazine. Quite a re-

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INTRODUCING the Author

★ *Raymond A. Palmer* ★

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cord, but when you consider that only five of those magazines are still published, it's not so hot."

And so it goes. My fans are legion (this legion was formed out of sheer desperation), and they expect great things out of me—someday. Till now, however, I have nothing to brag about except a very lovely wife and three fine children, a ten-room house with a staggering mortgage standing proudly on the shores of my own lake, and beside my own trout stream. I hate city life, and think city life will eventually destroy all individuality. I think free speech is our most important freedom, and that it is in very grave danger. I believe Americans are losing their minds—to propaganda via radio, television, newspapers, politicians, generals (drat 'em), and magazines (except my own). I think flying saucers are real, but I laugh at the little men the army is always capturing. I am absolutely positive they do not come from other planets. Because I believe in the literal sense of the 5th commandment, I've been called everything from fanatic to red. I be-

lieve an atom war is impossible, and will not happen. I decry and resent our government holding back the facts of radioactive poisoning, which they have no *right* to do, Russia or no Russia. I despise Admiral Strause, head of the Atomic Energy Commission for what I know to be false statements about radioactivity (whether deliberate or through lack of knowledge). I believe honesty is a dead virtue, especially in politics. I think the working man is a fool to expect the world "owes him a living" at *any* wage, guaranteed annual or what have you; in fact, he owes the world his labor, and to the best of his ability, and when he does a slipshod job, he ought to be fired. In short, I don't fit too well into a society that is becoming more and more enslaved to the machine, and to the madmen (meaning psychiatrists) who presume to lay down the boundaries of sanity.

And Bill Hamling will never fit this in the space he gave me, and it serves him right. I'm the world's champion yakker and I bet this proves it!

—*Raymond A. Palmer*